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Chinese College Students' Competence in Expressing Chinese Culture in Intercultural Communication

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Abstract

The present study explored current Chinese college students' expressiveness of Chinese culture as well as intercultural communicative sensitivity in intercultural communication. 152 First-year undergraduate non-English majors of academic year 2012-2013 in a prestigious university participated in the research. A triangulation of instruments was used to collect data in the present research: surveys, reflective journals and semi-structured interviews. The findings of the research were: (1) the overall participants' intercultural sensitivity level was slightly above the medium. (2) All students agreed the expressiveness of Chinese culture in intercultural communication was very important, however, most of them believed that they had difficulties in expressing Chinese culture in intercultural communication. (3) When facing the difficulties in expressing home culture in English, more than 62.5% of the students would try to explain it in different ways, while 24.3% of them would choose to switch the topic. (4) The majority of the students held that lack of vocabulary and translation proficiency were the leading factors that influenced their expressiveness of Chinese culture.

Keywords: Intercultural Communicative Competence; Competence in Expressing Chinese Culture; Intercultural Communication

Introduction

The importance of developing learners' intercultural communicative competence（ICC）is claimed in *the College English Curriculum Requirement* (2007) which emphasizes the acquisition of the ability to communicate in meaningful and appropriate ways with users of other languages.

To be sensible to the target culture is far from enough, since the communications between different languages involve not only languages but also cultures. As Smith (1983) proposed, that the aim of English teaching is neither learning English culture nor forming new thinking patterns, but to strengthen learners' ability to express their opinions and home culture. His idea further expressed in the goal of learning the language "is to enable learners to communicate their ideas and cultures to others" (Smith, 1998). In the latest two decades, researchers have given increasing attention to this field (Stem, 1992; Lessard-Clouston, 1997; Kramsch, 1998) they regard intercultural communication is the interaction between cultures and claim the importance of learners' home culture in teaching.

In China, Song (2010) points out, as for culture teaching in English, the predominant principle for both teachers and students is to learn the English cultures over Chinese culture, whereas little emphasis is laid on home culture input in language teaching. When it comes to intercultural communication, students may suffer from introducing home culture even though their language proficiency is good enough.

Regarding the problems mentioned above, the present research presented the overall view on the Chinese college students' intercultural communicative competence from two perspectives: their sensitivity to the target culture and their expressiveness of home culture. It is hoped this paper would shed some light on improving intercultural communicative competence as well as culture teaching and learning in college English courses.

Literature Review

Intercultural communication sensitivity (ICS), is regarded as an attitudinal forerunner to successful intercultural encounters and a predictor of cultural competence (Bhawuk, D. P., & Brislin, R., 1992). It refers to the subjects' "active desires to motivate themselves to understand, appreciate, and accept differences among cultures (Chen, G. M., & Starosta, W. J., 1997)." ICS is often measured by a well-established questionnaire ISS (Intercultural Sensitivity Scale) which was designed by Chen & Starosta (2000).

One of the representatives of the ICS studies at home is Peng (2005; 2006; 2007), by conducting a large scale study, he examined the validity of the five factors of the ISS, and investigated the performances of the five factors showed by students of different levels (English major, non-English major). The

research showed that Participants showed the highest ability in cultural differences, and the lowest in interaction confidence.

However, in intercultural communication, cultures between or among the speakers are also exchanged along with the information conveyed. The intercultural interaction is, therefore, a meeting of diverse cultures mediated through the communicative behaviors of the interactants (Cui, Y., & Song L., 2010), as both of the interactants' intercultural communication sensitivity (ICS) and their expressiveness of home culture play an important role in the smooth going of the interaction.

Building on the perspective, studies has been conducted and a consensus is made that authorities and educators places too much emphasis on learning English speaking cultures at the expense of Chinese culture input. Among them, Cong (2000) from Nanjing University is regarded the first scholar uses the term "cultural aphasia" to describe the phenomenon of a students' inability to express Chinese culture in English in cross-cultural communication.

Among the limited empirical studies on the expressiveness of Chinese culture in English have been conducted, most of research focus on investigating the students' competence in conveying Chinese culture in English (Zhang, W., & Zhu, H., 2002) and the English learning with culture identification (Gao, Y., 1994). Among the limited research, Zhang& Zhu (2002) investigate 126 non English major students' competence in conveying Chinese culture in English, data collected by questionnaire and interview show that the majority of the participants share the problem of expressing Chinese culture in English properly.

Gao & Zhou (2008) conduct a large scale investigation by examining the self-identity of college students from 30 universities in English learning via questionnaire. The study reveals that the learners' self-identity change with their periods of schooling of English learning, the longer they learn English, the more respect they show to the target culture, however, culture respect doesn't necessarily relate to the learners' language proficiency.

These empirical studies have contributed a deeper understanding of the role of Chinese culture in English language learning. While the limitations lie in: first, among all the studies conducted on intercultural communication, most researches focus on the target culture, little emphasis is laid on the home culture or both. Second, as Peng (2011) claimed that there is the lack of scientific and empirical study on intercultural communication in china, especially the empirical studies conducted with a triangulation of instruments and sources to gather data. With setting in an authentic summer English program, the present research hopes can shed some lights on exploring the problems among the college students in intercultural communication. Third, the students' attitudes towards both English and Chinese culture in English learning and teaching, their perspectives on Chinese culture expressiveness in intercultural communication and related difficulties remain unrevealed.

The present study aims to answer the following questions:

1) What's the overall intercultural communication sensitivity level among the participants?
2) How do the college students' perceive the importance of home culture expressiveness in intercultural communication?
3) What are the difficulties that the students are facing with when expressing Chinese culture in intercultural communication?

Research Design

Context

Summer Camp, a three-week English program around July hosted by one of the prestigious universities in mainland China aimed at promoting the participants' access and exposure to spoken English and English culture. The camp is for students who have just completed their freshmen year at the university and approximately 3200 students were involved in the camp in 2013 on the university campus. Before they attend the Summer Camp, all the students had been grouped into five colors (five different colors from basic level to advanced level: purple, blue, green, yellow and red) based on the students' performance in the English Placement Test they took in August, 2012, when they began to study at the university.

Altogether 148 (40 visiting teachers and 108 volunteers) native or near native English speakers joined the camp. All the students enrolled in the program were divided into 80 classes, around 25 for each class. The class met four and half hours (9:00 am-11:30 am, 2:00 pm-4:00 pm) in every work day. Each day was devoted to a variety of activities, formal classroom instruction, lectures and various activities including seminars, singing, games, movie dubbing, chorus, etc during the three-week program. The working language is English.

Each foreign teacher worked with a Chinese coordinator, two foreign volunteers.

Participants

Altogether 152 (111 male and 41 female) first-year undergraduate non-English majors of academic year 2012-2013 in a prestigious university participated in the present study. With an age range from 17-19, they were randomly chosen from green, blue and yellow group because they were the representatives in number, population diversity, English proficiency and major diversity of the whole students of the year in the university.

Instruments

In order to get a more comprehensive and accurate picture of the situation, a triangulation of instruments were used to collect data in the present research:

surveys, reflective journals and semi-structured interviews. Namely, both qualitative and quantitative methods were adopted in the study.

Survey

Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS). To measure the participants' intercultural communication competence, all the 152 participants were required to answer the questionnaire *Intercultural Sensitivity Scale* (ISS) (Chen & Starosta, 2000). The questionnaire used in the research enjoys a high level of validity and reliability involving a 24-item scale for intercultural awareness. Designed on a 5-point Likert-scale ranging from "strongly Disagree" to "strongly Agree" with values 1-5 assigned to each alternative, the questionnaire consists of five factors: interaction engagement (l, 11, 13 21, 22, 23, 24), respect for cultural differences (2, 7, 8, 16, 18, 20), interaction confidence (3, 4, 5, 6, 10), interaction enjoyment (9, 12, 15), and interaction attentiveness (14, 17, 19).

Along with the ISS questionnaire, a revised 18-item 5-point Likert-scale survey based on Lan (2003) to measure students' perspectives on Chinese culture expressions in English and the current culture teaching status and expectations on Chinese culture teaching in college English course. The answers ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" with values 5-1 assigned to them respectively. The questionnaire covers four aspects: perceptions on English textbooks and culture knowledge contained in it (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6), perceptions on culture teaching in college English course and expectations (7, 8, 16, 17), importance of Chinese culture expressiveness in intercultural communication (9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 18), self-rated expressiveness of Chinese culture in English (15). At the end of the questionnaire, one open-ended question was added: 19）In your opinion, what are the factors affecting you expressing Chinese culture fluently in intercultural communication? The question aimed to explore the causing factors to the difficulties to express Chinese culture in English.

Reflective Journal

Eighteen participants were asked to write weekly reflective journals mainly on the difficulties and problems that occurred concerning Chinese culture expressiveness in their intercultural communication and the reasons which caused the problems.

Semi-Structured Interview

Based on the reflective journals, the 18 participants were also invited to a semi-structured interview to explore further the problems involve in the expressiveness of Chinese culture in English occur in their intercultural communications. The interview questions covered such aspects as educational experience (abroad experience), family background, Chinese language proficiency, personal experience, personal assessment of their performance (competence in conveying Chinese culture) in the Summer Camp, assessment

of the importance of Chinese culture in their communication with native speakers; their expectation of Chinese culture teaching and learning, the strategies they used to introduce Chinese culture. The interview was conducted in Chinese and was recorded.

Procedure

The survey items were translated into Chinese and checked. The surveys were administered to the 152 participants in 6 classes by their course teachers on the same day toward the end of the Summer Camp. The students were asked to finish the surveys within 15 minutes during the normal teaching period. All the questionnaires were collected by the teachers and given to the researcher. The respondent rate of questionnaire is 100%.

In the beginning of the program, 18 students among the participants agreed to keep weekly reflective journals during the three-week Summer Camp. Besides they all were invited for the semi-structured interview after the program, which was conducted in Chinese and audio-taped.

Data Analysis

Software SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) 19 was used to analyze the survey data. The data gathered through reflective journals and interview supplemented the survey results.

The interview was transcribed and checked twice, which, together with the journals were subject to thematic content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980). The purpose was to identify the possible factors contributing to their performance of expressiveness of Chinese culture and the coping strategies they applied to make up for the lack of competence in conveying Chinese culture in English.

Result and Discussion

The Intercultural Sensitivity (IS) Score

The overall level of the students' IS scores were studied by analyzing its five factors scores.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics of IS Score*

	N	minimum	maximum	Mean	SD
Interaction engagement	152	2.86	4.86	3.8383	.40596
Respect for cultural differences	152	2.83	4.83	4.2149	.64525
Interaction confidence	152	1.60	4.60	3.2049	.58422
Interaction enjoyment	152	1.00	5.00	3.6579	.66661
Interaction attentiveness	152	2.33	4.67	3.3662	.52845
sum	152	2.75	5.13	3.7179	.37099
Valid N (listwise)	152				

The descriptive statistics analysis results of ISS' five factors can be inferred from the Table 1.

Generally, with a mean score of 3.7179, the overall participants' ISS level is slightly above the medium. As it is indicated in the Table, the participants' *Respect for Cultural Difference* enjoys the highest score while the *Interaction Confidence* remained the lowest. The research result was consistent with Peng (2006) and Hu (2011)'s research. It can be inferred that the students are more sensitive and fully aware of the differences in both diverse cultural background and ways of communication. The highest score reflects that the students have a high degree of tolerance and respect in their counterparts' cultures and opinions. The Cultural Engagement ranks the second. It is not difficult to find that the students are showing their interests in taking in all kinds of English activities like English corner, volunteering jobs in international conferences, and so on. However, the students' Interaction Attentiveness level is relatively low and their Interaction Confidence level remains the lowest. It can be explained that lack of intercultural background knowledge and competence in intercultural communication can strongly influence the students' Interaction Attentiveness and Interaction Confidence. Therefore, the failures and frustrations in intercultural communication directly impact on Interaction Enjoyment.

Since the majority of the students didn't quite sensitive to the target culture, how were their performances on their home culture? The following research explored the students' self-rated expressiveness of Chinese culture in English and their perceptions on the importance of home culture expressiveness as well.

Perceptions on Chinese Culture Expressiveness in Intercultural Communication

With a reliability score of .67 in the present research, the students' perceptions on the importance of Chinese culture expressiveness in English were computed on seven items (9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 18). The higher the score, the more importance was aroused. The students' self-rated expressiveness of Chinese culture in English (item 15) was also computed. The higher the score, the more competence was assumed by the students in conveying Chinese culture in English.

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics of the Perceptions on Chinese Culture Expressiveness*

	N	minimum	maximum	Mean	SD
1.Importance of Chinese culture expressiveness in intercultural communication (9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 18)	152	1.00	5.00	4.0066	.89494
2.Self-rated expressiveness of Chinese culture in English（15)	152	1.00	4.50	2.7961	.59064
Valid N (listwise)	152				

As presented in Table 2, the mean score of 4.0066 suggested that most of the students agreed or strongly agreed the expression of Chinese culture in

intercultural communication was very important. This point was also proved by the reflective journals and interviewees' self-reports. Most of the students claimed that they began to realize the importance of Chinese culture expressiveness in English during and after the summer program. This can be best supported by a student's comment, "…. It wasn't until the Summer Camp that I realized the importance of Chinese culture expressiveness …. Culture exchange is a two-way process, it's a process involving not only target culture input but also home culture output, and the latter is more important" (male, 19).

Differently, the students' self-evaluation on expressiveness of Chinese culture in English remained was low. The mean score of below the average 3.00 showed that all the participants believed that they were not confident and had difficulties in expressing Chinese culture in intercultural communication. This was consistent with the interviewees' self-reports. When interviewed, most students claimed they weren't satisfied with their expressiveness of Chinese culture in English. This was best supported by a freshman student's comment, "I don't think I can express Chinese culture well, especially for some terms with strong culture flavors…no matter how hard I tried to explain 'Dui Lian" (couplet) to the foreigner, he was still confused, finally, I gave it up, it really made me feel depressed (male, 19).

As most of the students claimed that they were not competent in expressing Chinese culture terms, therefore, what were the difficulties the students facing in terms of Chinese culture expressiveness in English and how did they cope with it in intercultural communication?

Difficulties in Chinese Culture Expressiveness in English

In order to have a further understanding on the difficulties students faced in expressing Chinese culture in English in intercultural communication and their coping strategies, one open-ended question was computed in terms of frequency.

Table 3. *Perceptions on Factors Affecting Chinese Culture Expressiveness in English*

Factors	N	frequency	percentage
1. Vocabulary size	117	77	77%
2. Translation proficiency	97	63	63%
3. Lack of Chinese culture knowledge	17	11.2	11.2%
4. Not interested in	4	2.7	2.7%
5. Never been taught or learnt Chinese culture in English	17	11.2	11.2%
6. Irrelevant to English examination	2	1.3	1.3%
7. Other reasons	6	4.0	4%

According to Table 3, the majority of the students held that lack of vocabulary and translation proficiency are the leading factors that influence their expressiveness of Chinese culture in intercultural communication. Only 17 out of 152 believed Chinese culture knowledge also played a part.

These findings contradicted the reflective journals and the interviewees' self-reports. 12 out of 18 in the reflective journal and 15 out of 18 in the interview mentioned that lack of Chinese knowledge were the main causing factor in their Chinese culture expression. It was best supported by one of the journals: "…when I was asked to explain the meaning of some Chinese characters and the way to write them to the foreign volunteers, I felt stressful… I don't know how it comes, I think the reason mainly lies in I just learnt the surface of Chinese culture rather than the deep culture like the culture history" (female, 18). Another reason mentioned by most of the students in the journals and interview was the culture gap, as a student reported in the interview: "…the difference between Chinese and English culture is also a causing factor, sometimes, it is difficult to find a counterpart in translation especially the expressions with strong Chinese flavors…I tried to translate one of the Chinese dishes 'Gong Bao Ji Ding', but all I can do was to explain it was made by diced chicken. Although the foreigner understood me, I still felt depressed because I didn't introduce the culture flavor of the dish" (male, 19).

Regarding the difficulties mentioned above, it is easy to understand the students' intercultural enjoyment and confidence in intercultural communication remain low as the unhappy feelings arises when they couldn't express themselves properly. Therefore, it is necessary to enrich more Chinese culture input in English. As English textbooks and English courses are regarded the most effective access to learn anything related to English, what was the adequacy of foreign and Chinese culture knowledge introduced in English textbooks? What were the students' perceptions on their English textbooks?

Perceptions on English Textbooks and Culture Knowledge Contained in It

The students' perceptions on English textbooks (item 1, 4, 5) and culture knowledge introduced in it (item 2, 3, 6) were computed by the minimum, maximum, mean and standard deviation.

Table 4. *Descriptive Statistics of Perceptions on English Textbooks & Culture Knowledge Contained in it*

		N	minimum	maximum	Mean	SD
Perceptions on English textbooks	Item 1	152	1.00	5.00	2.8816	1.15623
	Item 4	152	1.00	5.00	3.8947	.97762
	Item 5	152	1.00	5.00	3.4276	.93923
Perceptions on culture knowledge contained in English textbooks	Item 2	152	1.00	5.00	2.5921	2.06951
	Item 3	152	1.00	5.00	2.1447	.82517
	Item 6	152	1.00	5.00	2.9474	.90466
	Valid N (listwise)	152				

As can be seen from Table 4, the mean score below average 3.00 suggested that most of the students didn't believe "English textbook is the main reliable source to learn English" (item 1), it could be explained by the multimedia accessible to the students. However, it was interesting to find that

although students didn't assume the textbooks were the main channels of learning English, most of the students insisted that "Chinese culture knowledge should also be introduced in English textbooks not only in Chinese textbooks" (item 4). Because "culture knowledge learned in textbooks is very useful and practical when communicate with foreigners" (item 5), the mean score 3.4276 suggested most of the students agreed with it.

As the students had high expectations on the culture knowledge conveyed in English textbooks, what were their perceptions on the current English textbooks in terms of culture knowledge contained?

The mean score of below the average 3.00 in Table 4 implied that most students held the negative view on "there are adequate foreign culture knowledge contained in English textbooks" (item 2), "there are adequate culture comparison between Chinese and English contained in English textbooks (item 3). Besides, they all didn't agree that "it is easy to find Chinese culture introduced in English in the textbook" (item 6).

Since the majority of the student held that the English textbooks didn't contain adequate cultural knowledge, how about the current culture teaching in college English courses? What were the expectations on it?

Current Culture Teaching in College English Courses and the Expectations

With a reliability score of .618 in the present research, the students' perceptions (item 7, 8) and expectations (item 16, 17) on culture teaching in college English was computed.

Table 5. *Descriptive Statistics of Current Culture Teaching In College English Courses and the Expectations*

		N	minimum	maximum	Mean	SD
Current culture teaching in college English course`	Item 7	152	1.00	5.00	3.7434	.80968
	Item 8	152	1.00	5.00	2.6118	.88437
Expectations on culture knowledge in English course	Item 16	152	1.00	5.00	3.8355	.96594
	Item 17	152	1.00	5.00	3.5526	.98189
	Valid-N (listwise)	152				

It was interesting to find that although the most students didn't assume there were adequate foreign culture knowledge in English textbooks, however, the mean score above the average 3.00 showed that they all agreed " English teachers often introduce foreign culture in English courses" (item 7). As for Chinese culture, most of them held the negative view, the mean score 2.6118 implied that they didn't hold that "English teacher often introduce Chinese culture as comparison with foreign culture" (item 8).

It also suggested from the Table that that the majority of students were positive to introduce and compare Chinese culture in English courses, the average score above 3.00 signified that most of them expected that "to learn expressions of Chinese culture in college English course in order to facilitate English learning" (item 16), besides, they all agreed "English teacher should introduce more culture knowledge concerning Chinese culture and foreign

culture" (item 17). Interestingly, this result was contradicted with the reports from interviewees and the reflective journals. It was best supported by a interviewee: "…I think it is ok whether my teacher introduces Chinese culture in English courses or not…maybe it's our responsibility to acquire more correspondence expressions in English if we are interested in" (female, 18).

Conclusion

The present study investigated Chinese college students' intercultural communicative competence from mainly two perspectives: their sensitivity to the target culture and their expressiveness of home culture.

The research result showed, the overall intercultural communicative sensitivity (ICS) score among the participants was not high, among the five dimensions of the ICS, the participants showed the highest ability in cultural differences, and the lowest in interaction confidence. On the other hand, when be examined the perspectives on home culture expressiveness in intercultural communication, all of them agreed the expression of Chinese culture in intercultural communication was important, however, all of the participants believed that they had difficulties in expressing Chinese culture in intercultural communication. The causing factors were: the lack of vocabulary; translation proficiency; lack of Chinese culture knowledge; Never been taught or learnt Chinese culture in English, and some of the participants even held that the home culture expressiveness in English was irrelevant to English examination based on their test driven learning.

Therefore, upon the problems revealed among the college students in intercultural communication, the present study suggested that it is necessary to introduce Chinese culture expressions in college English culture courses, besides, relevant Chinese culture introduction activities, like group discussion, presentation, competition, etc. can be done to facilitate students' expressiveness of home culture to improve their interaction confidence and competence and the intercultural communicative competence as a whole.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The major limitation of the research lies in that the students' competence in expressing Chinese culture in intercultural communication was self-reported. A well-grounded test or questionnaire is needed to be developed to guarantee the research result would be more valid.

Along with other research instruments, observation and video tape would ensure the research result more valid which could reflect the students' authentic performances in intercultural communication. Further research will be needed to explore the issue of Chinese culture expressiveness in intercultural communication form an overall perspectives.

In the future studies, it is advisable that more efforts could be made to explore such problems on enriching the materials of Chinese culture in English textbook, applying more scientific and effective teaching approaches, etc. It is true that in china, the college English is really a complicated project, only with fresh blood and reform can it exit healthily.

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