The research and practice of the effects of online course on cultivating students' intercultural communicative competence.

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Summary - *Crynodeb*

This paper explores the impact of an online course on the cross-cultural communicative competence of the students. The results showed that transnational online courses created a real cross-cultural communication scenario for students, which significantly improved the overall level of intercultural sensitivity in students' communicative confidence, communicative pleasure and cross-cultural effectiveness.

Mae'r papur hwn yn archwilio effaith cwrs ar-lein ar allu cyfathrebu trawsddiwylliannol y myfyrwyr. Dangosodd y canlyniadau fod cyrsiau ar-lein trawswladol yn creu senario cyfathrebu trawsddiwylliannol go iawn i fyfyrwyr, a fu'n fodd i wella'n sylweddol lefel gyffredinol y sensitifrwydd rhyngddiwylliannol yn hyder y myfyrwyr wrth gyfathrebu, eu pleser wrth gyfathrebu a'u heffeithiolrwydd trawsddiwylliannol.

Keywords: foreign language teaching and learning, internationalization, cross-cultural communicative competence, online courses

Introduction

With the integration of the world economy, the internationalization of higher education is the inevitable development of its own. The goal of college English teaching has also changed from the simple training of language and skills to the cultivation of intercultural communicative competence. The teaching methods changed from teacher-centred to student-centred, emphasizing students' participation and experience, inspiring their enthusiasm and initiative. It is necessary for teachers in the universities to think about the effective teaching mode of improving the intercultural communicative competence of college students.

Experts and scholars of English educators at home and abroad have published many papers and works on cross-cultural communication.

Cross-cultural competence is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people of other cultures: 'appropriately' means valued rules, norms, and expectations of the relationship are not violated significantly, and 'effectively' refers to that valued goals or rewards (relative to costs and alternatives) are accomplished. McDonald (2008) posits that the acquisition of cross-cultural competence begins with the self by understanding one's own beliefs, values, and biases to better appreciate other cultural identities. British scholar Bryam (1997) proposed "cross-cultural competence" (3C) (Inter-cultural Competence). He believes that cross-cultural ability is the sensitivity of cultural differences in international communication, the degree of understanding of foreign cultures, and the ability to seek common ground while reserving differences in cross-cultural communication.

The related research in China mainly focuses on the general introduction of cultivating intercultural communicative competence. Hu Wenzhong who published "Introduction to Intercultural

Communication" in 1999 gave a comprehensive introduction to the concept of intercultural communication. He advocated that "language is a form of culture, it is impossible to learn language well if the students don't understand its culture. Accordingly, language teaching must also include cultural teaching." Deng Yanchang and Liu Runqing published the book "Language and Culture" in 1989 which emphasized the relationship between language and culture and cultural differences in the understanding of the importance of cross-cultural communication competence. Over the past 10 years, the foreign language teaching sector in China paid more attention to the cultural component and strengthened the study of cultural differences and cultural theories.

The design and practice of the teaching model of the online course

The idea that the language presented in the classroom should be as authentic as possible so as to represent the reality of the native speaker language use has been one of the tenets of the communicative approach to foreign language teaching and learning (Jensen, 1995; Alptekin, 2002). Taking the native speaker as the model for cross-cultural communication has been another reason that has led to the revision of this concept and the move on to cross-cultural communication.

In view of the *status quo* of the above research, this study attempts to explore a new type of classroom teaching model of online course which relies on the Internet's powerful messaging capabilities. The online course is a cross-national cooperation program offered by Business College of Beijing Union University and the universities of other countries. It aims to cultivate students' international vision and awareness of cross-cultural communication. Due to the time difference between China and other countries, long-distance online courses are arranged at 8:00 to 9:00 pm (Beijing time). Each connection takes about an hour. Online course breaks time and space barrier and allows students of different countries and regions to have the course at the same time.

Characteristics of the online course design

The design of the online course has the following two characteristics:

A variety of cross-cultural communication experience. Intercultural communicative competence is a new concept, and its definition is still under constant discussion. Bryam (1997) suggested that it should be composed of attitude, knowledge and skill. Intercultural communication (or cross-cultural communication) refers to the communication between native speakers and non-native speakers, and also refers to the communication between people who have different language and cultural backgrounds. Because of their different ecological, material, social and religious environments, people from different linguistic environments have different language habits, culture and customs as well. Therefore, people always like to use their own words to explain each other's words in communication, which may make inaccurate inferences about each other's intention and result in misunderstanding, conflict and obstacles. Intercultural communicative competence is a kind of ability to deal with the practical problems arising in intercultural communication on the basis of understanding and mastering foreign cultural knowledge and communication skills. Learners need to master the social and cultural skills and apply to the reality of communication. The on-line course was designed according to the cross-cultural communication theory and arranged the online course to cooperate with the universities of different countries.

The course which provides students with opportunities to communicate with students from other countries in the form of a topic discussion offers a low cost, efficient and sustainable global communication practice for students who cannot study abroad. Students could obtain fresh, interactive and diverse cross-cultural communication experience from the three dimensions of attitudes, knowledge and skills of intercultural communicative competence. Students in the class can discuss the different views on different issues of the two countries under the guidance of the teachers.

Students from different cultures communicate with each other through online and offline interaction. In our present world, learners of a foreign language will find themselves more and more often in situations where they have to understand the relationships between different cultures and will have to make sense of different behaviours and attitudes. They will have to become mediators trying to interpret and connect two or more ways of understanding the world (Byram, 1995, "Acquiring" p. 54). Accordingly, the online course is designed for a small class of about 16 people. Students from different partner countries of

different cultures can conduct online seminars through videoconference and communicate with each other through e-mail and social communication tools. Students and teachers should record the main points of the certain topics of the course after each link and review comments and attitudes related to cultural differences. All students are expected to take pre-class and post-class surveys, complete each lesson (online course), online discussions and after-school journals and summaries, and collaborate with other partners of foreign countries to complete the assignment and presentation. Students are also expected to visit their partner's university website regularly to learn more about their partner institutions. The main topics of the seminar is to promote intercultural communication, including university life, family life, cultural tradition, life and religion, stereotype and prejudice, and free discussion. In the course of evaluation, teachers changed from a single test based on the students' test results of the language to the assessment of the performance of communicative ability of using the language appropriately. The final marks are graded by the teachers according to the student's classroom performance, attendance and completion of the assignment.

The changes of teaching methodology

The teaching method of the online course is quite different from the way of teaching in a traditional classroom. Intercultural communicative competence goes beyond the concept of language learning. It is based on acquiring skills in a language accompanied by some factual knowledge and culture about a country where the language is spoken. The roles of the teachers and learners are also bound to be different in this course. During the online course, teachers in the classroom act as the classroom controller, the detectors of the students' learning effect, the providers of learning resources, the organisers and coordinators who pay more attention to consider how to change the teaching method from "teacher-centred" to "student-centred", how to stimulate students' awareness of communication, how to guide students and partner students to expand the topic. Teachers should master the skills on how to prompt students and how to make the necessary intervention as well. The students could show positive attitude during the online course, recognize and respect the existence of cultural differences between cultures, and have a high degree of cross-cultural sensitivity. They are also rational about their own culture and are able to overcome the tension when they communicate with people from a different culture. They are willing to openly express their ideas and experience and listen to each other as faithful listeners. Thus, an informal, cohesive language and cultural exchange atmosphere will be created in the classroom where "the cooperative learning" and "discussion-based learning" occur.

Research Methods

Classroom practice, theoretical models and research are interrelated with each other. This research compares the students' cross-cultural communicative competence before and after the online course by using classroom observation, interviews, questionnaire and students' journals as well.

Observing the class by adopting Ruben's behavioural approach to intercultural communicative competence

Observing and describing of classroom practice are always helpful for teachers, who are usually confined to their own classrooms and have the opportunity to observe and gather useful information about the learners' performance which makes the underlying principles explicit during the course.

The Behavioral Assessment Scale for Intercultural Competence (BASIC) (Ruben & Kealey, 1979; Koester & Olebe, 1988) was developed from Ruben's pioneering work in behavioural approaches to ICC. In Ruben (1976), observers used 4- and 5-point Likert scales to assess individuals on each of the seven dimensions: display of respect, interaction posture, orientation to knowledge, empathy, self-oriented role behaviour, interaction management, and tolerance for ambiguity. Ruben's behavioural approach was one of the earliest comprehensive frameworks to the evaluation of intercultural communicative competence (Ruben, 1976; Ruben & Kealey, 1979). Ruben (1976) advocated that to understand and assess individuals' behaviours, it would be necessary to employ "measures of competency that reflect an individual's ability

to display concepts in his behavior rather than intentions, understandings, knowledge, attitudes, or desires" (p. 337). An early factor-analytic study of the scales (Ruben, 1976) revealed three clusters, described as three types of participants: Types I, II, and III. Accordingly, observing an individual's behaviour during the online course to assess their ability is the basic approach in investigating the learners' intercultural communicative competence. At pre-class discussion, most students as Type III participants had limited knowledge about the cultures and societies of their partner countries and their own country and their own language skills are also limited. They faced with difficulties when attempting to communicate cross-culturally. Their intercultural communicative competence was very weak. Therefore, students expressed their hesitation in attending the online course. At the beginning of the course, students were very nervous and passive in talking with their partners. They were very shy and afraid of making mistakes in communicating with their partners. In the mid-way through the course, some students became Type II participants with potential for successful cross-cultural communication and had more chances to communicate with their partners via online communication tools to exchange their ideas and they had a fundamental change in communication with their partners and became more confident and active in finding, questioning, thinking and summarising the cultural differences between different countries. At the end of the course, the majority of students who possessed the quality of Type II and III showed high interaction management competence and could communicate easily with each other and had a strong learning initiative and interactive desire to participate in the discussion.

Doing and analysing research by adopting Fantini's (2006) Assessment of Intercultural Competence instrument

Sixty-eight students who are the members of the course were arranged to complete the questionnaire. Topics of the questionnaire ranged from personal characteristics to intercultural abilities, as shown in Table 1. Questions on a 0-5 point scale had descriptors ranging from 0 = none/not at all to 5 =extremely high/well.

Table 1 - Items from Assessment of Intercultural Competence (AIC)

Section	Items	Sample Items, ask respondents to…
1. About the respondent	5	provide name, nationality, gender, education level, past intercultural relationships, etc.
2. Personal characteristics	5	rate themselves as they perceive themselves in their own cultures and as they believe their hosts perceived them in the other culture (0-5)
		example characteristics: 1.Intolerant, 2. Flexible, 3. Patient, 4. lacks sense of humour, 5. tolerates differences
3. Motivation and options	4	rate level of interest and characterize motivation towards host culture (0-5)
4. Language proficiency	4	describe proficiency at beginning and end of course (yes or no) (0-5)
5. Communication styles	3	compare their responses to situations in their own and in the partners' culture
6. Intercultural areas	3	rate their situations (0-5)
7. Intercultural abilities	4	rate intercultural abilities at the beginning and the end of the program for knowledge, attitudes, skills, and awareness (0-5)

The findings from the self-assessment instrument showed that the result of each item on the four dimensions of intercultural competence: knowledge, attitude, skills, and awareness offered support for most of the assertions that were researched on observing the class by adopting Ruben's behavioural approach to intercultural communicative competence: 69% of the students agreed that their intercultural competence had improved a lot after the online course having become more confident in communicating with people from other countries clearly and effectively; 18% of the students still had the difficulties in demonstrating their willingness to interact with members from other cultures; and, 15% of the students showed that they needed more opportunities to get to know the culture and language of other countries for developing this cross-cultural communicative competence.

Conclusion

The online course plays a unique role in offering students the opportunity to develop their intercultural competencies. Foreign language teaching should strive to create and introduce real cross-cultural communication scenarios where students could have the opportunities to experience and practise the communicative skills with people from other countries. In this research and practice we tried to investigate the existing approaches and tools for the assessment of cross-cultural communicative competence. We also reviewed some related works of researchers and scholars internationally. It has been proved that this course has significantly improved the overall level of communicative confidence, communicative pleasure and cross-cultural effectiveness of the learners. These resources will be a useful basis to foreign language (and other) educators to improve the intercultural competencies of their students.

The acquisition of cross-cultural communicative competencies may provide them with the capabilities necessary for promoting successful collaboration across cultures and improving their communicative proficiency to step beyond their own culture and communicate with other individuals from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds.

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