

Approaches to Improving Non-English Major's Intercultural Communication Competence in the Context of the Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract

The initiative and implementation of the Belt and Road has promoted the economic and trade as well as cultural exchanges between China and other countries in the world, which also means our country needs large numbers of intercultural talents. This paper analyzes the current situation of intercultural communication competence of non-English majors and its reasons. Based on the detailed analyses, development of intercultural communication competence as an ultimate goal in foreign language teaching is put forward and specific approaches to cultivating college students' intercultural communication competence are discussed.

Keywords

College students; intercultural communication competence; cultivation approaches; the Belt and Road Initiative.

1. Introduction

The construction of the Belt and Road is a new pattern of China's all-round opening up, which was put forward in the context of deep integration into the world economic system. It conforms to the trend of transnational economic and cultural development of all countries in the world and also speeds up cultural exchanges and cooperation among countries. Therefore, intercultural communication is becoming increasingly frequent. As the second economic power in the world, our country needs large numbers of intercultural talents who not only have good intercultural communication competence and an international perspective, but also are familiar with international rules and can participate in international affairs and international competition. From the above connotations of intercultural talents, we believe foreign language proficiency is a prerequisite for successful intercultural communication. Compared with non-English majors, the population of English majors is small. English language learning experience is positively related with intercultural sensitivity (Peng, 2006). Their completion of many language courses also contributes to their intercultural communication competence. They are less prejudiced and more open to different social customs and cultural values because they are more linguistically competent. Armed with language skills, the English majors improve their intercultural communication competence much more easily. Therefore, this paper focuses on the cultivation of non-English majors' intercultural communication competence.

2. The Connotation of Intercultural Communication Competence

The term of intercultural communication was firstly put forward by E.T. Hall in his book *The Silent Language*, which created the research history of intercultural communication

competence (Deardorff, 2006). Scholars in different fields study intercultural communication from different perspectives, so they have different definitions of intercultural communication competence. Byram (1997) divided intercultural communication competence into four dimensions: knowledge (the understanding of one's own culture, as well as the corresponding aspects of the other's culture) , skills (intercultural communication skills and intercultural cognitive skills) , attitude (attitudes toward differences in culture, belief, and behavior) and awareness (the ability to critically identify and evaluate one's own culture and the cultural practices and products of other countries on the basis of clear criteria), which is considered one of the most influential definitions. Gudykunst (1993) believes knowledge, skills and motivation are essential to define intercultural competence. Chen and Starosta (2000) think that intercultural communication competence is comprised of cognitive, affective and behavioral ability. Deardorff (2006) points out that intercultural communication competence is "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes" (p. 247-248). Though scholars utilize different terms, they actually agree that knowledge of the target culture is an indispensable part of intercultural communication competence.

3. The Current Situation of Non-English Majors' Intercultural Communication Competence

At present, the overall level of intercultural communication competence of non-English majors is low (Wang, 2016). Most of the students have little understanding of foreign cultures such as beliefs, values, etiquette and customs (Fan et al., 2013). Although they are willing to take the initiative to communicate, when the real opportunity to communicate with foreigners arises, they may not actively participate. Some studies also show that there is no significant difference in the intercultural communication competence of the students majoring in arts and science (Wang, 2008). The reasons for the low level of non-English majors' intercultural communication competence can be summarized as follows: first of all, the national English proficiency test, that is, College English Test Band 4 (CET 4) and College English Test Band 6 (CET6) for undergraduates and graduates respectively, has to be mentioned. The test focuses on language points for the sake of reliability. Many employers give priority to Band 4, or Band 6 certificate holders. University students are highly motivated to pass the test so that they can stand a better chance in job hunting. Test oriented teaching has been very common in EFL classrooms in some provincial universities since the test started in 1988. In EFL classrooms, the cultivation of intercultural communication competence is not paid enough attention to from middle school to college. Teachers and students all concentrate on the improvement of vocabulary and grammar for various examinations. Secondly, the knowledge of foreign culture acquired by Chinese students is one-sided. Students often learn foreign culture by watching foreign movies and listening to English songs in a passive way. They lack the opportunity to communicate directly with foreigners. If they are given the opportunity to communicate directly with foreigners, they are not confident. Thirdly, universities do not offer intercultural communication courses for the non-English majors to choose. No wonder their knowledge of the features of verbal or non-verbal communication, values, social customs, even cultural stereotypes and prejudices of foreign cultures is really limited. Since the current intercultural communication competence of non-English majors is worrisome, it is very important to find strategies to improve it in order to meet the needs of social development and international communication.

4. Approaches to Improvement of Non-English Majors' Intercultural Communication Competence

4.1. Innovation of Teaching Methodology

Classroom teaching should not only cultivate students' language ability, but also strengthen the cultivation of intercultural communication competence. Teachers need to be trained or reeducated to make them capable of their new job. First of all, they have to take students' motivation into account to cultivate the non-English majors' intercultural competence. Interesting activities must be designed to attract students to be actively involved in intercultural communication competence training, from which process students learn to respect for cultural differences. When their intercultural communication competence gets higher, their interaction confidence builds up and they experience the enjoyment of being able to communicate with people who are culturally and linguistically different. The very progress will make them more attentive during next intercultural experience. Thus students are led into a sound cycle of intercultural communication competence development. Teachers can also use advanced information technology, such as interactive electronic whiteboard, which can construct a multi-dimensional interactive classroom teaching model, expand students' cross-cultural knowledge, activate classroom teaching inspiration, mobilize students' enthusiasm to participate in classroom activity, and make classroom teaching an important place to enhance students' cross-cultural communication ability(Huang, 2019).Secondly, high quality teaching materials must be developed to forge students' intercultural awareness. Thirdly, students should be encouraged to attend short-term study programs such as the three-to four-week summer camp programs in the United States or the United Kingdom to help them to improve their intercultural communication competence. Last but not least, colleges or universities should offer a series of selective courses about intercultural communication. Through studying these courses, students master the skills of intercultural communication, understand the obstacles in intercultural communication, get fully aware of different cultural values and social customs. The curriculums may adopt the way of joint teaching by Chinese and foreign teachers. Teachers and students discuss cultural phenomena reflected in foreign film clips, articles published in foreign newspapers and magazines in classroom so that they have authentic language input.

4.2. Creating Intercultural Communication Atmosphere on Campus

It is not enough to train students' intercultural communication competence only by limited classroom teaching and lectures. The very improvement of students' intercultural communication competence mainly depends on students' real intercultural communication experience, continuous cultivation of intercultural awareness and enhancement of cultural sensitivity. Universities may construct a three-dimensional intercultural communication environment, in which students' life is influenced imperceptibly. Students can actively participate in various intercultural activities and gain rich intercultural communication experience, which is an effective extension and expansion of classroom learning. For example, University administrators hold foreign language corner regularly, invite foreign teachers and foreign students to participate in, set corresponding themes for participants to discuss and exchange. When different cultures and different ideas meet, students broaden their horizons. Typical films of intercultural communication conflicts, such as "Guasha Treatment" and "Pushing Hands" are shown regularly to deepen students' understanding of intercultural conflicts and help them see the essence through phenomena and explore the deep causes of intercultural communication failures and conflicts.

Universities should make full use of international students and foreign teachers as an important intercultural communication teaching resources. At present, international students in

universities are all educated in International School and there are separate dormitory buildings for them, so there is no intersection between international students and Chinese students in their study and daily life. Universities should break this administrative barrier and provide opportunities for international students to study with Chinese students so that international students and Chinese students can deepen their understanding, exchange and learn from each other through practical intercultural communication experience to make common progress.

5. Conclusion

The Belt and Road initiative is an important strategy for China to open up to the outside world in all directions in the new era. Intercultural talents are decisive resources and cultural soft power, which play a key role in the development of the Belt and Road Initiative. Foreign language teaching in universities also needs to adapt to this strategic background. Development of intercultural communication competence should be regarded as an ultimate goal in foreign language teaching. Teachers should design specific teaching strategies to meet the diverse foreign language learning requirements of students so as to satisfy our country's crying need of intercultural talents with international vision and strong communication competence.

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