

Chinese College Students' Intercultural Competence: Current Situation, Barriers and Solutions

Abstract

Situated in Byram's intercultural competence model (1997), this study sought to investigate Chinese college students' intercultural competence. Using a combination of a survey questionnaire and face-to-face interviews, the study explored the experiences of students in an English major class. The results showed that students were not satisfied with their reported intercultural competence. In addition, students' desire for culture learning was constrained by the current language teaching methods and content. Discussions are made on how to position culture in language teaching and learning. Lastly but not least, the article considers how teachers could provide more opportunities for authentic intercultural learning with a view to preparing students to participate as global citizens.

Keywords: intercultural competence; culture teaching; language teaching; vocational education

Background

Many countries, including China, have embedded culture teaching objectives such as cultivating students' intercultural ability and intercultural communication in language teaching guidelines. However, some researchers point out that there is lack of empirical research concerning this important topic in the context of mainland China (Han & Song2011). From a practical perspective, integration of language skills and intercultural competency could assist learners to be better prepared for interacting in the global world. In addition, in order to prepare students for their future career, there is great need to emphasize the development of intercultural competence in such a globalizing job market. There is also evidence suggesting that students' current intercultural ability needs to be further developed (Liu2016). As a result, it is necessary to conduct research such as the one at hand, that seeks to explore students' current situation regarding their intercultural competence.

In addition, this study seeks to enrich the existing intercultural literature by adding empirical information on the development of students' intercultural competence, and filling the existing gap in research in the chosen area within the Chinese context. On the other hand, the study provides some suggestions for language teachers in China and elsewhere across the globe on how to manage their future classroom teaching practice with the view to promoting the development of students' intercultural competence.

Culture learning and the cultivation of intercultural competence in language education

Culture is important for effective communication not only because it contains shared experiences but also involves individual life experience (Guilherme2002). Responding to the current state of global use of English, Liu and Fang (2017:26)

define culture from a post-structuralist perspective as “a complex social system, as opposed to natural system, that emerges through individuals’ joint participation in the world giving rise to sets of shared knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes and practices” (Baker2015:71). In this way, culture is not only a cognitive concept but also involves social practices. Many linguists, language educators, and teachers believe that it is necessary to integrate culture into language teaching and learning (Nguyen2017). Arguably, in order to communicate effectively, speakers must not only have knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, but also know how to use them properly in a particular context or situation (Choudhury & Kakati2017). For instance, Brown (2001) cited in Nguyen (2017) contends that learners who are exposed to language-related cultures can better participate in the real and functional use of language for meaningful purposes.

Considering cultural learning in language education, Fenner (2000) claims that language education should provide students with opportunities to acquire cultural knowledge, awareness, and abilities of the target culture and their own culture. Some researchers (e.g., Piątkowska2015) also illustrate the outcomes of cultural learning with reference to knowledge, awareness, and competence. Similarly, Larzén (2005) proposes three aims of culture teaching which include knowledge of other cultures, skills for intercultural interactions, and tolerance as well as empathy. Cultural learning in language education is a process that involves developing cultural knowledge, skills, cultivating cultural awareness, and gradually bringing learners closer to higher levels of intercultural competence. In the same vein, Byram (2000) posits that someone who is interculturally competent can see the relationship between different cultures and develop a critical understanding of their own culture as well as other cultures. At this level of learning, Nguyen (2017) makes an apt observation that apart from the acquisition of cultural knowledge and skills, learners also develop the ability to reflect, evaluate, and construct critical perspectives on cultural issues and identity. Understandably, this helps the learners to build tolerance and harmony towards their own and other cultures.

Previous research (e.g., Bean & Boffy-Ramirez2019) indicate that overseas experience is positively correlated with the development of intercultural competence. Apart from merely providing opportunities for overseas programs, language teachers can also make an effort to promote the development of students’ intercultural competence. Zou and Yu (2019) emphasize proper and purposeful teaching design for promoting the development of intercultural competence in language classrooms. Piątkowska (2015) reviewed main approaches such as comparative approach that can be harnessed to integrate culture teaching into language teaching. There are previous studies that focus on the effects of various classroom teaching approaches on students’ intercultural competence development. For example, Zhao (2013) used literature as a training resource to promote the development of learners’ intercultural competence. Miao and Wang (2013) used network and multimedia resources to achieve the same goal. Ye (2014) promoted critical thinking and intercultural communication skills through the application of comparative cultural case studies. While these studies are encouraging, most of them are focused on approaches used in the classroom

environment. Besides the classroom settings, researchers (e.g., Roberts et al.2001; Wang & Kulich2015) also pointed out the necessity of encouraging learners to experience authentic intercultural interaction with interlocutors from other cultures. It is against this backdrop that the study at hand was designed.

Using authentic resources can help ESL/EFL learners to participate and get involved in the target cultural experience (Choudhury & Kakati2017). Traditionally, English courses often connect English and English-speaking Western culture, but new interpretation about culture challenges this simple cultural understanding of regional and national constraints (Baker2015). In particular, in English teaching, cultural views tend to favor Anglophone culture (Kramsch2014), and “the dynamic and liminal nature of much intercultural communication” (Baker 2011:198) is overlooked. Apart from the existing resources, Bray (2010) also recommends the use of new tools based on evolving technologies. As pointed out by Çiftçi (2015:322), only relying on training learners is not enough for effective intercultural interactions. It is necessary to create a stimulating environment that provides learners with opportunities to engage with other cultures. In addition to proper teaching designs, some researchers also highlight the importance of fostering inclusivity in the classroom. For example, Hurtado (2001) suggests that students may experience a sense of superiority or inferiority if they encounter cultural differences in the learning process without a proper guide. Guidelines that can help teachers to work effectively with students from different backgrounds have been developed (e.g. Jabbar & Hardaker2012).

Cultivating intercultural competence in the Chinese context

In the market-driven and globalized education environment, the development of students’ intercultural competence has changed from value-added effects to full persuasive motivation (Huang2017). It has been argued that re-emphasizing intercultural education is essential and will contribute to institutional internationalization (Deng2013; UNESCO2006). In China, for the cultivation of intercultural competence, the government pointed out in the Outline of China’s National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020) that “a large number of talents shall be cultivated that are imbued with global vision, well-versed in international rules, and capable of participating in international affairs and competition” (Huang2017:184). The national guidelines for integrating the cultivation of intercultural competence into foreign language education at all levels have emerged from more than two decades of cross-cultural communication research and teaching experiences in the country. However, it has been observed that the key concepts, skill sets, and procedures are not yet clearly defined, implemented effectively or studied comprehensively within the Chinese context (Wang, Deardorff & Kulich2015).

The connection between intercultural competence and foreign language education has been discussed in some previous studies conducted in China from the perspective of training models of intercultural competence in language teaching, courses design, and how to teach effectively (e.g. Chen2012). Regarding the development of college students’ intercultural competence, researchers have

conducted studies to explore the important issues. For instance, the research by Gao (2006) emphasized the necessity of promoting students' intercultural competence in language teaching. Wang and Yu (2008) adopted Byram's model in a study that focused on non-English major students' intercultural competence. They developed a questionnaire that referred to Fantini's YOGA form with a full score of 100. Students' intercultural competence was evaluated in four dimensions, including attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical awareness. The survey results revealed that the 193 participating students' intercultural competence was unsatisfactory ($M=67.46$). After studying intercultural communication course designed for English major students, Liu (2009) proposed that stereotyping in cultivating students' intercultural competence should be minimized. In addition, the empirical results of the research conducted by Fan, Wu, and Peng (2013) indicate that Chinese college students consider their foreign cultural knowledge to be inadequate, and they think their foreign language skills and cultural awareness should be improved for effective communication.

It has been observed that although intercultural communication is reflected in the objectives and principles of the official guidelines, the cultivation of intercultural competence is otherwise hardly addressed (Song2008). Culture teaching is often carried out as teaching the knowledge of the target culture explicitly (East2012). The systematic development of intercultural competence and how this could be integrated effectively into language teaching remains a great challenge for Chinese language teachers and researchers. Some researchers (e.g. Wang2015) pointed out the specific features of vocational colleges that are necessary for developing intercultural competence. They stated that students in vocational colleges need more instruction on competencies related to culture in order to suit the fierce job market competition. With the rapid development of globalization, students have more chances to work with foreigners, and this requires good intercultural competence. As a result, this requires universities to prepare students adequately.

Intercultural competence and Byram's model

Intercultural competence embodies the ability to communicate appropriately and effectively with people from other cultures. Byram (1997) explains that someone who is interculturally competent can communicate with people from other cultures who speak a foreign language. They can negotiate and mediate interactions and satisfy both themselves and the interlocutor. Intercultural competence is a complex concept to try and define, as Deardorff (2006) pointed out, "Just as culture is constantly changing, scholars' perceptions of intercultural competence will change over time" (Romjue & MacDonald2018:258).

Byram's (1997) model is a widely accepted and applied model among the various models of intercultural competence. There are four interactive dimensions in Byram's intercultural competence model: attitudes, knowledge, skills (skills of discovery and interaction, skills of interpreting and relating), and critical cultural awareness. The first dimension, attitudes (*savoir-e^tre*), refers to "curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's

own” (Byram1997:50). The second dimension, knowledge (savoirs), refers to familiarity with “social groups and their products and practices in one’s own country and in the country of one’s interlocutor, and knowledge of the general processes of societal and individual interaction” (Byram1997:58). Two sets of skills constitute the third dimension. One of the sets of skills is, skills of interpreting and relating (savoir-comprendre), and this refers to the “ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to the documents from one’s own” (Byram1997:61). The other set of skills is, skills of discovery and interaction (savoir-apprendre/faire), and this refers to “the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes, and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction” (Byram1997:61). The fourth dimension is, critical cultural awareness (savoir s’engager) and this refers to “the ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices, and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries” (Byram1997: 63). As shown in Figure 1 below, Byram also developed teaching objectives under the four dimensions as guidelines for language teachers.

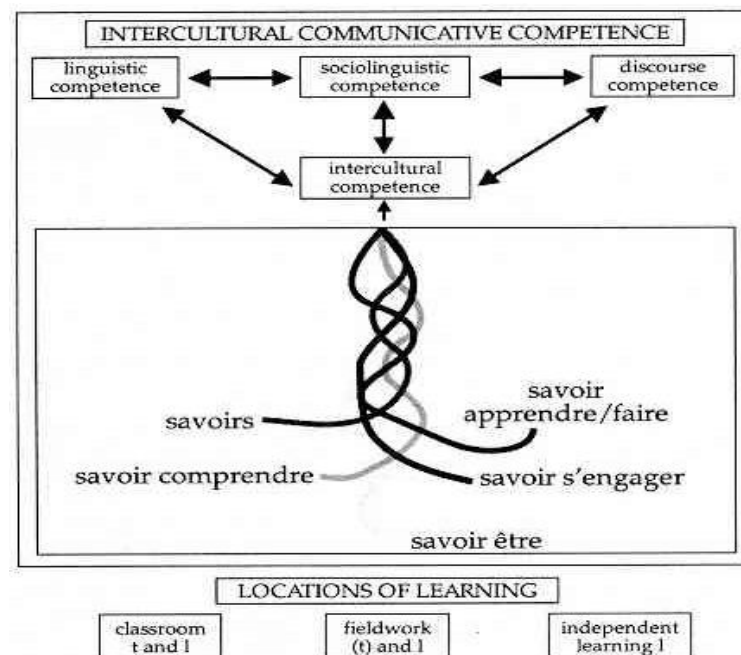


Figure 1. Byram’s ICC model (1997:73)

Byram enhances the interpretation of intercultural competence further by proposing the concept of intercultural mediator as one of the objectives of being interculturally competent (e.g. Byram2006). In addition, he enhanced the application of intercultural competence model by applying the model as a way of promoting citizenship education (e.g. Byram2008;2012). The model was also taken as the theoretical base in developing projects such as Intercultural Competence Assessment (INCA) project and Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) project in the area of intercultural competence development and research (Byram2014).

Research questions

- 1: What are the current levels of the students' intercultural competence in the four aspects including attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical awareness?
- 2: What are the challenges/barriers faced by students in acquiring intercultural competence?

Method

This research adopted a combination of a survey questionnaire and face-to-face interviews to collect data. The use of both quantitative and qualitative data allows the researcher to obtain more comprehensive information about the problem (Creswell 2014). The survey data were used to evaluate students' intercultural competence, and the interviews explored any problems and confusions among students in the area of language and culture learning. The survey data were collected first to assess the current situation of college students' intercultural competence and analyzed under four dimensions according to Byram's theory. Then qualitative interviews were conducted as a follow-up to the quantitative results to help explain any critical issues concerning the development of students' intercultural competence. In addition, the interview data also helped the researcher to explore students' learning situation.

Participants

The participants in this study were drawn from a vocational college in mainland China. For survey questionnaires, a class of Business English major students in year two was randomly selected. All the students in the class were invited to fill in the questionnaire of intercultural competence (AIC-CCS) to evaluate their language ability and intercultural competence in the four aspects namely, attitudes, knowledge, skills, and awareness. A total of 33 valid responses were used for data analysis. There were 26 female and 7 male students who studied English for at least seven years. For the interview, the researcher contacted the students who had completed the questionnaire to explain the research purpose and the procedure of interview in more detail. Ten students agreed to participate in face-to-face interviews and share their learning experience. Students were invited to take part in a semi-structured interview to share their views towards their culture learning experience as well as any barriers, challenges and expectations. With the questionnaire and interview, students' current situation of intercultural competence and barriers of intercultural competence development were reflected. In line with good ethical practice, each participant was given full information about the study and were asked to sign a consent form before their involvement in the study.

Data collection

Procedure

As indicated in the preceding section, the data in this study came from different sources. Collecting data from different sources can help the researcher to fully understand the research problem and enrich the depth of discovery (Creswell2008).

Questionnaire and semi-structured interviews are the main data collection methods for this research. Quantitative data generated from the questionnaire, were collected through a Chinese online platform called Wenjuanxing. To better examine the current situation, semi-structured interviews were also used. Ten students took part in the interview session. During the interviews, students were encouraged to reflect on their experience and express their opinions regarding culture learning in their language courses. The interview sessions were conducted in Chinese and were recorded using an audio recorder. The interviews were transcribed and translated into English for subsequent analysis. As the translation of quotes poses specific challenges such as difficulty in translating specific concepts used by the participants (Van Nes, Abma, Jonsson, & Deeg2010), besides cooperating with a professional translator in translating the quotes, rich descriptions with the use of quotes of participants are also provided in order to enhance trustworthiness.

Instrument

AIC-CCS (assessment of intercultural competence for Chinese college students) was adapted from Wu's (2013) study of assessing Chinese college students' intercultural competence. This tool is selected for its validity and its firm theoretical base and it also considers the situation of Chinese college students. Some modifications were made to ensure that the wording was concise and to avoid any misunderstanding. Several items were added to the questionnaire based on comparisons made with the detailed objectives in Byram's model. The revised questionnaire consists of two parts, the first part focuses on collecting participants' self-evaluated language abilities and necessary personal information, and the second part allows students to evaluate their own intercultural competence in four dimensions, namely attitude, knowledge, skill, and critical cultural awareness. The second part is composed of 46 questions, and students choose from 1 to 5 scales for every question, which represent the weakest to the strongest.

Data analysis

The data collected from the 33 survey questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive analysis by Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS version 21.0), and the qualitative data were analyzed in detail using the thematic analysis approach. The qualitative phase of the study revealed interesting information about students' experience and expectations about cultural learning in language courses. After transcription, reading and rereading, thematic analysis was conducted, and the responses to the interviews were reviewed and divided into common themes. The four themes that emerged from the analysis are presented in the next section. All the students' real names were changed to guarantee anonymity.

Results and discussion

As stated earlier, the researcher began this project with two primary goals: 1) to better understand students' evaluation of their intercultural competence; and 2) to explore the barriers, confusions and expectations regarding the development of intercultural competence in language learning from the perspectives of students.

By analyzing the data, students' current situation of culture learning and

intercultural competence is reported using four main themes: learners' self-evaluation of intercultural competence and experience of intercultural interactions, learners' cultural learning experience in language courses, learners' after-class learning preferences, and learners' confusions and expectations towards language courses.

Learners' self-evaluation of intercultural competence and experience of intercultural interactions

Table 1 shows the results of students' self-evaluated intercultural competence scores, that is, the overall score and scores for each of the four dimensions.

Table 1. *Students' self-evaluated intercultural competence.*

	<i>M</i> (Max 5)	Std. Deviation
ICC	3.06	.47
Attitude	4.03	.81
Knowledge	2.53	.48
Skill	3.29	.63
Awareness	3.18	.70

The sample of 33 students had an intercultural competence mean score of 3.06 and $SD=0.47$. Meanwhile, the sample's attitude mean score is 4.03, which is the highest in the four dimensions and indicates a general positive attitude towards culture, cultural learning and intercultural communication. Students considered their knowledge to be the weakest ($M=2.53$, $SD=0.48$), and the result of skills and awareness mean scores are almost the same, with skills ($M=3.29$) a little higher than the dimension of awareness ($M=3.18$). From the results of AIC-CCS, it can be seen that students' self-evaluated intercultural competence is not very satisfying, and there are some differences in the four dimensions. From the results, participating students considered the dimension of attitude as the highest of the four dimensions, while the knowledge dimension is considered as the weakest.

The results echo some findings from previous studies. Wu, Fan, and Peng (2013) also gathered information on Chinese university students from five colleges. Their results showed that among the six factors they studied, knowledge of others and skills of intercultural communication were the highest. Knowledge of self and the attitude dimension were at a medium level, and intercultural awareness was the lowest. These findings confirm that intercultural teaching practice in Chinese context still focuses primarily on knowledge and skills training. Part of the reason is that China's intercultural education tradition emphasizes foreign language teaching. Apart from language, teachers should cover more areas such as culture and society. Due to the increasing curriculum requirements, growing pressure, and lack of qualified intercultural trainers, practitioners may not have the energy and skills to develop a true intercultural curriculum (Wang & Kulich 2015).

These statistical findings are also supported by interview data. In addition to the results from AIC-CCS, interview data also revealed that participating students considered that they know little about intercultural competence and what is needed to communicate in intercultural situations. When talking about intercultural competence or other related concepts, it can be found that students have vague perceptions of intercultural competence, and they have not learned in previous courses. A

considerable number of students indicated that they are not familiar with intercultural abilities, for example, a student said:

"I can only say that I have vague consciousness. That is to say, when I communicate with people who come from different countries, we may have conflicts." (Student 3)

Another student stated that:

"This kind of high-level cross-cultural topic has not really been learned." (Student 5)

In addition to intercultural competence reflected in statistics; the researcher also explored students' experience of interaction with foreigners. Experience of intercultural interactions is another factor that could influence students' intercultural competence. Bean and Boffy-Ramirez (2019) conducted a study to find any differences in intercultural communication skills between undergraduate Chinese students in the United States and those studying in China. Their study results revealed that the students who studied abroad generally demonstrated higher intercultural communication abilities compared to those who were based in China. The relationship observed in the study is the connection between intercultural competence and the and ideas between learners, which can benefit learners in developing intercultural competence.

The first aspect of students' previous contact with people from other cultures to be explored is the frequency of previous communication experience. From the interview results, most of the students did not have much interaction experience with English speakers. Most of the participants never had any interaction with foreigners, some just had opportunities to say hello in some occasions, as one participant stated:

"It's just like 'hello', then it's over, it's not a deep conversation." (Student 2)

In the same vein, another student said:

"I haven't communicated with foreigners. Even if I really meet them, I think I might not be able to organize wording." (Student 1)

Two participants shared their experience of interacting with foreigners. One helped foreigners to buy things and gave them directions on the street. Another one communicated with foreigners when working in a plant. Some students had experience of communicating with foreign teachers but over a short period and the communication style tended to be passive. A student shared her experience during the interview:

"I talked to a foreign teacher recently, but it's kind of nothing to talk about, very passive, and sometimes I couldn't react quickly." (Student 10)

The student also tried to find partners online to practice speaking, but she was afraid and opportunities were quite limited, as she stated:

"Well, I tried to find it by myself, and there is some software that can be used, but it is infrequent because I didn't dare to take the initiative, especially in real life, I am willing to do but don't have the courage." (Student 10)

It can be seen that students lack opportunities for intercultural interactions.

Although they are willing to communicate, they sometimes lack the courage to do so. As students have limited opportunities to contact people from other cultures, it is necessary for teachers to design specific types of classroom activities to provide students with more opportunities to experience authentic intercultural learning. Classroom activities should be designed to promote equal learning opportunities for all students. To support the development of students' intercultural competence, it is necessary to consider equally the knowledge base of each learner, help them to achieve common goals, and promote positive interactions outside the formal learning environment.

Another aspect explored in the study is students' experience of dealing with misunderstandings or difficulties that happen during the interactions. During interviews, it was found that all the participants who had communicated with English speakers reported difficulties. Problems in understanding, including the effect of speakers' accent and the use of colloquial or difficult words, and problems in expressing, including the inability to use accurate words, inadequate vocabulary, and not knowing how to express thoughts accurately. Some psychological factors, including being nervous and being afraid of awkwardness were mentioned. Some students shared their confusions, for example, a student said:

"Because my English is not very good, so when he said some difficult words, or he has an accent, I can't understand, because of that word, I can't understand the meaning of the whole sentence." (Student 9)

Apart from highlighting the difficulties and problems they faced, the study also presented students with the opportunity to share their coping strategies. Most of them indicated that they seek help from others such as professional translators or use body language to communicate. It was evident that the participants did not have much experience and confidence in addressing misunderstandings and difficulties in communication with English speakers.

Students' cultural learning experience

Firstly, the study explored the cultural dimensions that students are familiar with. When talking about the culture that they are familiar with, students mentioned many aspects of cultures, including etiquette (telephone, table, giving presents), daily life (eating habits), entertainment (sports, movie, music). Although students mentioned some areas, they indicated that they are not familiar with other cultures. Students used words such as "some" and "a little" to express their cultural knowledge, and what they mentioned are almost cultural facts which are not systemic and may be stereotyping. In addition, the main channels students use to learn culture are social media, TV series, and the tasks designed by their teachers. Students highlighted some cultural topics that they are not familiar with such as customs. For example, a student said:

"That kind of professional cultural customs, I may not know very well."
(Student 2)

Another student also said:

"I know a bit more life-like, for example, what to say when people are

greeting me. In fact, I really don't know much." (Student 10)

When the students were asked to recall what they had learned about culture in their language lessons, they reported an apparent focus on facts. Only a few made reference to the integration of culture with language in ways that appeared to enhance their learning of both. When asked about any cultural aspects (e.g. values, belief systems, etc.) discussed in language classes, students have few impressions in learning culture, and they know a little about some cultural differences such as values or taboos, but the learning is not systematic and comprehensive and can be biased. Reasons may include limited teaching methods and the ineffective curriculum design of the course. Some teachers may have mentioned some aspects of the culture, but not systematically. This can be identified in the following quotes:

"They didn't mention it in my mind, that is, teachers rarely mentioned it, basically teaching is based on textbooks." (Student 2)

"It is actually according to the textbook, and less about daily life, I didn't learn it systematically." (Student 5)

As reflected by students during interviews, besides the content of textbooks, it is necessary to present various cultural content in language classes. Some teachers made an effort in teaching culture and avoided stereotyping other cultures at the same time. One participant cited a lesson that they had from a reading class that changed her traditional way of thinking:

"Taking the reading course for example, in the United Kingdom, everyone is wearing a hat with an umbrella. Actually, it is very strange in the UK, and this changes my previous view." (Student 9)

Communication skills is one of the aspects explored in the study. Besides cultural knowledge, communication skills are also necessary to cope with various intercultural situations. When they reflected on knowledge and skills of communication that they learnt in previous language classes, it seems that students did not learn much in their language classes. The interviews data revealed that students developed certain skills such as changing expressions in interactions, but the learning is quite limited. Students did not feel confident to communicate effectively using the subtle knowledge and skills they learnt. One student said:

"In fact, teachers taught us some expressions, for example, to express agreement we can not only use 'I agree with you', and there are still many other ways." (Student 5)

Another student stated that:

"I remember that in almost all countries, ladies don't want to be asked about age, which should be the matter of privacy." (Student 4)

Teachers can provide learners with a stimulating environment to engage with cultures (Çiftçi2015). When designing the environment, considering the diversity of digital tools and the unique aspects of participation and context is also important. With the recommendation of Bray (2010), teachers can use new tools based on evolving technologies. For instance, video technology seems to provide an important opportunity for future practice and research to enrich intercultural interactions. This design also requires interculturally competent language teachers who should have

knowledge of cultures and should understand the theoretical background of intercultural dimensions.

Some teaching methods were also revealed during interviews. A participant said that a teacher used visual resources such as movies to teach how to communicate with others in specific situations:

“She often let us watch some movies, such as the Rio Adventure for several times, and then the teacher explains a lot of details. For example, people in this place will say this, that is to say, in different situations, it may be different.” (Student 5)

The student also shared that one teacher shared her own working experience with students:

“She told us about her experience, in some occasions, what you should say and what you should not say. For example, she used to work at the front desk and then she saw several foreign customers coming over. Then they were chatting, that is, what to say and what should not be said.” (Student 5)

This kind of teaching practice could benefit students in developing necessary communication skills to cope with intercultural interactions. As Zou and Yu (2019) proposed, meaningful intercultural interactions do not occur naturally, proper and purposeful teaching design and adequate preparation of learners’ mindset, skills, and behavior are essential. Teachers can also make use of proper guidelines (e.g. Jabbar & Hardaker 2012) to better facilitate the culture learning of students with different backgrounds.

However, it can be seen from interviews that besides teaching culture, how to communicate with people from other cultures is not being treated as an important aspect of teaching. This was articulated by one student who said:

“It is not very specific; teachers only mentioned in some exercises.” (Student 8)

This view was echoed by another student who expressed that:

“Teachers have not said it specifically, if you see a foreigner, how can you communicate with him, no teacher has specifically said it.” (Student 9)

Overall, the analysis of the students’ interviews found that in general, most of the interviewed students considered that they were not confident and capable to communicate in intercultural interactions. Teachers should provide students with more opportunities to pay attention to and explore cultural diversity, strive to positively influence the classroom atmosphere, encourage students to interpret and analyze differences, and learn to communicate with people from other cultures.

For students’ learning experience in language courses, the following comments can be summarized:

	Positive comments	Neutral comments	Negative comments
1	For students, it is really beneficial to have some activities such as video analysis.	Some activities are awesome but learning for language skills is still the priority.	Not much time for culture learning.
2	Some resources used by teachers	Students studied culture from the	Relying too much on the

	are interesting and helpful.	resources, but still, lack opportunities for cultural learning.	textbook is still one of the major problems in language courses.
3	Some teachers provide opportunities for learning different communication skills.	It is nice to have some teachers who are willing to share own experience of communication, but very limited.	Skills and knowledge of business is an important part of course content, and students who are not interested in business face difficulties in learning.

Table 2. Participant students' comments on previous language courses

Learners' preference of after-class learning activities

During interviews, students also shared their language learning experience. The first aspect to be explored focused on students' learning habits. When discussing after-class language learning opportunities, the most frequently mentioned approach was learning through entertainment, including English TV series, movies, and English songs. Media resources such as news and TED shows are also preferred by students in addition to some of the approaches introduced by teachers. One student shared his learning methods:

"Singing English songs. Sometimes I will sing with the singer, but I find it really hard." (Student 3)

Another student prefers TV series:

"Generally, I watch American TV dramas such as American Horror Story, I'm interested in this type anyway." (Student 6)

It can be found that interest is an important factor in students' after-class language learning activity and using various applications and doing exercises are also popular approaches among the participating students. With the development of technology and the internet, students now have more access to authentic resources. Talking about this, a student said:

"In addition to watching American TV dramas, I also like TikTok. There are many videos that teach English. There is a teacher named Alex, and he will pose some videos teaching some methods of learning English, and some guidelines of how to improve spoken English." (Student 5)

Another student also said:

"I use some video software or Weibo. There are many Chinese people studying abroad. On those platforms, they talk about some experiences abroad or the differences between foreign countries and China." (Student 8)

Exam-oriented learning method also plays an important role in students' off-class learning for qualifications to meet the requirements of a competitive job market. As one of the participating students said:

"I am now preparing for the CET-4 exam, so I have been memorizing the words and doing exercises for the exam." (Student 2)

Students' after-class learning patterns and habits could be further explored as the

cultivation of intercultural competence cannot only rely on classroom teaching. There are previous studies (e.g., Miao & Wang2013; Zhao2013) that focus on the effects of various classroom teaching methods such as literature and case study on the development of students' intercultural competence. However, how to encourage students to "break the walls of the classroom" to experience authentic intercultural interaction with interlocutors from other cultures is still a problem (Roberts et al. 2001:243). More research on the approaches used in different situations and different levels of culture is needed (Wang & Kulich2015).

Students' confusions and expectations concerning language and culture learning

From the results of interview questions regarding current confusions and problems in language and culture learning, most of the participants want to improve their speaking skills. In addition, enhancing fluency and pronunciation, and how to interact simply and fluently is a concern for many students. Other aspects such as vocabulary, listening and writing skills, and grammar were also mentioned. As for confusion or problems in learning English, three main aspects were identified, including how to speak English more fluently, how to improve listening and react quickly, and how to enhance learning interest. Participants have different confusions towards language learning. For instance, a student said:

"I don't know how to learn English better, how to speak English fluently, and not to worry about it." (Student 1)

When asked about short-term expected improvements, most of the participants related their objectives with examinations such as CET-4 or translation certificate. Another objective relates to improving language abilities and it covers the following aspects: enhancing basic knowledge and skills, learning vocabulary and grammar. This is well articulated by one of the students who said:

"The most important thing is the CET-4 exam. Then I especially want to improve my speaking ability, because I always know that my oral English is not very good, but I must insist on it, that is, to improve this ability." (Student 2)

The study also explored students' expectations towards language courses. In terms of their expectations, students expressed the desire to learn more about foreign cultures, cultural knowledge related to daily life, cultural differences, and they also want to expand their cultural horizons. They want to improve their speaking ability, communicate fluently with foreigners, and express their own ideas freely in English. Some students also mentioned that they want to learn to communicate in a more confident way. During interviews it was quite visible that students' desire to learn more about cultures is quite strong and specific. For instance, one student said:

"Hope that teachers will involve more cultural content in the future, and it can help in learning English." (Student 2)

Another student also expressed the desire to learn about intercultural communication:

"I want to learn more, if I really see a foreigner on the street someday,

after all, it is our major. Then how to communicate smoothly, just talk to him directly, not being afraid, and talk about casual topics.” (Student 9)

In addition to the exploration of students’ expected improvements, the study also explored students’ topics of interest in culture learning. The study results showed that students were interested in several topics including travelling and food. It appears topics that are related to daily life are the most expected topics. Besides, some students also want to learn more about cultural differences. From students’ views, it can be seen that they are willing to learn cultural knowledge and skills, as a student said:

“I am particularly interested in this aspect, that is, the difference between British and American culture and Chinese culture.” (Student 8)

Students expressed the desire to learn more knowledge and skills that are closely connected with their life, and they want to learn more beyond the textbook content. For example, a student said:

“It is better to learn things that are used in real life. Don’t just teach history or geography, I feel a bit boring. It is better to involve a little bit of practical use, such as etiquette when you talk to foreigners.” (Student 2)

Another student also said:

“To understand a country, I think you should learn more aspects. Not just through the textbook.” (Student 6)

It can be seen that participating students are willing to learn more about culture and how to communicate with people from other cultures. They want more than learning through the textbook, so for teachers, the researcher suggests that language teachers could provide more cultural knowledge when teaching English and cultivate students’ ability to interact with foreigners. For teaching activities and methods, authentic materials and various interactive activities can be applied to cultivate the ability to interact in intercultural situations.

If we look at the higher education in China, English is the most important foreign language in the majority of educational institutions, although some universities also provide teaching in other languages (Huang2017). There is a large number of learners who study English through formal teaching. Therefore, as Huang (2017) proposes, making full use of English as a Lingua Franca and related intercultural activities is a helpful and effective way to design intercultural training programs.

Conclusion

This case study explored the current situation of students’ intercultural competence, problems, and expectations of the students in the selected vocational college. To find out students’ current situation of intercultural competence and explore any barriers and needs in developing intercultural competence, questionnaires and interviews were used as the main data collection methods. The results show that students consider that their intercultural competence is not satisfying, and students’ desire for cultural learning and development of intercultural competence is constrained by the current language teaching methods, course content, and exam-oriented learning situation. Language teachers could provide more opportunities

for cultural learning and the acquisition of communication skills in order to prepare learners for future intercultural interactions.

Implication and future research

This research is very timely because it has practical implications for practitioners such as English language teachers, teacher trainers and curriculum developers in intercultural communication teaching and learning. Language teachers can find some useful insights here and some practical examples of students' learning situations, confusions, and expectations. For teacher trainers, it is necessary to understand students' needs and opinions, in order to assist pre- and in-service language teachers training by instantiating how they could promote the advancement and development of intercultural competence in the classroom. The results can also provide help for practitioners in preparing useful materials and courses for promoting the development of students' intercultural competence.

More importantly, future research can focus on the impact of specific teaching methods on the development of students' intercultural competence. In addition, studying English teachers' perception of intercultural competence and their teaching practices is another area that is worthwhile of further investigation. In addition, as pointed out by Huang (2017), it is of great importance to investigate how to enhance the intercultural communication teaching practices in classrooms even though Byram's model and its related theory can provide guidance for interpreting the intercultural competence of students. Therefore, it is highly suggested that future research can focus more on constructing an intercultural competence work model for designing the program and guiding the teaching practices which will shed important light on the current teaching of intercultural communication courses.

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