A Comparative Study of Intercultural Sensitivity among Postgraduates Majoring in International Chinese Education in China Context

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Abstract

Based on a survey sample of 435 China postgraduates majoring in International Chinese Education with different undergraduate English learning experience, the research attempted to find out how five elements proposed by Chen & Starosta, interacted or influenced with each other. Those five elements incorporated in Intercultural Communication Competence Scale (ICCS), are interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment and interaction attentiveness. The survey results from the multiple regression charts disclosed that the elements composed of intercultural sensitivity actually interacted or influenced interactants' actual intercultural communication process.

Keywords: intercultural communication, language learning, intercultural learning, regression, intercultural sensitivity

1. Introduction

Since the term 'global village' was coined by the Canadian scholar, Marshall McLuhan, globalization increasingly expand in the past and present century and whether institutions or governments pay consistent efforts on developing citizens' intercultural communication competence to ensure that they are ready to embrace the new era (Wang & Kulich, 2015). From the social, linguistic, cultural, psychological perspective, these researches abound in the construct and measurement of intercultural communication competence (Ruben, 1976; Bennett, 1984; Koester, 1993). Meanwhile, education and training of intercultural competence has been drawn a growing attention (Wasson & Jackson, 2002), for example, according to those multinational companies, the globalization and global integrations lead to a tremendous amount of mobility of personnel. This is an urgent issue to assess and cultivate their intercultural competence to ensure that they can negotiate effectively during a business transaction (Karras, 2015).

However, Chen & Starosta (1997) argue that as a key concept in intercultural researches, it is not defined clearly from other concepts like intercultural awareness and intercultural competence. In fact, they further argue that intercultural communication competence, intercultural awareness and intercultural sensitivity represent behavioral, cognitive and affective aspect of interactants through the communication process. Anyway, the comprehensive and abundant conceptualization of intercultural communication competence facilitates our investigation into how on earth these factors contribute to one's general intercultural communication competence and influence one another. Therefore, it may be helpful for further studies on the establishment of theoretical structures for the development of education programs for intercultural competence. Because of the lack of effective empirical studies for Chinese postgraduates' intercultural competence assessment, the current study attempts to discuss how five elements incorporated in ICCS interact or influence interactants' intercultural communication process.

Based on a survey sample of 435 China postgraduates majoring in International Chinese Education with different undergraduate English learning experience, the research aimed at finding out how five elements proposed by Chen & Starosta (2000), interacted or influenced one another. Those five elements incorporated in *Intercultural Communication Competence Scale* (ICCS), developed by Chen & Starosta (2000), are interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment and interaction attentiveness.

It is estimated that the empirical findings can further promote the ICCS research in China context, thus providing a solid, rigorous foundation and evidence for the future training or cultivation trend for China's international Chinese education.

2. Literature Review

Over the last decades, an academic research field generally known as intercultural communication competence has been widely explored by scholars from various disciplines (koester, Wiseman, & Sanders,1993) Their efforts contribute to giving some insights into the construct of an effective intercultural communication, cultural values, measurements and adaptation, etc. For example, through an empirical research, Arasaratnam (2016) confirmed that there existed a positive relationship between intercultural communication competence and bilingualism. To Arasaratnam, if a child were introduced to learn a second language at an early age, it would be much helpful for him to develop ICC as adults. Neither gender had a preexisting advantage over the other in ICC, in other words, which may be conflicting with the general consensus that females are more competent at intercultural communication than males. Spitzberg (2000) develops a model of intercultural communication competence, including (a) individual system, (b) episodic system, (c) relational system. He targets and examines issues, surrounding appropriateness and effectiveness in intercultural interaction. His model does not figure out a specific way to cultivate intercultural competence and sensitivity.

In these previous researches, great contributions are made on intercultural communication competence, which however is comprehensively taken as knowledge, skills and motivations for effective communication (Spitzberg, 1989; Wiseman, 2001). Wiemann defines ICC as "the ability of an interactant to choose among available communicative behaviors in order that he [sic] may successfully accomplish his own interpersonal goals during an encounter while maintaining the face and line of his fellow interactants within the constraints of the situation"(1977, 198). Deardorff defines it in the *Handbook of Intercultural Competence* as appropriate and effective communication and behavior in intercultural situations (2009, xi).

Considering the multicultural and dimensional nature of intercultural communication competence, furthering probe into intercultural sensitivity should undoubtedly enrich and contribute the concurrent research of intercultural communication competence.

The earliest definition of intercultural sensitivity trace back to Bronfenbrener, Harding and Gallwey's research (1958) where they argue that sensitivity embodies two aspects: one is sensitivity to the generalized other, a "kind of sensitivity to the social norms of one's group" (McClelland,1958, 241), the other is sensitivity to individual differences (interpersonal sensitivity), an "ability to distinguish how others differ in their behavior, perceptions or feelings" (Bronfenbrener *et al.*, 1958).

Intercultural sensitivity was referred to as the interactants' ability not only to transform themselves from denial stage to integration stage affectively, but cognitively and behaviorally during the actual process of intercultural communication (Bennett, 1984; Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992).

Bennett (1993) further elaborates the concept and points out that there are six components of intercultural sensitivity, inter alia denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, and integration of cultural differences. Conceptually, Bennett's views on intercultural sensitivity are quite similar to that of intercultural communication competence, which is explored by many other researchers, Ruben (1976, 1988), Chen, (1989, 1990), Spitzberg (1989), Wiseman & Koester (1993). Building upon the elements of affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions, Bhawuk & Brislin (1992) even employs a model measure intercultural sensitivity from the perspective of both individualism and collectivism.

Obviously, these previous studies provide a solid foundation for the research of intercultural sensitivity. However, their understandings for intercultural communication competence remain rather confusing, overlapped. Though the three concepts are relevant, they are separate as they refer to different aspect or stage of the intercultural communication process. (Chen & Starosta, 2000). Accumulation of the abundant research in intercultural communication competence can facilitate our further probing into the deeper structure and potential hidden aspects of the intercultural communication. Hence, this can help to establish a more complete and scientific research system.

To Chen (1997), intercultural sensitivity mainly deals with our affective and emotion, while intercultural awareness, our cognitive. They both serve to interactants' behavioral act in intercultural communication process. In other words, intercultural sensitivity refers to affective aspect of intercultural communication competence of those interactants. That is Chen maintains "an individual's ability to develop a positive emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promotes an appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural communication" (1997, 5).

As the empirical studies on intercultural communication competence are limited (Chen, 2002); (Ding & Baldwin, 1996), the literatures of the empirical research on intercultural sensitivity are much less, especially those completed within intercultural situations where intercultural sensitivity is affected by various factors, such as individual intercultural training or experience, language proficiency, and understanding and acceptance towards cultural differences. In those limited empirical researches, Jain Sachin (2013) attempt to enhance intercultural sensitivity using cross-cultural movies and focused discussions with invited both treatment and control group, which was consisted of Caucasian participants.

The results establish that there is a significant increase in the participants' scores in the treatment group and no significant difference in the participants' pre and post scores in the control group. However, as pointed by the author, the more empirical data on intercultural sensitivity have to be shown in further studies. Loo and Shiomi (1999) survey 211 Canadians and 273 Japanese, using the Inventory of Cross-Cultural Sensitivity (ICCS) as proposed by Cushner (1986), who classify five scales into his inventory, namely, cultural integration, behavioral response, intellectual interaction, attitudes towards others and empathy. The results of the cross-cultural comparison show that Canadian sample expresses greater cross-cultural sensitivity than the Japanese one on the level of behavioral response, intellectual interaction and empathy. The empirical research on how Canadians and Japanese differ on intercultural sensitivity is rather detailed and specific. However, Cushner's scale fails to show a strong recovery of the five elements in both EFA and CFA given its low internal consistency reliability coefficients. Altshuler and various other critics (2003) also survey 24 pediatric resident trainees, 10 American and 14 non-American at a US medical center, using Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) as proposed by Hammer (1998), who categorizes his scale into six subscales, namely denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, cognitive adaptation and behavioral adaptation, with each composed of ten items. The results show low levels of denial, defense, and moderate levels of acceptance, cognitive and behavioral adaptation and a high level of minimization factors. To be specific, as put by the author, "training can produce some initial shift towards greater sensitivity" and "providing a cognitive framework for cultural differences would promote a greater understanding of such differences and enhance trainee's ability to learn specific communication skills" (2003, 400). However, on the one hand, considering the limitation of the sample size, the efficacy of the training intervention components need to be further reexamined, and on the other hand, given the affect of cultural difference on intercultural sensitivity. This is significant and apparent to see how such an influence after training revealed it in different trainee groups.

To improve the validity of measuring intercultural sensitivity, Chen and Starosta (2000) clarify the differences among intercultural competence, intercultural sensitivity, and intercultural awareness. This intercultural sensitivity refers to the affective aspect of interactional situation, together with intercultural awareness, contributing the interactant's behavioral aspect, namely intercultural competence. Referring to the above details, incorporated six elements, self-esteem, self-monitoring, open-mindedness, empathy, interaction involvement, and non-judgment-are conceived to be the factors influencing one's intercultural sensitivity. For instance, a scale is developed by Chen and Starosta (2000), that is the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ICC). Studies conducted by scholars, such as Chen and Starosta (2000), Fritz and various others (2001), and Banos (2006) replicate the five-factor structure and confirmed its high level of validity and reliability. Others, such as Wu (2015) only find four factors via Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) after the deletion of 9 items and Tamam (2010) only find three factors in Malaysian context.

To enrich the empirical study on intercultural sensitivity, the research explores how intercultural sensitivity is structured in China context among postgraduates majoring in International Chinese Education with different undergraduate English learning experience and how factors affect the disparity.

3. Method

To demonstrate how the five elements of intercultural sensitivity interact and affect one another, the survey, the current study uses the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale with 24 items (Cronbach $\alpha = 0.88$) proposed by Chen and Starosta (2000). It investigates 435 China postgraduates majoring in International Chinese Education. Among them are 237 students with the same undergraduate major as in postgraduate period, namely over half of the subjects hold the same experience of college English learning, 36 students with Bachelor degrees as of English majors, 73 students of Chinese majors and 64 students of none of the above majors. All the postgraduates surveyed are from universities with MA grants from Education Department of China, dedicated to international Chinese education. As the numbers of target subjects of each university are limited, to collect sufficient sample data, the researchers ask for assistance for the completion of the investigation from 19 universities in China: Beijing Normal University, Shanghai University, Soochow University, Southeast University, Nanjing Normal University, Zhejiang Normal University, Jiangsu Normal University, Shanghai International Studies University, Hebei University, Nanjing University, Minzu University of China, Nankai University, Southwest University, Dalian University of Foreign Languages, Hubei University of Technology, Yantai University, Nantong University, Yangzhou University, and Jiangsu University. Scale examples of the five elements are as follows:

a. Interaction Engagement: I tend to wait before forming an impression of culturally-distinct counterparts.

b. Respect for Cultural Differences: I don't like to be with people from different cultures.

c. Interaction Confidence: I am pretty sure of myself in interacting with people from different cultures.

d. Interaction Enjoyment: I get upset easily when interacting with people from different cultures.

e. Interaction Attentiveness: I try to obtain as much information as I can when interacting with people form different

cultures.

The whole scale is composed of 24 items, in which there are 7 items for interaction engagement, 6 for respect for cultural difference, 5 for interaction confidence, and 3 for interaction enjoyment and interaction attentiveness respectively.

As mentioned above, according to the undergraduate English learning experience, those survey samples are divided into four groups. The first group is for those 237 students, the second for those 36, the third for those 73, and the fourth for those 64. The study conducts multiple regressions for each group respectively in order to figure out the potential relationship and mutual influence among the elements in their structure of intercultural sensitivity across the four groups. Every element, as a dimension are taken as a dependent variable each time, when the rest of four as independent variables.

4. Results

The scale results reveal an overall Cronbach alpha of 857 on all 24 items. The Cronbach alpha for interaction was .729, for respect for cultural difference .664, for interaction confidence is .705, for interaction enjoyment is 753 and for interaction attentiveness is 404. The multiple regression results for each group are shown in from Table 1 to Table 5.

4.1 Regression of Interaction Engagement on other Dimensions

It is obvious that the contributions to interaction engagement based on the other four elements are presenting a diversity of different extent among those four groups. For postgraduates with undergraduate majors in International Chinese Education, respect for cultural differences (.437, $p<.001$) and interaction confidence (.342, $p<.05$) contributes significantly to their involvement of intercultural communication, whereas for the group two, those graduate as English majors, respect for cultural differences (.404, $p<.001$) and interaction enjoyment (.352, $p<.05$) contributes significantly to involvement of communication. For the group three, those graduates with Chinese majors, the respect for cultural difference (.502, $p<.001$), the contribution is also from interaction attentiveness (.327, $p<.05$), and for the group four, those who graduate with none of the above majors, only respect for cultural differences (.443, $p<.001$) serve as the essential contributing force.

Table 1. Regression of Interaction Engagement on other Dimensions

	Group one	Group two	Group three	Group four
Interaction engagement	—	—	—	—
Respect for cultural differences	.437**	.404**	.502**	.443**
Interaction confidence	.342*	-.003	.261	.126
Interaction enjoyment	.039	.352*	-.160	-.038
Interaction attentiveness	.262	.234	.327*	.259*
R	.741	.716	.705	.569
R^2	.549	.512	.497	.324
Adjusted R^2	.541	.449	.468	.278
F	70.585**	8.133	16.829**	7.064

Note. *$p < .05$. **$p <.001$

4.2 Regression of Respect for Cultural Differences on the other Dimensions

For the Group one, those postgraduates with the same majors in their undergraduate period, only interaction engagement (.535, $p<.05$) and interaction enjoyment (.426, $p<.05$) significantly contribute significantly to their respect for cultural differences. For the Group two, those postgraduates enrolled as English majors, the case is a little bit different. The data shows the interaction engagement is .473. It's disclosed that interaction confidence contributes significantly to the dimension of respect for cultural differences instead of interaction enjoyment. Interestingly, for the Group three and Group four, the same is true with Group one, but with reversed order as of interaction engagement (.416, $p<.05$), interaction enjoyment (.635, $p<.05$), and interaction engagement (.353,$p<.05$), interaction enjoyment (.517, $p<.05$) respectively.

Table 2. Regression of Respect for Cultural Differences on Other Dimensions

	Group one	Group two	Group three	Group four
Interaction engagement	.535[*]	.473[*]	.416[*]	.353
Respect for cultural differences	—	—	—	—
Interaction confidence	-.334	.550[*]	-.212	-.096
Interaction enjoyment	.426[*]	-.247	.635[*]	.517[*]
Interaction attentiveness	-.043	-.229	-.047	-.006
R	.669	.605	.764	.679
R^2	.447	.429	.584	.461
Adjusted R^2	.438	.355	.559	.424
F	46.961[*]	5.815	23.843[*]	12.601

Note. [*]$p < .05$.

4.3 Regression of Interaction Confidence on Other Dimensions

Interaction confidence is mainly affected by interaction engagement (.412, $p<.05$; 301, $p<.05$) and interaction enjoyment (.465, $p<.001$; 609, $p<.001$) for the Group one and Group three. Though it is basically the same true with the Group four, comparatively speaking, the contributions from the dimensions of interaction engagement and interaction enjoyment are much less. The case for Group two, those students with English major experience, is quite different. It is the combination of both interaction enjoyment (.473, $p<.001$) and interaction attentiveness (.393, $p<.05$), which contributed significantly to their level of interaction confidence.

Table 3. Regression of Interaction Confidence on other Dimensions

	Group one	Group two	Group three	Group four
Interaction engagement	.412[*]	-.002	.301[*]	.151
Respect for cultural differences	-0.328	0.293	-0.295	-0.144
Interaction confidence	—	—	—	—
Interaction enjoyment	.465[**]	.473[**]	.609[**]	.249
Interaction attentiveness	.149	.393[*]	.105	.299
R	.675	.834	.649	.433
R^2	.456	.696	.421	.188
Adjusted R^2	.447	.656	.387	.133
F	48.64[**]	17.721[**]	12.354[*]	3.407

Note. [*]$p < .05$. [**]$p <.001$

4.4 Regression of Interaction Enjoyment on Other Dimensions

For the Group one, those postgraduates with the same majors in their undergraduate period and the Group three, once as undergraduates being Chinese majors, interaction enjoyment is affected simply by the dimension of respect for cultural differences (.419, $p<.05$; 607, $p<.05$) and their interaction confidence (.465, $p<.05$; .419, $p<.05$). Similar to results shown in Table 3, for the Group four, those students who graduated from college without any learning experiences of none of the above majors, the contributions from the dimensions of interaction enjoyment are much less. What is different comes from the Group two, those students with BA of English major, their interaction enjoyment was influenced by their interaction engagement (.336, $p<.05$), and interaction confidence (.725, $p<0.001$).

Table 4. Regression of Interaction Enjoyment on Other Dimensions

	Group one	Group two	Group three	Group four
Interaction engagement	.048	.336[*]	-.127	-.035
Respect for cultural differences	.419[*]	-.201	.607[*]	.593[*]
Interaction confidence	.465[*]	.725[**]	.419[*]	.189
Interaction enjoyment	—	—	—	—
Interaction attentiveness	-.109	-.257	.032	-.043
R	.675	.731	.776	.618
R^2	.456	.534	.602	.382
Adjusted R^2	.446	.473	.579	.340
F	48.549[**]	8.869[*]	25.725[**]	9.114[*]

Note. [*]$p < .05$. [**]$p <.001$

4.5 Regression of Interaction Attentiveness on Other Dimensions

For the Group one, the students' interaction engagement (.441, p<.05) and interaction confidence (.208,p<.05) contribute significantly to the dimension of interaction attentiveness. For the Group two, the original English majors, their interaction attentiveness are mainly contributed by their interaction confidence (.753, p<.001) and interaction engagement (.280, p<.05). For the Group three, the students once as Chinese majors, interaction engagement (.470, p<.05) seems to be only supportively contributing factor. For the Group four, the results are similar to the Group one, the influential dimensions are from interaction engagement (.304, p<.05) and interaction confidence (.292, p<.05).

Table 5. Regression of Interaction Attentiveness on other Dimensions

	Group one	Group two	Group three	Group four
Interaction engagement	.441*	.280*	.470*	.304*
Respect for cultural differences	-.059	-.234	-.081	-.009
Interaction confidence	.208*	.753**	.131	.292*
Interaction enjoyment	-.152	-.321	.059	-.055
Interaction attentiveness	—	—	—	—
R	.491	.646	.528	.455
R^2	.241	.417	.229	.207
Adjusted R^2	.228	.342	.236	.154
F	18.434*	5.549	6.564	3.86

Note. *p < .05. **p <.001

5. Discussions

The results from the multiple regression charts demonstrate how the elements of intercultural sensitivity can interact or influence interactants' actual intercultural communication process. The diversity of contributions of one element from the other four reveals that differences exist among postgraduates with different college English or Chinese learning experiences.

Different combinations of factors affect interaction engagement among postgraduates in four groups. These help us distinguish how one can be motivated in an intercultural communication. For postgraduates with different college majors, whether international Chinese education, Chinese or whatever except English, the data of their respect for cultural differences and interaction confidence or even interaction attentiveness simply demonstrate their beliefs that in the intercultural communication process, one needs to respect, understand, accept or even tolerate cultural differences.   It is important and essential for interactants to achieve this .That is what a successful intercultural communication needs as interactants are all from diverse cultural backgrounds, communicating either verbally or non-verbally (Wells and Spinks, 1994). To get involved in an effective intercultural communication, confidence and attentiveness are also necessary, for one has to resolve a barrier caused by language non-proficiency, knowledge, apprehension or culture deficits.

Engagement is the initial step towards the successful completion of an intercultural communication process. Effectiveness of any intercultural communication also depends on their ability to display message skills, understand, distinguish, and execute the messages (Portalla & Chen, 2010). For the Group two, those students with English major experiences, as they have a higher level of English language proficiency than the other three groups, they enjoyed much more in the process of intercultural communication. This also may imply that the more fluently they can understand the messages. Consequently, the less attentive they will have to be in the process of intercultural communication. However, to our surprise, though those students with higher proficiency of English language and culture seem to enjoy much more than the other postgraduates with different major experience, they showed the least confidence among the four groups. This is probably due to the fact that frequently is deliberately overlooked by the foreign language teaching circle. That is to say, the English majors do actually reach a state of proficiency as compared with the native English speakers.

Our observation in foreign language teaching shows that today, the so-called English majors are frequently required to pass all kinds of tests to identify their proficiency of language, instead, the chances and time for their practice are rather limited. That is why, for those English majors, their confidences in intercultural communication almost disappeared.

Factors, which contribute to the interaction engagement of Group four, those students without English, Chinese or International Chinese education major experience, involve only respect for cultural differences (.443, p<.001) and interaction attentiveness (.259, p<.05). The absence of the contribution that interaction enjoyment could have made possibly shows that there is a long way for Group four students to go before their English proficiency may keep up with those English majors of the Group two. The case is similar for the Group three, those postgraduates with BA of Chinese major.

The influences that the dimensions have on respect for cultural differences are various among those four groups. For all of

them, they naturally anticipate the existence of cultural differences when involving in an intercultural communication. However, only for the Group one, especially for the Group three and four, the more they enjoy the communication, the more they show their respect for cultural differences. Nevertheless, for the Group two, those postgraduates once as English majors, it seems that though they bear much more confidence when communicating, they probably have not enjoyed the communication process as the other groups. It is easy to understand it because though those English majors have higher English proficiency and realize and want to completely apprehend those differences among cultures but only to find they frequently failed. Whereas, for the students of the Group one, especially in the Groups three and four, the different implications brought by cultural differences in the intercultural communication are novel and fresh for them, which may also explain why they barely had any confidence towards them. Confidence in the process of intercultural communication derives from the activity of communication itself. The growing confidence in the intercultural communications should have been built upon the frequency of an individual's practice, according to the developmental nature of intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1986).

The more you enjoy the communication, the more confidence you will build up. This is rather true for the postgraduates of the Group two, those English majors. For effective intercultural communication, the interactants will generally use appropriate behaviors to show that they are listening or agreeing with their counterparts' opinions (Portalla & Chen, 2010). The interaction enjoyment of intercultural communication relies on to what extent they are engaged (.336, p<.05) and confident (.725,p<.001) with these cultural differences in the process of understanding, acceptance or even tolerance as is shown in Group two, those English majors. The fact that only interaction confidence and respect for cultural differences contribute to interaction enjoyment for those students with different majors except English, seems to imply that on the way of experiencing the interaction enjoyment those English majors have gone much far; the more frequently they get involved with the interaction communication, the more confidence they will have, thus leading to a more joyful journey in the intercultural communication.

The results of interaction attentiveness for the Group two are similar to that of interaction enjoyment, with interaction confidence (.753, p<.001) and interaction engagement (.280, p<.05) contribute significantly to the dimension of interaction attentiveness. This further confirms the previous judgment that their attentiveness is affected by their involvement and confidence in the intercultural communication; however, it seems that no matter how much they get involved and how they are confident towards the communication, they fail to enjoy the process as they expect too much different than those of other three groups. This can be due to the fact that though those postgraduates with English major experience have much higher English language proficiency. They still cannot behave as what a native English speaker does in the intercultural communication.

The overall regression charts reveal how the five elements of intercultural sensitivity interact and influence one another among the different groups of postgraduates with different undergraduate majors. Undoubtedly, the deep probing into the structure of intercultural sensitivity across those interactants with different academic backgrounds enables us to improve how to boost students' intercultural communication competence, thus providing us a feasible way to engage in international Chinese education.

This study reveals that higher English language proficiency do help to improve individual's intercultural sensitivity to a large extent, but as far as the trainings for English majors or even for postgraduates majoring in international Chinese education are concerned, there is still a long way to go before they can be truly interculturally sensitive, bearing a competitive competence in intercultural communication. Future researches need to investigate how to improve individuals' intercultural sensitivity and continue to explore to what extent they may affect all the dimensions of intercultural sensitivity, English language proficiency, cultural fluency, second-language acquisition context or intercultural experience.

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