

Students' Construal of Intercultural Communication Competence and Intercultural Communication Teaching

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Intercultural communication competence (ICC) has been taken as one of the major goals in the teaching of English as a foreign language in China, under the impact of expanding intercultural and international contacts and the unsatisfactory English language performance of Chinese college graduates in their communication with other English speakers. Many universities in China are offering an Intercultural Communication (IC) course to their English majors. The course is explicitly designed to improve the students' ICC. However, a review of extant relevant literature finds it necessary to understand the students' perspective on ICC so that the teaching goal can be reached. Based on the assumption that ICC can be construed differently in different cultural contexts, this paper attempts to investigate the students' understanding of key concepts of ICC in an IC class in order to reveal any implications for effective IC teaching. Data were collected in class over the course of a semester including class observations, questionnaires, and course papers. Forty-nine participants of the class were junior English major students and seven were seniors. Discussion of the findings suggests that ICC as an ultimate teaching objective for the English majors in the classroom setting needs to be contextual, relational, dynamic, and conscientious so that stereotyping could be minimized.

Foreign (mainly English) language education in China has been facing tougher challenges since international and intercultural exchanges became prevalent over two decades ago. Graduates from colleges and universities are often required to be skillful in English listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating when they are hired. However, even after having learned English in the classroom in China for over ten years, many of them do not seem to be confident or competent in intercultural communication (IC)¹ in English.

Efforts have been made at various levels in the country to help college students develop their intercultural communication competence (ICC)² so as to meet the needs of the fast developing international trade and cultural exchanges. In 2000, the Ministry of Education started to implement nationwide the *National Syllabus for English Majors* (NSEM) (Chinese Higher Education Advisory Committee of Foreign Languages Programs, English Section, 2000). For the first time under the teaching principles in the NSEM, teachers are required to focus on cultivating ICC in their students. More universities also began to offer the IC course. Around 30 textbooks of IC in either English or Chinese have been published or introduced from abroad since the first collection of reading materials on IC for the English language learner, *Intercultural Communication—What it means to Chinese learners of English* (Hu, 1988), was published. An online search of the core journals of foreign languages in China using the key words "intercultural communication" found 475 articles published between 1999-2007, most of which, however, are concerned with how to integrate culture teaching in the target language teaching and learning.

The IC course is generally designed explicitly to improve students' ICC. A review of

extant relevant literature finds it necessary to understand the students' perspective on ICC so that the teaching goal can be reached. In communication studies, ICC has been constructed from communicative competence with a specific focus on the interlocutors' cultural backgrounds (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005; Spitzberg, 1988, 2000; Wilson & Sabee, 2003; Wiseman, 2007; Yang & Zhuang, 2007). The concept of "competence" is generally built upon the perception of effectiveness and appropriateness and "must be viewed as a social evaluation of behavior" (Spitzberg, 2000, p. 375). However, it is difficult to define ICC "[b]ecause competence can often be subjective and ICC is often subjective to the cultures of the individuals involved" (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005, p. 138). Such difficulty seems to be related to the elusive nature of culture which plays a key role in IC. In English language teaching, Alptekin (2002) questions the native speaker model of communicative competence since English has been used as a lingua franca worldwide. The culture variables seem to have significant impact on perception of ICC.

In second/foreign language teaching and learning, (for example, Byram & Feng, 2005; Gao, 1999), researchers generally focus on the teaching of culture integrated in a target language teaching course rather than IC teaching as part of the curriculum for the English major. To fill in this gap as well as to contribute to understanding of ICC, the current study attempts to explore how the advanced English major students define ICC and how they respond to knowledge they are learning in their IC class. Specifically, three research questions are asked:

1. What is the students' understanding of "culture," IC and ICC when they are taking the IC course?
2. What do the students mean by "knowledge" which is commonly taken as one component of ICC in English?
3. What might the findings imply for teaching IC in terms of helping the students develop their ICC?

Following are four sections: first, description of the IC classes and my data collection; second, definition of culture and ICC based on the data; third, discussion of ICC and stereotyping; and fourth, implications from the previous sections for teaching IC and further research.

Intercultural Communication Classes and Data Collection

This research was conducted at one of the key universities in a northern coastal city in China. The English Department of the university enrolls around 60 undergraduate students each year. Due to the university's privileged status in China's higher education, the students' grades in the national entrance exams are generally higher than those in less privileged schools. They are highly motivated to master the target language so that they will be able to find a job using their foreign language skills.

The IC course is one of the elective courses for the higher-level English majors. Following the NSEM (Chinese Higher Education Advisory Committee of Foreign Languages Programs, English Section, 2000, p. 27), the course aims to: help students understand the historical, geographic, social, economic, political, and educational situations and cultural traditions of English speaking countries; raise their sensitivity, tolerance, and flexibility to cultural differences; and develop their ICC. In addition, it emphasizes helping students

explore practical issues in their own IC experiences involving relationships of culture and language, and cross-cultural and cross-linguistic comparisons. The course was offered to two classes of English majors in the second semester of 2007: one senior undergraduate class of 11 students and one junior class of 53. Davis (2001) was used as textbook. The class format was an integration of brief lecture, group presentation on chapters, and class discussion. All the students were required to participate in the group presentation and class discussion. In addition, they were assigned a group research project and an individual course paper. The former was to analyze one of the cases they chose from the textbook, and the latter to reflect on one of their own personal intercultural experiences, applying what they had studied during the semester. Both tasks were completed outside of class and submitted in both hard and soft copies at the end of the semester. Their writings were 3-5 pages and double-spaced in font size 12.

Both classes had the same classroom setting except that one was much larger than the other. The classrooms were equipped with multi-media. Students mainly used PowerPoint for their chapter and final project presentations, but some of them inserted movie clips or songs for illustration. All the student seats were fixed in rows facing a platform in the front center and above it there was a blackboard and a white screen as one would find in a typical lecture hall. The computer was situated in the left corner opposite to one of the classroom doors.

In those classrooms, I collected the questionnaire data. Following Arasaratnam and Doerfel's (2005) proposal that understanding of ICC should be grounded in cultural contexts, I designed a series of questionnaires in Chinese to elicit the English majors' understanding of "ICC" and "culture." Of the four questionnaires, the first three consisted of open questions and the last one consisted of ten statements on which the students were asked to express their opinion on seven-point Likert scales, with anchors from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The ten statements were built upon content words (which function as key words for answering the questions) with highest occurrences in the students' answers from the previous questionnaires (for the statements in English version, see Appendix). Such a procedure aimed at eliciting non-imposed definition of the key concepts in IC related to ICC of the English major at a university in China.

I conducted the questionnaires one after another at the beginning of class throughout the semester. Papers were collected when students had finished individually answering all the questions. The number of papers collected varied for each questionnaire due to different number of absences each time and the shorter semester for the senior class (9 weeks). As this research is not quantity-driven but mainly qualitatively exploratory, inconsistency of the number of participants in the four questionnaires will not be considered.

Defining "Culture" and "ICC"

As the word "culture" was found relatively frequently in the first two questionnaires,³ Questionnaire 3 asked this open question: Based on your own ideas, try to define "culture" as much in detail as possible in Chinese. An analysis of the answers led to three categories of content words: 1) ideology subsuming worldviews, beliefs, values, mentalities, literature heritage, and ethnicity; 2) behaviors including customs and conventions, rituals, life and production styles, language and other material artifacts, and all kinds of activities; and 3) qualities or natures of culture such as historically transmitted, locally distinctive, traditional,

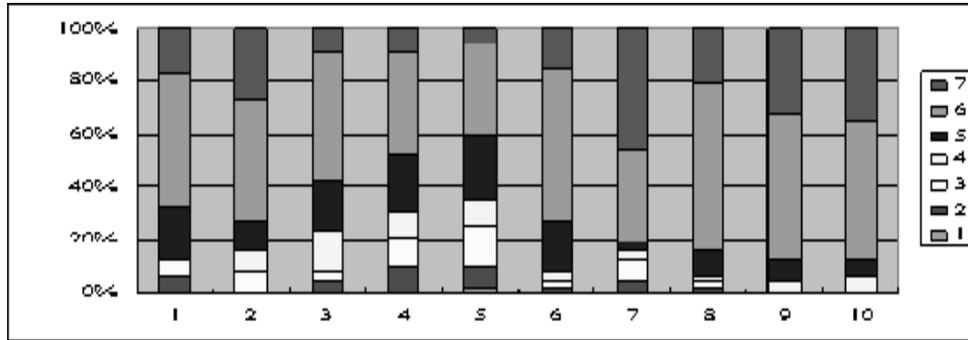


Figure 1: Distribution of the answers to the ten statements.

Note: The numbers 1-7 on the right in vertical stand for respectively “Strongly Disagree,” “Disagree,” “Slightly Disagree,” “Undecided,” “Slightly Agree,” “Agree,” and “Strongly Agree.”

representative, time free, identifiable, diversified, and so on. The answers suggest that “culture” denotes something that shapes our thinking-orientation, which can be observed in our behaviors (both verbal and nonverbal), and which transcends generations of a group of people.

The fourth questionnaire attempted to confirm quantitatively the students’ opinions on the key conceptions related to ICC. Figure 1 presents the students’ (n=52) answers to the statements, which shows that most students agree on all the statements, but their opinions on the first five statements, especially statements 4 and 5, seem to be relatively scattered.

Statement 5 is the only one on which 1.9% of the students strongly disagreed. With the 7.7% who disagreed and 15.4% who slightly disagreed, it has the highest percentage of negative responses (that is, all the three degrees of disagreement) followed by Statement 4. Both statements are about what good IC means. They might be confusing to the students who were uncertain about some terms such as the “speaker/listener identity,” “self and/or other satisfaction,” and “self goal orientation” used in describing good IC. On the other hand, the negative responses may suggest that the students have different criteria for what good IC is.

In contrast, over 80% of the students agreed or strongly agreed on Statements 7-10. The percentage of “Strongly Agree” on Statement 7 is the highest of all the answers. It may suggest that English majors have come to realize that understanding the linguistic form does not necessarily lead to comprehending meaning implicated in the form. That around 95% of the students gave positive responses (that is, all the three degrees of agreement) to Statements 8-10, especially Statements 9 and 10 without any negative response, may indicate the English majors’ strong awareness of functions of culture in language learning and use.

The above analysis of the questionnaire data offers an answer to the first research question how ICC is defined and understood by English majors in China. ICC refers to abilities to flexibly, appropriately, and effectively apply one’s knowledge and skills (including linguistic, cultural, and communicative) during interaction with people from different cultural backgrounds. Culture here refers to beliefs, values, ways of thinking, social conventions, ways of speaking, artifacts, and so on deposited and shared by a group of people through

generations living together. Knowledge, motivation, and skills constitute ICC. A competent intercultural communicator should understand his/her interlocutor's identity and adopt appropriate strategies accordingly in order to satisfy the other but *not to sacrifice one's own culture* as well as reach one's own goals. This attitude towards ICC is suggested in one of the student course papers:

From this Hong Kong travel, I concluded another basic rule in cross-culture communication which is not included in this textbook. The rule is sticking to your own culture. Different cultures always share a lot of valuable things, though they appear to be very different. I am sure that all the cultures can get along very well with each other. When doing cultures, *never sacrifice one culture to satisfy the other* [italicizing by the author]. One should be proud of his own culture and stick to it, only in this way can he be admired and respected in the other culture. (S7)

Many students seem to share such feelings about their native culture, which might explain why Statements 5 and 4 got the highest number of negative responses.

On the other hand, an incompetent intercultural communicator often lacks self-confidence due to unfamiliarity with the interlocutor's culture, or is overconfident due to some but limited knowledge about this culture. For the English majors, culture is as important as language. Language for them is a communicative tool which is systemic and culture-specific. Learning a new language does not mean just learning its forms (for instance, vocabulary and syntax), but most importantly acquiring or understanding its patterned use and associated meaning, that is, when, where, how, and why to say what to whom. Likewise, mastering linguistic skills (including listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation) does not necessarily mean intercultural competence. Appropriate language use (that is, what is said corresponds with the speaker's identity) directly determines communication effectiveness (that is, both parties being satisfied) in IC.

ICC and Stereotyping

According to the above definition of culture and ICC, how an English major can become a competent TL user may rely on his or her knowledge about the TL and its culture besides motivation and skills. However, this knowledge needs to be scrutinized in the IC classroom teaching for the purpose of developing the student's ICC.

First, what is knowledge in the English majors' mind? Three categories of knowledge in terms of its sources are found in the students' individual course papers and group written reports. First, knowledge means what students learn in the classroom or from teachers. For instance (the word "knowledge" is italicized by the author):

When I was in high school, I had a political class from which I could learn the basic *knowledge* of our government structure and some economical theories. (S15) [The code is used here for the author's reference. "S" stands for the individual course paper and "G" stands for the group written report.]

I do benefit a lot from it [the IC course the student took], through which I have

acquired quantities of *knowledge* concerning about what the subject is and how to communicate well with people from different cultures. (S34)

In this stage [honeymoon (Davis, 2001, p. 316)], we are eager to know whether the *knowledge* we have learned indirectly about the foreigners is true or not. Hanvey defines such kind of *knowledge* as stereotypes. For instance, we read in the textbooks that it is impolite to ask the Westerners about their age. (S36)

Having already had academic *knowledge* about cross-culture relations, I moved beyond the usual tourist experience and went deeper to cultural differences about ways in which Americans live their lives. (S37)

In China, teachers are always highly respected. Because for a long time, they have been regarded the symbol of *knowledge*: like Han Yu's (韩愈) [*Han Yu*] words that "teachers are those who pass on the *knowledge* to students and enlighten them" ("师者，所以传道授业解惑也" [*shi zhe, suoyi chuandao shouye jiehuo ye*]). (G4)

Second, "knowledge" is acquired from experiences as indicated in the following:

We are given more opportunities to have contact with different people, as a result, we gain more new *knowledge* from them. (S4)

While the *knowledge* of the above three issues [the student's personal IC experiences] is a necessary but not efficient conditions for success, because there are many other skills [that] should be handled, such as non-verbal communications, taboos and so on. Generally speaking, the more we know about different cultures, the better we do cross-cultural negotiation. (S14)

I learned a lot from that experience, not only the *knowledge*, more importantly, John's tolerance to the new and unusual ideas and that is also the reason he chosen me. (S15)

From the communication with the American students, I have a better understanding of the theories in the text book and recognize that real *knowledge* is found in real life and communication promotes understanding. (S25)

In this stage [frustration (Davis, 2001, p. 316)], the person has much more *knowledge* of the new culture but judges them negatively. (G1)

Third, knowledge is obtained from various sources such as classroom learning, print and visual media, and life experiences, or is general as shown below:

I can say that I have much *knowledge* of English culture through years of study, TV programs, films, etc., but I still feel that it is really frustrating when I communicate with our advanced writing teacher Daniel. (S2)

One important thing is to get some basic *knowledge* about the others' cultures so as not to misunderstand some actions or habits of the foreigners, for example, in some countries, nodding one's head means no, while shaking means yes. This is completely different with us, so if we don't know, we couldn't communicate with each other well, even cause some problems. (S12)

There should be a culture shock when we step from one culture into another. I used to be in the shocked half because of the universally existing reason for culture shock, half because of my lack of cross-culture *knowledge*. (S21)

My friend told me that they used a lot of slang words in America, especially among the young people. Without culture background *knowledge* and the context, it is difficult for others to understand the meanings. (S30)

They [abbreviations used in the MSN online chat] are very common in America, but not easy to be understood for our English learners, because we do not have the cultural environment and background *knowledge*. (S30)

As the textbook tells us: the key to effective cross-cultural communication is *knowledge*. (S34)

The first feature is self-help, which can mostly be found in the preparation of the basic *knowledge* and information before class. (G4)

The common mistakes at interviews are poor personal appearance, poor preparation, lack of *knowledge* about the organization, negativity, over enthusiasm or lack of enthusiasm. (G10)

All these kinds of knowledge can be essential and are prerequisites for understanding or doing something new. That adjectives such as "background," "basic," and "real" are found commonly used in Chinese students' writing and speaking to modify the word knowledge reflects a traditional Chinese view about education and learning, that is, students are supposed to master something fundamental for their future, either in their personal life or career. A solid knowledge foundation is often compared to the base of a building. As to mastering the basic knowledge such as the key points in a textbook, students tend to rely on the teacher for guidance. One of the students in my Intensive English class five years ago complained in the end-of-semester teaching survey about too much student talk in class because she strongly believed that she was supposed to learn knowledge from the teacher not her peers in class and only the teacher's lecture could provide "valid" knowledge. This student's belief may not be shared by every English major now but the teacher as a symbol of knowledge and the importance of textbooks remain popular among the Chinese students (see excerpts above, especially S34, S36, and G4).

Second, what knowledge do students learn in the IC course that would benefit their ICC development? As indicated in the students' writing, one of the major sources of knowledge on IC is textbooks and classroom teaching. However, a few junior students criticized in their

course papers the textbook as stereotyping and even discriminating against Chinese culture. For instance:

Just take our cross-cultural communication textbook for example, although the author seems to try to be objective, many of us (I have asked many of our classmates) can feel and find his superiority of his culture and his some misunderstandings of our culture. It makes us feel that he is beatifying his culture although he may not mean that. (S10)

One student critiqued elaborately the textbook in her course paper with a title, “Cross ‘cross-cultural communication’”:

In this textbook, cross-cultural communication is mainly concerned with cultural differences between the *American culture* which is described in this textbook as a spokesman of *western culture* and the *Chinese culture* which stands for the *eastern culture*. What’s more, in this textbook, when it comes to the so called culture-shock or cultural conflict, it tends to criticize Chinese culture directly or indirectly, though it claims that the purpose of this book is to promote mutual understanding and build friendly relationship between these two major worldly cultures. The above two aspects of this textbook which I find are cultural discriminations. As a textbook which is designed to learn and inspire students, in stead of speaking out of a sense of superiority, it should be more open and tolerate. [italicizing by the author] (S16)

This Western-American versus Eastern-Chinese contrast seems to connote an assumption that the two cultures do not stand on an equal base, according to the student (see further discussion on these binary terms in the following). Nevertheless, positive comments are found in most of the students’ course papers. For example:

After a semester of study, I’ve got a lot of useful information from this book. This course gives us a chance to explore and change attitudes so we are better prepared to communicate with people across culture. This textbook is not just words on paper, but ideas in practice...I practiced the ideas from the textbook and appreciated it so much. (S7)

The same textbook actually engendered quite different attitudes possibly due to individual circumstances, which, however, raises a critical question on what cultural knowledge represents legitimate or objective understanding of different cultures and how the teacher presents it to her students in class. Byram and Feng (2005, p. 917) contend that “the facts-oriented approach” to teaching culture “may well lead to the teaching of stereotypes” since “...the major component of what we call the culture ‘is a social construct, a product of self and other perceptions’” (Kramsch, 1993, p. 205). The process of teaching IC can be that of the students’ forming their own identity, accepting or negating it. The cases for exploring ideas in the textbook⁴ may be interpreted differently as materials for analysis so that one could avoid repeating a similar IC embarrassment, or as facts for discrimination. Although the students had been reminded throughout the semester that culture changes and no culture is

superior over the other, which the author clearly writes in her book, her tone of presenting the materials in her book might be interpreted differently.

The fact that both the textbook and the teacher participate in creating and projecting images of different cultural groups in class could lead to stereotypes of those groups in the students. Any academic studies of human behaviors are subjective, as the researcher him or herself determines how to approach to the topic. Stephens (1997) writes:

In anthropology, the tension between internally and externally generated category systems is well known. A culture can be described in terms of a set of categories which are generated by the participants in that culture, “emic” description, or it can be described using a system developed by outsiders to that culture, “etic” description. The interplay between these perspectives is a matter of concern for the process of cultural description. (p. 114)

The “etic” description might be overgeneralized whereas the “emic” description is too particular to be generalized. The connoted meaning of the etic terms tends to be biased. For example, “directness” versus “indirectness” could be associated with “honesty” and “dishonesty” (see Wierzbicka, 1991, for more discussion on this issue). There might be a paradox for teaching culture and communication, as no matter which category of description the teacher presents, she might tend to more or less stereotype different cultures. Another factor that seems to contribute to this dilemma is that a complete picture of any cultural group can hardly be presented in class. The elusive nature of culture poses a major challenge to teaching IC in terms of integrating generalities and particularities of the cultural groups under study without stereotyping.

As knowledge, especially cultural knowledge, is by nature partial and situational, and can be out-of-date or distorted, stereotypical or discriminative, what a competent intercultural communicator needs might not be just knowledge in the sense of knowing something but that in the sense of knowing how to handle something in a specific context. In his investigation of “20 students randomly chosen from a group of 98 freshmen in a university in China,” Wu (1999) points out that “the widening gap between a highly analytical TL knowledge and an undeveloped procedural knowledge inhibits the students’ development of oral abilities” (p. 2). Gao (1999), in her alternative framework to define ICC, proposes a “*Tao-qi* distinction of ICC” (p. 118). She defines *Tao* as “the communication subject’s orientation of realizing his or her own potential through the understanding of other human beings” and “*qi*” as “knowledge, skills, and effects” (pp. 125-126). She suggests to “teach *Tao* through *qi*” (p. 136). The natures of *Tao* of ICC are “holistic,” “not measureable or quantifiable,” “to be ‘*wu*’-ed,” and “universal” (p. 140). Both procedural knowledge and *Tao* may involve the cognitive capacity of perceiving, discovering, and making rational decisions in context (see Spitzberg, 2000, pp. 379-380). The few students’ critical views on the textbook were regarded as such cognitive capacity and actually encouraged in class by the instructor. The abilities to negotiate meaning associated with various cultures (mainly native and target) should be part of the cultural knowledge the students learn in class.

Third, what is the value of knowledge and whose value should be accepted? The different attitudes towards the textbook may represent the different values that the students attach to knowledge about different cultures. Spitzberg (2000) points out that “whether it is the

negotiation of an arms treaty, or the settlement of a business contract, or merely a sojourner getting directions from a native, cultures do not interact, people do” (p. 375). People subconsciously value each other from their own world views, but they can also act consciously in various contexts. For example, one senior student wrote in his course paper:

Several weeks ago, I was invited by Daniel, a teacher from England, to his apartment for lunch. He and his hospitable wife cooked tomato sauce, toasted bread with butter which they call “absolute British food.” Yet this time, British food really fit its world-famous reputation—I don’t like them at all. Having taken a slice of bread, I simply couldn’t stand it, but Daniel, his wife Joy and even his lovely daughter enjoyed it very much. According to English culture, if I said “no” to Daniel, he wouldn’t offer me anything. So when he tried to give me another slice of bread, I said “no, thanks.” To my surprise, Daniel said, “Have more, duo chi dian!” That was completely the Chinese way of treating guests! Then I realized that Daniel was learning Chinese culture at that time. Okay, according to Chinese culture, I’d better suffer and enjoy that bread.

In this case, both of Daniel and I wanted to use the other’s mother culture to tackle the problem, yet neither of us did succeed. I call this a coding mistake. The process of sending and receiving a message is a process of coding messages. The process of encoding and decoding is influenced or constrained by cultural and linguistic factors. The speaker encodes the message first, then decoded by the listener who makes a response. At Daniel’s home, I encoded my bad feeling as a “no” though British culture, but Daniel decoded it as being shy and moderate, according to Chinese culture. Maybe next time I visit him, we’d better make an agreement to standardize our culture reference. (S54)

This student recognized his interlocutor’s change of cultural identity and quickly switched from the English native speaker’s strategy to the Chinese one possibly due to his lack of confidence in his TL use and anxiety over any embarrassment or miscommunication. He practiced his knowledge about the different cultural behaviors in a flexible way. Daniel did not seem to be sensitive to Chinese table manners. In such a case, a competent communicator should be able to understand the situation and adjust him/herself appropriately and spontaneously.

On the other hand, cultural knowledge can be negatively valued as biased and discriminative, and hence may probably activate distant or even hostile attitudes towards the other cultural groups. One of the students wrote:

...as to chapter 15, it severely criticizes Chinese students for their poor writings. Actually no matter Chinese painting or Chinese style of thinking, they all come out of *Chinese philosophy* featured by *harmony and modesty*. Nevertheless the author use her *western philosophy* featured by *reasoning and argument* to value writings created by Chinese English students, ignoring the overwhelming influence of our mother culture. She should take this into consideration. What’s more, in the name of

doing cross-culture, why don't the author exhibit Chinese writings by American students and see if they write Chinese in an American thinking? [italicizing by the author] (S16)

She made an intriguing case of the Chinese EFL students' English writing. Implied in her writing seems to be a controversial question: Whose value should the EFL learner stick to in the TL use? To answer this question has to do with what criteria the teacher uses for evaluation. Using the native-speaker proficiency as a standard to evaluate the nonnative speaker's TL proficiency has been challenged in the circle of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Since English has become an international language, or the so-called lingua franca, localization of English is getting to be well accepted. Just as differences between American English and British English, be it phonetic or lexical, non-native English speakers in different nations tend to use English in their own unique ways. Alptekin (2002) contends that ICC should not target at "native speaker norms" but rather appropriacy at "both global and local" levels for competent communicators. In other words, appropriate and effective English language use has to be contextualized as different speech communities may share different rules of interaction and interpretation.

The two cases above indicate that students evaluate cultures in different ways. S54 seems more utilitarian, practicing both native and target cultural ways in a flexible manner. This approach seems to be deeply rooted in the Chinese concept of harmony and face in interpersonal communication. S16, in contrast, adopted a confrontational approach in her intercultural communication with the author of the textbook, claiming that the TL learner's cultural value in the TL writing should be respected and considered. Therefore, Chinese students' "poor" English writing should not be valued as "poor" if the style of "harmony and modesty" is applied instead of "reasoning and argument." Radical and partial as her words may sound, the student somehow demonstrated her critical thinking.

Controversial opinions on the value of knowledge might be related to categorization of cultures by nation. The same junior student wrote in her course paper,

...in the introduction of this book, it is said that this book written by a foreigner is in some sense to describe Chinese culture for a Chinese audience. What's more, on the back cover of this textbook, it says that this book is to inspire our reflection on our own culture. So there is no wonder that this book is full of direct or indirect of discrimination over Chinese culture, eastern culture, i.e. high context culture.The implies bias of this book would unfortunately give a false illusion of American civilization and make Chinese English learners look upon their culture and tradition. (S16)

Such binary terms as American-Western versus Chinese-Eastern culture may well lead to stereotyping and needs to be replaced by a non-discriminative approach. Scollon and Scollon (1995) put forward an alternative approach to describing human communication behaviors—a discourse approach, which may circumvent the cultural stereotypes. In any culture, you may find different discourse styles in use though there might be a tendency for adopting one of them in a certain profession or context. The speaking framework for describing and comparing patterned behaviors in different speech communities (Hymes, 1972) may also

serve well as non-stereotyping since it focuses on interaction of components of a particular communicative event on the insider's meaning.⁵

To answer the second question raised in the introduction, knowledge as one component of ICC can be problematic in the IC course for the English majors. Identified are three sources from which knowledge is acquired. Although the textbook and the teacher are believed to be major sources of knowledge in class, the teaching content is interpreted differently. The two opposite attitudes towards the knowledge suggest that classroom knowledge can be stereotypical as well as practically useful. The etic descriptions, binary terms, and selection of some discrete cases seem to project favorable and unfavorable images of the target and native cultures respectively and hence may lead to unrealistic expectations in IC. Therefore, knowledge as the cognitive capacity of perceiving, discovering, and negotiating of meaning must be stressed so that stereotypes or discrimination against any cultural group can be minimized.

Implications for EFL Teaching and Further Research

ICC for the English majors in an EFL context should be defined as abilities to use their TL flexibly, effectively and appropriately in IC by negotiating meanings for both parties of the interactants in a particular communicative event. Meaning negotiation is often affected by the student's cultural knowledge, and a very important part of that knowledge comes from the teacher and the selected teaching materials in class. However, how the teacher guides the classroom learning and how the students approach the input might somehow concern a human cognitive tendency to making sense of a larger and less familiar world; in other words, stereotyping. In an EFL context like China, stereotyping influences the students' motivation and skills in IC in that it tends to project undifferentiated images of the individuals from different cultural groups. Likewise, stereotyping may interfere in how the non-native speaker learners of English are judged in terms of their ICC. Therefore, the students' ICC in a classroom setting should not be measured by stereotypical standards of the so-called native speaker's proficiency but rather the students' abilities to perceive, discover, and make sense of what is going on in the process of IC. As the world is getting more multi-cultural and diverse with the growing trend of globalization, ICC as an ultimate teaching objective for the English majors in the classroom setting needs to be contextual, relational, dynamic, and conscientious so that stereotyping could be minimized.

The above findings from the previous sections have some implications for how teaching IC can help the English majors develop their ICC—the third research question of the current study.

First, the teacher needs to encourage students to think critically in order to avoid stereotyping members from any cultural groups including the students' own cultural group. Thinking critically means to be aware of the specific context in which the TL is used for all the participants' satisfaction in a reasonable sense. One way to help students think critically is to use the SPEAKING framework, which provides a systemic approach to understanding the impact of interaction of communicative components on discourse meanings. Thinking critically should be facilitated by an understanding of the nature of IC, that is, IC should be two-way rather than one-way communication, meaning following the TL use rules while letting the TL native speaker know or learn the non-native speaker's native language use.

Since “language is a record of cultural practices, or a syntactic and semantic representation of what is important or salient in that culture” (Lyons, 1977, cited in Tsuda, 1986, p. 49), one of the goals of IC should be to reach mutual understanding by exchanging diverse cultural values. Once students can think critically, they may learn the knowledge in class more effectively, which would help with their development of ICC.

Second, criteria for evaluating student ICC need to be contextualized rather than stereotyped (that is, using a fixed set of rigid rules or the TL native speaker’s verbal pattern as standard for intercultural behaviors). The teacher herself must be able to understand why her students use the TL in certain ways in either classroom interaction or self-report of their own intercultural experiences so that she could guide as well as evaluate the students regarding their ICC in dynamics. When designing the criteria, the teacher must fully consider interactional factors including topic, setting, interlocutor, the student’s language proficiency, and so on.

Third, to avoid projecting binary images between two cultural groups and to “undermine the human tendency to exaggerate and generalize differences,” teaching IC may well start with similarities rather than differences (Pachler, 1999, p. 10). In this rapidly globalizing village, one may find more young people than ever before from all over the world sharing certain fashion life styles and world views. Another way to refrain from stereotyping is to direct the student’s attention to discourse systems rather than culture dimensions such as individualism versus collectivism which are often associated with nations (Scollon & Scollon, 1995).

To conclude, I must point out that this research topic is certainly more than this paper can cover. Studies of teaching the English majors IC course for developing their ICC in an EFL context involve the target language and culture teaching and learning and communication. Further research needs to work on what factors may have impact on the students’ classroom performance based on which their ICC is evaluated, how the factors interact on their performance, how much the performance can tell about the competence, how the two concepts can be clearly defined, and what kind of operational measurements can be used for grading the students’ ICC. More data from various sources such as interviews is necessary. In addition, a broad survey of the impact of stereotyping on ICC in the EFL context will certainly be conducive to promoting international exchanges and world peace.

Notes

1. IC here refers to interaction with either native or nonnative English speakers.
2. ICC can be found in extant literature to be used interchangeably sometimes with “intercultural communicative competence,” “intercultural competence,” “communicative competence,” and “cultural competence.”
3. Questionnaire 1 included five questions on definition of IC, components of ICC, competent intercultural communicator, successful and unsuccessful IC. Questionnaire 2 was focused on meaning of language, successful language learners, and relative importance of accuracy, fluency, and appropriacy.
4. There are in total in the textbook 23 cases of cross-cultural contact in which the student is asked “to identify the sources of the misunderstanding and make recommendations as to how it can be improved” (Davis, <http://www.teflchina.org/teach/culture/index.htm#re-teaching->

culture).

5. Dell Hymes' SPEAKING framework comprises setting and scene, participants, ends, act sequence, key, instrumentality, norms, and genre. For each component's explanation, see Hymes (1972).

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