Intercultural Communicative Competence in Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract

In recent years there has been a growing interest in the cultural dimension of foreign language education, and teachers today are expected to promote the acquisition of intercultural competence in their learners. This study presents an analysis of viewpoints in the development of intercultural competence in the English as foreign language teaching classroom in Iran. Intercultural competence, as acknowledged as the key component of foreign language studies, increases the need to adapt teaching methods and materials to raise learners' intercultural awareness. The following research problem is formulated: do English as foreign language learners' attitudes become more positive due to the impact of intercultural learning and how they benefit from the impact of intercultural learning in their attitude and overall language proficiency. Based on the study carried out in two intact classes at Iran Language Institute with 48 intermediate language learners, the results indicated that practices in intercultural competence develop their positive attitudes about their culture and target language culture and it motivates them to develop their overall language competence.

Keywords: Intercultural Competence- Language Learners' Attitude- Overall Language Competence

1. Intercultural communicative competence and its components

An initial review of the literature to date regarding intercultural competence identifies a range of terms that have been used in the research as a synonym for intercultural competence including the following terms: cross-cultural adaptation, intercultural sensitivity, multicultural competence, trans-cultural competence, global competence, cross-cultural effectiveness, international competence, global literacy, global citizenship, cultural competence, and cross-cultural adjustment as Sinicrope , Norris & Watanbe (2012) list. Kim and Ruben (1992) state that the use of "intercultural" is preferable because "the term is not bounded by any specific cultural attributes" (p. 404). It is interesting to note that a meta-analysis of research on communication competence in intercultural contexts found that "many scholars seem willing

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to use intercultural communication competence in preference to other labels, including intercultural effectiveness" (Bradford, Allen, & Beisser, 2000, p. 32). However, due to the lack of consensus on its definition, Stone (2006) suggested a definition of "intercultural effectiveness" (which covers a similar range of competences to intercultural understanding and competencies) that is "the ability to interact with people from different cultures so as to optimize the probability of mutually successful outcomes" (p.338).

Chen and Starosta (1999) define "intercultural communication competence" as "the ability to effectively and appropriately execute communication behaviors that negotiate each other's cultural identity or identities in a culturally diverse environment" (p. 28). They outline three key components of intercultural communication competence: intercultural sensitivity (affective process), intercultural awareness (cognitive process), and intercultural adroitness (behavioral process), defined as verbal and nonverbal skills needed to act effectively in intercultural interactions. Chen and Starosta (1996) note that effectiveness and appropriateness are two other concepts commonly applied to communication competence.

Wiseman (2001) suggests that intercultural communication competence is comprised of knowledge, skills, and motivation needed to interact effectively and appropriately with persons from different cultures. In this definition, motivation is a unique element not included in some of the other definitions of intercultural competence and is further defined as "the set of feelings, intentions, needs and drives associated with the anticipation of or actual engagement in intercultural communication" (p. 4).

Kim (1992) in utilizing a systems-theory approach to examine intercultural communication competence, defines this construct in terms of one's "adaptive capacity" comprised of cognitive ("sense-making"), affective (including emotional and aesthetic tendencies, motivational and attitudinal predispositions), and operational/behavioral (flexible and resourceful) dimensions.   For Kim (1992) adaptability is at the heart of intercultural communication competence and defines it as "the individual's capacity to suspend or modify some of the old cultural ways, and learn and accommodate some of the new cultural ways, and creatively find ways to manage the dynamics of cultural difference/unfamiliarity, intergroup posture, and the accompanying stress" (p. 377). According to Kim, the elements of cultural difference/unfamiliarity, intergroup posture and accompanying stress are the challenges inherent in all intercultural encounters and the nature of intercultural communication competence should be viewed in this context.

 Byram (1997), in his model of intercultural communicative competence, puts much importance on the language (linguistic competence) and also identity and cultural understanding in his conceptualization. He argues that a comprehensive definition of intercultural communicative competence should include the social context and non-verbal dimensions of communication. For him the components of intercultural competence are attitudes, knowledge, skills and complemented by the values one holds because of one's belonging to a number of social groups. These values are part of one's social identities. Byram (1997) asserts that the foundation of intercultural competence is in the attitudes of the intercultural speaker.

2. Intercultural communicative competence in foreign language education

 Some characteristics and competencies have been identified in order to be cope with the inrtercultural experiences as the willingness to engage with the foreign culture, self-awareness and the ability to look upon oneself from the outside, the ability to see the world through the others' eyes, the ability to cope with uncertainty, the ability to act as a cultural

mediator, the ability to evaluate others' points of view, the ability to consciously use culture learning skills and to read the cultural context, and the understanding that individuals cannot be reduced to their collective identities (Sen Gupta, 2002).

 The intercultural experience tends to be described as an uncomfortable one, requiring the revision of beliefs, concepts and attitudes that one has hitherto taken for granted. The process includes changes in attitudes, beliefs, identity and values (Berry et al., 1992).

In the context of foreign language education, intercultural competence is linked to communicative competence in a foreign language. Modern approach to language education has shifted the aims of language learning from communicative competence to intercultural competence. As Baker (2011) stated, intercultural competence has been identified as 'one approach to systematically conceptualizing and investigating the knowledge, attitudes and behavior associated with successful intercultural communication'. It means that, in order to be successful in intercultural communication, students need to develop their intercultural competence. It brings new requirements for foreign language courses (teaching and learning). Intercultural competence requires learners to develop relevant knowledge and skills regarding target language and culture and their cultural awareness, and to be reflective and transferable among different languages and cultures. As Sercu (2004) summarized, there are two dimensions of intercultural competence identified by recent models: culture-specific (knowledge and skills about target culture) and culture-general knowledge and skills ('more generalizable in nature and transferable across cultures' (p.135)). Culture-general knowledge includes, for example, 'the nature of cultural adjustment and learning', 'the impact of culture on communication and interaction between individuals or groups', 'the role of emotions in cross-cultural, cross-linguistic interactions'. Culture-general skills refer to, attributes such as 'the capacity to display respect for an interest in the culture', 'tolerance and patience in cross-cultural situations', 'control of emotions and emotional resilience' (p.135). Intercultural competence requires learners to develop a view of two cultures (their own and that of target language) and a position where they mediate between these two.

In Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence (1997), foreign language teachers are asked to guide learners through the process of acquiring competencies in attitudes, knowledge, and skills related to intercultural competence while using a foreign language. Teachers must lead students through activities in which attitudes about the "other" are considered, and ideally transform the learner. The goal for the students is to start by questioning their preconceived ideas before entering into a process of discovery about the "other" with the intent of becoming more willing to seek out and engage with otherness in order to ultimately experience relationships of reciprocity (Byram, 1997). As students continue to engage in analysis of other cultures, certain knowledge must be acquired. It is imperative that the foreign language educator allows time to explore the national identity of the home culture and the target culture in relation to history, geography, and social institutions (Byram, 1997). Once learners have taken time to discover the similarities and differences between their culture and that of the target culture, the teacher must craft activities that will prepare students to build relationships with people of diverse backgrounds and languages (Byram, 1997). Next, foreign language students must be provided the time and the space to develop skills in interpreting and relating. When students begin to identify ethnocentric perspectives and misunderstandings related to cross-cultural situations, they become able to understand and then explain the origins of conflict and mediate situations appropriately in order to avoid misinterpretations (Byram, 1997). Finally, skills in discovery and interaction allow intercultural speakers to identify similarities and differences between

home cultures and foreign cultures resulting in successful communication and the establishment of meaningful relationships (Byram, 1997). A successful intercultural speaker seeks out opportunities to meet individuals from diverse cultures in order to share information through communication in a foreign language.

Based on the information provided in Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence (1997), foreign language teachers must reconsider methods for teaching language and culture in the classroom if the goal is to create true interculturally competent speakers of the language. Traditional methods for teaching foreign languages emphasized the importance of students practicing language structures, pronunciation and vocabulary in order to become native like speakers.

In this study some activities such as texts were used to make familiar with the target culture based on the theme of the topic of the units in ten sessions in order to find answers for following questions:

3. Research Questions
1. Do English as foreign language learners' attitudes become more positive due to the impact of intercultural learning?
2. How do they benefit from the impact of intercultural learning in their attitude and overall language proficiency?

Methodology
1. Participants

This study was conducted in Iran Language Institute (ILI), Qazvin branch, Iran. Two intact classes, comprising 48 intermediate participants participated in this study. They were female and their first language was Persian. The initial homogeneity of the participants was further assessed via a Preliminary English Test (PET). Two intact classes were further randomly assigned to one experimental group and one control group, each including 24 participants. The Experimental group received additional text with some information about the target culture while working on reading comprehension tasks. . No additional text and information was offered in the control group. The treatment lasted for ten sessions. All the groups received 3.5 hours of English language instruction every week through an integrated skills development approach which is the dominant method of teaching at ILI. English was used as the medium of instruction and communication in the classrooms.

2. Instrumentation

In this study, Preliminary English Test (PET) was used as a pre-test to get the data of the groups at the beginning of treatment. This test has three sections: grammar, reading and vocabulary, and writing. At the end of the treatment the results of the learners' final scores in achievement test was analyzed. The instrument of the study is a questionnaire survey. The questionnaire was mainly adapted from that used by Hong (2013) in his MA thesis entitled "Social Networking Sites: Social Support, Motivation, and Influence on Chinese International Student's Intercultural Communication Competence" with some modifications.

3. Procedures

Having verified the participants' initial homogeneity in English and assigned the groups randomly, the researchers launched the ten session treatment, which continued for two months. During the treatment, all participants were taught the same teaching materials comprising five reading passages that were presented based on the standard method of pre-reading, reading and post-reading reading tasks. What differentiated the groups was the

additional text related to the theme of the topic of the units which focused on the cultural aspects taken from net in experimental group. In the control group, however, the teacher started teaching reading after some warm-ups without any additional text and emphasis on the cultural aspect before or after reading. At the end of the treatment, another PET was administered to all the groups as the post-test.

Results and Discussions

4.1 Intercultural competence and attitude

The first research question in this study addressed the impact of intercultural communicative competence on learners' attitudes of Iranian intermediate language learners. The scores of questionnaire were submitted to SPSS and the Table1 illustrates the results between control group and experimental group.

Table1.
Descriptive Statistics of Intercultural Attitude Questionnaire of Control and Experimental Group

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q.Control.G	24	40.00	80.00	61.2500	12.61900
Q.Experimental. G	24	65.00	90.00	79.1667	7.32279
Valid N (listwise)	24				

The results of this study showed that due to the impact of intercultural learning, participants benefited from intercultural learning and demonstrated those learning outcomes in different kinds of attitudes and in their final scores. Of three kinds of attitudes (i.e. towards native speakers, towards the target culture, and towards communication and interaction with native speakers), attitudes towards communication and interaction with native speakers were found to be the only kind that became more positive as a function of treatment.

3. *Attitudes and final test achievement*

The second research question addressed the effect of the positive attitudes from the intercultural learning on the overall language proficiency test which administered in two groups at the same time and with the same items. The results of the scores were presented in Table 2.

Table2.
The Descriptive Statistics and results of Final Scores in Experimental and Control Group

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
CG	24	58.00	89.00	74.9167	7.42450
EG	24	75.00	95.00	86.2917	5.21269
Valid N (listwise)	24				

As Table 2 shows the experimental group with mean of 86.29 benefited more than those in the control group with mean of 74.91 in terms of positive attitudes.

Table3. The result of One-Way ANOVA in Final Achievement Scores of Experimental and Control Group

			Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups		(Combined)	318.625	14	22.759	.669	.759
	Linear Term	Weighted	108.808	1	108.808	3.197	.107
		Deviation	209.817	13	16.140	.474	.893
Within Groups			306.333	9	34.037		
Total			624.958	23			

As table 3 shows the participants in experimental group outperformed the control group and the result showed that the influence of intercultural learning on attitudes and overall proficiency was statistically significant.

Conclusion
The aim of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of providing intercultural information in English as a foreign language context on learners' attitudes and the impact of the attitudes on their overall language proficiency achievement test. The results of this research indicated that learners in experimental group which received additional intercultural text and activities outperformed control group.

The findings of this study have some implications for second language teachers since they would be aware of the positive impact of intercultural communicative instruction in intermediate level. In addition, they will know different techniques for application of these instructions especially in classroom context. Moreover, the results of this research can have implications for material developers help them design tasks to provide opportunities for focus on the most effective approach.

However, there are certain delimitations in this study. First, this study is limited to intermediate level. There can be more in investigations for elementary and advanced levels of proficiency to infer some generalizations. Second, in this study only one form of activities related to the intercultural competence were used. There are some other types of activities that can be considered in such investigations. Third, the participants were Iranian and from Iran Language Institute, so the results cannot be generalized to learners of other nationalities.

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