Assessing the Intercultural Sensitivity of China TCSOL-to-Be Postgraduates: An Empirical Analysis Based on Chen and Starosta’s Model

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This article attempts to examine the intercultural sensitivity of a certain group of China postgraduates on the basis of Chen and Starosta’s Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, which though is originally developed for US subjects; its replication studies in Germany, Malaysia, and other different countries have been proved very successful. This study collected participants’ data via online APP and the statistical results revealed that the sample respondents displayed their highest respect for cultural differences, followed in order by Interaction Engagement, Interaction Enjoyment, Interaction Attentiveness, and Interaction Confidence. This study makes suggestions for further research on applying the ISS model to China postgraduates.

Keywords: intercultural sensitivity, China postgraduates, ISS empirical study

Overview of the Study

This article reports on the empirical evaluation and analysis of a model of intercultural sensitivity developed by Chen and Starosta in U.S. context, designed to measure or index intercultural sensitivity. The initial purpose of the research is to find out the psychometric properties of the ISS: the overall scale reliability, factors reliability, and factorial validity (based upon the theoretical model). The next purpose is to devise an empirical ISS data out of the five elements in order to examine the discriminant validity of the ISS and to figure out the statistical relationship involving intercultural competence in a convincing way when using the scores of the five elements.

To achieve these goals, the empirical survey was conducted from October, 2018 to about December, 2018 to 435 postgraduates majoring in international Chinese education and most of them are the future candidates for Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages (short for TCSOL). The subjects were selected and able to bear diversity of demographic, geographic distribution, and intercultural experiences as well.

Literature Review

With the globalization of the whole world, the ability of intercultural competence has become increasingly

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significant (Bradford, Allen, & Beisser, 1998). There is a large body of literature works on what intercultural sensitivity defines (Landis & Bhagat, 1996; Martin, 1989).

However, though many related scholars have spent great efforts on the field, neither a comprehensively acknowledged conceptualization nor a suitable empirical model for assessing intercultural competence does exist (Fritz, 2001; Muller & Gelbrich, 2001). In fact, a large series of definitions as of capabilities, characteristics, and skills have been put forward and thus are taken as essential components for the research of intercultural interactions (Dinges & Baldwin, 1996; Kealey & Ruben, 1983). However, most importantly for the same purposes of the study, the empirical survey data on tools or other reliable models of assessing intercultural sensitivity have been very limited.

In the previous studies, some scholars’ research showed that three dimensions—affective, cognitive, and behavioral—constituted intercultural competence (Bennett, 2001; Chen & Starosta, 1996; Muller & Gelbrich, 2001). It is an assumption that communicators from different cultures should develop their affective, cognitive, and behavioral competence to meet the smooth and efficient communication ends. However, the three-dimension classification is still hard to form a perfect consensus on its appropriateness (Chen & Starosta, 2000). Nevertheless, what’s the most important is to reach a theoretically sound conceptualization for these three dimensions before a valid model for assessing intercultural competence can be set up (Fritz, Mollenberg, & Werner, 1999).

Some researches have been done on the elaboration of the three dimensions and the development of the instruments on how to assess each skill (Chen & Starosta, 1996). Three constructs have been put forward by the authors: intercultural sensitivity, intercultural awareness, and intercultural adroitness. They developed one model called International Sensitivity Scale to test the affective component of intercultural competence involving the subjects’ capability to receive and send positive emotional signals before, during, and after the intercultural interactions.

Bennett (1984) conceived intercultural sensitivity as a developmental process in which one is able to transform oneself affectively, cognitively, and behaviorally from ethnocentric stages to ethnorelative stages. There are six stages for the transformation route: denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, and integration. The model not only requires the gradual change of affection and cognition but the behavioral ability, which seems quite identical with the concept of intercultural communication competence. Chen and Starosta (1997) further specified six elements that intercultural sensitivity should be composed of: self-esteem, self-monitoring, open-mindedness, empathy, interaction involvement, and non-judgment. Chen and Starosta (2000) initially designed a questionnaire with 73 items representing the empirical indicators of the six components for the measurement of intercultural sensitivity. After a series of analysis and deletion a scale with 24 items remained which has been validated in many other cultures like Germany and USA for its validity and reliability (Fritz, Mollenberg, & Chen, 2002).

The purpose of the study is to empirically replicate Chen and Starosta’s Model—Intercultural Sensitivity Scale—to assess the actual intercultural sensitivity of the TCSOL-to-be China postgraduates sample.
Methods

Subjects

The following principles guided the sampling: (1) a sample large enough to make sure the variability on intercultural sensitivity at a high level, (2) sample for variability based upon a series of personal features which are theoretically liable to be taken correlated with the measurement (in the instance, like amount of exposure to both Chinese and English education, international learning or work experiences), (3) the sample respondents are orderly organized and required to participate in the project in a relaxed and interested manner.

The 435 subjects in the present study included postgraduates majoring in international Chinese education (ICE) ranging from grade one to grade three in geographically different China universities which represent the comparatively high level of the ICE.

Data Collection

All the subjects filled out the ISS completely, mostly via Mobile APP, Wechat. Because we originally designed the survey through a specialized website instrument called Wenjuanxing, it is quite easy and convenient for our sample respondents to choose their answers in that the five Likert point scale was put into a five-star scale, for example, if you strongly disagree with the item, you only need to choose one star, or if you totally agree, you can select all the five stars. Hence, after the smooth initial data collection in excel format, they are subsequently adopted in SPSS 21 for further statistic analysis.

Instruments

Two instruments were employed and administered to the sample respondents. One was ISS developed by Chen and Starosta (2000), the other being a demographic questionnaire developed by the authors. The second questionnaire involved items like the postgraduates’ age, sex, previous and current international learning or work experience, their perceptions on the cultural differences, their attitudes towards a successful intercultural communication, what they thought are the most important traits a successful intercultural communicator should bear.

Procedures

Several procedures were used to analyze the ISS. First, the scale was examined for internal consistency reliability. Second, all 24 items were factors analyzed to determine how well a five-factor structure could explain the data results. Both the mean and standard deviation values were considered. Third, the correlations among the five factors were examined to ensure how well the ISS could be applied in a Chinese postgraduate context. Finally, the partial variance was examined by correlated ISS scores with the control of some specific factors.

Results

Scale Reliability

The whole scale of 24 items had Cronbach $\alpha$ internal consistency reliability coefficients of 0.857, thus represented a comparatively high internal consistency reliability. The $\alpha$ coefficients of 0.729 for Interaction Engagement, 0.664 for Respect for Cultural Differences, 0.705 for Interaction Confidence, and 0.753 for Interaction Enjoyment could approximately meet the minimum standard, the whole scales are acceptable as they are the true reflections of the competence of the sample respondents though the Cronbach $\alpha$ for Interaction Attentiveness is only 0.404.
Table 1
Cronbach’s α for the ISS-24

| Gross Interaction Engagement | Respect for Cultural Difference | Interaction Confidence | Interaction Enjoyment | Interaction Attentiveness |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|
| α                            | α                               | α                      | α                    | α                       |
| 0.857                        | 0.729                           | 0.664                  | 0.705                | 0.753                   | 0.404                   |

Overall Descriptions of Five Factors

Table 2
Overall Descriptive Statistics

|                                      | Mean     | Minimum | Maximum | Std. Deviation | Variance | N  |
|--------------------------------------|----------|---------|---------|----------------|----------|----|
| Respect for Cultural Differences     | 4.3188   | 2.17    | 5.00    | 0.53826        | 0.290    | 435|
| Interaction Engagement               | 4.0795   | 1.57    | 5.00    | 0.49360        | 0.244    | 435|
| Interaction Enjoyment                | 3.9188   | 1.00    | 5.00    | 0.71488        | 0.511    | 435|
| Interaction Attentiveness            | 3.6720   | 1.67    | 5.00    | 0.57444        | 0.330    | 435|
| Interaction Confidence               | 3.5099   | 1.20    | 5.00    | 0.58991        | 0.348    | 435|

As shown in Table 2, the scores for factor Respect for Cultural Differences were the highest among all the five, followed by Interaction Engagement, Interaction Enjoyment, Interaction Attentiveness, and Interaction Confidence. The mean value for these five factors did not show great differences; however, the internal large differences for all the factors did exist, especially for Interaction Enjoyment. As it is a standard Likert Five Scale employed in the survey, the mean value 4.3188 for Respect for Cultural Difference confirms that those China postgraduates engaged in international Chinese education did perceive and show their respect for the differences between cultures and languages. However, it is necessary and essential to improve their attentiveness and strengthen their confidence during their intercultural interactions through a great variety of activities as possible as it could be.

Correlations Among the Factors

Table 3
Pearson Coefficients of All the Five Factors

|                                      | Interaction Engagement | Respect for Cultural Differences | Interaction Confidence | Interaction Enjoyment | Interaction Attentiveness |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|
| Interaction Engagement               | Pearson Correlation    | 1                                | 0.552**                | 0.473**              | 0.441**                 | 0.463**                |
|                                       | Sig. (2-tailed)        | 0.000                            | 0.000                  | 0.000                | 0.000                   | 0.000                   |
| Respect for Cultural Differences     | Pearson Correlation    | 0.552**                          | 1                      | 0.202**              | 0.542**                 | 0.177**                |
|                                       | Sig. (2-tailed)        | 0.000                            | 0.000                  | 0.000                | 0.000                   | 0.000                   |
| Interaction Confidence               | Pearson Correlation    | 0.473**                          | 0.202**                | 1                    | 0.499**                 | 0.361**                |
|                                       | Sig. (2-tailed)        | 0.000                            | 0.000                  | 0.000                | 0.000                   | 0.000                   |
| Interaction Enjoyment                | Pearson Correlation    | 0.441**                          | 0.542**                | 0.499**              | 1                      | 0.174**                |
|                                       | Sig. (2-tailed)        | 0.000                            | 0.000                  | 0.000                | 0.000                   | 0.000                   |
| Interaction Attentiveness            | Pearson Correlation    | 0.463**                          | 0.177**                | 0.361**              | 0.174**                 | 1                      |
|                                       | Sig. (2-tailed)        | 0.000                            | 0.000                  | 0.000                | 0.000                   | 0.000                   |

Note. **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
As indicated from Table 3, there are no negative correlations among all the five factors and all the positive correlations are revealed as following:

- The correlation coefficients between Interaction Engagement and the other four are 0.552**, 0.437**, 0.441**, and 0.463** respectively, which shows that they are strongly correlated.
- The correlation coefficient between Respect for Cultural Difference and Interaction Enjoyment is 0.542**, which shows that they are strongly correlated.
- The correlation coefficient between Respect for Cultural Difference and Interaction Confidence is 0.202**, and 0.177** for Interaction Attentiveness, which shows that they are weakly correlated.
- The correlation coefficient between Interaction Confidence and Interaction Enjoyment is 0.499**, which shows that they are liable to be considered as strongly correlated as there is only 0.001 gap to meet the minimum classification standard.
- The correlation coefficient between Interaction Confidence and Interaction Attentiveness is 0.361**, which shows that they are moderately correlated.
- The correlation coefficient between Interaction Enjoyment and Interaction Attentiveness is only 0.174**, which shows that they are weakly correlated.

The above analysis reflects that there exists a mutually influential and restraining relationship among the factors. To be concrete, Interaction Engagement is strongly correlated with the other four factors, which means it is an essential component when accessing intercultural communication. The confidence and enjoyment they acquired, the attentiveness they maintained, and even the respect they showed for cultural differences in the process of intercultural communication are greatly and closely associated with the extent they are engaged in the communication. Thus, we can create or offer opportunities as much as possible for students to conduct intercultural communication. Besides, As Interaction Enjoyment is strongly correlated with Respect for Cultural differences and Interaction Confidence, one point is clear that the more students are involved in the intercultural activities, the more they will respect those cultural differences and acquire more confidence, therefore, the more they will enjoy the communication.

Partial Correlation Analyses

It is too complicated to assess the relation between two factors; the coefficient value in Table 3 may tend to be unable to reflect the true and precise relations as they were obtained with the possible influence of each others. At this time, some partial correlation analysis should be conducted. In order to figure out the precise relation between Interaction Enjoyment and Respect for Cultural Differences, we choose to control the other three variables, and the results are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4

| Control variables | Respect for Cultural Differences Correlation | Significance (2-tailed) | Interaction Enjoyment Correlation | Significance (2-tailed) |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Interaction Engagement | 1.000                                       | 0.457                   | 0.000                           | 1.000                   |
| Interaction Confidence | Correlation | 0.457                   | 1.000                           | 0.000                   |
| Interaction Attentiveness | Interaction Enjoyment | 0.000                   |                                  |                          |

Partial Correlation Analysis of Interaction Enjoyment and Respect for Cultural Differences
From the Table 4, the precise correlation coefficient between the two factors is 0.457, which reveals that when the other three factors are under control, these two are also moderately correlated. Lacking the full understanding of the cultural differences they confronted or even sometimes mistook, it is understandable that it is really hard for them to acquire the enjoyment as expected.

**Analysis for the Postgraduates’ Various Ways of Contacting Foreign Cultures**

In our survey the second instrument is specially designed to investigate how the sample respondents get exposed to cultures, and the results are as follows:

| Table 5 | Distribution Chart of Their Various Approaches of Exposures to Cultures |
|---------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Group   | One | Two | Three | Four |
| Sex     | Female | Female | Female | Male |
| Sample  | 278 | 93  | 20    | 33   |
| Grade   | One | Two | Three | All grades |
| Intercultural communication training | 196 | 66 | 13 | 22 |
| Watching foreign movies | 252 | 76 | 13 | 23 |
| Reading international news | 137 | 32 | 7 | 15 |
| Reading novels or magazines | 148 | 29 | 6 | 12 |
| English music | 139 | 28 | 5 | 11 |
| English corners | 37 | 6 | 1 | 2 |
| English community | 43 | 5 | 2 | 2 |
| Interpreting for a while | 17 | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| English volunteers | 68 | 13 | 2 | 2 |
| English cultural festivals | 54 | 12 | 3 | 3 |
| Foreign pen-friends | 34 | 7 | 1 | 3 |
| Foreign chatting | 96 | 34 | 6 | 13 |

From Table 5, it is shown that for those female sample respondents of grade one, they are very active, taking nearly all kinds of intercultural activities as possible, and their major ways of exposures to foreign cultures are through watching foreign movies (90.6%), attending intercultural communication training or education (70.5%), reading novels or magazines (53.2%), international news (49.3%), and listening to English music (50%). However, for those females of grade two and three, the varieties of exposures are becoming less, only attending intercultural training or education (70.9% and 65% respectively) and watching foreign movies (81.7% and 65% respectively) remain as in fact for the former they are officially required to take part in and the latter apparently seems to be the easiest and convenient way to get themselves engaged with English languages and cultures. It is strange that it is nearly the case for males and the only difference lies in that boys may be a little more interested in reading international news (45.5%).

**Discussion**

As revealed by the survey, the sample respondents—the China postgraduates majoring in international Chinese education—showed their highest respect for cultural differences. Their engagement in intercultural communication/activities ranked next, and they can reap much enjoyment to a large extent while, generally speaking, their attentiveness and confidence are not satisfactory. According to our interviews and routine
teaching introspections, these may be mainly caused by: To begin, in the past decades, the China education circle including the colleges or universities requested by our questionnaire survey has exerted great efforts on English learning, thus as postgraduates walking out of the training system they must have been very much aware that there do exist many a difference between cultures and languages; thus there are many opportunities or activities concerning intercultural communication for Chinese students to be engaged in and thus they did get themselves occupied and enjoyed to some extent from the communication process. However, these opportunities or activities are not ideal enough for students to develop their full intercultural communicative competence. The universities surveyed did provide a series of courses like British and American Literature, Introductions to UK and USA, Appreciations for Foreign Movies, and Societies and Cultures in Western countries, but in those regular classes the instructors are inclined to impart knowledge instead of explaining why behind the factual details. In other words, the China students are seldom to be cultivated with the right and exact sensitiveness towards the differences across cultures and languages. In fact, taking the course Appreciation for Foreign Movies for example, as almost all the students are very interested in their so-called “Da Pian” like Hollywood or Oscar movies, it is worthwhile to point out and deeply analyze the true nature of languages, cultures, beliefs, and values behind those exciting scenes, even the characters’ lines, expressions, gestures, and thinking habit should be involved.

There are positive correlations among the five factors through Pearson correlation analysis. The highest correlation occurs between Interaction Engagement and Respect for Cultural Differences and the second highest for Interaction Enjoyment and Respect for Cultural Differences; even when the other three variables are under control, their correlation coefficient is still up to 0.437. In other words, what the whole education circle promoted in the past—to provide opportunities or activities related to intercultural communication and strengthen the differences between cultures and languages should generally be considered that they are on the right path; however, there are lots more specific and detailed work should be completed. That is, to realize, understand, and even accept the differences on both parties’ behavioral modes, attitudes and values are quite essential for students to get themselves fully attentive in the communication process, and more confidence as well.

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