Collaborative Online International Learning: A Pilot Study in Intercultural Communicative Competence in Chinese Higher Education Background

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College English is a compulsory course in the curriculum of Chinese higher education. Among various abilities that should be fostered in language teaching and learning, students’ intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is an important one that should always be highlighted in teaching objectives. In this research, the researcher conducted collaborative online international learning (COIL) as part of a teaching approach in College English course. The aims were, through a pilot study, to examine whether this approach might be effective in improving Chinese students’ ICC, with Byram’s definition and ICC model, based on a qualitative analysis of the students’ reflection essays after the COIL practice.

Keywords: Chinese higher education, College English, intercultural communicative competence, collaborative online international learning

Introduction

In China, English is being taught and learned as a foreign language from primary school to college. College English, by name, is a compulsory course in Chinese college curriculum deemed by educationalists to be an integral part of general education. During the long period of English study from primary school to college, the students are claimed to, in varied degrees, master the basic language skills, such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English, which are mainly tested through such examinations as Band Four of College English Test (CET-4) and Band Six of College English Test (CET-6). But it is worth mentioning that language and culture are inseparable (Byram, 1989), so that “learners who lack cultural competence will have problems in communicating with native speakers, even when they are proficient in formal language skills” (Watts, 1994, p. 60). So, in recent years, how to help students with relatively enough language skills become culturally competent and able to communicate more effectively in English with native speakers interculturally has become a hot topic in English teaching field in China. In terms of humanism, one of the important aims of College English is to equip the students with intercultural horizon and intercultural communicative competence (Wang, 2016), develop them into intercultural individuals who have intercultural awareness, knowledge, and ability, and can live harmoniously, communicate effectively, and cooperate equally with people from different cultural backgrounds (Zhang, 2012).

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Then, how should the College English teachers design their teaching activities oriented by the faith to improve the students’ intercultural communicative competence (ICC)? In its essence, ICC is a kind of ability on practical level, and without the backup of practice, it would lose its vitality and application value (Zhang & Yang, 2012). Byram (1989, p. 20) believed that “it must be the deliberate strategy of the teacher to bring the pupil to this kind of experience”. Sun (2016) put forward five principles for intercultural teaching, which are “critiquing”, “reflecting”, “exploring”, “empathizing”, and “doing”. In other words, “practice”, “experiencing”, and “learning by doing” on the students’ part is the most straightforward and effective way to the development of their ICC. So, it is crucial that the teachers should create a proper platform for the students’ “experience” or “doing”.

**Literature Review**

**Intercultural Communicative Competence**

Competence can be measured, but the measurement depends on its definition (Klemp, 1979). There are a large range of definitions and models of ICC proposed by worldwide researchers (Bennett, 1993; Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006; Zhang & Yang, 2012). Deardorff (2006) conducted a Delphi study which included the participation of 23 world-prestigious scholars on intercultural studies, and she concluded that the most agreed-upon definition of intercultural communicative competence is the one derived from Byram’s (1997) work. Byram’s model of ICC suggests five dimensions that the students should achieve to be interculturally competent, they are:

(a) Savoir-entre: Attitude of curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one’s own;

(b) Savoirs: Knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in one’s own and one’s interlocutor’s country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction;

(c) Savoir-comprendre: Ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one’s own;

(d) Savoir-apprendre: Skills of discovery and interaction, ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes, and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction;

(e) Savoirs’ engager: Critical cultural awareness and political education, the ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices, and products on one’s own and other cultures and countries.

Byram’s model offers a comprehensive description of the dimensions a culturally competent communicator should embrace, so it is widely used for the assessment of students’ development of ICC.

**Telecollaboration and Collaborative Online Intercultural Learning (COIL)**

Since computer technology, especially Internet began to be used in language education, students are taking part in telecollaborative exchanges where parallel learners in geographically different locations are partnered using technological tools (Dooly, 2017). Scholars have continually pointed out the benefits of telecollaborative projects for students’ better language skills and ICC development (Belz & Thorne, 2006; Levy, 2007; Blake, 2008; Helm & Guth, 2010; Schenker, 2012; Chen & Yang, 2014; Dooly, 2017; Lenkaitis, Calo, & Escobar, 2019). “Telecollaboration” has become an umbrella term for the various online communication tools which
bring classes of language learners in geographically distant locations together to develop their foreign language skills and intercultural communicative competence through collaborative tasks and project work, and allow teachers to engage their students in authentic or semi-authentic communication with members of other cultures and also give students the opportunity to reflect on and learn from the outcomes of the intercultural exchange (O’Dowd, 2011). Among the telecollaborative terms are Internet-mediated intercultural foreign language education (Belz & Thorne, 2006), online intercultural exchange (O’Dowd, 2007; Thorne, 2010), technology-enhanced intercultural projects (Chen & Yang, 2014), and synchronous computer-mediated communication-based telecollaborative exchanges (Lenkaitis et al., 2019).

In this study, the author adopts the telecollaborative approach COIL, which was initiated at The State University of New York (SUNY) more than a decade ago. According to COIL:

COIL has developed an approach to fostering cross-cultural student competence through development of multicultural learning environments that link university or college classes in different countries. In the COIL model, students from different cultures enroll in shared courses with faculty members from each country co-teaching and managing coursework. The COIL model does not merely promote courses where students from different nations co-habit an online classroom. Rather, we advocate creation of co-equal learning environments where instructors work together to generate a shared syllabus based on solid academic coursework emphasizing experiential and collaborative student learning. (SUNY COIL Center, about COIL)

Inspired by the idea of COIL, the researcher conducts a pilot study in Chinese higher education background and intends to examine whether the COIL approach might be effective in improving Chinese students’ ICC based on Byram’s ICC model.

The Study

Methodology
The researcher attempts to qualitatively analyze the reflection essays written by the Chinese students after their participation in the COIL practice. The reflection essays are hand-coded by the researcher according to the different coding categories shown in Byram’s ICC model.

Participants
Fifteen students enrolled in College English course at a university in China and 13 students interested in Chinese culture from a university in America participate in the COIL module, and they are teamed up into seven international groups, each group comprised of two Chinese students and two American students or three Chinese students and one American students. Each international group has to finish their own research-based team projects within a seven-week COIL module.

Instruments
Email, WeChat are the main telecollaborative instruments for the students’ daily exchange of information and discussion on their project work. And the students can choose to use synchronous or asynchronous ways for their intercultural encounters. Blackboard is used more officially, mainly for the students’ presentation of their study outcomes in different study sessions, students’ mutual comments, and the teachers’ instructions, comments, and assessments on the students’ performance.

Procedures
The seven-week COIL module is comprised of four study sessions:
1. In the first session (Weeks 1-2), ice-breaking activities are conducted, in which the members of each international group make self-introduction, exchange emails, and establish WeChat groups. In this way, they get familiar with each other and start their collaborative relationship. It is required that in this session, each group’s self-introduction videos should be posted onto blackboard.

2. In the second session (Week 3), each international group conduct in-group online discussion, learning about recommended topics and materials, and then decide on their research topics. The research topics should be posted onto blackboard as the products of the second learning session.

3. In the third session (Weeks 4-6), according to their selected research topics, each group start their research, reading relative literature, collecting data, concluding their findings, and creating a piece of PowerPoint (PPT) work for classroom presentation. The PPT files should be posted onto blackboard.

4. In the last session (Week 7), the students present their final research findings with the PPT in both Chinese and American classrooms and share the presentation videos with each other on blackboard.

At the end of each study session, the international groups have to post their learning products onto blackboard, where a portfolio of each group is created, with which the groups can reflect on their own COIL experiences, different groups can comment on and get inspired from each other’s works, and the teachers could comment, give suggestions for modification, and make assessment.

When the COIL module is finished, the Chinese students are encouraged to reflect over their whole COIL experiences, and each group incorporate their reflections into a reflection essay.

Findings

Improvements of Students’ ICC

The students’ reflection essays are examined on the basis of Byram’s ICC model to find out if the five outlined dimensions are displayed in the students’ reflections.

Dimension 1: Attitudes of curiosity and openness. The first dimension in Byram’s (1997) ICC model is the curious and open attitude, the readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one’s own. This dimension can be traced in the students’ reflections. For example,

The most interesting part of this exchange study is to understand the culture of Europe in the middle ages. (Group 4) COIL is a cool new way to study, it can not only broaden my horizon, but also open a door of a new world. (Group 3)

which show that the students are open to other cultures, interested, and eager in discovering unfamiliar things in a different culture.

We felt a little nervous before the COIL, because we afraid we couldn’t finish the project well…We solved this problem and everything is so good. (Group 4)

You should strive to ease the awkwardness, make more communications with foreign students, actively cooperate with them to complete the task. (Group 5)

which demonstrate that the students are ready to experience the different stages of adaptation during the interaction with people from another culture.

Dimension 2: Knowledge of social groups and their products. The second dimension of Byram’s (1997) ICC model is about the intercultural learners’ knowledge of the social groups and products of their own culture and the interlocutors’ culture. This dimension can be traced in the following statements.
Before COIL, I feared that I could not communicate with foreigners very well. But in the middle of COIL, I found that we are all the same, as my peer, they have the same thought as I have. (Group 3)

The short communications with them let us feel that we are the same, there are not so many differences among us, such as they were not eaten (do not eat) KFC every day. (Group 6)

Every time we type a sentence, we need to think about for a long time, but in the process of slow communication, we are also more and more skilled, grammar’s mistake is also reduced. (Group 4)

These statements show that after participating in the COIL module, the Chinese students have a better understanding of the life of American university students and a better mastery of the target language.

**Dimension 3: Ability to interpret documents or events.** The third dimension of Byram’s (1997) ICC model refers to the ability to interpret documents or events from the target culture and to relate them from their own culture. This can be seen in the following example,

Chinese (ads) pay more attention to its history rather than religion, maybe (because) there are less religious people in China, but China is a country with long history. (Group 1)

Through comparing the American and Chinese documents, the Chinese students demonstrate their ability to explain the Chinese ads in terms of Chinese cultural system, and the awareness of their own culture is increased as well.

**Dimension 4: Skills of discovery and interaction.** In Byram’s (1997) ICC model, the fourth dimension is about the skills of discovery and interaction, mainly referring to the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices. While examining the students’ reflection essays, the following examples stand out.

Many unknown cultures have enriched our extracurricular knowledge through consulting. (Group 4)

We learned not only about a western church, but also about western culture. (Group 5)

These statements show that through the intercultural collaborative learning, the students’ ability to acquire new cultural knowledge is demonstrated and enhanced.

**Dimension 5: Critical cultural awareness and political education.** The last dimension proposed by Byram (1997) in his ICC model is critical cultural awareness and political education, and he refers it to the ability to evaluate the products, perspectives and practices of the learners’ own culture and that of the target culture. This dimension can also be traced in the students’ reflections.

American ads are more laid-back, while Chinese ads are more structured. (Group 1)

It is one of the largest Catholic churches in the world. The interior decoration of the church is very magnificent. (Group 3)

Thanks for our international partners’ patience, we finished the project successfully. (Group 2)

These examples demonstrate that the students’ critical cultural awareness is greatly cultivated, and they can impartially evaluate the Chinese and American documents, the target cultural products and their international partners.

Through examining the Chinese students’ reflection essays, it is found out that all the five dimensions of Byram’s ICC model are clearly demonstrated, which means that the COIL approach is effective in enhancing the students intercultural communicative competence in Chinese higher education background.

**Problems**

From the students’ reflection essays, some problems in this COIL module are also perceived. First, partly because of the time difference, partly because the Chinese students were not confident enough in their English
speaking and listening ability, none of the seven groups held synchronous online meetings in their daily communication, and all of them communicate through emails and WeChat text messages. Second, in the co-designed syllabus, the teachers did not arrange any synchronous class in consideration of the time difference, which disappointed some students to different extents. So, this syllabus is in lack of the consideration of the learning effects and students’ feelings if they had chances to talk to the whole international class synchronously.

Conclusion

In this pilot study, based on the five dimensions in Byram’s ICC model, the researcher examines the Chinese students’ reflection essays written after their participation in the COIL module. The findings show that COIL approach is effective in enhancing the Chinese students’ intercultural communicative competence. So, COIL approach can be conducted in a larger scale in Chinese higher education. And, to solve the problems perceived from the pilot study and contribute to better COIL modules, the teachers should put more emphasis on the strategies for encouraging the students to overcome the problem of time difference (despite time difference, it is possible to find time overlap for online meeting), and to be more confident and brave to talk synchronously with native English speakers in their daily interaction. The teachers should also overcome the difficulty brought about by time difference, and arrange proper synchronous classes, at least in the ice-breaking session and the final presentation session, to make COIL a better platform for the students’ intercultural communicative experience.

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