

## A BASIC OVERVIEW OF THE CHALLENGES IN TEACHING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AMONG TERTIARY LEVEL ENGLISH TEACHERS IN CHINA

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper provides an overview and discussion on the current situation of intercultural communication training and challenges for tertiary English in China. A qualitative meta-analysis was conducted on research articles written both in Chinese language and English during the last two decades (from 2002) to explore reported challenges faced by teachers. Mitigating strategies undertaken were also scrutinized via documents analysis of the assorted papers. The findings showed that instructional efforts to develop intercultural communication competence in tertiary students was previously quite stagnant in its approaches, riddled with various micro and macro level challenges and quite unsuccessful in yielding the desired results. Only within the last decade with the advent of ICT and multimedia technology that concerted efforts could be integrated into producing considerable results. This study puts forth relevant improvement strategies derived from various aspects analyzed. They came in the form of inevitable measures like upgrading the teaching system, improving the quality of teachers, changing the teaching strategies, developing resource hub, developing professional teams and groupings, and optimizing intercultural communication evaluation mechanism. The findings from this study has high transferability and insights for institutions in countries with similar contexts. It also provides beneficial theoretical reference for the training of intercultural communication competence in a foreign language learning context.*

**Keywords:** *Intercultural Communication, Higher Education, Foreign Language Teaching, Tertiary Level English,*

### INTRODUCTION

Intercultural communication (ICC) skills have become among the desired traits in graduates due to the rapid expansion of international business and the growth of world economy. The development of the internet and multimedia network has bridged international communication and brought great opportunities for the improvement of intercultural communication ability in language teaching and training (Luo, et al., 2014). There is a great demand for international talents in various fields, especially quality talents with strong intercultural communication competence, who are in urgent need by the market (Xiaohui, 2014). As a communication tool, English teaching should be given attention on the explanation of knowledge, and more importantly, students' communication competence should be improved, especially communication within multi-cultural background (Zhang, 2019). It is imperative to train students' intercultural communication competence by adopting systematic ways in the teaching of tertiary English. Language is the vehicle for culture and in training intercultural communication

competence to students, teachers should integrate cultural contents into language teaching. At the same time, by introducing folk customs, local conditions and customs and cultural history can greatly stimulate students' interest in learning, by broadening their horizons. Intercultural exposure inevitably changes that frame of reference and an individual's prior dominant understanding of reality begins to adjust (Bennett 2004). Intercultural competence relates directly to self-discipline in a person's quest to learn about another culture (Allen 2014). The effort of actively working towards this competence is associated with effective intercultural pedagogy (Bickley, et. al, 2014)

Intercultural competency refers to the ability to form interaction between individuals from different cultures in working effectively together (Navaitiene, et al., 2015) and it is a must have traits for intercultural professionals (Goryunova & Jenkins, 2017). The demand for graduates imbued with communicative competence and good mastery of lingua franca such as English has been steadily increasing due to rapid growth in businesses and economic activities around the world (Ahmad, et.al, 2021). Chen and Yang (2016) found that intercultural learning activities via joint projects had a significant impact on the development of learners' critical cultural awareness, foreign language, motivation, and willingness to discard stereotypes and respect views from a different perspective. Language is a complex tool as it is not only the solitary combination of phonetics, vocabulary and grammar but also comprise deep cultural factors, which cannot be acquired by rote memorizing some vocabulary or grammar in a short period of time. Angelova and Zhao (2016) in their study on online intercultural communication activities via creative project benefited both Chinese and American students by (1) improving teaching skills through tutoring non-native speakers of English; (2) developing cross-cultural awareness; and (3) improving non-native speakers' language skills. This study demonstrates that intercultural communication can be used to help students from two different countries to improve their skills in their field of study and develop cross-cultural awareness

In tertiary English teaching, the teachers should carry out training to develop students' intercultural communication competence by creating and simulating authentic English application environment to carry out relevant practical activities. These efforts, not only deepen students' comprehension and understanding of English through differences between cultures, but also form correct English thinking habits (Zhang, 2019). Consequently, students' ability to understand cultural contexts and to use language efficiently will gradually improve. Teachers that work to create a learning environment utilizing both Western and Eastern pedagogy generally excel in their work (Tang 2009).

To some students, learning a language is relatively boring especially in the context of traditional English teaching in China. Traditional English teaching often centers on the memorization of words, meaning, pronunciation and grammar, which gives rise to a large number of students to lose interest and regard English learning as a burden. It could be observed that teachers in Eastern cultures generally control knowledge in an authoritarian style and deliver instruction in a unidirectional way for students to listen, retain, and use to pass examinations (Tang 2009). Wenzhong (2013) highlights the need for teachers to change the passive and authoritarian way of teaching and provide opportunity and autonomy to students to play active role as learners. This is mandatory under a quality-oriented education system, especially for tertiary level English teaching for college students to further develop their critical thinking skills.

English has a large number of vocabulary and relatively varied pronunciation, and this has resulted in various non-native speakers and learners to encounter considerable difficulties when communicating in foreign countries (Yang Li, 2010). Chinese students for instance are reluctant to participate in Western style classroom environments (Harryba, et al., 2012) and they seldom raise their hand to ask or to answer questions (Huang, 2012). In the context of EFL in China, there are a multitude of obstacles and challenges in achieving the goal of intercultural language teaching. The challenges range from the government policy to the test system and the aspect that require immediate attention is the teacher training program (Yu, et al., 2014). There are strong assertions by scholars that in content-specific domain, a language specific curriculum and assessment will provide better and more reliable indicators of language skills and communication abilities than a general-purpose language course (Ahmad, et.al, 2021). In addition, research into intercultural teaching styles, students' responses, and classroom teacher-student relations have been somewhat ignored by the academy and it needs to be undertaken (Li, et al. 2012; Allen, 2019).

The objective of this study is to explore the present challenges that language educators in China need to grapple with in teaching and developing intercultural communication among students and the mitigating strategies taken to achieve the teaching and learning goals. The research questions for this study are as follows;

1. What are the challenges faced by educators teaching intercultural communication at college level in China?
2. What are the mitigating strategies undertaken by the educators?

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Through researching basic contents of cross-cultural communication via qualitative meta-analysis, this paper discusses inseparable relationship between cross-cultural communication and foreign language teaching. Hu (2014) believes that by undertaking such analysis, main problems existing in current foreign language teaching could be identified and improvement efforts could be initiated towards achieving the fundamental objective of foreign language teaching that is to get students to achieve cross-cultural communication competence. An assortment of seminar, workshop and conference papers with themes relating to intercultural communication at tertiary level in China for the past two decades were revisited, reviewed and collated via summary version into a list of key challenges and mitigating strategies. Inter rater verification were employed to avoid errors, reduce overlapping and increase the accuracy of the themes and points identification. The key literature and studies on the challenges and mitigating strategies were presented in non-linear format for easy reference and discussion.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The aggregated findings from the qualitative document analysis of the studies written both in English and Chinese language were presented in the following table and elaborated in the paragraphs that follow;

Table1. Challenges and Obstacles in Teaching Intercultural Communication

No	Challenge Type and Level	Level	
		Micro	Macro
1	Poor Teaching System for ICC	-	National level
2	No Clear Goals on ICC	Institution	-
3	Low Teachers' Professionalism for ICC	Institution	National Level
4	Teachers' Lack of Training on ICC	Institution	National Level
5	Outdated Teaching Concept & Approaches on ICC	-	National Level
6	Need Guideline for Innovative Teaching for ICC	-	National Level
7	No Evaluation of Teachers' ICC	Institution	National Level
8	ICC Not Incorporated Evaluation Criteria	Institution	-
9	Lack of Guideline on ICC Lesson Planning & Delivery	Institution	-
10	Reliance on Traditional Textbooks for ICC	Institution	National Level

### **No Clear Training Goals and Poor Teaching System**

When compared with the teaching of Chinese language in China or English teaching in foreign countries, the teaching of intercultural communication competence in China is still in the fledging period. A systematic teaching procedure has not been in place and there are no clear teaching goals. At many universities, although the corresponding teaching practice has been carried out, it is not enough to just regard it as a dependable or well-established language teaching due to a number of factors (Ying & Enping, 2007). For instance, there is a lack of cultural identity on the part of the teachers and the teaching materials when delivering intercultural lessons. The teachers need to have knowledge of corresponding cultural identity of different countries and regions where English is used (Zhang, 2017). In the traditional English teaching in China, some teachers rarely take the initiative to introduce the national and cultural background of the language taught to the students. As a result, the students have developed some misunderstanding in foreign culture cognition (Luo, et. al, 2014). Moreover, some teachers excessively publicize the advantages of foreign culture, which affects students' recognition of their own national culture. Within traditional teaching method, students cannot develop good understanding of foreign culture as it is difficult for them to comprehend the relationship between local and foreign culture. This greatly affects the training of intercultural communication among tertiary students (Yu, et al., 2014)

A large number of teachers still adopt the traditional model in teaching as evident by their lesson delivery that comprise explaining of vocabulary, reading, grammar and other language aspects without creating adequate communicative environment for students (Tang, 2009). Frequently missing from their lessons are two-way interaction, discussion activities, presentation time as well as cultural contents. Due to the lack of quality guidance, the students rarely get to learn cultural knowledge and literary works of different countries and are unable to improve their understanding of foreign culture (Zhang, 2019). The conscious incorporation of intercultural communication content does not actively take place and limited knowledge relating to culture is interspersed within English teaching. When planning for teaching goals, choice of content to teach and ways to evaluate the success of the learning process, there are no clear guidelines or

regulations. In addition, there is also a lack of supporting teaching resources and facilities, which makes the training of intercultural communication competence in China to be inadequate and lacks impact (Chunyan, 2013).

### **Low Teachers' Professionalism due to Lack of Training**

As teachers have strong leading role in the teaching and learning process, their own teaching quality and ability directly affect students' development of competence in intercultural communication. It is important for teachers to have the required competence and quality to carry out teaching on content that deals with different national, cultural, historical background and communication mode (Bickley, et al., 2014). There is a short supply of high-quality teachers with intercultural communication competence. At present, though the training of intercultural communication competence is imperative, not many universities or research institutes have the capacity or expertise to specially trained teachers' competence in intercultural communication. In the process of teachers' re-education, the knowledge involved in this aspect is not enough (Jianliang & Huixin, 2017). This greatly affects the construction of teaching body, as well as the work progress of training intercultural communication competence at universities in China.

### **Outdated Teaching Concept and the Need for Innovative Teaching Mode**

At present, the philosophy in teaching language at tertiary level in China is still lagging behind their counterparts in other parts of the world. The prevalent adoption of traditional teaching methods makes language teaching to be disconnected from authentic communicative situations and affect the training and development of competence in intercultural communication. Senior teachers tend to spend too much energy on language knowledge that centers around grammar, vocabulary and syntax and less on communication and culture (Chunju, et al., 2015). There is also an imbalance arrangement of teaching hours where more hours are allocated for the training of basic English ability as compared the time arrangement for communicative and cultural classes. Generally, the incorporating of intercultural communication in teaching is still limited as the communication aspect of tertiary English in China is mostly concentrated in the classroom. It is basically carried out by answering the questions of teachers and the main lesson objective is just to train sentence patterns and grammar for the students to pick-up. The contents of such teaching practices are also tied up to and reliant upon the course textbooks, which are usually not comprehensive. There are also limited elements of exploration on cultural knowledge, nuances and connotation of language in context and authentic communication environment. In oral communication lessons, teachers and students are influenced by the "negative transfer" factor of the mother tongue Mandarin and the "Chinglish". Systematic evaluation mechanism is an important precondition to promote continuous improvement of teaching, but at present, there is limited dependable system for the evaluation of intercultural communication competence training at tertiary level English teaching.

Students' achievements are essential for evaluating the success and impact of language teaching. It is unfortunate that intercultural communication is not well incorporated into the evaluation criteria. This will certainly give rise to the indifference of teachers and students on intercultural matters. Another area where intercultural component is missing is in terms of their lesson delivery evaluation. Within a teacher-centered authoritarian approach system, even the general methods of evaluating

teachers itself is relatively new. In some universities, there is no teacher's guidance on the ways to develop the learning atmosphere for intercultural communication competence.

### **Mitigating Strategies for Cultivating Intercultural Communication Competence**

Presented in this section is the aggregated findings of the document analysis of articles and studies on mitigating strategies on teaching intercultural communication written both in English and in the Chinese language.

Table 2. Possible Mitigating Strategies Undertaken

No	Types of Strategy	Level	
		Micro	Macro
1	Increase Teachers' Awareness of ICC	Institution	-
2	Improve Quality of Teachers	Institution	National Level
3	Improve Teaching System	Institution	National Level
4	Provide International Mobility Opportunities for Teachers	Institution	National Level
5	Enrich Teaching Methods with Dynamic Activities	Institutions	-
6	Integrate Culture and Communication Materials in Teaching Methods	Institution	-
7	Establish ICC Resource System	Institution	National Level
8	Improve ICC Evaluation Mode and Mechanisms	Institution	National Level
9	Building Professional Teams for ICC Teaching	Institution	National Level

In order to better cultivate the intercultural communication competence among tertiary students, a number of mitigating strategies at the micro and macro level could be undertaken. They are discussed in the sections that follow;

#### **Improving Teaching Awareness and Teaching System**

There is a crucial need to understand and respect cultural differences. The purpose of carrying out intercultural communication training is to let students understand the differences between different cultures correctly, respect the differences and reduce the cognitive deviation. Teachers can guide students to learn more about the cultural differences of various countries and regions through the internet to prevent assumptions and misconceptions in language use. In the training of intercultural communication competence, if there are conflicts and differences between different cultures, the teachers must guide students to deal with them correctly (Allen, 2019). This will expand students' horizon and minds while learning intercultural communication.

#### **Establish System for Intercultural Communication Resources**

There is also a need to establish system of resources for intercultural communication for teachers to carry out relevant teaching researches, revise the teaching contents of English language courses to be in line with relevant principles of

intercultural communication. The resource system will also assist to guide teachers in preparing lesson materials which are in accordance with tertiary level English course requirements, teaching goals and optimized teaching resources. The resource system will be useful to specify and recommend relevant theoretical contents and instructional goals of teaching and training intercultural communication competence. It will enable teachers to formulate specific teaching goals and contents for the teaching to be based on evidence and diverse contexts (Haiyan, 2008). In the process of teaching, teachers should make clear the teaching goals and contents of each course relating to intercultural communication. It is necessary for the basic courses to focus on the cultivation of basic language skills, which is applicable to the common students and the advanced course to focus on the cultivating communication competence (Angelova & Zhao, 2016). Through the continuous improvement of English courses, the intercultural communication resource system will also grow and become more established.

### **Improving the Quality of Teachers and Building the Professional Teams**

Tertiary education has a significant role in ensuring the progress of any nation and this requires higher education institution curriculum to be well-tailored towards assisting undergraduates meet future workplace needs and face the real-world employment challenges (Ahmad, et. al. 2019). Among the needs is to develop competence amongst graduates in intercultural cultural communication. Before students could be trained to competent, the teachers themselves must be well versed in and well exposed to aspects of intercultural communication (Zhang, 2019). When recruiting local or foreign teachers, the school should not only pay attention to whether they have the educational background, but also their overall quality. Developing competency in language is a gradual process where the cultivation of intercultural communication competencies requires knowledge explanation and activity organization in the classrooms (Bickley, 2014). The teachers will carry certain cultural information within some of the words used or in the communicative activities done with the students during and after class.

### **Provide International Mobility Opportunities for Teachers**

Tertiary institutions can create opportunities for teachers to go abroad through various means. To experience and embrace intercultural communication, the opportunities for teachers to go abroad must be increased via international mobility and 'going global' approach (Allen, 2014). This is to enable the teachers themselves to feel the cultural differences in different countries and regions (Tang, 2009). They could explore and bring back some of the advanced teaching ideas and methods and improve the English teaching of the school as a whole. Thus, it is important for tertiary level teachers to promote intercultural knowledge by cooperating in international mobility involving students and staff exchange with other international colleges and institutions. Consequently, an excellent teacher team that comprise Chinese and foreign teachers will be established on campus.

### **Enriching Teaching Methods with Dynamic Activities**

There is a crucial need to increase communication activities within extracurricular practices at tertiary institutions. The teachers can make full use of the existing resources and conditions and organize some intercultural communication activities in combination with the actual teaching reality (Allen, 2019). For example, the teachers can invite foreign teachers and foreign students to participate in carrying out English conversation

and cultural activities together while strengthening their awareness of intercultural communication (Zhang, 2019). In addition, teachers and students can organize intercultural communication learning clubs, and hold some English performances, cultural knowledge interesting speeches and other activities. In addition, the teachers can also guide students to be volunteers at tourist attractions and make full use of the opportunity and services for foreign tourists to understand the differences between Chinese and foreign cultures, so as to improve their language communication competence (Liang , 2004).

### **Integrate Culture and Communication Materials in Teaching Methods**

The other essential preparations required is to upgrade teaching methods by focusing on cultural integration. The teachers can make full use of online teaching resources or multimedia teaching methods to help students understand the thinking and communication mode of foreign communication, and explore the cultural values contained within the communication mode (Chen & Yang, 2016). For example, teachers can play short videos of foreign mannerism and customs before class for students to view and study the language and cultural differences. In addition, teachers can also guide students to find dialogue videos of different communicative situations on the internet on their own. This will enable students to widened their horizon and deepen their understanding of western culture. The purpose of introducing culture-related knowledge in intercultural communication competence is to understand the differences between Chinese and foreign cultures, to better improve students' language competence, rather than to glorify or to detest certain culture (Jiangliang & Huixin, 2017). To ensure that students are able to distinguish different linguistics aspects in cultural context like in films, animation or other forms of culture, it is necessary to screen their contents. They will gradually learn to develop a healthy concept of personal intercultural communication selectivity and censorship.

### **Infuse Intercultural Communication Information in Teaching Materials**

There is also a need to pay attention to multicultural infusion in the specific teaching process, where teachers should infuse the multi-cultural elements into every aspect of tertiary level English teaching (Wenzhong, 2013). Teachers could select the relevant cultural aspects in a systematic manner, to be infused in chosen setting or context like classroom, café, hostel, campus common area, resource center and guide the students to carefully study and embrace the created cultural situations to feel the differences of the cultures. The cultivation of intercultural communication competence is not achieved in a short duration of time, but a long-term process (Xiaohui, 2014). Therefore, teachers should not only cultivate it in aspects of English teaching, but also penetrate into every aspect of students' life.

### **Improve the Evaluation Mode and Optimizing the Evaluation Mechanism**

The manner in which students are assessed at higher education institutions is becoming more essential as it reflects the efforts and depth in tertiary learning as part of a life-long learning process of becoming quality graduates who are ready for employability (Ahmad, et.al, 2017). Systematic teaching evaluation mechanism can effectively facilitate teachers to modify teaching methods and improve the teaching and training of intercultural communication to develop competence in students. Due to this, teachers should utilize a variety of teaching evaluation methods and activities that incorporate aspects of intercultural communication to develop competence within



students (Yu, et al, 2014). The communicative learning activities within the tertiary English lessons could be assessed with evaluation instruments and rubrics that considers intercultural communication criteria.

Language assessments must be made more dynamic and integrated instead of just relying on traditional pen and paper summative examination which is outdated and must be modified to adapt to more contemporary evaluation approaches (Chunju, et.al, 2015). Otherwise, multiple aspects that evolve around language use such as thinking process and intercultural competency could not be properly evaluated. Apart from just evaluating summative evaluation results of students, teachers should always consider a variety of achievement indicators such as communicative competence and performance. Teachers can encourage peer evaluation in language classes and occasionally get the students to evaluate them when they do sample demonstration or presentation of language use. The higher the rate of students engaging in independent self-study the more efficient they will be in acquiring various aspects and skills that constitute intercultural communication competence (Jianliang & Huixi, 2017).

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, the cultivation of intercultural communication skills in college English teaching can broaden the horizons of students and improve their interest in English learning. It also has tremendous potential to elevate students' cognition of English and better enhance their overall English language mastery and competency to meet communication challenges of the globalized world. They will also develop into sought after talents in the job market and will be in high demand for employability. To ensure these outcomes could be achieved, certain aspects require improvement and upgrading such as the quality of language teachers, the teaching system, the resources and evaluation methods. This is crucial as they present challenges to the process of cultivating competency in intercultural communication, via tertiary English courses. Mitigating strategies which are currently being undertaken should be intensified and concerted efforts at micro and macro level should be further mobilized to ensure the intended teaching and training goals are well achieved.

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