



Does context count? Developing and assessing intercultural competence through an interview- and model-based domestic course design in China



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ABSTRACT

Most intercultural competence training designs focus on international exchange and study abroad opportunities, however, approaches for developing intercultural competence “at home” are negligible. This paper reports on a descriptive and reflective interview process in the domestic higher education context in China, utilizing mixed-method quantitative and qualitative assessments. Through enrollment in a specially designed *Intercultural Communication* course, Chinese university students ($N=57$) were guided to conduct two cross-cultural interviews in varied contexts. The quantitative IDI findings indicated that participants' Perceived Orientation (PO) and Development Orientation (DO) increased significantly after the course. Noteworthy is that students involved in domestic cultural diversity interactions and online intercultural exchanges increased intercultural competence as much as those who engaged in international cultural and face-to-face encounters. Qualitative findings concurred, illustrating significant growth, eliciting some new indigenous insights, and highlighting their positive responses to both the intercultural interactions and IDI assessment. Some characteristics emerged that either reflect Chinese cultural perspectives or contribute to evaluating a proposed integrative multi-level model of culture and intercultural communication. Themes emerging from the qualitative analysis elicited ten items that conceptually “fit” the model in this exploratory analysis. The study thus demonstrates that a mixed-method training design using a multi-step interview process can be used in limited domestic “home”-based situations (like some higher education contexts in China) as an effective means of developing and assessing intercultural competence.

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1. Introduction and rationale for the study

With ever expanding globalization in the 21st Century, intercultural understanding and competence are increasingly featured in the mission statements of governmental or educational institutions that aim to develop informed and well-equipped citizens for the ever-changing contexts of this new era. The significant volume of acculturation and adjustment studies (cf. [Chi & Young, 2013](#), Table 2, Fig. 6; [Young & Chi, 2013](#)) often recommends certain competencies or broader frameworks for

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“global competence” (e.g., Hunter et al., 2006; Wilkinson, 2012). Some European scholars (e.g., Byram, 2008, 2012; Byram & Parmenter, 2012) combine citizenship education with foreign language education to help young people develop both intercultural competence and intercultural citizenship. In China, over twenty years of intercultural communication research and teaching resulted in updated national guidelines toward integrating intercultural communication competence (ICC¹) into all levels of foreign language education (cf. Kulich, Meng, & SII Team, 2012; Kulich & Wang, 2015). However, definitions, skill sets, and procedures are not yet clear, widely implemented, or adequately researched for the Chinese context. To address some of these issues, this study proposes an integrative heuristic model and explores its relevance with mixed-method data from an interview-based course design in a Chinese educational setting.

The international literature on competence increasingly recommends the implementation of “ethnographic approaches” for effectiveness in deepening foreign language learners’ understanding and awareness of cultural acquisition processes in various contexts (e.g., Byram, 1989; Paige, Jacobs-Cassuto, Yershova, & DeJaeghere, 2003a; Paige, Jorstand, Siaya, Klein, & Colby, 2003b; Du, 2008; Holmes & O’Neill, 2012). However, beyond the broader need to consider to what degree a study can be considered adequately “ethnographic” in such approaches, (a) most studies have been conducted on students’ going abroad or interacting in multicultural settings. This study seeks to explore whether an interview inquiry approach can develop learners’ intercultural competence effectively “at home” when political, economic, or geographic factors limit cross border exchanges. A further issue in competence research is that most studies revolve around Euro-American participants (given the institutionalization of study abroad programs). The resulting theory base is potentially Euro-centric or ethnocentric in its conceptualization, outcomes, and models (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). If these do indeed harbor a Western bias, (b) research is certainly needed from non-Western contexts with other social-economic and psycho-cultural conditions (in this case, one in China). Kramersch (1999) further cautions that most studies have been too focused on countries, noting that “they see cultures as much more homogeneous than they really are, especially in national terms” (1999, p. 43), therefore (c) efforts to consider other levels, conceptualizations, or models of “culture” are needed in intercultural competence research.

This study is part of a broader program of research initiated in Chinese contexts (cf. Kulich, 2003, 2006, 2008; Kulich & Zhang, 2010) that seeks to address such shortcomings by considering a wider range of perspectives on “culture,” the dynamic nature of intercultural encounters at all levels (balancing critiques on static national culture “traits” or “indices,” cf. Weng, 2013; Weng & Kulich, 2014), potential competencies needed for each, and explorations into varied methods for measurement. Specifically this study (1) applies the intercultural competence literature on “ethnographic approaches” to design a reflective interview project for a college course on “Intercultural Communication” and takes the enrolled participants through a domestic process of training, observation, recording, reflection, and evaluation. This investigation then (2) seeks to assess the intercultural competencies reflected in the Chinese written materials that each participant produced as well as through their pre- and post-experience scores on an leading intercultural competence measure (the IDI), then (3) relates these to a proposed intercultural multi-level, multi-paradigmatic heuristic model and utilizes the Chinese language learners’ perspectives generated to reexamine intercultural competence frameworks toward enhancing future research.

2. Theoretical background: Revisiting the complex and dynamic growth processes in developing intercultural competence

Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2010) documented how intercultural competence has been explored from a wide variety of disciplines and approaches. Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) note that contemporary theories and models of intercultural competence fit five types: compositional, co-orientational, developmental, adaptational, and causal process. Though the taxonomies and frameworks are varied, most affirm that developing intercultural competence is an ongoing process acquired through intercultural interaction. The widely adopted Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) (Bennett, 1986, 1993) addresses this process of awareness growth from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. It shows how individuals become increasingly interculturally sensitive and competent when they are exposed to or experience cultural differences across six stages over time: from Denial, Defense, Minimization, Acceptance, Adaptation, to Integration. The Intercultural Development Inventory measurement tool (IDI, Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003) was developed from the DMIS model. Now translated into twelve languages, the IDI has been tested in diverse cultures and contexts, regularly updated, and is used extensively in a wide range of intercultural competence studies (Paige, Cohen, & Shively, 2004; Yuen & Grossman, 2009; DeJaeghere & Cao, 2009; Nam, 2011) and has demonstrated statistically reliability and cross-cultural validity (Hammer et al., 2003; Hammer, 2008, 2011).

As a qualitative supplement, Deardorff (2004) utilized a Delphi technique to generate definitions and components of intercultural competence that could be agreed upon by leading intercultural experts (her Process Model of Intercultural Competence, PMIC). PMIC reflects a cyclical process through individual level factors (attitudes, knowledge, and skills) and interaction levels (internal and external outcomes), movement from personal to interpersonal levels (intercultural

¹ Though there are subtle distinctions between the terms “intercultural competence” (which we consider to be the broader more inclusive frame) and “intercultural communication competence” (ICC, a more narrower subset related specifically to language or communicative contexts and outcomes), this essay uses the two word designation, intercultural competence in agreement with Spitzberg and Changnon (2009, p. 6), Byram (2012, p. 87), and Fantini (2009, p. 458) unless an original author cited specifically added “communication,” for which we will follow their use of use “intercultural communication competence.”

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