

A study on strategies for cultivating Chinese university students' intercultural communication competence

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Abstract

In the era of globalization, marked by the «One Belt, One Road» initiative, interaction between people from diverse countries and cultural fields is increasing. The formation of highly qualified personnel in the field of intercultural communication is becoming critically important for China. In this regard, teaching foreign languages in Chinese universities plays a key role in the development of intercultural communication skills among students. This study analyzes the relationship between the theory of language transfer and the development of intercultural communication skills among students of Chinese universities. In addition, based on a literary review and comparative analysis, the main problems in the field of intercultural communication among this category of students are identified. In conclusion, effective methods and strategies for improving the intercultural communication competence of students at universities in China are presented.

Keywords

theory of language transfer; intercultural communicative competence; competence cultivation; Chinese university students; strategies.

Introduction

Within the framework of the «Belt and Road Initiative», the interaction amongst individuals across various nations and regions is escalating. English, as the global lingua franca, serves as a pivotal medium for cross-border dialogues, encompassing cultural, scientific, and technological exchanges. The pedagogy of English in Chinese institutions is tailored towards its pragmatic application, with a particular emphasis on fostering the English proficiency of students. Integral to this educational paradigm is the intercultural communication module, which stands as one of the triad pillars of collegiate English instruction (Wang Shouren, 2016). Mastery in intercultural communication skills not only facilitates a deeper appreciation and assimilation

of global cultures and civilizations but also plays a crucial role in the dissemination of Chinese heritage, amplifying China's linguistic influence and fostering global engagements.

This study delves into the landscape of intercultural communicative competence development among Chinese university scholars, offering robust methodologies grounded in the language transfer theory for nurturing such competencies.

Language transfer, as a concept, navigates the similarities and disparities between a learned or partially acquired language and the target language (Yuan Hua, 2017), transcending mere linguistic phenomena to encompass psychological dimensions. It functions as a strategic mechanism, leveraging known linguistic frameworks to acquire new linguistic capabilities. The intricacies of language transfer in cross-cultural interactions bear significant implications for both pragmatic and applied linguistic research. Categorized into positive and negative transfers, it highlights the influence of native linguistic structures on second language acquisition. Positive transfer leverages similarities with the native tongue, facilitating the learning process, whereas negative transfer, arising from significant linguistic discrepancies, often hinders this process. The dynamics of language transfer permeate all linguistic analysis levels-phonology, lexicon, syntax, reading, and cultural contexts-operating not in isolation but in a synergistic manner that influences the learning trajectory. Harnessing these transfer phenomena optimally can significantly benefit learners (Zhong Shaoxiong, 2015).

Intercultural communication, embedded in the variances among communicators, cognitive psychology, and linguistic milieus, underscores the inevitability of language transfer in cross-cultural exchanges. It encompasses interactions between both native and non-native speakers and those from divergent linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Brian H. Spielberg articulates intercultural communicative competence as the adeptness in adhering to environmental and relational linguistic adaptation rules, facilitating the achievement of communicative objectives. Spencer Oatey and Franklin (Spenceroatey, 2014) conceive it as the capacity to execute effective and appropriate verbal and non-verbal communication actions across cultural divides, addressing the psychological ramifications of such interactions.

Leveraging the language transfer theory, this discourse explores its correlation with the intercultural communication competencies of university students, proposing that language transfer theory critically informs the development of such competencies.

Materials and methods

The study summarizes the literature in the field of intercultural communication in China and internationally and examines the common problems of intercultural communicative competence of Chinese university students through the analysis of literature and research.

Thus, the definition of the term «intercultural communication», which was first introduced by Hall in 1959, is considered. He described it as the ability of individuals with distinct social and cultural identities to engage in dialogue, transcending linguistic boundaries. This study established a link between culture, language and communication, marking a new era of careful study of the field of intercultural exchanges.

By 1970, the creation of the Credit Association for Intercultural Communication marked a turning point when academic curricula began to include intercultural communication, thereby institutionalizing the concept.

In the 80s and 90s, scientific research in this field focused on the development of concepts, models, components and analysis of cultural value orientations. During this period, various theoretical foundations emerged, including the comprehensive multi-element Hunter model (Hunter, 2006), combining knowledge, skills, attitudes and experience, the Navas adaptation model (Navas, 2005) and the Arasaratnam causal system (Arasaratnam, 2006), among others.

Research in the field of intercultural communication in China began in the 1980s, which marked a belated beginning compared to international efforts in this field. Xu Guozhang's 1980 study of the relationship between lexical culture and English language teaching, using vocabulary as a cultural guide, marked the birth of intercultural communication research in China.

Hu Wenzhong's subsequent works expanded the concept of «culture» in his seminal work «Introduction to Intercultural Communication». He explained how cultural transfer leads to foreign language learners imposing

their local cultural frameworks on new languages and cultures, emphasizing the inherent unity, continuity and universality of culture along with its differences and dynamism (Hu Wenzhong, 1999).

The trajectory of intercultural communication research in China was mainly characterized by the import of foreign academic disciplines, the creation of theoretical foundations and empirical research. Thus, the material of this study was the scientific study of intercultural communication as a cornerstone of increasing the adaptability of individuals to intercultural interactions, forming a positive attitude and improving communication skills.

Upon scrutinizing relevant scholarly works, we identify four primary challenges faced by Chinese college students in their intercultural communication abilities.

A prevalent teaching methodology in Chinese higher education institutions for English language involves a focus on intensive reading and lectures that adhere strictly to textbook content. This approach, coupled with the high enrollment in general education classes, leads to a curriculum dense in linguistic theory but sparse in real-world communication scenarios and practice. Consequently, students often find themselves deprived of genuine interactive experiences. The crux of the issue lies in the underrepresentation of intercultural communication within university English curriculums. A lack of dedicated and systematic training means students seldom venture beyond basic expression forms, lacking the skills necessary for dynamic engagement in diverse communicative contexts.

English instruction in Chinese universities primarily emphasizes vocabulary, phrases, and grammatical structures, alongside the development of listening, translation, and writing competencies. This focus neglects the critical aspect of cultural depth, leaving students with a superficial understanding of the cultures associated with the English language. Many Chinese students approach intercultural exchanges with a self-centric perspective, often overlooking the nuanced differences that define individual cultures. This approach not only hampers effective communication but also reflects a broader lack of sensitivity and appreciation for the complexities of intercultural dialogue.

Spanning over three decades, the exploration of intercultural communication in China has flourished, with the Chinese full-text journal database cataloging thousands of entries on the topic of intercultural communicative skill and its cultivation. An in-depth review and analysis of these documents reveal insights into the prevailing challenges in intercultural communicative competence among university students in China.

Drawing parallels to the «language transfer» concept, the principle of contrastive analysis, rooted in behaviorist theory, emphasizes the comparative study of languages or their subsets to identify their similarities and discrepancies. (Lado, 1957), a pioneering advocate for contrastive analysis, posited that understanding the distinctions and parallels between a foreign language and the native tongue enables educators to pinpoint the precise challenges learners face, thereby enhancing the teaching process.

The resurgence of contrastive analysis in recent times, bolstered by advancements in psycholinguistics and cognitive linguistics, has reinstated its importance in the realms of pragmatics and cultural comparisons. Rod Ellis (Rod, 1985) supports the foundational premise of linguistic contrasts, contending that the concept itself is sound; the crux of the issue lies in the methodology of implementation. This approach allows educators to juxtapose the nuanced meanings that English and Chinese convey across various cultural backdrops. As an illustration, the subsequent table juxtaposes the connotative interpretations of identical terms within divergent cultural settings in both Chinese and English.

Table 1. Cultural Connotation Comparison between English and Chinese

English/Chinese Words	Cultural Connotations in English	Cultural Connotations in Chinese
dragon/龙	«Dragon» is the symbol of evil. It is a cruel and violent monster, and should be exterminated.	In ancient China, «龙» is the symbol of the emperor, and represents supreme power. Even today, «龙» is the lucky animal, Chinese people use «龙的传人» to refer to themselves.

bat/蝙蝠	In English-speaking countries, «bat» is an ugly animal. So there are such sayings in English: «have bats in the belfry», «crazy as a bat», and «as blind as a bat»	«蝙蝠», in China, is the symbol of luck, because «蝠» in «蝙蝠» has the same pronunciation with «福» (luck) .
intellectual/知识分子	In English, intellectual refers to those professors who have higher academic achievements.	In Chinese, those people who have some education can be called «知识分子».
individualism/个人主义	In English «Individualism» is definitely a commendatory word. It reminds people of self-independent, and self-made man.	In Chinese, «个人主义» is opposite to «集体主义». It is related to «being selfish, being self-centered».

Results and discussion

From the analysis presented, it becomes evident that a significant link exists between the intercultural communication skills of university students and the concept of language transfer, especially within the realm of foreign language education.

Initially, both language transfer theory and intercultural communicative competence delve into the nuances of linguistic interactions within cross-cultural settings. Language transfer theory sheds light on the transference of speech construction elements from one's native language to a foreign language, encompassing aspects like phonetics, vocabulary, grammar, sentence structures, and cultural communication patterns. On the other hand, intercultural communication spans across various dimensions including knowledge, abilities, and cultural understandings across diverse linguistic landscapes. Here, language transfer theory leans more towards a linguistic explanation of communication, whereas intercultural communicative competence focuses on the practical application of language across different cultural contexts. Moreover, the relationship between language transfer theory and intercultural communicative competence can be seen as a dynamic interplay between process and outcome. The former primarily deals with how cultural aspects influence a learner's native language processing, while the latter looks at adaptive language learning as a dynamic phenomenon. Effective intercultural language teaching strategies within university English education can foster more positive language transfers, enhancing students' intercultural communication skills.

Additionally, there's an instructional dynamic at play between the theory of language transfer and the development of intercultural communicative competence. Focusing on the learner's rule acquisition in mastering a target language, language transfer theory aids educators in structuring classroom activities that promote positive linguistic transfers, thereby nurturing students' intercultural communication abilities.

The discussion also touches upon the general challenges faced in cultivating intercultural communication skills among Chinese university students. Most existing research within China aims to pinpoint these issues, offering specific teaching strategies or recommendations. Some analyses explore the root causes of these communicative challenges, attributing them to both subjective factors like students' psychological attitudes and objective factors such as the educational model's cultural neglect and limited practice opportunities. While these strategies are tailored and contribute to the enhancement of intercultural communication teaching methods in China, they often lack a solid theoretical foundation or systematic theoretical guidance.

This paper, therefore, by acknowledging the prevalent issues in the intercultural communicative competence of Chinese university students, proposes leveraging the well-established language transfer theory as a foundational guide. This approach is aimed at formulating an effective methodology for fostering intercultural communication skills among Chinese college students.

Exploring the nexus between language transfer theory and the enhancement of intercultural communicative skills, this section aims to unveil the instructional insights that language transfer theory provides for enriching the intercultural communicative abilities of Chinese university students. It also introduces tailored strategies to address the prevailing challenges in nurturing these competencies within the Chinese academic context.

The proficiency in intercultural communication among students in Chinese universities can generally be distilled into four primary areas of concern: a constrained understanding of intercultural dynamics, often constricted by native linguistic frameworks; a lack of proactive engagement with individuals from diverse cultural settings; a subdued consciousness of the importance of intercultural exchanges; and moderate to insufficient intercultural communication tactics and proficiency. Based on the prior examination of how language transfer phenomena within educational settings influence students' intercultural communication skills, it has been deduced that language transfer theory serves as a pivotal theoretical framework for guiding the development of these competencies in university students. While the application of language transfer theory has gained traction in the realm of English language teaching research, its implications for fostering the intercultural communicative competence of Chinese university students suggest that transfer occurs broadly across different facets. By systemizing this transfer process, we propose several strategies aimed at cultivating the intercultural communicative competence of students in Chinese universities.

The first strategy is that intercultural knowledge can be added in English language teaching and elective courses can be offered in university. In intercultural communication, there exists a close correlation between the flexible application of linguistic communication skills and the intercultural knowledge of both parties involved in the communication. Therefore, if the communicating parties do not understand the differences that exist in language and culture, it is also easy to cause many communication barriers. This puts new demands on teachers' English teaching activities, that is, while teaching students the language knowledge and skills, they also have to strengthen the intercultural comparative teaching. For example, when teaching intercultural communication dining etiquette, teachers can focus on foreign dining culture to students. In an English household, there are usually four meals a day, and in addition to the main meal of breakfast, lunch and dinner, there is an important tea time. In the British banquet, tableware arrangement is a strict requirement, the plate in the center, the left fork, the right knife, the number of knives and forks equal, soup spoons are usually in the knife. Through the cultural introduction of British dining etiquette, teachers can also combine cultural history and etiquette to add interest to students' learning and motivate them to take the initiative to learn some foreign cultural knowledge. Universities should include courses on intercultural communication knowledge in their professional electives to help university students understand foreign culture, customs, social and the style of language use under the rules of etiquette, etc. This will improve students' intercultural communication awareness, eliminate communication barriers in cultural understanding, and improve students' confidence in communication.

The second strategy is that comparing the linguistic similarities and differences in Chinese and English cultures and exploring the commonalities that exist between them. The theory of language transfer makes it clear that in the process of foreign language learning, it is impossible for students to absolutely isolate their mother tongue and the target language for cognitive isolation. The positive and negative transfer effects of the presence of native language naturalness can accelerate or hinder the target correct acquisition of the target language. There are some similarities between the native language and the target language. And some linguistic rules in the mother tongue can motivate learners to learn and practice the target language better. Many of the Chinese and English phonetic pronunciations are similar, only the names are different, as shown in the table 2. When students are communicating, they can use positive language transfer to transfer Chinese phonetic pronunciation to English pronunciation to improve their speaking ability and enhance their intercultural communication skills.

Table 2. Similar Pronunciation Parts of Chinese Consonants and English Consonants

Chinese(consonants)	/k/	/m/	//
English (consonants)	/k/	/m/	//

In terms of syntactic structure: both in Chinese and English, they have declarative sentences, negative sentences, interrogative sentences, exclamatory sentences, etc. When language learners are first introduced to the target language and its culture, they can use the syntactic structures of their native language to transfer to target language learning. This can help students better understand the syntactic structure of the target language and enhance intercultural knowledge.

However, Chinese and English belong to different language families and have complex grammars, so the differences are obviously greater than the similarities. Therefore, both teachers and students should make good use of the negative transfer of language, combine the similarity between languages, analyze where the mistakes are, constantly correct and improve, strengthen the understanding of the target language, and improve intercultural communication competence.

The third strategy is to reasonably guide students to analyze negative transfer and carry out diverse intercultural communication practice. Le Page and Tabouret-Keller introduced the concepts of «focal occasions» and «non-focal occasions». Communicators will pay more attention to the correctness of the target language in formal settings (focal settings); whereas in informal settings (non-focal settings), communicators pay less attention to the normality of the target language. Negative native language transfer is more likely to occur in non-focused settings than in focused settings. For example, in the classroom, when the students being questioned communicate with the teacher in English, the students will pay more attention to their own grammatical correctness and communication etiquette when they express their language. Students will subconsciously monitor themselves to make their expressions as accurate as possible. In contrast, in some informal settings after school, student-to-student communication in English is shown to be casual.

The theory of language transfer emphasizes error analysis. This requires teachers to identify and collect errors from learners' oral output and to describe and explain them in order to eliminate errors in the teaching process and to guide students correctly. This teaching idea is also applicable to the intercultural communication competence of students' cultivation.

The fourth strategy is to make full use of the existing teaching conditions and reasonably create an intercultural communication platform. The theory of language transfer focuses on the «creation of situations». This theory emphasizes the learner's mental cognitive process, which simply means that prior knowledge facilitates and interferes with later knowledge. Through the creation of scenarios, similarity and proximity in people's way of thinking, as well as their emotions in the same situation, so that communicators become strongly motivated by each other in the process of communication, and the differences between them become controllable and understandable. Cultural communicative competence is the ability of communicators to apply linguistic knowledge and skills in a certain language communication scene or environment. The level of competence of the communicator in applying linguistic knowledge and skills in a certain communicative situation or environment is embodied.

Therefore, in order to better improve the intercultural communication competence of university students, teachers can create a language environment for intercultural communication in English teaching. The students can learn lessons and accumulate experience in actual intercultural communication situations, and gradually improve their self-perception. For example, teachers can make the scene reappear through some classic English scripts with appropriate changes, so that students can imitate the dialogues in the scene through role-playing. Universities can open intercultural salons to increase students' intercultural communication opportunities, which can improve their ability to communicate.

Conclusion

This manuscript delves into the realm of language transfer theory alongside the essence of intercultural communicative competence, examining the interplay between language transfer theory and the intercultural communicative skills among university students. Through a thorough review of existing literature and a comparative analysis, it identifies prevalent challenges faced in nurturing intercultural communicative competence within the Chinese context and offers strategies for its enhancement.

The strategies for fostering intercultural communicative competence outlined in this document consider the specific needs of Chinese university students and draw upon the principles of language transfer theory. These four strategies are intricately linked rather than being siloed or mutually exclusive. In essence, during the process of enhancing university students' intercultural communicative abilities, these strategies can simultaneously coexist and exert mutual influences. Educators are encouraged to apply these strategies with flexibility, aiming to optimally bolster students' proficiency in intercultural communication.

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Исследование стратегий развития межкультурной коммуникативной компетенции студентов китайских университетов

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Аннотация

В эпоху глобализации, отмеченную инициативой «Один пояс, один путь», взаимодействие между людьми из разных стран и культурных сфер усиливается. Формирование высококвалифицированных кадров в области межкультурной коммуникации становится критически важным для Китая. В связи с этим преподавание иностранных языков в китайских университетах играет ключевую роль в развитии навыков межкультурного общения у студентов. В данном исследовании анализируется взаимосвязь между теорией языкового перевода и развитием навыков межкультурной коммуникации у студентов китайских университетов. Кроме того, на основе литературного обзора и сравнительного анализа выявлены основные проблемы в области межкультурной коммуникации среди данной категории студентов. В заключение представлены эффективные методы и стратегии повышения межкультурной коммуникативной компетентности студентов университетов Китая.

Ключевые слова

теория языкового переноса, межкультурная коммуникативная компетенция, повышение компетентности, Студенты китайских университетов, стратегии

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