

Effects of Intercultural Communication on Academic Achievement of Chinese Overseas Students in the UK

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Abstract: Nowadays, numerous Chinese students are struggling for admission to internationally renowned schools among English-speaking countries. In this case, an influencing factors on their academic performance, intercultural communication, is demonstrated under the consideration of language education. This paper mainly focuses on the learning adjustment of international students from China in order to illustrate the helpfulness of intercultural communication towards academic records of Chinese students. By improving intercultural communicative competence, language proficiency and having more intercultural social contact could have a positive impact on the academic performance of Chinese students abroad. indicate that more frequent cross-cultural interaction could have a positive influence on the study of Chinese students abroad.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication; Chinese Overseas Student; Academic Achievement; Language Education.

1. Introduction

This paper would argue for various effects of intercultural communication (ICC) aspects on academic success, particularly focusing on Chinese student contexts in UK higher education. English language teaching (ELT) in contemporary China has gained increasingly concern during the past several decades as English is widely used among various industries, especially international business, education and manufacture (Hu, 2005b). With a mass of English learners in China, numerous students tend to study abroad for the higher world ranking and reputation of universities (UKCISA, 2015). Even in the pursuing process before experiencing higher education in a foreign language speaking world, the actual intercultural communication happens. It is likely that some factors of such ICC encounters can enhance the quality of learning achievement among students as adapting a new education system and learning environment (Laopongharn & Sercombe, 2009).

To illustrate the helpfulness of intercultural communication towards academic result of Chinese students, the relevance between ICC and contemporary language education would be generally introduced first, followed by the description of the current situation of English teaching in Chinese school and then further analysis on three aspects of ICC, namely intercultural competence, language proficiency and intercultural social contact, that may influence the international students' academic performance (Wang & Daller, 2015). It's then concluded by emphasizing how overall effects of ICC could contribute to the quality of higher education on international students from China.

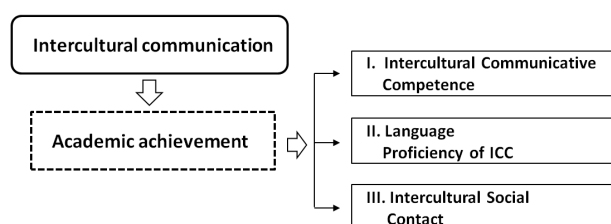


Figure 1. Effects of Intercultural Communication on Academic achievement

2. Literature Review

2.1. ICC and Contemporary Education

Intercultural communication has becoming an essential part among people learn from or work with individuals related to other countries. As English is sometimes considered as the Lingua Franca for major intercultural communication, this language education has played a fundamental role for the speakers to achieve mutual understanding between different cultures (Firth, 1996).

Initially, many scholars provide their own definitions for the term ICC (Holliday et al., 2004; Scollon & Scollon, 2001), among which a general accepted one is that Lustig and Koester regard ICC as “a symbolic, interpretative, transactional, contextual process in which people from different cultures create shared meanings” (2003, p.46). In other words, the communicative process between individuals with different cultural backgrounds as well as languages could be seen the intercultural communication and requires deconstruction (Piller, 2007). As the two notions ICC and CCC (cross-cultural communication) are often interchangeably used in the field of study and the difference is mainly on the emphasis rather than being contrastive, this paper covers both terms to refer to the same research scope.

On the one hand, the intercultural communication has developed its terms and study frameworks theoretically into an academic programme of higher education system in many universities all over the world, such as Warwick University, University of Sheffield, Newcastle University, University of Bedfordshire and University of Denver (2016). In this case, the public concern would be more attracted by ICC since it has entered the education system through the academic conferences together with journals and the enrolment of college students. More improvement could be made to the intercultural research since the professional programme involves a growing number of researchers along with the teaching process. On the other hand, both English language teachers and learners have begun to take intercultural communication in to account when students are acquiring this new language both grammatically and culturally then put it

into practice. According to the relevant literature of intercultural communication, several components of intercultural communication such as intercultural competence and acculturation model under the second language acquisition context have been deeply examined as case studies (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005; Busse, 2014; Yang et al., 2015). Not only the scholars but also the practical English teachers giving class now tend to realize the importance of intercultural communication and its positive effects of academic achievement on international students who travel to a country different from their own for the purpose of higher education (OECD, 2011).

Therefore, the intercultural communication is closely linked to contemporary education as it may help facilitate the language learning by offering chances for learners to speak a foreign language and gain the cultural norm effectively at the same time, resulting in a better result of language study.

2.2. English Learning in China

English in China is more likely to be seen as a foreign language (EFL). Nevertheless, the globalization trend forces the public to arise more attention on English because it has obtained the domains of intercultural communication and titled 'lingua franca' (Firth, 1996). According to Chinese Ministry of Education and the government, English must be taught as a compulsory subject in grade three of primary school, some more developed regions even from grade one or even kindergarten (Hu, 2005a; Liu, 1993). To meet up with the modernization trend, Chinese government considers English language teaching as a method for improving intercultural communication at a national level. As a result of this promotion, successful and effective intercultural communication might be seen the ultimate aim of English teaching in the foreign language education system although compared to many other countries like Malaysia and India, the low penetration and proficiency of English is still a problem that should not be ignored (Hu, 2005a).

Additionally, intercultural communication is become a growing issue resulting from the situation that such encounters could now happen both at home and abroad to students. Even before going out to English-speaking countries to receive higher education, Chinese students have established some specific sub-contexts like the so-called 'English corner' around reputed universities where many participants with higher English level or interest as well as native speakers of English could meet together and have casual talks freely (Gao, 2009). It is provided that participation in such actual interpersonal communicative activities indeed enhances the autonomous learning ability and may lead to some psychological changes that could better the learners' adaptation for future study abroad (ibid). However, here comes the point that intercultural communication is not just based on the proficiency of language but also the culture behind (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999). Otherwise, the e-dictionary or mobile-translator would replace most efforts of acquiring cultural knowledge for understanding the intercultural conversation.

Consequently, the most believed beneficial way of learning the inseparable cultural norms and practicing target language is to have intercultural communication with foreigners, and in return this experience could contribute a lot to the future academic success of international students. The potential effects of ICC aspects to the quality of education would be further addressed in the following work.

3. Discussion: Effects of ICC on Higher Education

The phenomenon that an increasing number of international students coming from different sociocultural background are supported to study abroad has become a norm rather than the expectation (Young et al., 2013). The statistics of enrolment in higher education institution (OECD, 2011; UKCISA, 2012) show that among all the popular destinations globally, the Europe, especially the UK, stick on top level, just after the USA. Being an important part of university students and contributing to the future development of educational institutions financially and academically, the accommodative reaction on both physical well-being and academic achievement to the British education system should be considered deeply. Many scholars (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Andrade, 2006; Sercombe, 2011) state that international students would have greater problematic issues than host classmates even with similar degree of other conditions.

This paper mainly focuses on the adjustment of international students from China. The English language teaching in China is still far from the practical use as intercultural communication occurs rarely on students except for English majors. Generally, both the lack of confidence of speaker and the inherent social environment of separating from exotic interaction may lead to this gap. However, many researches (Andrade, 2006; Hartshorne & Baucom, 2007; Young et al., 2013) indicate that more frequent cross-cultural interaction could have a positive influence on the study of Chinese students abroad.

3.1. Intercultural Communicative Competence

First of all, experience of intercultural communication would help develop the intercultural communicative competence, which is defined "an individual's ability to function effectively across cultures" (Whaley & Davis, 2007). This term separately explains the disposition of interactive individuals in the cross-cultural transition. Several instruments are designed to measure the intercultural competence, including Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) (Mol & Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2001; Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2002). It is believed that the notion ICC competence is a trainable skill that language learners can foster this ability by practise, in other words communicating cross-culture intentionally (Brinkmann, 2001).

Specifically, this ability is associated with several aspects of ICC and contains five dimensions, namely Cultural Empathy, Open-mindedness, Social Initiative, Emotional Stability and Flexibility (Mol & Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2001; Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2002). The first point refers to "the ability and sensitivity to read the feeling s and thoughts of people from other cultural background" and the second term requires "an open and non-judgmental attitude towards people with different social norms and values". Social Initiative can reflect "the use of proactive strategies in social situations and taking initiatives in problem solving and interpersonal relations". The last two dimensions represent "the ability to handle stressful situations and regulate emotional reactions under difficult circumstances" as well as "the capacity to tolerate uncertainties, and the ability to learn from past experiences and to adjust one's behaviours where necessary" (Leong, 2007, p. 546). In empirical research based on the classic model of Multicultural Personality

Questionnaire (MPQ) (Leong, 2007; Mol & Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2001; Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2002), the analysis on collected data of MPQ and academic success issue is able to predict the academic result of international students. These five distinctive components of intercultural communicative competence could contribute to the international students in terms of academic achievement apart from life adjustment.

Theoretically, Cultural Empathy, Open-mindedness and Flexibility features allow us international students to 'fit-in' to a new language-cultural environment more easily with a considerate and curious attitude so that negative cultural stereotype may be avoided, leading to a friendly interpersonal contact with foreign speakers or higher acceptance of different teaching patterns and better grades (Byram & Nichols, 2001; Young et al., 2013). Besides, other impairing issue such as face threatening feeling during overseas study period may be solved by Emotional Stability as the individual can hold a calm and peaceful emotion when dealing with frustrations in reading the course (Leong, 2007). Social Initiative can also be regarded the result of Intercultural communicative experience. Students in higher education institutions in the UK are encouraged to participant in the programme autonomously, and only in this case could they achieve high marks in independent learning as 'researchers'.

Practically, Young and other colleagues (2013) found strong associations between aspects of ICC and academic achievement of international students. According to their multiple linear regression analysis, coefficient results demonstrate that five different dimensions of intercultural competence developed based on cross-cultural encounters are all associated with academic records of international students among which over one-third are from China (Young et al., 2013). The model data also implies that cultural empathy and open-mindedness contribute to the result of UK higher education most so that overseas students having better intercultural competence learned from practical contacting may achieve a higher score in the programme (ibid). It is established that improvement of education score can be regarded as a result of intercultural communication with adjusting ability gained.

3.2. Language Proficiency of ICC

Secondly, the intercultural communication contact may assist the progress of language proficiency, thus improving the understanding of reading contents for the course and the final score potentially. As researcher Andrade (2006) claimed that the relationship between academic achievement of overseas students and the language ability arouses great concern in the intercultural field. When it comes to the Chinese overseas students, the English language ability even accounts more because the level of Chinese English speakers are general lower than many other international students (Hu, 2005a; Lee & Greene, 2007). However, the opinion to this factor of ICC on education quality varies significantly considering the different results of following researches. Using prediction of academic achievement based on previous Language tests such as IELTS or TOEFL, sometimes the inconclusive results indicate that language level of students may have little or entirely no effect on the final academic performance (Cho & Bridgeman, 2012; Yen & Kuzma, 2009). This weak relation could result from the inconsistency between language tests score and the actual linguistic requirement of the university or the test-wise training

provided by popular study-abroad agency brands in China, such as EIC, Longre and Global Education (Moore & Morton, 2005; Yu, 2014).

On the contrary, many other scholars argue that the proficiency of target language can be of great importance to the academic success (Ramburuth, 2001; Woodrow, 2006; Young et al., 2013). Among dozens of Chinese and other international students in the British university, the statistics outcomes analysed by SPSS application suggest that language ability of the foreign language of together with self-rated comments are both significantly contribute to the increase of final test result (Young et al., 2013). So it is illustrated that English language ability has a positive influence on the study result of overseas students.

Particularly, the vocabulary knowledge in English is defined as "the most important aspect of oral English proficiency for academic achievement" (Saviller-Troike, 1984, p. 216). Findings of Morris and Cobb's research (2004) reveal a strong correlation between vocabulary profiles and academic performance, emphasising that larger vocabulary size can enhancing the score of multilingual speakers like overseas students, especially in assessment writing. Vocabulary knowledge may be even considered as an influential factor or indicator in predicting the degree performance of foreign university students since it can affect the comprehension and speed for the reading contents and lectures and ability to present well-structured and fluent assignments (Roche & Harrington, 2013, 2014; Milton & Treffers-Daller, 2013). It is often found that most Chinese overseas students switch their subjects in British university when pursuing a higher degree instead of continuing their awarded major (Daller & Xue, 2009).

The interesting overall study illustrates that the failure of module is directly related and could be predicted by the IELTS scores, in other words language ability, before entering the programme. In this case, sufficient language knowledge especially vocabulary could be adapted as a helpful component of intercultural communication for achieving a better result as it can inspire the understanding of material and confidence for asking questions among students learning abroad.

3.3. Intercultural Social Contact

Thirdly, intercultural communication encounters could be seen a useful method for international students to get necessary and supportive information from other overseas school mates or people working at school. For instance, much assistance is provided around teaching buildings, students union and school libraries where staffs are willing to help us international students with various questions like how to find related sources to read for the writing assessment apart from the fresh week sessions. And many valuable chances are offered by departments of the university but they would be of help only when students attempt to participant intentionally and communicate with host lecturers after class (Isabelli-Garcia, 2006). Furthermore, scientific analysis conducts that the frequency of interactive contacts with other international students, defined as non-co-national students, can be a leading predictor of academic success while communication with British people may also related to the study results of overseas students (Young et al., 2013).

However, the social support and intercultural contact with host community are reported in recent texts to be less associated with the quality of learning. As going through

similar sojourn experience during study, communications between international peers even with different cultural background are provided to be more beneficial towards problem-solving during the learning process. Such social networks created by encouragement to build more social bonds with school members inside or outside class may assist the improvement of multicultural teamwork, which is “likely to be a considerable transferable skill for graduates, contributing, on the evidence of this study, to their academic success” (Isabelli-Garcia, 2006; Young et al., 2013, p. 167). Essentially, the intercultural interaction would arouse the motivation of overseas students to seek recourses from peers or staffs, possibly obtaining a better learning environment and academic result.

Although intercultural communication indeed benefits the academic performance of international students in several aspects, it is not a necessary for all the students to maintain frequent intercultural communication when future career requires almost no interaction with foreigners. From a holistic perspective, even living in a globalising society there are still many regions in China where people are raised and live their life in a small town with no intercultural contact ever happened (Hu, 2005a). And some people not very open-minded also have the right to prefer the stay away from different cultures and avoid possible cultural shock. Financially, much efforts and expending would be paid on purposing cross-cultural interpersonal encounter since education agencies with foreign tutors in China may charge hundreds of pounds from students preparing themselves for the English-speaking study environment (Hu, 2002).

Therefore, intercultural contacts can be of little use for enhancing the quality of education except for the students with expectation to study abroad. Furthermore, it is worth noticing that the quality of education in this paper is measured as academic score rather than other dimensions such as self-comment or practical use.

4. Conclusion

It can be considered conclusively that intercultural communication has a general promoting function for the academic performance of Chinese international students receiving higher education in the UK contemporarily. Three main positive factors of study result among intercultural communication field: intercultural communicative competence, English language proficiency and intercultural social contact around school are demonstrated with the support of examples and analysis. To sum up, the academic success on international students in British education institutions from China could be enhanced with the help of practical intercultural communication. Thus, helping students to build greater self-confidence and national confidence, acquire more proficient language knowledge and communicative skills of English as well as familiarizing students with inherent social environment of the target language are of great significance to language teaching in the higher education system.

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