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Intercultural Learning Through a Chinese-American Education-themed Virtual Exchange Project

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Abstract: This study reports on the results of an 8-week virtual exchange project, in which Chinese and American students compared Chinese and American education via videoconferencing and text messaging. The final reflection journals were collected and analyzed at the end of the project. The results showed that, according to Byram's intercultural competence model, learners developed the interest in knowing other people's way of life and introducing one's own culture to others, ability to change perspective, knowledge about one's own and other's culture for intercultural communication, and knowledge about the intercultural communication process. Besides, the students have shown positive attitudes towards this learning project due to the theme of education which is the domain of their future careers.

Keywords: Education-themed; Intercultural Competence; Virtual Exchange.

1. Introduction

Culture teaching is an essential part in foreign language teaching. The early cultural learning which focused on transmitting facts about the target culture has been replaced gradually by intercultural approach [1]. Communicative competences prepare individuals to interact appropriately and effectively with those from other cultural backgrounds [2]. Byram's model of intercultural competence was widely adopted in the domain of foreign language learning. In the newly developed model, Byram (2000) included five types of intercultural competences, namely, interest in knowing other people's way of life and introducing one's own culture to others; ability to change perspective; ability to cope with living in different culture; knowledge about one's own and other's culture for intercultural communication; knowledge about the intercultural communication process. Among them, ability to cope with living in different culture was excluded in this research, as there was no physical mobility of learners in a virtual exchange project.

An 8-week virtual exchange project, in which Chinese and American students compared Chinese and American education via videoconferencing and text messaging was investigated to find indications of the intercultural competences listed in Byram's model. The data were analyzed to find the learners' perceptions of this virtual exchange project, and the impact of this virtual exchange project on the development of the learners' intercultural competences.

2. Literature Review

Teaching culture has always been recognized as one of the essential parts in foreign language (FL) learning. Early models of cultural learning tend to focus on transmitting facts about the target culture, it's people and their lifestyle, while the latest model (i.e. the intercultural approach), places emphasis on the understanding and reflection of the learners' own culture [1]. The intercultural approach encourages students to debunk stereotypes, examining both themselves and the other from multiple frames and perspectives [3]. Hence, communicative language teaching is not sufficient in teaching communication and interaction to people who speak different languages or to people who use a shared lingua franca; speakers in the new global and remarkably digitized era should also be aware of both their own culture and the culture of others and therefore develop their cultural awareness [4].

Different terms have been used in different researches to describe learners' ability to communicate effectively with people speaking different languages from other cultures. Some of these terms are intercultural competence, intercultural communicative competence, cross-cultural adaptation, intercultural sensitivity, transcultural competence, multicultural competence, global competence, and intercultural Communicative competence among others [5]. In this study, the researcher adopts the term intercultural competence, as it is consistent with the theoretical framework used in the research. The ultimate goal of teaching culture is to help learners develop intercultural competences, which prepare individuals to interact appropriately and effectively with those from other cultural backgrounds [2]. In the past decades, different researchers have developed different theoretical models of intercultural competences, among which, Byram's model addresses intercultural communication in the domain of foreign language learning. It is consistent with the teaching context of this research. Byram's model (1997) of intercultural competence consists of five components: knowledge of self and other, attitudes of openness and curiosity, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness (or political education). It was used widely by foreign language teachers to embed intercultural elements in the curriculum, thus to foster intercultural competence more effectively. In response to the follow-up criticisms, Byram combined the concept of intercultural citizenship, and developed a new framework which is to 'develop competence for communication and interaction whilst stimulating critical thinking and action in the world' [6]. There are five dimensions including interest in knowing other people's way of life and introducing one's own culture to others; ability to change perspective; ability to cope with living in different culture; knowledge about one's own and other's culture for intercultural communication; knowledge about the

intercultural communication process. This model was used by the researcher to assess the intercultural competences of the Chinese learners in this virtual exchange project.

In the past decades, many educators including foreign language teachers have found positive influence of virtual exchange on fostering learners' intercultural competence. Virtual exchange can be defined as the engagement of groups of learners in online intercultural interactions and collaboration projects with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of their educational programs [7]. Virtual exchange projects focus on the enhancement of language skills [8] as well as cultural learning and critical cultural awareness [9]. The main communication tools in virtual exchange projects are email, synchronous or asynchronous chats, blogs, wikis and other virtual learning platforms. Recently, with the development of information technology, videoconferencing tools, such as Skype, Zoom, Lark meetings, etc. have become the mainstream virtual exchange media, since it 'allows educators to engage their learners in regular, (semi-)authentic communication with members of other cultures in distant locations' [10].

It is well acknowledged by educators including foreign language teachers that the development of intercultural communicative competence is not ensured unless educators intentionally proceed with curricular and co-curricular efforts [5]. Thus, a well-designed virtual exchange project can guarantee the development of learners' foreign language as well as their intercultural competence.

Given the positive role virtual exchange plays in fostering learners' intercultural competence, and the authentic communication context for foreign language learning, a virtual exchange project was designed between two groups of Chinese and American students. To be better embedded in the existing courses for both sides, the instructors decided to choose education as the theme for discussions, since students from both sides will be primary or secondary school teachers in the future.

In order to see if this virtual exchange project can bring positive impact on learners, the following research questions are raised:

How was the education-themed virtual exchange project perceived by the Chinese students?

How did the education-themed virtual exchange project impact on the Chinese students' intercultural competences?

3. Research

3.1. Methods

3.1.1. Participants

A virtual exchange (VE) project was carried out between a group of American students majoring in education and a group of Chinese students majoring in English. The course the American students took that semester was Foundation of Education, while the course the Chinese students took was English as a Foreign Language. There were 20 students in both groups respectively. All students joined small international groups in which there were two American students and two Chinese students.

All the American students will be teachers in primary or secondary schools, so will their Chinese counterparts. As a result, both instructors believed education should be the most suitable theme for this VE project. Besides, the students could also foster intercultural awareness and competence as well as technology and information literacy in academic and professional settings.

3.1.2. Collaborative Tasks Design

An 8-week syllabus was designed to cover education issues which could help students from both sides to explore the similarities and differences between Chinese and American education. The syllabus included four phases, namely, technology preparation, icebreaker, discussions, and evaluation.

In phase one, students from both sides created Larksuite account (a multi-function platform on which all course messaging, videos and meetings took place). Instructors assigned two American and two Chinese students in each small international group.

In phase two, each student posted a self-introduction video to get to know each other. They were encouraged to comment on the others' videos and ask any questions they might be curious about their partners.

In phase three, five weekly discussions were planned. Five general topics for five weeks were given, namely, parental involvement, curriculum, teaching, social media in education, and student needs. Students can choose from primary, secondary or high school to explore the similarities and differences between China and America. For each weekly discussion, some sub-topics were suggested to help their dig out more to share. For example, in the discussion of teaching, the following sub-topics were given: teaching methods, behavior management, teacher preparation/certificate, classroom environment, and technology in the classroom. For each weekly discussion, the students held one online meeting which was about one hour in Lark small group. At the end of each meeting, students from both sides reflected and summarized the main points they've got from their counterparts.

In phase four, the students wrote final reflection journals about their learning experiences in the virtual exchange project. They summarized the major takeaways and regrets.

English is used to accomplish all the collaborative tasks, as English is the only common language for both American and Chinese participants.

3.1.3. Technology

Larksuite was used as the main communication tool in this virtual exchange project. It has multi-functions, such as text or voice messaging, picture sharing, video posting, videoconferencing, comments, and task collaboration. Students were assigned to small international groups in which all kinds of communications took place.

3.1.4. Data Collection

As the research questions of this study is to investigate the Chinese students' perception of the virtual exchange project and their intercultural competence development, only the final reflection journals of the Chinese students were collected. Besides, the chats of each small group were on Larksuite platform. And the meeting recordings of all the weekly topic discussions were shared by each group with the instructors.

3.2. Results and Discussion

3.2.1. Perception of the Virtual Exchange Project

All the 20 Chinese participants finished the five topic discussions. Through the meeting recordings, it is easy to find the willingness from both sides to participate in the online meetings. Most of the weekly meetings were about one-hour

long, some of which were scheduled during weekends. Although there was a 13-hour time difference, participants had overcome all the inconveniences and obstacles to accomplish all the learning tasks.

In the final reflection journals. there are lots of positive comments on this virtual exchange project from the Chinese participant. Some examples are like these. “This is a happy experience.” “I’ve learned a lot of knowledge from this project.” “I think I’ve made great progress through this learning project.” “I’m extremely happy to have such a chance to communicate with a foreigner who’s about the same age as me.” “During the whole process, I gradually accepted my imperfect grammar and inaccuracy of word usage, got more willing to try to make language mistakes. All these have helped me build my confidence in using English as a foreign language.”

3.2.2. Development of Intercultural Competences

The final reflection journals were collected and analyzed according to Byram’s (2000) assessment model of intercultural competence. Among the five dimensions, the third one “ability to cope with living in a different culture” was excluded, since there was no physical mobility of the virtual exchange program. The other four types of intercultural competences are interest in knowing other people’s way of life and introducing one’s own culture to others, ability to change perspective, knowledge about one’s own and others’ culture for intercultural communication, and knowledge about the intercultural communication process.

All the four types of intercultural competences of Byram’s (2000) Model were exhibited in the data. Some examples of the participants’ comments will be shown below.

Interest in knowing other people’s way of life and introducing one’s own culture to others

The participants demonstrated great interest in knowing the other culture. What’s more they found although there were a lot of differences between Chinese and American culture, it was a bit surprising to find more similarities as well than they’ve expected.

Example 1 “I have a chance to know the authentic American education and culture. Jessica shared with us lots of information in each meeting. We always feel getting a lot after each online meeting.”

Example 2 “I realize we have a lot of cultural differences between us, but we also have a lot in common. This makes me feel interested in American life and culture.”

Example 3 “I’ve known a lot of real stuff about America, such as their examinations, college tuition, traffic, Halloween, and travelling experiences, etc.”

Ability to change perspective

Many participants found there were a lot of similarities between China and America in terms of life style and education. Some mentioned they had broken some stereotypes of the other culture. And they started to view the issues of America as well as China from new perspectives.

Example 1 “Besides differences, there are a lot of similarities between Chinese and American education as well. For example, all the teachers need certificates and parents’ company is important for kids. I had thought American parents didn’t regulate and take care of the kids very often, but it was not the fact. ”

Example 2 “I thought Chinese education is super awesome. However, through the discussions with my American partner, I still found something we can do to make it better.”

Example 3 “I found a lot of similarities concerning education between China and America. In addition, by chatting with my partners, I found not all American people are extroverted.”

Knowledge about one’s own and others’ culture for intercultural communication

Some participants mentioned they realized the importance of knowing cultures of both countries could promote the discussions better and deeper. Especially, when they reflected upon the regrets for this learning project, they thought if they know more about the other culture, they could find more to talk.

Example 1 “I should know more and deeper about western culture. Thus, I could know the differences of thinking patterns between China and America.”

Example 2 “When talking about students with special needs, I found we have similar policies to help them and the same deep empathy for this group of people.”

Example 3 “I think I should understand deeper about my culture, because when my partner asked me about Chinese zodiac, due to my limited knowledge about it, I couldn’t offer enough information to carry this topic further.”

Knowledge about the intercultural communication process

Many participants mentioned their American partners were really nice and patient, as they use English to communicate, which is a foreign language for Chinese students, but a native language for their American counterparts. Their American partners always slowed down and repeated what they had said for their Chinese partners to understand. Besides, they have realized the importance of preparation for the intercultural communication, especially when they think their English proficiency is not high enough to handle the synchronous videoconferencing. What’s more, participants also mentioned the significance of listening and asking appropriate questions in order to explore the topics deeper instead of only getting superficial facts.

Example 1 “The two of my American partners were really patient to listen to my words, and answered my questions with great details.”

Example 2 “Before each meeting, my Chinese partner and I always prepared some questions for the upcoming meeting. We were really cautious, because we would like to avoid any misunderstandings caused by the different languages or cultures.”

Example 3 “Due to the different cultural background, we had great cultural inclusiveness to each other to carry our discussion further and deeper.”

Example 4 “We have practiced our critical thinking and the ability to ask questions. In our discussions, we should listen carefully first, and then ask more questions as a response to the previous chat, thus to further our chats to a deeper level.”

4. Conclusion

This research aimed to investigate the impact of virtual exchange project on the participants’ intercultural competence development as well as their attitudes towards the project. Based on the analysis of the qualitative data collected from the Chinese students’ final reflection journals and the videoconferencing recordings, the positive attitude towards the virtual exchange project was confirmed. The virtual intercultural communication can help decrease foreign language anxiety and build confidence in using the foreign

language in communicating with native speakers. In addition, the theme of education is concerning the majors of both sides who have strong curiosity to learn more facts and opinions from another culture, so the weekly topics concerning education can promote the discussion to a deeper level. Data indicated all the four types of intercultural competences outlined in Byram's (2000) assessment model. Besides, virtual exchange between two cultures can create authentic communication with low cost for foreign language learners to practice using the target language, thus to relieve foreign language anxiety.

In conclusion, the findings of this research indicate that virtual exchange can impact positively on developing learners' intercultural competences as well as learning motivation. As it is of great value and low cost, virtual exchange can be employed as an effective pedagogy in cross-culture collaborative courses.

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