Developing Students’ Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) in English Medium Instruction (EMI) Programmes in a Transnational University in China

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Abstract

With globalization and neoliberalism over the past few decades, English medium instruction (EMI) has been adopted widely in higher education worldwide. To participate more competitively in the new era of knowledge globalization and to realize the goal of national rejuvenation, the Chinese central and regional governments have implemented a series of policies and strategies to promote the internationalization of its higher education by adopting an EMI language policy in tertiary level education. The governments also encourage to establish several high-level Sino–Foreign cooperative projects (Huang, 2016; Perrin, 2017). The Sino-foreign cooperative activities can take various forms (Wihlborg & Robson, 2018; Zhang, 2018). Among them, transnational higher education (TNHE) is a key component of the internationalization of the higher education sector in China. However, Chinese scholars mainly focused on the challenge and the development of this new form of cooperative education and associated it with the social level, but studies on the influence of such a complex multilingual and multicultural context on individuals are limited (Huang, 2016).

Keywords

Intercultural communication competence (ICC), English medium instruction (EMI), transnational university, higher education

1. Introduction

English medium instruction (EMI) can be defined as “the use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority of the population is not English” (Dearden, 2014, p. 2). As the usage of EMI was initiated to present the high quality of university teaching in non-anglophone contexts (Botha, 2014; Hu & Lei, 2014) and could attract more applicants thus increasing the competitiveness of universities. Many Chinese prestigious universities have started to design EMI courses, and international universities are no exception (Hu & Lei, 2014). The proposed research site is a Sino-foreign university located in an east coastal city. The university is selected based on purposive strategies as this university can provide a suitable environment and participants to investigate the research phenomenon. This university has more than 700 faculty members including 75% foreign teachers and about 8,000 students. Among the students, one out of ten is international students coming from over 70 countries and regions. Additionally, this international university is one of the universities promoting EMI programmes and requiring students to develop their ICC in China mainland. It is also one of the earliest and representative Sino-foreign coopera-
tive universities in China with an independent legal personality and an independent campus. Hence, the school management, teaching mode, enrollment standards and many other aspects tend to be more reasonable, stable and comprehensive. More importantly, the university adopts EMI from the beginning for all majors and offers good research conditions for this study.

2. Literature review

Among the vast research on EMI, they have mainly focused on aspects of academic content and language teaching. While, the other important element ICC is not given the same weight as contents and language in EMI, particularly in high education (Macaro et al., 2018). Whereas, only having a good command of a foreign language cannot guarantee success in an international academic context and a globalised world (Dervin, 2010). It is also more important for students to have ICC than master languages in the EMI context (Bradford, 2016). Although it is widely accepted that multilingual and intercultural skills are increasingly necessary among working and studying (Costa et al., 2020), there is a dearth of researches on ICC in EMI, particularly in China.

As Fantini and Tirmizi (2006) claim that ICC is the ability to perform in line with social norms and the value orientation of the target context with different cultural backgrounds and can effectively achieve communicative objectives. Similarly, Aguilar (2018) points out that ICC is an intricate thing consisting of variable dimensions and components such as communication skills, the level of knowledge about the target context, personalities and so forth. The ICC has three main components, namely attitudes, skills (behaviour), and knowledge (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005; Fantini & Tirmizi, 2006; Deardoff, 2009). Attitudes include the strength and weakness of the motivation to communicate with others and the basic equality of groups, which could complement knowledge competencies such as understanding cultural identities, oppression and the influences of cultural differences on communication processes. Such awareness and knowledge would be compatible with the skills of self-reflection, multiple perspective-taking, communicating cross-culturally and so on. Major scholars believe that ICC is closely related to the proficiency of foreign languages, which values the relationship between languages and cultures (Macaro et al., 2018). Therefore, ICC is often studied in language teaching (Earls, 2016), but few studies have put ICC in the EMI context. Even though ICC is in an international academic context and a globalised world (Dervin, 2010), it is often acknowledged as a secondary learning result of language in EMI (Pulcini & Campagna, 2015; Macaro et al., 2018). However, Bradford (2016) argues that the failure of EMI classes may more due to a lack of ICC than to language fluency. Moreover, a large number of previous studies have emphasised the principal element of ICC in EMI. Specifically, Aguilar (2021) suggests that EMI requires a more culturally aware teaching approach to elicit and interpret information through English. Otherwise, it may bring some unresolved cultural misunderstandings that can impact the effect of teaching and learning. As Bradford (2016) claims that the level of teachers and students’ ICC could determine the success or failure of an EMI class to some extent. Teachers or students who lack ICC could also cause some misunderstandings due to the different cultural backgrounds and then lead to negative effects on the study.

Some empirical studies and surveys discovered that EMI has the potential to improve students' ICC. For instance, some studies (e.g., Byram, 2014; Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002; Saarinen & Nikula, 2012) found that in EMI context, students’ ICC could develop by learning to communicate in a foreign language as was often encompassed learning about its cultural norms and habits. Also, Aguilar (2021) proposed that the integration of ICC pedagogy in EMI classes would be more effective to improve the ICC of students. However, EMI alone does not suffice to enhance students’ ICC and may need to be supported by other effective actions. For example, if teachers are not properly and professionally trained in EMI, lecturing in a multicultural and multilingual classroom in English may pose problems (Aguilar & Rodriguez, 2012). Hence, other actions, such as adapting internationalisation teaching style, developing specific skills for the international classroom (Leask, 2015; Sawir, 2011), are needed for teachers to support students’ development of ICC in EMI.

ICC has traditionally been considered as an automatic outcome of study abroad experiences (Cots et al., 2016; Messelink et al., 2015; Byram & Dervin, 2008; Kinginger, 2013). However, only putting students from different cultural backgrounds together cannot improve their ICC naturally (Knight, 2008; Papatsiba, 2006). Many factors may affect students’ ICC development.

It is believed that the awareness and sensitivity of teachers and students affect students’ ICC development. For example, some Japanese EMI teachers teach academic subjects in English using a traditional Japanese pedagogic approach, and they seem to separate the language from its western culture (Bradford, 2016). In this case, Japanese teachers only use English to deliver knowledge and instructions but do not concern about the close relationship between language and its culture. As a result, students’ ICC did not improve significantly. Furthermore, it has been reported that some South-European EMI engineering lecturers show no interest in handling ICC in their multicultural classrooms and are
reluctant to receive EMI methodological training (Aguilar & Rodríguez, 2012; Klaassen, 2008), which indicates that teachers in some areas do not have the awareness to help students develop their ICC in EMI classes and lack related pedagogical awareness as well. Similarly, some students also did not have an awareness of the importance of ICC. They claim that English as an international lingua franca is used in the EMI context to deliver knowledge, and it should not tie English with its culture (Aguilar, 2021). Due to teachers and students’ lower awareness, it is difficult to improve their ICC in EMI.

Other factors such as personality and psychological factors can also play a key role in ICC development (Spitzberg & Chagnon, 2009). For instance, people who are more extroverted and more willing to risk intercultural communication failure are more likely to succeed in cross-cultural communication (Hu & Lei, 2014). Also, previous international experiences such as studying abroad and having foreign friends would help ICC (Arno-Macià & Aguilar-Pérez, 2019). This means that ICC improved or not may ultimately depend on every student.

To sum up, these previous studies have just briefly mentioned the factors affecting the development of ICC in EMI. Nevertheless, how they affect students’ ICC development has not been explored deeply. Hence, this study aims to examine the factors affecting students' ICC development in TNHE institutions more comprehensively.

3. Discussion

These two following theories have formed a solid framework for a proposed study to evaluate the effectiveness of EMI programmes in improving students' ICC and to explore the contributing factors of students’ ICC development in the EMI context. Each of these frameworks interplays as an element of ICC to underpin this research.

First, this study draws on the works of Byram (1997)’s co-orientation and interactive ICC model. As demonstrated by his model, intercultural competence consists of five elements: attitude (namely the openness and curiosity to different cultures), knowledge (both on own culture and other cultures), critical cultural awareness (taking multiple perspectives to evaluate other practices or products), interaction skills (consisting the application and acquisition of cultural practices knowledge), and interpretation of the related skills. The content of the first four elements is similar to the ICC model of Howard Hamilton et al. (1998). Furthermore, the interpretation relevance skills are stressed in this model, which refers to the ability to interpret symbols and events of other cultures based on one’s own cultural experience. It is worth mentioning that Byram (1997) points out that ICC is formed on a combination of intercultural competence together with linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence and textual competence. It is in accordance with the aforementioned theories of the close relationship between language and ICC (Macaro et al., 2018), making this model more adaptable in EMI contexts.

Although Byram’s model contributes to a comprehensive understanding of ICC and shows the interaction between various competencies in ICC, the primary and secondary relations among various abilities need to be further explored. To improve the reliability and validity of the following ICC test for students, this study also considered adopting Deardorff (2006)'s pyramid model of ICC. The main difference between this model and the others is the order of these elements: the bottom of the pyramid of ICC is the essential attitude: respect, openness, curiosity and discovery. The second level is knowledge, understanding and skills, and there is an interactive relationship between the two. Deardorff (2006) focuses on discussing the relationship between knowledge and skills, theory and practice in ICC. As he states that the specific attitudes, knowledge, and skills outlined in the model can be used to derive specific indicators and criteria in each of those domains (Deardorff, 2006). Thus, this model has inspired and provided methodological enlightenment for the proposed assessment of this study in students' intercultural communication ability evaluation.

4. Conclusion and implication

It is of great significance to conduct this proposed study. Firstly, it aims to address the research gaps of lacking research on developing ICC in EMI programmes in transnational universities in mainland China. By investigating the understanding of students of ICC in EMI and factors affecting the effectiveness of EMI in developing students’ ICC within different modes, this study can provide an in-depth understanding of the multicultural and multilingual learning environment of EMI for students. Further, it can provide practical implications for developing students’ ICC in other similar contexts.

References


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