

Empirical Study on Intercultural Communication Teaching for English Majors in Chinese Universities

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Received 17 September 2012; accepted 23 November 2012

Abstract

The relationship between intercultural communication competence and foreign language teaching has been attended to worldwide for many years. Its importance has also been well recognized. In China, many universities have run Intercultural Communication as an individual course at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. This paper presents findings from an empirical research on intercultural communication teaching for undergraduate English majors from six universities in Yunnan province in southwest China. It focuses on students' perception of present intercultural communication course in terms of purpose of learning, content and effective approaches, expectations for teachers and suggestions for improving the course. Based on data analysis, this paper puts forward some implications on intercultural communication teaching. Teachers should help students to develop appropriate cultural attitudes and improve their intercultural communication competence so as to meet the demand of the globalized world. Meanwhile, collaboration among researches and teachers are advocated to improve teaching of intercultural communication.

Key words: Intercultural communication; English majors; Perception; Teaching

HUANG Ying, KOU Ying (2012). Empirical Study on Intercultural Communication Teaching for English Majors in Chinese Universities. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 8(6), 21-29. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/j.ccc.1923670020120806.1101>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.ccc.1923670020120806.1101>.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, an increasing number of studies have been done on intercultural communication and foreign language teaching, particularly on developing intercultural communicative competence. In China, with the increasing awareness of the importance of intercultural communicative competence, more and more universities have started to run intercultural communication course at both undergraduate and postgraduate level.

The trend for learning intercultural communication course is determined by many factors. Societies are moving towards greater interdependence and interconnectedness. How people from diverse cultural backgrounds effectively communicate with each other is becoming a challenging issue. University graduate are also demanded to demonstrate intercultural perspectives such as awareness of its own culture and its perspective and other culture and their perspectives, and to be able to value diversity of language and culture.

Based on literature review and problems identified in intercultural communication teaching, a study was carried out in Yunnan Province in southwest China to investigate the situation of intercultural communication teaching, and to find out what are students' perceptions of difficult perspectives in intercultural communication course, what are their perceived effective approaches and what are their expectations for course teachers. The study also tries to find suggestions from the perspective of teachers. Finally, the study puts forward some suggestions for teaching intercultural communication, particularly for the area like Yunnan where cultural diversity is so strong, and communication among ethnic groups are dynamic. It argues that students' perception of intercultural communication is important, as well as their attitudes towards their native culture, and that intercultural

communication does not only mean the communication between China and western countries. It is therefore important for students to understand that communication among ethnic groups in a certain area or country is also important.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between intercultural communication competence and foreign language teaching has been attended to worldwide for many years. Its importance has also been well recognized. Scholars usually regard the publication of Professor XU Guozhang's article "Culturally-loaded Words and English Language Teaching" in *Modern Language* journal in 1980 as a symbol of intercultural communication study in China (WANG, 1996). In the past two decades, intercultural communication study has been developing very fast in China, drawing a large amount of scholars and researchers. The achievement in this area is also very obvious. A web search in CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) indicates that from 1999 up to 2011, there are 6133 journal articles with "intercultural communication teaching" as a key word. These articles analyze the importance of intercultural communication, developing intercultural sensitivity, intercultural communication and translation, strategies to improve intercultural communication, relationship of nonverbal communication and languages teaching, intercultural communicative competence and so on (ZHANG, 2008; YANG & ZHUANG, 2007; PENG, 2010; ZHONG, 2009; GAO, 2006; & LIN, 2006).

Teaching of intercultural communication course in China does not have a long history in comparison to North American and European countries. It was from the 1980s' that some universities in China started to run intercultural communication course. At the beginning it was usually called cross-cultural communication course. For courses as such, improving intercultural communicative competence is the target. Scholars have literatures on how to improve students' intercultural communicative competence. Professor HU Wenzhong (1999) proposed that the most effective approach for improving students' intercultural communicative competence is to improve learners' intercultural communication awareness.

A large number of universities in China have been running intercultural communication as a course at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. The main focus of the course running to different categories of students can be different. The target of the course includes: to understand the cultural differences between target language and native language; to improve students' cultural sensitivity and develop intercultural

communicative competence (XIA, 2004). Without a uniform guideline, most universities choose their teaching content according to their own requirements and institutional goals.

There are some textbooks compiled by Chinese scholars to suits the requirements of Chinese students. HU and GAO (1997) suggested that 5 components could be includes in culture teaching: verbal communication (including vocabulary, idioms, grammar and rhetoric), non-verbal communication (facial expression, eye contact, gestures, proximic distance), communication protocols and manner, social organization and interpersonal relationship, and value system. There are different components proposed based on varied purposes. But the following ten are usually included in the textbooks: intercultural communication overview, culture, process of language, social structure, interpersonal relationship, intercultural perception, value and belief, and improving intercultural communicative competence (HUANG & KOU, 2010).

Literature indicates that in the present teaching, a lot of efforts are made to compare cultural differences and relevant responses to these differences. But some scholars argue that more emphasis should be paid to practice. In cultural teaching, teachers should try to improve students' comprehensive quality. Some advocate more contact with native speakers of the language for culture acquisition (ZHANG, 2008). With the development of science and technology, and the frequent use of information technology and the Internet, students have more opportunities to learn culture of other countries, particularly the surface culture (HUANG & KOU, 2010). What approaches are more effective in this situation is an issue to be explored.

With the development in intercultural communication study and improvement in intercultural communication, there still exist many problems. This is particularly the case in China. For example, there is more emphasis on "what to teach" instead of "how to teach" and "how to help students to learn". There are also problem in textbook and teaching materials, teaching approaches, and content to teach (HUANG & KOU, 2010). As for empirical researches, there are some that focused on university students' intercultural communicative competence (GAO, 2006), and on intercultural approached to foreign language teaching (ZHANG, 2008). WU and ZHU (2010) has conducted a research on intercultural communication teaching in universities. Findings from their questionnaire investigation to 29 teachers from 29 universities, plus interviews to some teachers indicate that there are problems in intercultural communication teaching in teaching materials, curriculum, and teaching methods. Their research was from the perspective of teachers. But what did students say about this is not included.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

The specific research questions for this research are: What are students' perceptions of present intercultural communication course? What are students' perceived effective teaching approaches? And what are their expectations for the course?

To reach the goal, a questionnaire investigation was conducted to English majors from 6 universities in Yunnan Province. These universities have been running intercultural communication course to English majors.

Table 1 shows the basic information of the participants. Altogether 849 copies of questionnaires were distributed and 765 returned. Among them 725 copies are valid. The validity rate is 94.8%. Based on the preliminary analysis of the questionnaire feedback, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 4 teachers who have been teaching the course to these students. The purpose for the interview was to learn teachers' perceptions of course content, teaching approaches, and their comments on what students raised as difficult aspects.

Table 1
Basic Information of Participants

Yunnan Normal University	Year 4	Selective	2	180	171
Yunnan Nationalities University	Year 3	selective	2	38	38
Southwest Forestry University	Year 4	selective	2	50	50
College of Arts and Sciences	Year 3	selective	2	173	151
Chuxiong Teachers' College	Year 3	selective	2	108	108
Qujing Teachers' College	Year 4	selective	2	300	246
Total				849	765

Note: 725 returned copies are valid.
 Questionnaire data was analyzed with SPSS software 17.0.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 Students' Perceptions of Teaching Content and Difficulties

Data indicates that participants have different views on useful content of the course. 63.8% choose verbal

and nonverbal communication; 51.2% choose cultural and communication; 49.5% choose interpersonal communication; 47.19% choose improving intercultural communicative competence; 38.9% choose social organization; 38.6% choose value and belief; 22.7% chose intercultural awareness and 11.3% choose cultural identity.

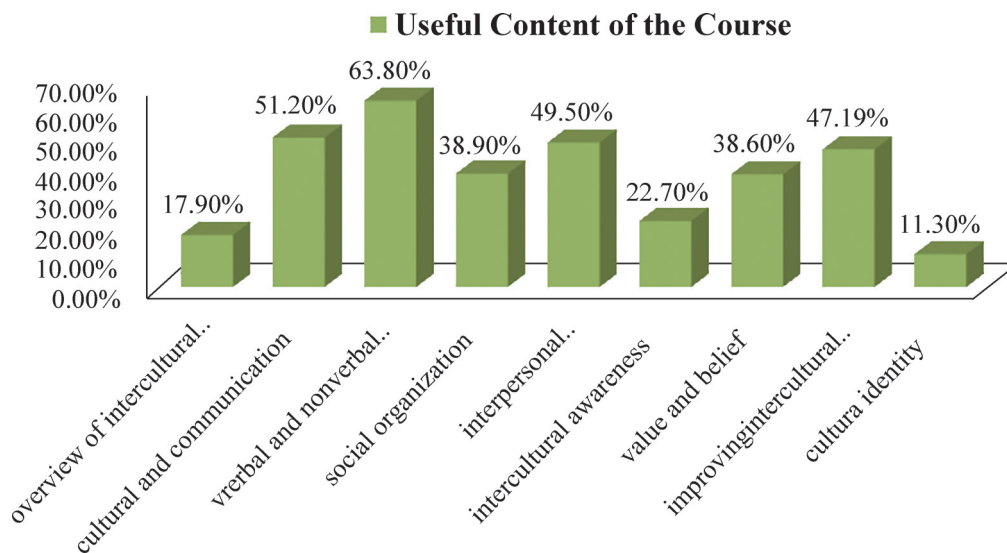


Figure 1
Useful Content of the Course

Questionnaire also includes items to ask for difficult points in the course (Figure 2). Data indicates that 26.26% students regard theories as the most difficult because they are theoretical and abstract, thus hard to understand; 19.1% think the differences between Chinese and Western

culture is the most difficult; 16.31% think the course is not easy to learn due to the lack of practice in reality; 9.28% think the difficulty is caused by learners' personal knowledge and language efficiency.

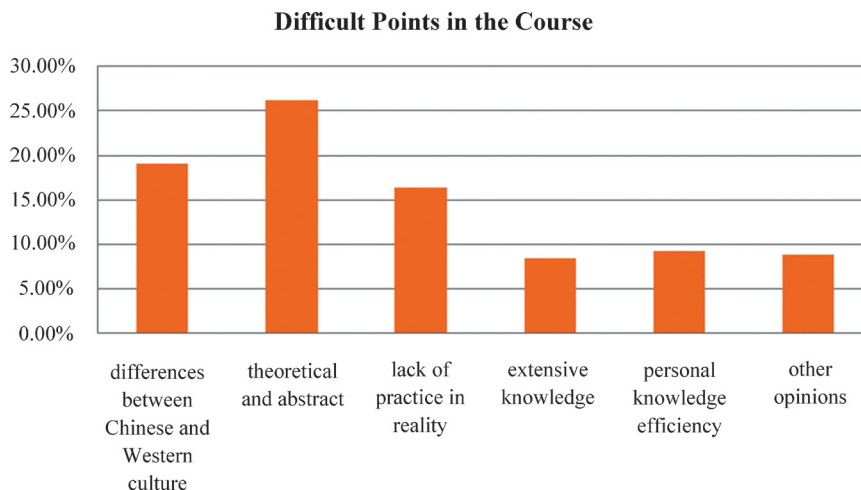


Figure 2
Difficult Points in the Course

These findings have some implications for teachers in what material to choose according to students, and what methods to use.

3.2 Students' Perception of Effective Teaching Approaches

Two questions were set to find out the commonly

used teaching approaches in the course and students' perceptions of effective approaches. Five items were included to find out the answers. These items are: lecture, role play, group discussion, case analysis, and field work. Figure 3 shows approaches often used, and Figure 4 presents the perceived effective approaches.

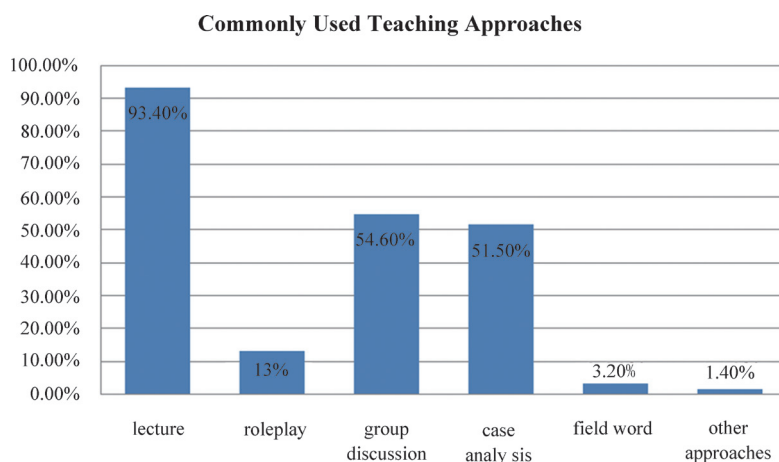


Figure 3
Commonly Used Teaching Approaches

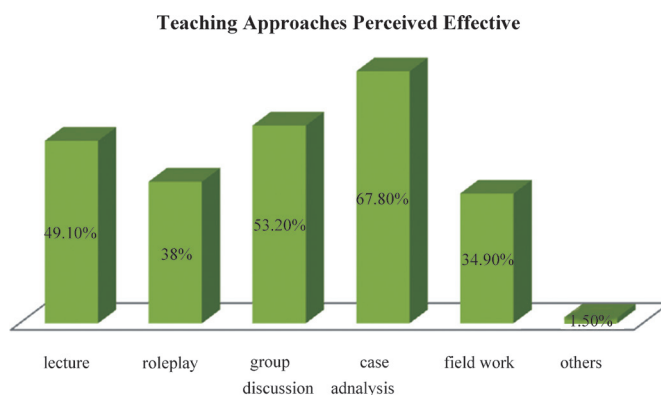


Figure 4
Teaching Approaches Perceived Effective

Findings indicate that there is a distance between the commonly used approaches and students' perception of effective approaches (Table 2). For example, 93.7% respondents identify lectures as commonly used method, while only 50.6% regard it as an effective approach. Role play and field work are less used but perceived effective by the students.

Table 2
Approaches Used and Approaches Perceived Effective

Item	Approaches used	Approaches perceived effective
Lectures	93.7%	49.10%
Role play	13%	38%
Group discussion	54.6%	53.2%
Case analysis	51.5%	67.8%
Field work	3.2%	34.9%

Teaching Techniques often Used

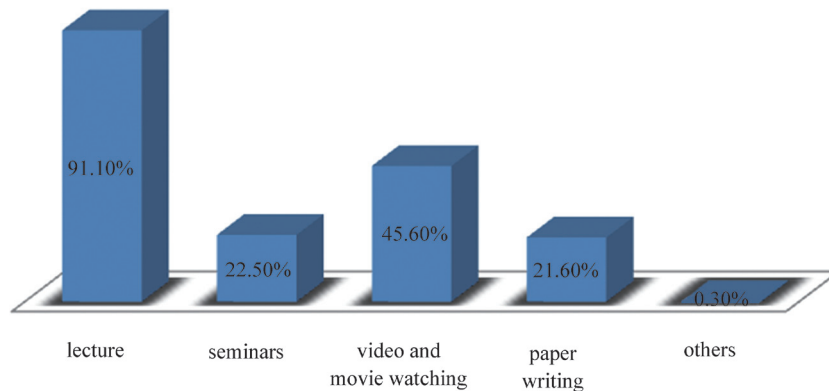


Figure 5
Teaching Techniques Often Used

Teaching Techniques Perceived Effective

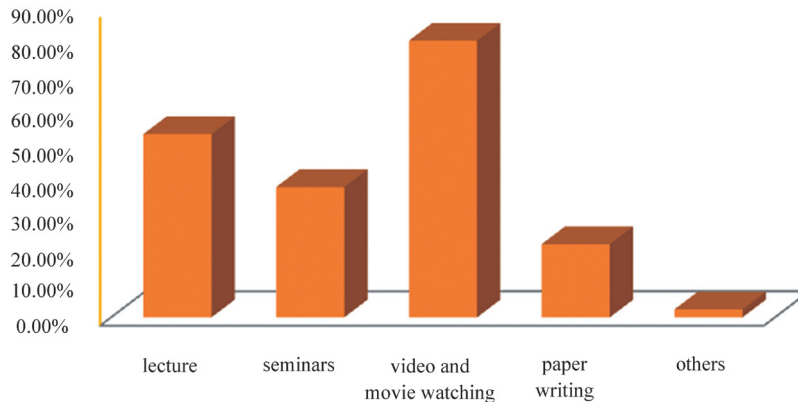


Figure 6
Teaching Techniques Perceived Effective

Five items are used to find out the perceived effective teaching techniques in the course, and what are actually used. Figure 5 and Figure 6 show the result respectively.

Data also indicates similar findings from this item. For example, video and movie watching takes 80.9% for perceived effective techniques, while only 45.6% indicate it is often used. Lecturing is also regarded less effective than it is taken.

The 9 items used for answers regarding effective teaching approaches and effective teaching techniques are what is often used in intercultural communication teaching course. Finding for these two have implications for teachers when choosing their methods and techniques.

3.3 Students' Expectations for the Course

To know students' motivation for learning the course and be adaptive to the students are important for improving the course teaching. Based on this perception, students' purpose of learning the course, their expectations for teachers, and their suggestions for improving the course are all included in the investigation. To give respondents enough space for expressing their views, answers were drawn by open-end questions.

3.3.1 Purpose for Learning the Course

86.3% of the respondents wish this course could help them know cultures of other countries, and to compare cultural differences; 57.2% of the respondents wish they could have better communication with culturally different

people with the help of this course; 34.2% respondents take the course because it is part of the curriculum, which indicates the passive attitudes of the students, and teachers should try to motivate students' interest in the course;

10.6% of the respondents wish the course could be helpful for their future study abroad; and 2.5% mentioned it is out of their interest.

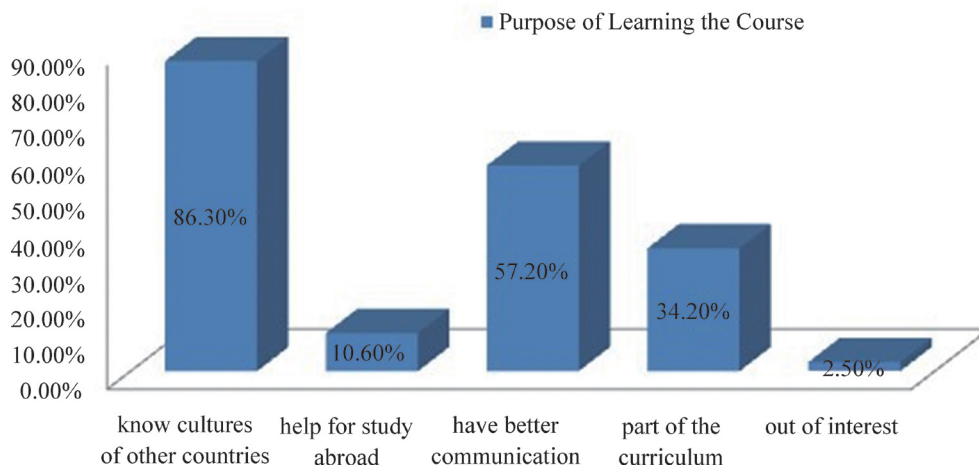


Figure 7
Purpose of Learning the Course

On this point, answers from the students have indicated some overlap from interviews with the teachers. Teachers include in the purposes of teaching items such as improving students' interpersonal communicative competence, and improving ability to communicate with culturally different people. By culture differences, they include different age, background, education, gender and so on. In such a multi-ethnic and multicultural region like Yunnan, it is especially important to develop intercultural awareness and be able to understand cultural difference.

3.3.2 Students' Expectation for Teachers

One question was set to find out the expected qualities of course teachers. 44.96% of the respondents expect their teachers to have rich cultural knowledge; 16.58% expect their teachers to have intercultural communication experience such as overseas experience; other points mentioned are personal charisma (such as sense of humor, patience, temperament), own style of teaching (such as personal ideas on teaching), strong communicative competence and creativity in teaching methods. Figure 8 shows this:

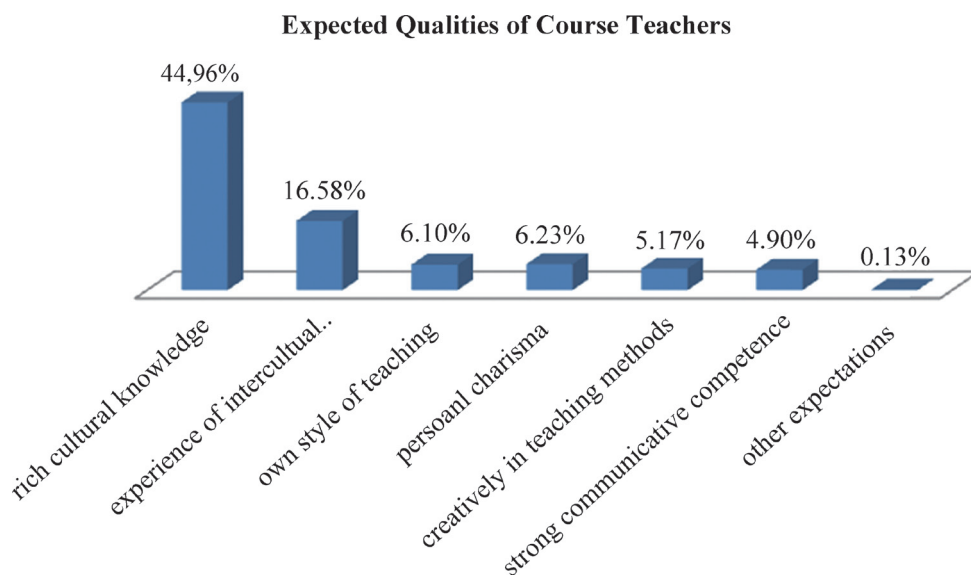


Figure 8
Expected Qualities of Course Teachers

The respondents have also given their suggestions for the course. About 40% of the students suggest that varieties of techniques be used in the teaching, and that

teachers adopt different methods and techniques such as movie-watching, group discussion, case analysis, role-play to make the class more attractive, and they do not like the

lecture-dominated class; 14.06% of the respondents wish to increase contact hour; and 13.13% of the respondents wish to have practical experience such as communication with foreigners; 7.69% of the respondents wish teachers could make a balance between their rich knowledge and the depth of knowledge to present to students.

3.4 Others

Data also shows that students are concerned with application of what they have learned in classroom into practice. 78.6% mention that they very occasionally have chance to use what they have learned, while 14.9% students said they had never had any chance. This can partially explain why 16.31% of the students think “lack of practice” is one of the difficulties of the course. What can teachers do to balance theories and practice or help students develop their communicative competence is an issue for teachers.

4. IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE AND CULTURE TEACHING

Intercultural communication has a multidisciplinary nature. While teaching intercultural communication to language learners as a course is more from the perspective of education, language, culture, and sociology, to develop students' intercultural communicative competence is the target. How to improve teaching has been given great attention both in China and around the world. In countries such as America, Canada, Australia, Britain, and some other European countries, due to their international education and migration, a large number of research have been done in intercultural communication training and teaching. But in China, there is insufficient empirical research on effective teaching method in the area of intercultural communication teaching and culture teaching. Therefore this research, with its focus on what happens in teaching of this course, has generated some implication for intercultural communication course teaching and language teaching. By listening to the voice of students involved in the course, this research can have implications for what material or textbook to choose, and what approaches to use. The main implications are summarized as follows.

4.1 To Develop Students' Cultural Awareness and Positive Attitude to the Course

One purpose of the course is to help students develop a positive cultural attitude and cultural awareness. It is important that students have a positive attitude and be mindful of the differences. Teachers should help students to develop appropriate cultural attitudes and improve their intercultural communication competence so as to meet the demand of the globalized world. For example, they should know that no culture is superior to others, and to

respect cultural differences. To achieve these goals, first of all, teachers should help students to develop positive attitudes to the course. A passive attitude will decrease the effectiveness of the teaching. Let the students know that learning intercultural communication can help them to achieve cultural tolerance and behave properly in diverse cultural context, and to achieve cross-cultural understanding, i.e., awareness of their own culture as well as that of the target culture.

It is also important for students to know that intercultural communication not only refer to communication with English-speaking countries or the Western countries, it also means communication between nations, and ethnic groups. Take Yunnan province as an example. Yunnan is a province full of cultural diversity. Twenty-six large ethnic groups share their culture within this province. How to communicate well with people from other groups is also worth exploring.

4.2 To Improve Teacher Quality

The respondents have expressed their expectation for intercultural communication course teachers, which have indicated the importance of teachers' quality. Among the points mentioned, to be knowledgeable is still the first in the ranking, followed by teachers' own experience in the area. Teachers interviewed also regard teacher quality as an important element contributing the quality of the course. The four teachers interviewed all have overseas study experience, and they think this experience have obvious effect on their teaching. This experience enables them to share their intercultural communication experience with students, and they have also got the first-hand material for teaching, with personal comments.

Teachers' professional development is also a big concern for the teachers interviewed. They said that young teachers should read more and have as much contact as possible with people from other cultures. In this way they can accumulate what they need for teaching gradually. Through reading and thinking, they can develop cultural sensitivity themselves, and avoid cultural stereotyping. They should make the best use of materials they could get from media, from internet, and more importantly from their own experience. Interest and experience are very important for good teachers of intercultural communication. They should, first of all, be ready to accept cultural differences, and be willing to share with students.

Intercultural communication is a multi-disciplinary course which is concerned with linguistics, anthropology, psychology, education and so on. It is a challenge to teachers, and demands their knowledge, communicative competence and experience in intercultural context. Having some experience in overseas countries will empower the teachers. And their personal experience in communicating in diverse cultures will help students with their understanding.

4.3 To Choose Teaching Material According to Subjects

Questionnaire investigation has shown that all the universities investigated have their textbooks instead of using handouts. However, the 6 universities use 5 kinds of textbooks. The study of WU and ZHU (2010) has also identified problems in teaching materials. Textbooks used by universities are quite varied. This problem is also identified by the teachers who all agree that there is no such a book that could meet the expectation of all students and teachers. The problem is that some books are systematic but too theoretical and vice versa. Therefore while attentions should be paid to the systematic arrangement of materials, the context of communication and the teaching for adjustment are all to be attended (DeVoss *et al.*, 2002). Textbooks and materials should be both systemic and target-oriented.

4.4 To Apply Varied Teaching Approaches in the Course

Using appropriate approaches for different goals is important in achieving satisfactory results. As is indicated by students' responses, a multiple application of different approaches are expected to fulfill the goals of the course. Teachers have also advocated applying different approaches to improve the course teaching. For example, task-based teaching method is good in giving students tasks and let them work on it, and make them think. Students can have a lot of communication in this process, and in one way or another, they can learn more than what they get from teachers' lectures. With much teacher-student interaction, students can be totally involved in the teaching. And role play is also a good technique. It is effective in helping learners gain insights into the experiences of people from diverse cultures (CHEN, 2010). Approaches like these can engage students and provide chances for students to share their own experience with teachers.

4.5 Teacher Should Be Ready to Face Challenges

The ever-changing world and the essence of intercultural communication course are demanding for teachers. In particular, the multidisciplinary nature of intercultural communication studies adds challenges to teachers. Firstly, teachers should be open-minded and be ready to accept cultures that are different from their own, and be open-minded in communicating with these culturally different people.

Secondly, teachers need to improve their own quality and update their knowledge constantly. Learning is a life-long process and teachers should try to enrich their knowledge. They should also try to have more communication with their students, and be ready to share. This relates to one of the characteristics of intercultural communication, i.e., to some extent, communication between individuals is also intercultural communication (Singer, 1998). The future classroom will

be even challenging with the globalization and frequent professional exchange. For example, there will be occasions when students are homogenous but the teacher will be from other culture (Crabtree & Sapp, 2004).

If possible, teachers who teach intercultural communication course should experience life in a culturally different environment, which can help in applying theories into practice. Meanwhile, teachers should keep pace with the times, and update their concept of education. All these are challenging for teachers.

CONCLUSION

There is an increasing trend worldwide to have communication with people from culturally different background. The number of universities in China to run intercultural communication course is also increasing. As this research and others indicate, there does exist some problem in teaching intercultural communication, which needs colleagues in this same field to work together and head for improving students' intercultural communication competence and be able to adapt to international development. Teaching methods, textbooks, and teachers all play important roles in improving intercultural communication. Collaboration is needed among intercultural communication researchers and teachers on teaching materials or textbooks suitable for Chinese students. The text books should be both systematic, with specific addressing of the context of communication. Much work still needs to be done to improve teaching of intercultural communication.

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