Middle-School Chinese Students Adjusting to Western Approaches to Teaching and Learning: A Study of Students' Intercultural Competence

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Abstract: This study focuses on analyzing international high-school students' intercultural competence that can help them overcome the language barrier, adapt to a new culture of thinking and learning, and be successful in their academic studies. Beyond the knowledge level, this research also focuses on analyzing students' intercultural competence at the skill and attitude level to determine whether they possess the willingness and the ability to adjust their existent learning systems to suit the needs of the new learning environment. The results of this study can benefit teachers by increasing their intercultural competence to better facilitate this student population.

Keywords: intercultural competence; case study; multicultural education

Research rational and background

According to the 2018 Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange, the number of international students in the United States surpassed 1,000,000 for the third consecutive year, increasing by 1.5% to reach a new high of 1,094,792 ("Institute of International Education," 2018). Chinese nationals make up the largest group of international students in the United States. Based on the data presented by the Department of Homeland Security (2018), Chinese students account for roughly 30% of all foreign students. Although the influx of international students has brought great value to the U.S. educational context, international students may not be successfully adapted to the target culture and language. As Wang and Byram (2011) argued, each culture values certain skills and qualities and therefore has different teaching and learning practices, including attitudes to knowledge and learning, approaches to learning, modes of participation, teacher-student relationships, and so on.

Although some studies have focused on undergraduate- and graduate-level international students and revealed that students are able to identify the differences in cultures of learning by themselves based on their previous learning experiences and cognitive abilities (Feng, 2015; Wang & Byram, 2011), only a limited number of studies have focused on younger international students and their intercultural competence. According to the Institute of International Education (2018), more than 10% of international students are enrolled in secondary-level education in the United States in the fall of 2018. Compared to the graduate students who possess high levels of self-regulative and self-reflective abilities, the emotional toll for younger learners is often high. Linguistic skills, lack of familiarity with classroom norms, and the effort to form social bonds and friendships can all be disorienting.

Therefore, analyzing international high-school students' intercultural competence is crucial so that they can overcome the language barrier, adapt to a new culture of thinking and learning, and be successful in their academic studies. Beyond the knowledge level, this paper also focuses on analyzing students' intercultural competence at the skill and attitude level to determine whether they possess the willingness and the ability to adjust their existent learning systems to suit the needs of the new learning environment. The results of this study can benefit teachers by increasing their intercultural competence to better facilitate this student population. This study was designed to address the following research questions: (1) Do Chinese international high-school students process intercultural competence at the knowledge level? What cultural differences in learning have they noticed? (2) Do Chinese international high-school students process intercultural competence at the attitude level? Can certain attitudes be found toward various cultural differences? (3) Do Chinese international high-school students process intercultural competence at the skill level? Where and how did they get the skills to modify their Chinese way of learning to be better suited for a Western education system?

Theoretical framework

The study will adopt Deardoff's (2006) process model of intercultural competence as theoretical framework. By reconstructing Byram's (1997) four levels of framework, Deardoff (2006) narrowed down the framework regarding intercultural competence to three levels: knowledge level, skill level, and attitude level. At the knowledge level, intercultural competence includes cultural self-awareness, specific cultural knowledge, and

sociolinguistic awareness. In other words, at the knowledge level, intercultural competence requires an understanding of how culture has shaped one's identity and worldview. Furthermore, it also requires analysis and an explanation of basic information about another culture, as well as the acquisition of basic local-language knowledge to adjust speech to accommodate nationals from other cultures. At the skill level, intercultural competence includes listening, observing, and evaluating skill. An intercultural competent person should be able to use patience and perseverance to identify and minimize ethnocentrism. Also, intercultural competence involves analyzing, interpreting, and relating critical thinking skills to seek out linkages, causality, and relationships between cultures and interpret the word from other cultures' perspectives. At the attitude level, intercultural competence includes respect, openness, curiosity, and discovery. People with intercultural competence should be interested in seeking out other cultures' attributes and thinking comparatively and without prejudice about cultural differences. Furthermore, they should view differences as a learning opportunity and tolerate and regard ambiguity as a positive learning experience.

Methodology

The study uses a sequential mixed methods approach, starting with quantitative survey research and following with qualitative research to attain a comprehensive understanding of intercultural competence. According to Park (2016), "the purpose of the sequential design is to initiate a quantitative strand, to implement qualitative research, and to draw inferences for supporting the quantitative results" (p. 890).

First, a questionnaire will be used for quantitative survey research. There are three sub-levels of intercultural competence: (a) cultural awareness and understanding; (b) communication, cooperation, and collaboration; and (c) attitudes and dispositions. The questionnaire items have been extracted from three current measurements focusing on each level. Statements 1 through 10, focusing on knowledge and attitude level of intercultural competence, were extracted from the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS). Statements 11 through 20 were extracted from the Behavioral Assessment Scale for Intercultural Competence (BASIC) and Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI). These questions focus on behavioral level and skill level of intercultural competence. Second, a semi-structured interview protocol will be used for the qualitative phase. Interview items ask about the participants' school lives and academic adaptation processes as well as demographic information. Because the qualitative phrase of the study is intended to collect rich description of the participants' experiences and thoughts, the interview questions and follow-up questions were designed to open the participants' narratives and allow for unexpected answers to emerge.

Descriptive statistics (e.g., mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage) and correlation statistics will be used for the analysis of survey data. Semi-structured interview data will be analyzed to identify recurring patterns or themes. In brief, the quantitative survey data will be used to assess students' intercultural competence at different levels. Qualitative data is utilized for a deeper understanding of the difficulties and obstacles that students experience when they make cultural adaptations in school.

Convenience and purpose sampling will be used for this study. Three high schools that have close connections with the researcher will be used for convenience sampling. Then, the classes and students were selected according to the researcher's criteria (i.e., nationality). Based on survey results and participants' voluntary decisions, five to eight participants will be chosen for the qualitative research.

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