

Chapter 56

Assessing Intercultural Sensitivity and Effectiveness: Adult Learners of Chinese as a L2

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines adult CSL (Chinese as a L2) learners' intercultural sensitivity and effectiveness while studying in a university in Beijing. Seventy-four international students from various countries answered the intercultural sensitivity scale (ISS) and intercultural effectiveness scale (IES) as well as other scales in the present study; eight participants were informally interviewed. The findings indicate that the participants were moderate in terms of intercultural sensitivity and effectiveness, that intercultural sensitivity and effectiveness were generally and significantly related to each other, and that students' intercultural sensitivity and effectiveness levels were not statistically correlated with their background variables. Based on these findings, some implications are therein discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, with the advancement of globalization and the development of computer networking technology, international education is of great importance and necessity. Consequently, study abroad programs, especially student exchange programs, have been developing fast in accordance with government-driven initiatives (Rawjee, Reddy & Maharaj, 2013). Accordingly, cultural diversity and intercultural communication, embodied in Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC), have become issues of wide discussion and research (Amason & Ulrey, 2015; Chen & Starosta, 1996, 2000; Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013; Pedersen, 2010; Portalla & Chen 2010; Pritchard & Skinner, 2002; Rahimi & Soltani, 2011; Tabatadze & Gorgadze, 2014; Yu & Chen, 2008).

ICC has *three* main dimensions: (1) intercultural awareness; (2) intercultural sensitivity; and (3) intercultural effectiveness (Byram, 1997; Chen & Starosta, 1996). Studies have revealed that intercultural sensitivity is inversely related to ethnocentrism, that engagement in international interactions helps im-

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prove intercultural sensitivity and intercultural effectiveness, and that both intercultural sensitivity and effectiveness are related to open-mindedness, cultural empathy and cognitive flexibility (Christmas & Barker, 2014; Hammer & Bennett, 1998; Yurtseven & Altun, 2015). Nevertheless, as discussed in Hannigan (1990), various factors are associated with intercultural sensitivity and effectiveness, research on these two issues is far from adequate. Meanwhile, most current research focuses on individuals learning English as the second/foreign language (SL/FL) or living/studying in English-speaking communities or English learners of European languages as SLs/FLs such as French and Spanish. Learners of FLs/SLs other than English are under-researched and deserve more attention. For this, the present study aims to assess the intercultural sensitivity and effectiveness levels of adult learners of Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) in Beijing, a study abroad context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

With an increasing importance of international education around the globe, study abroad programs and sojourners have increasingly caught the attention of researchers and educators (Liu & Liu, 2015; Martinsen, 2011; Olson & Kroeger, 2001; Straffon, 2003). Researchers found that sojourners in study abroad contexts encounter numerous difficulties and obstacles coping with cultural adaptation and intercultural communication due to various reasons (Zhang, 2010). Hammer, Wiseman, Rasmussen and Bruschke (1998) categorized the reasons for cultural challenges into *four* fundamental factors: (1) interpersonal salencies; (2) intergroup salencies; (3) communication message exchange; and (4) host contact conditions. Griffith and Harvey (2001) identified *four* determinants of cultural adaptation: (1) cultural understanding; (2) communication competence; (3) cultural interaction; and (4) communication interaction. Xue and Pan (2012) claimed that grammar-translation pedagogy and lack of intercultural communication awareness were two main reasons for cultural challenges. During the process, the issue of ICC has become prominent to all parties involved (Byram, 1997; Jensen, Jaeger & Lorentsen, 1995).

ICC is ‘the ability to behave appropriately in intercultural situations, the affective and cognitive capacity to establish and maintain intercultural relationships and the ability to stabilize one’s self-identity while mediating between cultures’ (Jensen et al., 1995, p. 41). According to Byram (1997), ICC includes *three* principal components: (1) attitudes; (2) knowledge; and (3) skills, with the first two being preconditions for [successful] intercultural/interlingual interaction. In Chen and Starosta (1996), ICC covers *three* subcomponents: (1) intercultural awareness (*cognitive*-aspect of ICC); (2) intercultural sensitivity (*affective*-aspect of ICC); and (3) intercultural adroitness (*behavioral*-aspect of ICC).

Intercultural Sensitivity (IS)

Intercultural sensitivity is a critical component of ICC (Chen & Starosta, 1996, 2000; Tamam, 2010). As claimed in Bhawuk and Brislin (1992), ‘to be effective in another culture, people must be interested in other cultures, be sensitive enough to notice cultural differences, and also be willing to modify their behavior as an indication of respect for the people of other cultures’ (p. 416). The term ‘intercultural sensitivity’ was proposed by Bennett (1984, cited in Chen & Starosta, 2000) and refers to an interactant’s ability to transform themselves not only affectively, but also cognitively and behaviorally in the developmental process of intercultural communication, which includes *six* stages: (1) denial; (2) defense; (3) minimization; (4) acceptance; (5) adaptation; and (6) integration.

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