

An Empirical Study on the Current Situation of Intercultural Communication Competence in English Reading Teaching in Secondary Vocational Schools

Sui Fenghua

Dongshan Campus of Xuzhou Kindergarten Teachers College, China

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ABSTRACT: *With the economic globalization, intercultural communication is becoming more and more frequent. To communicate with people of different cultural backgrounds effectively and appropriately, people need intercultural communication competence. The National Medium and Long-Term Plan for Education Reform and Development (2010-2020) points out that it is necessary “to train a large number of international talents”; English Curriculum Standards for Secondary Vocational Schools (2018) makes it clear that “one of the tasks of English course for secondary vocational school is to equip students with intercultural communication competence in daily life and professional situations”. Most studies on intercultural communication competence are aimed at college students and senior high school students, and there are few studies on secondary vocational school students. In addition, there are few empirical studies on intercultural communication competence training in English reading teaching in secondary vocational schools in China. So, it is necessary to take this as a starting point to conduct empirical study on intercultural communication competence training in secondary vocational schools. This study adopts a combination of quantitative and qualitative data analysis methods to investigate the current situation of intercultural communication competence among secondary vocational students. Questionnaires and student interviews are adopted to collect and analyze data.*

KEY WORDS: intercultural communication competence; English reading teaching; secondary vocational schools

INTRODUCTION

With the economic globalization, intercultural communication is becoming more and more frequent. People are facing a multicultural environment (Huang Wenhong, 2013).

When we communicate with people from different cultures, we should not only rely on our mother tongue culture to express ourselves, but also consider the differences in cultural habits, behavior patterns, thinking habits and so on. Additionally, to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds effectively and appropriately, people need intercultural communication skills (Tran & Duong, 2018).

In addition, the National Medium and Long-Term Plan for Education Reform and Development (2010-2020) points out that we should “cultivate a large number of international talents”. International talents should not only have a solid knowledge of English, but also be familiar with the cultural backgrounds behind the language, especially the cultural differences of different countries and regions. Therefore, the intercultural communication competence training has become an urgent requirement of the new era and a basic literacy of citizens in the 21st century. English Curriculum Standards for Secondary Vocational Schools (2018) clearly points out that the tasks of secondary vocational English courses are to fully implement the party’s educational policy and the basic tasks of Building Morality and Cultivating People. Through language knowledge learning and language communication activities, students are equipped with ability using English in daily life and professional situations, thinking ability, learning ability, and intercultural communication competence, so that they can adapt to the needs of workplace and become high quality technicians with national feelings, international vision, all-round development in Morality, Intelligence, Physical, Aesthetic and Labor. It can be seen that the intercultural communication competence is a necessary ability in the career of the secondary vocational school students.

However, the current situation of intercultural teaching in secondary vocational schools is not optimistic (Huang Yaqiao, 2016; Gu Xiaole, 2017), and student’s intercultural communication competence needs to be improved. At present, English teaching pays more attention to language teaching and ignores the foundation and precondition role of intercultural knowledge and intercultural attitude in improving intercultural communication competence, which leads to the lack of intercultural communication competence (Huang Yaqiao, 2016). Although students have a wealth of vocabulary and grammar knowledge, as well as some English reading skills, it is still difficult for them to break through in reading speed and comprehension (Yu Yuyu, 2017). English reading itself is a kind of intercultural communication. To improve the students’ intercultural communication competence is to improve their reading ability (Liu Fang & Zeng Yuwei, 2018).

To sum up, the status of intercultural communication competence has been unanimously recognized at home and abroad. Students’ intercultural communication

competence training is a crucial factor in solving the problems of English reading teaching. Therefore, this study aims to study intercultural communication competence training in English reading teaching in secondary vocational schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of Intercultural Communication Competence

Nowadays, foreign scholars have made extensive researches on the concept of intercultural communication competence, which can be summarized in the following two aspects.

In terms of the components of intercultural communication competence, Byram (2000) believes intercultural communication competence mainly includes knowledge, attitude, skills and critical cultural awareness, which is the ability to communicate with people from different cultures effectively and appropriately. Wiseman (2003) believes intercultural communication competence is composed of knowledge, motivation and skills, which are necessary for proper communication with people from other cultures. Deardorff (2004) believes that intercultural communication competence which is based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes, is the effective and appropriate communication ability in intercultural communication practice.

From the perspective of the "appropriateness and effectiveness" of intercultural communication competence, Spitzberg (1994) holds that communication competence is reflected in the appropriateness and effectiveness of communication behaviors, and intercultural communication competence is embodied in communication situations. Chen & Starosta (1998) define intercultural communication competence as the ability of communicators to discuss cultural significance, identify cultural identities and communicate effectively and appropriately in specific situations, which is a process of emotional, cognitive and behavioral development and improvement. Ting-Toomey (1999) holds that intercultural communication competence is embodied in the direct and effective identity negotiation between communicators in the new communication situations. Fantini (2006) believes that intercultural communication competence refers to the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from different cultures, including knowledge, skills, attitudes and awareness.

Since the 1980s, the concepts of intercultural communication competence have been expressed differently by Chinese scholars, most of which are defined according to the components of intercultural communication competence. Hu Wenzhong & Gao Yihong (2002) believe that intercultural communication competence is a combination of

pragmatic competence, comprehension of different cultures, rational evaluation ability of information received and the ability to integrate new cultural information with known knowledge. Han Haiyan (2008) believes successful intercultural communication requires four elements of ability: the ability of language cultural expression, the ability of language cultural cognition, the ability of language cultural perception and the ability of language cultural thinking. Zhang Weidong & Yang Li (2012) believe that intercultural communication competence is embodied in three dimensions. They are cultural awareness, cultural knowledge and communication practice. Liu Baoquan (2015) believes that intercultural communication competence can be divided into cultural knowledge, cultural understanding and cultural expression.

In all, although scholars at home and abroad have different definitions of intercultural communication competence, they have formed a relatively consistent view. It is widely believed that intercultural communication competence is mainly composed of knowledge, attitude and skills and the core is effectiveness and appropriateness, which is consistent with Bram's definition. Therefore, this study adopts Byram's definition of intercultural communication competence.

Studies on ICC in English Reading Teaching

In the late 1950s, intercultural communication, as an independent subject, was born in the United States. Edward Hall (1959) first raised the concept of intercultural communication in *The Silent Language*, which is supposed to lay a foundation of intercultural communication study. Since Hymes (1972) came up with the concept of communication competence, foreign scholars have set out to probe the relationship between the training of intercultural communication competence and English reading teaching from different perspectives. These studies mainly focus on the following aspects.

As for the intercultural communication competence training in English reading teaching, Grabe (2001) considers reading process as an interactive process between readers and reading materials, and cultural knowledge has a positive effect on reading comprehension. Grabe & Stoller (2013) argue that fluent reading is a positive interaction process, in which readers understand the author's intention and explore the meaning of the text actively through rich cultural background knowledge. Based on the existing intercultural communication competence assessment tools, Miguel Ángel Candel-Mora (2015) proposes to revise the analytical framework from different perspectives so as to achieve the dual purpose of evaluating learners' intercultural communication competence and applying it to English teaching. Hazaea & ALZubi (2017) discuss the application of text analysis, discourse analysis and critical discourse

analysis in English reading class and suggest further research should be carried out on the training of critical cultural awareness in English reading teaching based on discourse. Maiijet & Fatin (2017) state that constructive measures and interventions are taken in intercultural reading programs to improve intercultural knowledge and behavior among secondary school students in Malaysia. Byram's Ph.D. student Melina Porto (2017) combines text reading with the training of intercultural attitude and awareness, and conducts an empirical study on intercultural communication competence in Argentina University, which lays a foundation for the combination of theory and practice of intercultural communication attitude and awareness.

In the 1980s, intercultural communication study entered China. The Intercultural Communication Society was established in 1995, which is a landmark in the study of intercultural communication in China (Gao Yongchen, 2014). Since then, with the rapid development of intercultural communication, intercultural communication competence training plays an increasingly important part in the teaching of English reading in China (Zheng Xiaohong, 2012; Li Ling, 2016; Yang Guihua & Zhao Zhiyun, 2018). Intercultural foreign language teaching has entered a new stage. Many experts, scholars have put forward valuable opinions and suggestions in this aspect.

As for the intercultural communication competence training in English reading teaching, Jiang Juejing (2016) believes that language ultimately serves communication, so it is necessary to train students' intercultural communication competence in English reading teaching and puts forward specific strategies. Zhang Lingling (2017) analyzes the necessity of cultural teaching in senior high school English reading teaching: not only improve students' reading ability, but also promote the smooth progress of intercultural communication. Liao Yuyu (2017) believes that under the background of Chinese-foreign cooperation in running schools, English reading can be enhanced from the following aspects: improving teachers' intercultural awareness, choosing reading materials reasonably, optimizing teaching contents and methods, expanding channels and carrying out intercultural communication activities actively, so as to improve college students' intercultural communication competence and enhance Chinese and foreign cultural literacy. He Yaqing (2018) explores the critical teaching of English Reading Course of Chinese Culture from the aspects of classroom design and teaching methods through teaching cases, and points out that to train students' critical ability is to train students' intercultural communication competence. Xing Feng (2019) suggests that attention should be paid to the training of students' intercultural communication awareness and the improvement of students' language application ability in English reading teaching in senior high schools. Duan Wenjing & Zhao Zheng (2019) point out that in the new era, the training of intercultural communication competence in college

English teaching should be drawn more and more attention, so that students can not only grasp English language knowledge and skills, but also be equipped with strong intercultural communication competence. Xue Yi (2019) points out that in computer-aided reading, students can choose teaching software based on their own situation, which plays an important role in intercultural teaching.

In all, foreign researchers are mostly psychologists and sociologists; intercultural communication abroad is an independent discipline. Most of the domestic researchers are experts and scholars, mainly focusing on foreign language teaching. Most studies on the intercultural communication competence training in English reading teaching are concerned with college students and senior high school students, and there are few empirical studies in secondary vocational schools.

In view of this, based on previous studies, referring to the English Curriculum Standards for Secondary Vocational Schools and the influential evaluation scales, it is necessary to take this as a starting point to carry out an empirical study on intercultural communication competence training in secondary vocational schools.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts quantitative and qualitative data analysis methods to investigate the current situation of intercultural communication competence. Questionnaires and student interviews are adopted to collect and analyze data. The purpose of the research is to investigate the current situation of intercultural communication competence in English reading teaching in secondary vocational schools. According to above purposes, the question is proposed in this research.

What is the current situation of intercultural communication competence training in English reading teaching in secondary vocational schools?

Participants

To analyze the current situation of intercultural communication competence from the overall and four dimensions, a questionnaire survey is conducted on the current situation of intercultural communication competence among 310 secondary vocational school students in Grade 2022 in the first week of the first semester 2022-2023. A total of 310 questionnaires are handed out and 310 valid questionnaires are collected. At the same time, 10 students are interviewed to collect direct and effective information from different perspectives.

Data collection

In empirical research, the following research instruments are adopted for data collection and analysis, which are questionnaire and student interviews. The questionnaire, combined with student interviews, comprehensively presents the results of the current situation of intercultural communication competence among secondary vocational school students.

The questionnaire

Based on Byram's EU Model, combined with English Curriculum Standards for Secondary Vocational Schools (2018) and referring to the questionnaire designed by Zhong Hua, Bai Qianhui & Fan Weiwei (2013), the questionnaire is formed. This questionnaire employs the 5 Likert scale, which corresponds to the Arabic number 1-5 (1= fully disagree; 2= disagree; 3= uncertain; 4= agree; 5= fully agree).

To ensure the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, a pilot study was made among some students in Grade 2022. According to the results of this pilot study analyzed by SPSS23.0, some questions that students could not really understand were deleted. In addition, the author and teachers with rich experience in intercultural teaching repeatedly studied, modified and improved the questions to ensure that the questionnaire not only conforms to the theoretical category of Byram's intercultural communication competence, but also is in line with the actual situation of secondary vocational school students.

The final questionnaire is made up of 30 items which consists of four dimensions of ICC: knowledge, attitude, skills and awareness. The contents are as follows.

Table 3-1 Content Classifications of the Questionnaire

Content		Order number	Total
intercultural communication competence	knowledge dimension	1-6	6
	attitude dimension	7-14	8
	skills dimension	15-23	9
	awareness dimension	24-30	7

In order to ensure the quality of students' answers, the following points should be paid attention to. First, students are promised that the questionnaires are anonymous and the results would only be used for research. Second, teachers should clearly explain the requirements of the questionnaire to students. Third, teachers should remind students to check the questionnaire so as not to omit it. Besides, students should finish the questionnaires within the specified time. The questionnaires are issued through the

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK

Questionnaire Star online questionnaire survey platform. A total of 310 questionnaires are sent out in class. There are 310 valid questionnaires, with an effective rate of 100.00%. The results are as follows (See Appendix I).

Table 3-2 Reliability Test Case Processing Summary of the Questionnaire

		Number	%
Cases	Valid	310	100.00%
	Excluded	0	0.00%
	Total	310	100.00%

According to Gay (1992), the acceptable reliability coefficient should not be less than 0.7. According to Table 3-3, it can be seen that the overall reliability is 0.808; the reliability of each dimension in the questionnaire is higher than 0.70. It indicates that the reliability of the questionnaire is high and the design of each part is scientific, which can meet the needs of data analysis.

Table 3-3 Reliability Analysis of the Questionnaire

Reliability statistics	Cronbach Alpha	Number of Items
overall reliability	.808	30
knowledge dimension	.762	6
attitude dimension	.746	8
skills dimension	.722	9
awareness dimension	.730	7

Table 3-4 Test of KMO and Bartlett of the Questionnaire

KMO Sampling Appropriateness Quantity		.765
Bartlett Sphericity Test	chi-squared approximation	906.479
	df.	435
	sig.	.000

As can be seen from Table 3-4, the KMO value is 0.765, which shows that the internal validity structure of the questionnaire is good. It indicates that the design of this questionnaire meets the requirements and the data are suitable for factor analysis. Generally speaking, the lower the significance of Sphericity Test (< 0.05), the greater the possibility that there is a meaningful relationship between the original variables. If the significant level of Sphericity Test is large (> 0.1), it indicates that the data are not suitable for factor analysis. It can be seen from Table 3-5 that the significant

value is 0.00, < 0.05 , indicating that there is a significant relationship between the questionnaires. In conclusion, the questionnaire meets the requirements of Byram's theory, which proves that the reliability and validity of the questionnaire is ensured.

The interviews

In order to obtain effective and direct feedback and know better about the current situation of intercultural communication competence in English reading teaching in secondary vocational schools from a different perspective, this thesis carries out the student interviews.

Combined with Byram's EU Model and students' actual condition in secondary vocational schools, the study adopts the interview outline designed by Hong Yuanhui (2013) for reference and makes some modifications on it. To make it more objective, 10 students from Grade 2019 are selected for the interview at random. There are five questions in the interview outline.

Before the interview, students will be asked for permission and be promised that the results are only used for research. They will be interviewed during their free time so as not to disturb their study. Fifteen minutes will be spent in interviewing each student and the entire process will be recorded. After the interview, the main points of their views will be sorted out immediately. Finally, the thesis will analyze and summarize the notes to get more detailed information.

Outlines of the Student Interviews

Question 1 Have you heard of "intercultural communication competence"? How do you understand it?

Question 2 Do you care about cultural knowledge? How well do you know the cultural knowledge of English-speaking countries?

Question 3 Do you have the experience of intercultural communication? If so, do you have any difficulties in communicating with the foreigners? Please describe the process and your feeling.

Question 4 How does your English teacher carry out cultural teaching?

Question 5 What do you think of the cultural teaching methods adopted by your teacher? Can you give any of your suggestions for the training of ICC?

Data analysis

Firstly, the data in the questionnaires are analyzed by SPSS25.0. The descriptive analysis of questionnaire is conducted on the overall situation and the specific dimensions of intercultural communication competence. In order to check the data in

the future, the author codes the questionnaire data and input the data information into SPSS 25.0 in the coding order for statistics and analysis. According to the general grade setting method in the scale (Oxford, 1999), the scale adopts the 5-Likert scale, which corresponds to the number 1-5 (1=fully disagree; 2=disagree; 3=uncertain; 4=agree; 5=fully agree). When scoring, the specific number selected by the subjects shall be counted as the score of the question. The larger the number is, the higher the subject's score on the item will be.

Secondly, this research mainly adopts semi-structured interview. Based on the interview outline, this study asks questions in a more flexible way to dig into the information and understands the interviewees' ideas and practices. Before the interview, the author makes clear the purpose of the interview to the interviewees, and promises that the data would be kept confidential and only used for research. After obtaining the consent of the interviewees, the author records the whole process. During the interview, the author properly controls the topics to be discussed and guides the interviewees to fully express relevant issues; at the same time, timely adjust and supplement problems according to the actual situation; the interviewees are encouraged to actively participate in and talk about relevant issues that interest them, so as to obtain more accurate and rich research data on intercultural communication competence. Each interviewee will be interviewed for about 30 minutes. After the interview, the author transcribes and collates the recorded materials for the purpose of analyzing the data information.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the questionnaire

By analyzing the overall situation and specific dimensions of intercultural communication competence and combining with the student interviews, this section comprehensively presents the results and discussions on the current situation of subjects' intercultural communication competence, and answers the first research question of this thesis.

Overall situation of ICC

SPSS23.0 is used to comprehensively analyze the current situation of secondary vocational school students' intercultural communication competence. The statistical results are shown in Table 4-1:

Table 4-1 Overall Situation of ICC

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Error Mean	Std. Deviation
Total Average	310	2.30	3.63	2.89	.0152	.264
Valid Sample Number	310					

The total average of students' ICC is 2.89, below the median 3.0, which indicates that the overall situation of secondary vocational students' ICC is at a very low level, not reaching the medium level. From Table 4-1, it could also find that the minimum of ICC is 2.30 while the maximum is 3.63; the standard deviation is 0.264 and the standard error mean is 0.0152. That's to say, the difference definitely exists between the ones with high average of ICC and the ones with low average of ICC. From these data, it is predictable that quite a number of students are not in the medium level in ICC and there is still much room for improvement (See Appendix I). It can be observed from Table 4-1 that although almost all secondary vocational school students have been learning English for 6 years, and have a certain knowledge of vocabulary and grammar as well as English reading skills, their ability to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds is not satisfactory. To some extent, it also reflects that the current teaching situation of secondary vocational school students' intercultural communication competence training is not optimistic, which is consistent with the research result of Huang Yaqiao (2016).

Current situation of four dimensions of ICC

To further explore the current level in each dimension of ICC among secondary vocational school students, based on Byram's (2000) theory of ICC, this thesis makes the concrete analysis of four dimensions: knowledge, attitude, skills and awareness. The results are shown in Table 4-2 and Table 4-3.

Table 4-2 the Analysis of Four Dimensions of ICC

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Error Mean	Std. Deviation
Total	310	2.30	3.63	2.89	.0152	.264
Knowledge	310	1.33	4.33	2.93	.0297	.515
Attitude	310	1.88	4.00	2.98	.0240	.416
Skills	310	1.56	3.89	2.87	.0248	.430
Awareness	310	1.57	3.86	2.77	.0257	.446
Valid Sample Number	310					

Table 4-3 the Analysis of Each Item of Four Dimensions

Item	Dimension	Number	Mean	Std. Error Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Knowledge	310	3.20	.060	1.043
2		310	3.40	.061	1.065
3		310	3.12	.055	.959
4		310	2.80	.052	.895
5		310	2.27	.055	.960
6		310	2.82	.057	.990
7	Attitude	310	2.84	.054	.932
8		310	2.81	.053	.919
9		310	2.91	.050	.875
10		310	2.96	.052	.897
11		310	2.99	.054	.942
12		310	3.07	.051	.879
13		310	3.12	.049	.854
14		310	3.13	.047	.812
15	Skills	310	2.94	.055	.959
16		310	2.88	.060	1.032
17		310	2.82	.062	1.079
18		310	2.83	.058	1.013
19		310	2.93	.061	1.053
20		310	2.86	.053	.914
21		310	2.80	.054	.939
22		310	2.92	.052	.907
23		310	2.91	.055	.946
24	Awareness	310	2.86	.053	.918
25		310	2.82	.049	.858
26		310	2.80	.051	.893
27		310	2.79	.055	.946
28		310	2.69	.052	.905
29		310	2.65	.043	.745
30		310	2.75	.057	.986

Table 4-2 shows the analysis of four dimensions: knowledge, attitude, skills and awareness. In the four dimensions, the average of attitude dimension (2.98) ranks the highest, followed by knowledge dimension (2.93) and skills dimension (2.87); while the average of awareness dimension (2.77) is the lowest. Table 4-3 shows the specific

analysis of four dimensions in ICC and the factors affecting the training of ICC.

In terms of knowledge dimension, six questions (item 1-6) are contained, which are designed to find the current situation of knowledge training. In general, the average of knowledge dimension is 2.93. To be specific, the averages of item 1, 2 and 3 are 3.20, 3.40 and 3.12 respectively, slightly above 3.0, reflecting the knowledge dimension of “dress culture”, “social etiquette” and “customs”; while the averages of item 4, 5 and 6 are all below 3.0. The averages of item 4 and item 6 are 2.80 and 2.82, which reflect “national geography” and “national history”; the average of item 5 concerning “belief and behavior” ranks the lowest of knowledge dimension, which is only 2.27. The total average and the specific analysis of each item of knowledge dimension show that the overall level of students’ intercultural knowledge is not ideal enough to get into the medium level.

The reasons for the lack of intercultural knowledge are shown as follows. Firstly, teachers do not pay enough attention to cultural teaching. They do not dig into the cultural factors contained in the teaching materials. The width and depth of intercultural knowledge are not enough. Secondly, the way of cultural teaching is single. Even if teachers adopt cultural teaching, they can only introduce simple cultural background knowledge through PPT or video. Thirdly, due to the limitation of class hours, teachers have no time to supplement teaching materials of intercultural knowledge. In addition, this kind of knowledge, such as “national geography”, “national history” and “belief and behavior” are few involved in the teaching content and they know little about them.

In the aspect of attitude dimension, according to Table 4-3, eight questions (item 7- 14) are included in attitude dimension, which is meant to test the current situation of attitude training. It could be seen from Table 4-2 and Table 4-3 that the average of attitude is 2.98, close to the median 3.0, and the average of each category in attitude dimension is unbalanced. The averages of item 7-11 are all below the medium level, while the averages of item 12, 13 and 14 are above the median 3.0. Specifically, item 7-8 are used to measure whether the subjects have the tendency to interact with people from other cultures; Item 9 refers to “how the subjects adapt or tolerate to their counterparts’ cultures and opinions”; Item 10-11 concerns about “communicators’ self-confidence in intercultural communication”; Item 12 is about “communicators’ inner feelings of happiness in intercultural communication”; Item 13-14 refer to “people’s attempt to understand what is going on in intercultural communication”. Although the average of attitude dimension is slightly higher than other dimensions of ICC, its overall level is still low.

As Byram (2013) introduced, attitude is the premise of successful intercultural communication. Attitude is curious and open to cultural issues; no longer doubts about other cultures and no longer regards our own culture as “central culture”. Compared with other dimensions of ICC, the average of attitude dimension is slightly higher than that of others. The conclusion can be drawn that secondary vocational school students have a strong desire to communicate with people of different cultural backgrounds. According to the characteristics of secondary vocational school students, they are easy to accept new ideas, and have strong adaptability, but they are lack of learning interest and motivation.

According to Table 4-3, nine questions (item 15-23) belong to skills dimension, aiming to find out the current situation of skills training. To be specific, item 15 and 16 mainly cover “the ability to mediate conflicting and explain one’s own culture to convince the other one”; item 17, 18 and 19 can be described as “the ability to avoid offending others in the process of communication with people from different cultures”; item 20, 21, 22 and 23 can be illustrated as “the ability to acquire knowledge”. From Table 4-2, it could be seen that the average of skills dimension is only 2.87, which is below the median 3.0 and is also lower than the total average of ICC (2.89). In Table 4-3, the average of each item of skills dimension is 2.8 or so. It reflects that the skills training of ICC among secondary vocational school students is insufficient.

Skills are the guarantee of effective intercultural communication (Byram, 2013). The training of skills is a long process of development, and it is closely related to students’ growth and educational environment. To improve students’ intercultural skills, we not only need to comprehend the intercultural knowledge, but also practice by simulating interpersonal communication situation from different backgrounds (Xia Zongfeng, 2013). In all, it is a higher requirement of English Curriculum Standards for Secondary Vocational School to realize the appropriate and effective intercultural communication

In views of awareness dimension, according to Table 4-3, the last seven questions (item 24-30) belong to awareness dimension and are meant to find out the current situation of awareness training. Compared with other dimensions, the average of awareness is the lowest and the average of each item of awareness dimension is below the total average of ICC. Specifically, the average of item 29 is only 2.65, which is the lowest among each item of awareness dimension. It refers to “the awareness of putting the learned intercultural knowledge into communication; the awareness of evaluating own behavior objectively and making own behavior better”. The average of item 28 and item 30 are also very low, which are 2.69 and 2.75 respectively. They refer to “be aware of the differences when communicating with people from different cultures” and “avoid

interacting with people from different cultures” of critical cultural awareness.

In accordance with Byram’s theory (2013), critical cultural awareness requires students to have a critical spirit, look at problems dialectically, and make their own judgments on the basis of analysis. Among the four dimensions of ICC, the average of awareness is the lowest. There are several reasons for the lack of critical cultural awareness among secondary vocational school students. First of all, in the secondary vocational education stage, with the guidance of employment-oriented, teaching pays attention to strengthening students’ professional skills, but universally neglecting the training of cultural literacy; and students’ English foundation is generally poor. Secondly, due to the interference from mother tongue culture, secondary vocational school students’ critical cultural awareness is not strong, and their intercultural sensitivity is low. Thirdly, although some contents are added to the textbook to cultivate students’ awareness, most of them emphasize the culture of Britain and the United States, and lack the cultural comparison between China and the West. In conclusion, these factors will inevitably lead to the lack of critical cultural awareness in intercultural communication.

The analysis of student interviews

In view of the current situation of the secondary vocational students’ ICC, this thesis analyzes the results of student interviews from the perspectives of students’ understanding of intercultural knowledge, difficulties students have in intercultural communication, and cultural teaching’s methods, contents and effects. The following are some selected recordings of the interviewees. One interviewee said his opinions:

“...I have never heard about ICC, let alone knowledge, attitudes, skills and critical awareness. In my opinion, intercultural communication competence may be a comprehensive ability which can be used to communicate with people from other cultures. We have very few opportunities to communicate with foreigners, and I don’t think it is useful to have intercultural communication competence....”

In terms of intercultural knowledge, one of the students said that “intercultural knowledge is rarely involved in the exam, so I confess that I don’t care much about intercultural knowledge”. One student stated that “I am interested in intercultural knowledge, but I do not think it as important as language points and grammar points”. Another student said that “I am more concerned about intercultural knowledge, but because of the heavy learning tasks, I have no time to put it into action....”

From these interviewees’ response, we could find that most students are not familiar with the concept “intercultural communication competence” and don’t care

much about intercultural knowledge. Few students have a good understanding of the training of intercultural communication competence which was put forward by the Ministry of Education in English Curriculum Standard in Secondary Vocational School. Some students can give the definition of intercultural communication competence as a whole, but they are not clear about the dimensions of it. According to Byram's (2000) EU Model, intercultural communication competence is mainly composed of knowledge, attitude, skills and critical cultural awareness. It is the ability to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds effectively and appropriately. As for teachers, it is necessary to make secondary vocational school students realize the importance of training ICC and deepen the understanding of ICC. At the same time, they should try their best to make students interested in Chinese and foreign cultures rather than be exam-oriented. As for secondary vocational school students, they should be motivated for the cultural knowledge; it is advisable to understand the deep meaning behind the cultures, be able to share their feelings and emotions and treat other cultures positively; meanwhile, they should be open and tolerant when facing the communication conflicts; furthermore, they should remain motivated to participate in some intercultural activities and accumulate the intercultural skills.

As far as the experience of intercultural communication, the following are some views of the interviews

“.... due to the limitation of actual situation, I have few opportunities to communicate with foreigners. I will feel shy and excited when I can communicate with foreigners in simple everyday English.”

Intercultural communication helps students understand the cultural differences and improve their cultural sensitivity. Secondary vocational school students' characteristics determine that they have a strong desire to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds with a more open and inclusive attitude.

In addition, in view of cultural teaching, the following opinions are listed from some of the interviewees:

“.....My English teacher does not pay enough attention to cultural teaching in her daily teaching. To be specific, she teaches very little intercultural knowledge and the way of cultural teaching is single. If she encounters cultural knowledge related to the text, she would introduce it through oral explanation or PPT, and occasionally supplement some cultural knowledge about social etiquette, customs and habits of English-speaking countries in the class. Even if it refers to foreign geography, history

and values, she just mentions them briefly. It seems that my English teacher attaches more importance on language points and grammar.....”

From this interviewee’s expression, it is suggested that although intercultural teaching has been conducted in English reading class, the percentage is not large. And they ought to make some changes on the methods and contents of cultural teaching. Language is not only an integral part of culture, but also the carrier and external manifestation of culture. To truly understand a language, we must understand the cultural background of the language. The relationship between them decides that it is necessary to develop intercultural teaching.

Last but not least, in terms of cultural teaching methods students like to be carried out in English reading classes, some interviewees said:

“.... I like lively and interesting ways to teach culture knowledge, such as integrating games, scene performances, and speeches into teaching activities....”

Almost all of the interviewees think that combining cultural knowledge with language teaching is helpful to stimulate students’ interest and enthusiasm in English learning and improve English reading ability. It is generally believed that English teaching should not be simply language teaching, and teaching activities of the English classes should be rich and diverse. Only in this way can students learn the language and master the culture through different activities. In addition, students all hope that the teacher will explain more English classical stories. Because it contains rich social background knowledge, customs and social etiquette, etc. Students can gradually understand the cultural differences between Chinese and foreign cultures.

CONCLUSIONS

In accordance with the analyses of the results gathered from questionnaires and student interviews, the following are the main findings of this thesis.

In general, secondary vocational school students’ ICC is weak. According to the analyses, on the whole, the total average of secondary vocational school students’ ICC is 2.89 and the overall level of ICC is not satisfactory enough to get into the medium level. As regard to the four dimensions of ICC, the questionnaire statistics show that the subjects’ average in each dimension of ICC is different. Although the subjects’ attitude dimension ranks the highest among other dimensions, it is only 2.98, slightly lower than the median 3.0; followed by knowledge dimension and skills dimension;

while awareness dimension ranks at the bottom, with an average of 2.77.

To be specific, in terms of knowledge dimension, the average values of “dress culture”, “social etiquette”, and “customs” in the knowledge dimension are slightly higher than those in “national geography” and “national history”. In the aspect of attitude dimension, the conclusion can be drawn that secondary vocational school students have a strong desire to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds. As for skills dimension, the average of each item of skills dimension is 2.8 or so. It reflects that the skills training of ICC among secondary vocational school students is insufficient. Compared with other dimensions, the average of awareness is the lowest of ICC. It can be concluded that the critical cultural awareness of “be aware of the differences when communicating with people from different cultures” and “avoid interacting with people from different cultures” is relatively weak.

Implications

Although this research has successfully answered the question proposed in the study, there are still some limitations and suggestions for future study.

As introduced in introduction, it is necessary to train intercultural communication competence in English reading teaching in secondary vocational schools. The most important thing is to probe the strategies of training it. The following points should be paid attention to.

Firstly, teachers should change their previous teaching concepts and methods. They should not only pay attention to language teaching but also attach importance to cultural teaching. Secondly, teachers should choose teaching materials carefully to make the selected materials closer to students’ study and life to improve their intercultural communication competence significantly. In addition, in order to improve students’ intercultural communication competence, the implementation of a series of activities had better combine with original English literary works, so that students can get access to real foreign cultural materials.

Limitations

Although this research has successfully answered the question proposed in the study, there are still some limitations and suggestions for future study. In the future, the author should perfect the research from the following 2 aspects.

First, we should enlarge the sample to obtain higher reliability. The sample of this research is not large enough. This research is carried out in a secondary vocational

school in Xuzhou. The sample of teaching experiment is only 310 students. In the future, we should expand the number of samples for questionnaire, interview, so as to analyze the differences between different regions.

Second, expand the scope of research. In the future research, schools in different regions and at different levels can also be selected for investigation to enhance the scientific nature of the research.

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Appendix 1. Questionnaire of ICC of secondary vocational students

Dear student,

The purpose of this questionnaire will be only used for research. The information you provide below will remain confidential. Thank you for your time and cooperation.

1. When communicating with people from different cultures, I pay attention to my dress and image.

(1) fully disagree (2) disagree (3) uncertain (4) agree (5) fully agree

2. When communicating with people from different cultures, I understand their social etiquette.

(1) fully disagree (2) disagree (3) uncertain (4) agree (5) fully agree

3. When communicating with people from different cultures, I understand the customs and habits of foreign cultures.

(1) fully disagree (2) disagree (3) uncertain (4) agree (5) fully agree

4. When communicating with people from different cultures, I understand the geographical situation of each other's culture.

(1) fully disagree (2) disagree (3) uncertain (4) agree (5) fully agree

5. When communicating with people from different cultures, I understand foreign religious knowledge and cultural taboos.
(1) fully disagree (2) disagree (3) uncertain (4) agree (5) fully agree
6. When communicating with people from different cultures, I understand the current important and popular events of the other culture.
(1) fully disagree (2) disagree (3) uncertain (4) agree (5) fully agree
7. I always avoid dealing with people from different cultures.
(1) fully disagree (2) disagree (3) uncertain (4) agree (5) fully agree
8. When communicating with people from different cultures, I often give them a positive response.
(1) fully disagree (2) disagree (3) uncertain (4) agree (5) fully agree
9. I am open-minded towards people from different cultures.
(1) fully disagree (2) disagree (3) uncertain (4) agree (5) fully agree
10. I am always good at expressing myself when communicating with people from different cultures.
(1) fully disagree (2) disagree (3) uncertain (4) agree (5) fully agree
11. I always feel confident when communicating with people of different cultures.
(1) fully disagree (2) disagree (3) uncertain (4) agree (5) fully agree
12. I enjoy communicating with people from different cultures.
(1) fully disagree (2) disagree (3) uncertain (4) agree (5) fully agree
13. I am very observant when communicating with people from different cultures.
(1) fully disagree (2) disagree (3) uncertain (4) agree (5) fully agree
14. When communicating with people from different cultures, I strive to obtain as much information as possible.
(1) fully disagree (2) disagree (3) uncertain (4) agree (5) fully agree
15. When misunderstandings arise in cross-cultural communication, I have the ability to explain to the other party to achieve mutual satisfaction.
(1) fully disagree (2) disagree (3) uncertain (4) agree (5) fully agree
16. When language communication barriers arise, I am able to use body language or other nonverbal communication methods for communication.
(1) fully disagree (2) disagree (3) uncertain (4) agree (5) fully agree
17. I have the ability to treat foreigners politely when communicating with them.
(1) fully disagree (2) disagree (3) uncertain (4) agree (5) fully agree
18. When communicating with foreigners, try to avoid offending their abilities in terms of language, clothing, and behavior.
(1) fully disagree (2) disagree (3) uncertain (4) agree (5) fully agree
19. When communicating with foreigners, one will avoid mentioning the ability of foreigners to have a sense of privacy.
(1) fully disagree (2) disagree (3) uncertain (4) agree (5) fully agree

20. When communicating with people from different cultures, I use a long sentence to explain vocabulary that I don't know.
(1) fully disagree (2) disagree (3) uncertain (4) agree (5) fully agree
21. When communicating with people from different cultures, I use conversational complements such as "you know" and "well" to gain thinking time.
(1) fully disagree (2) disagree (3) uncertain (4) agree (5) fully agree
22. When encountering communication difficulties, I will send signals of incomprehension to the others, such as "I bet your partner?", to help them reorganize their discourse.
(1) fully disagree (2) disagree (3) uncertain (4) agree (5) fully agree
23. When communicating with people from different cultures, I use a questioning tone to repeat the other person's words, implying that I have difficulty understanding.
(1) fully disagree (2) disagree (3) uncertain (4) agree (5) fully agree
24. When communicating with people from different countries, I am aware of their different communication habits.
(1) fully disagree (2) disagree (3) uncertain (4) agree (5) fully agree
25. I am able to establish a mutually agreed upon standard to address intercultural conflict issues.
(1) fully disagree (2) disagree (3) uncertain (4) agree (5) fully agree
26. When communicating with people from English speaking countries, I am aware of cultural similarities and differences between them.
(1) fully disagree (2) disagree (3) uncertain (4) agree (5) fully agree
27. When communicating with people from English speaking countries, I am aware of their different values.
(1) fully disagree (2) disagree (3) uncertain (4) agree (5) fully agree
28. When communicating with people from English speaking countries, I am able to accept the similarities and differences between them and Chinese people in terms of interpersonal and social behavior.
(1) fully disagree (2) disagree (3) uncertain (4) agree (5) fully agree
29. I am able to apply the intercultural knowledge I have learned to practical communication and objectively evaluate and improve my behavior.
(1) fully disagree (2) disagree (3) uncertain (4) agree (5) fully agree
30. I always avoid dealing with people from different cultures.
(1) fully disagree (2) disagree (3) uncertain (4) agree (5) fully agree