

CHINESE COLLEGE STUDENTS' ENGLISH LEARNING  
AND THEIR CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Approved by Kory Wein  
Paper Adviser

Date: 4/30/2010

CHINESE COLLEGE STUDENTS' ENGLISH LEARNING  
AND THEIR CULTURAL COMPETENCE

A Seminar Paper

Presented to

the Graduate Faculty

University of Wisconsin-Platteville

---

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirement for the Degree

Master of Science

in

Education

---

By

Ji Li

(Cynthia)

2009

## **Abstract**

Chinese College Students' English Learning and their Cultural Competence

Ji Li (Cynthia)

Under the supervision of Dr. Kory Wein

Since the 1990s, great importance has been attached to the teaching of English culture in China within the EFL context. According to Pulveness, teaching of a foreign culture involves teaching of different ways of seeing the world to achieve new cultural competence and thereby reflecting upon their own cultural competence (Pulveness, 1995). It indicates that foreign language learning interacts with learning of target culture and learner's cultural competence.

This paper starts from definitions of cultural and cultural competence. English learning in China also is introduced here. Then it presents the findings of researchers' studies of cultural competence. The relationship between EFL learning in China and learners' cultural competence is analyzed as well.

As an international language, English has attracted Chinese college students' passion. It would be meaningful to study cultural competence and its relationship to learner's English proficiency in China. With the aim of improving Chinese College Students' English proficiency, there will be more educational study of cultural competence.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

APPROVAL PAGE.....	i
TITLE PAGE.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT PAGE.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Introduction	
Statement of the Problem	
Definitions of Terms	
Delimitations	
Method of Approach	
CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	4
Definitions of Cultural Competence	
English Learning in China	
Previous Studies on Cultural Competence	
The Relationship between EFL Learners' English Learning and Their Cultural Competence	
CHAPTER III. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	15
REFERENCES.....	17

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

With the globalization, the world is becoming more and more diverse. As an international language, English functions as a worldwide means of communication. As to the effective learning of English within the EFL context, Pulveness (1995) suggests that the learning English of culture should be integrated into the learning of English language, and those learners should try to learn the target culture knowledge by comparing and contrasting it with their own culture, thereby improving their cultural competence. Cultural competence interacts with EFL learners' English learning.

There is no unified definition of *culture* because of its complexity. Accordingly, there are different definitions of *cultural competence*, which is closely related to the nature of culture. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) states that cultural competence can be analyzed from two dimensions: surface structure and deep structure. King et al. and Paz (2008) offer the five essential elements which contribute to becoming more culturally competent. All these findings lead to effective foreign language learning as well as the improvement of cultural competence.

This review of literature addresses cultural competence, English learning in China, and the relationship between cultural competence and EFL learner's English Learning.

#### **Statement of the Problem**

The problems addressed as a question are as follows: What are the definitions of cultural competence? What factors do contribute to becoming more culturally competent? What's the relationship between EFL learners' English learning and their cultural competence?

## **Definition of Terms**

**Culture:** “an integrated system of learned behavior patterns which are characteristic of the members of a society and which are not the results of biological inheritance” (Hobel and Frost, 1976).

Moran (2003) interprets culture as “evolving way of life of a group of persons, consisting of a shared set of practices associated with a shared set of products, based upon a shared set of perspectives on the world and set within specific social contexts.”

**Cultural competence:** “a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enables that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross cultural situations” (Isaacs & Benjamin 1989).

Davis (1997) holds the opinion that cultural competence evolves first from having knowledge of a set of culturally integrated patterns defined by individuals and groups of people and then incorporating and transforming that knowledge appropriately into specific standards, policies, practices, and attitudes in a certain cultural settings, which will be helpful for people to function effectively in a certain cultural setting and thereby leading to the increase of quality of services.

Paz (2008) interprets cultural competence as how well a person function in cross-cultural settings.

**EFL:** English as a Foreign Language

## **Delimitations of the Research**

The research was conducted through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, over eighty-five (85) days. Primary searches were conducted via the

Internet through EBSCO Search Elite as the primary sources. Key search topics included “culture,” “EFL,” and “cultural competence.”

### **Method of approach**

A brief review of literature on the studies of cultural competence was conducted. A second review of literature about English learning and teaching in China was conducted. A third review of the relationships between EFL learner’s English learning and their culture competence was conducted. The findings were summarized and recommendations made.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### **Definitions of *culture* and *cultural competence***

According to Hoebel and Frost (1976), *culture* is an “integrated system of learned behavior patterns which are characteristic of the members of a society and which are not the result of biological inheritance.” This definition of culture is based on the largest sense of it, which emphasizes that culture is learned rather than inherited.

Moran (2003) interprets culture as “evolving way of life of a group of persons, consisting of a shared set of practices associated with a shared set of products, based upon a shared set of perspectives on the world and set within specific social contexts” Moran’s definition of culture has something in common with that of Hobel and Frost in that it’s about human behaviors. What is more, it put forwards five dimensions of culture which include practices, products, perspectives, persons and communities (Li, 2007).

King, Sims, and Osher believe that the word *culture* is used because it implies a set of human behavior including thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, religions and so on, and the word *competence* is used because it suggests being able to function appropriately in a particular cultural setting. In this sense, being culturally competent suggests having the capacity of using proper “culturally integrated patterns of human behavior defined by a group” (King, Sims, & Osher).

Cultural competence is defined by Isaacs and Benjamin (1989) as “a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enables that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in

cross cultural situations.” King et al. defines cultural competence based on their interpretation of the words *culture* and *competence*, respectively, while Isaacs et al. interprets cultural competence from the perspective of its social function.

Later, focusing on the operational function of cultural competence, Davis (1997) holds the opinion that cultural competence evolves from first having knowledge of a set of culturally integrated patterns defined by individuals and groups of people and then incorporating and transforming that knowledge appropriately into specific standards, policies, practices, and attitudes in a certain cultural settings, which will be helpful for people to function effectively in a certain cultural setting and thereby leading to the increase of quality of services.

Stan Paz (2008) once pointed out that cultural competence is how well a person function in cross-cultural settings, which put emphasis on the individual capacity of functioning effectively in different cultural context. As a result, this definition of cultural competence enlightens people more on how to be personally cultural competent and then achieve a better outcome.

Though there is no unified definition of culture and cultural competence, these multiple definitions contribute a lot to later finding of cultural competence.

### **English learning and teaching in China**

Great changes of English teaching and learning in China have taken place. “In 1978, the Ministry of Education (MOE) issued the first unified primary and secondary curriculum and the accompanying draft English syllabus; thus English was recognized as an important tool for engaging in economic, commercial, technological and cultural exchange with the rest of the world and hence for facilitating the modernization process” (Hu, 2005: 9). However, English

textbooks for students were full of revolutionary language and political message. The method of Grammar and Translation teaching were widely used.

Later, there were three English syllabuses issued in 1992, 1993 and 1996 (CTMRI, 2001) in which English proficiency was attached great importance (Hu, 2005). “The major goals of secondary ELT were defined as cultivation of communicative competence in English, fostering of learner autonomy and development of various intellectual abilities” (Hu, 2005: 11). The more advanced teaching approach such as Task-based and Communicative Language Teaching were introduced and advocated in China. For most people, English Learning was not linked with political affairs anymore and English proficiency provides many people opportunities and access to be individually successful.

Since the 1990s, English teachers and experts in China have attached more importance to the teaching of English culture. However, the results of previous studies found that culture learning and teaching in China is far from satisfactory. Researchers also indicate that students’ cultural competence fails to develop with their linguistic competence (Wang, 1994; Zhang, 2001; Zhong & Qin, 2001).

The studies are based on the theoretical construct of cultural competence of Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) hold that the following four components should be involved in the construct: social contextual factors, stylistic appropriateness factors, cultural factors, and nonverbal communicative factors. “In communication, these components are implicitly or explicitly presented in verbal or nonverbal behaviors” (Li 2005). The studies use the self-constructed cultural competence test to measure Chinese non-English major freshmen students’ cultural competence and the result is that the subjects’ cultural competence fail to develop with their

linguistic competence (Li 2005). The findings of this research also indicate that more research in China should be done to learn how to make Chinese college students cultural competent.

### **Previous Studies on Cultural Competence**

With the aim of helping people have a clearer and deeper understanding of cultural competence, National Association of Social Workers (NASW) analyzed it from two dimensions: surface structure and deep structure. Surface structure includes using “observable and superficial (though nonetheless important) characteristics of a target people” (p. 9) to remove cultural obstacles. To illustrate in particular what is the observable and superficial features of a target people, NASW took audiovisual materials as examples and pointed out that the surface structure may involve using the familiar and favorite factors of the target people, such as people, places, language, music, food, and clothing. Beside that, surface structure also involves identifying which channels (e.g., media) and settings (e.g., churches, senior centers) are most effective to deliver the needed messages and programs (NASW).

Deep structure focuses on the “socio-demographic and racial/ethnic differences in general as well as how ethnic, cultural, social, environmental and historical factors may influence specific behavior (NASW, p. 9).” Being aware of surface structure will generally increase the effective delivery of target message. Compared to surface structure, which works as a prerequisite for feasibility, deep structure contributes more to the efficiency or impact of a program (NASW).

Paz (2008) pointed out that cultural competence is a developmental process. Both individuals and organizations are at various levels of the cultural competence continuum, which include the following six levels: (1) cultural destructiveness, meaning the tendency to

reject any different culture; (2) cultural incapacity, meaning unable to recognize cultural differences; (3) cultural blindness, meaning the ignoring of difference though accepting it; (4) cultural pre-competence, or the early stage of valuing differences; (5) cultural competence, or a successful system with the function of dealing with different cultures appropriately; and (6) cultural proficiency, or the highest level of the continuum at which the system is expert at functioning effectively in different cultural context (Paz, 2008). This finding help individuals and organizations be more aware of the levels of their cultural competence.

According to research by King et al. and Paz, five essential elements contribute to becoming more culturally competent.

1. Valuing diversity, or the tendency to accept and respect differences (King, Sims, & Osher). It advocates that people should appreciate those who bring new experiences into their lives and applaud them. Due to the different backgrounds, people's customs, thoughts, ways of communication, values, and traditions vary accordingly, which may also affect the choices the individuals make nearly in every aspect (King, Sims, & Osher). King et al. gives an example to show how one's cultural background affects his/her definition of family: in matrilineal societies, a child's maternal uncle plays a central role in raising the kids in stead of the father and father may live in another area, taking little role in caring for his wife's children. Such a phenomenon may be unfamiliar to people from other groups. If a teacher is at the higher level of the cultural competence continuum and knows the importance of valuing difference, he/she may know how to treat the student and his/her family from a matrilineal society properly. From this example, people will find that a school accepting and respecting the cultural difference can maximize its relationship with the child's family (King, Sims, & Osher).

Compared to the differences between cultures, people are more likely to ignore the differences within a group. It's widely believed that people in a certain group share a common culture. However, besides the common historical, geographical and racial factors that people share in a larger group, other factors, such as, gender, geographic locality, and socioeconomic status can be more powerful in shaping a person's cultural experience and attitudes (King, Sims, & Osher). What's more, the modern society provide more chances for people to be exposed to different channels, such as, books, television programs, internets, school, and other activities, which may lead to the facts that people in a same group are becoming more and more diverse (King, Sims, & Osher). Needless to say, recognizing and accepting intra-cultural difference will help people be more culturally competent.

2. Cultural Self-Assessment, or the process which enable people to see how their actions affect people form other cultures and then improve their cultural competence (King, Sims, & Osher). To achieve cultural competence, King et al. suggests that people should try to get rid of the consciousness of taking something for granted and always be aware their own cultural behaviors and thereby modifying them when appropriate.

King et al. also points out that besides individuals, institutions, such as schools, have and embody a culture as well. In this sense, the institutions or organizations should construct a system to serve people from different cultural settings effectively. The key of building a culturally effective system is to develop mechanisms which have the function of providing ongoing feedback and advices for change and differences (King, Sims, & Osher). King et al. introduced a project in Tucson entitled Actualizing Cultural Competence in Educational and Preventative Techniques (ACCEPT), which aims to provides school staff, project staff, and

teachers involved with consultants to help them develop their cultural self-evaluation capabilities by using different techniques such as survey, discussions.

3. Distinctive Tendencies, meaning when different cultures interact, the relationship among them are always dynamic inherent (Stan Paz 2008).

Paz (2008) holds the opinion that a culture has different levels. Besides the surface level of culture which mainly includes folklore, history, food, arts, holidays and so on, there are much deeper levels of culture. For example, people in some eastern countries tend to believe in destiny or fatalism, while many western people believe they can take control of their own life (Paz 2008). Undoubtedly, people's different beliefs will affect their interaction.

To demonstrate how to be conscious of the dynamics inherent when cultures interact, King et al. presents an example of how New Pathway, a program in Wichita, tried to illuminate many family members' negative attitude towards social workers. To achieve positive association regarding social worker, the program staff changed how they interact with families, wearing informal but respectful dress, greeting with culturally appropriated titles to them, using proper body language, social distance and eye contact defined by the family. All these efforts turned out to contribute to build a new and harmonious relationship. This example proves that at one side, when cultures interact, there is a dynamics inherent, at the other side, only when people or organizations are conscious of the dynamics of cultural interactions, can they be more culturally effective.

4. Institutionalization of cultural knowledge, or the integration of cultural knowledge into every level of education (Paz 2008). It's not sufficient to accept and respect diversity consciously. King et al. took a school as example to illustrate how to integrate cultural

knowledge successfully into every level of a school: The staff should be trained to have enough necessary cultural knowledge and use it effectively; Administrators should develop policies to embrace cultural diversity; Administrators also should be able to provide program materials which reflect positive images of all people and be available for use for each group (King, Sims, & Osher). To be more specific, King et al. suggests that educational institutions first should develop cultural competence standards to have the teachers and administrators be well prepared in cultural knowledge and policies. Then these same teachers and administrators should work as professionals to collaborate with families and develop school policies with which the professionals can work out culturally familiar values to improve children's behavior and avoid more expensive interventions (King, Sims, & Osher). When there needs necessary, family and school can use the proper policies and values to develop effective treatment (King, Sims, & Osher). The whole detailed process of integrating cultural affairs into the every facet of a school shows that institutionalized cultural knowledge can strengthen an organization's ability to serve diverse populations (King, Sims, & Osher).

5. Adapt to diversity, or the adaptation of service system to reflect a respect towards diversity among and within cultures. This element especially focuses on changing activities to fit cultural diversities (King, Sims, & Osher) .

Paz (2008) suggests that these elements must be demonstrated in every level of the service delivery system, and most important of all, keep the development of the system ongoing. Paz pointed out that, in New York City, there is an action, initiated in 2003, known as Children First, which has brought about major reform in the system. With the aim of offering deep and ongoing learning to language and culture for the key institutes, The Office of English

Language Learners was called into action to provide professional development (Paz 2008).

Until now, according to the office reports, more than 20,000 participants, including teachers, administrators, school staff and parents are trained through forums, workshops and conferences (Paz 2008).

### **The Relationship between EFL Learning and learners' Cultural Competence**

As an international language, English functions as a worldwide means of communication. However, putting too much emphasis on communication and neglecting culture, EFL learners will undoubtedly make improvements in communicative proficiency but they will lack “cultural resonance” which helps to make the communication “fully meaningful for the native speakers” (Pulveness1995). Consequently, the teaching of English culture should be integrated into teaching English language. In effective foreign language teaching, the target language works as a tool for learning the target culture, and the target culture serves as a source for learning the target language (Pulveness1995). In this sense, the foreign language class room should “offer an ideal arena for developing a critical awareness of cultural diversity (Pulveness1995),” which contributes greatly to a student’s cultural competence.

As to the ideal way of learning a culture of the target language, learners should learn it comparatively and contrastively, the reason is that when foreign language learners are exposed to a new culture, all the “new phenomena can only be understood in the light of learner’s existing cultural experience” (Pulveness1995). Accordingly, English teachers in the EFL context should lead students to learn the target culture knowledge by comparing and contrasting it with their own culture, and thereby improving their cultural competence.

EFL teaching and learning need to “address culture-specific, contextualized usages to be

effective and effective EFL instruction leads to the development of genuine intercultural competence for the learners” (Caroline C. Hwang2006).

## CHAPTER III

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is no unified definition of *cultural competence*. Researchers and experts interpret it from different shades of meaning of it. However, some definitions are widely accepted and used. For example, Isaacs and Benjamin define it as “a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enables that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross cultural situations” (Isaacs & Benjamin 1989).

The definitions of cultural competence contribute to deeper understanding of it. Later, National Association of Social Workers (NASW) analyzed it from two dimensions: surface structure and deep structure, which help individuals and organizations be aware of their levels of cultural competence. Paz (2008) and King et al. put forward five essential elements contribute to becoming more culturally competent. This finding benefits individuals and organizations in helping them know how to improve their cultural competence.

There is no dispute at present that the process of learning a foreign language is also a process of learning a foreign culture. Pulveness (1995) once pointed out, “[I]n learning a foreign language, we are not only gain access to a different way of seeing the world; we are inevitably led to reconsider our own world view and in this sense all culture can be said to be inter-cultural.” Base on this opinion, Pulveness also suggests EFL learners to learn the target culture comparatively and contrastively to improve learners’ cultural competence.

It’s regretful to find that the research of learners’ cultural competence in China lag far behind that in America, though researchers and experts have attached great importance to the

teaching of English culture. The relationship between culture and cultural competence is neglected more or less.

## REFERENCES

- Cele-Murcia, M., Dormyei, Z and Thurrell, S. (1995). Communicative Competence: A pedagogically motivated model with content specification. *Issues in Applied Linguistics*, 6,2.5-35
- CTMRI. (2001). Ershi shiji zhongguo zhongxiaoxue kecheng biao zhun jiaoxue dagang huibian: waiguoyu juan yingyu. *An Anthology of Primary and Secondary English Syllabuses in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Beijing: People's Education Press.
- Davis, K. (1997). *Exploring the intersection between cultural competency and managed behavioral health care policy: Implications for state and county mental health agencies*. Alexandria, VA: National Technical Assistance Center for State Mental Health Planning.
- Hu Guangwei. (2005). English language education in China: Policies, progress, and problems. *Language Policy* (2005) 4:5-24
- Hobel, E. A. & Frost, E. L. (1976). *Culture and Social Anthropology*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Isaacs, M. and Benjamin, M. (1991). *Towards a culturally competent system of care, volume II, programs which utilize culturally competent principles*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Child Development Center, CASSP Technical Assistance Center.
- King, Mark A., Sims, A & Osher D. *Defining Cultural Competence*. [www.cecp.air.org](http://www.cecp.air.org)

- Li Jiajun. (2005). *An integration of culture of the target language in foreign language education—an investigation of social-cultural competence for freshmen of non-English majors*.
- Moran, P. (2004). *Teaching Culture in Practice*. Beijing: Foreign language teaching and Research Press.
- National Association of Social Workers. (2001) *Achieving Cultural Competence: A Guidebook for Providers of Services to Older Americans and Their Families*.
- Pulverness, A. (1995) Cultural studies, British studies and EFL. *Modern English Teacher*, 4.
- Paz, S. (2008). Cultural competency. *School Administrator*, 65(10), 36-38
- Samovar, L. A, et al. (2000). *Communication between cultures*, Beijing: Foreign language Teaching and Research Press.
- Zhong, H., Fan, W. W. & Qin, A. S. (2001). The study of cultural competence to college students of non-English major. *Foreign Language World* (4) 19-23