

# Improving Intercultural Communication Competence through Cultivating Cultural Empathy

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## Abstract

**Intercultural communication competence is a key factor for successful communication between individuals from different cultures. As an indispensable part of intercultural communication competence, cultural empathy has attracted great attention in intercultural communication practice and research field. This paper focuses on the cultivation of cultural empathy, which can be developed by studying various elements of the target culture.**

## Keywords

**Intercultural communication competence; empathy; cultivation approaches.**

## 1. Introduction

Globalization has been an important manifestation of the current era. More and more frequent political, economic and cultural exchanges among countries have been flourishing for decades. Communicators must have a sound knowledge of the target culture as well as flexible thinking mode in intercultural communication. Since each culture is the embodiment of certain values in a particular region or country, some communication barriers inevitably arise in intercultural communication. Strong intercultural communication competence can not only make the communication more smooth and effective by removing communication barriers between individuals with different cultural backgrounds, but also clear up misunderstandings or contradictions and reach consensus between the two sides.

Therefore, intercultural communication competence is the key factor to decide whether intercultural communication is successful or not, and how to develop intercultural communication competence has been an unavoidable topic for foreign language teachers and learners to consider. Unfortunately, scholars do not share opinions about the definitions or constructs of intercultural communication competence. Ruben's (1976) communication theory related to intercultural communication competence involves seven components: displays of respect, interaction postures, orientations to knowledge, empathy, role behaviors, interaction management and tolerance for ambiguity. Gudykunst (1993) thinks knowledge, skills and motivation are essential to define intercultural competence. Chen and Starosta (2000) argues that intercultural communication competence is comprised of cognitive, affective and behavioral ability. Fantini (2006) considers knowledge, attitudes, skills and awareness as the main dimensions of intercultural communication competence. It's easy to see motivation, affective ability, awareness is equivalent to intercultural sensitivity or empathy here. This paper focuses on the discussion and cultivation of cultural empathy.

## 2. The Origin of Empathy

Empathy is derived from an ancient Greek word meaning physical affection or passion. The term was adapted by Hermann Lotze and Robert Vischer to create a German word which was translated by Edward B. Titchener in 1909 into the English word 'empathy' (Gallese, 2003). Empathy definitions encompass a broad range of emotional states, including caring for other people and having a desire to help them, experiencing emotions that match another person's emotions, discerning what another individual is thinking or feeling (Pijnenborg et al., 2012), and making less distinct the differences between the self and the other (Hodges and Klein, 2001). The concept of empathy has expanded from aesthetics to cognitive psychology and intercultural communication.

## 3. The Relationship between Cultural Empathy and Intercultural Communication

People of different ethnicities have formed various lifestyles and character traits for a long time due to different geographical environment and climate characteristics. In the long course of history, people all over the world have formed their own customs and cultures because of the isolation of human society in different regions which led to their different ways of thinking and values. The diversity of different cultures contributes to the richness of the world cultures and provides more possibilities for the sound development of different cultures. Each culture can absorb beneficial elements from other cultures and supplement its own culture. Meanwhile, each culture can realize the advantages and disadvantages of its own culture from the comparison with other cultures. By exchanging ideas and learning from each other, all the cultures make progress. On the other hand, when facing a different culture, people will certainly be influenced by their own thinking orientation, so it is difficult to avoid doing some improper behaviors in the new cultural environment. For example, cheek kissing in public is a very flighty behavior in China and it is easy to arouse the antipathy of others, but it is a way to show amity in many other countries. It can be seen that an improper behavior in one culture is not definitely inappropriate in another culture. Intercultural communication competence involves being fully aware of the social customs of the target culture. Cultural empathy is an very important part of intercultural communication competence.

Cultural empathy generally refers to the two sides of communication who consciously get rid of the shackles of their own culture, willingly change their cultural standpoint, and put themselves in another cultural mode, so as to truly feel and respect the other side's customs, lifestyle, values and so on (Yi, 2014). Hence, in intercultural communication under the multicultural background, cultural empathy bridges the two parties. If one party can actively project their emotions into the context of others, they could arouse the emotional resonance of each other and greatly improve the quality and effect of intercultural communication. No wonder empathy is regarded as a core feature in successful and effective intercultural communication (Gao and Ding, 2012). By using the ability of cultural empathy, it is easier and more effective to remove the communication barriers between communicators.

## 4. Approaches to Improvement of Cultural Empathy

Hodges and Klein (2001) believe "most people manage to pick up empathy skills naturally without the aid of special lessons or designated practice sessions." However, the cultivation of empathy is no easy job, which means that it cannot happen overnight. It is necessary for the individuals to have enough knowledge of other countries' cultures, to accumulate experience in practice, to enhance the flexibility of intercultural communication, and to improve the intercultural skills constantly.

The primary condition for maximizing cultural empathy is to assimilate communicators' cultural values, beliefs, attitudes, thinking, aesthetics, behaviors and other aspects (Chen, 2016). The specific method for people to enhance intercultural communication competence continuously is to learn the target culture and obtain various knowledge through reading foreign books, newspapers and magazines, and experience the target culture by visiting foreign news websites. This learning approach also includes listening to the radios and watching television programs. As long as they pay close attention to the representative media of the target culture steadily, the learners would enrich the knowledge of the politics, economics, society of the target culture. This method can broaden the vision and enhance the cultural understanding and sensitivity of the learners. Furthermore, it is also effective for people to watch foreign classic movies. Cultural differences are often reflected in films and television programs. Through the analysis of the customs, habits, values and the ways of expression that directly reflected in the film, the ability of empathy can be cultivated in a subtle way (Chen, 2016). By understanding the customs of different cultures, the distance between communicators would be effectively shortened.

As is known to all, cultures vary and sometimes contradict each other, but all of them have certain rationality in their cultural system, and each has its own characteristics, and there is no superior or inferior among them. If one party judges the speech and behavior of the other from his or her own values and evaluation standards, it can be called egocentrism, which may prone to verbal and even physical conflicts that lead to failure of communication. Similarly, if a nation only stands in its own cultural perspective, it is ethnocentrism. In order to adapt to the multicultural interaction effectively under the globalization trend, people must eliminate stereotypes and prejudice against other cultures. Instead, they must strive to consciously construct the coordination mechanism between or among cultures in order to stay neither trapped in the limitations of their own culture nor blindly going into the other cultural framework. Only in this way can the individuals deeply understand the significance of the integration and the complementation of different cultures.

## 5. Conclusion

In intercultural communication, people need to constantly remind themselves to be aware of the emotional expressions of others. Since cultural empathy is a mutually beneficial behavior, people can try to take the initiative and be honest with each other. It will help both sides to communicate more smoothly. Therefore, it is necessary to improve foreign language proficiency to arouse cultural empathy consciousness and overcome the culture prejudice of ethnocentrism. With economic globalization and widespread migrations, intercultural communication has become more frequent than ever before. In order to have barrier-free communication, the individuals should deepen the understanding and cognition of cultural differences. Cultural empathy can be seen as a prerequisite for successful intercultural communication; once it is established, intercultural communication competence is improved.

The implications of this study can be summarized as follows: firstly, it helps students to have a better understanding of the significance of foreign language learning. Secondly, it promotes EFL teachers to reflect on current teaching activities. Thirdly, it discusses intercultural empathy training methods and provides EFL teachers with a new perspective when they devise education goal or teaching plan in future foreign language teaching.

Follow-up relevant research can be done on examining students foreign language proficiency and interpreting the relationship between their foreign language proficiency and their intercultural communication competence with cultural empathy as a core.

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