

# Fostering English Learners' Intercultural Competence and Multicultural Awareness in a Foreign Language University in Northeastern China

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## INTRODUCTION

Today, in the era of globalization, it is vital that students in higher education are exposed to opportunities such as international experiences. Companies are targeting foreign markets much more as a result of the saturation of domestic markets. This trend of globalization changed the employee selection procedures as the vast majority of firms are looking for personnel who are at least bilingual, have a university diploma and qualified to do business travel both domestically and abroad (Hugenberg, LaCivita, & Lubanovic, 1996). In 2010 the China State Council published the *State Guidelines for Medium-to-Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan between 2010 and 2020* which proposes the foreign language human resource development strategy will implement overall quality education in China, “to nurture more internationally qualified personnel with international vision who have a good knowledge of international conventions and are capable of participating in international affairs and international competitions” (Ministry of Education, 2013).

It is acknowledged by many scholars that curriculum development in the area of foreign language education is not simply limited to the development of language ability. It also involves the enhancement of intercultural communication competence (ICC). Considering the current situation of foreign language education in a foreign language university in northeastern China and to achieve the anticipated goal of increasing the IC of foreign language learners, this study seeks to provide a model that surpasses the traditional framework of the current bicultural model between native and target cultures in intercultural communication education. This study ran a series of creative intercultural competence development, or ICD courses in Dalian International Studies University and developed multicultural awareness of foreign language learners. The newly created model of intercultural communication education is called “4-D” (four dimension) ICD modules which includes four modules in the course setting, namely, Intercultural Communication Theory Module, Chinese Culture Module, World Cultures Module (involves cultures from different countries) and Comparative Studies of Chinese & Western Cultures Module.

The longitudinal research was implemented for one term in order to meet the demands of College English Curriculum Requirements enacted by China Ministry of Education in 2007. The following study was carried out from the analysis of the current use of ICD courses in China and moved along to the needs analysis, course content design, syllabus design and teaching evaluation.

## Background of ICD Courses in China

Resulting from a needs analysis from strategic leadership approach, ICD curricula began in the United States in the early 1960s; however, they were only imported to China 20 years later in 1980s. The core concepts of the ICD curriculum design in China primarily aimed to improve the IC bicultural competence between the native Chinese culture and a target culture (Gao, 2002; Huang Ying, & Kou Ying, 2010; Pan, 2006). In other words, in a specific department, such as the French department in a foreign language university, will only have an ICD course with the content centered on French culture, for the sole purpose of creating ease of intercultural communication between China and France. While in the English department, the ICD course setting is viewed as “multicultural”, nevertheless, it primarily focuses on the cultural interaction between China and the other homogeneous English speaking countries such as the U.S., U.K., Australia and New Zealand. These cluster countries are considered as one cultural cluster as English-speaking cultures, though there are some differences between each of them.

In our era of economic globalization, this concept of fostering IC through the present bicultural model is apparently not appropriate and not geared toward the social demands in the booming economic development context. Dai Weidong, the Chair of Foreign Language Education Consultants Committee<sup>1</sup> under the Ministry of Education of People’s Republic of China, stated, “In the internationalized context, multicultural and multilingual education is a strategic development trend in foreign language education, and the competition in cultural soft power is becoming increasingly evident” (Dai, 2010). This study purports that the strategic development of ICD courses in China should implement a combination of theories and practices in order to continuously explore new concepts, new strategies in language and culture education and to meet the challenge and demands of continuously-developing foreign language education in the 21st century.

Dai (2009), further extrapolated that:

*Scholars in the foreign language research community generally believe that in the era of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, excellent foreign language majors should be equipped with various capabilities in dealing with foreign affairs in their future workplaces...including intercultural communication competence, mental and critical faculties to foreign cultures, familiarity to different thinking patterns...*

Therefore, whether the universities can cultivate more internationalized foreign language talents with robust theoretical foundations of IC, broad relative knowledge and outstanding IC skills, is the foremost problem bound to be solved in the new round of reform of foreign language education, especially for the higher education sectors in the major foreign language education fields. Therefore, leadership must design strategic goals towards the implementation of these competencies.

Scholars found foreign language learners are deficient of the knowledge of other cultures. He Qixin, a professor from Beijing Foreign Languages Studies University, implemented a survey in the foreign affairs service workplace in China (2001). The results showed that 52% of those surveyed were deficient in the area of understanding the differences between Chinese and foreign cultures. In an investigation with 204 university English major students, Zhang (2003), found a gap existed between linguistic, cultural knowledge and competence. There are also studies that showed the language learners in China have a limited knowledge of Chinese culture (Lu, 1999; Shi & Wang, 2001). Gao Yihong, another professor in China from the same university also claimed that there were limitations in the IC course settings in foreign language teaching in China.

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