Education Quarterly Reviews

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Realizing Learning Effects on University Students from the Training of Intercultural Communication

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Abstract

This study aims at university students including those who study abroad in one of the universities in Taiwan and examines their learning effects arising from the training course of intercultural communication through qualitative research. The results of the study firstly show that both native students and international students respond to the training course of intercultural communication differently. However, it is found that native students and international students are indeed influenced by such a course in various aspects. International students of the study feel the learning effects from the training course in gaining cultural awareness and culture shock, while native students of the study benefit from the same course in developing the ability of reflection on social responsibility and cultural diversity. It is thus concluded that the training course of intercultural communication is beneficial for university students in possessing new thinking patterns which may enable them to develop different kinds of competence to respond to the changing world. It is also suggested that the training course of intercultural communication should not be simply viewed as a general course but rather part of intercultural education which may be integrated into English education to respond to the development of internationalization in higher education of Asian countries.

Keywords: Culture Shock, Cultural Awareness, Intercultural Communication, Intercultural Education

1. Introduction

While many universities are striving for the development of internationalization in higher education by recruiting international students coming from different countries to study abroad in Taiwan, the increasing number of international students has become a symbol of its internationalization in higher education (FICHE, 2023). According to the statistical information, the total of international students in Taiwan's higher education in 2023 is 119, 929 and up to 123, 188 in 2024 (MOE, 2025). More importantly, such information also shows that international students studying abroad in Taiwan's universities commonly come from Southeastern Asian countries such as Vietnam and Indonesia and speak English as a foreign language or a second language (EFL/ESL). Namely, universities in Taiwan tend to recruit international students coming from Southern Asian countries for the concern of internationalization in higher education. However, it is interesting to find that those students are hardly willing to communicate and interact with native students in Taiwan. The daily performance of international

students in Taiwan may emerge in other countries. For instance, studies find that Vietnamese students who study abroad in Japan simply pay attention to their personal interest and professional growth but do not take the necessity to interact with native students on campus for granted (Nhi, 2025). Similarly, native students in Taiwan's universities are commonly passive in communicating and interacting with international students in daily life. Under these circumstances, the participation of international students in universities does not make any sense to native students in Taiwan at all. Indeed, the situation may make people in Asian countries wonder about the feasibility that universities in Taiwan completing the tasks of internationalization in higher education. In addition, there seems to be no channel to make international students communicate and interact with native speakers for specific tasks outside the classroom in daily life. All in all, international students may not actually learn the target culture from native speakers inside or outside the classroom during studying abroad in Taiwan.

For the goal of internationalization in higher education, implementing the training course of intercultural communication is assumed to be a good strategy in the study. Given the training course of intercultural communication could work well, on the one hand, the mutual understandings between native students and international students might be enhanced, On the other hand, it is assumed that offering university students the training course of intercultural communication effectively might help them to adjust the way they usually do in daily life and in turn to change their thinking modes. It is further hypothesized that the change in university students' thinking modes might make them feel the learning effects arising from the training course of intercultural communication by using either Chinese as the target language or English as an international language.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1. The Training as an Essential Task of Higher Education

With the trend toward globalization and internationalization, internationalization in higher education which involves global mobility can be viewed from different perspectives such as commercialism and citizenship (Bamberger & Morris, 2024). Regardless of whether those perspectives are positive to the development of universities, internationalization in higher education has indeed become the goal that many universities across the world try to achieve. However, its related tasks seem to be uneasily completed and call for specific strategies in different aspects. For example, studies show that internationalization in higher education involves the change of the curriculum in which students are able to possess the ability to do global mobility and to cross the boundaries of different cultures (Marinoni & Cardona, 2024), Studies also find that the process of internationalization in higher education consists of the integration of both international education and intercultural education (Knight, 2022). International education refers to both the academic exchanges of scholars and students in transnational contexts (Marshall, 2024) and the sharing of international students' experiences in the target culture (Mendoza et al., 2023). As to intercultural education, it is linked to the curriculum which enables students to face cultural diversity and learn to understand the concept of culture between "the self" and "the others" (Lee, 2024). Indeed, it is necessary for teachers to provide their students with the curriculum and opportunities in which intercultural learning or multicultural exchanges are included (Elias & Mansori, 2024; Patnaik, 2025). In addition, intercultural education may provide university students with intercultural experiences and English-medium instruction (EMI) programs which help to achieve the goal of internationalization in higher education (Avolio & Benzaquen, 2024). In general, it usually takes time for university administrators and teachers to make a change in different aspects for the development of internationalization in higher education.

2.2. The Training as a Vital Role in Intercultural Education

While people across the world are having many opportunities to communicate and interact with one another by adopting English as an international language for different purposes in daily life, intercultural communication has emerged as one of the global phenomena in the global society of the 21st century. The training of intercultural communication is thus viewed as part of intercultural education which involves the learning of cultural diversity by adopting the English language as a shared language inside the classroom. Especially when culture is complex and varies with different countries, studies show that this kind of training may be linked to the teaching of multicultural and multilinguistic knowledge and skills which help students understand the ways to communicate

and interact with people from different countries (Eleman & Saide, 2023). Studies also find that the training of intercultural communication is to enable learners to know how to cope with the change in a new environment and leads to socio-cultural adaptation (Ward et. al, 2020). Corbett (2022) maintains that students may learn to deal with some changes in multicultural negotiation and develop the contextualized knowledge of cultural diversity in the process of intercultural communication. According to Kim (2023), those who receive the training of intercultural communication are taught to possess the critical perspectives on cultural differences and benefit from it in developing a certain level of competence for communication and interaction with people from different cultures by using the English language. Byram (2021) also emphasizes that those who are taught to learn different cultures in the context of intercultural communication may adjust their attitudes toward native speakers and the target culture to be positive and develop intercultural communicative competence from discovering, comparing, and interpreting the differences between one culture and another in the meaning-negotiation process. To this point, intercultural communication as part of intercultural education is important to university students for learning to respond to the changing world in the global society.

2.3. The Training as an Unavoidable Part of English Education

As English is widely adopted as an international language by people across the world for various purposes, it indeed functions in communication and interaction with one another in specific contexts to some extent. Under these circumstances, studies show that intercultural communication may influence second or foreign language acquisition and contribute to the emergence of English as a lingua franca (ELF) among non-native English speakers in the global society (Huang, 2021; Yuwita & Ambarwati, 2023). From the perspective of researchers on English education designed for university students in Asian universities, they may consider it necessary to make English education be not isolated from the training of intercultural communication for enhancing the mutual understanding between native students and international students in different contexts. For example, Risager (2022) emphasizes that English teachers may design special contexts of intercultural communication to help students incorporate global perspectives into their sense of the self and worldviews. While making a change in English education which includes the training of intercultural communication, English teachers also need to recognize EMI programs as one of the components in English education which can be considered as a global phenomenon for enhancing intercultural and academic senses among university students (Boonsuk & Fang, 2023). Mckinley (2024) maintains that EMI programs are usually viewed as a form of intercultural education, which can assist non-native English speakers in bridging the gaps where many native English speakers get involved and improving their English for specific purposes (ESP) in various disciplines. Indeed, university students may learn more about ESP through English education in which both the training of intercultural communication and EMI programs are incorporated. In addition, English education with the training of intercultural communication can be designed to enable students to tolerate cultural diversity and become more open-minded to what should be learnt in different cultural fields (Kremmer & Pinto, 2025). Namely, teachers may train students to become open-minded to others and actively engage in meaningful communication, which can potentially lead to the change of their thinking patterns. Since intercultural communication is part of intercultural education, the change in English education which involves the training of intercultural communication is inevitable but positive to university students in the process of internationalization of higher education. This change may also be a strategy of enhancing the frequency of communication and interaction between native and international students inside the classroom. Regardless of how differently English education is changed, it may play a role in supporting the development of internationalization in higher education in Taiwan.

3. Methodology

3.1. The Design of the Training Course

Different from general communication in which people may just need to listen to what others say and respond to one another, intercultural communication was dynamic process which called for its related strategies. Based on theories and studies, the design related to the training course of intercultural communication in this study was to provide students with the knowledge and skills of intercultural communication in different contexts. The course was arranged to take two hours a week and to last for four-and-half months in one semester. It consisted of two

stages of teaching. The first was the classroom teaching. In addition to giving lectures, the researcher who was also the teacher of the training course designed a simulative context which was to make students get involved in the activities of intercultural communication such as group discussion and role-play inside the classroom during the first stage of teaching. In the second phase of teaching, she designed the other context of communication and interacting with native speakers outside the classroom. The context of the second stage was to allow both native students and international students to undertake the real practice in communicating and interacting with native speakers who were healthy but stayed at a nursing home. The practice of the second stage experienced by university students was very different from what they had learned inside the classroom. Students' performances of the real practice outside the practice were expected to show their critical thinking and communicative strategies in the other context of intercultural communication. Namely, the real practice outside the classroom could let the researcher who was responsible for the training course understood whether students learned that the task of communicating and interacting with native speakers from different generations was not simply to have the conversation with them but rather to share something special in various cultures by using the target language or the English language as the shared language. The assessment of the training course included two parts. One was about students' performances inside and outside the classroom, and the other was related to the learning reports in which students had to write down what they thought about the real practice of communication and interaction with the elderly outside the classroom.

3.2. The Contents of the Training Course

As to the contents of the training course, the researcher as the teacher of the training course firstly explained the concept of cultural diversity which helped students learn the knowledge concerning both the components of culture in general and the characteristics of different cultures. In addition, the case analysis in which the differences and similarities between one culture and another were compared was offered to students through the activity of group discussion and role-play. The other contents of the training course were focused on the usage of nonverbal and verbal messages in the English language and the target language. For instance, body language which included the dimension of deep culture behind the expressions such as gestures and facial expressions was explained. In response to the emergence of ELF in the global society of the 21st century, an introduction to ELF which involved a comparison between inner-circle Englishes and English spoken by non-native speakers might also be included in the contents of the training course to make students understand cultural and linguistic differences. More importantly, the researcher as the teacher of the training course guided students to analyze its related problems and solutions inside the classroom and to do the real practice in communicating and interacting with native speakers from different generations by adopting Chinese as the target language or English as an international language in the other context of the study.

3.3. Research Questions

After finishing the training course of intercultural communication, the researcher started with examining its learning effects on university students taking such a course through focus group interviews. There were three research questions in this study. The three questions of the study were in the following:
1. How do university students enjoy learning the knowledge and skills of intercultural communication from the training course of intercultural communication?
1. How do university students think about the real practice of communicating and interacting with native speakers coming from different generations?
2. What are the learning effects which can be felt by university students from the training course of intercultural communication?

3.4. Information about Participants in the Study

Two groups of participants consisted of those who studied in the department of foreign languages (DFL) of the university in the study. They were in their twenties. Females were more than males. Participants in Group A consisted of five international students coming from the Southeastern Asian countries such as Vietnam and Indonesia, while those in Group B included five native students in Taiwan. These participants attended the study

because they had more opinions about communication and interaction with native speakers in different contexts designed for the training course of intercultural communication and would like to share them with the researcher.

3.5 Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to the number of participants. Among 18 students who took the training course of intercultural communication as an elective course, ten of them would like to attend the study. The other limitation of the study might be associated with whether participants concentrated on the learning of intercultural communication. If participants in two groups did not pay attention to their learning, they could not be really influenced by the course and able to fully express the learning effects caused by the training course.

3.6. Data Collection and Analysis in the Study

The data of quantitative research were collected from the focus group interviews responded by participants in two groups during their break time. As one group of participants in this study came from Southeast Asian countries, they all agreed to speak English as the shared language during the first interview. However, the other group of participants were native students and preferred speaking the target language as the shared language during the second interview. The raw data were taken notes by the researcher who implemented the training course of intercultural communication with the permission of participants. All the raw data of this study were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2023) in which the researcher would code, categorize, and connect the data via the process of comparing different responses collected from the participants of the study.

4. Results and Discussions

In the discussion on whether participants enjoyed learning the knowledge and skills of intercultural communication, it was interesting to find that participants in Group A responded to the question more positively than those in Group B. For example, participants in Group A who studied abroad in the university of the study mostly had positive responses and considered this training course "important", "necessary", "useful", or "essential". Their excerpts indicated that they enjoyed taking the training course of intercultural communication and recognized its importance to them due to the concern for future work and their understanding of cultural diversity:

A2: I think the learning of intercultural communication is important to
    us when we study abroad.
A5: I pay more attention to the learning because I need this kind of knowledge and skills for my future work.
A3: I consider it essential to take this kind of training because I need to communicate and interact with people
    from different countries during studying abroad.
A1: This kind of learning is useful to me for understanding more about
    different cultures.
A4: I hope to learn more about the knowledge and skills of intercultural
    communication due to its usefulness to interacting with people here.

However, participants in Group B tended to view the learning neutrally by simply considering it as a "special", "different", "uneasy" or "challenging" course. The reason might be caused by many activities designed by their teacher inside the classroom. The excerpts meant that regardless of how many characteristics of the training course there were, participants in Group B seemed not to take this kind of training for granted and might not get used to the activities of role-play and group discussion on cultural diversity inside the classroom:

B3: I think the learning is very special because we have different
    activities.
B4: It is not easy for me to learn this course because I am shy to interact
    with others.
B2: I consider the learning a big challenge to me in discussing the topic

of cultural differences.

B5: The role-play activity is very different from what I expect to learn.

B1: This course is special because I need to attend many activities inside
   the classroom.

When participants were asked about the real practices of communicating and interacting with the elderly at a nursing home outside the classroom, it was interesting to find that participants in two groups responded quite positively. For instance, all the participants in Group A appreciated the opportunity to communicate and interact with native speakers from different generations by considering it to be "necessary", "lucky", "enjoyable", "pleasant", or "shocked" , Their excerpts revealed that they had never had the experiences in communicating and interacting with native speakers coming from different generations of the country where they studied abroad in such a specific context and thus felt it uneasy to have the opportunity to learn more about native speakers and the target culture from the course:

A5: It is my pleasure to interact with native speakers from different
   generations here.

A3: I enjoy communicating and interacting with native speakers from different generations and learn more about
   the target culture.

A1: I feel lucky to communicate and interact with those people who are
   old but nice to me.

A2: As I study abroad here, I think it is necessary for me to interact with native speakers of different generations.

A4: I feel shocked at having the opportunity to interact with native speakers coming from different generations in
   the country where I study abroad.

Similar to the responses of participant in Group A, those expressed by participants in Group B were also positive to their learning outside the classroom. For example, they all recognized the opportunity to communicate and interact with native speakers from different generations as a kind of "responsibility", "necessity", "pleasure", "enjoyment" or "task" from his or her heart. The excerpts indicated that these participants in Group B understood the concept of cultural diversity and the necessity of communication and interaction with those from different generations in their own country:

B3: This is the first time for me to interact with the elderly from the real practice of intercultural communication.
   This interaction makes me feel necessary to talk to my grandparents often when I go back to their home.

B5: I think it is our responsibility to interact with the elderly and understand them.

B2: I enjoy communicating and interacting people from different generations. Their curiosity and knowledge are
   beyond my expectation.

B4: It is my pleasure to interact with those from different generations in my culture. I think that's what we should
   do in my own country.

B1: I think it is the task for us to interact with the elderly and take care of them. I would like to donate some of
   my money to the nursing home today.

In terms of what effects participants could feel from the training course of Intercultural communication, most participants in Group A directly had special responses without hesitation. For instance, they responded that they felt "shocked at", "aware of", or "sensitive to" cultural differences due to the training course of intercultural communication. The excerpts might imply that these participants studying abroad in the Asian university of the study tended to feel the learning effects such as culture shock, cultural awareness or intercultural sensitivity from the training course:

A4: I seem to become more sensitive to cultural diversity after learning the course.

A2: In fact, I feel shocked at the differences between my culture and other cultures in Taiwan. Old people and
   young people may have different cultures.

A1: Compared to my personality in the past, I become more aware of other cultures.

A3: I think I make a change in my viewpoints on cultural diversity.

A5: I think I may become more sensitive when I find cultural differences.

Different from the participants in Group A, those in the Group B who were born in the country where they communicated and interacted with people from different generations seemed to learn something that could make them "reflect on the real meaning of culture and "know more about cultural diversity" even in his or her country from the training course. The excerpts meant that their learning effects arising from the training course of intercultural communication might be related to the ability of reflection on cultural diversity and the development of cultural awareness:

B5: I would like to know more about cultural differences even in my own country after learning the knowledge and skills of this course.
B3: I understand cultural differences even though cultures belong to different generations in my own country.
B1: I hope to have a worldview to interact with people in different cultures from learning this course.
B4: The learning of this course helps me with thinking more about cultural differences.
B2: I would like to have more worldviews from learning this course.

5. Implications and Suggestions

The results of the study show that the training course of intercultural communication indeed make effects on either native students or international students in the study. However, it is found that international students seem to recognize the importance of learning the knowledge and skills of intercultural communication more than native students in the study. For example, they tend to consider such knowledge and skills essential and useful to them for the future concern and the need for communication and interaction with people from different countries. It can thus be argued that international students who take the training course of intercultural communication may learn not only to become more motivated in communication and interaction with people from different cultures but also to be more curious about cultural diversity during studying abroad.

Although both native students and international students are found to enjoy communicating and interacting with native speakers from different generations, the results of the study show that the real practice of intercultural communication seems to be more helpful to native students in becoming aware of cultural diversity. Especially when native students are found to consider the real practice in communication and interaction with native speakers coming from different generations as a kind of social responsibility and the task they have to do, it can also be argued that the training course of intercultural communication is indeed part of intercultural education which is useful to native students in contributing what they learn to their society and developing new thinking patterns to respond to the changing world in the global society of the 21st century.

Native students are found to benefit from the training course of intercultural communication in changing their thinking patterns and knowing to reflect on social responsibility and cultural diversity, while international students are found to show culture shock, cultural awareness, and intercultural sensitivity. As those learning effects of the training course on both native students and international students may be linked to their thinking patterns, it is further argued that such a course is beneficial for university students in developing the ability of reflection on cultural diversity and a certain level of competence to respond to the changing world in the 21st century. On this point, the study highlights the notion that the learning effects of the training course may symbolize what can be achieved in intercultural education for the development of internationalization in higher education. In addition, the learning effects arising from the training course of intercultural communication on university students may lead to the mutual understanding between international students and native students and the development of internationalization in higher education in Taiwan.

6. Conclusion

While finding that university students are influenced by the training course of intercultural communication, the results of the study show that the learning effects may vary from one context to another. It is thus concluded that offering the training course of intercultural communication to university students is indeed the unavoidable task

that leads to the development of internationalization in higher education. Especially when international students studying abroad in Taiwan can be found to feel the learning effects from such a course in gaining cultural awareness, culture shock, and intercultural sensitivity, it is also concluded that this kind of training should not be merely viewed as a general course but rather part of intercultural education to enable international students studying abroad in an Asian university to possess the knowledge and skills in intercultural communication. More importantly, the results of the study show that native students are affected by the training course of intercultural communication in developing the ability of reflection on social responsibility and cultural diversity. It is further concluded that such a course makes effects on native students in fostering the change of their thinking patterns such as open-mindedness and cultural awareness within their own country. Regardless of which language is adopted by university students of this study for intercultural communication, it is suggested that educators in Asian universities should consider the task of integrating the training course into English education in which EMI programs are also included as an essential change to support the development of internationalization in higher education.

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