The Impact of Street Interviews on Chinese EFL Undergraduates' Intercultural Communicative Competence

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Abstract: The study adopts Byram's Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) model as the theoretical framework, and structured interviews were conducted to explore the impact of street interviews on the participants' ICC. Analysis results revealed street interviews help students acquire knowledge in intercultural attitudes, intercultural knowledge, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness, aligning with the four components of Byram's ICC model. Meanwhile, they have positive perceptions of street interviews. Therefore, street interviews have a positive effect on the development of participants' ICC.

Keywords: Street interviews; Intercultural Communicative Competence; Byram's ICC model; Undergraduate English majors

1. Introduction

With the development of globalization and internationalization, intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is a fundamental prerequisite in the workplace, and it is also regarded as one of the major skills required for university students [1]. However, the ICC of Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) undergraduates is not as good as expected [2]. Among the previous studies, most explored the relationships between ICC and other variables, such as Ghasemi and Ahmadian [3], Nadeem *et al.* [4], and Novikova *et al.* [5]; some explored effective interventions to improve learners' ICC, such as Nevado-Llopis and Sierra-Huedo [1] and Stambouli and Sarnou [6]. However, there are few qualitative studies on the impact of street interviews on ICC development. Therefore, the present study is a qualitative research exploring the impact of street interviews on Chinese EFL undergraduates' ICC development based on Byram's ICC model [7].

2. Research objectives and research questions

The present study aims to investigate intercultural knowledge that the participants acquired from street interviews and their perception of their experience of street interviews. To fulfill the research objectives, the

study is trying to answer the following two specific research questions:

(1) What intercultural knowledge do participants learn from street interviews?

(2) How do participants perceive their street interview experience?

3. Data collection

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were two EFL Chinese students, labeled as Student A, male, and Student B, female. They were randomly selected from a class of third-year EFL undergraduates who had completed the course Intercultural Communication, and had participated in street interviews. With the students' consent, face-to-face structured interviews were conducted individually. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes, and was recorded. After the interviews, the recordings were transcribed verbatim into text, and the transcripts were verified and confirmed by the interviewees.

3.2. Coding

The transcripts were read multiple times by the researcher to get familiar with the interview data, and then were coded line by line. Assisted by NVivo 14, the coding was strictly operated based on the grounded coding process of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, which was put forward by Strauss and Corbin [8]. Open coding, known as the first-level coding, was to extract meaningful expressions from the data, and then refine them into initial themes. 39 initial themes were generated at this level. Axial coding, also known as second-level coding, was to explore the correlations among the initial themes. In this study, the initial themes were classified into 11 main categories or sub-themes, namely, open-mindedness, tolerance, attitude to working overtime, power distance index (PDI), inclusiveness, courtesy, challenges, collaboration, critical thinking, benefits, and limitations. In the selective coding, the third-level coding, 4 core categories or themes were summarized according to Byram's ICC model, including intercultural attitudes, knowledge, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. **Table 1** shows the themes of 3 coding levels. The coding and the generation of themes were verified by other researchers in this research field to ensure reliability.

Table 1. Themes of coding

Theme	No. of reference	Sub-theme	No. of reference	Initial theme
Intercultural attitudes	5	Open-mindedness	3	Different perceptions; Different responses; Sharing views
		Tolerance	2	Embracing diversities; No stereotyping
Knowledge	8	Attitude to working overtime	6	Accepting working overtime; Checking the reasonability; Declining working overtime; Separating work and personal life
		PDI	2	Deeper understanding; Verifying PDI
Skills of discovery and interaction	20	Inclusiveness	3	Listening to others; No stereotyping; Open-mindedness
		Courtesy	11	Explaining; Goodwill; Gratitude; Kind and polite; Mutual respect; No offense; No pushing; Respectful; Sincerely and politely inquiring; Smiling
		Challenges	3	Communication barrier; Finding interviewees; Setting interview questions
		Collaboration	3	Discussing; Seeking help from friends; Speaking slowly
Critical cultural awareness	6	Critical thinking	3	Understanding other's and my own cultures; Viewing dialectically
		Benefits	2	First-person experience; Practicing English
		Limitations	1	Limiting information

4. Data analysis and discussion

In this section, the four themes, namely, intercultural attitudes, knowledge, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness are analysed and discussed based on Byram's ICC model to answer the research questions.

4.1. Data analysis
4.1.1. Intercultural attitudes

According to Byram, intercultural attitudes mean "showing curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own culture" [7]. In this study, intercultural attitudes include 2 sub-themes, namely, open-mindedness and tolerance, and 5 coding references, accounting 12.8%.

Based on their street interview experience, the participants realized that people should keep an appropriate attitude when facing different cultural situations and communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds. Student A reported that mutual respect, no stereotyping and sharing views are some appropriate attitudes in intercultural communication. Student A's statement shows a good piece of evidence: "We should respect each other, stop stereotyping other people and things, and share our views and ideas with each other." Student B thought embracing cultural diversities is a proper attitude when facing cultural differences, and this is evident from her saying: "We need to embrace diverse cultures and welcome different voices." Therefore, in the present study, the participants suggested that when communicating with people with different cultural backgrounds, people should be open-minded and tolerant. Specifically, people should mutually respect and share views with each other, stop stereotyping, and embrace cultural diversities. From the above, we can see that the students show openness and readiness to different cultures taping intercultural attitudes from Byram's ICC model.

4.1.2. Knowledge

According to Byram, knowledge refers to "the acquiring information about social groups and their products and practices in learners' country and in one's interlocutor's country, and societal and individual interaction" [7]. Attitude to working overtime and PDI are the 2 sub-themes of knowledge which includes 8 coding references, accounting 20.5%.

In the study, the participants reported that by personally interviewing people from different cultural backgrounds, they had a clear interpretation of the knowledge they had learned in Intercultural Communication classes, as Student A stated "I have a deeper understanding of this topic (power distance)." They also observed that their interviewees had different attitudes to working overtime. For example, Student B reported that one of her interviewees led a different lifestyle in which she could clearly separate her work from personal life, which is evident from the following excerpt: "The interviewee (a Canadian) differentiates clearly between their work time and personal time." Student A found that two interviewees hold different attitudes to the same issues, and interestingly, the Canadian's attitude to working overtime is different from what he had ever thought. A piece of evidence can be seen in Student A's interview extract:

"When answering the question 'whether you are willing to work overtime with pay,' one of the Filipinos chose to accept it. I had thought Canadians would directly reject it regardless of whether they were paid or not. Because as far as I learned, Westerners emphasize their privacy and they do not want to be disturbed in their private time. But the Canadian respondent said 'to check if it's reasonable.'"

The analysis above indicates that this theme aligns with the second component of Byram's ICC model, that is, knowledge. therefore, the participants acquired certain cultural information of some social groups from street interviews.

4.1.3. Skills of discovery and interaction

Skills of discovery and interaction refers to the "ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes, and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction" [8]. In this study, skills of discovery and interaction includes 4 sub-themes, namely, challenges, collaboration, courtesy, and inclusiveness, and 20 coding references are included, accounting 51.3%.

When conducting street interviews, the participants encountered some challenges, and their handling the challenges displays their skills of discovery and interaction. Firstly, when preparing for the street interviews, Student B and her team members found that designing the interview questions was a difficult task. She said "The setting of interview questions is also a relatively complicated matter." Their corresponding solution was cooperation, that is, she and her group members discussed the interview questions and they made decision after 3 rounds of discussion. As she reported, "We spent a lot of time on discussing the interview questions. After 3 discussions, the questions setting was finally completed." The second problem was that it was difficult for them to find foreigner interviewees. Student B stated that "Da Dong Hai (the location) had already been covered by other classmates. Therefore, foreigners living in Da Dong Hai may feel bored and have some resistance to this kind of interview, and are unwilling to cooperate." The solution they came out was to seek help from friends, "We sought help from friends to find foreigners who were willing to accept our interviews." The third problem was the communication barriers, which were caused by language, psychological factors, and the like. As Student A stated, "It is challenging to talk freely with people in English. In the situation of face-to-face communication, I was a little nervous. I could not give an immediate response or guide the interviewee." He then spoke slowly and tried to be polite to make himself understood. As Student A stated, "But what I can do was just speaking slowly in order to calm myself down, and make myself understood. The other way is to keep smiling and treat people politely, and try not to offend the interviewees." He also reminded that "when dealing with people from different cultural backgrounds, one should not stereotype, but should face other people and things with an open mind, and learn to listen to the views of others." To put it another way, inclusiveness is one of the skills of discovery and interaction in ICC.

From the street interview experience, the participants gave some suggestions on intercultural communication. They said that courtesy is essential in intercultural communication settings, so people should be respectful, polite, kind to others, show gratitude to others, and do not push others when interacting with them. Two examples confirming this stance are given by the participants, which indicates that courtesy is a fundamental strategy in intercultural communication. The two pieces of evidence from the interview data are as follows:

Student A said "I think no matter what cultural background it is, we should be respectful. Only on the basis of mutual respect can we have in-depth exchanges and burst out more creative ideas."

Students B said "Etiquette is essential in social interactions. We should smile, be kind, clearly state our purpose, and sincerely and politely inquire whether the persons are willing to be interviewed. If they decline, it is important not to push further."

The above demonstrates the participants' skills in dealing with intercultural communication, indicating that skills of discovery and interaction from Byram's ICC model has been triggered.

4.1.4. Critical cultural awareness

As Byram asserted, critical cultural awareness was "an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices, and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" [8]. In this study, participants' critical cultural awareness was mostly reflected in their comments on their street interview experience.

In this study, the comments include the benefits and the limitations of street interviews as a method to improve students' ICC. As Student A stated "I think to a certain extent, the street interviews are helpful in improving my intercultural communicative competence," and Student B said "It is worth doing, as it has a significant impact on our understanding of the intercultural phenomena." The street interviews were helpful in that it provided first-person experience, practice their English, reminded them to be dialectical to different cultures, etc. This is evident from Student A's saying, "practice my English in real life" and "We should view different cultures dialectically, and it also made me think more about intercultural communications." From the experience of street interviews, the participants were able to critically think about other's and their own cultures, as Student B stated "The street interviews help us understand their culture as well as our own culture".

On the other hand, the participants also pointed out the limitations of street interviews. Student A said "There might be some limitations on the information." He thought that the similar career background of the interviewees and the short period of the street interviews might be the reasons for the limitation of the street interviews. Their concern of the limitations indicates that they could view the street interview experience dialectically and critically.

The sub-themes of critical thinking, benefits and limitation reflect the participants' critical awareness of different cultures and their experience as well. That means the component of critical cultural awareness from Byram's ICC model was activated by their street interview experience.

4.2. Discussion

4.2.1. Question 1: What intercultural knowledge do participants learn from street interviews?

The results from the data analysis indicate that the study follows four of the components of Byram's ICC model, namely, skills of discovery and interaction, knowledge, critical cultural awareness, and intercultural attitudes. In other words, the students acquired information of these four components of intercultural communicative competence from the street interviews and street interviews attribute a positive impact on the participants' ICC development. The hierarchy of the impact of street interviews on the participants' ICC development can be seen from the coding, that is, the theme of skills of discovery and interaction ranks first, followed by knowledge and critical cultural awareness, and intercultural attitudes comes at the last. It can be inferred that in conducting street interviews, students paid great attention to intercultural practice in real-time communication and interaction, and they gained some enlightenment from their personal experience of interacting with different people of different cultural backgrounds. **Figure 1** shows the hierarchical comparison of themes by number of items coded.
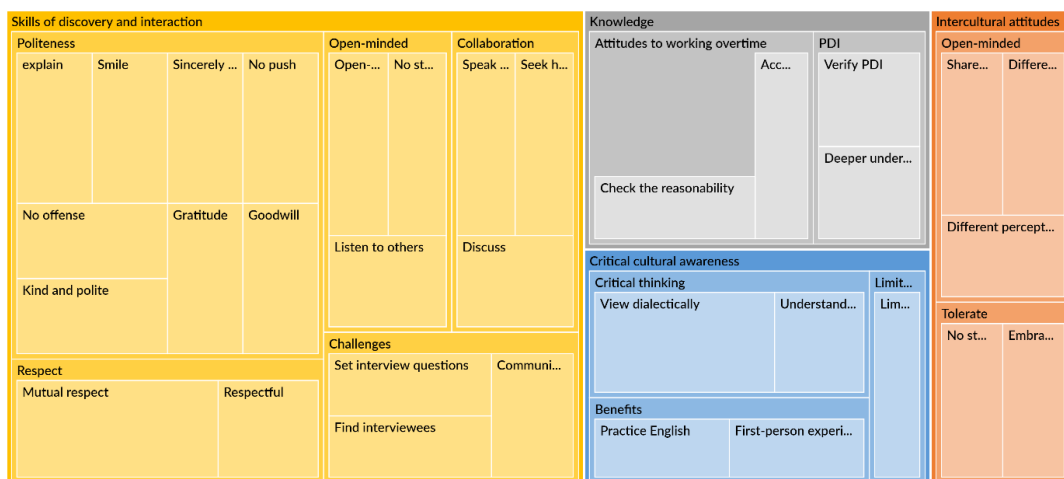

Figure 1. Hierarchical comparison by number of items coded

4.2.2. Question 2: How do participants perceive their street interview experience?

In this study, the last interview question aimed to gather information about students' perception of their street interview experience. From the interview data, it can be seen that the students benefited a lot from the street interviews, including the intercultural aspect and the language learning. For example, as Student A stated "I think to a certain extent, the street interviews are helpful in improving my intercultural communicative competence," and Student B said "I believe this is something worth doing, as it has a significant impact on our understanding of the intercultural phenomena in society." Meanwhile, they also noticed the limitations of the street interviews. Therefore, it can be concluded that the participants mostly perceive their street interview experience positively.

As Byram *et al.* stated, a learner who is of good ICC must realize that a culture is elusive, multilayered, and multifaceted [9]. Thus, learners should be fully exposed to all aspects of a foreign culture and learn about different viewpoints and underrepresented problems before making a decision on an intercultural phenomenon [10]. Street interviews engage students in diverse cultural settings where they could observe and acquire different cultures and cultural practices, raise their curiosity, openness, and readiness, and prompt their critical awareness. Therefore, street interviews could effectively improve the participants' ICC.

The results of the present study can be compared with some of the previous studies indicating a positive impact on learners' ICC development by interventions of creating intercultural settings for students to interact with people of different cultures. For example, Nevado-Llopis and Sierra-Huedo studied the impact of specific courses and studying abroad on students' ICC development, and they found that the interventions effectively improve students' intercultural competence [1]. Similarly, Tecedor and Vasseur examined the ICC development by the intervention of videoconferencing conversations between second language learners and native speakers, and the findings provided enlightenment in accurately identifying the development process of learners' intercultural competence and planning proper training interventions [11].

5. Conclusion

This study intends to investigate the knowledge that the participants acquired from the street interviews and their perception on this experience. The result follows Byram's ICC model, namely, the street interviews provided some intercultural information to the participants, and the participants' perceptions of the street interview experience was positive. Therefore, street interviews positively impact the participants' ICC development. The results of the present study have some implications for teachers and learners in promoting ICC. The present study showed that street interviews are useful in promoting both learners' intercultural knowledge and their English language proficiency, and it also aroused the participants' interest. Moreover, the instructors should give learners more training on how to conduct street interviews to help them obtain sufficient information that they need and to avoid some unexpected situations.

There are some limitations in this study. Firstly, the component and skills of interpreting and relating of Byram's ICC model is not included in the present study. Another limitation is that the sample size is small which leads to limited interview data.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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