

Chinese University EFL Teachers' Beliefs Regarding Cultivating Intercultural Communicative Competence via Task-based Language Teaching

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Abstract

Intercultural communicative education and task-based language teaching (TBLT) are regarded as two distinct categories of pedagogical instructions within the field of applied linguistics, and teaching about culture is often perceived as the transmission of cultural facts in the foreign language classroom. This paper investigates the feasibility of addressing the cultural dimension via TBLT. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with five university EFL teachers teaching *Communicative English*, this study found evidence of the feasibility of realizing learners' communicative automaticity and cultural automaticity via the implementation of TBLT. Further implications are provided on practice-oriented teacher education for teachers to optimally raise the potential of TBLT in addressing the cultural dimension.

1. Introduction

In line with globalization and technological development, English as a Lingua Franca (Baker, 2011) has gained momentum, which focuses on the global role of English and the variety of Englishes. This shift in the nature of English as an international language has heightened the need for cultivating learners' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) along with their linguistic competence and led to new demands on teachers to integrate the intercultural dimensions to students' language acquisition. ICC refers to the ability to understand relationships between different cultures and to engage in effective and appropriate interaction with people with cultural and linguistic diversity (Byram, 1997). It also advocates to take an intercultural stance "to critically or analytically understand that one's own and other cultures' perspective is culturally determined rather than natural" (Byram, 1997, p.10). English language teachers, however, face challenges and complexity when addressing culture in the communicative language teaching (Baker & Fang, 2021; Newton, 2016), especially with the profound changes in the conceptualization and linguistic landscape of English. Existing research on ICC in foreign language teaching has identified the contextual factors as well as language teachers' personal factors associated with these challenges. The contextual factors include curriculum materials (e.g., Sercu, 2010), assessment standards of ICC in the FL education (e.g., Gu, 2015), institutional support (O'Neill & Viljoen, 2021), and so on. Studies have also indicated that various personal factors including previous learning experience (Kidwell, 2021) and teachers' identity in teaching ICC (Gong et al., 2021) were linked with complexity in teaching ICC. However, scant attention has been paid to the compatibility and interaction between addressing learners' ICC and the prevalent language teaching pedagogy, such as task-based language teaching (TBLT) which is advocated by the Chinese Ministry of Education as curriculum innovation and is "being promoted in many countries around the globe as a potentially very powerful language pedagogy" (Van den Branden et., 2009, P.1). Examining the feasibility of addressing ICC in the authentic TBLT classroom could help teachers address the language-culture nexus and enhance students' communicative and cultural automaticity. To

address this need, this study aims to explore Chinese EFL teachers' beliefs regarding teaching about culture in the TBLT classroom in the tertiary education.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical perspectives of the language and culture nexus

There is a consensus among scholars that teaching culture is a significant part of language teaching (e.g., Byram & Wagner, 2018; Newton, 2016). A common yet misguided understanding about teaching culture regards culture as "the information about a country or countries where the target language is spoken" (Byram & Wagner, 2018, p.142). This understanding of culture at the nation-state level and setting the target cultures of mainstream English speaking countries as models tend to be over simplistic and problematic, for it exaggerates the us-them binary and views culture as a fixed and static entity (Kidwell, 2021). According to Billig's (1995) interpretation of the term banal nationalism, though the idea of national culture belongs to the reductionist view, it remains part of people's subconscious understanding. Another misconception in traditional approaches to teaching about culture regards the transmission of cultural knowledge as the end product of teaching (Kidwell, 2021). This behaviorist approach of cultural learning overlooks the dialogic and dynamic nature of culture (Baker, 2011) and exaggerates the role of teacher in disseminating cultural knowledge.

Asserting that the development of intercultural communicative competence requires more than factual knowledge, Bryam (1997) developed a model for ICC in Foreign language education in terms of the multi-dimensions of *savoirs* (knowledges). Within Bryam's model, while explicit knowledge of a culture and cultural practices (*savoir apprendre*) plays an important role, it needs to be integrated with the development of students' skills and attitudes and realized in real-time interactions (*savoir faire*). In addition, learners are required to step outside their own values, beliefs, and behaviors and recognize the differences between their own culture and the target culture. *Savoir etre* refers to learners' willingness to interpret and communicate meaning through the lens of culture and creates space for the "us-others reciprocity" described by East (2008). Beyond these, *savoir s'engager* (knowing how to engage) encourages learners to take a critical cultural awareness and critically evaluate learners' own perspectives and practices and those of others. By doing this, students achieve greater language proficiency and the knowledge, attitudes, and competence of the intercultural speaker (Byram & Wagner, 2018). Similar to the notion of *savoir s'engager* (knowing how to engage) and the sphere of exploration is the concept of "symbolic competence" put forward by Kramsch (2011).

2.2. TBLT and ICC

Since 1970s, there has been an increasing amount of literature on the usefulness of pedagogic tasks to foster learners' language acquisition (see, e.g., Carless, 2007; East, 2016; Nunan, 2004; Zhu, 2020). These studies extend our knowledge of the rationale of TBLT and how the implementation of TBLT could facilitate learners' language production, interaction, negotiation of meaning, and ultimately, second language acquisition. However, to date the contribution of TBLT to the enhancement of learners' intercultural competence remains under-researched in the instructed second language context (East, 2012; Müller-Hartmann & Schocker, 2017). In their analysis of the challenges for adopting TBLT in the Asian context, Adam and Newton (2009) claimed that intercultural communicative education and task-based teaching are "two quite distinct fields of research and scholarship within the field of applied linguistics" (P.13). This might explain the intrinsic nature of challenges EFL teachers face when addressing the intercultural competence in FL classrooms where the innovative TBLT as a realization of CLT was applied. More recently, a limited number of attempts have been made to investigate the possibility of addressing the communicative and cultural competence simultaneously with

tasks. Drawing on the task-based activities and an innovative usage of virtual space as learning platform, Juan-Garau and Jacob (2015) claimed that the implementation of task-based teaching could enhance learners' transcultural competence and their skills to interact effectively in the intercultural sphere and relate to otherness. Similarly, telecollaboration was identified as a valuable venue to enhance learners' ICC through the learners' critical analysis and discussion of cultural aspects of the language (Bohinski & Leventhal, 2015; Guth & Helm, 2012). East (2012) drew an extensive range of interviews to analyze New Zealand teachers' perspectives and practices in integrating culture into TBLT. The author pointed out that for the teachers, cultural knowledge mainly focused on facts and linguistic appropriateness, and only incidentally on learners' competence to interpret meanings and critically evaluate their own and other cultures. In the same vein, East (2012) claimed that there was little evidence in the teachers' practices to make full potential of tasks for students' intercultural exploration. The findings of this study suggested that there was room for the advocate of tasks being both interculturally and linguistically reflective if teachers received more support and practice-oriented training. Though limited, there seems to be some evidence to indicate the compatibility between ICC and TBLT. However, more work needs to be done to examine the possibility of integrating ICC in the actual implementation of TBLT to cope with the tensions between linguistic and intercultural objectives.

2.3. Teachers' beliefs in teaching ICC

According to Borg (2003), teachers' beliefs include teachers' stated thinking, personal theories, and pedagogical maxims that play a powerful role in shaping teachers' instructional behaviours. Teachers make pedagogical choices with reference to practically-oriented and context-sensitive systems of thoughts and beliefs (Borg, 2003). Cognition in turn is shaped by a variety of factors, including the experiences teachers accumulate and other personal and contextual factors (Rubie-Davies et al., 2012). Research on teachers' beliefs about culture in the language classroom has pointed out that many teachers showed greater attention to linguistic elements than cultural objectives (East, 2012; Kidwell, 2021). In addition, most teachers conformed to the more traditional approaches to teaching about culture and focused on facts about the target culture (Byram & Wagner, 2018; Munandar & Newton, 2021). Studies conducted in China have showed similar results. In an investigation into Chinese EFL teachers' perception and practice regarding ICC in FL education, Gu (2015) found that Chinese university EFL teachers held inadequate perceptions of the components and assessment of ICC and mainly focused on the cultural facts and values of mainstream English-speaking countries, facilitating the evaluation of shallow learning. Moreover, the survey results suggested that there were internal contradictions between teachers' beliefs and practices regarding ICC and teachers prioritized the knowledge dimension over the attitude and awareness dimensions when undertaking the assessment. The author attributed the teachers' deficiencies in ICC assessment to teachers' inadequate preparation, lack of materials for curriculum development, and lack of institutional support. A recent study by Gong et al., (2018) involving Chinese language teachers' knowledge and objectives in teaching ICC reported that teachers had conceptual confusion in terms of cultural knowledge which was affected by contextual factors. Detailed examination of the survey showed that teachers' pedagogical objectives in teaching about ICC were more skill oriented. These findings enhance our understanding of the teachers' beliefs and practices regarding the interrelationship between language and culture and provide implications for intercultural language teaching in China. However, insufficient attention has been paid to Chinese EFL teachers' beliefs in integrating ICC within the innovative task-based curriculum in the context of tertiary education. Since the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE, 2020) have advocated the implementation of TBLT and development of students' ICC to help them become culturally responsive citizens in the multilingual and multicultural societies, more work is needed to investigate the potential synergies between TBLT and development of ICC in the real

classroom. Integrating the cultural strand to TBLT could help realize language learners' communicative and cultural automaticity and provide a conceptual framework for ICC within which tasks have a significant role to play. To address the gap, this study aims to answer the following two questions:

1. What beliefs do Chinese university EFL teachers hold regarding teaching about intercultural communication in the FL classroom?
2. How might the university EFL teachers address learners' ICC through TBLT?

3. Methodology

3.1. Context and Participants

The recent curriculum innovation in the Chinese EFL tertiary education provides a good opportunity to examine the learners' ICC in the context of TBLT. To make sure that university students achieve communicative automaticity, the National English Curriculum Standard in 2001 was promulgated by the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE, 2001), which advocated the student-centered, experiential TBLT approach. In line with the language requirements in the new era, MoE (2007, 2020) revised the curriculum standard and incorporated the key element of intercultural communication in order to prepare students for successful communication in intercultural interactions. The study reported here examined the teachers' understandings of teaching about intercultural communication against the backdrop of the introduction of the new curriculum standard. Five Chinese university EFL teachers took part in this qualitative study. They were all following the new curriculum standard described earlier, teaching the course of Communicative English targeting at the non-English major freshmen students. All the five teachers taught in the same university in Hangzhou, capital of Zhejiang Province. Based on Borg's (2003) observation that teacher education, previous learning experience, and instructional practices play a powerful role in shaping teacher cognition, the maximum variation sampling strategy was adopted to examine whether the patterns of beliefs regarding teaching about ICC hold for teachers with multiple educational backgrounds and teaching experiences. Table 1 provides the background information of the teachers, and each teacher was given a pseudonym to protect their anonymity.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Qualifications	Teaching Experience (years)	Overseas Studying and Working Experience (years)
Iris	female	41	Phd	16	1
Mark	Male	36	Phd	4	4
Grace	female	38	Master	11	2
Kelly	female	41	Phd	15	15
Chen	female	36	Master	3	1

3.2. Data collection and analysis

Face to face semi-structured interviews were conducted to have an in-depth inquiry about teachers' beliefs about teaching ICC in the context of implementation of the new English standard. Interviews with each teacher lasted about approximately an hour. The interviews explored teachers' knowledge and understanding of the concept and principles of ICC together with teachers' practices in cultivating learners' ICC in the TBTL classroom. All the interview data were audially recorded and transcribed for comparison and contrast. Thematic analysis, which is suitable for the interpretive paradigm of this study and "a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning across a data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.57) was adopted as the method of data analysis. The phases of thematic

analysis include familiarizing with data, generating codes, theme development, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The procedure of thematic analysis is not linear but a reiterative and recursive one, moving constantly between different phases until refinement and depth was achieved and themes were developed that could answer the research questions. In addition, strategical approaches such as prolonged engagement with data, researcher triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking were adopted to ensure trustworthiness of thematic analysis.

4. Findings

4.1. Culture as artefact

In response to the question “what’s your understanding of teaching about culture and intercultural competence in the FL classroom?”, two of the respondents regarded culture as artefact and factual knowledge, even though they acknowledged that the dimensions of intercultural competence called for more than that. Chen, for example, noted that teaching culture should be embedded in teaching the language. Nevertheless, she attached importance to teaching culture as informational facts about a country or region, especially the cultural knowledge present in the textbooks.

I think the interaction rituals of the target country, the good manners and etiquette of their daily life, their celebrations and festivals should be included in the teaching activities because they constitute meaningful topics for students to discuss in their oral work. Learning about the foreign culture can remind one of their native culture.

Chen’s understanding of culture and intercultural competence was fact-driven and confined to the nation-state level, whereby the target culture was assessed on the information basis.

Similarly, though Grace recognized the dynamic nature of language and culture, and the pivotal role language education plays in the development of students’ ICC theoretically, in practice she treated teaching culture as a discrete element and were challenged with contextual constraints when cultivating students’ ICC in class:

A vast majority of students at the freshman level have low linguistic proficiency. Their inaccuracy in language use and comprehension has constrained to a large extent their understanding of the culture of the target country, let alone engage in the intercultural communication in the authentic situation.

For both Chen and Grace, treating culture as factual knowledge indicated that culture was a discrete element apart from the language education and that linguistic proficiency was a prerequisite for the development of intercultural competence. Interpreted in this sense, culture was inextricably treated as an addendum to language learning.

The other four teachers were taking a stronger intercultural stance in their spoken communication class and believed that merely addressing culture as artefact was not enough. For example, Mark noted:

In the language classroom, we should recognize the diversity of learners’ previous learning experience, home languages and practices, and their cultural identity. Teachers’ instructions should be targeted at engagement with the diversity of resources, whether from textbooks or from daily life, that are likely to improve students’ motivation to learn as well as mediate their achievement. Remembering the cultural facts requires lower-thinking abilities and just remembering is not enough...to experience is more important

Mark went on to provide some examples of tasks which integrated culture with language in his classroom, for example, in the chapter studying abroad, he would arrange interview tasks such as *university professors have interviews with candidates*, which provided opportunities for students’ intercultural reflection. However, Mark also believed that teachers should give

priority to developing students' communicative competence, since low linguistic proficiency would lead to over simplification of the task-in-action, and constrain the development of students' meta-pragmatic awareness and sociolinguistic competence, which he believed were intrinsically linked to students' ICC.

4.2. Integration of language and culture and moving towards interculturality

Engagement with the new curriculum standard was enabling some teachers to focus on the interplay between language and culture as well as add a culturally reflexive component in their language teaching. Iris, for example, set the explicit pedagogical objective of achieving intercultural communicative competence along with linguistic achievements in her Communicative English class and intended to take intercultural speaker norms instead of native-speaker norms as models for her students. She suggested that:

Cultural practices are embedded within language, and the negotiation of meaning during the TBLT cycle is not only about choosing grammatically correct language but selecting appropriate language in use. Students' pragmatic competence is a key element of communicative competence.

Iris's highlighting the appropriate choice of language echoed Mark's view of the importance of learner's pragmatic awareness and sociolinguistic competence. Both believed that competence in culture need to replace facts about culture and learners need to learn how to exchange through language their cultural stances and beliefs. In addition, Iris adopted intercultural classroom practices and provided opportunities for learners to explore and reflect on their experiences, beliefs, and thought patterns. These include teaching English interculturally via the appropriate establishment of meaning and critical enquiry and facilitating the learners transfer their learning into practice and act across cultural boundaries. For example, Iris noted : Learning another language is also about understanding other people, respecting other people, and being tolerant of other people. I would always select up-dated news video from YouTube and ask my students to exchange their understanding of the framing of the news. For example, one piece of news video depicts the American army's salute and attitude to the American president, which is vastly different from what Chinese army do. I ask my students to analyze it from the cultural value of individualism and collectivism, and share with them that there's no right or wrong behaviour...you just need to place it in the macro sociocultural context...

Iris's perceptions included moving learners to a third place and adopting both an insider's view and an outsider's view. In addition, Iris's encouragement of students to have a critical comparison of the two cultures is important for realizing *savoir engager* (Byram, 1997) and the identity of intercultural speaker (Kramersch, 2011). According to Kramersch (2011), learners' symbolic mentality that highlights learners' subjectivity and the history of experience represents the essential core of being an intercultural speaker. Iris's belief is in line with the principles of Intercultural Communicative Language Teaching (ICLT) which reflects on the transnational and transcultural backgrounds as well as the interplay among language, culture, sociocultural context, and power (Baker, 2011).

Kelly expressed a similar perception. She suggested that communicative language teaching should serve as a catalyst for learner's engagement in the intercultural communication and establish their identity of intercultural citizens. Asserting her belief that selecting situationally appropriate language should combine metalinguistic knowledge, cultural awareness, and values simultaneously, she went on to note that: "Becoming a successful communicator requires that you have the understanding, tolerance, and respect for different cultures, and coexist with people from different cultural and linguistic background." Kelly's view reflected her understanding of the dynamic nature of culture and language and her perception of culture as the lens with which students evaluate, interpret, and reflect on meaning.

4.3. Intercultural reflection and relating to otherness

It is evident that the interpretation of interculturality at a more advanced level beyond “culture as facts and social practices” and “culture is the appropriate use of language” is affecting both Iris and Kelly. While acknowledging the cultural difference at the nation-state level, both noted that intercultural communication should be cultivated without essentialism and multiple factors such as gender, age, and social economic could impact the interpersonal communication. Iris noted that:

We as teachers should promote a more enriched understanding of language teaching, and help students reflect on the dynamic processes of communication they have engaged in different contexts. For example, when I ask my students to deliver a presentation at the beginning of class, I require them to search for the symbol of culture in China and find another symbol of culture that is comparable in any other country. For the discrete cultural knowledge, everybody can find google or baidu for help, but raising their intercultural awareness is different. Tasks and communicative activities can be used as opportunities for reflection on the complex nature of language and communication.

Kelly held a similar perception:

To make it intercultural, I ask my students to take into consideration different factors like gender and age. Once I ask them to design a project, select the issue they want to explore and conduct a survey to audiences of different age and gender. Majority of my students found it fulfilling and they discovered that age and gender really accounted for different interpretation of the same phenomenon.

For Iris and Kelly, *savoir etre* and *savoir engager* were set as their primary goals in cultivating students' ICC. Drawing on the intercultural reflection, Iris and Kelly aimed to help learners develop intercultural competence and raise intercultural awareness and apply the cultural understanding adaptively during intercultural encounters. In other words, language learning under an intercultural paradigm advocated the learner's identity as an intercultural speaker.

4.4. Intercultural Communicative Competence and tasks

According to Willis and Willis (2007), task is central to the pedagogical principles of TBLT, which requires learners to focus on meaning and has language in actual use as the first and foremost focus. Based on this, there is scope for linguistic competence and intercultural learning via the adoption of tasks. Several teachers have explored ways in which TBLT could be used as vehicles to achieve students' communicative competence as well as intercultural competence.

Iris designed and set up an email exchange task between her students and their pen pals in the target country. Iris observed that through the negotiation of meaning and ongoing interaction, her students had been exploring comparisons and contrast between their home culture and target culture through language in real use. She added that by exchanging social, political, power, and other issues, her students increased the awareness of their own culture values and critically engaged with others.

Mark saw the potential of tasks in the context of virtual learning platform in providing opportunities in negotiating gaps in information and opinion. He designed a series of tasks in the e-platform which focused on doing voluntary services such as receiving the foreign guests, introducing the e-commerce of Hangzhou, introducing the west lake of Hangzhou, where students had online interaction through the computer and could receive dynamic feedback.

Mirroring the notion of post-task phase in the task-based cycle, Kelly suggested that the focus on form in the post task phase could be directed towards the cultural knowledge or the cultural differences in the linguistic structures. Teachers could co-construct the meaning with students from an intercultural perspective and guide students to build intercultural awareness.

Consciousness-raising tasks about the cultural differences and language-culture connectedness will all serve this purpose. In addition, she mentioned the example that she would ask her students to act as volunteer in the international conference and explain the rationale for anti-virus policies of different countries from the cross-cultural perspective. This task allowed learners to go beyond the established meanings, recognize the historical contexts of discourses, and reframe and recontextualize the events.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper investigated college EFL teachers' beliefs in teaching about culture and intercultural communication, and how these beliefs might impact their practices. In answers to the first research question, two of the five teachers' answers echoed the finding that teaching about culture is focused on the transmission of cultural knowledge (Munandar & Newton, 2021) and that teachers showed greater attention to linguistic elements than cultural objectives (East, 2012). The other three teachers were providing opportunities for students to recognize the diversity of their cultural identity and engage with the diversity of cultural resources through language. However, only Iris and Shelly were further in their understanding of cultivating students' *savoir etre* and *savoir engager*. Rather than internalizing new cultural norms, students in their classes were encouraged to adapt to and reflect on unfamiliar cultures and share their cultural values with others (Byram & Wagner, 2018). From an intercultural perspective, these two teachers were guiding the learners to develop cultural skills and awareness as well as reflect on culture in language. According to Iris, the professional training in the field of intercultural communication during her Phd study strengthened the positive influence on her pedagogical maxims and played a powerful role in shaping her instructional behaviours. In the same vein, Kelly's fifteen-year overseas studying and working experience contributed to her deep thinking in the dynamic nature of culture and language. This has implications that in-service practice-oriented teacher education is needed to stimulate teachers to reflect on the fundamental aspects of language-culture nexus, further develop their professional competence in teaching ICC, and optimize the learning potential of tasks in cultivating students' ICC in class.

In response to the second question, this study found evidence that teachers were exploiting the potential of tasks for intercultural exploration. The wide adoption of situationally authentic, technology-mediated tasks enabled the students to use and acquire linguistic and cultural resources in their immediate, national, and international community and retrieve and exchange information in the authentic situations. These tasks enhanced students' competence to relate to otherness, namely, their competence in *savoir engager* (Byram, 1997).

Against the backdrop of the linguistic landscape of world Englishes and the intercultural agenda of TBLT, this study suggests that there is potential for the realization of learners' communicative automaticity and cultural automaticity via the implementation of TBLT. The data from this paper suggests that it is feasible to address the intercultural dimension via TBLT, which requires the teachers and learners to understand the relationship between culture and language as well as focus on the "the complexity of language use and the flows of linguacultures across national boundaries" (Byram & Wagner, 2018, p.142).

One limitation of the study is that it drew exclusively on teachers' self-reports and didn't adopt classroom observation for data triangulation. Future research could include the classroom observation and learner perspectives to investigate the extent to which the tasks could enhance students' intercultural competence.

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