

# English Language Learners and Intercultural Competence

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the correlation between comprehensibility and intercultural development of Chinese English Language Learners (ELL) at a Canadian university. Students received 30 hours of an English language instruction which focused on developing linguistic and intercultural competence. The experimental design included a pretest-posttest procedure in order to compare the subject's performance before and after instruction. A direct comparison between the scores on the comprehensibility pretest and posttest showed a minimal improvement in the subjects' performance. The causal relationship between intercultural competence and language learning was assessed by comparing the results of the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) with the comprehensibility test.

Keywords:

## INTRODUCTION

Competence in English has become a highly rated ability, in some cases a necessary skill, for citizens actively participating in the globalized economy of the twenty-first century. Approximately one quarter of the world's population (1.5 billion people) is already fluent or competent in English. Furthermore, English is growing faster than any other language in the world. English as second language speakers now outnumbering those for whom English is a mother tongue (Crystal, 2003). In keeping with this trend, China is home to approximately 300 million people studying Shakespeare's language (Yunbao & Huaying, 2008).

Within the globalized context of contemporary society, the juxtaposition of teaching and learning about the cultural values and mores of the acquired second language has been an area which has garnered considerable interest (Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein & Colby, 2003). Linguistic knowledge as well as cultural integration into professional and academic contexts has become a necessary condition leading to successful international pathways. In fact, recent research focuses on the impact of intercultural training and the ensuing proficiency of English Language Learners (ELL) (Utley, 2002; Coleman, 1998; Hess, 1977).

Post-secondary institutions, populated by increasing numbers of English Language Learners (ELL), are becoming fertile grounds for an emergent dynamic and global community. The aim of the language students is bilateral: to learn a second language and to integrate into a culture that is very different to their own (Lupart, 2009; Chamberlin-Quinlisk, 2005; Sapir, 1921).

Previous publications recognize that an important skill development in second language learning is related to a good command of the sound system (Rossiter, et. al., 2010). In particular, English Language Learners (ELL) need to know how units of meaning are formed into words, the grammar of sentence formation and the vocabulary (Liceras, 2008; Lightbown and Spada, 1999). However, pronunciation studies have shown that when students are presented with phonemes that are not used in their own language, they typically show performance that is not as good as first language

speakers (Munro et. al, 2008; Derwing et. al. 2006; García-Pérez, 2011; Flege, 2003). In many cases, this issue may result in a breakdown of communication due to the language student's poor level of comprehensibility in the acquired second language. Several studies have also suggested that there might be a correlation between exposure to the cultural background of the language and success in pronunciation. (García-Pérez, 2011; Flege, 2009; 2007; Vandergrift, 2006; Taylor & Francis, 2005). Therefore, this pilot study focused on examining the correlation between comprehensibility and intercultural competence in second language learning.

Within the scope of a language class, intercultural competence is often referred to as 'the fifth skill, following reading, writing, listening and speaking. Communicative functions earned in intercultural developmental programs include observing, identifying and recognizing, comparing and contrasting, negotiating meaning, dealing with or tolerating ambiguity, effectively interpreting messages, limiting the possibility of misinterpretation, defending one's own point of view while acknowledging the legitimacy of others and accepting difference.

The Intercultural Development Inventory™ (IDI) is a tool that assesses intercultural competence. The IDI is a statistically reliable, cross-culturally valid measure of an individual's and group's intercultural competence. Grounded in the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), the IDI has been successfully used since 1998 in corporate, academic, and other settings identify and support intercultural team development and diversity programs. The DMIS was created by Milton Bennett (1986, 1993) as an explanation of how people construe cultural difference. It is a theoretical framework used for conceptualizing intercultural sensitivity and competence. Bennett's (1986, 1993) observations of intercultural adaptation allowed him to identify six orientations that people seem to move through in their acquisition of intercultural competence. This six stage developmental model of intercultural sensitivity provided conceptual framework for the construction of the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) by Hammer (1998). The first three stages of the model, Denial (D), Defense/Polarization (DP), Minimization (M), contribute to an attitude of ethnocentrism in which one's culture is experienced as central to reality. For example, denial of cultural difference is the state in which one's own culture is experienced as the only one. Defense against cultural difference is the state in which one's own culture may be perceived to be the only real viable one. A variation of defense is reversal where an adopted culture is experienced as superior to the culture of one's primary socialization. Minimization of cultural difference is the state in which elements of one's own cultural worldview are experienced as universal.

The final three stages, Acceptance (A), Adaptation (A), and Integration (I), form the basis of ethnorelativism, an attitude in which one's own culture is experienced in the context of other cultures. Acceptance of cultural difference is the state in which one's own culture is experienced as just one of a number of equally complex worldviews. Adaptation to cultural difference is the state in which the experience of another culture yields perception and behaviour appropriate to that culture. Integration of cultural difference is the state in which one's experience of self is expanded to include movement in and out of different cultural worldviews.

In general, the more ethnocentric orientations (DDM) can be seen as ways of avoiding cultural difference, either by denying its existence, by raising defences against, or by minimizing its' importance. The more ethnorelative (AAI) worldviews are ways of seeking cultural difference, either by accepting its importance, by adapting perspective to take it into account, or by integrating the whole concept into a definition of identity.

This six stage developmental model (Denial, Defense/Polarization, Minimization, Acceptance, Adaptation, A) forms the basis of the IDI continuum.

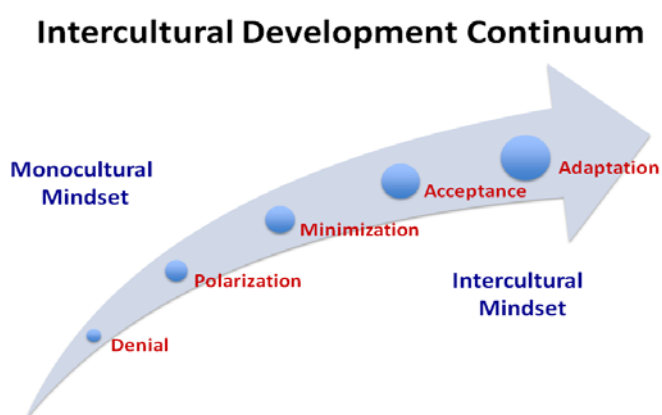


Figure 1. The Intercultural Development Continuum (Bennett, 1986; 1993)

## The Study

In the context of preparing students for life in a foreign community, the notion of cultural adaptation presupposes that some cultural norms are likely to differ from the student's homeland. Moreover, the experience of living and studying in a foreign country physically separates the students from their normal micro-communities and transports them to a new community where they will have to be able to appreciate, adapt to, and function within the norms of a new reality (Mikk, et. al., 2009; Gielen, et. al., 2004; Utley, 2002).

Within this context, the study explores the correlation of comprehensibility and intercultural development in Chinese English Language Learners (ELL) at a Canadian university. Students received 30 hours of an English language/cultural instruction which focused on developing linguistic and intercultural competence. The experimental design included a pretest-posttest procedure in order to compare the subject's performance before and after instruction.

This research proposal was submitted and approved by the university ethics review board. International students from China were sent a letter (in the form of an e-mail attachment) inviting them to participate in the study. Eighteen students responded and were invited to attend information session where the objectives of the study were explained. Those who decided to participate were asked to sign a consent form.

During this initial phase, the participants completed a language background questionnaire as well as the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). An interview was conducted prior to the 30 hour language and cultural classes. This interview was recorded using a Sony IC Recorder and the speech samples were edited using Audacity 1.3.13 Beta, a free and easy-to-use multilingual audio editor available online. Once all the initial data was collected, the students were randomly assigned to, either, the experimental group, or the control group. The subjects in the experimental group undertook a thirty hour English language and cultural course highlighting the commonalities and differences between Chinese and Canadian cultures. Feedback on the suprasegmental features of the language was given. The control group did not receive this training. Both groups were interviewed a second time and the same set of questions was used.

Eighteen students agreed to participate in the study. Out of these students, ten withdrew because of personal reasons, conflict with the schedule, and illness. The eight students remaining were administered a questionnaire designed to obtain detailed information about their language background. Then, the subjects were randomly grouped into the experimental group and the control group (4 students each). The control group, made up of one female and three male International students, were between the ages of 18 and 30 years old. Originating from the Asia Pacific, all participants had lived in another country ranging from 3-6 months to 6-10 years. The experimental group was made up of International students, two females and two males between the ages of 22 and 40 years old. Originating from the Asia Pacific, all students had limited experiences with overseas studies and/or travel between 7 -11 months and 3-5 years. This information was collected through a series of demographic questions included in the IDI questionnaire.

Content of the 30 hour language and cultural classes were drawn from the textbook *More Than Words*, written by Pamela M. Elder and Barbara Chen, and published in 1997 by Hartcourt Brace and Company, Canada. The book is intended for high-intermediate to advanced ESL students and offers factual information for new students to Canada. The topics include Canadian history and Geography, famous Canadians, native animals, Canadian education and art, and Canada's relationship with the world. The readings and exercises were completed in class, and students were asked to present and contrast information from their country (China) in relation to the Canadian theme discussed in class. The presentations were done individually and the students devoted a considerable amount of time and effort in the completion of these activities. The control group did not receive any type of language/cultural training.

At the end of the 30 hour course, speech samples focusing on comprehensibility were collected from the experimental group using a Sony IC Recorder. The samples were attained by asking the subjects to respond to the following questions:

1. How long have you been learning English?
2. What do you know about life in Canada?
3. What do you know about culture in Canada?
4. Have you had the opportunity to interact with locals in Kelowna? And what cultural differences did you notice?

The recording of responses to each question was repeated in the post-interview. All of the speech samples were inserted into a PowerPoint program so that each slide had a button that, when pressed, would play one recorded speech

sample. The sequence of the samples was randomized using a random number generator. This PowerPoint served as a means to deliver the speech samples for assessment by selected speech evaluators.

Three native born English speakers were asked to serve as evaluators to assess the speech samples. Each of the three evaluators had extensive background in speech related areas. Two were speech language pathologists with experience analyzing phonological patterns and speech articulation skills. The third evaluator was a trained English Additional Language (EAL) and an English Second Language (ESL) educator with seven years of teaching experience. Individually, the evaluators viewed the PowerPoint program and rated the comprehensibility of each of the samples using a response sheet with a 5-point Likert scale for each sample. A response of '1' indicated that the sample was "very easy to understand." A response of '5' indicated that the sample was "very difficult to understand." An additional recording of one Canadian English native speaker was added to the samples. This served as a bench-mark standard to calibrate each evaluator's ratings.

## FINDINGS

The following section summarizes the results of the interviews assessing the comprehensibility of the participants and the results of the data collected from the Intercultural Development Index (IDI). Table 1 presents the results of the comprehensibility test. Qualified evaluators assessed the samples for comprehensibility using a 5-point Likert scale.

Table 1: Comprehensibility of English Language Learners

Question	Experimental		Control	
	Pretest	Post-test	Pretest	Post-test
1	3.50	3.44	4.11	3.90
2	2.99	3.58	3.42	4.08
3	2.91	3.58	3.74	3.83
4	3.24	3.33	3.83	4.16

The results of the comprehensibility test indicate an improvement in the experimental group and the control group for questions 2, 3 and 4 but not for question 1. Question 1 asked "How long have you been learning English?". All the participants had a hard time enunciating the number of years spent studying English. Despite the lower comprehensibility for question 1, the above results indicate that there is no discernible improvement in comprehensibility between the experimental group who took a 30 hour language and culture class and the control group who did not receive any instruction.

### Results of the Intercultural Developmental Index (IDI)

This section discusses the IDI results of the control group (n=4) and the experimental group (n=4). In order to respect confidentiality, students were identified according to alphabetical and numerical codes. Code C represents the control group and code E represents the experimental group. As consent was received, students were coded numerically in chronological order (C1, E1 etc.)

**Control group:** Table 2 and Table 3 present the IDI results of the Control group and its collective profile. The tables show the Perceived Orientations of the participants, indicative of their personal assessment of Intercultural Competence, and the Developmental Orientations which show the individual's primary orientation toward cultural differences and commonalities as assessed by the IDI, that is the actual measure level of intercultural competence.

Table 2 Perceived Orientations of the Control Group

Control Group	Denial	Defense	Minimization	Acceptance	Adaptation
C9					131.37
C16				118.39	
C17				121.40	
C18				119.71	
Group Profile				122.72	

Three members of the control group rated their own capability in understanding cultural differences within Acceptance, an ethnorelative orientation which indicates a recognition and an appreciation of cultural differences in one's own and other cultures. One member rates his/her capability within Adaptation, which indicates an ability to shift perceptions and behaviours according to different cultural contexts.

Table 3 Developmental Orientation of the Control Group

Control Group	Denial	Defense	Minimization	Acceptance	Adaptation
C9				114.92	
C16		80.08			
C17			92.48		
C18			86.97		
Group Profile			93.60		

Table 3 indicates the Developmental Orientations of each member of the control group as assessed by the IDI. This score indicates that the group's primary orientation is within the ethnocentric stage of Minimization (50%) which indicates attitudes which focus on universalities while effectively negating differences in values, perceptions and behaviours in different cultures. One member's (25%) orientation is within Defense, which indicates an overly critical attitude towards cultural differences. Another member's (25%) orientation is situated within Acceptance, an orientation that recognizes and appreciates cultural differences. The Orientation Gap between this group's Perceived Orientation (122.72) and their Developmental Orientation (93.60) is 29.12 points which indicates that the group has overestimated its level of intercultural competence. A gap score of 7 points or more can be considered significant in relation to where the group perceives itself to be on the developmental continuum and where the IDI places the group's level of intercultural competence.

**Experimental Group:** Table 4 and Table 5 present the IDI results of the Experimental group and its collective profile. The tables indicate the Perceived Orientations and the Developmental Orientations as assessed by the IDI.

Table 4 Perceived Orientation of the Experimental Group

Experimental	Denial	Defense	Minimization	Acceptance	Adaptation
E1				117.41	
E3				116.09	
E4				118.08	
E15			106.70		
Group Profile				114.57	

Three members (75%) of the experimental group rate their own capability in understanding cultural differences within Acceptance, an ethnorelative orientation which indicates a recognition and an appreciation of cultural differences in one's own and other cultures. One member (25%) perceives her orientation to be within Minimization, an ethnocentric stage which effectively negates cultural differences by focusing on universalities in attitudes and behaviours in cultures.

Table 5 Developmental Orientation of the Experimental Group

Experimental	Denial	Defense	Minimization	Acceptance	Adaptation
E1			87.34		
E3		75.76			
E4		79.62			
E15	66.22				
Group Profile		77.20			

Table 5 indicates the Developmental Orientations of each member of the experimental group as assessed by the IDI. This score indicates that the group's primary orientation is within the ethnocentric stage of Defense which reflects an *us and them* judgmental viewpoint towards cultural differences. This score indicates that two member's (50%) primary orientation is within the ethnocentric stage of Defense, in which cultural differences relating to values, to perceptions and to behaviours are viewed negatively. One member's (25%) orientation is within Denial, which is reflective of an avoidance or withdrawal from cultural differences. The last member's (25%) orientation (E15) is within Minimization, a stage which effectively negates cultural differences by focusing on universalities in attitudes and behaviours in cultures. The Orientation Gap between this group's Perceived Orientation (114.57) and their Developmental Orientation (77.20) is 37.37 points which indicates that the group has overestimated its level of intercultural competence. Again, here the Orientation Gap is significant.

## CONCLUSIONS

Despite the fact that there were no observable differences in the Comprehensibility Test between the control group and the experimental group, there were differences in the level of intercultural competence of the ELLs.

The control group (n=4), which did not receive the language/cultural instruction, was composed of younger students enrolled in undergraduate classes who had on average 6-10 years outside their native countries (Asia Pacific). In identifying Acceptance as a primary orientation, this group had overestimated its level of intercultural competence (see Table 1). However, the Developmental Orientation of this younger group was situated within Minimization, a stage which emphasizes universality over differences (see Table 2). Leading Orientations for this group were Acceptance through Adaptation which indicated a desire to increase cultural self-awareness and learning culture specific frameworks. This group was well positioned to recognize and appreciate cultural differences and to adapt behaviour around cultural differences.

The experimental group (n=4) which did receive the language/cultural instruction, was composed of older students who had spent on average 1-2 years outside their native countries (Asia Pacific). This group's Perceived Orientation was within the stages of Acceptance (75%) and Minimisation (25%). However, the Developmental Orientation indicated that all students overestimated their level of intercultural competence. This score indicated that two members' (50%) primary orientation is within the ethnocentric stage of Defense, in which cultural differences relating to values, to perceptions and to behaviours are viewed negatively. One student (25%) was at the Minimisation stage, two students (50%) were at the Defense stage, and one student (25%) was at the Denial stage. Within the Intercultural Continuum, Minimization, Defense and Denial represent an ethnocentric stage in which one's own culture is viewed as superior and other cultures are viewed with fear and trepidation. Leading Orientations for this group were Minimization through Acceptance. In order to improve intercultural competence, this group could have begun to focus identifying cultural patterns of difference in an objective, critical manner in order to increase cultural awareness within themselves and the communities in which they live. This should have occurred in the language/culture class.

The above results found no causal relationship between intercultural competence, pronunciation and language/cultural classes. The Comprehensibility Test results did indicate improvement in both the experimental group and control group for questions 2, 3 and 4 but not for question 1 where the students had to respond with a number, stating how many years they had been studying English. The discrepancy in the IDI results may be attributed to the following factors: age, phonetic ability, length of residence outside the home country and motivation. For example, these differences in intercultural competence between the experimental group and the control group may be attributed to factors relating to age, phonetic ability, years of residence outside the home country and motivation.

The experimental group, which received the language/cultural instruction, was composed of students who were older than the ones in the control group. These subjects had spent less time abroad than their counterparts: 1-2 years on average. The participants tested at either at a Defense stage in the IDI in which cultural differences relating to values, to perceptions and to behaviours are viewed negatively or the Minimization stage in which effectively negates cultural differences by focusing on universalities in attitudes and behaviours in cultures. Despite the IDI results demonstrating a progression towards intercultural competence, there was no visible impact on comprehensibility. The control group, which did not receive any language/cultural instruction, was assessed at a higher level of intercultural competence. Leading Orientations for this group were Acceptance through Adaptation which indicated a desire to increase cultural self-awareness and learning culture specific frameworks. Chronologically younger, these participants had spent more time abroad than their counterparts. This exposure to different countries and culture may have impacted their intercultural awareness by sensitizing them to differences in linguistic and cultural mores.

There is a commonly held belief that there is a strong relationship between L2 language acquisition, cultural adaptation, years abroad and age (Flege, 2007; Hess, 1997; Utley, 2002). However, there is controversy on whether there is an age-related limit on the mastery of pronunciation and intercultural competence. Some researchers support the idea that pre-pubescent children have an excellent chance of acquiring a native like accent and a better understanding of the secondary culture if they have continued exposure to a native context. In addition, it is generally believed learners who study a second language after puberty will retain their native accent in an additional language. That is, a seventy-year old SL learner will be just as successful as a twenty-year old SL learner provided all other learning factors are equal for both. So, there is no advantage attributed to age after puberty (Scovel, 1969; Krashen, 1973).

In our study, all students improved. Pronunciation improved as the year progressed in both the experimental and control group. This has been substantiated by the fact that there are accounts about adult learners who have studied a second language after puberty and have achieved a native like pronunciation. Phonetic ability is the capacity some people have to discriminate foreign sounds; that is; *to have an ear for a foreign language* (Brown, 2001; Nunan, 2000).

Motivation is another important factor affecting language learning. All students had improved their scores in the comprehensibility test. The participants reported to have a specific interest in improving their pronunciation. In keeping with the literature, the correlation between motivation and comprehensibility can be established (Garcia-Perez, 2011).

Analysis of exposure to a second language indicate that International students living in foreign countries do not often take advantage of exposure to the foreign language (Derwing et al. 2006). For example, in this study, the students estimated that during 40% of their time they spoke English to a native speaker. However, the average time the majority of the students were exposed to an English speaking environment was 30%. Studies have shown that length of residence does make a difference in the accuracy of the production of foreign sounds (Bohn & Flege, 1992). If according to research most of the improvement in L2 pronunciation takes place within a 2-year period (Flege, Bohn, & Jang, 1997), a correlation between length of residence and pronunciation could be established in this study.

Despite the limitations of this small scale study, the observable results indicate that the increased exposure to the second language in either a formal (language/culture class) or informal (no classes) in the country of residence had a positive impact on comprehensibility but not necessarily on intercultural competence. Research recognizes that communication in today's world requires not only linguistic competence but also an intercultural competence emphasizing awareness of the values, traditions and ways of being of the language being acquired (Cummings, 2009; Egbo, 2009; Bennet, 2007). Previous research and anecdotal evidence indicate that Chinese students in first year classes in North American universities lack these skills (Bloch & Chi, 1995; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005; Silva & Matsuda, 2001). Research also reveals that a lack of intercultural competence often results in students' experiencing 'culture shock' (Killick & Parry, 1999; Roberts, 1998; Oberg, 1960). This has serious implications because trauma to the learners' affective and behavioral disposition can prevent success in second language learning and in academic performance. If a student is tense, worried or anxious due to intercultural issues, second language acquisition and subject area knowledge may be affected (Krashen, 1985). Furthermore, comprehensibility in the spoken language may be affected. This may explain the IDI results of older, less-travelled experimental group who were assessed at a lower level of intercultural competence, the Defense and Minimization Stages.

From a Second Language Teaching (SLT) point of view, these interconnections between language and culture can have both practical and theoretical implications. In practice, the teacher can foresee the linguistic difficulties the students may experience arising from cultural differences. Theoretically, the teacher could determine the conditions that facilitate the development of the second language student's ability to develop intercultural competence, the ability to successfully communicate with people of other cultures as well as comprehensibility in the second language. However, practically, the present study did not determine correlation between language/cultural instruction, comprehensibility and intercultural competence. In fact, exposure to the L2 in informal settings seems to have been more beneficial to comprehensibility than the language/cultural class as well as the amount of time spent abroad in a foreign culture.

In this case, the limitations of the sample do not promote generalizations regarding ELL's language acquisition and intercultural competence but emphasizes the need for more research in this direction.

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