

# Intercultural L2 Teaching: Enhancing Intercultural Interactions at Home and Abroad

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As internationalization efforts intensify in China, the number of incoming international exchange students is on the rise, and a growing number of local university students are pursuing at least some of their education in other countries. According to UNESCO, China was the greatest exporter of study abroad students in 2012. Among the 694,400 Chinese nationals who were studying abroad, 210,452 were in the United States (UNESCO, 2013). Nearly all of the outgoing international exchange students study in a second language (L2), with the majority taking courses in English in an English-speaking country. With more institutions of higher education signing international exchange agreements, the number of outgoing semester and year abroad students from China will continue to increase in the next few years. There are also large

numbers of students who are joining L2 immersion programs or other study abroad schemes with a shorter duration (e.g., several weeks). This article aims to prompt readers to reflect on the design and delivery of study abroad programs, and argues for intercultural language education to optimize and extend sojourn learning.

It is often assumed that L2 students who study abroad will experience considerable growth in host language proficiency and intercultural sensitivity, but what does the research tell us? A current investigation of the language and intercultural learning of more than 1,700 outgoing international exchange students from Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese universities has challenged these assumptions. While some participants experience gains in L2 self-efficacy (e.g.,

confidence in using English) and intercultural awareness, others have a ‘bubble experience’ abroad and do not acquire either a higher level of intercultural sensitivity or L2 proficiency. Finding intercultural interactions confounding, contrary to their expectations, sojourners may spend most of their time with co-nationals, gaining little exposure to the host language in social situations (Jackson et al., 2014). Similar findings with other populations have led to an appeal for more research that investigates what actually happens on stays abroad (e.g., Kinginger, 2009, 2013; Vande Berg et al., 2012). Many recent studies have shown that advanced proficiency in the host language (e.g., a high TOEFL score) does not correlate with an advanced level of intercultural competence, that is, the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people who have a different cultural background (Jackson, 2014). For example, L2 speakers of English may have an adequate grasp of English grammar and vocabulary but little understanding of pragmatics, the appropriate use of a language in specific situations and cultural contexts (LoCastro, 2003; Thomas, 1984; van Compernelle, 2014). Limited sociopragmatic awareness can make it difficult to initiate and sustain meaningful intercultural friendships, and this can negatively impact L2 attitudes and learning. The use of avoidance strategies reduces L2 contact, and this can limit growth in intercultural understanding as well as L2 proficiency.

At present, most students in China who join study abroad programs receive little or no pre-sojourn preparation, and many are inadequately prepared for social and academic life in an unfamiliar linguistic and cultural environment. English language teachers can play a vital role in changing this (see also Lee, this issue). Intercultural language education can impact the quality of the learning that takes place on stays abroad and also enhance L2 intercultural interactions on home soil. Even ‘advanced’ L2 speakers who achieve satisfactory results on L2 proficiency tests can benefit from L2 courses that center on intercultural elements (e.g., informal discourse in intercultural interactions), provided the curriculum is tailored to their needs.

The call to incorporate cultural elements into L2 teaching is not new (Alred et al., 2003; Byram, 1997; Corbett, 2003; Diaz, 2013; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Recognizing that L2

proficiency alone is inadequate in today’s increasingly interconnected world, more applied linguists and education policy makers are recommending that L2 teachers integrate a cultural component into their curricula. In particular, there is now much more awareness that successful intercultural L2 communication requires knowledge of the connections between language and culture and the various ways in which language can be used to negotiate meanings in intercultural situations (Byram, 2012; Jackson, 2014; Kramsch, 1993; Risager, 2012). Instead of focusing solely on the teaching of linguistic codes (e.g., grammar, vocabulary), today’s L2 teachers are encouraged to draw attention to the pragmatic, sociocultural, and interpretative components of intercultural competence.

With foreign language educators in mind, Michael Byram (1997) devised a model of intercultural communicative competence. In the first part of the model, he cited the following *linguistic* elements as characteristic of an interculturally competent L2 speaker:

- **Linguistic competence:** the ability to apply knowledge of the rules of a standard version of the language to produce and interpret spoken and written language.
- **Sociolinguistic competence:** the ability to give to the language produced by an interlocutor--whether native speaker or not--meanings which are taken for granted by the interlocutor or which are negotiated and made explicit with the interlocutor.
- **Discourse competence:** the ability to use, discover and negotiate strategies for the production and interpretation of monologue or dialogue texts which follow the conventions of the culture of an interlocutor or are negotiated as intercultural texts for particular purposes. (p. 48)

The second part of this framework identifies five *savoirs* or components that are linked to the *cultural* dimension of intercultural competence.

- **Intercultural attitudes (*savoir être*)** – curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about others’ cultures and belief about one’s own intercultural attitudes.

- **Knowledge (*savoirs*)** – of social groups and their products and practices in one’s own and an interlocutor’s country.
- **Skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*):** the ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one’s own.
- **Skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/ faire*):** the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and to operate this knowledge in real-time communication.
- **Critical cultural awareness (*savoir s’engager*):** the ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries. (Byram et al., 2002, pp. 12-13)

This model raises awareness of the importance of paying attention to multiple linguistic *and* cultural dimensions in L2 teaching and learning. What are the implications for intercultural language education in China and the preparation of L2 students for intercultural interactions both at home and abroad?

First, it is important to recognize that the specific aims, content, and activities of intercultural language courses will need to vary depending on the proficiency level and intercultural sensitivity of the participants. Drawing on empirical research, intercultural L2 teaching can foster more awareness of the complex connection between language, culture, and identity. As self-awareness is a core component in intercultural competence, students can be prompted to describe and reflect on their cultural background, language attitudes/use, communication style, and preferred self-identities, as well as their attitudes towards people from other cultures. For example, students who have an intermediate or advanced level of L2 proficiency may write a language and cultural identity essay or journal entries in which they discuss the impact of the socialization process and their intercultural interactions, if any, on their self-identities, language learning/usage, and perceptions of people who have a different linguistic and cultural background.

Guided reflection and introspection (e.g., journal writing, discussions) can lead to more

critical awareness of intercultural behavior, or what Byram (1997) refers to as *critical s’engager*. L2 educators can provide students with a framework to help students make sense of cultural differences (e.g. communication styles, nonverbal codes, values, beliefs). By developing the skills of observation, description, interpretation, and analysis, participants can gradually resist the natural temptation to stereotype and quickly label unfamiliar behaviors as ‘weird’ or ‘impolite’ (Jackson, 2014; Nam, 2012).

In pre-sojourn courses, the curriculum for intercultural language courses could address such issues as language and culture learning strategies, language/culture shock and coping mechanisms, cultural variations in sociopragmatic norms and communication styles, and the dangers of stereotyping, among others (Jackson, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014). Explicit instruction in language and culture learning strategies and sociopragmatic elements can help students develop the knowledge, skills, and confidence necessary to manage language and culture shock and initiate/sustain intercultural relationships. Some materials may be culture-general, focusing more broadly on the intercultural knowledge and skills that can enhance communication and adjustment in a new environment. If a group will sojourn in the same speech community, context-specific linguistic and cultural dimensions may be incorporated into the curriculum (e.g., host culture knowledge, instruction on sociopragmatic norms in the host language) to help the participants make the most of their stay abroad.

Ideally, guided critical reflection should continue once the students are in the host country. In L2 immersion programs, regular on-site debriefing sessions may provide a safe haven for students to freely discuss their L2/ intercultural experiences. The facilitator may field questions about the host language and environment, and encourage the participants to view intercultural situations from multiple perspectives. Sharing sessions, in class or online, can foster personal growth and empower students to take a more active role in the host environment (e.g., initiate L2 interactions). Sojourners may be prompted to describe, interpret, and evaluate their L2 experiences in diary entries, open-ended

surveys, and/or e-journals or blogs (Jackson, 2010; Nam, 2012; Paige et al., 2006). L2 students who are participating in international exchange programs could be encouraged to reflect on their experiences and share their new understandings in essays that are made available online for future sojourners. Reflection and writing can heighten awareness of the L2 environment and the potential impact of attitudes, behavior, and positioning on intercultural relations.

In some L2 study abroad programs, it may be possible to build in experiential activities that require sustained intercultural/L2 contact in the host environment. With adequate pre-sojourn preparation, even short-term sojourners can carry out small-scale projects (e.g., ethnographic tasks) that require close observation of a cultural scene and informal, L2 conversations with host nationals (Jackson, 2006). If sufficient scaffolding and ongoing support are provided, projects of this nature can help L2 sojourners acquire a sense of belonging in the host environment, which can facilitate language and intercultural learning and adjustment.

Near the end of their stay abroad, L2 sojourners should be encouraged to take stock of their learning. When possible, debriefing sessions in the host environment may prompt participants to divulge their re-entry expectations and concerns. They may also write diary/blog entries or respond to open-ended questions that encourage them to revisit their L2/intercultural experiences and assess their sojourn learning (e.g., linguistic, intercultural). For those who are in exchange programs in different parts of the world, the home institution may prompt the participants to complete online reflective questionnaires at strategic intervals (e.g., shortly after their arrival, mid-sojourn, near the end of their stay, on re-entry) or submit reflective entries to a study abroad writing contest. These activities can draw attention to L2 use/attitudes and promote more language and intercultural awareness.

Returnees often receive no support and quickly ‘shoebox’ their international/L2 experience, as they become re-immersed in their L1; valuable opportunities for L2/intercultural learning are then lost. Once the students are back on the home campus, debriefings can stimulate deeper reflection on

sojourn learning and the process of re-entry. In intercultural language education programs, students can be encouraged to assess their L2/intercultural awareness and set realistic goals for further self-enhancement (e.g. L2/culture learning). Ideally, intercultural communicative competence should be nurtured before, during, and after a sojourn.

While this article has primarily focused on the intercultural language education of student sojourners, the theoretical framework and many of the ideas could be incorporated into courses designed for L2 students who will remain on the home campus. Due to globalization and internationalization trends, more and more students in China now have opportunities to interact in English with people who have a different linguistic and cultural background. As noted by Kirkpatrick (2014) in a previous issue of ETiC, speakers of English as an international language (e.g., expatriates from other parts of Asia, incoming international exchange students) “represent excellent opportunities for speakers of Chinese English to engage in intercultural communication and develop their use of English as a lingua franca” (p. 5).

Ultimately, intercultural language education can enhance intercultural, L2 interactions both in the home environment and abroad. Through carefully planned and sequenced activities, English language teachers in China can help propel students to higher levels of English language proficiency and intercultural competence. This stance has clear implications for the preparation and professional support of L2 teachers. To move past basic discussions about cultural festivals and traditions requires intercultural knowledge and awareness as well as linguistic competence. To meet the challenges of our increasingly globalized world, much more attention needs to be devoted to intercultural discourse, identity, and other cultural elements in L2 teacher education programs in China and elsewhere.

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