

Intercultural Sensitivity

An Empirical Study of Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

All communication takes place in the matrix of culture; therefore difference in culture is the primary obstacle to intercultural communication. When we look at the major aspect of intercultural communication competence, we notice that intercultural sensitivity has gained increasing attention in different disciplines. Accordingly, the present study sought to evaluate the intercultural sensitivity of Iranian EFL learners. For this purpose, 60 participants from different professions and age groups completed an instrument comprising 5 factors with 24 items developed in the United States, by Chen and Starosta for measuring intercultural sensitivity. Subsequently, in this study Chen and Starosta's instrument was tested in an Iranian sample by using confirmatory factor analysis. Overall, the results showed that the instrument holds satisfactorily. Although the results also suggested that the operationalization of the concepts in the instrument can be further improved, the instrument as a whole is a valid one through which a culture-free scale for measuring intercultural sensitivity can be developed.

Keywords: Communication, Competence, Intercultural, Iranians, Sensitivity

1. Introduction

Communication is a system of behavior, and because different cultures often demand very different behaviors, intercultural communication is more complex than communication between persons of the same culture. The trend towards globalization and internationalization has increased the importance of being competent in communicating with people of different cultural backgrounds. This includes the necessity to be able to communicate effectively in the setting of international business transactions. The trend leads to a growing need for executives and managers to learn how to act appropriately and successfully in a culturally diverse environment. However, research shows that the demand is still not sufficiently met in the business world (Fritz & Möllenberg, 1999; Fritz, Möllenberg, & Werner, 1999). One of the reasons for this is the lack of cross-cultural comparison studies by which the validity of the research results can be tested interculturally.

Among studies in this line of research, Chen and Starosta's (1996) model of intercultural communication competence gains much attention. The model is comprised of three conceptual dimensions of intercultural communication competence, including intercultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and intercultural adroitness. Based on this conceptual model, Chen and Starosta (2000) further explicated the nature and components of intercultural sensitivity and developed an instrument to measure the concept. Because the study was restricted to the United States sample, the purpose of the present study was then to test the instrument in a different cultural context.

2. Literature Review

With respect to intercultural communication competence, research has mainly attempted to produce models based on individual traits that relate individual attitudes and skills to some measure of interculturally successful behaviors, such as intercultural adaptation, appropriateness, and effectiveness of the interaction. For example, Hammer, Gudykunst, and Wiseman (1978), Wiseman and Abe (1984), Hammer (1987, 1989), and Wiseman, Hammer, and Nishida (1989) basically employed the cross-cultural attitude approach to discriminate between cognitive, affective, and co-native dimensions of intercultural communication competence. From this perspective, intercultural communication competence was conceptualized as the ability of individuals to develop a positive attitude towards the foreign culture.

In contrast, Ruben (1976 and 1977), Ruben and Kealey (1979), Hawes and Kealey (1981), and Kealey (1989) followed the behavioral skills approach that emphasizes individual behaviors and skills in the process of intercultural interaction. The authors argued that behavioral effectiveness is the core criterion of intercultural communication and identified seven skills that account for interculturally competent behavior, including display of respect, interaction posture, orientation to knowledge, empathy, self-oriented role behavior, interaction management, and tolerance for ambiguity.

In addition, more recent approaches towards the study of intercultural communication competence took other components into consideration. For example, Dinges and Lieberman

(1989), Parker and McEvoy (1993), and Hammer, Nishida, and Wiseman (1996) argued that the situation of the context of interaction affects the degree of intercultural communication competence. Moreover, Spitzberg and Cupach (1984, 1989), Imahori and Lanigan (1989), and Spitzberg (1997) pointed out that traits and behavioral skills of one's counterpart are equally important in the measurement of intercultural communication competence. Taken together, as Fritz, Möllenberg, and Werner (1999) argued, integrating different approaches and developing reliable and valid measures of intercultural communication competence is the foremost task for future studies in this line of research.

2.1 Chen and Starosta's Model

Chen (1990) and Chen and Starosta (1996) criticized the previous studies on intercultural communication competence as suffering from conceptual ambiguity. The authors indicated that scholars did not discriminate clearly the concept of communication competence and its related constructs. This conceptual confusion has led to difficulty especially in the evaluation of intercultural trainings and in the measurement of intercultural communication competence (Chen & Starosta, 2000). Thus, more research on these particular constructs and their relation to competence is necessary before valid and reliable measures of intercultural communication competence can be developed.

Chen and Starosta (1996) developed a model of intercultural communication competence that integrates features of both cross-cultural attitude and behavioral skills models. According to the authors, intercultural communication competence is comprised of three dimensions: intercultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and intercultural adroitness. Each of these dimensions contains a set of components.

Intercultural awareness is the cognitive dimension of intercultural communication competence that refers to a person's ability to understand similarities and differences of others' cultures. The dimension includes two components: self-awareness and cultural awareness. Intercultural sensitivity is the affective dimension of intercultural communication competence that refers to the emotional desire of a person to acknowledge, appreciate, and accept cultural differences. The dimension includes six components: self-esteem, self-monitoring, empathy, open-mindedness, nonjudgmental, and social relaxation. Intercultural adroitness is the behavioral dimension of intercultural communication competence that refers to an individual's ability to reach communication goals while interacting with people from other cultures. The dimension contains four components: message skills, appropriate self-disclosure, behavioral flexibility, and interaction management (Chen & Starosta, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2000).

2.2 Intercultural Sensitivity Measurement

In order to measure the dimensions of intercultural communication competence, Chen and Starosta (2000) first developed an instrument to explore the concept of intercultural sensitivity. The empirical construction and validation of the instrument of intercultural sensitivity were conducted in three stages. First, a pre-study was administered to generate items representing the conceptual meaning of intercultural sensitivity. Then, the model was

tested by exploratory factor analysis. Finally, the concurrent validity of the instrument was evaluated.

In the pre-study, 168 American college students in communication disciplines were asked to rate the original 73-item intercultural sensitivity questionnaire for the purpose of reducing the number of items. After factor analyzing the data, 44 items with > 0.50 factor loadings were selected for the second stage in which 414 college students were asked to answer the questions. Data were analyzed in a principal axis analysis followed by oblique rotation. Five factors, formed by 24 items, with an Eigen value > 1 , were extracted, explaining a total of 37.3% of the variance. The five factors were labeled Interaction Engagement, Respect for Cultural Differences, Interaction Confidence, Interaction Enjoyment, and Interaction Attentiveness. The concurrent validity of the 24-item instrument of intercultural sensitivity was then evaluated against seven other valid and related instruments. The results were found satisfactory. Appendix A shows the 24-item instrument of intercultural sensitivity. Based on the results of Chen and Starosta's study, the present study tested the instrument in Iran, another cultural setting.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Sixty randomly selected EFL students coming from different parts of Iran consisting of 20 PhD, 20 MA, and 20 BA levels at Khorasgan Azad University in Isfahan, Iran were administered for this study. Out of these 60 participants 25 were female and 35 were male whose age ranged from 23 to 52.

3.2 Instrument

The 24-items intercultural sensitivity questionnaire comprising 5 factors developed by Chen and Starosta was used in this study. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. Part one gave the general introduction to the author and the instruments. Part two was the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS). This 24-items questionnaire was based on 5-likert scale and the choices were: 5=strongly agree, 4=agree, 3=uncertain, 2=disagree, and 1=strongly disagree. The Five factors were: Interaction Engagement, included 7 items which are related to participants' feeling of participation in intercultural communication; Respect for Cultural Differences, included 6 items which are about how participants orient to or tolerate their counterparts' culture and opinion; Interaction Confidence, had 5 items, which are concerned with how confident participants are in the intercultural setting; Interaction Enjoyment, included 3 items, which deal with participants' positive or negative reactions towards communicating with people from different cultures; and Interaction Attentiveness had 3 items, which are concerned with participants' effort to understand what is going on in intercultural interaction.

3.3 Data Analysis

In contrast to Chen and Starosta's exploratory analysis, a confirmatory approach was used in this study. The model structure developed by Chen and Starosta via exploratory factor

analysis was tested in an Iranian sample by means of confirmatory factor analysis. The confirmatory factor analysis is a method for testing hypotheses on the number of dimensions or factors of a complex construct. It is used to illustrate the interrelations between factors and the relations between factors and their indicators. As opposed to exploratory factor analysis, the confirmatory factor analysis is explicitly based on assumptions about the factor structure and the factor-indicator relationships and aims to test these assumptions. Therefore, it is suitable for testing the results of exploratory factor analysis.

4. Results

Factor 1. Interaction Engagement

Item	Choice 5	Percentage	Choice 4	Percentage	Choice 3	Percentage	Choice 2	Percentage	Choice 1	Percentage
1	18	30%	33	55%	2	3%	4	7%	3	5%
11	12	20%	15	25%	9	15%	15	25%	9	15%
13	21	35%	27	45%	6	10%	3	5%	3	5%
21	18	30%	30	50%	6	10%	4	6%	2	4%
22	9	15%	12	20%	9	15%	21	35%	9	15%
23	15	25%	27	45%	9	15%	6	10%	3	5%
24	12	20%	27	45%	6	10%	9	15%	6	10%

The first factor--Interaction Engagement is concerned with participant's feeling of participation in intercultural communication. As it can be seen from the figures, about 45% (20% + 25%) of the subjects agree that they tend to wait before forming an impression of culturally-distinct counterparts (item 11). This indicates that they will not jump to a conclusion before patiently listening to the counterparts.

As many as 85% (30% + 55%) of the subjects express that they "enjoy interacting with people from different cultures" (item 1). 80% (35%+45%) of the subjects are open-minded to people from different cultures (item 13) while 65% (20%+45%) have a feeling of enjoyment towards differences between their culturally-distinct counterpart and them (item 24). These students can be divided into the category that Chen and Starosta (1997) regard as with high self-esteem and open-minded. Thus they usually hold positive attitude in intercultural communication and are willing to openly explain and accept differences between them and their cultural counterparts.

Moreover, 70% (25%+45%) of the subjects often show their culturally-distinct counterpart their understanding through verbal or non-verbal cues (item 23); 80% (30%+50%) of the subjects often give positive responses to their culturally different counterpart during their interaction (item 21). These figures indicate that a large majority of Iranian learners enjoy interacting with culturally different counterparts. However, only 35% (15%+20%) of the subjects avoid the situation when he or she has to deal with culturally-distinct persons (item 22). These students do not master the skills needed in intercultural communication events. Therefore, not only the desire and feeling of enjoyment towards differences between cultures but also proper communicating skills are needed to promote and smoothen intercultural communication.

Factor 2. Respect for Cultural Difference

Item	Choice 5	Percentage	Choice 4	Percentage	Choice 3	Percentage	Choice 2	Percentage	Choice 1	Percentage
2	1	2%	2	3%	6	10%	33	55%	18	30%
7	3	5%	3	5%	3	5%	36	60%	15	25%
8	33	55%	21	35%	3	5%	2	3%	1	2%
16	22	37%	29	48%	6	10%	2	3%	1	2%
18	2	3%	1	2%	12	20%	24	40%	21	35%
20	3	5%	3	5%	3	5%	30	50%	21	35%

The second factor--Respect for Cultural Difference is mainly about how participants orient to or tolerate their counterparts' culture and opinions. 5 % (2%+3%) of the subjects agree that "people from other cultures are narrow-minded" (item 2); 10% (5%+5%) of the subjects "don't like to be with people from different cultures" (item 7); 90 % (55%+35%) of the subjects "respect the values of people from different cultures" (item 8); 85 % (37%+48%) of the subjects "respect the ways people from different cultures behave" (item 16); only 5 % (3%+2%) "would not accept the opinions of people from different cultures" (item 18); All these indicate that the majority of the participants do not reject opinions held by their culturally-different counterparts; neither do they hesitate to associate with people of different cultures. In other words, they are open-minded, willing to accept and appreciate different opinions and ideas. Acceptance of cultural difference represents a major shift from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. Cultural difference is no longer judged by the standards of one's own culture and those who have moved into this stage have undergone a shift in their perception of difference; they no longer find difference threatening.

However, still 10 % (5%+5%) of the subjects think their culture is better than other cultures (item 20). It is possible that some Iranian learners who have awareness of the cultural differences and similarities may be unwilling to respect those cultural differences because of some deep-rooted perceptions, stereotypes or prejudices. Bennett (1993) notes that group or individual whose intercultural sensitivity is in the ethnocentric stage will react to cultural difference with defensive actions, and they can only perceive the world from their only cultural reality. Though those Iranian learners have a lot of chances to obtain knowledge about different cultures through many channels such as journals, internet, and mass media, some of these channels may be the production of obvious ethnocentric and self-centered points of view. And this will cast impact on their perspective.

Factor 3. Interaction Confidence

Item	Choice 5	percentage	Choice 4	Percentage	Choice 3	Percentage	Choice 2	Percentage	Choice 1	Percentage
3	6	10%	30	50%	21	35%	2	3%	1	2%
4	3	5%	18	30%	15	25%	18	30%	6	10%
5	5	8%	16	27%	27	45%	9	15%	3	5%
6	6	10%	15	25%	27	45%	10	17%	2	3%
10	7	12%	29	48%	12	20%	9	15%	3	5%

The third factor--Interaction Confidence has 5 items, which are concerned with how confident participants are in the intercultural setting. The above figures show that 60% (10%+50%) of the subjects feel pretty sure of themselves in interaction with people from different cultures (item 3); 35% (5%+30%) of the participants find it very hard to talk in front of people from different cultures (item 4); 35% (8%+27%) of the participants know what to say when interacting with people from different cultures (item 5); 35 % (10%+25%) of the participants can be as sociable as they want to be when interacting with people from different cultures (item 6); 60 % (12%+48%) of the participants feel confident when interacting with people from different cultures (item 10). All these indicate that nearly half or more of the Iranian learners do not have interaction confidence when interacting with culturally-distinct people.

Coleman (2002), in his many years of study with over twenty-five thousand learners of language living and studying abroad, has pointed out that “the problem of confidence clearly needs addressing”. He has found that linguistic and personal confidence appeared frequently under anticipated worries and problems. Rodgers and McGoven (2002) have also noticed that individuals must meet the challenges of language barriers, unfamiliar customs and practices, and cultural variations in verbal and nonverbal communication styles in order to achieve successful intercultural understanding. As a result, linguistic and cultural barriers often carry evaluative and affective consequences for interactants in an intercultural context, resulting in their lacking of confidence.

According to the above findings, it can be inferred that the participants’ weakness in interaction confidence should also be derived from challenges in both language and cultural aspects. These two barriers must be overcome in order to improve interaction confidence. As second language and culture learning is rather a comprehensive and chronological process, there is a long way for Iranian learners to go in perfecting their foreign language and cultural competence. Only a linguistic competence can hardly help Iranian learners achieve a fairly satisfactory intercultural competence without rich intercultural experience in reality. Through adjusting Iranian learners’ attitude and behavior in intercultural interaction and gaining more intercultural knowledge consciously, their interaction confidence will be improved and then their intercultural sensitivity will be raised.

Factor 4. Interaction Enjoyment

Item	Choice 5	percentage	Choice 4	Percentage	Choice 3	Percentage	Choice 2	Percentage	Choice 1	Percentage
9	2	3%	4	7%	6	10%	33	55%	15	25%
12	3	5%	3	5%	9	15%	30	50%	15	25%
15	3	5%	3	5%	6	10%	33	55%	15	25%

The fourth factor--Interaction Enjoyment, as defined by Chen and Starosta (2000), is about participants’ positive or negative reaction towards communicating with people from different cultures. Jettmer and Nass (2002) believe that enjoyment of the interaction is composed of the following items: pleasantness of the interaction, productiveness of the interaction, enjoyment of the interaction, and cooperative nature of the interaction.

As the above figures show, only 10 % (5%+5%) of the subjects “often feel useless when interacting with people from different cultures” (item 15); 10 % (3%+7%) of the subjects admit that they “get upset easily when interacting with people from different cultures” (item 9); and 10 % (5%+5%) of the subjects “often get discouraged when they are with people from different cultures” (item 12). However, there are 10 % of the participants who are uncertain about item 9, 15 % of the subjects who are uncertain about item 12, and 10 % of the subjects who are not sure of item 15.

This phenomenon indicates the following points: a) more than half of the participants have experienced a relatively high degree of enjoyment in terms of the pleasantness, productiveness and enjoyment of interaction, and are relatively optimistic when they encounter some problems in intercultural communication situation and have enough courage to deal with difficulties when interacting with culturally-distinct people; b) less than one fourth of the subjects are uncertain about the three items, which indicates that this group of participants are not sure of their own feelings when interacting with people from different cultures or when encountering some problems.

The author concludes two reasons for the findings. Firstly the subjects’ inadequate interaction confidence may partly account for this phenomenon. It is the scant confidence in intercultural communication that can easily lead to frustration when they encounter some problems. Another reason is the learning environment of our traditional English class which is of teacher-dominant, student-submissive nature and in which students are accustomed to being silent listeners (Liu liebin 2001). The chance of interaction between teacher and students as well as among students is limited, therefore they do not have much rewarding experience with regard to pleasantness of interaction, productiveness of interaction, enjoyment of interaction or cooperative nature of interaction. What they may embrace are more of fear of making mistakes, hesitancy about answering questions and a reluctance to be singled out rather than enjoying the process of interaction.

Factor 5. Interaction Attentiveness

Item	Choice 5	percentage	Choice 4	Percentage	Choice 3	Percentage	Choice 2	Percentage	Choice 1	Percentage
14	12	20%	24	40%	12	20%	6	10%	6	10%
17	15	25%	21	35%	12	20%	6	10%	6	10%
19	6	10%	18	30%	24	40%	6	10%	6	10%

The last factor--Interaction Attentiveness deals with participants’ effort to understand what is going on in intercultural interaction. The concept is similar to what Cegala (1981) calls “Interaction Involvement”, which according to the author, consists of three concepts that are related to the ability of sensitivity: responsiveness, attentiveness, and perceptiveness. People with Interaction Attentive ability tend to be intercultural sensitive enough with conversational procedure and maintain an appropriate interaction (Chen & Starosta, 2000).

According to the above table, 60% (25%+35%) of the subjects “try to obtain as much information as they can when interacting with people from different cultures” (item 17). It is

very helpful for a productive communication. Meanwhile, 60% (20%+40%) of the subjects are “very observant when interacting with people from different cultures” (item 14). However, 40% (10%+30%) of the subjects are “sensitive to their culturally-distinct counterpart’s subtle meanings during their interaction” (item 19). This indicates that more than half of the Iranian learners are not attentive and sensitive enough in interaction, so they cannot capture the subtle meanings revealed by their counterparts either verbally or nonverbally.

In order to have a clear picture of the overall situation of the Iranian learners’ intercultural sensitivity, it is necessary to calculate the average score of each factor and the average score of the five factors. The following figures clearly show this information.

The average score of the five factors

Factor 1	Factor 2	factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Sum	Average
3.5023	2.4784	3.0261	2.0268	3.4621	14.4957	2.8991

From the above table, we can see that the highest average score of the five factors is Factor 1 (3.5023), closely followed by Factor 5 (3.4621). The lowest average score is Factor 4 (2.0268) followed by Factor 2 (2.4784), while Factor 3 (3.0261) remains in the middle. The average score of the five factors is 2.8991.

5. Conclusion

As the results indicated, the overall outcome of this evaluation for the Iranian learners was much better than expected ($4 < 2.8991 < 3$). These findings indicate that all the Iranian learners have a relatively positive attitude toward intercultural communication. Of the total five factors, students display their strongest ability in their “Interaction Engagement” (factor 1, 67% on average, mean score 3.5023) and weakest in their “Interaction Enjoyment” (factor 4, about 18% on average, mean score 2.0268). The combination of the five factors can ideally reflect the intercultural sensitivity of the subjects.

According to the evaluation conducted in this study, we can see that there is still some room available for improvement in terms of the general level of Iranian learners’ intercultural sensitivity. Improving intercultural sensitivity will help intercultural communication more successfully and effectively. Iranian learners with their special educational background and professional skills can always serve as bridges between different cultures; and, developing their intercultural sensitivity will better equip them for their future intercultural obstacles to overcome.

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Appendix A

Intercultural Sensitivity Scale

Below is a series of statements concerning intercultural communication. There are no right or wrong answers. Please work quickly and record your first impression by indicating the degree to which you agree or disagree with the statement. Thank you for your cooperation.

5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = uncertain, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree

(Please put the number corresponding to your answer in the blank before the statement)

- ___ 1. I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures.
- ___ 2. I think people from other cultures are narrow-minded.
- ___ 3. I am pretty sure of myself in interacting with people from different cultures.
- ___ 4. I find it very hard to talk in front of people from different cultures.
- ___ 5. I always know what to say when interacting with people from different cultures.
- ___ 6. I can be as sociable as I want to be when interacting with people from different cultures.
- ___ 7. I don't like to be with people from different cultures.
- ___ 8. I respect the values of people from different cultures.
- ___ 9. I get upset easily when interacting with people from different cultures.
- ___ 10. I feel confident when interacting with people from different cultures.
- ___ 11. I tend to wait before forming an impression of culturally-distinct counterparts.
- ___ 12. I often get discouraged when I am with people from different cultures.
- ___ 13. I am open-minded to people from different cultures.
- ___ 14. I am very observant when interacting with people from different cultures.
- ___ 15. I often feel useless when interacting with people from different cultures.
- ___ 16. I respect the ways people from different cultures behave.
- ___ 17. I try to obtain as much information as I can when interacting with people from different cultures.
- ___ 18. I would not accept the opinions of people from different cultures.
- ___ 19. I am sensitive to my culturally-distinct counterpart's subtle meanings during our interaction.
- ___ 20. I think my culture is better than other cultures.

____ 21. I often give positive responses to my culturally-different counterpart during our interaction.

____ 22. I avoid those situations where I will have to deal with culturally-distinct persons.

____ 23. I often show my culturally-distinct counterpart my understanding through verbal or nonverbal cues.

____ 24. I have a feeling of enjoyment towards differences between my culturally-distinct counterpart and me.

(Items 2, 4, 7, 9, 12, 15, 18, 20, and 22 are reverse-coded before summing the 24 items. Interaction Engagement items are 1, 11, 13, 21, 22, 23, and 24, Respect for Cultural Differences items are 2, 7, 8, 16, 18, and 20, Interaction Confidence items are 3, 4, 5, 6, and 10, Interaction Enjoyment items are 9, 12, and 15, and Interaction Attentiveness items are 14, 17, and 19.)

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