

Intercultural awareness: A qualitative study of foreign language students in an Australian tertiary context

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ABSTRACT

In line with internationalisation goals of Australian universities, the development of intercultural understanding, awareness and practical communication skills has become most useful in a multicultural society. This study aimed to investigate how teachers' and students' view and interpret intercultural awareness in an Australian tertiary education, and discuss the role of intercultural awareness in the development of students' intercultural communication and interaction skills in foreign language learning.

Mixed methods study was adopted. A questionnaire was used to gather the participants' views, attitudes, beliefs, values, and perceptions toward the significance of intercultural awareness in their foreign language teaching and learning experience. Interviews were conducted to provide comprehensive insights into factors which were not captured in the questionnaire but were really important to them.

The questionnaire was completed by 293 participants from two main campuses in total, including 273 students (response rate 62%) and 20 teachers (response rate 74%). Twenty-six participants (9 teachers and 17 students respectively) consented to participate in the interviews. There were over 27 written comments from the questionnaires. This paper reports the written comments from the survey and interviews. Three main themes emerged from the data, namely i) Interpretation of intercultural awareness, ii) Significance of intercultural awareness, and iii) Attitudes towards intercultural awareness.

This study has reviewed a comprehensive description of teaching staff and students' overall perceptions in relation to their foreign language teaching and learning, both personally and professionally in an Australian tertiary education. The research findings indicated that in this case study, both teaching staff and students highly valued the role of intercultural awareness in foreign language teaching and learning in tertiary education. Suggestions and expectations of teaching staff and students with regard to strategies to enhance cultural sensitivity also provided.

Keywords: globalisation, intercultural awareness, foreign language study, internationalisation, Australian tertiary education

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, rapid developments in science and technology, especially advances in transportation and telecommunication, have literally shrunk the world into a “global village”, where people of different cultural backgrounds and languages can easily transcend the limits of time and space and get in touch with one another. People are travelling more and the number of people working or settling down in foreign countries, in search of better jobs or better living conditions, is increasing all the time (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2009, 2013; Linacre, 2007).

Throughout the 100 years since the first National Census in 1911, migrants have made up a large component of the Australian population. Historically, the majority of migrants have come from Europe; however, there are increasingly more Australians who were born in Asia and other parts of the world. This pattern of migration is evident in the makeup of the richly diverse society recorded in the 2011 Census. This diversity can be seen in the variety of languages, religions, ancestries and birthplaces reported by Australians. In addition, globalisation is influencing universities worldwide through market competition (Marginson, 2008). As a result of globalisation, the growth of international trade and communication, and the migration of cultures, people now live in a hybrid world where numerous different cultural practices have blended. That is why interest in understanding other cultures is increasing both in Australia and all over the world. In addition, the internationalisation of higher education is today a world-wide phenomenon that is intimately linked to globalisation (Altbach, 2002; Lingard & Rizvi, 1998). According to Marginson (2008), the global position of Australian higher education is central to national policy and capacity in higher education. The growth of transnational education over recent decades has provided Australia with the opportunity to develop a market for international students, offering courses and qualifications that are accredited globally (Australia Bureau of Statistics, 2009). Therefore, internationalisation of education has become a significant development in Australian universities. International job applicants who are proficient in at least two languages will be at a distinct advantage in the global market (The Education Office of the French Cultural Services, 2013).

Learning languages other than English opens a whole new world of insights, perspectives and possibilities to learners. As language educators in the twenty-first century, one of the most important tasks is to help students learn about the rich variety of people in this multicultural world. Similarly, as Stern (1983) proposes, the language learner should not only study the cultural context (language and culture) but should be made aware of the interaction between language and culture. Therefore, intercultural awareness is required if a foreign language learner is to achieve intercultural communication competence, which is now considered the major goal of foreign language learning (Han, 2013). According to Kramsch (1998), intercultural awareness, or the “fifth skill”, is the ability to be aware of cultural relativity – following reading, writing, listening and speaking. In response to the demands of a globalising world and in order to prepare future global language learners, intercultural awareness, as an indispensable element in language learning, becomes critical for a productive and successful life in the ever shifting social, cultural, economic and technological reality that defines the shrinking world of the twenty-first century. The use of the term “intercultural” reflects the view that foreign language learners have to gain insight into both their own and the foreign culture (Kramsch, 1993).

The aim of this paper is to examine the views and attitudes of teachers and students towards intercultural awareness at a university in Australia and further explore how their views affect the way they teach and learn. The results of this study will inform teaching staff as well as students of current perspectives, and more broadly to the university, concerning the development of intercultural awareness, the effectiveness of intercultural communication and the need for improving internationalised education in the university.

METHODS

Research questions

To fulfil this aim, the following research questions were raised:

- What does intercultural awareness mean to teaching staff and students in general?
- How do teaching staff and students interpret intercultural awareness in tertiary-level language education?

This study was part of a wider research project examining the views and attitudes of teachers and students towards intercultural awareness at a university in Australia, employing mixed methods approach. The data collection methods included a survey and semi-structured interviews. Ethics approval for the study was granted by the Tasmanian Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Network. This paper reports the qualitative findings of the study from the interview data and written comments from the survey.

Survey

The survey consists of 46 questions which were informed by the literature and was divided into three parts: Part A about respondents' background, Part B consisted of 40 statements requiring a 5-point scale Likert response, where 1 (Strongly Agree) represents the maximum score of the scale and 5 (Strongly Disagree) represents the minimum score; and Part C, the open-ended question. There were 293 respondents (20 teachers and 273 students respectively) recruited from two main campuses at the University between May 2011 and May 2012 (74% and 62% response rate respectively). During the period of data collection, these respondents were teaching or learning a foreign language at the time, ranging from Asian languages (Chinese, Indonesian and Japanese) to European languages (French and German).

Interview

All survey participants were asked to indicate their willingness to participate in the follow-up interviews on the returned survey forms. Prior to the interview, both teacher and student participants had an opportunity to view the interview schedule. Interviews took between 30 and 40 minutes each and were scheduled to ensure that the interviewees had sufficient time to give serious consideration to their responses. Twenty-six participants (9 teachers and 17 students respectively) consented to participate in the interviews.

Data analysis

Survey analysis

Twenty-seven respondents (1 staff/26 students) provided a response to open question in the questionnaire, with all the answers in handwritten format. However, despite the spelling and grammatical errors and differences in handwriting and difficulties in understanding a few of the answers, most were easy to comprehend. Overall, responses from the participants completing the survey suggested that respondents found it valuable and stimulating to integrate cultural awareness into foreign language teaching and learning. For instance, one survey participant expressed the view that having a cultural side to language learning was hugely beneficial to his understanding of world culture.

Interview analysis

The qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis which requires involvement and interpretation by the researcher. Computerised software (NVivo 10.0)¹ was used to organise the transcripts and codes. The profile of the interview participants is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Participants of semi-structured interviews

	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
Teachers (N=9)		
Language(s) taught		
– Chinese	1	11.1
– French	1	11.1
– Indonesian	1	11.1
– German	2	22.2
– Japanese	4	44.5
Gender		
– Male	5	55.6
– Female	4	44.5
Students (N=17)		
Language(s) studied		
– Chinese and Japanese	2	11.8
– French	3	17.6
– Indonesian	10	58.8
– German	1	5.9
– Japanese	1	5.9
Gender		
– Male	6	35.3
– Female	11	64.7

RESULTS

The findings were organised into three major themes: i) Interpretation of intercultural awareness, ii) Significance of intercultural awareness, and iii) Attitudes towards intercultural awareness. Several subthemes were also identified.

¹ QRS International Pty Ltd. Nvivo 10. Melbourne QRS International Pty Ltd. 2012

Interpretation of intercultural awareness

In regard to this theme, interpretation of intercultural awareness, the participants demonstrated their understanding of this concept as self-explanatory concept and personal understandings about intercultural awareness.

Conceptualisation of intercultural awareness

Overall, there is general agreement among the participants on this point. Basically in the view of participants, intercultural awareness means an understanding and appreciation of cultural differences. The key elements are acceptance, respect and tolerance. Apart from their general agreement, the participants also tended to give explanations and examples of intercultural awareness from their own perspectives. For instance, one staff participant commented as follows:

First of all you should acknowledge there are differences and secondly there are different people surrounding you in social and cultural settings, and thirdly it is to respect and be tolerant and willing to learn. (Staff 1)

Another staff participant chose a different way to explain intercultural awareness:

It means a collection of skills and attitudes that help to interpret understand and relate to people of a culture other than your own. (Staff 4)

In addition, the following comments given by two student participants provide relatively detailed explanations of their understandings:

Intercultural awareness to me means being aware of the different behaviours and underlying patterns in society that are different between cultures. Having that sort of awareness instilled in you, you get to appreciate what you have and also other people's cultures. (Student 11)

It's also a bi-directional thing – it's those people in those countries understanding about my culture, Australian culture, and the western culture. It's definitely two ways. (Student 2)

It is interesting that one staff participant proposed the definition of intercultural awareness in a very unique way, appearing to summarise the comments above.

It is relatively self-explanatory in the words itself. It's difficult to define it without restating the words within there, but it would be an awareness of different cultures, and how different cultures would work together and combine together, and how the significance of the cultures, of each of the cultures within each of the other separate culture. (Survey - Staff 2)

Equally important, another staff participant demonstrated the definition of intercultural awareness from the perspective of a university staff member as follows:

Especially in the university environment, there are more and more international students coming in, and Australia itself is generally defined as a multicultural society. So I think tertiary educated students generally have the responsibility to carry this kind of intercultural awareness to wherever they end up in the workforce or in their social community networks and interactions. (Staff 1)

From the above statements, it can be seen that people from different backgrounds, both personal and professional, give different interpretations of intercultural awareness.

Personal understandings of intercultural awareness

Based on their individual cultural backgrounds, it is of great interest to explore the participants' perceptions of intercultural awareness from their personal and professional perspectives. Here are some profound remarks from both staff and student participants:

It's extremely complicated. It is that knowledge and ability people have, to deal with all of the non-linguistic or extra-linguistic ways that we communicate with each other. But it's the broader context of meaning, and how human beings get meaning across to each other – or fail to get meaning across to each other. It's the awareness of that broader world of meaning that I think is intercultural awareness. (Staff 5)

It is acknowledged that there are different cultures out there, knowing how to handle them, as in meeting different people, and also just being open to learning about different cultures and how they work in their particular cultures. (Student 5)

Additionally, it is worth mentioning that one of the student participants demonstrated his/her interpretation of intercultural awareness vividly by quoting a Native American proverb as follows:

'Walk a mile in my shoes' – putting yourself in the shoes of someone else, and that's always a difficult thing to do, but one of the big things is to open your heart, and to be open to the possibility of differences, and not being closed to the view that my way is right, and therefore your way is wrong. (Student 7)

Equally importantly, another student participant emphasised that:

A person is a person and a human first and foremost. Hence, that's what intercultural awareness is – it's by recognising what basic humanness is, and that everything else is informed by experiences, and putting them on an equal level rather than in a hierarchical position. (Student 8)

Significance of intercultural awareness

The results showed that there were no differences between teaching staff and student participants about the significance of intercultural awareness. They strongly believed that intercultural awareness is of great importance both personally and professionally.

Intercultural awareness is very crucial in every individual. Knowing about different cultures, and knowing culture through languages, is a very crucial component of everyone's life. (Survey - Student 13)

Moreover, there was also a high agreement among all the participants that language and culture are closely related. The findings in this part emphasised the strong relationship between culture and language. In fact, the prevalent assumption was that language proficiency is beyond the basics of language. This is illustrated by the following notable comments:

Culture is a term that encompasses almost everything. One of the parts of culture is language, it is a part of culture, but it is not culture by itself. (Staff 3)

Language being the vehicle of communication, and communication being the way that we know other human beings, language is central to true intercultural awareness. (Staff 4)

Understanding meaning as well as the intention behind that meaning, so it's not only understanding in terms of vocabulary, it understands in a whole lot of terms. (Survey - Student 7)

Attitudes towards intercultural awareness

In this study, the participants were invited to evaluate the changes in their attitudes and perspectives on intercultural awareness as a skill, and to share their views with the researcher. An analysis of attitudes expressed by the participants revealed a mix of perceptions and several major recurring themes including attitudinal changes and attitudinal consistency. Generally, participants agreed that having a positive attitude towards intercultural awareness was very important.

Attitudinal changes

While the participants shared their changed attitudes about intercultural awareness, they were also asked to describe a particular experience that contributed to their changed attitudes.

What I have realised since teaching language in Australia is that intercultural awareness is not just about introducing the cultural and political background of this particular language to the students, but it's also incorporating my students' own experience and background into learning language. (Staff 1)

The key things that have changed is just that what's possible here in the classroom, and for students in terms of what they can choose, has become more limited, and what's possible in terms of what they can do in country has actually expanded. You start realising when you're in the class trying to teach particular things, that if you don't have the cultural context around it, they can't make sense of this. (Staff 5)

From the comments above, it can be seen that the teaching staff had a clear understanding about how teaching foreign languages has affected their way of thinking and has reshaped their attitudes towards intercultural awareness. Several student participants shared the same opinions on this issue. This was supported by the following statements:

It gives the learning of the language more depth, and it's not just isolated – like learning the characters – you are getting to understand the process that leads up to that, and everything is put together, and it becomes more meaningful. (Student 6)

It changed gradually over time, and the most significant change is that I have a much more conscious awareness of different cultures ... definitely more sensitivity too, but I think that sensitivity is very different – I think you can have sensitivity towards a culture without really being conscious of it. So sensitivity has definitely increased, which is fantastic. Going from my own experience, one of the key things that has enabled me to develop intercultural awareness is studying and investigating my own culture. (Student 9)

However, another student participant put it in quite a philosophical way:

I wouldn't say that they have changed – it's just that they have broadened. I've become far more aware of the situations that do exist – and the reason it's been broadened since I've learned the language is because I've had more communication with people from different backgrounds. It's those experiences that have helped me to broaden my understanding. (Student 3)

Attitudinal consistency

The data also showed that, for quite a number of the participants in this study, there were no significant changes in their attitudes. This suggested that their attitudes towards intercultural awareness had remained consistent to those held prior to their language teaching/learning. To further understand the factors that might have impacted the participants' views towards intercultural awareness, some of adjustments they made to integrate intercultural awareness in foreign language teaching and learning were explored. Evidence of this was introduced below:

I still find that it's only by having the discipline to study a language that I started to seek out more literature to read from that cultural and linguistic realm. (Student 4)

DISCUSSION

The combined results from the study indicated that intercultural awareness, as a key element in foreign language teaching and learning was highly valued from various perspectives by the participants within this study. That is to say, its significant role, particularly in the field of language and culture, was recognised by the teaching staff and the students from this university. Their understanding of intercultural awareness has certainly enhanced participants' language teaching and learning. This is consistent with the findings reported in several studies (Roberts, 1992; Robinson, 1978).

Findings from the participants' responses to the open question of the survey and interviews were consistent with the situation discussed in the literature regarding views on Australia's multiculturalism. Participants considered Australia as a nation of cultural diversity. However, there was one survey participant who made the critical observation that Australia is a multicultural country although some people do not embrace intercultural awareness, around Tasmania especially as there tends to be a 'fear' towards other cultures and languages.

Furthermore, according to Han(2013), most significant when examining culture in foreign language teaching and learning are the types of knowledge, skills, and attitudes envisaged in intercultural awareness. These relate to understanding culture, language, and communication in general, as well as in relation to particular contexts, and an awareness of the dynamic relationship between foreign language and its diverse sociocultural settings. For instance, one survey respondent pointed out that language and culture are mutually embedded. She went on to state her own belief that culture was naturally embedded within language and therefore needs to be integrated with teaching the language. This finding is supported by Aguilar (2009), who believes that "language and its corresponding cultures are compared and contrasted and actively interrelate and interact, mutually and positively influencing one another"(p. 246).

This study highlights an issue of considerable importance for developing intercultural awareness and improving intercultural communications, contributing to a growing inter-disciplinary literature in this area. The results of this study provide researchers with a better understanding of intercultural awareness in tertiary education settings.

In summary, recommendations based on the findings of this research study fall into three categories: the promotion of intercultural awareness among staff as well as students; assisting staff members and students to improve the effectiveness of their intercultural communication; and assisting language students to take advantage of the cultural learning opportunities available on campus and beyond. All of these recommendations have implications for teaching methodology and course content. The fact that differences and cultural misunderstandings or even conflicts unavoidably exist within the cross-

cultural context should be understood. As intercultural enhancement is much needed in a rapidly changing and interactive world, language learners should concentrate on improving target language proficiency and extending experiences in the target culture.

However, investigations have been conducted exclusively in the field of tertiary education at one particular university, and this could potentially limit the findings in terms of their generalisability to other contexts. Researchers interested in the study of intercultural awareness need to be mindful that the findings of this study may not be transferable to their own contexts. Therefore, an all-round approach to studying intercultural awareness should be developed and it is also hoped that the increasing presence of international students on campuses will provide opportunities for the enhancement and development of intercultural awareness.

CONCLUSION

Taken as a whole, results from the data analysis in this study indicated that both teachers and students highly valued intercultural awareness in tertiary education areas. They would like to engage with people from different cultural backgrounds, seek common grounds, celebrate diversity and also enjoy the privileges of being intercultural. The results of this study suggest that in an increasingly complex and multicultural society made up of values and beliefs that can be understood from different points of view, the enhancement of intercultural awareness will also better equip language learners for the upcoming responsibilities as global language learners. As discussed, “more people than ever before in the history of the world now have both direct and indirect contact with each other, and increasingly, this contact includes people from a variety of diverse language and cultural backgrounds” (Deardorff, 2009, p. 456). This study provides the insights that language teachers must be culturally aware, considerate of students’ culture, and inform students of cultural differences, thus promoting understanding. Further research can be conducted using a larger sample size (e.g., by including distance undergraduate language students, postgraduate students) and more refined research instruments, in order to increase the statistical power of the data. The examination of a larger sample may also give greater insight into the effects of age, gender and experiences with other cultures on participants’ responses.

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