THE PARTICULAR AND UNIVERSAL IN CROSS-CULTURAL CURRICULA IN GENERAL EDUCATION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY

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The Particular and Universal in Cross-cultural Curricula in General Education: a Comparative Study of Students' Intercultural Sensitivity

Hsiang-Yung FENG[1], Chien-Lung TSENG[2], Yung-Ching LEE[3]

Abstract

Globalisation and entry into the era of knowledge economy have led to a stronger focus on internationalisation of higher education, with universities seeking to develop students' international sensitivity (IS) through cross-cultural general education courses. The current study used the intercultural sensitivity scale to investigate the effectiveness of such courses in improving students' IS. The study recruited 197 students enrolled in multicultural and bicultural courses and revealed that the students had high IS in terms of respect for cultural differences and interaction engagement but low interaction confidence. The male students had higher interaction confidence scores than the female students did. However, no other background attributes significantly influenced IS. The results of this study indicate that cross-cultural general education courses can enhance students' IS, particularly with respect to their interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, and interaction enjoyment.

Keywords: intercultural sensitivity; general education; cross-cultural curricula; internationalisation at home.

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Introduction

Higher education has become increasingly internationalised as our world becomes more globalised and as the knowledge economy becomes increasingly dominant. In her book on this topic, Higher Education in Turmoil: The Changing World of Internationalization, Jane Knight (2008) analysed how well higher education has engaged in internationalisation vis-à-vis its position in the global economy. In particular, she investigated how internationalisation's development should be interpreted and recommended internationalisation strategies for higher education institutions.

Contrary to popular belief (whether among authorities or the general public), international education is not simply about foreign language education or international exchange. International competence requires 'the ability to interact and cooperate with people from different countries and cultures to complete work tasks' (Chang 2021; Uyun and Warsah 2022) and thus involves linguistic, professional, and cross-cultural skills (Chang 2021; Van Melle and Ferreira 2022; Wu 2013; Yanto *et al.* 2022; Yurur *et al.* 2021). International competence in pursuit of a given task entails an ability to not only converse in a shared language but also inhabit a shared set of assumptions - within an international organisation or a given field (e.g., medicine, education, or art). Thus, individuals with cross-cultural competency are capable of observing and adapting to the needs of a given culture and handling the inevitable friction that arises when instances of cultural mismatch (inevitably) arise.

Internationalisation in higher education can be distinguished into internationalisation abroad and internationalisation at home. Internationalisation abroad has students spending time abroad, and internationalisation at home has students going through international education courses. Knight (2008) discussed the concept of internationalisation at home, indicating that it should involve a wide focus in which liaisons with local cultural and ethnic groups are but one of many crucial elements. In particular, internationalisation at home should be reflected not only in curricula but also in research, extracurricular activities, and approaches to teaching and learning. According to Knight, cross-cultural courses that help students navigate the global economy and job market are especially importance. The present study compared the effectiveness of two cross-cultural courses, as part of the internationalisation at home paradigm, in improving students' intercultural sensitivity.

Literature review

Competency-based education

Artificial intelligence is likely to disrupt the global economy in general and job market in particular. In particular, 70% of current jobs are expected to disappear within the next 10 years. Higher education must adapt to this new reality, and quickly. In particular, didactic pedagogical approaches must be urgently phased out in favour of those that emphasise critical thinking; problem-solving; and individualised, self-directed learning (i.e., learning how to learn).

According to the OECD (2016), competency-based education includes the four elements of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values, which must be cultivated jointly instead of singly. The term 'core competency' refers to the knowledge, abilities, and attitudes that a person must possess to be able to adapt to current life events and to face future challenges. In education focused on developing core competencies, learning should not be limited to subject knowledge and skills; rather, it should be focused on integrating life and learning and ensuring learners undergo holistic development by applying theory in practice (MOE 2021).

Core competencies are developed through lifelong learning. They are constituted by three dimensions - namely, autonomous action, communication and interaction, and social participation - that are each constituted by three aspects. Autonomous action entails self-directedness and physical and mental well-being; logical thinking and problem-solving; and the capacity for planning, execution, innovation, and adaptation. Communication and interaction involve linguistic, information technology, aesthetic, and media literacy. Social participation entails moral praxis and citizenship, interpersonal relationships and teamwork, and cultural and global understanding. Figure 1 illustrates the main concepts of the core competencies that are the focus of general education (MOE 2021; Wu 2017).

The present-day university is modelled on a model of liberal, humanistic education inspired by practices in ancient Greece. General education courses were first developed by scholars who believed that academic subjects in universities were overly specialised, and that the knowledge taught in universities was overly siloed. Through general education courses, they hoped to inspire students to think independently and ensure students gained at least a basic understanding of different subjects, with the expectation being that integrating knowledge in different areas would lead to students developing into well-rounded individuals. The university the authors are affiliated with has stated that the goal of its general education training is to 'cultivate talent who are equally skilled in the sciences and humanities. With their feet planted at home and with the world as their stage, these individuals must be forward-looking and have a sense of citizenship, whether in relation to the natural environment or society. In this university, the goal of general education is to cultivate a spirit of liberal education, to help students find their voice, to foster a capacity for big-picture thinking, and to meet a diverse range

of educational goals. Cross-cultural learning courses are a crucial aspect of such education, with the focus of these courses being cultivating a global perspective and intercultural sensitivity in students studying in disciplines such as science, engineering, business management, design, and language.

Intercultural sensitivity

In higher education, an increasing amount of attention has been given to cultivating cross-discipline and cross-cultural abilities. In addition, many companies have established cultural diversity as a pillar of company strategy (King, Perez, and Shim 2013; Lustig 2005; Moradi and Ghabanchi 2019; Yang 2016) given the global reach of their operations. Many companies also seek to internationalise their talent pool to hone their competitive edge, and cross-cultural adaptability is a must in such a workplace (Chen and Wang 2017; Çingöl *et al.* 2021; Kaya *et al.* 2021; Li 2016; Phan 2016).

Cross-cultural experiences (whether through formal avenues such as classes or informal avenues such as interacting with friends from other countries) and cultural tourism are indispensable to the humanistic vision of liberal education. Fantini (2020) analysed intercultural communicative competence (ICC) by investigating how ICC should be conceptualised and its components should be identified. Those attempting to internationalise curriculum and schools and seeking to implement educational exchange programmes should investigate both of these topics. Aptitude with respect to these components is developed but may also stagnate or regress over time. Traditionally, ICC has mainly been the focus of foreign language teaching intended to cultivate cross-cultural talent. Students in foreign language classes have generally been expected to not only become proficient in the target language but also engage with a range of issues from various cultures and do so with intellectual depth (Hagley 2020; Lu 2018; Rodríguez-Izquierdo 2021; Wu 2014). In modern society, close contact between countries, companies, and people has led to cultivation of intercultural awareness and literacy receiving more attention (Aktaş *et al.* 2021; Chang 2019; Huang 2019), with greater emphasis being placed on developing ICC-related characteristics and attributes, that is, on developing intercultural sensitivity (IS).

The concept of IS was first proposed by Bennett (1984), who considered IS to involve a process of continual development in cognition, emotion, and behaviour. Individuals with IS are able to effectively adapt when they encounter cultural differences. Bhawuk and Brislin (1992) developed the IS inventory, which measures the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural aspects of intercultural communication ability. However, Chen and Starosta (2000) reported that IS and ICC are often conflated and that the boundary between the two concepts has been analytically fuzzy. Thus, the current study defined the emotional aspect of ICC as an individual's willingness to proactively work toward understanding, appreciating, and accepting cultural differences. With this definition, IS is considered to include

an inner ability to develop positive emotions, with these emotions formed through the internal dynamics of appropriately coping with cultural differences to achieve effective interaction. Chen and Starosta (2000) developed an IS scale (ISS) in which IS is considered in terms of five dimensions: interactive engagement, respect for cultural differences, interactive confidence, interactive enjoyment, and interactive attentiveness.

A high level of IS is essential when an individual travel and is exposed to other cultures. However, IS is arguably more important in an individual's daily life, particularly when an environment is multicultural and likely to change quickly. Teachers are responsible for providing students with skills and for helping them develop empathy and respect differences (Arcagok and Yılmaz 2020; Chen and Wang 2018; Khabir *et al.* 2022; Wang *et al.* 2023; Yusof *et al.* 2015).

Methodology

Participants

This study recruited 197 students of higher education in Taiwan who had enrolled in the current authors' general education courses, with 112 enrolled in the multicultural course 'World Culture and Tourism' and 85 enrolled in the bicultural course 'Japanese Literature and Culture'. The participants were aged 18–22 years; 51.8% of the students were men, and 48.2% were women. The students mostly were freshmen or sophomores (67%) and were from different universities. Of the students, 91 (46.2%) had previously travelled abroad or participated in international exchange activities. The students' demographic information is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The distribution of the students' information

Item	Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	102	51.8
	Female	95	48.2
Grade	Freshman & Sophomore	132	67.0
	Junior & Senior	65	33.0
College	Science & Engineering	57	28.9
	Humanities & Design	44	22.4
	Business management	96	48.7
Overseas experience	None	106	53.8
	Yes	91	46.2
Cross-cultural courses	Multicultural course	112	56.9
	Bicultural course	85	43.1

Instrument

This study investigated the IS of students enrolled in cross-cultural general education courses and determined the relationships of IS with the background characteristics of students. This study also investigated the effectiveness of multicultural courses and foreign culture courses in improving students' IS. The questionnaire used to investigate these topics was divided into two parts: one was used to assess the students' background attributes, and the other was used to assess their IS. IS was evaluated using the ISS developed by Chen and Starosta (2000); the Cronbach's α coefficient of this scale is 0.86, indicating it has good reliability.

The ISS comprises 24 items, which are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with the items divided between 5 subscales measuring interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness. The ISS has been applied in various cultural contexts, and research has consistently confirmed that this scale has very high reliability and validity. For example, Altan (2018) used the ISS to analyse the IS of professional English teaching preservice teachers in Turkey, reporting the Cronbach's α coefficient for the overall scale to be 0.861. Segura-Robles and Parra-González (2019) used the scale to explore the IS of 364 primary school teachers in 4 Spanish cities and reported the scale to have a Cronbach's α reliability coefficient of 0.90. Li *et al.* (2020) used the ISS to determine the effectiveness of virtual reality in enhancing young people's IS in Hong Kong; they reported the ISS to have a Cronbach's α reliability coefficient of 0.886 before the participants completed in the virtual reality session and 0.832 immediately after the session. Lee (2022) applied the ISS in her study, 'The teaching and practice of cross-cultural literacy-oriented general education courses' and reported the scale to have a Cronbach's α reliability coefficient of 0.892.

Data analysis

The data were analysing using SPSS for Windows. The ISS and its five subscales were subjected to the Cronbach's α validation test; the resulting α values ranged from 0.688 to 0.825, and the overall reliability coefficient was 0.882, indicating the ISS had good reliability in this study. In the data analysis, values were presented as frequencies (f), percentages (%), means, and standard deviations (SDs), with data analysed using independent samples t-tests and one-way analysis of variance. An independent samples t-test was used to compare the measurement values of two independent groups with normal distributions, whereas a paired samples t-test was used to compare the measurement values of two dependent groups with normal distributions. Significance was set at $p < .05$.

Results

Participating students' IS

This study explored university students' IS and the personal emotional changes or reactions they experience when they interact with people of different cultures during course learning focused on developing cross-cultural literacy. The IS of the students who participated in this study were analysed through a comparison of the means and SDs of their scores on the five subscales of the ISS.

Table 2 lists the component reliability coefficient for each item. All items had a Cronbach's α of higher than 0.5; the subscale reliability coefficients were within the range of 0.688 to 0.825, and the overall Cronbach's α for the scale was 0.882, indicating good reliability and validity and, therefore, good internal consistency. The mean scores for the subscales indicate that the students' IS was high with respect to 'respect for cultural differences' (Mean = 3.969, SD = 0.599), 'interaction engagement' (Mean = 3.891, SD = 0.532), 'interaction attentiveness' (Mean = 3.853, SD = 0.581), and 'interaction enjoyment' (Mean = 3.562, SD = 0.822) and low with respect to 'interaction confidence' (Mean = 3.236, SD = 0.551).

Table 2. Participating students' intercultural sensitivities

Constructs	Number of items	Cronbach'α	Mean	SD
Interaction engagement	7	0.796	3.891	0.532
Respect for cultural differences	6	0.688	3.969	0.599
Interaction confidence	5	0.750	3.236	0.551
Interaction enjoyment	3	0.825	3.562	0.822
Interaction attentiveness	3	0.692	3.853	0.581
Total	24	0.882	3.728	0.441

IS and background characteristics

An independent samples t-test was employed to determine whether the IS of the participants differed in gender; the results are presented in Table 3. The results indicated that the IS of the participants did not show a significant difference in gender for the 'taking part in the intercultural interaction', 'respect for cultural differences', 'interaction enjoyment', and 'interaction attentiveness' subscales (t value = −.146, p > .05; t value = −.707, p > .05; t value = −1.093, p > .05; t value = .494, p > .05, respectively) but did for the 'interaction confidence' subscale (t value = 2.241, p < .05), with the results indicating that the male students had

more intercultural interaction confidence than the female students did. The overall results for the ISS indicated no difference in IS by gender (t value = .112, p > .05).

Additional t-tests indicated that IS did not significantly differ with the other background attribute variables, including grade and university.

Table 3: The t-test of intercultural sensitivities in gender

Constructs	Gender	Mean	SD	t	p
Interaction engagement	Male	3.885	0.532	-0.146	0.884
	Female	3.896	0.535		
Respect for cultural differences	Male	3.940	0.599	-0.707	0.481
	Female	4.000	0.601		
Interaction confidence	Male	3.320	0.546	2.241	0.026
	Female	3.145	0.545		
Interaction enjoyment	Male	3.500	0.804	-1.093	0.276
	Female	3.628	0.841		
Interaction attentiveness	Male	3.873	0.586	0.494	0.622
	Female	3.832	0.577		
Total	Male	3.731	0.445	0.112	0.911
	Female	3.724	0.438		

Cross-cultural courses and IS

This study used t-test analysis to explore whether students' scores on the five subscales of the ISS significantly differed when they had participated in cross-cultural courses. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 4. We discovered that the scores of the participants who had participated in multicultural or bicultural courses did not significantly differ on the 'taking part in the intercultural interaction', 'respect for cultural differences', 'interaction confidence', 'interaction enjoyment', or 'interaction attentiveness' subscales (t value = −.121, p > .05; t value = 1.002, p > .05; t value = −.829, p > .05; t value = 1.833, p > .05; t value = −.870, p > .05, respectively). The overall scores on the ISS also did not differ between the students who had multicultural course and who had bicultural course (t value = .362, p > .05). Furthermore, the findings seem to show that both multicultural and bicultural courses can increase students' intercultural sensitivity. The following would conduct a comparative analysis of the pre- and post-test results of the two courses.

Effect of cross-cultural general education curricula on IS

The Cronbach's α of the ISS was 0.882 before the cross-cultural course (pretest) and 0.841 immediately after the cross-cultural course (posttest). A paired samples t-test was conducted to compare the participating students' IS before and after the cross-cultural course. The average score on the posttest (Mean = 4.008, SD = 0.301) was higher than that on the pretest (Mean = 3.728, SD = 0.411), and the difference was significant (t value = 16.353, $p < .000$). The average posttest scores for the students who participated in the multicultural (Mean = 3.999, SD = 0.321) and bicultural courses (Mean = 4.019, SD = 0.274) were higher than the average pretest scores were. In addition, regarding the five subscales of the ISS, for the students who participated in the multicultural course, the pretest and posttest scores on the 'interaction engagement', 'respect for cultural differences', 'interaction confidence', and 'interaction enjoyment' subscales differed at a highly significant level ($p < .000$), and those on the 'interaction attentiveness' subscale differed significantly ($p < .05$). For those who participated in the bicultural course, the pretest and posttest scores on the 'interaction engagement', 'respect for cultural differences', and 'interaction enjoyment' subscales differed at a highly significant level ($p < .000$), and those on the 'interaction confidence' and 'interaction attentiveness' subscales significantly differed ($p < .01$).

Table 4: The t-test of intercultural sensitivities in different courses

Constructs	Course	Mean	SD	t	p
Interaction engagement	Multicultural	3.887	0.578	-0.121	0.903
	Bicultural	3.896	0.469		
Respect for cultural differences	Multicultural	4.006	0.646	1.002	0.318
	Bicultural	3.920	0.531		
Interaction confidence	Multicultural	3.207	0.557	-0.829	0.408
	Bicultural	3.273	0.545		
Interaction enjoyment	Multicultural	3.655	0.831	1.833	0.068
	Bicultural	3.439	0.799		
Interaction attentiveness	Multicultural	3.821	0.615	-0.870	0.385
	Bicultural	3.894	0.533		
Total	Multicultural	3.737	0.481	0.362	0.718
	Bicultural	3.715	0.384		

Table 5: The t test of intercultural sensitivities in pre- and post-test courses

Constructs	Pre-test		Post-test		Multicultural Compare pre-&post-test		Bicultural Compare pre-&post-test	
	Multicultural Mean (SD)	Bicultural Mean (SD)	Multicultural Mean (SD)	Bicultural Mean (SD)	t	p	t	p
Interaction engagement	3.887 (0.578)	3.896 (0.469)	4.233 (0.393)	4.244 (0.344)	11.724	0.000	11.178	0.000
Respect for cultural differences	4.006 (0.646)	3.920 (0.531)	4.445 (0.331)	4.418 (0.270)	9.315	0.000	10.249	0.000
Interaction confidence	3.207 (0.557)	3.273 (0.545)	3.307 (0.458)	3.384 (0.434)	3.829	0.000	3.512	0.001
Interaction enjoyment	3.655 (0.831)	3.439 (0.799)	3.845 (0.510)	3.808 (0.481)	4.188	0.000	4.898	0.000
Interaction attentiveness	3.821 (0.615)	3.894 (0.533)	3.869 (0.556)	3.969 (0.479)	2.356	0.020	3.034	0.003
Total	3.737 (0.481)	3.715 (0.384)	3.999 (0.321)	4.019 (0.274)	10.956	0.000	12.628	0.000

Discussion and Conclusion

This study used the ISS to measure university students' IS. The results indicate that the participating students had high IS in terms of respect for cultural differences and interaction engagement. However, their interaction confidence was low. The male students had higher interaction confidence scores than the female students did. However, no significant differences were noted for any of the other four subscales of the ISS. Furthermore, the students' background attributes, including their grade and university, did not significantly influence their IS.

This study investigated whether the use of cross-cultural curricula could effectively enhance students' IS. The results indicate that both multicultural and bicultural general education curriculum can enhance students' IS, particularly in terms of 'interaction engagement', 'respect for cultural differences', and 'interaction enjoyment', for which the pretest and posttest scores very significantly differed ($p < .000$). These results indicate that IS is not an instinctive or universal aspect of human behaviour and that cultivating IS in educational systems through competency-based education can be challenging. Nevertheless, students' IS can be effectively cultivated through partial or universal cultural curricula.

Although geopolitics has been an important issue in recent years, and regional economies have become increasingly important, issues of globalization and internationalization are still key to the development of leading industries and technology. Higher education cannot be exempted from seeking individual development within the framework of globalization or regional economy. Based on the push-pull theory, Wu and Huang (2022) pointed out that (1) in the "pull" aspect, the internationalization of higher education institutions, international students must be attracted and taken care of; (2) in the "push" aspect, home students must be motivated to look outward and move outward; then (3) it is to promote internationalization at home and widely offer general education courses that incorporate an international perspective.

Knight (2003) indicated those international, intercultural, and global dimensions are three terms that are intentionally used as a triad. Internationalization is about relating to the diversity of cultures that exist within countries, communities, and institutions, and so intercultural is used to address this dimension. However, globalization is included to provide the sense of worldwide scope. These three terms complement each other and together depict the richness in the breadth and depth of internationalization. Chang (2021) defines internationalization as "the ability to interact and cooperate with people from different national cultures to complete work tasks, and its connotation includes language, professional and cross-cultural abilities." The basis of cross-cultural competence is intercultural sensitivity. Borghetti and Zanoni (2019) identified three main themes about internationalization at home: multilingualism (which includes but it is not limited to English language use and learning), interculturality, and courses at university

as an opportunity for renewing curriculum. Pedersen (2016) believes that putting students under different cultures or making cross-cultural comparisons do not mean that cross-cultural literacy will naturally arise. They are necessary approaches toward intercultural development by systematic curriculum and teaching design.

An internationalised curriculum could better prepare graduates for globalising and increasingly culturally diverse workplaces. There is a need to provide students with intercultural learning opportunities at home because many students do not have access to study abroad opportunities. Brown, Mak and Neill (2016) described curriculum changes designed to enhance students' intercultural learning in a third year social psychology course at an Australian university. Students reported increased intercultural learning in this course, especially regarding awareness and knowledge, compared to another peer students who did not include such activities. Lehtomäki, Posti-Ahokas and Moate (2015) studied students, faculty and experts at "Education For All" (EFA) seminars and pointed out that internationalization at home can be enhanced by purposefully designing an integrated approach of contents, contexts and activities with careful consideration of pedagogical implications. More emphasis needs to be placed on students' active engagement, and spaces for cross-cultural learning dialogue need to be created to realize meaningful internationalisation at home. The conclusion of this study indicated that cross-cultural general education courses can enhance students' intercultural sensitivity. Not only the particular curricula introduce bicultural courses from other countries and the home country, but also the universal curricula introduce multicultural around the world, can improve students' cross-cultural competency.

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