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English Proficiency and Intercultural Communication--A Study of Chinese Students' Ability to Adapt to American Culture

He-ping Cheng

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English Proficiency and Intercultural Communication--A Study of

Chinese Students’ Ability to Adapt to American Culture

By
He-ping Cheng

THESIS
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1996
YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING
THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE

7-25-96
DATE

7/25/96
DATE

ADVISER

DEPARTMENT HEAD
Abstract

Modern technologies have brought our world to the brink of a Global Village. In the modern world, intercultural communication becomes an indispensable part of human activities. In the environment of foreign language study, intercultural communication skills are intertwined with the language education in order to prepare students for the needs of intercultural communication. There is no exception with teaching English as a foreign language in China. Started in the early 1980s, intercultural communication is a hot topic among scholars in the field of language education. However, despite the efforts made to raise the English learners' intercultural awareness, Chinese students still encounter countless difficulties when they come to the English speaking countries. They often consider their language deficiency as the main factor which hinders their ability to communicate successfully with the native speaker. In this study, I explored the different theories of culture and intercultural communication with a focus on the differences between China and America. Based on the literature review, a survey was conducted which examined the differences that exist in the interpretations of some daily expressions and cultures by both Chinese and American students. I assume that the language barrier the Chinese students have is, in the final analysis, a significant barrier between two cultures. I argue that the differences between Chinese culture and American culture hinders the Chinese students' capacity to communicate with American students. Recommendations are made based on the analysis of the findings in the research.
Acknowledgement

The project such as this would have been impossible without the dedication and support of my academic adviser. I would like to thank my chairperson, Dr. Mark Borzi, for the time and energy devoted. His professionalism and knowledge have made this project an exciting learning experience for me. Special thanks also go to Dr. Malenie, Mills. It was from her SPC 5000 class that my interest in this project developed. Her constant advice and support helped to pave the way for this study.
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CHAPTER I
Review of the Literature

Communication and Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication is nothing new. It has existed for thousands of years. It occurs whenever people of different cultural backgrounds come in contact with each other. In China's history what happened on the Silk Road (Evelyn Nagai Berthrono, 1983) was an outstanding example of communication across cultures.

According to Porter and Samovar (1985), communication has eight ingredients: source, encoding, message, channel, receiver, decoding, receiver response, and feedback. Among these ingredients, encoding and decoding are of special significance. In intercultural communication, messages are to be encoded in one culture and decoded in another. Misunderstanding or breakdown of communication may occur as a result of the different cultural contexts in which the encoding and decoding take place. For example, a message of greeting is encoded into "Have you eaten?" according to Chinese cultural norms, but is decoded as an invitation to a meal in Western culture.

Culture is a large and evasive concept. Scholars have all tried to define culture in a satisfactory manner, but none of them is satisfied with the other's definitions. Sapir (1921) argues culture may be defined as what a society does and thinks. Benedicts (1935) considers culture as what really binds people together. He holds that ideas and the standards are cultures that people have in common. Brown (1978) defines culture as a collection of beliefs, habits, living patterns and behaviors which are held more or less in common by people who occupy particular geographic area. Richard (1993) considers culture to include all of the conceptualized
and patterned ways of behavior of a given people: their ways of thinking, feeling, and acting and the physical manifestations of these. He thinks that this broad definition enables people to view the values, beliefs, attitudes, and concepts of "self" of a given people as important to understanding their behavior.

In today's world of unprecedented movement and contact across the boundaries of human communities, intercultural encounters come in many forms and circumstances. Individuals with differing cultural backgrounds come together in varying degrees of formality, involvement and intimacy, from encounters of national leaders, business men and women, students and faculties on college campuses to immigrants with a unique set of constraints. As no two cultures and no two individuals are quite alike, the cultural difference and incompatibility that the interactants bring to specific encounters add complexities to their communication experiences (Kim, 1991).

A major area of intercultural communication lies in belief and value systems and world view, which are the source of many of the apparent cultural differences. Richard (1993) lists five factors that influence intercultural communication; values, attitudes, knowledge, understanding, and observable aids. Values consist of beliefs, perceptions, and practices of worth to the individual. Attitudes include preferences, decisions regarding personal roles and relationships to group orientation regarding the use of space and touch, human similarities and differences and self-esteem. Knowledge is concerned with awareness of facts, observable skills, ability to apply knowledge, learning and facilitating styles, verbal and non-verbal interaction modes, flexibility, dependency, independency and interdependency patterns. According to Richard (1993), values are human beings' connections to the things of worth to them in life. They are seen in one's perceptions and beliefs and they are visible in one's actions. Althen (1988) argues: "Values are
intercultural communication studies is to help increase people's cross-cultural awareness so that fewer problems arise in their interaction with people of another culture. The focus of the study of intercultural communication will be on the communication styles and values. Communicative style refers to several characteristics of conversations among individuals. They are the topics people prefer to discuss, their favorite forms of interaction in conversation, in how much depth they want to get involved with each other, the communication channels (verbal or non-verbal) on which they rely, and the level of meaning.

Intercultural Communication Education in China

The study of intercultural communication in China started in early 1980. In the late 1970s, a policy of opening to the outside world and all round economic reform was implemented in an effort to modernize China. Since then trade and joint ventures with the western countries have mushroomed throughout China. As interaction with the outside world increases, so does the demand for personnel with strong English language skills. English began to be taught widely at all levels of education.

Realizing the importance of the background knowledge of English speaking countries, the policy makers and some western educated scholars in the circle of English education initiated intercultural communication research and teaching in China. Various training programs have been provided to raise the cultural awareness of the teachers of English. A variety of techniques have been incorporated into course-work to meet the objectives of intercultural communication education. Quite a few authentic teaching materials have been introduced. An increasing
number of English teachers from English speaking countries have been invited to teach in schools at various levels on both long-term and short-term basis. These teachers brought with them different cultural perspectives of different countries and intertwine English language instruction with the norms and folkways of English speaking countries.

However, despite the efforts made in intercultural communication education, there is no specific way to measure intercultural communication competence. Since the teaching of cultural difference between China and English speaking countries is mingled with language teaching, the prevalent consensus is that if one can master a sufficient amount of vocabulary and relevant structures he/she can naturally acquire the language competence (Cheng, 1987, 1988). The way to measure language competence is the written test. In addition to the countless tests a student must pass before he/she gets to college, at the college level he/she must pass a standardized test administered by the State Education Commission. Some universities, particularly key universities, have made it a regulation that any student who fails to pass the unified College English Test will not be granted a degree. The certificate of passing the test serves as a pass of English proficiency, which can help students easily find well-paid jobs in some big companies where proficiency in English is required.

For the most ambitious students who want to come abroad to further their study, they must pass TOEFL. The TOEFL test is intended to evaluate certain aspects of the English proficiency of persons whose native language is not English (Duran, Amorebieta & Colussi, 1985; Henning and Cascallar, 1992). The test result is widely used by colleges and universities in the United States and Canada in reviewing the admissions qualification of incoming foreign students whose native language is not English (Geranpayeh, 1994).
Statement of Problems

There has been an on-going debate in China on both the validity and the reliability of the College English Test since it was first applied. Some people argue that the College English Test has higher standard than TOEFL. There are some cases showing that some students who score high in the College English Test can get around 600 in the TOEFL test, which is far over the minimum score 550 for admission to most of the universities in both Canada and the United States.

Duran, et al. (1985) find that the TOEFL test is directly appropriate for assessing some language skills. However, so far no literature is available which provides statistical evidence as to how many scores are sufficient for a student to adapt well to the host culture.

In contrast, a number of studies have been conducted on the difficulties international students experience in the process of adapting to the host culture. Many people (Herkinheimo and Shute, 1988; Perkins, 1977; Sutdam and Collins, 1991) find that the foremost difficulty international students have is language proficiency.

Henderson (1993) argues the most common problems reported by international students were difficulties in language. They also find that owing to the wide diversity between the Eastern and Western cultures, all of the Chinese students in their study experienced adjustment problems while making a cultural transition. The most critical problems these students have were those of English proficiency. One study (Cheng, 1995) surveyed Chinese students’ cultural adaptability to the American culture. The results show that most of the Chinese students segregated themselves from American students. While denying any cultural shock they have experienced, most of them complain about their limited vocabulary when communicating with native...
speakers. These students have had at least ten years experience in English and were top students as far as English language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) are concerned. Most of them scored above 570 in the TOEFL test and were quite successful in their academic endeavors. The author assumes that conviction held by most Chinese students that language is the main hurdle in communication with native speakers is one-sided.

It might be true that the TOEFL scores can show their ability to survive academically in the English speaking countries, but they can not ensure successful adaptation to the host culture. To test this belief it is necessary to find out whether there exist differences in social norms and attitudes between Chinese students who prove qualified in language proficiency by TOEFL and American students. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H: Chinese students, who have adequate TOEFL scores, are still unable to evaluate successfully foreign cultural clues embedded in typical social situations.
CHAPTER II
Research Method and Sources of Values

Method

A questionnaire survey designed to compare responses from American students and Chinese students was developed. Twenty-five American students and sixty-four Chinese students were selected. (Twenty-four from Eastern Illinois University, twenty from University of Illinois at Urbana and twenty from Southern Illinois University). The questionnaire consists of three parts (see Appendix A). The first section is made up of four situational dialogues followed by multiple choices labeled a, b, c, and d on the interpretation of the dialogues. Section two consists of twelve topics of conversations. Section three contains eight practices in entertaining guests. The topics and the practices selected in the survey are considered most likely to cause confusions in intercultural communication. The intention of the second and the third sections is to identify differences in values and attitudes held by both American and Chinese students.

Sources of Survey Values

Althen (1988) indicates that the most important thing to understand about Americans is probably their devotion to individualism. Americans are brought up to conceive of themselves as separate individuals and they assume everyone else in the world is too. They consider the ideal person to be an individualistic, self-reliant and independent person.

Americans are also distinctive in the degree to which they believe in the ideal that all men are created equal. They are generally quite uncomfortable when someone treats them with obvious deference. They dislike being the subjects of open displays of respect-- being bowed to, being deferred to, being treated as though they could do no wrong or make no unreasonable requests.
This position of equality leads Americans to be quite informal in their general behavior and in their relationships with other people.

In contrast, traditional Chinese culture is widely considered to be built upon a value system crystallized in Confucianism (Yum, 1991; Pan, Chaffee, Chu and Ju, 1994). All schools of Confucianism agree that this traditional value system is revealed through elaborated definitions, regulations and moral and ethical principles regarding individual’s roles and relationships (Pan et al., 1994).

At the heart of the Confucian system lies a linear hierarchy governing the family structure, which was characterized by various dominance-obedience relationships, men dominating women, old dominating young and the emperor dominating everyone else (Pan et al., 1994). This hierarchy is presented with clearly defined roles, responsibilities, and customs which govern all the social, interpersonal interactions among all the members of the society.

Pan et al. (1994) summarizes six key differences between Chinese culture and American culture as follows:

1. American culture emphasizes “Active mastery” in the person-nature relationship, whereas traditional Chinese culture emphasizes “passive acceptance” of fate by seeking harmony with nature;

2. American culture tends to be concerned with external experiences and the world of things, whereas traditional Chinese culture emphasizes inner experiences of meaning and feeling;

3. American culture is characterized by an open view of the world, emphasizing change and movement, whereas traditional Chinese culture is typified by a closed world view, prizing stability and harmony;
4. American culture places primary faith in rationalism and is oriented toward the future, whereas traditional Chinese culture rests upon kinship ties and tradition with a past orientation;

5. American culture emphasizes horizontal dimensions of interpersonal relationships, whereas traditional Chinese culture places more weight on vertical interpersonal relationships;

6. American culture values the individual personality, whereas traditional Chinese culture weighs heavily a person’s duties to family, clan, and state.

Both Chinese culture and American culture have their own hierarchical organized systems of values (Richard, 1988). These differences in the patterning of values produce distinct patterns of social relationship in the two cultures.

According to Althen (1988), when Americans first meet they engage in a kind of conversation they call “small talk”. The most common topic is weather, or the speaker’s current physical surroundings -- the room or building they are in, or the sidewalk where they are standing. Later, after the preliminaries, Americans may talk about past experiences they have both had, such as watching a particular TV program, going to some place or eating at a particular restaurant.

Beyond small talk, there is a variation according to the situation, the people involved, and the setting in which the conversation is taking place. The topics vary among different genders and age groups. For example, the students are likely to talk about their teachers and classes, adults may talk about jobs, recreations, interests, houses or family matters, men are likely to talk about sports or cars, and women are likely to talk about their children if they have any or about household matters or personal care. However, there are some topics which many people regard as being a private matter, such as money, marital status, and age. Generally speaking, it is regarded as impolite in American culture to ask a person his/her age. This is particularly true of
women, and although individuals may vary as to how sensitive they are about this, on the whole it is offensive to ask directly "How old are you?" which is often asked in China.

Some people, though, particularly elderly people are quite happy to reveal their age. In this case, they may bring up the topic themselves, and may ask the other person to guess how old they are. Probably, it is then acceptable to discuss age freely. Another common question in China is how much money a person earns. This is regarded as an extremely personal and private affair in America. Marital status is another topic Chinese people prefer in daily conversations. It seems strange to most Chinese if someone, especially a female over thirty, has not gotten married, as they assume that everyone over 25 or 30 should be married, and if not, he/she must have some problems with his/her personality or social economic problems.

Embarrassment can also be made even worse in some other social rituals in visiting, leaving-taking, and the use of thanks. In America, it is common to telephone a friend or acquaintance before visiting them to make sure that they are at home and that the time is convenient. Whether it is acceptable or not depends somewhat on the nature of the relationship.

If the visit is a business rather than a social one, such as when a student wants some academic help from his/her professor, the professor may prefer to arrange a time in advance. American professors often have an appointment system and they expect students to come straight to the point, rather than go through lengthy social preliminaries. But in most Chinese higher educational institutions, although a formal appointment system is practiced, students are used to going directly to their teachers. As a result, if an American professor insists on a Chinese student making appointments, he/she may appear to be cold or rude, and give the impression of being extremely busy. And if things are done in the Chinese way, an American professor may feel it is
an inefficient way of managing his/her time.

If the visit is social rather than “business,” the situation is rather more flexible, however, Chinese people often make a command like statement when they mean to make a request. It is common for a Chinese to say to an American friend, “I’m coming to see you this afternoon.” In fact, what he/she really means is “Can I come and see you this afternoon?” But his/her wording carries the implication “You must stay at home this afternoon (because I’m coming to see you)”, which needless to say may cause irritation.

Another difference appears to be in visiting someone. In America, the visitor will be asked by the host to be seated. They will chat for a while, and then the host may offer the visitor something to drink like coffee, beer or soda. This is normally phrased as a question, “Would you like something to drink?” or the host may offer a specific drink directly. The guest is expected to answer honestly what he prefers. If he/she turns down the offer, the host will not give him any. If he/she accepts, he will be given one and will be expected to drink it all. After he/she has finished it, the host will offer him a second one. In China, the situation is quite different. When a guest arrives, the host will offer a seat which he assumes is the most comfortable and insist that the guest take that particular seat, no matter whether the guest feels comfortable or not. After the guest settles down in the seat, the host will offer a drink which he/she thinks is the best in value or price he has in the house. No matter whether the guest likes it or not, he will insist the guest drink it, as any refusal from the guest is perceived according to Chinese culture as a gesture of politeness that the guest assumes before he accepts the offer. As a result, the embarrassment often arises in the context of either culture. When in an American home, a Chinese may turn down an offer of the drink as a polite gesture before he accepts it. His
expectancy is that the host will insist before he accepts it. Unfortunately, that is not the case on most occasions, whereas in a Chinese home, if an American does not like what is offered for real he will probably be forced by the host to accept it. Furthermore, when Chinese receive visitors, they are often extremely hospitable in offering food even if it is not meal time. This shows their generosity and respect for the visitor.

If guests are invited for a meal, again there are major differences between the two cultures. Chinese prepare a very large number of dishes, usually far more than can be eaten at the time, whereas Americans tend to relate it more accurately to the people’s appetites. Both the quantity and variety are normally far less compared with those prepared in Chinese situations. The Chinese host may constantly put the best pieces of food on the visitor’s plate, and this again is an expression of hospitality. Americans, on the other hand, usually leave the guest to help himself and do not keep urging him to eat more.

Rituals of leave taking constitute another difference between two cultures. Chinese rituals seem to consist of imputing motives of tiredness and business to the other party. If an American is invited to a Chinese occasion the signal to leave is usually given by indulging in a couple of minutes’ small talk, as preparation for leaving, such as “It’s been nice to have seen you again, but I must be going now,” or “It’s nice of you to have invited us,” etc. However, when a Chinese is a guest in an American home he is likely to excuse himself by claiming that their hosts must be very tired, and have to get up early next morning for work, etc. What often shocks American hosts is the abruptness of leave-taking. The Chinese visitors often stand up suddenly and say “I’m sorry to have wasted your time” or “I’m sorry to have taken up much of your time.” Unlike Chinese culture, in typical Western contexts guests would usually find reasons to leave related to
themselves rather than to the hosts.

Still another difference between two cultures can be found in expressing “thanks.” The expression, “thank you” is used both in English and in Chinese to show gratefulness for help or for a present, invitation or an offer, but the exact way in which the expression is used in the two languages is somewhat different.

In Chinese, the frequency with which “thank you” is used is connected with the relationship between the speakers. If the relationship is very close, such as between the family members or close friends, it is not used so often. In fact, the use of it implies some distance. But in America this is not the case. “Thank you” is used extremely frequently, and is just as common between close friends as between casual acquaintances (Althen, 1988). If it is not used, it seems that the other person is being taken for granted. This difference can sometimes lead to misunderstanding. To Chinese, it may appear that the Americans always want to keep a distance between them. All of these differences of habits in language and behavior can be potential sources of offense and misunderstanding.

This survey provides data on the difference between Chinese and American interpersonal relations. The purpose is to utilize the data to analyze factors that influence intercultural communication between Chinese and American students.

**Method of Data Processing**

After the data was collected, each item was treated as an independent question. A Chi-square test was conducted in each item to determine if there was a significant difference between answers of American students and the responses by Chinese students to the items. The results of the $\chi^2$ are reported in the next chapter.
CHAPTER III

Result and Data Analysis

Result

An obvious difference was found between American and Chinese students in this survey. As indicated earlier, the section one consists of four situational dialogues followed by four choices. The purpose of this design is to find out whether there is any difference between Chinese and American students in their interpretation of these situations. Since people of different cultural background tend to interpret the situation by the standard of their own values and attitudes, the result of such interpretation in one culture contrasts sharply with that of another culture. The difference in the interpretation is considered to be possible factors that hinder the communication between Chinese students and American students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section I</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Probability *Significant at .01 Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Situation 1</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>44.56</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. invitation</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. greeting</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. both</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. others</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In interpreting the first item, “Have you had your lunch?”, there was a significant difference between American and Chinese student responses ($\chi^2=44.56$, df=3 $p=.000$). Eighty-eight percent of American students interpreted it as an invitation to meal, while eighty-three percent of Chinese students considered it as a greeting. There is also a difference in the interpretation of the second item($\chi^2=18.3$, df=2, $p=.000$). When a student speaks to his professor: “I am coming to see you this afternoon.”, to most American students(seventy-two percent), it is an affirmative statement, whereas seventy-three percent of Chinese students took it as an inquiry. Items three and four are typical Chinese ways of showing concerns to others in daily life, however, the result is different than expected. There is no significant difference in the choice of item three between American
and Chinese students. A significant difference exists in interpreting situation four. Seventy-two percent of American students considered the statement of item four as showing concern, however, none of the Chinese students deem it as showing concern. Noteworthy is that five percent of the Chinese students even think the statement is meaningless.

Section two is concerned with topics of conversation people tend to choose when they meet for the first time. The author's purpose is to find out whether there is any significant difference in norms between the Chinese students and the American students in their daily interactions.

Table 2:

Section II: Commonly Chosen Topics in Conversation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic of Conversation</th>
<th>percentage</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Probability *Significant at .01 level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. weather</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>8.87</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.003*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. age</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>14.93</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.000*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. origin</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.045</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. occupation</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>15.52</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.000*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. movement</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.584</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. income</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.720</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. residence</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>16.09</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.000*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. marital status</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>10.83</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.000*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. children</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>9.53</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.002*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. looks or appearance</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>4.86</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.028</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. spouse’s job</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.606</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. education</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>9.53</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.002*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
As the table shows, eight of the twelve items in section two were significant at the p=.01 level. These items were 1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 12. Weather is generally considered by English learners in China to be the most common topic English speaking people prefer in their social interaction. The survey shows ninety-five percent of the Chinese students chose it as a common topic, whereas only sixty-eight percent of American students considered it as a usual topic ($\chi^2=8.87$, df=1, p=.003). When it comes to inquiring about age, thirty-two percent American students thought it is an appropriate topic. In contrast, none of the Chinese students selected it as an acceptable topic ($\chi^2=14.93$, df=1, p=.000). Sixty-eight percent of American students thought it is all right to ask someone about his occupation, while only twenty percent of the Chinese students chose this topic ($\chi^2=15.52$, df=1, p=.000). The difference exists in the topic seven, asking where one lives. Unlike most American students (seventy-two percent), only a small percentage of Chinese students (twenty-two percent) thought the topic as appropriate ($\chi^2=16.09$, df=1, p=.000). There is also a difference between American and Chinese students in topic eight, asking marital status. Thirty-six percent of American students and only five percent Chinese students chose this topic ($\chi^2=10.83$, df=1, p=.000). Topic nine is asking about how many children the partner has. Twenty-eight American students considered it as a usual topic, compared with two percent of Chinese students who shared the same opinion ($\chi^2=9.53$, df=1, p=.002). The last topic is inquiry about the education the partner has. Twenty percent American students and only two percent Chinese students considered it as an appropriate topic in a conversation ($\chi^2=9.53$, df=1, p=.002). An obvious difference is also found in section three. This section deals with some norms and values which may demonstrate different perspectives
between Chinese students and American students.

Table 3:

Section III: Practices in Entertaining Guests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Probability *Significant at .01 level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Provide a particular seat</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>7.79</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.005*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Let the guests be seated wherever they like</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.001*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Offer the best drink</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>11.62</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Offer several choices</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>10.99</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.001*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Host insists on the guest having something to drink</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.881</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The host keeps offering alternatives until the guest accepts something to drink</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The host keeps providing helpings to the guests at the meal</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.432</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. The host keeps the guest for a while to show hospitality</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.431</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When entertaining guests, eighty-four percent of the American students, compared with forty-one percent of the Chinese students, ($\chi^2=11.62$, df=1, p=.01) thought the host should let the guest be seated wherever he/she likes. Sixty-three percent of the Chinese students, in contrast to twenty-eight American students ($\chi^2=7.79$, df=1, p=.005), thought that the host/hostess should provide a particular seat which he/she thinks is the most comfortable in the house. Ninety-six percent of the American students and fifty-nine percent of Chinese students ($\chi^2=10.99$, df=1, p=.001) thought that when offering drinks the host/hostess should provide several choices. Forty-nine percent of the Chinese students and eight percent of the American students ($\chi^2=11.62$, df=1, p=.000) thought the host/hostess should offer a drink which he/she thinks is the best in the house.

The result of the survey shows that a sharp contrast exists between Chinese and American students in not only interpreting the situations in which conversations are taking place but also the selection of topics in conversations and the practice of social norms. A further discussion can support the argument that these differences can to a great extent affect intercultural communication.
CHAPTER IV
Discussion, Recommendations, and Limitations

Discussion

From the analysis of the data collected in the survey, I have come to a conclusion that most of the Chinese students studying at EIU are aware in various degrees that there exist differences between the Chinese culture and the American culture. For example, none of the Chinese students chose the inquiry about age as an appropriate topic when talking to a person they meet for the first time. To my surprise, thirty-two percent of the American students chose it as a common topic when they meet someone for the first time. Again, beyond my expectation, there is no significant difference between American and Chinese students in the selection of item eight in section three.

It is a common practice across China for the host to keep the guest a little while as a token of host/hostess’s hospitality. Thirty percent of American students and forty-one percent of Chinese students considered it as an appropriate practice. It is obvious that fifty-nine percent of Chinese students consciously avoided this practice.

The awareness of the cultural difference is also evident in interpreting situational dialogues three and four in section one. Item three and four are typical Chinese ways of showing concerns to others. Interestingly enough, those who think the statements are meaningless are none other than Chinese students.

The tendency for the Chinese students to avoid typical Chinese expressions and practices is obvious. This purposeful avoidance is understandable. For one thing, these students are all college graduates who studied English for at least ten years and had more or less some contacts
with native English speakers or American and British cultures before they came to the United States. For another, most students attended some kind of training course before they took the TOEFL and GRE in China. From these courses they probably learned some differences between the two cultures.

Their life in America also helped them pick up some customs. Most of the Chinese students surveyed have lived in the United States for over a year. Of twenty-four students surveyed at EIU, forty-one percent have lived in the United States for over two years, twenty-four percent have lived in the United States for over one year and only thirty-five percent have lived in the United State for less than one year.

Despite Chinese student awareness of the cultural differences, the influence of their primary culture can not be totally eliminated. The results of the survey show the difference in value held by both American and Chinese students. Take items one, two, three and four in section three for example. Item one is a traditional Chinese way of entertaining guests. When a guest enters the house, the host/hostess usually leads him/her to a particular seat for him/her to be seated. The guest will feel very uncomfortable if the host/hostess fails to do so. He/she might have the feeling that he/she is not welcomed if no seat is provided by the host/hostess, however, as shown in item two, a majority of American students think the host/hostess should let the guest sit wherever he/she thinks comfortable. The significant difference exists between American and Chinese students in selecting item three, providing a particular drink while entertaining the guest. Item two and four represent an American value of respecting “personal independence”. If the host/hostess designates the guest to sit in a certain seat, it obviously intervenes the freedom of the guest, who would probably feel quite uncomfortable. Sixty-three percent of the Chinese students
still consider it as an appropriate practice.

The survey confirmed the author's conviction that differences exist between American students and Chinese students in the interpretation of the expressions and practices in their daily interactions. These differences can to a certain extent interfere with the communication between the students from two cultures.

Porter and Samovar (1991) argue: "in the most basic sense, language is an organized, generally agreed-on learned symbol system used to represent human experiences within a geographic or cultural community" (p.17). They consider communicative behavior to be governed by rules-principles or regulations. Communication rules are both culturally and contextually bound. Hall (1991) argues: "the rules governing what one perceives and what one is blind to in the course of living are not simple; at least five sets of disparate categories of events must be taken into account. These are the subject or activity, the situation, one's status in a social system, past experience and culture. The patterns governing these five dimensions are learned early in life are most taken for granted" (p.16). As Porter and Samovar (1991) put it "culture is an all-encompassing form or pattern of living. It is complex, abstract and pervasive. Numerous aspects of culture help to determine communicative behavior. These socio-cultural elements are diverse and cover a wide range of human social activity" (p.14). They hold: "intercultural communication can best be understood as cultural diversity in the perception of social objects and events" (p.14). Since people from different cultures perceive the world differently a minor diversity is likely to introduce people to "dissimilar experiences and hence to varied and frequently strange and unfamiliar perceptions of the external world" (Porter and Samovar, 1991).

When people talk about culture, they can not exclude language, as “language is the primary
vehicle by which a culture transmits its belief, values and norms," (Skow and Samovar, 1991, p.87). Language is a part of a culture and culture is a part of language. The two are closely and intricately related. Although Chinese students have reached a certain degree of proficiency in English their primary culture is so deeply rooted in their mind that it is unavoidable that when two languages, and indeed two cultures come into contact, they still constitute a hurdle for them.

Since Chinese students learned English in China, most of the meanings of the words they learn are from a dictionary. Some culturally loaded words and expressions are learned without relevant context, therefore, when they find the words they are familiar with appearing in a different context they feel totally at a loss as to what the words mean in a particular situation. For example, the word "dude", which American girls often use to refer to young men, has a complete different meaning when it is translated into Chinese. In English Chinese dictionary "dude" means dandy- a man who spends too much money on his clothing and personal appearance, it also refers to playboys, which has a negative meaning in Chinese culture. That is why when Chinese students hear girls refer to boys as "dude" intimately they are totally lost at sea.

As native speakers of English and Chinese students have different beliefs, customs, life styles and behaviors, they often find the nomenclature loaded with culture. Chinese students are often puzzled over such terms as "me" generation and "baby boomer" generation etc.

When the denotation of a word is the same in both cultures, there may still be a problem, for the connotations of a word are also culturally loaded. The word "authority" is a case in point. A native speaker of English may say the authorities of the government or the authorities of the school without attaching any pejorative sense to the word, but its Chinese equivalent "dang Ju" is
usually used as a derogatory word. A Chinese student of English would naturally refer to his
government authorities as government leaders, he would address his school authorities whom he
favors as school leaders or head/leadership of the school, and influenced by his traditional
Chinese concept, Chinese students would naturally but erroneously regard the English word
“authorities” as having only a pejorative connotation.

Another example is the word "rhetoric". Although according to the dictionary, "rhetoric" has
both positive and negative denotations, Chinese students of English usually memorize its
negative meanings, that is, "speech or writing that sounds fine and important, but is really
insincere or without meanings", therefore, when they are bombarded with positive comment on
some political figure’s rhetoric they are often confused.

Cross-cultural differences also exist in the case of idioms and proverbs. In Chinese culture
idioms and proverbs are frequently used. Most of the proverbs and idioms either originated from
historical events or developed from the folk stories. The ability to use proverbs is a symbol of
wisdom. The Chinese students will automatically revert to this habit while interacting with
Americans. It is often the case that while they are describing something they will unconsciously
refer to a proverb in Chinese and then try to translate the proverb into English. Although
occasionally they can find some similar ones in English, owing to the cultural difference and
hence the symbol of the language, the literary translation always puts them in an awkward
situation. By literary translation, they are likely to confuse American students with Chinglish
(mixture of Chinese and English), and, as a result, the conversation might break down.

As language is a means for people to interact with other members of their culture and a means
of thinking, serving both as a mechanism for communication and as a guide to social reality
(Skow and Samovar, 1991), when people sharing the same culture are involved in an interaction, they both understand the context. They often take it for granted that their partners share the same understatements. This is what is called TFG notion in interpersonal communication, which has tremendous effect on the intercultural communication.

**TFG Effect**

Hopper (1981) suggests a taken-for-granted notion applied by the native speakers. He defines this notion as:"a particular level of experience which presents itself as not in need of further analysis”. He thinks the notion of TFG relates to at least five factors. They are missing premises of enthymemes, felicity conditions of speech acts, wants of arguments, presuppositions of sentences, cooperative principles and pragmatic implication. He (1981) holds: "TFGs are individual tiles in the human discourse mosaic. They have uses or meanings in regard to the larger patterns they help constitute.” In answer to the question how communicators interpret TFGs and the message patterns in which they are embedded, Hopper (1981) describes a list of "interpretive procedures”, which includes doing reciprocity of perspectives, using et cetera routines, searching for a normal form linguistic analogs and tacit integration. By reciprocity, he means in communication partners use the method of role-taking. This idea assumes that if speaker and hearer were not to change places, they would perceive basically what the other presently perceives. Difference resulting from perspective should be essentially disregarded as bias. Perspective similarities become TFGs. Et cetera involves the assumption that talk can be presumed meaningful and coherent, though these properties are not always immediately evident in the talk but at the some deeper level they are presumably clear and purposeful. Hopper (1981) argues:"The most important et cetera interpretive procedure is retrospection-prospection, which
Interculture 30

involves comparisons of the present message with other message of the similar form/content used in the past or likely to be used in the imaginable future. "Another et cetera routine involves a notion of let it pass which involves a procedure for accepting ambiguous or enigmatic discourse without insisting that it be clarified.

The basic assumption underlying concept of normal form is that discourse fits a relatively stable set of normal forms. In interaction, communicators ask a procedural question about what kind of event they are in and simultaneously calibrate their place in the spare-time script of the situation. By linguistic analog, Hopper(1981) indicates that to make sense of TFG-studded patterns people involved in the interaction follow two procedures. One is transformation, the other is embedding.

Transformation relate surface ordering to presumed deeper levels of meaning and intentions. Embedding is another syntactic analog to TFG processing. It involves procedures for taking any size of string and inserting it into another string as a single unit. "in a conversation we obtain a focal awareness of others' statements motives and the like, and support this awareness by attending while-not-thinking-one-is-attending to many other aspects of the conversation: turn-taking, facial expression, verbal intonation" (Hopper, 1981). The process of combining subsidiary information with facial information to act is referred to as tacit integration. Hopper (1981) argues that although TFG factors have received much attentions from many people there are still possibilities of miscommunication. One cause may be different enthymemes held by the speakers and listeners. The other is the failure to choose relevance which can serve to remind a listener that some tie between a present utterance and other discourse exists.

Hopper (1981) argues: "if we cannot solve TFG interpretation all the time, then speakers
could run into many interpretative difficulties.” From Hopper’s analysis we can see that the TFG effect can even cause some problems among the people sharing the same culture, therefore, it can definitely cause even more difficulties for the people from different cultures.

Skow, and Samovar (1991) argue: “Language gives people a means of interacting with other members of their culture and a means of thinking, serving both as mechanism for communication and as a guide to social reality.” Since Chinese students have learned English in the context of their own culture, the English they have learned is unavoidably tinged with Chinese culture. Lack of sufficient knowledge of American culture has handicapped them in their ability to communicate interculturally. It seems to be a common phenomenon that Chinese students’ motivation to communicate with Americans decreases with the passage of time. This phenomenon is, according to my observation, related to their experience of unsuccessful communication with native speakers. It follows that the more setbacks they meet, the less willingly they are to communicate with native speakers. All too often, they prefer to refrain from the host culture.

The statistics obtained so far demonstrate that a language barrier is only a part of the cultural barrier. The Chinese students’ experience shows that intercultural communication education intertwined in English education in China is not enough to prepare Chinese students for the adaptation to the host culture. The data also shows that a high score on TOEFL does not ensure that one can adapt well to the host culture.

Recommendations

The difficulty in communicating with the people of the host culture is not the problem only the Chinese students have. Instead, it is the common problem the international students are faced
with when they first come to the United States, therefore, as long as the international exchange
programs exist at any of the American universities, it is necessary to put the cultural orientation
program on the agenda. It is recommended that:

1. The Office of International Programs of the university should have a cultural orientation
   program. When new students come to the campus, it is necessary to involve them in a host
cultural orientation program. The purpose is to acquaint new-comers with cultural norms,
values and social rituals of the American society.

2. If possible, a host family should be provided. A student can live with the host family for at
   least a semester to learn the gist of the culture.

3. Seminars should be held on the regular basis on the different cultural norms and values
   held by the people from different countries.

4. The news coverage of the university newspaper should take into consideration the diversity of
   cultures to raise the cultural awareness of both international students and American
   students.

**Limitations**

Although this research has turned out some useful data, there are still some limitations that
need to be addressed for future researchers. Owing to time constraints, the sample size was
limited. The samples selected are based on the availability rather than on the basis of random
sampling. The scope of the survey should be expanded. The survey covered only a small portion
of the social norms, values and attitudes. Since culture is a diversified concept, to study cultural
difference, it is better to cover as many aspects as possible to make the argument stronger. A
final limitation is on the form of data collection. No study has examined real situation. Since
most Chinese students’ complaint about their inability to communicate well with American students focuses on the language itself, it would be better to study the real conversation between the students from two cultures.
CHAPTER V

Conclusion

Where there is a human being, there is culture. Culture is whatever can be learned. Communication takes place whenever people have the message passed around. When people from different cultural backgrounds send and receive messages reciprocally, intercultural communication occurs.

Modern technologies will sooner or later make the dream of the Global Village into a reality. This makes it imperative for the people of different cultural backgrounds to acquire the capacity of communicating with the people from other cultures.

Intercultural communication education in China dates back to the early 1980s, when China began to launch its ambitious modernization program. However, in spite of the efforts made to incorporate the cultures of English speaking countries into the language teaching, still more efforts are needed to strengthen intercultural communication education. Further research is needed on the intercultural communication education in China to meet ever increasing demand of its international exchange programs.

Although the Chinese students surveyed score higher in English proficiency test and have stayed in the United States for a couple of years, they still find it difficult to assimilate into the host culture. Most of them think that it is their language proficiency that prevents them from communicating fluently with the native speakers. This research shows that this opinion is incorrect or at least it is one-sided.

This research has proved my assumption that written test proved proficiency in English language, namely, scores of TOEFL and GRE, cannot ensure successful communication with the
native speakers. Sharing the common language structures and vocabulary cannot guarantee effective intercultural communication.

To meet the needs of ever increasing international exchange, more efforts should be made by the policy makers in the circle of the language education in China. In the meantime, in-depth cultural orientation programs are also needed to help those who have newly arrived in the United States to adapt to the host culture sooner.
References


Yum, J. O. (1991). The impact of Confucianism on interpersonal relationships and
Appendix A

Dear friend:

This is survey research on intercultural communication. Please take a few minutes to complete the questions listed below. Your cooperation will be highly appreciated:

I. Instruction:

Below each of the following sentences please write your interpretation. For example, "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

This can be interpreted as

a. an inquiry to offer a drink to the guest
b. suggestions to offer a cup of coffee
c. greeting
d. others

1. Situation: In the hallway two people meet one asks the other.

Speaker: "Have you had your lunch?"

This can be interpreted as:

a. an invitation to lunch
b. greeting
c. both
d. others (please explain ____________________)

2. Situation: A student speaks to his professor.
Speaker: "I am coming to see you this afternoon."

This can be interpreted as:

a. an inquiry
b. suggestion
c. affirmative statement
d. others (Please explain _________________________)

3. Situation: A cold day. One saw his colleague standing outside the office building. He spoke to his colleague.

Speaker: "It's such a cold day. You should put on more clothes, or you will catch a cold."

This can be interpreted as:

a. Showing concern
b. suggestion
c. meaningless
d. others (Please explain _________________________)

4. Situation: A student saw his classmate keeping coughing. He said the following to him.

Speaker: “You must have caught a cold. You should go and see the doctor, otherwise, the cold can develop into complications.”

This can be interpreted as:

a. meaningless
b. a suggestion
c. Showing concern

d. others (Please explain ________________________ )

II. Which of the following items are appropriate to say to one you've just met. Circle all that apply.

1. What do you think of the weather?
2. How old are you?
3. Where are you from?
4. Where do you work?
5. Where have you been?
6. How much money do you make?
7. Where do you live?
8. Are you married?
9. How many children do you have?
10. You look nice.
11. What does your spouse do?
12. What schooling do you have?

III. What do you think is the appropriate way to entertain guests at home. Circle those which you think are acceptable practices.
1. Provide a particular seat which you think is the most comfortable in the house.

2. Let the guests be seated wherever they like in the house.

3. Offer a drink which the host thinks is the best.

4. Offer several choices of drinks to let the guests decide which one they like.

5. When the guest turns down the offer, the host insists on him having one, because the initial declining is only a gesture of politeness.

6. When the guest turns down the offer, the host keeps offering something else until the guest accepts something to drink or eat.

7. To show hospitality, it is appropriate for the host to keep providing helpings to the guests, at the meal.

8. When the guests want to leave the host keeps the guests for awhile to show the host’s hospitality even if he does not want the guest to stay any longer.