

Has The Cat Got Your Tongue? Second Language Factors in Intercultural Difficulty Management

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Abstract

Previous intercultural communication research has relatively underplayed the influence of second language factors. This underplaying arises for three reasons: 1) the over-emphasis on the influence of cultural differences in intercultural communication; 2) the prevalent assumption that communication style in intercultural communication is the same as that in intra-cultural communication; 3) the dominant (post-) positive research approach in intercultural communication leading to the overlooking of linguistic factors and context. This paper reports an exploratory study on the influence of linguistic factors in intercultural communication by taking an interpretive research approach. It shows that in the process of dealing with intercultural difficulties in Australia, Chinese overseas students with different self-perceptions of second language (L2) communicative competence can influence their face concerns and difficulty management strategies in different ways.

Keywords: linguistic issues; intercultural difficulty management; international students

Introduction

Intercultural difficulty management is a major problem that overseas students have to deal with in their intercultural communication experience. However, recognized by many studies as a big difficulty in intercultural interactions, second language factors have been underplayed in cross-cultural and intercultural communication research (Byram 1997). This is because the dominant understandings in the intercultural communication literature have attributed intercultural difficulties to cultural differences. Predominantly using quantitative research methods, researchers in this area have identified different cultural variables to account for intercultural miscommunication. However, their models have failed to account for some phenomena such as where second language users intend to solve intercultural miscommunication with strategies suggested by these theories because of constraints on their second language competence.

This underplaying of linguistic issues reflects several factors. First, the focus of many intercultural studies is on the influence of cultural difference on communicative behaviour. Second, assumptions about the process of intercultural communication can downplay linguistic factors. Third, the methodological approach characterizing much research on intercultural communication issues prioritises comparisons of culture rather than of linguistic competence.

This paper attempts an initial study on the influence of linguistic factors in intercultural communication, or language and culture interaction, by doing case studies of a small number of Chinese overseas students in Australia managing their interactional difficulties in English. "Difficulty" here is defined as any rapport-threatening situation in which people have the potential to feel uncomfortable, confused, embarrassed, humiliated, angry, annoyed, or stuck in a dilemma. Difficulty is common in our daily life and might escalate into conflict or be defused before it turns into a conflict. Thus, difficulty in its commonsense definition is dynamic in nature, including its background, history, the way it is embedded

in the moment and outcomes. It provides a fertile ground for study. Here, intercultural communication is specifically studied in the context where the shared language is English, which is spoken as an additional language by Chinese students and as a dominant language by many Australians. "Chinese students" rather than other L2 learners are chosen here due to the first author's advantageous position as a Chinese culture insider, who can look at their interpretations of their experiences from their cultural perspective. "Chinese students" in this study only refers to Mandarin-speaking background people who were born and have received their primary and secondary education in the People's Republic of China, who have learned English as a foreign language and use English as a second language in Australia.

Linguistic Factors in Intercultural Communication

Previous studies into interactional difficulties in applied linguistics have mainly focused on language, taking language proficiency as a variable to predict or measure language problems. In dealing with these difficulties, applied linguistic studies have recommended micro-level linguistic strategies such as repair, repetition, or rephrasing to compensate for the intercultural communication breakdown.

Cross-cultural and intercultural communication research has mainly focused on cultural influences on communication. Second language factors have been relatively underplayed in this field (Byram 1997). This underplay may be due to three reasons. Firstly, many studies in this field are *cross-cultural* rather than *intercultural* studies. They use these two terms interchangeably, which reflects a concern of scholars to understand how the forms and functions of communication might be better comprehended by comparative analysis. This approach has led to the useful distinction between culture-general characteristics of communication (focusing on the search for universals) and culture-specific characteristics (focusing on the search for national or local cultural variants). Since communication identified in this approach is the one conveyed in people's native language, second language factors are not the focus.

Secondly, though some scholars do not necessarily share the same assumption (e.g., Lustig & Koeter 2003), most researchers in this field assume that the intercultural communication process is similar to the intra-cultural one. Byram (1997), for example, points to this assumption in his critique of Gudykunst's underplaying of language issues in his writing on intercultural communication:

The significance of linguistic competence is down-graded ... in the perspective taken by Gudykunst (1994), who argues that 'the processes operating when we communicate intercultural are the same as when we communicate intra-culturally' (1994: x). It is not surprising when he devotes only two pages to 'second language competence' ... [that linguistic competence is] mentioned only as a possible supportive factor." (Byram 1997:15-16).

This statement from Gudykunst remained unchanged in the most recent edition of his book (2003), reflecting his emphasis on process rather than content or style. Byram finds the emphasis on similarity unsatisfactory, and argues that the process of intercultural communication actually differs from that of intra-cultural communication in "the subjective experience of interaction in a foreign language" (Byram 1997:41). Intercultural communication focuses on communication among members from different cultures, whereas intra-cultural communication refers to communication among members of the same cultural background. Byram (1997:41) further explains that "the foreign speaker may experience a degree of "powerlessness" when he/she is communicating with a native speaker and "may sense the constraints of insufficient knowledge and skill in linguistic competence to meet the specific requirements of the interaction".

Thirdly, the underplaying of second language competence as a factor in intercultural communication is also due to the influence of the (post-) positivist methodological perspective in intercultural communication research. This approach aims to identify variations in communication behaviours and assumptions from group to group (Martin & Nakayama 2007). Cross-cultural and intercultural communication research characteristically regards culture as a variable and assumes that intercultural communication difficulties are likely to be caused by cultural differences. Using a (post-) positivist approach, researchers have identified, on a macro level, the content and sources of intercultural difficulties, and have suggested that adapting to different communication styles when communicating with people from different cultures should reduce intercultural difficulties and enhance intercultural communication. However, people often bring to intercultural communication different cultural frames, values and personalities that make adaptation difficult. In many situations, it is not clear who should

adapt, to what norms and styles, and for what purpose. If people are communicating in a second or third language, this adaptation is often more difficult.

To capture the influence of second language factors, this paper, along with Gudykunst (2002), distinguishes *cross-cultural* and *intercultural* communication. According to him, while *cross-cultural* communication involves different communication styles in different cultures, *intercultural* communication research focuses on interaction between members from different cultural communities. Specifically, the term "intercultural" communication in this paper refers to the investigation of the interaction among members coming from different cultures (cf. Gudykunst 2002). Oetzel provides a succinct illustration of this approach:

Intercultural communication ...is... communication that occurs between individuals and entities that are culturally unlike. Using this definition, intercultural communication can take place between two individuals who might be married (one partner from South African and the other from Argentina), but also between international entities such as rival governments (Oetzel 2009:15).

Intercultural communication, from this perspective, emphasizes the roles of individuals in particular contexts. It provides the possibility for an approach that sees communication styles and behaviours as dynamic and subject to change. In order to understand the complexity of intercultural interactions among the Chinese students participating in this study, we need to take into account these dynamic characteristics of both linguistic and cultural adaptation.

In accord with these dynamic characteristics, we chose to look at our participants' self-perceptions of L2 communicative competence rather than their objectively measured L2 proficiency. Most studies on intercultural communication in applied linguistics have taken measured language proficiency as a static determining variable. They have mainly focused on the arbitrarily measured average second language proficiency level, usually using an experimental or semi-experimental method. But second language interaction in real life is complex and subject to change. It is constantly shaping and shaped by culture and context. Maybe because of the complexity of language and culture interaction, previous studies in cross-cultural communication and applied linguistics have mainly focused on *either* cultural *or* linguistic aspects. Some scholars, such as Spencer-Oatey, attempt to untangle this complex interaction on a theoretical level, but few empirical studies have been done to date. Our approach is looking at self-perception of L2 communicative competence in an attempt to untangle this complexity because self-perception of L2 communicative competence is influenced by multiple factors in L2 learners, such as their L2 proficiency, beliefs and values in language learning and personalities, is also dynamic and subject to change, therefore is useful to capture the dynamism of L2 interaction.

L2 Proficiency and Self-perceptions of Communicative Competence

The term "competence" has been the centre of debate in the field of linguistics and applied linguistics. Chomsky's 1960's definition of "competence" only refers to the ideal speaker-hearer's knowledge of a language. In opposition to Chomsky's view of the ideal speaker-hearer, Hymes focused on the real speaker-listener features of language, that is, social interaction and language in actual use, and developed a broader concept to include social dimensions of linguistic competence—"communicative competence". This concept later has been developed for application in language teaching and language proficiency testing, such as the model developed by Canale & Swain and Canale . This most influential model distinguishes four levels of competence:

- 1) linguistic competence (knowledge of grammar)
- 2) sociolinguistic competence (knowledge of how to use language appropriately)
- 3) discourse competence (the knowledge of coherence and cohesion of text)
- 4) strategic competence (knowledge of how to deal with trouble and breakdown)

They use this model to test L2 learners' proficiency level and as a variable to understand second language use in real-life contexts.

Second language communicative models such as Canale & Swain's (1980) model provide a useful repertoire for researchers to draw on to analyze language problems of L2 learners. However, this field has treated L2 as static, and used language proficiency level as a variable in research. But language is dynamic and is constantly shaping and shaped by culture and context. Therefore, our study is using L2 proficiency as a starting point to investigate participants' self-perceptions of their L2 communicative competence. Proficiency can be a source of self-perceptions of L2 communicative competence, for L2 users may take it as an objective measure to evaluate their own language competence, but in interactions, proficiency cannot be the only source of self-perception of L2 communicative competence. Another important source of self-perception of L2 communicative competence is beliefs in the norm of L2 use, such as English native speaker model.

The Native Speaker Model

The native speaker model has been a traditionally preferred goal for second language learners for a very long time. There have been many debates about this model in recent years. For example, Byram (1997) argued that this native-speaker model creates an impossible target and consequently inevitable failure for language learners. Kramsch also contended that this model could possibly put native speakers in a position to exercise power over non-native speakers in social interactions. The sense of failure and powerlessness in front of native speakers may exert great influence on L2 learners' self-perceptions of their language competence, and therefore make them feel powerless and vulnerable in interactions.

In relation to Chinese students, L2 factor is also closely associated with their tendency to be particularly sensitive to the concerns of face when using second language in interactions.

Chinese Face-protected Orientation and L2 Learning and Use

Originally a Chinese concept, face is an influential metaphor that connects communication with social life, and has attracted the interest of scholars in diverse disciplines. Although people in all cultures tend to maintain and negotiate face in all communication situations, individuals in different cultures emphasize different aspects of face (Ting-Toomey 1988; 2005).

Western scholars like Goffman and Brown & Levinson conceptualize face as an individualistic phenomenon. Goffman's definition of Euro-American face is "an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes". Brown & Levinson (1978:66) define face as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself". These western concepts of face have been criticized as being self-oriented and rational rather than relational, and thus could not be applied to Asian social interactions.

Ho (1976) maintains that the Chinese *mianzi* concept of face is inherently social and dependent on the perceptions of other people. This is because the shaping of the Chinese self and one's perception of the relationship between self and others or the outside world are predominantly shaped by values that orient towards collective life, which is derived from Confucianism. Confucius regarded the self not as an independently existing entity, but as dialectically related to the family, the community, the nation and the world. So self in Chinese culture is relational and defined by the surrounding relations. With this in mind, the Chinese are socialized to care very much about their self-images as perceived by significant others. This means that in any given task or situation, they are likely to have these questions in mind, "What will others think? What will others evaluate? How will others respond?". As a result, most Chinese tend to be very sensitive to external opinions of their behaviors. As Yang describes it,

...submission to social expectations, and worry about external opinions in an attempt to achieve one or more of the purposes of reward attainment, harmony maintenance, impression management, face protection, social acceptance, and avoidance of punishment, embarrassment, conflict, rejection, ridicule and retaliation in a social situation.

In interactions using L2, which involve "an alternation of self-image, and the adoption of new social and cultural behaviours and ways of being", Chinese students are therefore particularly sensitive to the judgment of the public upon their language behaviors (Wen & Clement 2003). It is especially so when they are communicating with English native speakers, because they might fear that their English is poor in the eyes of those who speak English as their mother tongue. This might lead to their silence or withdrawal when they encounter interactional difficulties. In Byram's (1997: 41) words, they "may experience a degree of powerlessness" when communicating with native speakers.

Other sources of self-perceptions of L2 competence also include some of personality factors such as risk-taking and anxiety .

When Chinese overseas students with different personalities bring in their beliefs in the native speaker model of English learning and particular sensitiveness to face during their social interaction, the process of interactional difficulties with their English native speaker interactants will be further complicated. To explore the influence of self-perceived L2 communicative competence on face concerns in intercultural difficulty management, face negotiation theory is used to analyze the face concerns and different facework strategies in intercultural difficulty management.

Face Negotiation Theory

Originally a theory focusing on conflict, face negotiation theory (FNT) integrates cultural-level dimensions and individual-level attributes to explain cross-cultural conflict (Ting-Toomey 1988, 2005; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). FNT has advantages over other facework theories because FNT focuses on face concerns and facework strategies used to deal with conflict, while other models (e.g., Brown & Levinson 1987; Lim & Bowers 1991) focus on general facework behaviors and have not been specifically applied to conflict .

According to FNT, "face" refers to "a claimed sense of desired social self-image in a relational and international setting" and it is an identity-boundary issue . Ting-Toomey explains that the concept of face is "about identity respect and other-identity consideration issues within and beyond the actual encounter episode" (Ting-Toomey 2005:73). She further argues that face is closely related to the emotional significance and individuals' evaluation of social self-worth (both their own and others), so face is an important identity resource in communication, which can be threatened, honored, undermined and negotiated. "Facework" refers to "the specific verbal and nonverbal behaviors that individuals engage in to maintain or restore face loss and to uphold and honor face gain" (Ting-Toomey, 2005:73). Face loss occurs when there is a mismatch of identity expectancy, that is, a face-threatening episode is an identity expectancy violation episode.

Face negotiation theory summarizes eight conflict management facework strategies, i.e. domination, avoidance, accommodation, compromise, integration (collaboration), third-party help, emotional expression and neglect (Ting-Toomey 2005).

Ting-Toomey draws on the value dimensions of individualism-collectivism to frame why people from different cultures deal with conflict in different ways, and that self-construal, the individual-level equivalent of the cultural variability dimension of Individualism-Collectivism, influences the use of specific facework behaviors in particular cultural scenes. Face negotiation theory claims that people from different cultures have different face concerns and tend to use different conflict management styles. For example, people in individualistic cultures, such as Americans, tend to use self-face oriented dominating strategies, whereas people in collectivist cultures, such as Chinese, tend to use avoiding or integrating strategies out of other- or mutual face concerns.

FNT suggests that in order to handle conflicts effectively, people from different cultures should achieve intercultural facework competence, which includes knowledge, mindfulness and communication skill. Knowledge and mindfulness refer to mutual understanding and respecting each other's cultural value, beliefs, assumptions, cognitions and emotions. Communication skill refers to the ability to communicate appropriately, effectively and adaptively (Ting-Toomey 2007).

Face negotiation theory provides valuable information regarding values, beliefs, and behavioral conventions of a given culture. This kind of information is useful in this study because it offers a repertoire of, facework strategies that participants may draw on in their difficulty management process. It is possible that participants may change their strategies when they are located in a different context from their own culture, but they will also transfer their values, beliefs and behavioral conventions to an intercultural context .

Methodology

As argued above, previous cross-cultural and intercultural communication research has predominantly used a (post-) positive approach and quantitative research methods, and thus overlooked the influences of context and linguistic competence in intercultural communication. This study, therefore, used an interpretive approach and a qualitative method, a case study, to look at how self-perceptions of L2 communicative competence influence face concerns and the selection of facework strategies in Chinese overseas students' intercultural difficulty management.

Repeated episodic interviews were used in this study. During a period of six months, five Chinese overseas students in Australia were interviewed individually about their experiences and their reflections on their experiences over time. Interviews enable us to get the "access to what is 'inside a person's head'" . Repeated episodic interviews include two dimensions: episodic interviews and repeated follow-up interviews. An episodic interview consists of an interviewee's narration section and a semi-structured interview section. This type of interview has the advantage of collecting two different forms of data. On the one hand, interviewees are allowed to unfold their views with the least interruption from interviewers in the narration section. On the other hand, by asking different types of relevant questions after interviewees' narrations, interviewers can make more explicit their interviewees' knowledge, assumptions, and position in a dialogical form. Repeating follow-up interviews at different points of time enables the interviewer to capture the interviewee's reflections on their experiences over time. Therefore, repeated episodic interviews used in our study have multiple sources of data and thus enhance the process of triangulation .

This repeated episodic interview method (Flick 2009) enables us to capture the participants' emotions and reactions in the moment, and the change that happened on their reflections over time, that is, their dynamic perceptions of L2 communicative competence, and the facework strategy use in different contexts over time.

Findings

The following cases are used to illustrate the influence of L2 factors in intercultural difficulty management with examples of two of our participants, Leo and Fay. They have been selected because they represent contrasting self-perceptions of L2 communicative competence, which appear to result in contrasting actions. Leo and Fay had had different English learning and use experiences before they came to Australia, and thus perceived their English communicative competence differently. As a result, their self-perceptions of English communicative competence influenced their difficulty management processes in a different way.

Leo

Leo gave up his job as an IT engineer with a good income, and came to Australia to pursue a Masters degree as well as a different life. Leo said he was interested in English and had breezed through different English exams during his university study. Viewing English movies and TV programs were his main form of practice of English after class. As a non-English major student, Leo had learned English in a teacher-centered and exam-oriented context and had few opportunities to practise oral English either inside or outside the classroom. Later when he was working in an international company as an IT engineer, he had some opportunities to communicate with his European colleagues in English.

On his arrival in Australia, Leo found that his English was not good enough for his daily communication. He had difficulty understanding Australian English, and he was not capable of describing what happened while making a phone call to claim the insurance when he was involved in a car accident. Leo talked about his difficulty management experience at a petrol station. He used a "20cents off" voucher when paying the bill, but the check-out lady charged him at a "4cents off" rate, which was more frequently used by customers. Leo pointed out her mistake with a smile, but the check-out lady was unhappy and said that Leo should have let her know when he displayed the voucher. Leo was angry and felt that the lady was being ridiculous because it was her responsibility to check the voucher, but Leo said nothing. He explained,

What could I say? If I had said one word, she might have followed with a long speech. What if I didn't understand her while she spoke fast? You know people always speak fast when they are excited or angry. I couldn't even understand

Australian English well when spoken slowly, not to mention fast-speaking arguments! Who knows what she would say about me? What if people around me thought I was picking on her? Anyway, I didn't want to look ugly...

As Leo said, at that moment, his perceived lack of English communicative competence and his assumption about others' reaction thwarted his intention to argue with the check-out lady. He assumed that the check-out lady might produce an extended argument beyond his understanding. He assumed that other customers and staff members in the store might judge negatively what was going on because he was afraid that his limited English would not enable him to express his intention accurately, which might leave a negative impression on other people present.

Leo chose an avoiding strategy and said nothing rather than arguing with the check-out lady which he could have done if a similar event happened in Chinese. For one thing, he perceived that the limits in his English communicative competence, such as sociolinguistic competence (understanding the Australian accent), discourse competence (organizing an argument) and strategic competence (managing the communication breakdown), prevented him from handling an effective argument. For the other, he was very concerned about his face in relation to his English use. He was afraid that his English, with mistakes and inappropriate usage, might leave a negative impression on other people present. They might therefore misunderstand and assume that Leo was picking on the check-out lady.

In a word, concerned about his competence face and moral face related to English use, Leo chose an avoiding strategy to prevent from losing his face in a public place.

In a later interview with Leo, he reflected on this event and said if the same thing happened again, he would argue with the check-out lady because he perceived that his English had improved a lot and he was able to do so. Another thing was that he learned from Australian culture that he should be "tough" and defend himself in that situation.

But when Leo learned to be tough and wanted to defend himself, he found that it was not easy to do so all the time. He encountered another event when he was doing a part-time job at a convenience store. One day he passed in front of a customer to help his colleague at the cash register, the customer complained to his colleague, "Why didn't he say 'Excuse me'?" Leo wanted to explain that he thought there was enough space in front of her for him to get through without bothering her, but he still chose to remain silent because he did not want to "invite trouble". Explaining further, he said,

If I said something that made that woman feel offended, she would make a complaint to the manager. You know, English is my second language, you know how easy for me to say something inappropriate to cause misunderstandings and offenses. So in that situation, I'd better keep my mouth shut.

Although Leo perceived that he was able to set up an argument and defend himself linguistically, he still perceived the potential trouble that might be caused by his English communicative competence. Leo thought since his customer complained about his mistake caused by English pragmatic failure, arguing with her with his non-native like English might cause more misunderstandings and offenses. To avoid more potential trouble, Leo chose an avoiding strategy again. According to Leo, another reason for his choosing avoiding strategy was that he was concerned about his job and could not afford to lose it. If he offended the customer and she made a complaint to his manager, his job security would be at risk. In other words, Leo gave up being tough and defending himself in this event because, in his eyes, the customer had the power over him not only in terms of English but also in terms of his job security.

To sum up, Leo's difficulty management was influenced by his self-perceived English communicative competence and its relationship to the English native speaker model. It was also influenced by the power issues between him and his interlocutors. Even if his English improved and enabled him to be assertive linguistically, he had to use avoiding strategies due to power issues. As he said, "When I am a customer, I can be tough and don't have to worry about many things, but as a service provider who needs job security, things are different".

Fay

Fay came to Australia to pursue a PhD degree in law. Before coming to Australia, Fay had worked as a lecturer in a Chinese university as well as a part-time lawyer for a couple of years. Having studied English for almost 20 years, Fay said she had been very "confident" in her English communicative

competence. Due to her high level of English proficiency, she had been employed by a university in China to teach Legal English, which required the lecturer to conduct 70% to 80% of teaching in English. At the same time, with a Certificate as an English Interpreter under her belt, she also acted as an interpreter at international conferences from time to time. So Fay was experienced in both using English outside the classroom and teaching others how to use English.

Fay also experienced some linguistic difficulties caused by sociolinguistic competence such as unfamiliar Australian accent and pragmatic failures, but she realized soon that she should use English as a medium for communication and improve her English at the cost of losing face. Talking of dealing with difficulties and conflicts, Fay said her principle was "reciprocity and fairness", that is, she was tolerant, but if others crossed the line, she would fight for herself and seek fairness. In our interview, she mentioned a conflict that happened between her and her English speaking housemate, Amy.

Amy was a girl younger than Fay. Since they shared the same house, Fay regarded her as a younger sister and was tolerant of Amy's undesirable living habits such as leaving unwashed dishes in the sink for several days and wasting electricity. Fay did not complain to Amy about these because she did not want Amy to feel uncomfortable. She wanted to maintain the harmony in the house. But one day, Amy's behavior irritated Fay who then could not stand any more and had a quarrel with Amy.

One day I went back home and switched on TV. Amy went downstairs and said, "Turn down the TV! I am doing my homework!" I thought she was rude, so I said, "You should say that politely. I didn't know you were at home." Actually, I didn't turn up the volume. The volume was there, set by her while she was watching TV the day before. Somehow we began to argue with each other and also argued about her problems that I had tolerated for a long time, such as going back her bedroom without turning off the TV in the living room.

Fay explained that Amy went too far in this event. Firstly, she did not realize Amy was at home. Even if Amy did not know it, she should have made her request politely as a housemate. Secondly, the volume of the TV set had been set by Amy the night before, so her request of turning down the volume sounded selfish. In other words, when Amy was watching TV at that volume, she did not regard it as disturbing for Fay, but when Fay was watching at the same volume, it became disturbing! Further, Amy's "rude" attitude and selfishness violated Fay's expectation of her as a housemate who should observe the convention of mutual tolerance. Fay had kept tolerant of Amy all the time, but Amy could not even tolerate a small misunderstanding. Therefore there was no reciprocity in their relationship, so Fay had to play her fairness card and argue with Amy.

In Fay's case, second language factors did not prohibit her implementation of difficulty management strategies that she intended to use. She chose avoiding strategies not because she was not able to make a complaint linguistically but because she did not want to threaten Amy's face and destroy the harmony in their relationship. However, when her intention of maintaining harmony was not reciprocated, she used an integrating strategy and then a dominating strategy to seek fairness. Her strategies achieved a satisfactory result. Amy apologized to Fay and began to change her bad habits. To Fay's amazement, their relationship was not adversely affected but became better than before.

L2 Factors and Face Negotiation Theory

Fay's example lent support for face negotiation theory in that people of collectivist cultures such as Chinese tend to use avoiding strategy out of other- or mutual face concerns to maintain harmony, and also in that the integrating strategy works more effectively in conflict management in individualist cultures such as Australia. But Leo's examples did not confirm face negotiation theory. His selection of avoiding strategies was out of self-face rather than other- or mutual face concerns. Although he learned that being assertive would work more effectively in Australian culture, his self-perceived limited English communicative competence and other factors such as power issues prevented him from being using this as a strategy.

One of the reasons why Fay and Leo's strategies are reflected differently in face negotiation theory is that Fay perceived that she had a good command of English and did not regard L2 as a barrier in her interaction with Amy. Therefore she was able to transfer her difficulty management style into an intercultural context. By contrast, Leo perceived his English as limited and thus regarded it as a barrier in interactions and a potential cause of troubles. Therefore he used avoiding strategies to try to prevent further troubles in his difficulty management.

Therefore, the influence of L2 learners' self-perceptions of L2 communicative competence is significant in an intercultural context. Analysing the data in our study further, we suggest the following roles played by perceptions of competence in second language.

Roles Played by Self-perceptions of L2 Communicative Competence in Intercultural Difficulty Management

1. Perceptions of L2 communicative competence influences face concerns in selection of strategies

This study showed that when situated in an intercultural context, and where self-perception of L2 communicative competence was an important factor, a novel dimension emerged on our Chinese participants' face concerns in their interactions with their native speaker interlocutors. Their selection of avoidance strategy was not out of other- or mutual-face concerns but out of self-face concerns.

Some of participants in this study said explicitly that they chose avoidance strategy in their difficult situations because they wanted to avoid losing face, i.e., their own face. For example, Leo felt that the check-out lady at the petrol station was "ridiculous", for he thought checking discount was the check-out staff's responsibility but she pointed a finger of blame at her customer instead. As a customer, Leo thought he was entitled to claim his right and had the right to argue back. Leo also claimed that he would do so if the event had happened in China or delivered in Chinese. But he finally chose an avoidance strategy and said nothing. This was not that Leo gave the check-out lady face so that she would not be blamed and embarrassed, but that Leo perceived that his English was not good enough to argue with her. He feared that he could not understand her English while she spoke fast and could not argue effectively and thus was misperceived by other customers that he was "picking on her". Therefore, to avoid a potential face-losing or face-threatening episode, Leo chose to walk away.

2. Perceptions of L2 communicative competence, power and difficulty management

The missing of power issues has been regarded as a common weakness of traditional functionalist approaches to intercultural communication studies (Jensen 2004). Brown and Gilman define power as follows:

One person may be said to have power over another in the degree that he is able to control the behavior of the other. Power is a relationship between at least two persons, and it is nonreciprocal in the sense that both cannot have power in the same area of behavior.

French and Raven categorize power into 5 main bases:

1. reward power: if a person, A, has control over positive outcomes (such as bonus payments, improved job conditions) that another person, B desires, A can be said to have reward power over B;
2. coercive power: if a person, A, has control over negative outcomes (such as demotion, allocation of undesirable tasks) that another person, B, wants to avoid, A can be said to have coercive power over B;
3. expert power: if a person, A, has some special knowledge or expertise that another person, B, wants or needs, A can be said to have expert power over B;
4. legitimate power: if a person, A, has the right (because of his/her role, status, or situational circumstances) to prescribe or expect certain things of another person, B, A can be said to have legitimate power over B;
5. reference power: if a person, B, admires another person, A, and wants to be like him/her in some respect, A can be said to have referent power over B.

(Cited in Spencer-Oatey 2008:35)

The neglect of power issues in face negotiation theory has made its application in intercultural interactions problematic. Our study showed that power difference was reflected in both self-perceived second language use and difficulty management processes.

In Leo's "Petrol station" example, he perceived that his native speaker interlocutor had the power of English, a kind of expert power. He perceived that his limited English would threaten his competence face and moral face to such a degree that other people around would see him in a negative way. Feeling

powerless in terms of English communicative competence, he had to choose an avoidance strategy to avoid losing face.

In his "Excuse me" example, though Leo perceived that he was able to explain and defend himself linguistically, he still chose an avoidance strategy due to two sources of power difference between him and his interlocutor. One was the perceived expert power that the customer had in English. Leo felt that since the customer complained about a language mistake he made, the more he said, the more mistakes would occur. This would invite further trouble. The second was the perceived legitimate power the customer had over the service provider. Leo worried that the customer's possible complaint to the manager would threaten his job security, which he could not afford to lose.

In contrast, Fay did not perceive the power issues in her difficulty management and was able to follow her usual principle of difficulty management.

Conclusions

The interaction of language and culture in intercultural communication has not been sufficiently explored. Relevant research in applied linguistics has mainly focused on micro-level rational linguistic behaviors and orientation of turns in interactions by using mostly conversation analysis and discourse analysis. Research in cross-cultural and intercultural communication has underplayed the roles of second language factors. The reason for this insufficiency may be due to the complexity of the language and culture nexus. Our study, therefore, is an initial attempt to explore this nexus.

This paper reveals that self-perception of L2 communicative competence plays a significant role in intercultural difficulty management. It can influence L2 learners' face concerns and difficulty management strategies when they are delivering messages in L2 in an intercultural context dealing with power issues in relation to language and interlocutors of the dominant culture. This paper is an attempt to explore aspects of second language and power, two issues that have been underplayed in traditional intercultural communication studies. Hopefully this approach might lead to new insights into intercultural communication research, second language learning, teaching, and the improvement of intercultural communicative competence.

Future research and more empirical support are needed to solidify the interaction of language and culture so that a model can be established.

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