

AN INVESTIGATION OF CHINESE STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND ITS ROLE IN ELT

Hong Xiao and Eleni Petraki

University of Canberra, Australia

Abstract

This study discusses the intercultural communication competence of Chinese students who were studying at an Australian University. The study specifically explores the frequency of interactions between Chinese students and students from other countries; the difficulties they encountered and the reasons they attributed to these difficulties. Research results, derived from questionnaires and interviews, reveal that the Chinese students encountered many difficulties when interacting with students from other countries which they ascribed to lack of knowledge of intercultural communication, cultural shock and differences in nonverbal communication and politeness strategies. Findings suggest that intercultural communication skills should be an important component of English language teaching (ELT) in China particularly with the rapid globalization of English and its use in international business communication.

Keywords: intercultural communication; Asian ELT; Chinese students; University students

1. Introduction

With the increase in international trade, the global economy and the globalization of English usage, more and more Chinese students are seeking to study abroad to gain intercultural understanding, to achieve individual academic goals, or obtain personal independence. Chinese students have become the largest source of overseas students in the world (Yao 2004). One of the most common reasons for Chinese students wanting to study abroad is to improve their English competence and to improve their communicative ability with other people.

One effect of the globalization of the English language is a significant increase in the number of intercultural interactions. More people than ever before are involved in interactions with foreigners and communities are becoming increasingly multilingual and multicultural. As a result of this international trend, Australian Universities are now populated with a vast diversity of students from many countries in the world, with the Chinese students being the largest international student population. Despite the prominence of Chinese students at Australian universities, the researchers' informal observations, coupled with previous studies, have revealed that Chinese students prefer to mix with people from their own community rather than interact or communicate with students from other cultural backgrounds.

This phenomenon led the researchers to the present investigation which aims to undertake a systematic study of the Chinese students' intercultural behaviour and verify the initial observations. In addition, due to the increase in and development of multi-ethnic and multilingual communities world-wide, the project aimed to study the Chinese students' perceptions and interest in intercultural communication with students from other countries, their communication preferences and the difficulties they encounter in intercultural communication.

Moreover, another motivation for this project was the current limitations in the ELT syllabus in China. Previous studies pointed out the importance of intercultural knowledge in ELT, especially with regard to L1 and L2 cultural knowledge but there was no reference to wider intercultural knowledge. Moreover, the ELT syllabus and teaching practices in China in primary and secondary education place emphasis on

teaching competence in macroskills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing), and microskills (vocabulary and grammar) without much emphasis on the development of intercultural skills. The present study also investigates the participants' opinions and satisfaction with their English training in China and the need for training in intercultural communication skills. It is hypothesized that with the increase in intercultural interactions, and the spread of English usage all over the world, intercultural communication skills are vital for successful communication and should be an important component in ELT world-wide.

This paper presents an exploratory study of the Chinese students' perceptions of intercultural communication at an Australian University. It specifically focuses on the intercultural communication competence of Chinese students, their intercultural communication experiences and their perceptions about the importance of intercultural communication in ELT in China. The study data was obtained from 30 questionnaires with University students and from 10 semi-structured interviews conducted with some of those students. The paper also offers recommendations on how intercultural communication can be improved for future students.

2. Definitions

For the purposes of this study, it is important to define intercultural communication and understand the various implications of the term. There are many definitions for intercultural communication, depending on the way culture and communication are defined. Damen (1987: 23) defines it as "acts of communication undertaken by individuals identified with groups exhibiting intergroup variation in shared social and cultural patterns. These shared patterns, individually expressed, are the major variables in the purpose, the manner, the mode, and the means by which the communicative process is effected".

Intercultural communication, in Lustig and Koester's words (2003: 49-51), is a "symbolic process in which people from different cultures create shared meanings". It occurs "when large and important cultural differences create dissimilar interpretations and expectations about how to communicate competently". Jandt (2004: 4) pointed out that intercultural communication is not only between individuals but also between "groups of diverse cultural identifications". In summary, intercultural communication describes the interaction between individual and groups with different perceptions of communicative behaviour and differences in interpretations.

Studies in intercultural communication examine what happens in intercultural contacts and interactions when the communication process involves culturally diverse people (Samovar & Porter 1997). A common problem in intercultural communication arises "when persons who describe themselves as the same nationality or ethnicity do not share ideas about how to enact their identity and disagree about the norms for interaction" (Collier 1997: 43).

To achieve effective intercultural communication, people should develop intercultural competence; which refers to the skills required to achieve successful intercultural communication. Jandt (1998, 2004) identifies four skills as part of intercultural competence: personality strength, communication skills, psychological adjustment and cultural awareness. There is no doubt that intercultural competence is an imperative nowadays and this study will offer some insight into the Chinese students' needs in and attitudes towards intercultural competence.

3. Previous Work on Intercultural Communication of Chinese Students

Intercultural communication is described as a difficult process especially when it results in misunderstandings and a failure to achieve a common understanding (Samovar and Porter 2001). Due to its difficult nature and extensive applicability nowadays, intercultural encounters have been the subject of much research. The problems in intercultural experiences have motivated many research studies examining the reasons for intercultural misunderstanding and cross-cultural difficulties (Holliday, Hyde & Kullman, 2004; Jandt, 1998, 2004; Lustig & Koester, 2003, 2006; Samovar & Porter, 1995, 2001, 2004; Scollon & Scollon, 2001).

Many studies have focused on the intercultural encounters of the Chinese, especially of Chinese students during their overseas study. These studies have explored the intercultural communication either between the Chinese students and the students of the host countries, or between Chinese students and students of

other cultures in the classroom context, analyzing various problems that have arisen and identifying strategies for improvement. The following section reviews the literature on intercultural communication of Chinese students, specifically focusing on linguistic difficulties, face, politeness strategies and nonverbal communication, as these are the elements considered in this study.

Liu (2001) discussed the face-saving and politeness strategies used by Chinese students in American classrooms. He pointed out Chinese students' silence in the classroom is ascribed to the Chinese concept of saving face. He also identified the reason why, when and how Chinese students save their face by keeping silent in the classroom on the basis of case studies of two Chinese students. In his study, Liu argued that although the silence patterns can sometimes lead to intercultural misunderstandings and stereotyping, the way Chinese students use politeness and face strategies should be treated with intercultural sensitivity and respect. He suggested that Chinese students should develop a new face-saving concept to better interact with other students and to adapt to the new community (Liu 2001).

Gao (2000) analyzed the influence of Chinese native language and culture on the verbal and nonverbal communication of Chinese students when they interacted with English native speakers in Australia. From a large survey and interviews with Chinese student immigrants in Australia, he found that both nonverbal and verbal communication embodied cultural values and customs. He pointed out that Chinese culture and background affected their way of life in Australia and sometimes created difficulties and miscommunication problems in the new living environment. He specifically discussed influences caused by differences in social status, approach to academic study, work opportunities, recreation, and verbal and nonverbal communication when Chinese students studied and lived in the new cultural community. He concluded that "acquisition of a non-native language by an immigrant is culture-orientated; the more you are ready to embrace a culture the more you are tuned to the language of that culture; and as a result the more you will be competent in that language" (Gao 2000: 15).

Liao (1996) discussed the importance of L2 cultural knowledge in ELT teaching in China. She first categorized four common types of cultural mistakes made by Chinese students: a. pragmalinguistic transfer of speech acts that involves Chinese students using "where are you going" as an initiation for a greeting, b. 'unacceptability of L2 customs' which incorporates the use of politeness and modesty strategies by negating any praise, c. contradiction between the English and Chinese value senses such as violating the teacher's privacy, and d. simple and general views of foreign countries which could be classified as stereotyping of L2 culture and which can lead to more serious miscommunication difficulties than linguistic mistakes. Within this framework, Liao advocated the inclusion of L2 cultural knowledge in language teaching which could be achieved in three ways: with a well-designed language curriculum, syllabus and testing; with the textbooks, which should be compiled from a cultural perspective and reflect the changes of modern language and culture, thus enlightening language teaching and keeping up with the development of the society; and with the TESOL teacher who should be equipped with cultural knowledge of the target language and take responsibility for guiding students to intercultural competence (Liao, 1996). A similar point of view was put forward by Zhao and Edmondson (2005). They proposed that some L2 cultural knowledge, such as human philosophies, religions, ideologies, and even science, should be included in relevant university courses, thereby, raising the consciousness of practical solutions to intercultural communication problems (Zhao & Edmondson 2005). Although these studies underline the importance of L2 cultural teaching in China, they do not discuss the role of other intercultural knowledge in language teaching.

Research on Chinese students studying in a Western (New Zealand) learning environment was conducted by Holmes (2004, 2005). She exposed the Chinese students' difficulties in collaborative relationships with their New Zealand peers and in seeking help from teaching staff as well as the differences in communication and learning between their first culture and the host culture. In her papers, Holmes (2004) suggested that Chinese students should reconstruct and renegotiate their primary culture learning and communication styles to accommodate other styles; the teachers' role should move from the mind-set of a *deficit* to a *difference* view of Chinese learning and teaching methods. The Australian local students would benefit from intercultural awareness training to better understand and, therefore, more easily adapt to, the different ways of learning and the new cultural environment; the educational institutions should apply intercultural skills in seeking out ways of assessing Chinese and other international students, Australian local students and teachers as an educational resource "in developing diversity awareness, in

learning about diverse business practices, and more generally in offering other ways of viewing the world" (Holmes 2004).

In another previous study of Chinese students' communicative competence in the University of Canberra in Australia, Liu (2004) investigated how Chinese students "made the full use of speaking environment" in Australia to "improve their communicative competence". The study focused on Chinese students' communication experiences with the local Australian students. The relationship between language study and intercultural communication ability was also discussed. Liu (2004: 24) found that "only one third of Chinese students are actively involved in interactions with Australian students". The majority are "inactive or incapable" of communicating with the local students. She suggested that the language teacher's intercultural competence should be further improved; "the pedagogy of teaching intercultural communication needs to be updated and implemented" (Liu 2004: 25).

4. The Present Study and Its Aims

As discussed above, many studies were carried out on the intercultural competence of Chinese students in many contexts, such as classroom settings, and everyday interactions in ESL (English as a Second Language) and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) settings. Some studies focused on the cultural comparison between Chinese students and the culture of the host countries. Some other studies were conducted to address the difficulties of Chinese students in classroom interactions and education settings. Others discussed only one aspect of intercultural communication, such as face and politeness strategies (Liu 1995). Despite the abundance of intercultural communication studies, all authors underlined the importance of additional studies due to the difficult nature of intercultural interactions. Moreover, no studies were found that examine the intercultural communication experiences of Chinese students with members of other cultures except those of the target or host culture. As explained previously, due to the globalization of English language and the increase in intercultural interactions between non-native speakers, the understanding of other cultures is of paramount importance for successful communication. Therefore, the present study addresses those gaps and extends previous studies by examining the interactions of Chinese students when in contact with students from diverse cultures at an Australian University. It specifically analyzes the difficulties they encountered, the nature of those difficulties, thus shedding light on the relationship between culture and language.

The study also investigates the importance of intercultural communication in English language teaching in China. The outcomes of this research will help EFL teachers in China to better understand the current intercultural communication status of Chinese students and their difficulties, and will inform the current curriculum in China. The Educational Ministry (EM) of People's Republic of China (P.R.C) issued "the Basic Requirement of College English Curriculum Teaching" in January of 2004 (EM of P.R.C. website 2004), which mentioned L2 cultural knowledge should be incorporated in ELT. Although there was a small component of intercultural communication in the curriculum, the majority of the curriculum focused on the improvement of macroskills, such as speaking, listening, reading, writing competence and translating ability. Moreover, previous studies have highlighted the significance of L1 and L2 cultural knowledge but no studies pointed out the use of other cultural knowledge in ELT. The present study was designed with that hypothesis in mind and aimed to identify whether and what kind of intercultural communication should be part of the ELT curriculum in China.

This research will also be helpful to researchers in social science and those who want to further study the field of intercultural communication and the Chinese learners' difficulties in communicating with people from various cultures.

Based on these principles and discussion of the literature, this study has three main aims: a. to examine to what extent the Chinese students interact with students from other countries at an Australian University; b. to explore if there are any difficulties, what difficulties they encounter, the nature of these difficulties, and the reasons for these difficulties; and finally, c. to explore the importance and place of intercultural communication in ELT in China.

5. Methodology and Data Collection

The participants in this study were 32 undergraduate and postgraduate Chinese students, coming from mainland China studying at an Australian university. Among them, 17 were females and 15 were males.

10 interviewees were randomly chosen among the 32 participations, 5 females and 5 males. All agreed to participate in the research voluntarily.

First, a questionnaire was used to obtain information from participants in an economical way as questionnaires allow flexibility in collecting controlled responses from a large number of participants and can be distributed and collected in different ways, such as e-mail and face to face (McDonough, J. & McDonough, S. 1997). The questionnaire was carefully designed using closed-response and open-response questions. The participants were asked about their frequency of interaction with participants from other countries, their difficulties in those interactions, their preferences in communication and their knowledge of cultural differences. Many questions combined closed-response with open-response questions in order to get more information and to encourage respondents to offer additional relevant details (Brown 2001). Questionnaires were distributed either personally or electronically, but no names were collected by the researcher.

Second, the interview method was also employed to complement the data obtained from the questionnaires and to add to the validity of the questionnaire responses (Nunan 1992). Participants were selected randomly from the respondents who answered the questionnaire through a question that asked the participants if they wanted to participate in an interview. The semi-structured interview was adopted in order to obtain more in-depth information about the participants' intercultural communication status (Cohen and Manion 2000). The interviews adopted a face-to-face, semi-structured approach and were tape-recorded using a digital recorder. The questions revolved around the students' intercultural difficulties, their knowledge and opinion about IC, and their opinion about the use of IC skills in ELT. The interviewer followed the questions consistently for all interviews. The interviews were conducted over a period of 3 weeks and the duration of the interview was about 40 minutes. They were conducted in both English and Chinese and they were all transcribed and translated into English.

6. Findings and Discussion

The data from the questionnaires and interviews show the range of experiences of Chinese students in Canberra when communicating with students from other countries. Their experiences were analyzed to see if their communication difficulties, and the reasons for these difficulties, were related to the years spent studying English and the time they had lived in Australia. The data also show the extent of interaction between the study group and other students, and the attitude they had towards students from other countries. The students' opinions on intercultural communication and the relationship between intercultural communication and English teaching in China are also shown.

6.1 Participants' Characteristics and Background

Table 1: Chinese students' English study and stay in Australia

Years of Studying English				Years of living in Australia			
1-4 years	>11 years	5-8 years	8-10 Years	1 year	1-2 years	3-4 years	>4 years
0%	59.4%	12.5%	28.1%	59.40%	18.70%	12.50%	9.40%

The majority of Chinese students started learning English in primary or middle school. So, it is not surprising that nearly 60% of the students had studied English for more than 11 years. Table 1 above shows that all the participants had studied English for more than 5 years, and 12.5% of the participants studied English at least for 5-8 years. Nearly 60% of all the participants had lived in Australia for under a year and less than 10% of them had lived here for more than 4 years. More than 18% of the participants had stayed in Australia 1-2 years and 12.5% of them had lived here for 3-4 years. The participants' background characteristics are useful for determining possible tendencies and correlations between their stay in Australia and the students' communication status or strategies they use in intercultural encounters.

6.2 General Intercultural Communication Status of Chinese Students

Table 2: Chinese students' friends from other countries

	0 friend	1-2 friends	3-4 friends	5-6 friends	>7 friends
Male	6.7%	6.7%	33.3%	33.3%	20.0%
Female	17.6%	5.9%	23.5%	17.6%	35.3%
Total	12.5%	6.3%	28.1%	25.0%	28.1%

Table 3: Frequency of communication with students from other countries

	Everyday	Few times a week	Once a week	Few times a month	No communication
male	33.3%	40.0%	0.0%	26.7%	0.0%
female	29.4%	47.1%	17.6%	0.0%	5.9%
total	31.3%	43.8%	9.4%	12.5%	3.1%

Participants gave the number of foreign friends they had while staying in Australia. Generally, the students had a high level of intercultural communication with foreign students. From the two tables above we can see that about 88 % of the study group had at least one foreign friend, with 28% having more than 7 friends. Also, about 85% of the group communicated at least once a week with a foreign student, and a third of them had a daily experience of such communication. This is positive in that it seems Chinese students take advantage of the cultural richness in Australia, engaging in communication with people from other countries.

However, there were clear differences between males and females. As shown in Table 2, more than a third (35.3%) of the females had more than 7 foreign friends, compared to only 20% of males. Yet, surprisingly, about 18% of female students had no foreign friends, compared to 6.7% of males. Figures in Table 3 show that although two thirds of the females (64.7%) communicated with foreign students at least once a week, compared to only 40% of the males, 6% of the females had no communication with foreign students. The differences, therefore, might not be mainly related to gender but to other factors, such as personalities, hobbies, and lifestyles.

Figure 1: Conversation topics in Chinese interactions with students from other countries

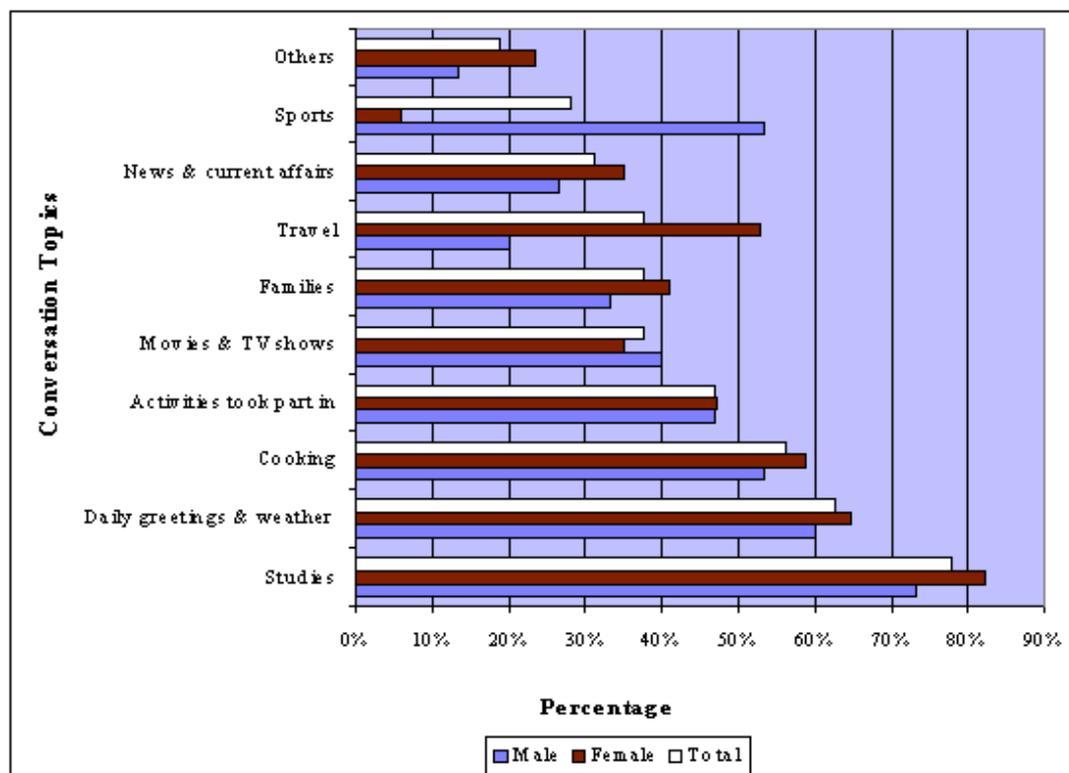


Figure 1 above describes the frequency of conversation topics in the students' intercultural encounters. All the topics listed in this question were discussed in conversation by all the participants. However, it is apparent from Figure 1 that many of the communications were on safe topics, which are not greatly influenced by cultural knowledge, such as study, weather, cooking, activities, movies, families, and travel; while the more difficult or possibly sensitive topics, such as sports, news and current affairs, and other topics, were less frequent.

Considering that all the participants had studied English for at least 5 years, and, before they came to study in Australia, must have passed the International English Language Test System (IELTS), their English proficiency should be advanced enough to enable them to deal with these topics listed in this question. Therefore, the length of English study does not seem to be the reason for participants choosing easy and safe topics to communicate with students from other countries.

One explanation for the limited choice of topics in the interaction was obtained from the interview responses. All participants reported having limited knowledge about other cultures. In their understanding, culture means customs, holidays, life styles, music, food, religions, or histories. One participant mentioned that before he came to Australia, he had little knowledge about culture and intercultural communication. Most of them learned about other cultures from reading, movies and TV programs, or from their daily interaction with students from other countries. "Culture", according to Samovar and Porter (2004), is "an integrated system" (Samovar & Porter, 2004: 44). It contains history, religion, values, social organization, and language (Samovar & Porter, 2004). Although Chinese students had some language ability, lack of sufficient knowledge about values, common faith, or the political views held by students from other countries, made them reluctant to engage in conversation on topics that are more serious and personal.

Another probable reason for the limited conversation between the students is the low level of intercultural communication skills training given in Chinese secondary schools and in universities. According to the participants interviewed, ELT in China focuses on grammar and training in macroskills, which include speaking, listening, reading, writing and aim at students' passing exams and tests. One participant suggested that most TEFL teachers in China themselves lack knowledge of intercultural communication. All the intercultural communication knowledge the participant learned from ELT in China was about body language or gestures, and very little was learnt about politeness. Five participants reported having no intercultural communication education during their university studies. Two interviewees reported receiving some intercultural communication knowledge in language training

schools before they came to Australia, but, the amount was small and, in their view, not enough and not systematic.

The limited knowledge of culture and intercultural communication skills of the Chinese students may explain why more than 3% of participants had no communication with their foreign peers and 12.5% participants had no foreign friends. Although the majority (97%) interacted with students from other countries to some degree the conversation topics still remained within the scope of daily life and studies most of time.

6.3 Chinese Students' Intercultural Communication Difficulties and Reasons

Table 4 below shows the number of students' intercultural communication difficulties. From the table below we observe that a high percentage of students (81.3%) experienced communication difficulties. Females had more difficulties, with over 82% of them having difficulties, compared to 67% of males. Thus, one third of the males had no communication difficulties, compared to only 12% of females. The students who did not answer this question were all males. This is understandable because it was mentioned earlier females had more foreign friends than males and therefore more opportunities to be misunderstood.

Table 4: Participants' intercultural communication difficulties

	Have difficulties	No difficulties	No Answer
Male	66.7%	33.3%	0.0%
Female	82.4%	11.8%	5.9%
Total	81.3%	21.9%	3.1%

Figure 2: Reasons for communication difficulties

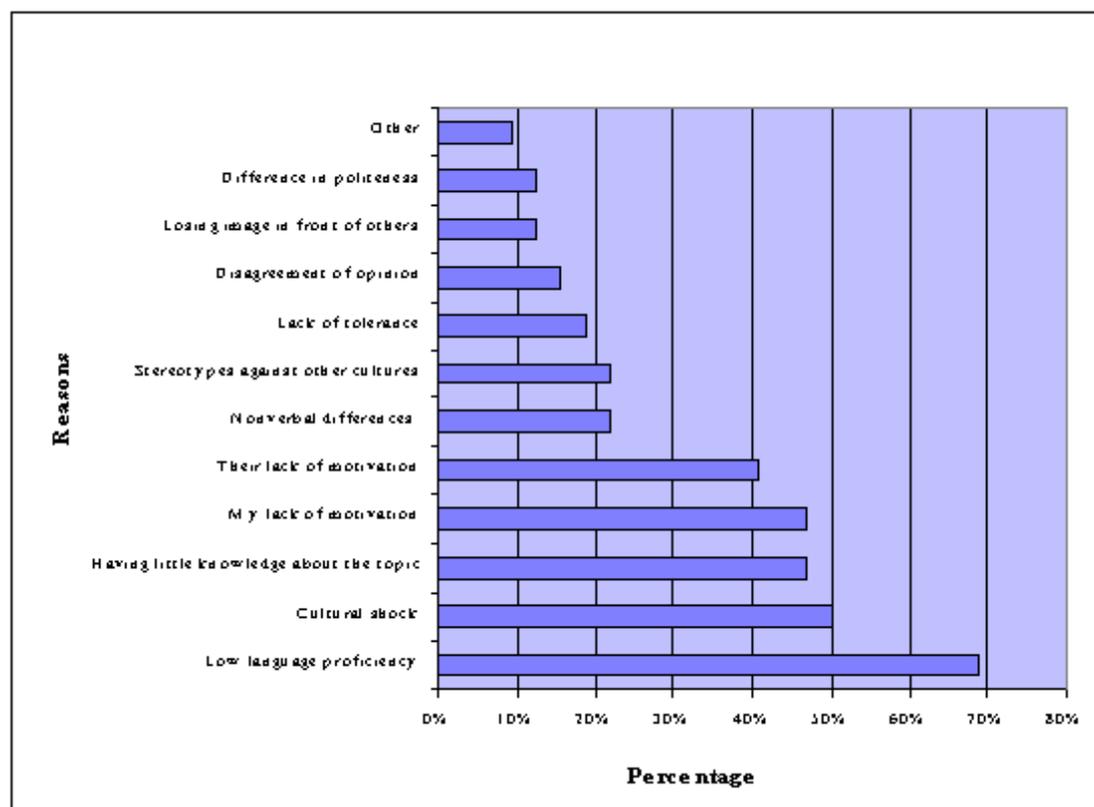


Figure 2 shows the reasons for the intercultural communication difficulties as experienced by the participants. Low language proficiency was the most common reason given for this difficulty. "Culture shock" was the second most common problem. The third equally important group of problems that received the same scores was the students' lack of motivation in communicating and lack of knowledge about the topic. A significant percentage of participants attributed their communication problems to the other party's perceived lack of motivation in interacting with them. A small but significant number of problems was ascribed to nonverbal differences and differences in politeness.

Most participants recognized that there were many reasons for their difficulties in interacting with students from different cultural backgrounds. They can be broadly divided into two types. Some thought the difficulty of communicating with students from other countries was due to poor language proficiency. Although language ability was considered a significant reason, other participants thought most difficulties they encountered were the result of cultural differences and lack of experience and knowledge of other cultures. In the following section, we describe in more detail the difficulties that participants reported in the questionnaires and interviews.

6.3.1 Language Problems

Many examples of unsuccessful intercultural communication experiences were given when the participants were interviewed to answer this question. Three participants attributed some failures of interaction to poor pronunciation by certain non-native speakers, such as Indian students, African students, but sometimes also Australian students. Two attributed it to native speakers' lack of accommodation of non-native speakers' low language proficiency when they interacted with them.

The global spread of English generated the development of many varieties of English. A major challenge in the era of globalization of English is the maintenance of culturally determined varieties of world English in the face of pressures to achieve viable international communication (Crystal, 1988). Thus, English language proficiency not only means one can understand the English native speakers' speech, but also the varieties of English used by the majority of non-native speakers.

However, successful intercultural communication cannot be reached only by good listening and speaking abilities. Language and culture are "intertwined and are shaping each other" (Beamer & Varner, 2001: 31) and cannot be separated. When people communicate with others, they do not only select words and form sentences but also make cultural choices. As Beamer & Varner suggest, language can reflect the environment, people's lives, customs, and values people hold (Beamer & Varner, 2001). So even if people who have a good language proficiency may misinterpret the cultural signals, leading to confusion and misunderstanding without the support of cultural knowledge (Beamer & Varner, 2001). It also suggests that language teaching needs to be integrated with raising intercultural awareness. It is important to say at this point that the classification given in this paper between language and cultural problems may not be accurate and there may be some overlap; however, the paper distinguished between the two categories to provide a clearer understanding of language and culture and because language includes elements such as dialects and pronunciation.

6.3.2 Cultural Problems

Culture shock was considered a major reason for communication difficulties. Culture shock is "precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse" (Samovar & Porter, 2004: 295; cited in Oberg, 1960). The culture shock experienced by the participants results from different understanding of the social interactions, different values in the two cultures, differences in personal interactions, and different lifestyles. Culture shock is an inevitable experience people undergo to different degrees. Effective intercultural communication entails the understanding and acceptance of differences. To achieve that, people should accept the difference of viewpoints and cultural values between them (Lustig & Koester, 2003).

Nonverbal communications constituted a significant reason for the students' difficulties. "Misunderstanding often occurred in the interpretations of nonverbal behaviors because different display rules create very different meanings about the appropriateness and effectiveness of particular interaction sequences" (Lustig & Koester, 2006: 214). One participant gave an example of the cultural differences in

interpretations of gestures. When he gave a thumb up to praise an African student because of his good basketball skills, the African student was very angry because that gesture in his culture is insulting.

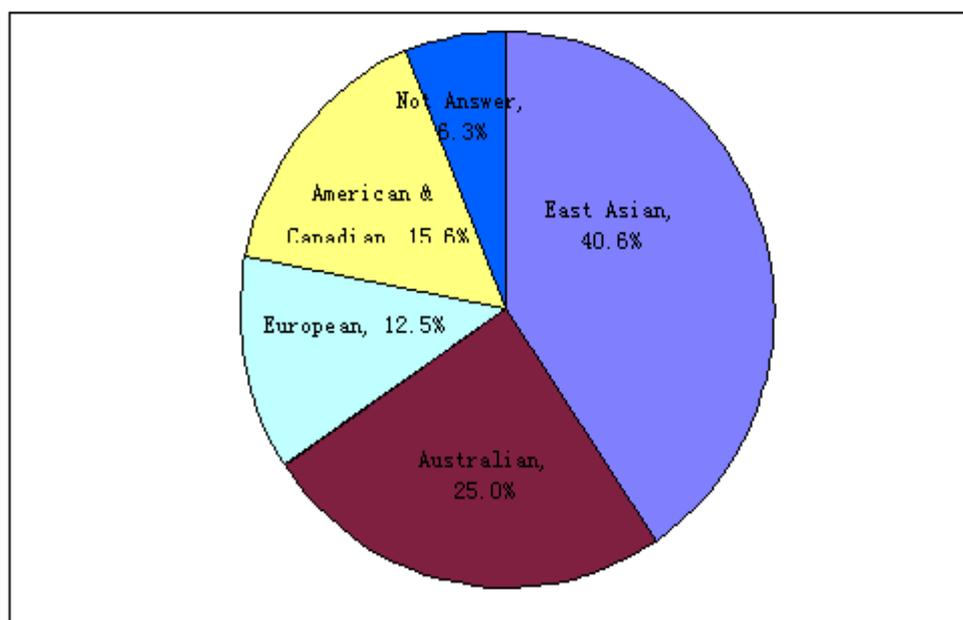
Cultural difference in politeness and face also contributed to miscommunication. An interesting example was offered about gift giving. This event happened when the female interviewee gave a small gift to an Australian girl to show her affection and politeness. The Australian girl declined the gift. The Chinese girl felt very embarrassed because being refused an offer directly is considered as losing face in China. The gift rejection can be associated with impoliteness and contempt towards the giver. In the Chinese culture, the notion of face embodies deeply held, although subtle feelings of honor, respect, esteem and the self in public and private interpersonal relations. We do not know the reason why the Australian girl refused the gift whether, i.e. it was because of her misunderstanding of politeness or her personality. However, this example suggests that Chinese students would benefit from a greater intercultural awareness and improved intercultural competence thereby deepening their understanding of different cultures.

When asked to describe the feelings experienced in situations of miscommunications, participants gave different answers. More than 28% of the participants felt quite comfortable when interacting with students from other cultures. They paid little attention to the miscommunication and continued the conversation. On the other hand, 25% felt frustrated and disappointed about what happened; nearly 10% felt embarrassed; and 6% felt that they lost face and wanted to give up the conversation. However, 22% students developed strategies to deal with the situation. They provided explanations to clarify their behavior or changed the topic to a safer one. Such feelings suggest that the lack of intercultural communication knowledge can result in the embarrassment and estrangement for the participants.

6.4 Chinese Students' Nationality Preference in Intercultural Communication

When participants were asked whether they preferred to communicate with Chinese or other nationalities, approximately one third of students preferred to communicate with Chinese students, another third preferred to communicate with foreign students, while the last third did not have a special preference. Participants were asked about the nationalities they found easier to communicate with and the results can be seen in the figure below:

Figure 3: Nationalities students find easier to communicate with



Friends from East-Asia were the most popular, accounting for 40.6% of the total. Participants reported the reason when they were interviewed. The participants who thought Asian students were more comfortable to communicate with suggested it was because they have a similar culture and set of values. As Samovar and Porter explain, "It is a very natural inclination when meeting someone to talk about a topic that both parties might enjoy; and should those talks prove interesting, it is equally natural for friendship to form and evolve" (Samovar & Porter, 2004: 284).

Yet, Chinese students take a positive attitude when they communicate with students from other cultures. From figure 3, it can be observed that Australians were the second most popular friends, taking up 25%. Americans and Canadians were the third most popular friends (15.6%), with European students being liked by 12.5%. The interviews confirm that result. Australian students were the most popular. Among the ten interviewees, four interviewees thought Australian students had good personalities and were described as "open", "friendly", "kind" and "warm-hearted", making them easy to communicate with. The reasons that the participants gave about their preference to communicate with American and Canadian students were that they knew more about the American culture from movies and TV programs. People who preferred to communicate with European students believed Europeans speak English more slowly than native Australian speakers, who speak "too fast to follow".

An exception put forward by one participant was that all non-Australian foreign students were more comfortable to communicate with. This was because students from other countries were more likely to feel lonely in Australia, and had a "need to communicate with others"; so that "they are more friendly and eager to make friends" in the words of some interviewees. While Australian students, since they "are the local people" and have "their own social circles", have little motivation to interact with students from other countries. One interviewee said "the local Australian students are very hard to communicate with" because "although they do not racially discriminate, the big gap between our cultures makes it difficult for us to communicate with each other".

The survey revealed the most difficult nationalities to communicate with were the Indians, the Africans, the Middle Eastern students, the Japanese, and mostly South Eastern Asian students. A quarter of the students did not identify any particular nationalities as being difficult to communicate with.

Indian (22%) and African students (9.4%) were considered to be difficult to communicate with because of their different accents. According to the participants, both Indian and African students speak English with very different accents to South East Asian students and to what they were used to, which usually made it difficult to be understood by students who are not familiar with their pronunciation. This demonstrated that global English varieties need to be part of the ELT curriculum in China and other EFL countries.

Students from the Middle East (18.8%) were listed in the nationalities considered difficult to communicate with because most Chinese students know little about their customs and religion. To avoid offending them through cultural ignorance, Chinese students chose to avoid communicating with them.

Ironically, 6.3% of participants thought East and Southeast Asian students were difficult to interact with. One participant felt that, despite having a similar culture, unlike Australian students, most Asian students were usually quiet and unsociable. Japanese people were regarded by 12.5% of participants as difficult to make friends with, mainly because of conflict between their two countries during World War II. This indicates that Chinese students as well as students from other countries need more intercultural interactions and more intercultural awareness to be able to deal with interactional differences.

Finally, with regard to ethnocentrism and stereotypes, the results revealed that most participants had no stereotypes of a certain nationality or thought they were culturally superior to others. This indicates that the majority of Chinese students maintain tolerance and openness to people from other cultures. That also indicates that most Chinese students treat other cultures equally. Their lack of stereotypes and ethnocentrism would encourage their intercultural communication and increase their intercultural competence thus decreasing intercultural misunderstandings. Yet, 22% participants admitted to holding stereotypes of some foreign nationalities and a small percentage (19%) held ethnocentric views. Although the figure is small, it can contribute to intercultural misunderstandings and should be addressed.

6.5 Importance of Intercultural Communication in ELT in China

Figure 4: Chinese students' opinions on intercultural communication

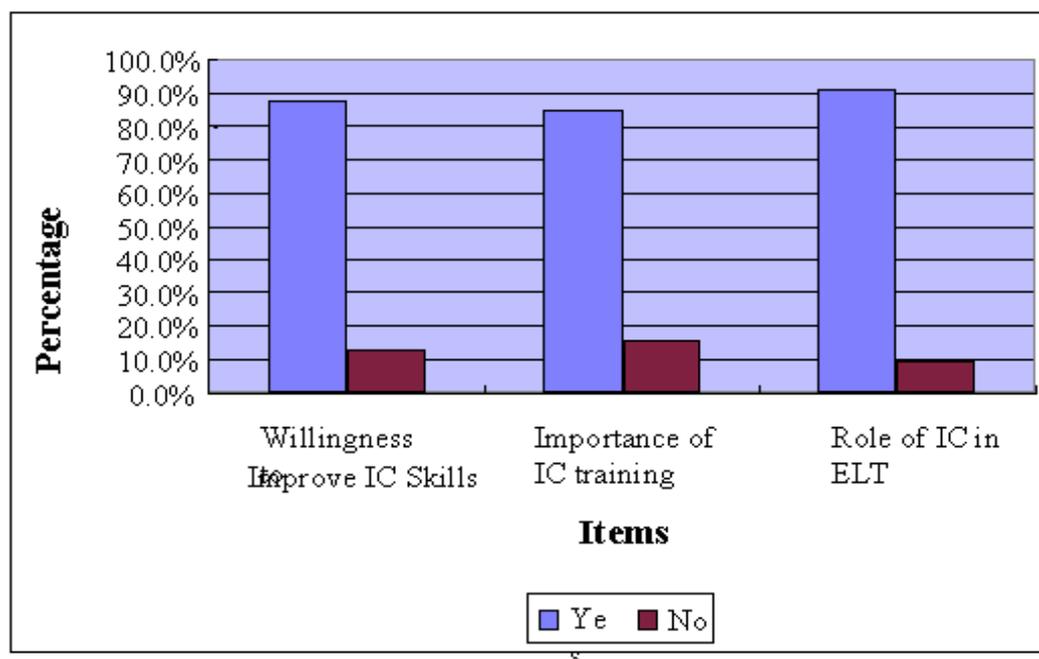


Figure 4 revealed a very positive attitude towards learning intercultural communication skills. It clearly illustrates that a very high percentage (87.5%) wanted to improve their intercultural communication skills. A small minority (12.5%) did not want to improve their intercultural communication skills. Nearly 85% of participants thought intercultural communication is very important and more than 90% believed that intercultural communication should be included in ELT in China. Participants who thought intercultural communication was not important and not necessary to be the part of ELT in China only account for 15.6% and 9.4% respectively.

All the participants in the interview acknowledged the importance of intercultural communication training, although a small number suggested they did not need it. The common reasons that were put forward included that 1) it is very useful to be equipped with some cultural knowledge about other countries; 2) it is an effective way to avoid culture shock and misunderstanding caused by lack of cultural awareness; 3) it helps to build a person's confidence and improve the intercultural communication competence; 4) it can play an important role in promoting the relationship among people from different cultures; 5) it will help in adapting to the new cultural environment and contribute to more successful intercultural interactions in their future careers.

When answering the above question about the importance of intercultural communication awareness in ELT, all the interviewees considered that intercultural communication skills should play a more significant role in ELT in China. According to them, intercultural communication knowledge will benefit students who plan to study abroad. With more intercultural communication knowledge, they will be able to interact more easily with people from diverse cultures. Moreover, it will also help students who stay in China. With the involvement of China in international trade and business communication, according to one participant, people should have some intercultural communication knowledge and "know how to communicate with the world". It is notable that the majority of Chinese students acknowledge the importance of intercultural communication and intercultural awareness in ELT. In an era of international business and trade where English is widely used, such knowledge enables effective communication.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study examined the status of intercultural communication between Chinese students and students from other countries at UC and the difficulties they encountered and the reasons for failures in communication. Moreover, it also aimed to assess the importance of intercultural communication as part of ELT in China.

The findings suggest that most Chinese students at an Australian University are very actively engaged in intercultural communications. More than 75% students communicate with students from other countries very frequently and 87.5% Chinese students have at least one foreign friend. These figures imply that Chinese students have a strong willingness to interact with students from other countries. When closely examined, we can observe that more than 40% of Chinese students like to talk with East Asian students, 25% chose Australians, 15.6% said Americans and Canadians and Europeans were chosen by 12.5%. This indicates that these Chinese students are inclined to seek out culturally similar people when placed in a new culture.

In this study, more than 81% of the Chinese students reported they face difficulties when interacting with students from other countries. Although language proficiency was regarded as a significant reason to communication difficulties, the majority of Chinese students admitted cultural differences were the major reason to abort the interaction. One of the most notable difficulties was finding a suitable conversation topic to get the conversation going on. Chinese students maintained their conversation with students from other countries on most safe topics, such as greetings and weather, studies, cooking, family, and activities they took part in. When they desired to talk more, most of them found they had limited knowledge of or little interest in the topic, which often resulted in them having little motivation in seeking further interaction. Many communicating difficulties derived from culture shock, differences in politeness or misunderstandings of nonverbal communication. All these communicating difficulties indicated that Chinese students need to improve their intercultural communication knowledge before and when they study overseas.

However, more than 85% of the Chinese students in the study have a desire to improve their intercultural communication abilities. They believe intercultural communication is very important to their study abroad and as well as those living in China. Teaching English in China has long been directed and shaped by examinations, which focus on grammar and reading. Most Chinese students could get a high mark in examinations, while in a real-life situation they are often unable to communicate effectively with foreigners. Intercultural communication is not only necessary to suit the life of a sojourner abroad, but a requirement for success in the multicultural world. Intercultural competence can increase the potential of success in international business and trade, enable productive interpersonal contacts and reduce misunderstandings caused by lack of intercultural communication knowledge. Therefore, intercultural communication skills are important and imperative in ELT in China as well as overseas.

The difficulties and experiences the Chinese students encountered when they interacted with students from other countries call for some measures for facilitating efficient intercultural communications, especially at this Australian University. Firstly, Chinese students should be equipped with both language and intercultural communication knowledge before studying overseas. They need a better preparation to function adequately and survive harmoniously in the situations encountered in the new cultural environment. Moreover, Chinese educational institutions should put more emphasis on intercultural communication in ELT. Since a lot of intercultural interactions involve the use of English between non-native speakers, intercultural communication knowledge should be a feature of modern ELT. This knowledge should incorporate information about other cultural values, customs, face, politeness and non-verbal features of other countries and world varieties of English. Finally, the local educational institution should take measures to improve the cultural diversity awareness of international students, local students, and teachers in order to build a harmonious intercultural environment. It should also create more opportunities for intercultural interaction and exchange among students.

This study has a number of limitations. First, it is restricted to a small sample of 32 Chinese students at an Australian university. The ages, genders, educational experience backgrounds, and years of living in Australia have not been considered in this study. Moreover, the results may be affected by the methods employed in this study. The study should be extended to other Australian Universities using a larger number of participants so that a more comprehensive picture is given of the Chinese students' difficulties and preferences in various contexts. Factors that could be more closely examined include the relationship between age, gender, background, personality, psychological factors and the students' intercultural experiences. Similar studies could be conducted for other ethnic students in Australia and in a wider range of contexts, such as high school students, postgraduate and undergraduate students to provide deeper insight into intercultural communication difficulties.

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About the authors:

Hong Xiao is a Lecturer at Beijing Police College, China. She has 10 years experience in TEFL and taught English at various levels in China. She received her MA degree in Professional English from the University of Canberra. Her research focuses on TEFL practices and pedagogy in China and Intercultural Communication.

Address for correspondence:

Hong Xiao
ELT & Culture Department, Beijing Police College,
Changping District, Beijing, China. 102202
Phone: 86-10-8976 8571
E-mail: Nelliexh@gmail.com

Dr Eleni Petraki is a Lecturer at the University of Canberra, Australia, teaching sociolinguistics, linguistics and research methods in language teaching. She holds an MSc in Applied Linguistics from the University of Edinburgh and a PhD from the University of Queensland, Australia specialising in discourse analysis. Her research focuses on family communication, cross-cultural communication, talk in interaction, ethnicity and genre analysis and combines discourse analysis, conversation analysis and narrative analysis.

Address for correspondence:

Dr Eleni Petraki
School of Languages, International Studies and Tourism
University of Canberra,
Bruce, ACT, Australia.
Phone: +61 2 62015219
E-mail: eleni.petraki@canberra.edu.au

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