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Encounters with Westerners:

Improving Skills in English and Intercultural Communication

跨文化交际技巧

——如何跟西方人打交道 (修订版)

教师用书

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Teacher's Book

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教育部最新颁布的《大学英语课程教学要求》将大学英语的教学目标确定为“培养学生的英语综合应用能力,特别是听说能力,使他们在今后学习、工作和社会交往中能用英语有效地进行交际,同时增强其自主学习能力,提高其综合文化素养,以适应我国社会发展和国际交流的需要”,并提出:“将综合英语类、语言技能类、语言应用类、语言文化类和专业英语类等必修课程和选修课程有机结合,确保不同层次的学生在英语应用能力方面得到充分的训练和提高。”《大学英语课程教学要求》明确要求大学英语教学中开设选修课,以满足大学生的实际需求。

依据《大学英语课程教学要求》,上海外语教育出版社邀请国内外英语教学专家开发编写了选修教材,通过教材的出版引领、促进了大学英语选修课程设置的发展,丰富了我国大学英语教学。这些教材品种丰富,涵盖面广,包括以下多个系列:大学英语应用提高阶段专业英语系列教材、大学英语综合应用能力选修课系列教材、职场英语选修教程系列、大学目标英语、牛津专业英语基础丛书等。这些年来,全国数百所高校使用了这些教材,部分老师对教材的内容和编写形式提出了宝贵的建议,为我们进一步完善教材提供了实践依据。

虽然很多高校多年来一直尝试开设选修课,专家学者也进行了理论研究,但目前此类课程在大学英语教学中所占比重并不大,仍处于探索阶段。多数教学专家对大学英语选修课程的具体教学目标和教学内容范围未形成统一认识,教育主管部门亦未出台具体的选修课教学要求。为了进一步推动大学英语选修课教学的发展,外教社在多年选修课教材使用情况调研的基础上,结合专家学者的最新研究成果和建议,充分考虑我国目前的大学英语教学现状、师资条件、实际需求等因素,重新策划编写了“大学英语拓展课程系列”。该系列教材包括EAP、ESP和EOP三个子系列。

- EAP (English for Academic Purposes)

学术英语类侧重高级水平英语听、说、读、写、译等技能的培养,为大学生出国留学、攻读研究生、进行科研等学术活动打下更扎实的英语基础。此类课程包括跨文化交际、文学赏析、学术英语写作等,适合需要继续在学术上深造的大学生使用。

- ESP (English for Specific Purposes)

专业英语类侧重提升专业英语能力,在培养学生听、说、读、写、译等基本语言技能的基础上,教授与该专业相关的英语词汇和表达,并尽可能传授专业知识,以使大学生轻松通过英语媒介获取本专业知识和信息。此类课程适合相关专业学生学习,针对性强。

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职场英语类侧重提升职场英语能力,为大学生将来在英语环境中工作打下扎实的职场交际基本功。此类课程多数适合所有大学生使用,有部分教程与专业结合,适合相应专业学生使用。

除了重新修订已出版的教材外,我们还通过邀请更多海内外英语教学专家参与编写、和国外出版社合作出版等方式,扩大本系列教材的选题规模,以满足各专业大学生的学习需求。本系列教材具有时代感强、实用性强、课堂可操作性强等特点,相信会给我国大学英语教学带来新风向。

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Don Snow
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Introduction to *Encounters with Westerners*

I. General

The ultimate goal of English study is not just to learn a language for its own sake. Rather, the goal is to learn how to understand and effectively communicate with people from other nations and cultures. *Encounters with Westerners* is a textbook to help students not only improve their English, but also grow in their ability to interact effectively with people from other cultures, especially Westerners.

This integrated skills textbook provides students with practice in speaking, listening, reading and writing. It is appropriate for use in courses on Western culture or intercultural communication, but due to its heavy emphasis on discussion it is also appropriate for use in oral skills courses.

II. Goals of *Encounters with Westerners*

This textbook aims to achieve five goals:

- 1) **Help students improve their English language skills.** *Encounters* allows students to build their English skills by reading about and discussing topics that are intellectually appropriate – and generally interesting – to adult learners in China. In particular, *Encounters* helps students learn to explain ideas at ever greater levels of nuance, and share ideas effectively in discussion.
- 2) **Help students develop good intercultural communication habits and skills.** In particular, *Encounters* builds students' awareness of how they go about interpreting the behavior of foreigners. It also encourages them to develop the habit of pausing to consider possible alternative explanations of puzzling or problematic behavior on the part of foreigners, rather than jumping to (often ethnocentric) conclusions.
- 3) **Familiarize students with basic concepts of intercultural communication.** *Encounters* introduces students to many of the basic concepts of intercultural communication. The more that students understand about the various factors which affect intercultural communication, the more aware they will be of the role these factors play in how they interpret the behavior of foreigners.

- 4) **Teach students basic aspects of Western culture.** While *Encounters* addresses Western culture in general, special attention is given to American culture. In part this is because the US is the world's largest English-speaking nation in terms of both population and economy. Also, as one of the world's most strongly individualist cultures, it provides an especially sharp contrast to China's culture.
- 5) **Help teachers learn more about culture and intercultural communication.** Through teaching *Encounters*, it is hoped that teachers – both Western and Chinese – will grow in their understanding of intercultural communication, of their students' culture, and of their own culture.

Critical Incident Exercises and Encounters with Westerners

I. Why should we teach intercultural communication skills in English classes?

For students in China, the real purpose of learning English – or any other language – should not simply be to learn grammar and vocabulary; instead, the real goal should be to learn how to communicate with people from other countries and cultures. Sometimes this communication is direct, for example, when a Chinese student talks face to face with a foreigner from the United States or Britain, or perhaps from Jordan or Thailand. Sometimes this communication is indirect, for example, if a student reads a book written in Canada or watches a movie made in South Africa. However, for all these situations, the real goal of learning English is to learn to communicate cross-culturally.

In order to interact successfully with people from other countries and cultures, one thing students need to learn is a foreign language. Of course some foreigners in China can speak Chinese – and more and more people around the world are studying Chinese as a foreign language. However, there will always be many foreigners who don't speak Chinese, and students who learn English will generally be better able to communicate with a broad range of foreigners from all around the world.

A second thing that will help Chinese students communicate well with foreigners is culture knowledge. Obviously it will be easier for Chinese students to interact with foreigners if they know a lot about those foreigners' culture. The problem here is the question of which culture students should learn. Clearly it is good for learners of English to know something about the cultures of the major English-speaking countries, and the more they learn, the better. However, in real-life use of English, learners are as likely to use English to communicate with Russians, Indonesians, Indians, and Brazilians as with Americans and British people, and it would be impossible for students to become expert in the cultures of so many different countries.

This means that, in order to interact successfully with people from other

cultures, students should study not only English and Western culture, but also intercultural communication skills, in other words, general skills and habits that will help them whenever they communicate with someone whose culture is very different from theirs. In fact, study of intercultural communication skills should not be something separate from learning English; it should be incorporated into English learning, because real-life use of English also requires use of intercultural communication skills.

The goal of *Encounters with Westerners* is to help students build not only English skills, but also intercultural competence – skills and habits that will help them interact more effectively with people from other cultural backgrounds. The main type of activity that *Encounters with Westerners* uses to build these skills is called a *critical incident exercise* (CIE), and there are at least two of these in each unit.

II. What is a *critical incident exercise*?

Critical incident exercises were originally developed in the 1960s for intercultural skills training, and they have come to be one of the most successful and widely used types of activities for intercultural training. (Wight 1995:127; Wang et al 2000:7) Since the 1980s, they have also increasingly been used in foreign language teaching.

Consider the following example (from *Encounters with Westerners*, Unit 1, “The Gift”)

Situation:

Xiao Wang has been granted a special scholarship at an American university, and his English teacher, Ms. Kelsen, wrote a recommendation letter that was instrumental in his getting the scholarship. Xiao Wang feels very grateful to Ms. Kelsen, so he decides to buy her an expensive gift, a landscape painting, in order to thank her. One day after class ends and the other students leave, Xiao Li presents the gift to Ms. Kelsen. Looking surprised, Ms. Kelsen says thank you, but says that she can't accept it. Xiao Wang offers the gift several more times but Ms. Kelsen insists on refusing.

Question:

Why do you think Ms. Kelsen won't accept the gift? List at least five possible reasons, and be ready to explain why you think these are likely.

As you can see, this CIE basically consists of two parts: 1) a story in which a person from one culture encounters a person from another culture, but there is some kind of problem or misunderstanding; 2) a question that invites learners to *interpret* the story, i.e. figure out what went wrong and why.

Some CIEs are designed so that there is one right answer, and the students' task is to discuss the situation and then try to figure out the right answer to the question. For example, a *cultural assimilator* (also called an *intercultural sensitizer*) is a critical incident exercise where the story is followed by four possible explanations, and the learners' task is to figure out which explanation people from the target culture would be most likely to choose. The goal of this kind of exercise is to help learners develop the habit of trying to see things from the perspective of the target culture, so for this kind of exercise, the "right" answer is the one that most people from the target culture would pick. (Albert 1995:164; Wang et al 2000:13)

Other critical incident exercises are more open-ended; no list of possible answers is provided, and there may be more than one "right" answer. Open-ended critical incident activities encourage learners to think more broadly about the situation, and to explore the many factors that may affect intercultural communication situations.

Each unit in *Encounters with Westerners* has two critical incident exercises.

- The Encounter activities are classic critical incident activities that only provide students with a situation and a question; "The Gift" (above) is an example of an Encounter activity.
- The Letter to Fran activities give students not only a situation and a question, but also a response from a fictitious teacher named Fran who analyzes the situation.

While these two kinds of critical incident activities differ in form, both are relatively open-ended – they recognize that many factors may play into the situation, and that there may not be one single right answer.

III. How are critical incident exercises good for building English skills?

While the precise English skills that students practice during a critical incident activity vary, it should be obvious from the example above that critical incident activities can easily be adapted for practicing any and all of the main English language skills. For example, a listening practice component can easily be incorporated into the activity if the teacher presents the situation to students orally, asking them to remember and take notes. Or, if the teacher wants to give students more reading practice, the situation can be given to students as a reading text. Writing can also readily be included in the activity, for example, by having students write responses to the situation.

However, critical incident exercises are most obviously useful as activities for helping students build their speaking skills. While there are quite a variety of different ways a critical incident exercise can be organized and used in a lesson plan (see “Teaching *Encounters with Westerners*”), most of these involve a lot of discussion. Taking “The Gift” as an example, students will probably first discuss the situation and question in pairs or small groups, and then report their conclusions to the class; further speaking practice will ensue as the class as a whole discusses what the small groups suggest.

Furthermore, it should be noted that students don’t simply practice speaking; they practice the more advanced skill of explaining. As you can see in “The Gift,” much of the discussion revolves around the question “why,” so students need not only to suggest ideas but also to explain and justify their ideas. This kind of activity stretches students’ speaking skill in ways that many other discussion topics do not.

Finally, critical incidents tend to be good topics for discussion because most adult students find them interesting to discuss. All too often, students with adult level thinking skills are bored in English classes because the topics have been kept simple so as not to exceed students’ speaking abilities. However, the result is too often that students find the topics childish and not very engaging. Critical incident activities are good for adult students because they are generally interesting and engaging for adult students, but also quite flexible in terms of the language skills

they demand. For low intermediate students, it is not difficult to keep the situations simple enough to understand even when presented in English, and basic explanations of the situation can often be stated in fairly simple language. The language skills of more advanced students, however, are challenged by the need to explain ideas in more detailed and nuanced ways, and also the need to provide evidence for ideas.

IV. How are critical incident exercises good for building intercultural competence?

Some of the potential benefits of critical incident exercises are quite obvious. One thing critical incident exercises are very good for is helping students learn more about other cultures – and even about their own. For example, “The Gift” is a good way to start discussion of gift-giving customs, and can easily be followed by a talk or reading that gives more information about gift-giving in Western cultures. Of course, study of other cultures also generally helps students become more consciously aware of their own culture. (Wight 1995:128; Fowler and Blohm 2004:58) Critical incidents are also good for preparing students for future intercultural encounters by giving them a chance to think about possible problems – and also possible responses; students who have thought in advance about a situation are usually better able to cope with it than students who are caught completely off guard. (Wight 1995:128; Cushner and Landis 1996:195)

However, the assumption underlying *Encounters with Westerners* is that the main benefit of CIEs is that they help students build useful thinking habits that will help them deal with intercultural encounters more successfully. These habits will be described one by one below.

A. CIEs help students build the habit of thinking more slowly and carefully when they run into problems in intercultural encounters.

This is a very important point; in fact, it may be the most important benefit of doing CIEs. However, in order to explain this point clearly, we need to first talk a little about human psychology.

Psychologists suggest that the human mind has two basic ways of thinking, in other words, two different ways of analyzing situations, making sense of them, and deciding what to do about them. The first one, called System 1, is an instinctive approach that does not involve much conscious or careful thought. This mode of thinking functions more or less automatically, and very quickly; in fact, Daniel Kahneman (2011) even calls this kind of thinking “fast thinking.” This is the thinking system we use most often when we interact with other people, because it is fast, efficient, and does not require much effort; it is also usually quite accurate and effective when we are dealing with familiar situations.

The other mode of thinking, called System 2, is much more conscious and careful; it also requires much more effort and functions more slowly; in fact, Kahneman calls this “slow thinking.” This system tends to be more thorough and reliable, and often produces better results than System 1, especially when we are dealing with unfamiliar or complex situations. However, we also tend not to use it unless we absolutely have to, because it requires more work. Kahneman points out that it could also be described as “effortful” thinking.

How does this relate to intercultural encounters? In most interactions with other people, our natural habit is to make many rapid judgments using System 1. This is because people generally interact primarily with people from their own culture; in fact, most of the people they interact with are not only from the same culture, but often friends or family members. These are the environments in which our thinking and communication habits are formed, and in these situations System 1 is usually not only fast and easy but also quite accurate.

The problem is that the habit of relying heavily on System 1 is not so effective in intercultural encounters. When we are interacting with people from unfamiliar cultures, and perhaps in unfamiliar situations, it is generally best to rely more heavily on System 2, in other words, to think more carefully and consciously. However, it would be impossible to think carefully and consciously about everything that is said and done in an intercultural encounter; there are simply too many things happening for us to think carefully about all of them. So, in intercultural encounters, the trick is to develop the habit of being alert for situations where we should switch to System 2 and think more slowly and carefully.

Regular use of CIEs helps students get into the habit of paying special attention during intercultural encounters, and also of switching to System 2 when problems arise. The situation gives students a rough model of the kinds of situations where System 2 may be needed, so regular exposure to such situations makes students more aware of the kinds of conditions under which they need to be ready to slow down and switch to System 2. The question serves as a signal that announces “Now you need to switch to System 2 and think more carefully!”

B. CIEs help students build the habit of thinking more broadly, and considering more possible explanations of a situation.

As we saw above, in most communication situations our natural tendency is to make very quick judgments about what other people mean. Another way of saying this is that we naturally tend to accept the explanation that seems most “obvious” to us. However, our decisions about what is “obvious” are often based to a large degree on our own cultural background, in other words, the “obvious” meaning of something is what it would most likely mean in our own culture. Of course, the problem is that what seems obvious to us may not at all be what somebody from another culture meant, and if we use System 1 to make quick judgments in intercultural encounters, there is a good chance that our judgments will be wrong.

This problem is related to the phenomenon known as *ethnocentrism*, in other words, the natural human tendency to judge situations and people by the norms of our own culture. Sometimes ethnocentrism is talked about as if it were a bad thing to do, almost as if it were some kind of crime that people consciously commit. However, ethnocentrism is better described as a very natural tendency – but one that can unfortunately cause problems during intercultural communication if we do not consciously manage it. So for students, the real goal is to learn to be aware of ethnocentrism and to manage it.

Open-ended CIEs, such as the ones used in *Encounters with Westerners*, help students build the habit of making a conscious effort to think of several possible explanations of a situation, rather than quickly adopting the most obvious – and quite possibly – ethnocentric explanation. In an exercise like “The Gift,” students should certainly consider the explanations that, from their own cultural perspec-

tive, seem most obvious to them. However, they are also required to think about the situation long enough to generate several other less obvious explanations. While this does not guarantee that students will arrive at the “right” explanation of a situation, or even that they will come up with non-ethnocentric explanations, the habit of carefully looking for additional explanations increases the chances that students will find at least some explanations that are not rooted entirely in the norms of their own culture.

C. CIEs can be used to help students build other habits that will make them better intercultural communicators.

The two benefits discussed above are inherent in open-ended CIEs – no matter what specific format you use for conducting the activity, it will help students build good skills and habits related to these two areas. In addition to these, CIEs can help students build several other good habits, but these are more dependent on precisely how the activity is conducted.

The habit of being careful when generalizing about other cultures: When students do CIEs, they have a natural tendency to draw general conclusions based on the behavior of foreigners in the CIE situations. For example, students who do “The Gift” may conclude that Western teachers – or perhaps even Westerners in general – don’t like to accept gifts. Of course, most students probably wouldn’t over-generalize to quite this degree, and they realize that there will be some differences between individual Westerners. However, the temptation to draw general conclusions from specific examples is very strong because the human mind is naturally designed to learn in this way. In fact, scholars point out that one potential problem is that the stories in CIEs may encourage students to draw overly broad generalizations about foreigners and their cultures. (Wang et al 2000:17; Corbett 2003:112)

However, this problem of over-generalization is typically only serious if teachers ignore it. In contrast, if teachers explicitly deal with the issue when teaching CIEs, CIEs can actually be quite useful for helping students learn to generalize more carefully and wisely. Taking “The Gift” as an example, if teachers do **not talk about** how typical Ms. Kelsen’s behavior is or, even worse, assume that **the behavior must** be typical, there is a danger that students will draw overly broad conclusions about