

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

—What It Means to
Chinese Learners of English

跨文化交际与英语学习

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内 容 简 介

本书是有关跨文化交际这一新学科的论文集。论文作者既有国内知名的学者、教授，也有国外一些有声望的教学法专家。本书共收论文十一篇，除介绍这一学科的概貌外，还着重从语言和非语言手段以及人们交往等各个侧面，论述文化因素对于人们交际——特别是中国人与西方人交际——的影响。为了帮助读者更好地理解，每篇论文均有中文提要，书末附有术语解释。本书有助于提高英语专业学生、英语教师及各类英语工作者对文化差异的敏感性，对英语学习者如何学习英语亦有裨益。

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Intercultural Communication and What It Means to Us

Hu Wenzhong

本文提要

跨文化交际作为一种现象久已存在，但作为一门学科，历史还很短。在美国，对跨文化交际研究较多，原因之一是国际交往的增加，另一个原因是国内的少数民族从六十年代起争取自己独立地位和权利的斗争迅速发展，推动了人们对于不同民族的文化之间的差异进行研究。在我国，“文化比较”引起了愈来愈多的人的兴趣，这其中包括哲学家、历史学家、民俗研究者、比较文学研究者以及外语教师等。

跨文化交际既涉及文化，又涉及交际。作者分析了交际的构成要素和文化的各种定义，指出文化可以分三类研究：高层文化、民间文化和深层文化。这三类文化既有区别，又互相联系。

研究跨文化交际的目的在于提高人们对于文化差异的敏感性，从而能够适应不同的文化环境。研究的方面包括语言交际、非语言交际、人们之间的相互交往，以及观念、信仰等。

在说明提高跨文化敏感性的必要性时，作者以自己的调查为例，说明无论教师或学生都认为教学中有必要把提高跨文化敏感性作为教学的目标。根据 Hanvey 的

说法，跨文化的敏感性可以分为四个层次，其中站在对方的立场上来思考理解问题是最不易做到的。在教学中可以采取多种方式提高学生的敏感性，但必须注意防止民族中心论——即认为凡符合本民族习惯的都是好的，反之即都是坏的。

在教学中，不仅需要注意对比中国文化与英美文化的不同，还需要学生了解非英语国家的文化。

最后，作者还接触到跨文化交际的研究方向及方法问题。

What Is Intercultural Communication ?

Intercultural communication is nothing new. It has existed for thousands of years. It occurred whenever people of different cultural backgrounds came in contact with each other. In China's history what happened on the Silk Road was an outstanding example of communication across cultures. As a discipline, however, intercultural communication has a fairly short history.

It seems natural that in recent years this field of study has drawn more interest in the U.S. than in any other country. Millions of people pour into and out of the U.S. every year and the idea that the world is but a "global village" becomes increasingly closer to reality. Domestically, ethnic groups like Blacks, Chicanos, and Puerto Ricans grew much more vocal in the sixties. These dictated the need for more cross-cultural studies in the U.S. Cultural anthropologists, sociolinguists, social psychologists and communications experts all turned their attention to this viable field of study. A number of books have

since been published on the subject, and organizations like SIETAR (Society of Intercultural Education, Training and Research) sprang up.

Intercultural communication is not only of interest to scholars and researchers, but also has practical value for businessmen, educators, teachers, tourist guides, foreign student advisers and consultants working overseas.

In China, those who take an interest in this field of study belong to different groups. First, we have the philosophers who make comparative studies of philosophical thinking in China and that in the West. Then there are folklorists who study Chinese customs and habits and occasionally make comparisons between Chinese customs and those of other countries. A sizable group of scholars are in the field of comparative literature. Finally, foreign language teachers, who become increasingly aware of cultural factors in foreign language teaching and learning. The Chinese contributors to this volume are all in the profession of teaching languages.

What Is Communication and What Is Culture ?

Porter and Samovar (1985) define communication as "that which happens whenever meaning is attributed to behavior or to the residue of behavior. When someone observes our behavior or its residue and gives meaning to it, communication has taken place regardless of whether our behavior was conscious or unconscious, intentional or unintentional." For instance, a spoken or written message is an act of communication, but a smile, a shaking of the head or a frown is also communication.

The important point is that meaning is attributed to the behaviour.

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

Culture is a large and evasive concept. Scholars have all tried to define culture in a satisfactory manner, but each is dissatisfied with the other's definition. As a result, we now have over 150 different definitions as reviewed by Kroeber and Kluckhohn in their book *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (1963). Sapir (1921) says, "Culture may be defined as what a society does and thinks. Language is a particular how of thought." Benedict says in her book *Patterns of Culture* (1935): "What really binds men together is their culture — the ideas and the standards they have in common." Brown's definition (1978) is: "A culture is a collection of beliefs, habits, living patterns and behaviors which are held more or less in common by people who occupy particular geographic areas." Kohls (1979) defines culture as "an integrated system of learned behavior patterns that are characteristic of the members of any given

society. Culture refers to the total way of life of particular groups of people. It includes everything that a group of people thinks, says, does, and makes.”

These and other definitions all point to the fact that culture is all pervasive, including not only customs and habits, ideas and beliefs but also the artifacts made by humans.

There are many ways of studying and classifying culture. One of the ways is to group culture under three headings: high culture, popular culture and deep culture. High culture refers to philosophy, literature, fine arts, music and religion. This is culture understood in its narrower sense. In its broader sense, culture (i.e. popular culture) includes customs and habits, rites and rituals, ways of living (which incorporate housing, dressing, eating and drinking) and all interpersonal behaviour. Deep culture refers to conception of beauty, definition of sin, notions of modesty, ordering of time, tempo of work, patterns of group decision-making, approaches to problem-solving, roles in relation to status by age, sex, class, occupation, and kinship, body language and so on and so forth. Deep culture is closely related to what may be termed the national temperament of a people.

Culture is often compared to an iceberg to imply that only a small part (some say ten percent) of it is visible while most of it is not. It is important to know this in our discussion of intercultural communication, for it helps us understand the problems involved and how to solve them.

High culture, popular culture and deep culture are not three separate watertight compartments. On the contrary, they are closely related, though the relationship is not always

easy to specify. For instance, a particular custom may have its roots in the deep culture of a people, which is in turn crystallized in philosophical terms in high culture.

It is not true to say that each country has only one culture. In the United States where there are many ethnic groups, we find not only White Anglo-Saxon culture, but also Black culture, Chicano culture, Indian culture, and Asian culture. Within one ethnic culture we find subcultures and subgroups like white-collar culture, drug culture, the culture of gay people, etc. In China, we have 56 ethnic groups and as many cultures. Within the culture of the Han nationality, we also find regional differences. Northerners and Southerners, for instance, are different in many obvious and subtle ways. It would be interesting and worthwhile to make a comparative study of customs and habits in different regions of the country and among people of different professions.

When we study a culture for communication purposes, however, we should focus on the dominant cultural pattern and guard against getting side-tracked. When we compare cultural differences, we should concentrate on the major differences of two dominant patterns. For instance, when we say differences between Chinese and American cultures, we mean differences between the dominant Han culture and the dominant American culture. Also we have to remember that individual differences always exist. Within a dominant cultural pattern there are always people who deviate to varying degrees from the pattern. But it is safe to say, for example, that Americans say "thank you" more often than Chinese say *xiexie* although we may find in each group some people who act in a way different from the

norm.

Goal and Scope of Intercultural Communication Studies

Briefly stated, the goal of intercultural communication studies is to help increase people's cross-cultural awareness so that fewer problems arise in their interaction with people of another culture. To do this, it is necessary to compare cultures to establish similarities and identify differences. But it is likewise necessary to clarify certain concepts and understand some of the inherent problems in cross-cultural communication.

I have put together this volume of essays in the hope of arousing greater interest in intercultural communication and helping students and younger teachers improve their cross-cultural awareness. Contributors have approached this subject from a verbal, nonverbal, interpersonal or perceptual angle.

In verbal communication we find differences on a phonemic, lexical, syntactical and discoursal level. Phonemic and syntactical variations are often taken for granted. On the lexical level there is a lot worth studying. In his essay "Culturally Loaded Words and English Language Teaching", Xu Guozhang discusses some commonly-misused words and phrases in China, which stem mainly from cultural differences. He points out that "the semantic component of our ELT has been very much under-taught" and believes that knowledge of the history, literature and culture of both China and English-speaking countries is essential to more successful teaching and learning of English. In his essay "EFL Learning and Culture Acquisition"

Qin Xiubai distinguishes lexical differences on two levels: denotative and connotative. Zuo Huanqi's "Verbal Interactions of Compliment in American English and Chinese" isolates a very interesting aspect of verbal communication and makes comparisons between the linguistic formulas, response formulas, cultural assumptions and social functions of compliments in American English and Chinese. Robinett and Chun-jo Liu's comparison of Chinese and English proverbs probes still another area of lexical differences. After examining 36 pairs of English and Chinese proverbs they conclude that although the Chinese and English languages have many proverbs that are similar in content and in usage, "the cultural content often differs, and it is this content that one must become familiar with in order to be able to use the proverbs appropriately in communicating ideas in the language." Those who work on translation theories have written on issues of equivalence and non-equivalence of words and phrases across languages. These no doubt will be of interest to students of intercultural communication. A few scholars have made comparative studies of Chinese and English discoursal patterns, but so far not much has been published on this topic.

The study of nonverbal communication has been all but neglected. But research has shown that a large portion of our communication is done nonverbally. N.V.C. includes not only proxemics and kinesics, but also use of space and attitudes towards time and a host of paralinguistic features. He Daokuan's article fills a glaring gap. The differences between the Chinese and Westerners in N.V.C. are no less significant than those in verbal communication and well worthy of further study.

Compared with N.V.C. interpersonal behaviour has aroused greater interest among researchers and foreign language teachers. This may be due to the fact that mistakes and inappropriateness in interpersonal relationships are easy targets. While it may take time and effort to find out how a particular word is misused or misinterpreted, social errors cause immediate friction or, at least, unpleasantness. Ouyang Fasu, Helen Oatey and Alan Maley draw upon their cross-cultural experience and each analyzes the errors or inappropriateness in his or her own way. The examples given are all very typical and the analyses insightful.

A major area of intercultural communication lies in the belief and value systems and world views, which are the source of many of the apparent cultural differences. Betty Robinett and Chun-jo Liu's comparative study of English and Chinese proverbs touches on the world view of both Chinese and native English speakers, but there is no article in the present volume dealing exclusively with this topic. Cultural differences are closely related to a people's history, philosophical thinking, religion, mythology and folklore, but it takes much more time and effort for scholars of many disciplines to undertake such research. Within academic circles in China there is mounting interest in this field of study and some significant work has been done. We hope that the next collection on intercultural communication will reflect the work done in this field.

How to Increase Cross-Cultural Awareness

To find out the views of both teachers and students on

questions related to cross-cultural awareness, I did some investigation in 1985. I sent questionnaires to 36 native English speakers who were teachers at Chinese institutions of higher education. Seven institutions in four cities were chosen. Of those contacted, 28 responded. I also sent questionnaires to two groups of Chinese students at my own institution. Fifty of these students were being trained as United Nations interpreters and translators and 14 were specializing in cultural exchange. My reason for choosing these students was that they could be expected to be more culturally aware since they had studied English at college for five or six years and would be working overseas among people of different cultures.

Of the 28 teacher respondents, 26 (92%) thought that there was a cultural gap between their Chinese students and themselves and all of them thought that awareness of cultural differences should be made a goal in teaching. Fifteen (53%) of them said that "cultural mistakes" (that is, language and behaviour which is inappropriate or unacceptable to most native English speakers) made them more uncomfortable than grammatical mistakes, while eight (28%) said that grammatical mistakes made them more uncomfortable. The rest (19%) either said that they expect mistakes from students or that they have taught Chinese students for so long that their mistakes do not make them uncomfortable any more. Most of the "cultural mistakes" reported occurred in socializing (60%) and only a quarter in written work. This corroborates Sukwiwat's observation (1982) that it is the mundane level that presents the greatest difficulties in contact between cultures.

Of the student respondents, 62 (97%) thought that there

was a cultural gap between native English speakers and themselves. Sixty-one (95%) held that cultural awareness should be made one of the goals in teaching. In answer to the question "What helps you most in terms of cultural awareness?" personal contact came first (53%), followed by films, videotapes, and lectures on society and culture.

The students' "cultural mistakes" fall into four categories: sociolinguistically inappropriate, culturally unacceptable, conflict of different value systems and over-simplification or over-generalization. Feedback from my respondents has confirmed my belief that "cultural mistakes" are often worse than linguistic ones and tend to create ill-feeling between native speakers and Chinese speakers of English. As Wolfson (1983) notes: "In interacting with foreigners, native speakers tend to be rather tolerant of errors in pronunciation or syntax. In contrast, violations of rules of speaking are often interpreted as bad manners since the native speaker is unlikely to be aware of sociolinguistic relativity."

According to Hanvey (1979), there are four levels of cross-cultural awareness. Level 1 is awareness of superficial cultural traits often interpreted as exotic or bizarre. Level 2 is awareness of significant and subtle cultural traits that contrast markedly with one's own and are interpreted as unbelievable and irrational. Level 3 is similar to Level 2, but the cultural traits are recognized as believable through intellectual analysis. Level 4 is awareness of how another culture feels from the standpoint of the insider. This is termed empathy by some and transpection by others. It is generally recognized that for most people empathy is something very difficult, if not

impossible, to attain.

Researchers and educators have proposed a number of ways to increase cross-cultural awareness. These include talks and lectures on the concept of culture and on differences in customs and habits, use of films and videotapes, the study of literature for cultural information, and interpersonal contact with native speakers of English in China. Although all these methods produce results, there is nothing as effective as direct exposure. The acquiring of cross-cultural awareness is often a complicated process of psychological adaptation, which does not occur unless one is brought face to face with the alien culture.

However, not everyone who is exposed to the culture learns. One has to overcome a lot of difficulties if one is to acquire true empathy. Hall (1976) illustrates the difficulty in understanding what he calls "hidden culture" with his own experience in Japan. He concludes, "Two things get in the way of understandings: the linearity of language and the deep biases and built-in blinders that every culture provides. Transcending either is a formidable task." Barnlund (1985) explains the deep biases this way: "Cultural myopia persists not merely because of inertia and habit, but chiefly because it is so difficult to overcome. One acquires a personality and a culture in childhood, long before he is capable of comprehending either of them. To survive, each person masters the perceptual orientations, cognitive biases, and communication habits of his own culture. But once mastered, objective assessment of these same processes is awkward since the same mechanisms that are being evaluated must be used in making the evaluations." Many people in cross-cultural encounters are victims of ethno-