

# Teaching Intercultural Communication in China and Australia:

## Intellectual and Contextual Constraints and Opportunities

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**Abstract:** As the world turns more towards China through trade, tourism and knowledge exchange, Chinese professionals will increasingly need to communicate directly with foreigners inside China. This face-to-face communication will require not only linguistic and communicative competence, but also a deep cultural knowledge of China as well as of other cultures, to help strangers adapt effectively to Chinese cultural contexts and to improve mutual understanding. In this paper we suggest that it might be useful for Chinese teachers of intercultural communication to examine their assumptions and practices by comparing them with those in other countries. We illustrate this argument through a comparison of the teaching of intercultural communication in Yunnan with an equivalent program in professional education in Melbourne. We argue that there are many similarities in the two programs, reflecting their common disciplinary basis. There are also differences between the programs reflecting different assumptions about teaching and learning, and different contexts of intercultural communication. This comparison helps identify the cultural and contextual influences on what is currently identified as appropriate in Yunnan, and the possible constraints on how much the program could be altered without clashing with acceptable aims, strategies and outcomes.

**Key words:** Intercultural Communication; Communicative Competence; Professional Education; Globalization

**DOI:** 10.3968/j.sll.1923156320110203.016

## INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of Chinese scholarship and teaching in intercultural communication reflects China's growing influence on the processes of globalisation. Following a long cultural tradition of debate about how China should relate to the outside world, there is a vigorous discussion about the

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† Received March 25, 2011; accepted May 20, 2011.

proper balance to be given to “Chinese” perspectives, “Western” approaches and global perspectives in teaching intercultural communication.

What should be taught in intercultural communication programs for professionals in China? It is a question that can never really be satisfactorily answered due to the changing contexts in which course designers, textbook writers and teachers make decisions about the most appropriate purposes, content, teaching methods and assessment in intercultural communication programs. But it is important to know the nature of these contexts, the opportunities they provide and the constraints they impose on the content and purpose of our teaching.

The debate in Chinese academic circles about the proper balance between Chinese and Western perspectives is important, but should not be the determining influence on what to include in professional preparation programs. The argument in this paper is that teaching in intercultural programs for professionals should try to prepare them to be appropriate and effective intercultural communicators in the new context of globalisation. The key to this task does not lie in basing these programs only on academic scholarship and research, because the requirements of professionals go beyond disciplinary-based knowledge to embrace problem solving, intuitive, experientially learned and practically oriented knowledge, skills and values. Both Chinese and Western perspectives are valuable and should ideally be integrated into professional programs.

Comparing two programs in professional education – one in Yunnan and one in Melbourne – provides an opportunity to look at how the disciplinary bases of intercultural communication and the commonality of professional issues are mediated by different culture to produce distinctively “Chinese” and “Australian” approaches. The comparison raises some implications for opportunities and constraints affecting decisions about the education of professionals in intercultural communication in China.

## **CHALLENGES FACING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION PROGRAMS FOR PROFESSIONALS IN CHINA**

Huang & Kou (2010) conducted research into some aspects of intercultural communication programs in Chinese universities. The research looked at aims, content and materials, teaching methods and assessment, in relation to changes in the Chinese and global contexts, developments in communication technology and the evolving nature of Chinese contacts with people from different cultures. Some preliminary findings indicated that:

-There is little agreement on what to teach and how to teach and assess intercultural communication knowledge, skills and values.

-There are some common topics and concepts and in most courses such as the nature and purposes of intercultural communication, definitions of culture and communication, verbal and nonverbal communication, language and culture relationships, communication and values, intercultural perceptions, intercultural competence.

- Preparatory programs for the professions (e.g. teaching, medicine, management, engineering, tourism and hospitality) focus more than general academic courses on improving pragmatic competence (and related knowledge, attitudes and values), but have problems in defining and assessing it.

- The more traditional programs focus on target culture knowledge and culture skills in preparing for Chinese in local or overseas projects to adapt to the target culture.

- The more innovative programs recognise that China’s influence is expanding in an increasingly interdependent global economy, that information technologies are transforming the channels of intercultural communication, and that Chinese professionals need to understand their own cultural identities thoroughly in a comparative context if they are to engage in mutually productive relationships with professionals from other cultures.

- Through exposure to global media, and colleagues and family overseas, many learners in professional preparatory and in-service development programs are asking for guidance in the knowledge, skills and values relevant to practical participation in both the local and global contexts of their profession.

There is a confluence of the influences of globalisation and internationalisation, as well as local challenges, on perceptions of student needs. There is also a need for many teachers to respond to these changing contexts.

But what is an appropriate response? The challenge of preparing professionals to be competent interpreters of Chinese culture and communication practices with foreigners emphasizes the need for culture specific knowledge and skills for expert communication. The need for “internationalisation at home” to prepare Chinese professionals for international contact with multiple target cultures, at home as well as abroad, emphasizes the importance of culture general understandings of how cultures all try to provide solutions to similar challenges in equivalent but different seeming ways. The challenge for teachers is to balance these needs through appropriate design and teaching of intercultural communication programs.

## **INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AS A GENERAL GOAL**

Intercultural communicative competence development is increasingly regarded as the main target of language teaching (Zhang, 2008). It should also be an over-arching goal of intercultural communication teaching. When Gao (2002) proposes two levels of intercultural communicative competence development, she means increasing target culture proficiency, gaining cultural awareness and an appropriate attitude towards the target culture. To communicate effectively and appropriately are regarded as two criteria for intercultural communicative competence (Chen & Starosta, 2007). An intercultural competent person knows how to elicit a desired response in interactions and to fulfil his/her own communication goals by respecting and affirming the worldview and cultural identities of the interactants. Intercultural communication competence is, ultimately, the ability to acknowledge, respect, tolerate, and integrate cultural differences that qualifies one for enlightened global citizenship (Wang & Huang, 2009).

Byram’s model of intercultural communication competence (icc) provides a detailed guide to achieving these competencies. It comprises four dimensions: knowledge, skills to discover and/or interact, skills to interpret and relate, attitude, and critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997). The model intends to encourage the development of both culture-specific knowledge (i.e., knowledge of one culture) and skills, and culture-general knowledge (i.e., knowledge of general patterns across many cultures) and skills for learning about, becoming involved in, and successfully negotiating intercultural communicative interactions. But how, in practice, can we as teachers try to achieve the goal of being competent communicators? How do the two programs in two universities try to help students communicate effectively in the globalized context? Are both culture-specific and cultural general knowledge being attended to in the programs? A comparison of the two programs can give some idea of how these concerns are looked after.

## **COMPARING THE PROGRAMS IN YUNNAN AND MELBOURNE**

The issues outlined above are not unique to China. However, their particular form of expression, and the options for meeting challenges, might well be distinctively Chinese. For this reason, this paper tries to identify these options, and the constraints on adopting them, by comparing the teaching of intercultural communication to professionals in a Chinese program (Yunnan Normal University, Kunming) and an Australian program (La Trobe University, Melbourne). It also identifies the extent of similarities in

content and concepts of the two programs required by their common disciplinary basis and their need to prepare professionally competent students. The differences prompted by the dissimilar cultural contexts are also discussed. These comparisons help to clarify constraints and opportunities for teachers wanting to respond to the challenges facing intercultural communication programs for professionals in China.

The course in Yunnan is a one-semester unit titled “Intercultural Communication Studies”. It is conducted for postgraduate students at the Masters level in the School of Foreign Languages and Literature. The main purposes of the course are to assist students to better adapt to the dynamic and competitive globalized world, and to be effective and appropriate in communication in their work and daily life. Students are mainly Mandarin speaking Han Chinese from different regions of China, with a few from ethnic groups and cultural backgrounds. Class sizes are normally between 30 and 40. These students are majoring in linguistics, literature and teaching pedagogy. Generally speaking, most of the students are preparing themselves to become teachers, with some to be in other professions such as government offices and international companies. Most of the students are English majors in undergraduate study; a few have other language learning backgrounds, but are good at English.

The course in La Trobe University’s Faculty of Education in Melbourne, Australia, is a one-semester unit titled “Intercultural Communication and Education”. It is normally taken by postgraduate students at the Masters level. The students are of mixed backgrounds. The proportions vary but in any given course there are usually 30% locally born or educated (Anglo, Irish, Scottish, European, African or Asian descent); 50% international students from Asia (mainly India, Vietnam and China, with smaller proportions from Malaysia Japan, Thailand, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Indonesia); and 20% international students from North and South America, Europe and Africa. Most of the locals are teachers or health and community workers. Most of the internationals are school and university teachers or public service managers.

Both these courses involve a component of general education relevant to contact with people from other cultures. They also provide vocational preparation for communicating in both the official language (Mandarin or English) and/or bilingually with culturally different clients in specific professional areas, especially teaching, but also in health, community service, management, tourism and hospitality.

The following table summarizes some characteristics of two intercultural communication courses for professionals in these two countries.

**Table 1: Summary of Characteristics of Two Intercultural Communication Courses**

	<b>YNNU unit “Intercultural Communication Studies”</b>	<b>La Trobe unit “Intercultural Communication and Education”</b>
Format	54 hours class time (3hrs/pw in 18 weeks)	39 hours class time (evenings, weekly 3 hrs/pw in 13 weeks)
Clientele and format	-Postgraduate students (most just finished undergraduate study, some are in-service teachers) -100% Chinese from different areas of China; Ages: 22-26	- PG masters students, teachers in schools, universities, public & private corporations -30% Australian educated, 50% Asian internationals 15% Europe and Americas, 5% Africa Ages: 23-50 (av. 35)
Rationale	- Globalization and frequent contact with people from different cultures; - Lay a foundation for further study and research in the area of linguistics and literature	-Australian and global diversity -Interactions with Asia - Apply core concepts, skills, attitudes in professional and personal life
Examples of Theoretical approaches	- Language and culture; - Culture general cf culture specific (e.g., Hofstede, Lewis, O’Sullivan) - Chinese Communication theories (e.g Chen Guoming)	-Constructivism -Identity negotiation -Social learning model -Discourse analysis-Principles of competence -Culture general cf culture specific

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	<b>YNNU Unit “Intercultural Communication Studies”</b>	<b>La Trobe Unit “Intercultural Communication And Education”</b>
Content (main topics)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Rationale for studying ic</li> <li>-Theoretical models of ic</li> <li>-Language &amp; culture</li> <li>-Nonverbal communication</li> <li>-ICC competence</li> <li>- Education and communication</li> <li>- Culture specific and general approaches</li> <li>-Intercultural communication training</li> <li>-Research in intercultural communication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Rationale for studying ic</li> <li>-Theoretical models of ic</li> <li>-Language &amp; culture relationships</li> <li>-Nonverbal communication</li> <li>-ICC competence</li> <li>-Teaching and learning across cultures</li> <li>-Culture specific &amp; general approaches</li> <li>-Personal &amp; social identities</li> <li>-Communication modes and strategies</li> <li>-Professional and personal applications</li> </ul>
Main resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-A major reference book (Samovar, L. &amp; Porter, R. 2007. <i>Communication between cultures</i>, Peking University Press)</li> <li>-Selected readings</li> <li>-Assignment readings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-CD of selected readings</li> <li>-Class readings</li> <li>-Assignment readings</li> <li>-Web resources</li> <li>-No set text: readings reflect ic. 10 main texts from USA, UK and Australia.</li> </ul>
Teaching & learning activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Teacher presentation/lectures</li> <li>-Class discussion and sharing of experience</li> <li>-Student presentation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Problem based learning using structured workshop activities</li> <li>-Group and whole class discussions based on readings, personal experiences.</li> <li>-Short lectures (teacher, visitors, students) with Q &amp; A.</li> <li>-Small group preparation of food for class meals.</li> </ul>
Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Attendance and participations;</li> <li>-Presentations</li> <li>-Course paper writing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Attendance and participation,</li> <li>-Presentations,</li> <li>- Course paper and activity based projects</li> </ul>
Achievement of practical competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No formal assessment;</li> <li>- Observation and face-to-face communication.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Not formally assessed except in small presentations.</li> <li>-Formative assessment of classroom competence in intercultural communication.</li> <li>-Personal recounts.</li> </ul>

\* Note: for examples of texts, see the Reference entries for Bowes & Martin (2007); Chen & Starosta (2007); Gudykunst (2001); Klyukanov (2005); Lewis (2005); Lustig & Koester (2008); O’Sullivan (1993); Samovar, L. and Porter, R. (2006); Spencer-Oatey & Frankin (2009); Ting-Toomey (1999)

The course “Intercultural Communication Studies” in Yunnan is an optional course for the MA students. It is designed to develop students’ intercultural communication competence. Basic theories in intercultural communication, language and cultural values, and strategies appropriate in diverse contexts are included as the content. Students are expected to take this course as a basis for further research and study in intercultural communication, second language learning and teaching, and other relevant areas. The teacher of this course (Huang Ying) has completed a doctorate in education in a Western country, and believes that, the best way to engage the interests of high ability bilingual postgraduate Chinese students is for them to critically analyse selected content from academic book chapters and high quality professional journal articles. Teaching is mainly through teacher presentation, plus class discussions and students’ presentation in pairs. Each pair gives a presentation based on any topic they choose within the framework of intercultural communication. By doing so, they can elaborate theories in intercultural communication, put forward arguments and support them with evidence. In particular, they are encouraged to use examples and evidence in Chinese culture in the areas of values, modes of thinking, style of communication, and education. In this way students’ cooperative team work is highly supported.

The La Trobe course is designed to meet the needs of international students adjusting to Australian university study, and of local students wanting an experience of “internationalisation at home”. Both groups are encouraged to develop skills for professional work in multicultural contexts. The course includes conventional disciplinary based topics to provide an understanding of the basic concepts and issues in intercultural communication. It covers theoretical frameworks that are considered most applicable to professional issues. It draws material from a variety of sources and includes perspectives and content from the students’ background countries; for example, Chinese models of face and harmony, Vietnamese approaches to academic writing, Indian approaches to religious diversity, and Japanese uses of silence. It contrasts culture general and culture specific approaches to clarify different types of intercultural understanding and their applications in understanding choices in practical communicative behaviour. Starting from analyses of the experiences of these international and local students at school and university in their various countries, the course provides opportunities to apply their different understandings to the causes of and solutions to intercultural misunderstandings.

Teaching is mainly through workshops, discussion and group work (class size is 35-40) to build written and oral discourse skills. Assessment is a combination of written essays or research projects and a more practically oriented short presentation (usually in a group) relating to solving intercultural miscommunications. More informal (formative) assessment of practical competence is difficult; it is complicated by the different assumptions about classroom participation held by international and local students. But it is made easier by relatively small classes, opportunities for activity based learning and participation, and development of a secure and mutually supportive classroom culture. One aspect of the class in particular increases opportunities for formative assessment. Each student helps (in a group) to prepare at least one meal for the whole class, eaten during the class break (classes are from 5-8 pm on a week night). The negotiations about food in a culturally and religiously mixed class are invaluable pointers to communication skills and attitudes to diversity. This practice of providing multiple types of assessment is a response to international students’ difficulties with written assessment and the need for a focus on experiential as well as disciplinary learning about cultural diversity.

The comparison in Table 1 shows that the two courses in different universities have both similarities and differences. Similarities are mainly in choice and sequencing of the content, definition of main topics, and in some respects, the reading materials. Both programs use selected readings for teaching instead of following the order of chapters in textbooks written by one or more authors. For postgraduate level programs, it is difficult to find a set text with appropriate material for diverse classes. To ensure the Chinese students have readings to help them understand the theories discussed in class, they are asked to use data bases such as *ProQuest*, *Gale* and some Chinese data bases to find journal articles in topics that interest them and are also relevant to the course content. The Melbourne students are provided with an online version of the subject and a cd containing the readings and other resources, including relevant data bases and web sites.

The two programs have some differences due to university assessment practices, course structure requirements, and students’ language level. But the major difference is contextual. YNNU students are developing their intercultural communicative competence in the Chinese context. In their future work and life, communication with culturally different others mostly also take place in China. As the students are majoring in foreign linguistics and pedagogy, there are more contents relating to linguistics and foreign language teaching. Students in the Australian program have more chances for interacting with people from a wide range of cultural backgrounds, and are preparing for diverse professional careers in different countries.

## **CHALLENGES, CONSTRAINTS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERCULTURAL PROGRAMS**

In some ways the broad challenges, constraints and opportunities are similar in both situations. Both programs need to address the challenges of globalisation (in the sense of a global reach of markets, communication, travel, information, and knowledge) and of internationalisation (in the sense of providing students with knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to communicating with diverse

others). Both programs must find out by experimentation and experience which are the most appropriate strategies for using IT effectively (the balance of face-to-face and on-line communication). Solutions to this challenge depend on the constraints of available IT facilities and the willingness and ability of the teacher to experiment with variations of face-to-face, online and blended teaching modes. The increasing demand by students for distance delivery is also a growing influence on pedagogical choices. Teachers in both programs need to decide the optimum combination of theoretical and practical components and of strategies for teaching and assessing pragmatic communicative competencies, not only in face-to-face but also in blended modes of teaching.

In other ways the challenges, and the opportunities to meet them, are different for each program. There are several major challenges for the program in Yunnan. First, the students have to develop their cultural sensitivities and awareness while improving their target language competence in preparation for a competitive and changing world. Second, the program has to help students to develop some adaptation skills for intercultural communication. In this respect, it is critical to help the students to reflect on their own understanding and skills in communication. The adaptation, in this situation, is different from the most discussed or researched situations focussing on the adaptation of the new comer to a target culture. Most of the participants in the Yunnan program are intercultural learners. Most likely their communication takes place within the context of Chinese culture, with strangers coming to China for work, education and tourism. In this situation, students' knowledge of Chinese culture is of vital importance to help people from other culture backgrounds to better understand Chinese culture, and to better adapt to local culture while in China. Third, the program has to help students to go deeper under the surface to learn the historical, cultural, geographical reasons for the culture differences, instead of only knowing their differences.

For the program in Melbourne the major challenge is to harmonise the different intercultural communication needs of the international and local students. The international students need to gradually adapt to their new learning culture in Australia. They must also be prepared for the demands of professional practice when they return to their home countries to resume their careers. The program must also meet the needs of local students for dealing with diversity in local organisations in which they will hold professional positions. They have to meet these needs by developing skills for communicating with the majority of their classmates, whose languages, religions and cultures are very different.

The teacher of the Melbourne program decided that the best way to meet this challenge is to make the classes themselves an experiment in intercultural communication practice. This has rewards. When the classes work well and the groups cohere, the students themselves teach their classmates how to communicate interculturally. When the cultural diversity contributes to miscommunications and conflicts, the focus inevitably turns to how to use the members' resources to solve the problematic communication. Both of these situations are mostly opportunities for effective student-centred teaching and learning.

But there are constraints as well. A seemingly unavoidable cost is that, because of the diverse backgrounds of the students, a lot of class time is used for explaining local conventions in oral and written academic discourse. The amount of time for discussing educational applications in the strict sense of professional preparation is also reduced by cultural constraints, such as unfamiliarity with IT, differences in expectations of appropriate behaviour for women, students and teachers, different strategies for dispute resolution, and the need felt to examine in class the problems of adaptation to the broader Australian society. The linguistic and cultural diversity of the groups also mean that an end of unit written examination is inappropriate as the only form of assessment. The teacher also needs to focus on oral interaction and the use of problem-solving strategies to improve oral and written discourse. It is essential to teach strategies for conflict resolution in class discussions. This can sometimes disadvantage students who prefer indirect, inductive, relational and collectivistic discourse styles. But, perhaps paradoxically, overt attentions to helping students develop skills in a variety of discourse practices strengthens the practical utility of the course because it exemplifies cultural influences on communication. The cost is the reduction in the time available for systematic considerations of a wider range of theoretical approaches and case studies of typical professional issues.

The comparisons above suggest that, whatever the cultural context, a major issue for designers and teachers of these kinds of intercultural communication programs is how to balance the contribution of

relevant academic disciplines with the requirements of professional preparation. The comparisons have also suggested that local cultural contexts prompt important adaptations in terms of content, materials, teaching and learning roles, and assessment.

In the intercultural communication course in Yunnan, the majority of the students are teacher-oriented, that is, most of them will become EFL teachers in universities or secondary schools. It focuses on three contexts of intercultural communication, which can be summarised by Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence for EFL professionals. First, communication between people of different languages and countries where one is a native speaker of the language used; second, communication between people of different languages and countries where the language used is a lingua franca; and third, communication between people of the same country but in different languages, one of whom is a native speaker of the language used (Byram, 1997: 22). The background and future professional orientation of the students require some involvement of education issues in course planning, and also some relevant readings to help with understanding both educational and intercultural communication theory and practice. Also the context of communication demands students have deep understanding of Chinese culture, so this course also has to develop students' awareness of native culture.

The course in Melbourne, because of its more culturally diverse clientele, is situated mainly in the second of Byram's contexts. Most of the communication is conducted among speakers of different languages from different countries using English as a lingua franca. The study of intercultural communication takes precedence over the study of curriculum and pedagogy. Education is used mainly as the vehicle for raising the issues of cultural influences on communication, teaching and learning.

Both these programs face the challenges to teachers of adapting in a balanced and effective way to the sometimes competing challenges of internationalisation and professional preparation. When we reflect on what this adaptation should look like, we are also raising the issue that effective teachers of intercultural communication will need to navigate the twin constraints of what is seen as appropriate culturally and what is pedagogically effective.

## CONCLUSION

Comparisons above have indicated that the preparation of Chinese professionals in intercultural communication share some characteristics with similar programs in other parts of the world. But Chinese programs will continue for the foreseeable future to reflect culturally specific characteristics of this preparation.

Target cultural development – in this case, Anglophone cultures – is important for appropriate and effective communication by Chinese professionals. However, it alone is not enough. For language learners, such as the postgraduate students discussed in this paper, awareness of both the local and the target culture is of great importance in successful intercultural communication. This raises the important issues of how do we teach cultural awareness alongside language competence, and do we teach awareness of Chinese culture in the same or different ways as we teach target culture?

Appropriate pedagogy for intercultural communication is also an unresolved issue. Comparison of these two programs has enabled the authors to see that neither a focus on the study of intercultural communication knowledge through the discussion of readings and case studies, nor an experiential approach to intercultural understanding through negotiation of cultural differences, is adequate by itself to provide an appropriate balance between disciplinary knowledge, professional preparation and practical competence. Given the strong influence of cultural traditions on teaching and learning, the extent to which internationalisation of pedagogy is possible or desirable is still an issue of discussion and disagreement in China. Comparisons of teaching and learning approaches in intercultural education might be a useful area to explore further.



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