

## **Report on an Investigation of Chinese English Learners' Intercultural Competence**

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### **Abstract**

The investigation in this paper looks into the intercultural competence of the university students in China in terms of their sensitivity to cross-cultural differences, appropriateness in English communication and their ability in dealing with conflicts and misunderstandings in intercultural communication. With a discussion on the problems and loopholes of the learning and teaching practice, the authors propose a plan for English teaching reform in China. It is hoped that the present investigation will help English teachers to make substantial efforts in producing more interculturally competent learners or users of English.

### **Introduction**

The investigation under discussion is part of a research project for English teaching reform initiated by the authors and three other teachers (Two of them are North Americans) in Nov 2000 at Harbin Institute of Technology. In our teaching and research experience we strongly feel that the students' communicative competence is far from satisfactory in spite of years of hard work of both learners and their teachers. Compared with the strong appeal for developing the learners' communicative competence, what has been achieved in the EFL classrooms in China is somewhat discouraging. Much more efforts are needed to find out what stay as obstacles in achieving the goal of English language teaching. And this need seems more urgent than ever before when we consider the increasingly frequent contact between China and the rest of the world in this multicultural global village and the extensive recognition of the important role that English plays as an international language. We initiated the two-year research project "Development of Chinese English Learners' Intercultural Communicative Competence" in the hope of getting a profile of the

present state of students' communicative competence in general and what we should do to enhance the learning and teaching of English for intercultural communication. The research project consists of a series of surveys of present day EFL in China at the collegial level, proposals for reform will be made after identification and analysis of problems in the prevailing learning and teaching activities in English classrooms. The present report is only our first attempt to look into Chinese university students' intercultural competence in English. We hope with this initial survey we could find reliable information and effective means to conduct more and larger scale surveys in our project.

### **About the investigation**

#### **Aim**

The aim of the investigation is to find out how competent the present Chinese university students are in intercultural communication in English, in particular, their sociocultural competence in verbal interaction.

#### **Hypotheses**

From our personal observation and research experience, we assume the following to be true:

- The students have a rather low sensitivity to cross-cultural differences in interpersonal interaction.
- The students show a weak competence in producing socio-culturally appropriate utterances in everyday communication.
- The students possess rather poor ability in dealing with problems that occur in intercultural communication.
- The students' linguistic competence and sociocultural competence are rather unevenly developed.

#### **Subjects**

We choose 80 students from four natural classes in two universities in Harbin: Harbin Institute of Technology and Heilongjiang University, with each group having 20 students. Half of the subjects are junior students majoring in English (referred as EM in this report) and the other half graduates majoring in other subject areas (referred as NEM in the report). We select these two groups of students as the subjects out of two considerations. One is that they are of easy availability to us in an initial study. And the other reason is that they have the longest or nearly the longest experience of learning English in first class universities or departments in the country and therefore they are more representative of the best or nearly best products of our teaching in EFL classrooms. We hope the finding of our survey could reveal valid information about EFL learning and teaching in other universities and serve as the basis for

further research along the two dimensions of English majors and non-English majors.

### **Instruments and data collection**

To find out how competent the subjects are in intercultural communication in English, we use 3 self-designed tests as the instruments of our present survey: Test of Cross-cultural Sensitivity, Test of Socio-cultural Appropriateness and Test of Intercultural Ability. All of these tests are concerned with everyday interaction between native speakers and non-native speakers of English.

- **Test of Cross-cultural Sensitivity**

This test consists of 15 short interactions. The subjects are told that some of the sentences are not appropriate expressions in English and they are asked to underline the part they think improper and to improve it by writing down the proper expression. (see Appendixes ) By picking out the right problem in the dialogue the subjects are tested on their ability to identify communicative failures due to sociocultural factors. By writing down the proper expressions they are tested on the true understanding of the problems and the ability to make appropriate interactions. In this sense, the Sensitivity Test also helps to look into the subjects' ability of appropriate communication in cross-cultural setting.

30 marks are attributed to all the 15 items in the test with each item having two marks. The subjects are rated under three rules: 2 marks are given if they identify the right problem and improve the sentence with appropriate expressions; 1 mark is given if they fail to do either of these two tasks; and a 0 is given if they fail to do both of the tasks or leave nothing marked for an item.

- **Test of Sociocultural Appropriateness**

This is a discourse completion test with 15 items. In each item the subjects are placed in a conversation with a native-speaker of English. They are required to insert in the blank spaces what they are most likely to say in each situation. (See Appendixes) The test is designed to cover various sociocultural factors in interpersonal interactions. The conversations involve interaction between people of different relations ( strangers, close friends, acquaintances, status-equals and status-unequals), on different occasions (at work, at home, at a party, in the street) and performance of different tasks (making or responding to greeting, requesting, leave-taking, complimenting etc. ).

As in the Sensitivity Test, all together 30 marks are given to the 15 items with each having two marks. The subjects are rated along the following criterion: 2 marks for appropriate utterances, 1 for half-acceptable utterances and 0 for completely inappropriate utterances or absence of any utterances. Where problems arise as for the appropriateness of a certain answer, two foreign teachers, one American and one Canadian are consulted for accurate grading. Marks are not deducted for minor grammatical mistakes like the improper use of plurals and articles.

- **Test of Intercultural Ability**

This test consists of three stories of intercultural communication breakdowns. They involve such areas as accommodation in a new culture, making friends and understanding of "false invitation", use of time and attitudes towards work etc. The subjects are required to choose one multiple choice answer to explain what causes the communication breakdown in each case and to give brief answers as to what they will do under the same circumstance (See Appendixes).

- **Language**

Since the tests are about English learners' intercultural competence, all the tests are conducted in English. The design and wording of each item in the tests are made under the monitor of the two foreign teachers working in our department, Prof. John Carl Olfon and Prof. Christine Enfield, who also provide referent answers and consultation in the rating of the tests.

### **Reliability and validity**

The tests are designed with the help of two North American teachers working with the authors at HIT. To assure the reliability of the tests, we made a pilot test by including all of the items of the tests in an examination paper in second-year English majors in HIT and discussed the rating criteria with the two foreign teachers. A high agreement was reached among the authors and the foreign teachers, who also helped to list several possibilities for each item. They were also consulted for the judgment of any problems about sociocultural appropriateness of the subjects' answers. So the measurement of the tests is believed to be consistent.

Under a sociolinguistic framework of what constitutes communicative competence, all of the items in the tests are devised to contain the sociocultural factors that define the nature and realization of an interaction. Therefore, the tests are believed to be valid in terms of content.

### **Theoretical basis**

We hold that the learning and teaching of English as a second or foreign language is to develop the learners' communicative competence. Our understanding of learners' communicative competence is based on the theories of Dell Hymes and other contributors to the communicative approach of language teaching, where both rules of speaking and rules of grammar are taken into the curriculum, with emphasis on appropriate linguistic performance in a given sociocultural context. We share with them the view that the difficulties which the students encounter arise not so much from an insufficient knowledge of the linguistic system of English, but from an unfamiliarity with English use.

( Allen & Widdowson, 1981). What Hymes referred to as "communicative competence " is, in fact, the competence of " when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner" (Hymes, 1972:277). We strongly believe that the answers to these wh-questions are culturally defined. It is no easy job to develop such competence since the language learners in many cases do not share these answers or rules with native speakers of the target language. They are often found to be less competent in performing communicative tasks than in coping with structural aspects of the language. This is especially true with Chinese learners of English, who have been taught to go through various proficiency exams but end up with what Thomas' (1983) terms as pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure in real life communication with English speakers. Effective learning and teaching of English as a foreign language is in a sense to help learners to do away with pragmatic failure. With such understanding of communicative competence and its significance for foreign language teaching we decide on the content and form of the tests.

### **Discussion of the survey**

After the collection and statistical treatment of the data, we get a general picture for the tests as shown in the tables below. Each of the three tests will be discussed respectively in this section.

### **Discussion of Cross-Cultural Sensitivity Test**

From Table 2-1 on the next page we can see that the average marks are rather low. This means that the subjects exhibit a rather low sensitivity to the improper expressions in the given 15 scenarios of everyday interaction. Only the EM (English Major) groups modestly get over half of the total marks and the variation between the subjects is very big. Generally speaking the students are not sensitive to the sociocultural factors in verbal communication, and big differences exist in their ability to identify problems caused by sociocultural factors.

To locate the strength and weakness of the subjects' communicative competence in cross-cultural settings, we also collected the data for the subjects' responses to each item. The detailed information is given in Table 2-1a. The percentage above half for complete identification and improvement is found only in 8 of the 15 given items. They are: Item 1(addressing and asking questions in class), Item 4 (Attending a customer in a shop), Item 6 and Item8 (responding to thanks), Item 9 (asking for repetition), Item 10 and Item 11 (responding to compliments), and Item 15 (telephoning to make an appointment).

**Table 2-1 Sensitivity Test Result**

Result Item	EM		Mean	NEM		Mean
	HIT	HLJU		HIT	HLJU	
<b>Average</b>	19.45	15.26	17.34	13.50	13.35	13.43
<b>Standard Deviation</b>	3.97	3.79		2.74	4.26	
<b>Variance</b>	15.78	14.39		7.51	18.19	
<b>Max.</b>	25	24	24.5	20	18	19
<b>Min.</b>	12	10	11	9	11	10

( N=20x4, V=30 )

**Table 2-1a Information on Individual Items in Sensitivity Test**

Marks (pct) Items	Complete identification & Improvement		Incomplete identification & Improvement		Failure	
	EM	NEM	EM	NEM	EM	NEM
1	50	35	32.5	40	12.5	20
2	20	5	40	40	40	50
3	20	12.5	32.5	15	47.5	70
4	85	85	7.5	7.5	7.5	7.5

5	12.5	7.5	12.5	2.5	75	90
6	85	62.5	7.5	7.5	7.5	30
7	42.5	7.5	12.5	12.5	40	80
8	62.5	42.5	5	15	32.5	37.5
9	87.5	67.5	5	15	7.5	7.5
10	65	55	25	12.5	10	22.5
11	55	15	12.5	12.5	22.5	72.5
12	37.5	40	10	20	52.5	50
13	0	0	7.5	10	92.5	90
14	7.5	7.5	10	15	82.5	72.5
15	62.5	50.25	12.5	20	20	22.5
Total	692.5	492.75	232.5	245	550	722.5
Mean	46.13	32.8	15.5	16.33	36.67	48.13

Meanwhile we find 8 of the 15 items with more than half of the subjects failed to do the task. The NEM groups outnumber the EM groups in this respect. In particular the students seem extremely incompetent in Items 5, 12, 13,14, where they cannot figure out the proper ways of talking about weather, responding to compliments from friends, showing concern for others and asking for favor. Their failure is largely due to negative pragmatic transfer, namely pragmalinguistic transfer and sociopragmatic transfer (Thomas, 1983, Wolfson, 1989). That is to say that the students tend to translate an utterance from their first language into the target language but fail to get their meaning across due to different communicative conventions; or they apply the rules of speaking in the first language to the use of the target language without realizing the

sociolinguistic diversity between the two languages. In literature about Chinese students common mistakes in spoken English, much has been talked about the pragmatic errors (Oatey, 1988, Hu Wen-zhong,1997). And our test shows that the students are indeed often blind to sociocultural diversity in the use of English. They seem to assume that the rules of speaking any where, at any time with any people are the same as they are in Chinese. For example, in Item I many of the students find there is nothing wrong with the request addressed to an American professor " I have a question, teacher." All the improper sentences given by the students in the test are acceptable if directly translated into Chinese. But the students are so insensitive to the cultural differences in the rules of speaking that they in many cases identify a false grammatical mistake, like changing "could " with "can " in "could you close the door?" or changing "was" into "am" in "I was sorry to hear that your grandma died in a car accident". Even if they identify the right problem the students often fail to improve the sentence properly. For example, in responding to the request " could you close the door? It's too noisy out there", quite a number of students replaced the answer "yes, I could " with " I'd like to " or with " yes, I will ", which is another pragmalinguistic error.

### **Discussion of Sociocultural Appropriateness Test**

In the Appropriateness Test we intend to find out if the students can produce socioculturally appropriate utterances in different interactive settings. We calculated the students' responses along three lines: appropriate, half-acceptable and inappropriate. Table 2-2 on the next page gives a general description of the test result.

The students' average marks appear to be higher than those in the Sensitivity Test. Again the EM groups show a better performance. But are the marks high enough to compliment the teachers' efforts in the classroom? We assume the total value of the test is 100, and we get an average of 58, 2 marks below the passing level. In addition to the low marks we can also see from the table that big differences exist among the students in making appropriate interactions.

In the same manner with what we've done in the Sensitivity Test, we collect the data for each of the 15 items in the Appropriateness Test. In Table 2-2a we find to our disappointment that items with half or above of the students giving appropriate utterances are only 7. They are : Item 2(showing concern for a sick person), Item 4 (answering the phone), Item 10 (responding to an apology), Item 12 (thanking others for a gift), Item 13 (EM, responding to the shop assistant's inquiry), Item 14 ( asking the way ) and Item 15 (making an appointment over the phone ). Even more discouraging is that the NEM groups only have Item 14 with most of the subjects giving appropriate sentences. They are particularly incompetent in Item 5 (talking about the weather), Item 6 (extended greetings),



Item 7 (showing concern), Item13 (NEM responding to the shop assistant's inquiry). And Item 15 (NEM, making an appointment over the phone).

**Table 2-2 Appropriateness Test Result**

Result Item	EM		Mean	NEM		Mean
	HIT	HLJU		HIT	HLJU	
<b>Average</b>	20.6	17.35	18.98	15.10	16.75	15.93
<b>Standard Deviation</b>	3.97	3.88		3.14	3.22	
<b>Variance</b>	15.78	15.02		9.89	10.41	
<b>Max.</b>	25	26	25	23	22	22.5
<b>Min.</b>	10	12	11	10	10	10

**N=20x4 V=30**

The failure is again caused by negative pragmatic transfer in some cases. For example, in responding to the shop assistant's inquiry "Can I help you, sir", some students write simply "How much is it?", "Can you give me a cup?", "Could you like to give me some introduction?" And in showing concern for a sick friend in Item 7 a common response from the students is "you'd better put on more clothes", or "you should take some medicine". It is perfectly all right in Chinese, but definitely not in English. One other example is found in Item10. When responding to an apology for breaking a plate, several students write "you're welcome" or even "you're too welcome". The re-occurrence of such reaction leads us to seek for an explanation. We find that there is a direction relationship between the appropriate Chinese answer "bié kè qì", "ní tài kè qì le" and the translation of the students' words. In fact many students in Chinese middle schools and universities learn English by rote. As a result they often apply the learned words and expressions in a wrong context. Another reason for the failure is violation of the rules of speaking, e.g, the Principles of Politeness (Leech, 1983) in English verbal communication. One example of this is Item I3,

where many students respond to the shop assistant by writing down the sentence "I want to buy a ball-pen". The sentence is grammatically correct and can convey the intention of the speaker, but in a rather demanding tone. The tact maxim is unintentionally broken here. Another example of this kind is to be found in Item 6. To greet the professor he met the day before, the subjects wrote sentences like " Good morning! How do you do?", " Good morning! What's you up, Prof. David ". Here they use the learned sentence at the wrong time or to the wrong person. And title plus first name is not used in English. One more noticeable fact unveiled in the test is that the students tend to make more errors if they are asked to write more than one sentence. What we can infer from this is that they seem to have very limited means at their disposal to produce and maintain a good conversation in English. In Item 9, the response to a compliment on one's achievement in a research project begins with "Thank you" in the first blank, and often nothing in the second blank. Similar things happen to Items 6, 11, 12, 14 and 15.

**Table of Information on Individual Items in Appropriateness Test**

Marks (pct) Items	Appropriate utterances		Half-appropriate utterances		Inappropriate Utterances	
	EM	NEM	EM	NEM	EM	NEM
1	42.5	22.5	22.5	32.5	30	30
2	50.5	32.5	12.5	32.5	30	35
3	42.5	42.5	12.5	12.5	40	40
4	57.5	40	7.5	12.5	30	47.5
5	45	20	22.5	40	22.5	67.5
6	30	22.5	10	10	60	62.5
7	22.5	20	15	20	57.5	60
8	40	40	25	22.5	32.5	35
9	47.5	22.5	40	45	17.5	45
10	52.5	32.5	22.5	37.5	17.5	30

<b>11</b>	22.5	7.5	55	50	12.5	37.5
<b>12</b>	62.5	42.5	12.5	22.5	15	35
<b>13</b>	52.5	25	32.5	22.5	20	52.5
<b>14</b>	72.5	65	12.5	2.5	15	42.5
<b>15</b>	50	12.5	30	30	20	52.5
<b>Total</b>	690.5	490	327.5	392.5	425	677.5
<b>Mean</b>	46.03	32.67	21.83	26.17	28.33	45.17

N=40 (EM) N=40(NEM)

### Discussion of Intercultural Ability Test

As was mentioned earlier, in this test we hope to find out if the students possess the ability to understand problems occurred in intercultural communication and what constructive strategies they will take to ensure objective understanding and communication effectiveness. The subjects are asked to offer explanations and solutions to the problem. The result is presented in Table 3.

The students' explanations could be largely categorized into "cultural differences", "personal attribution" or "no idea/others". We are happy to see that almost all the students believe the problems are caused by cultural differences. But this is no reason for optimism. For one thing, considerable percentage is found with personal traits or attitudes. There is potential danger that the subjects fail to see the true profile of a situation and develop negative feelings towards their communication partners. No effective communication or good relationship could ever be built upon the negative affectivity between the speakers. Apart from the negative attribution, the subjects give very general and simple explanations without specifying the exact differences in each situation. This shows their understanding is, to a large extent, superficial in nature, because the understanding of the exact trouble spot is crucial for the speakers to make a decision as to what to do in each case. A third reason is that the multiple choices offered in the test, esp. in Story 1, may possibly drop some hint at the subjects. This can be justified by the concentration of answers. Students who give answers out of the categories in the multiple choices are relatively few in number (see the figure under "no idea/others").

**Table 3 Ability Test Result**

Items & Subjects		Answers (pct)	Explanation			Solution		
			Personal Attribute	Cultural difference	No idea /others	Learn target culture	Talk with Natives/ countrymen	No idea /others
1	E M	HIT N=15	7	93.33	10	100	53.33/55	13
		HLJ N=20	13	100	5	85	40/53	10
		mean	10	96.67	7.5	92.50	46.67/54	11.50
	N E M	HIT N=20	20	70	13	90	65/50	7
		HLJ N=20	25	85	7	80	55/55	13
		mean	22.5	77.5	10	85	60/52.2	10
2	E M	HIT N=15	13	100	5	60	40	7
		HLJ N=20	15	100	10	55	35	10
		Mean	14	100	12.5	57.5	37.5	8.5
	N E M	HIT N=20	30	100	10	60	45	5
		HLJ N=20	25	90	7	55	35	15
		Mean	27.5	80	8.5	57.5	80	10
3	E M	HIT N=15	13	93.33	20	35	45	20
		HLJ N=20	20	95	15	60	30	20
		Mean	16.5	94.12	17.5	47.5	37.5	20
	N E M	HIT N=20	25	100	7	35	55	20
		HLJ N=20	15	100	10	25	45	30
		Mean	20	100	8.5	30	50	25

For solutions to the problems, there's high agreement to learning the target culture and talk with the natives involved in the given situation. Again the answers are given in a very general way.

We find the Ability Test can not reveal much about the students' strategic competence in verbal interaction. A more complicated test is needed for further study. But we do get some information about how the students tend to look at problems in intercultural communication and implication for the classroom teaching and learning of the target language.

### **Discussions of correlations**

#### **Correlation between cross-cultural sensitivity and intercultural appropriateness**

How are the students' cross-cultural sensitivity and socio-cultural competence correlated to one another? With this question in mind we calculated the coefficient between them on two levels in four groups. As it is shown in Table 4-1 the degree of relatedness varies from group to group. One thing we can say that the figures indicate some positive relation between the two aspects of the learners' intercultural competence, but not significant enough to make a big difference. Before we collect the data we assumed that a high sensitivity would lead to high rate of appropriateness in spoken language. But in the process of data treatment, we found no such cause-effect relation between the two. A high sensitivity does not guarantee appropriateness in speaking. To communicate appropriately in intercultural setting, it is far from enough just to realize the differences between cultures. Many other factors have to be considered. And it's up to the teachers and researchers to find out what these factors are and include them in the teaching curriculum.

**Table 4-1 Correlation between Sensitivity and Appropriateness**

<b>Subject</b>		<b>Coefficient (r)</b>	<b>Mean</b>
<b>EM</b>	<b>HIT</b>	0.59	0.48
	<b>HLJU</b>	0.37	
<b>NEM</b>	<b>HIT</b>	0.39	0.33
	<b>HLJU</b>	0.26	
<b>Mean</b>			0.41

### **Comparison with language proficiency**

We assume the students' performance in our tests demonstrates their intercultural communicative competence. Then we begin to ask a second question: how is the students' language proficiency compared with their cross-cultural sensitivity and intercultural appropriateness? Or to put it in another way: how is the students' linguistic competence compared with their intercultural communicative competence?

To answer this question we first compared the students' linguistic competence with their cross-cultural sensitivity and sociolinguistic appropriateness. All the students have taken national proficiency exams after two years of English learning in the university. We choose their marks in band 4 exams (TEM for English majors and CET for non-English majors) as a reference for their linguistic competence. According to the National Syllabus for English Majors (2000) by the end of second year the English majors should know 5500-6500 English words, and master 4000-5000 of them together with their collocations. For reading intermediate level or above materials in English the students should be able to read 120-180 words per minute. For listening and speaking the students are required to have the ability of understanding daily conversation, news broadcasting at normal speed and grasp the meaning of spoken discourse in different varieties of English. The students should also be able to express themselves clearly in conversations with native speakers. The basic requirement at Band 4 level for non-English majors is to master 4200 words including their common collocations, to be able to read articles of intermediate difficulty with a reading speed of 70 words per minute and for lower level reading, 100 words per minute. To pass CET4 the students should understand daily spoken English delivered at the speed of 130-150 words per minute. And they should also be able to make daily conversations and talks, write a short passage of 120-150 words within 30 minutes, and to translate 300 English words or 250 Chinese per hour with the assistance of dictionaries. All the subjects in our survey have taken Band 4 exams. We compared their marks with what they have got in our tests. If the Band 4 tests are rated on the intermediate level, our tests should be considered elementary in terms of the vocabulary, structure and other difficulties. The subjects' marks are converted into what they should be when the total mark is 100 other than 30. And the result of comparison is presented in the Table4-2 below.

In spite of the difference in level of difficulty, the students' linguistic competence is obviously higher than their communicative competence manifested in our tests. The marks are comparable for at least two reasons. One is that both universities follow the same principles laid out in the national syllabus and they both use the same textbooks for English majors (*College English* published by Beijing Foreign Language and Research Publishing House) and non-English majors ( *College English* published by Huanan Polytechnical

University Press) as well. Another reason is that the qualifications of the teaching faculty are of no big difference. Some of the teachers are graduated from the same university. The lower marks immediately prompts an alarming question to the teachers: what's wrong with our students? Or rather: what's wrong with our teaching?

**Table 4-2 Comparison with Language Proficiency**

	EM N=20x2 V=100		Mean	NEM N=20x2 V=100		Mean
	HIT	HLJU		HIT	HLJU	
<b>Band 4</b>	65.17	64.1	64.64	69	60.9	64.95
<b>Sensitivity Test</b>	66.77	50.87	58.50	38.33	44.33	40.83
<b>Appropriateness test</b>	64.83	57.83	61.33	47	54	50.5

**Correlation with language proficiency**

From the above table we can conclude that the students' communicative competence does not seem to go along with their linguistic competence. To find out how the two are related we make out the respective coefficient ( see Table 4-3) between the subjects' language proficiency and their performance in cross-cultural sensitivity and intercultural appropriateness on the levels of English majors and non-English majors.

**Table 4-3 Correlation with language proficiency**

Coefficient (r) Subject	Sensitivity & Language proficiency	Appropriateness & Language proficiency
EM	0.12	0.095

<b>NEM</b>	0.08	0.13
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The figures show a high agreement for both groups of subjects. They all indicate that little relations exist among the elements listed. This is in conformity with the comparison shown in Table 4-2. A sociocultural test conducted by Wang Zhen-ya (1997) provides the same conclusion. Wang comes up with a coefficient of -0.09 between the subjects' sociocultural competence and linguistic competence and the former is much lower than the latter. Wang suggests that since the learners' sociocultural competence is not related to their linguistic competence, they should be dealt with separately in EFL teaching. We believe they are both essential elements in the development of learners' intercultural competence. Linguistic competence does not naturally lead to sociocultural competence. More emphasis should be placed on the development of socio-cultural competence and more efforts should be made towards this end.

### **Implications for EFL teaching and learning in China**

The present survey is by no means perfect, but it does reveal useful information about the students' communicative competence in intercultural settings and helps to spot the weakness of the English teaching profession in Chinese universities. Some of the important implications we get from the survey are listed in this section.

- There's urgent need to enhance the students' communicative competence in intercultural encounters. The students' purpose of learning the English language is not to become grammarians, but to use it as a tool, a medium to function in the global multicultural environment. Linguistic competence is certainly necessary and important, but it is not the end of ELT in China. The survey indicates that the development of the learners' linguistic competence and sociocultural competence are strikingly unbalanced. This is particularly true in the case of non-English majors. Some Chinese students are better than native speakers in doing grammar tests, but they may fail to engage in effective conversations with them. The present state of over-emphasis on rules of grammar must be changed.
- Linguistic competence and communicative competence should be treated as equally important. The national syllabuses set the principles of English teaching in very specific terms. But most of the statements are about developing students' skills in reading, writing, listening, speaking and translating, and appropriateness always comes after correctness of using the language if it is mentioned at all. More attention is given to sociocultural competence in the newly revised syllabus for English majors. The relatively better performance of subjects majored in English is as much the result of more teaching time and



more lessons as the difference in teaching principle and more exposure to English speaking people and their cultures. In addressing to the study of culture, the National Syllabus for Non-English Majors only has this sentence added to the end of a paragraph: some knowledge about cultural background is helpful for the enhancement of the abilities in using the target language (1999:10). It is, therefore, of crucial importance for the English teachers to realize the importance of learning the target language in meaningful sociocultural context. Teachers of English majors may have much to offer in this.

- The emphasis on the importance of sociocultural context in language learning should not stay at the tongue-tips of the teachers. And it should not be treated as tins and bits offered upon availability of the teacher or teaching material. As the Ability Test shows that the students all know that language is influenced by culture, but they simply do not know how English functions in specific situations. A review of teaching materials and a look at the syllabus will convince us that there is no systematic and clear-cut illustrations about how and what should be covered for the development of the learners' sociocultural competence. And the teaching should go beyond the practice on simple exchange of conventional expressions. What the students need most is manipulation of rules and strategies that could assure them of successful interactions in the target language.
- An integrative approach is the key to solve the problems concerning the students' intercultural communication. Since we acknowledge that language and culture are inseparable, why do we often teach the language in isolation of its culture? An integrative approach combines the teaching and learning of language form and language use in meaningful sociocultural contexts. The students can thus be expected to learn the language as it functions in a real life context. In this way not only will the students' linguistic competence, cross-cultural sensitivity and communicative appropriateness be enhanced, but also they will acquire a better understanding of others as well as of themselves. In this way they can become more tolerant for cross-cultural differences, more capable of dealing with problems. The learners can thus experience personal growth in general, which not only does good to English language learning, but brings benefits to higher education by and large in China.

### **Concluding remarks**

The present survey proves our hypotheses about Chinese university students' intercultural competence. And it helps to uncover the correlations between the different abilities discussed in the report. More convincing and revealing tests for larger number of subjects from a variety of universities are needed. Some items of the tests need to be improved for future research. Although we did not, due to reasons of time and difficulties in inter-collegial project, include non-verbal communication and common knowledge about the

target culture, we do not consider them as unimportant. It is our hope that, in spite of all its weaknesses, this survey can help to gain more insight into EFL for communicative purposes and promote research and teaching in EFL in China.

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## Appendixes

### 1. Test of Intercultural Ability

**Read the following passage and choose the best answer for each question. There may be more than one answers for each question:**

#### 1. Living with the Johnsons

Wang Hong went to study in the United States in 1986 and she lived with an American family, the Johnsons. She found them very hospitable and friendly. On the second day of her arrival they took her around the neighborhood and they told her to be at home. But after a few days, she felt she was not welcome there and that the Johnsons no longer liked her. Because when she said she wanted to go to the museum, they just said: "OK, you go ahead. And have a good time." And they did whatever they'd planned without paying any attention to her existence. How could she have a good time going there all by herself? She was still a new comer! and at the dinner table they always asked her to help herself. Wang Hong really liked the stewed beef Mrs. Johnson cooked, but she was afraid that the Johnsons might think she was greedy and impolite if she took too much of it, even though Mrs. Johnson often asked: "are you sure you don't want any more of this?" Wang Hong would shake her head with a smile and doubted about her sincerity since she never asked one more time or did anything to let her eat more. Although the Johnsons did invite her to go skating with them one weekend she was not happy because she went with them only out of politeness. The Johnsons were not as friendly and hospitable as they seemed to be at first. She would like them take her around to see more of the city. But she did not feel like being cared much about at the Johnsons. And at the same time, the Johnsons found this Chinese girl seemed unhappy but they could not figure out why and did not know how to cheer her up.

1. Wang Hong was unhappy because:

- a. The Johnsons did not like her.
- b. She did not like to live with Americans.
- c. The Johnsons were inconsiderate and unfriendly people.
- d. She expected the Johnsons would treat her like the Chinese families do.
- e. Your own explanation: \_\_\_\_\_.

2. What could Wang Hong do to live happily in America:

- a. Move to live with a more friendly family.
- b. Find a Chinese friend for help.
- c. Try to do what the Johnsons like to please them.

- d. Talk with the Johnsons about her problems.
  - e. Your own explanation:\_\_\_\_\_.
3. What could Wang Hong do before she went to American to prevent such unhappy experience?
- a. Learn about American way of life.
  - b. Find some friends, esp. Chinese friends in America, so that she could turn to them in times of difficulty.
  - c. Buy a precious gift for the American host family.
  - d. Find an apartment to live by herself.

**Question: Are the Johnsons not as friendly or hospitable as most Chinese families?**

2. Work or Pleasure

Tom Baneroft, the top salesman of his Midwestern U.S. area, was asked to head up a presentation of his office equipment firm to a Latin American company. He had set up an appointment for the day he had arrived, and then began explaining some of his objectives to the marketing representative who was always changing the subject and they persisted in asking lots of personal questions about Tom, his family, and interests. Tom was later informed that the meeting had been arranged for several days later, and his hosts hoped that he would be able to relax a little first and recover from his journey, perhaps see some sights and enjoy their hospitality. Tom responded by saying that he was quite fit and prepared to give a presentation that day, if possible. The representative seemed a little taken aback at this, but said he would discuss it with his superiors. Eventually, they agreed to meet with him, but at the subsequent meeting after chatting and some preliminaries, they suggested that since he might be tired they could continue the next few days, Tom noticed that though they had said they wanted to discuss details of his presentation, they seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time on inconsequentiality. This began to annoy Tom as he thought that the deal could have been closed several days ago. He just didn't know what they were driving at.

**Read the above passage and help Tom to analyze the situation. Which of the following do you think explains the problem:**

- a. The Latin American company was doing some investigation about Tom's company so that they could learn more about it.
- b. Latin Americans are not accustomed to working hard and they only want to enjoy themselves.

- c. The Latin American company was not interested in the products of Tom's company.
- d. Tom was trying to do his work well by the American standard while the Latin American company was trying to establish good relations with their partner.

**Question: Suppose you are Tom, what would you do in the situation?**

### 3. Maliyta's Party Experience

Maliyta: a newly arrived foreign student in the United States

Jan: Maliyta: American friend

Maliyta is anxious to make friends at school. Her friend Jan invites her to a party where she is the only international guest. At the party she meets several people who ask her many questions and show a deep interest in her culture. Some of them tell her to "drop by" their apartments and say that they hope to see her at school. She gives her apartment number to several people and tells them to come by her house, which is near the school.

Several weeks pass but nobody from the party comes to Maliyta's house except Jan. Maliyta wants to ask her friend why other American students don't come to visit her but she is too hurt and proud to ask. Jan knows Maliyta feels lonely but she can't understand why. At school Maliyta is well-liked by her classmates. Jan also remembers that her friends really enjoyed meeting Maliyta at the party.

(This story is taken from *Beyond Language-Intercultural Communication for English as a Second Language* by Levine, Deena R. and Adelman, Mara B. Prentice-Hall Inc, 1982)

**Read the above passage carefully and find out what could possibly cause Maliyta's trouble:**

- a. Maliyta is too dependent on her friends.
- b. The American friends don't really like Maliyta.
- c. Maliyta does not understand the Americans' words when they say to her to "drop by" their apartments at the party.
- d. The Americans have not taken Maliyta's words seriously when she gives them her apartment number and asks them to come by her house.

**Question: What do you think Jan could tell Maliyta and her American friends to understand each other better?**

### Test of Cross-Cultural Sensitivity

Read the following dialogues. Some of the sentences are not appropriate expressions in English. At least one of the speakers is a native speaker of English. Underline any part that you think improper and try to improve it by writing your sentences in the bracket.

1. ( In class. A, Li Ming, is a Chinese student and B, Tom Williams, is an American teacher.)  
A: I have a question, teacher.  
B: What is it, please?  
( )
2. ( A and B are neighbors in a small town in California. They meet at the sidewalk and chat with one another )  
A: Please drop by and have tea with us sometime.  
B: OK. I'll come on Thursday at 5 p.m.)  
( )
3. ( A and B, Mr. Wang, work in the same office. A wants to talk about tomorrow's meeting with B. A telephones B.)  
B: Hello.  
A: Hello. May I speak to Mr. Wang, please.  
B: Yes, you may.  
( )
4. ( In a shop between shop assistant A and customer B)  
A: What do you want?  
B: I'd like to buy a compact camera.  
( )
5. (Two friends, A and B are talking inside a house on a rainy day.)  
A: It's raining today, isn't it?  
B: It's too bad that we couldn't take a walk in the park now.  
( )
6. ( A and B are colleagues.)  
A: Thank you so much for the book. It's very useful.  
B: It doesn't matter.  
( )
- 7 ( A and B are good neighbors.)  
A: I was sorry to hear that your grandma was killed by the car.  
B: I still can't believe it.  
( )
- 8 .( A has been helping B fix the bike.)  
A: Thanks a lot. You've been such a great help.  
B: Never mind.

- ( )  
9. (A is teaching B an English lesson.)  
A: Could you explain this word in English?  
B: (not hearing the question clearly) What?  
( )
10. (Upon departure at the airport, a foreign guest A is speaking with their interpreter B)  
A: We really appreciate what you have been doing for us. You're an excellent interpreter.  
B: It's my duty to do so.  
( )
11. (A and B are friends.)  
A: I like your new hat.  
B: Do you really?  
A: Yes, I like the color very much. Red always make people look lively.  
B: You can take it. It's yours.  
( )
12. (A is at her friend B's house.)  
A: Look! What a beautiful vase you've got here.  
B: I got it last week. And it was made in China.  
A: The design is marvelous. And the shape too. How much did you pay for it?  
B: Oh, I bought it at the China Exhibition Fair. It's not expensive. But I don't know if the exhibition is still on.  
( )
13. (A and B are colleagues.)  
A: Are you all right. You look pale.  
B: It's the cold, I think.  
A: Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. You must take some medicine and put on more clothes.  
( )
14. (A meets his business friend B at the platform.)  
A: Hi, Wang, nice to see you again.  
B: Hi, Mr. Smith, I'm so glad you could come to the meeting. You must be very tired after the long journey.  
A: I'm OK. How have you been?  
( )
15. (A and B are roommates.)  
A: Could you close the door? It's too noisy out there.  
B: Yes, I could.  
( )

### Test of Sociocultural Appropriateness

**Instructions: Imagine yourself to be one of the speakers in the following situations and give your responses to the English remarks of other speakers. Write down what you are most likely to say in each situation.**

1. You are a university student, and Prof. Smith is your English teacher. You come to his office to discuss your thesis with him. Prof. Smith is very helpful.  
Prof. Smith: Now, do you know how to revise it?  
You: Yes. \_\_\_\_\_.  
Prof. Smith: That's all right. Don't hesitate to call me if you have problems.  
You: \_\_\_\_\_.

2. You meet your American teacher Prof. John Williams on the campus and learn that he has a very bad cold.  
You: I heard that you have a very bad cold. How are you feeling today?  
Prof. Williams: Oh, a little better. I'm going to the hospital now to have a second check.  
You: \_\_\_\_\_.

3. You are at your American friend John's house.  
John: Would you like some coffee?  
You: \_\_\_\_\_.

4. You are Wang Fang. You work in the English Department. Someone calls and you answer.  
You: Hello, English Department.  
Caller: Hello, I'd like to speak to Wang Fang, please.  
You: \_\_\_\_\_.

5. You and your friend Mary are waiting for the bus.  
Mary: It's really cold today, isn't it?  
You: \_\_\_\_\_.

6. You are an English teacher. In the hotel corridor at around 8 a.m., you meet Prof. David White, whom you just got to know at yesterday's reception.  
David White: Good morning!  
You: \_\_\_\_\_.

7. You meet Cathy, a newly arrived Canadian teacher on campus.



You: I heard that you have a bad cold.

Cathy: Yes, I think it's the weather. It's been so unpredictable lately.

You: Yes, it is. \_\_\_\_\_.

8. You are visiting a British friend Lucy at her house.

You: I'm afraid I must go now.

Lucy: Oh, it's still early. Do stay a little longer.

You: Well, I've got to get home before dark. \_\_\_\_\_.

Lucy: We were so happy to have you with us this afternoon.

9. Bill is your former classmate.

Bill: I hear you did quite well in your research. Congratulations!

You: \_\_\_\_\_.

10. You are having dinner with your friend Jack at your house.

Jack: I'm extremely sorry I have broken your plate.

You: \_\_\_\_\_.

Jack: I do apologize. I'll buy you a new one tomorrow.

You: \_\_\_\_\_.

11. Jane and you are good friends.

Jane: We're going to have a dancing party at seven this Sunday evening. Would you like to come and join us?.

You: \_\_\_\_\_.

12. Mr. and Mrs. Jones are your American friends. You invite them to dinner.

Mr. Jones: Here's a little gift for you. I brought it from America.

You: \_\_\_\_\_.

13. You are shopping in a department store.

Shop assistant: Can I help you, sir?

You: \_\_\_\_\_.

14. You are in a new city. You ask a man the way to the nearest bank in the street.

You: \_\_\_\_\_.

Man: Yes. Walk two blocks down the street, you'll find one right on the corner.

15. You call up Dr. Johnson's office to make an appointment.

Secretary: Dr. Johnson's office.

You: \_\_\_\_\_.

Secretary: What time is good for you?

You: Every weekday afternoon after 3:00 is OK with me.

Secretary: Dr. Johnson is free next Tuesday afternoon.