

Challenges for Chinese Learners in Sino-UK Intercultural Online Interactions--Case Study of an eChina~UK Project Course

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Abstract

Education has gone beyond national boundaries with the help of Internet and other network technologies. People from various countries and places have more opportunities to learn together online through computer mediated communications and collaboration. However, cultural diversity has imposed new challenges on intercultural networked learning. This paper studies the case of an online course “Intercultural E-learning Communities” designed and developed collaboratively by partners from Britain and China. It is found that in intercultural online interactions of the course, Chinese learners participated much less, wrote much less, and put forward much less discussion topics than their British counterparts. In-depth interviews were conducted with some of the Chinese learners, analysis of which reveals that difficulty in ‘speaking’ in English, difficulty in understanding British participants’ message, difficulty in putting forward viewpoints, and difficulty in obtaining teacher’s direction are the major challenges for Chinese online learners. In view of the impact of Chinese culture, face problem in particular, and traditional education on online learning, it is concluded that the need to preserve face, ask-for-answer tendency in learning, and lack of skills in analytical thinking are the three major causes for these challenges.

Keywords

online learning, challenge, culture, intercultural interaction

In recent years education has gone beyond national boundaries with the help of Internet and other network technologies, which offers more opportunities for people from various countries or places to learn together online. Technological tools, such as virtual learning platform, real-time chatting systems, online forums, stream courseware, and collaborative production software all contribute to globalization of online education. Institutes offering online programs or courses are having learners from all over the world, many of whom learn in groups with learning partners from other countries. In such online collaboration, language is a big challenge as the language chosen for the course may be a second language for some learners, which might hinder their understanding of the learning materials and participation in communications. Culture is another big challenge, in particular when there is great cultural difference between learners. In online courses, both intercultural challenges, language and cultural, manifest themselves in online interactions where learners share, argue, discuss, refute, and negotiate.

eChina~UK programme, funded by HEFCE in UK, aims at raising cultural awareness and pedagogical exchanges between Britain and China in e-learning, and the project course studied in this paper is one of the products of the programme. Participants in the course come from either Britain or China and English is the language used in the course. It is found that in this course Chinese learners participate in online discussions much less than British learners. What are the reasons? Is it because of language difficulties or cultural differences or any other reason? If it is the cultural difference, what are the specific challenges met by Chinese learners in the course?

This paper analyzes the challenges met by Chinese learners in the intercultural online interactions with British students in the project course. Interviews are made with some Chinese learners and analysis of the interviews reveals that cultural challenges have a huge impact on Chinese learners' participation in intercultural interactions.

1. Cultural Studies in Online Education

Hall (1959, 1966) examined difference between countries in terms of communications and perception of time and classifies cultures into "high context" and "low context". Hofstede (2001, p29) defines five cultural dimensions and classifies each culture with a sliding scale of each of them, that is, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, and long term orientation. Cultural study in online education is becoming more and more important with its globalization. Kim and Bonk (2002, p2) studied the asynchronous discussions of three distinct national groups of undergraduate students and report that Korean students are more social and contextually driven, American students are more action oriented and pragmatic in seeking results or giving solutions, and Finnish students are more group focused, reflective, and driven by theory. Morse (2003, p51) based his study with three graduate level online discussions on Hall's high context and low context theory and concludes that cultural background of students influences both how they prioritize the benefits they have gained from their online study, and how they view the challenges it poses. Doherty (2004, p3) states that intercultural issues are intensified in online learning systems compared with those in face-to-face interactions. Thorne (2003, p38) suggests that communicative genre, pragmatics, and institutional context differ interculturally in online communications.

This paper focuses specifically on the challenges for Chinese learners in intercultural online interactions with British learners with an eye to the impact of Chinese culture on online learning of Chinese learners.

2. Research Process

2.1 Course Context

The online course studied in this paper was jointly designed and developed by British and Chinese partners in the project "E-learning Pedagogy" of eChina~UK programme, with partners from Lancaster University, University of Sheffield in UK, Beijing Normal University and 3 other universities in China. The project course "Intercultural E-learning Communities", fully online and run on the platform Moodle for 11 weeks, aims to identify differences in e-learning conceptions and pedagogies between Britain and China through online communications and collaboration between participants from the two countries. 45 e-learning professionals in higher education, 22 from Britain and 23 from China, participated in the course and were divided into 6 hybrid groups. Each of the 6 tutors, 3 from Britain and 3 from China, offered help and learning support for each group.

It is found in the course that, Chinese participants posted much less messages, much shorter messages, put forward much less discussion topics, than their British counterparts. Research is thus conducted to identify difficulties that have prevented Chinese participants from more active participation in the intercultural online interactions, which may help online course designers and tutors to understand intercultural barriers and challenges in online courses and to better facilitate learning in such courses.

2.2 Research Method and Process

To identify the challenges Chinese learners met in online interactions with British learners and the causes for such challenges, the author conducted in-depth interviews with some of the Chinese participants. In selecting interviewees, three factors were considered: English competency, level of participation in online interactions,

and gender. According to these factors, 8 out of the 23 Chinese participants were interviewed: 5 English majors and 3 non-majors, 2 above average message number of Chinese participants in the course, 3 about average, and 3 below average, 3 males and 5 females.

As the interviewees live in different cities in China, the interviews were made on the real-time chat system Skype and then transcribed for analysis. Each interview lasted about 1 hour and was semi-open in content and structure. The interviewer asked questions about the interviewees' perception of their participation in the course, the reason for such style of participation, the difficulties they had met in online interactions with British participants, and their expectations for tutor's role in online interactions. Analysis of the interview transcripts reveals the following results.

2.3 Results—Challenges for Chinese Learners

Despite the variety in English competency, level of participation, and gender of interviewees, all of them report difficulties met in interacting with British learning partners online.

2.3.1 Difficulty in 'speaking' in English

It is somewhat surprising to learn from the interviews that so many Chinese participants feel it difficult to talk in English with British learning partners, as most of them are so good at English from the point of view of a non-native speaker. It is found that a lot of Chinese do not have confidence in their language competency, as saying "I'm so poor at English that it's difficult for me to express my ideas in English" or "It is hard to exchange ideas in English with British learners and I guess other Chinese participants feel the same. I could have done better if the course were in Chinese". Some think they would have participated a lot more if the course were in Chinese, as saying "I need to improve my English so as to be able to talk more in depth" or "I'm not satisfied with my performance in this course. I should have participated more if I were better at English" or "I haven't talked more in interactions because of language difficulty". Some like real time chat better than forum discussions, as saying "It's better to 'talk' on Skype, because I don't have to worry about my grammar" or "It's difficult and takes a lot of time to write in English."

Though the Chinese participants are unconfident in English, their British counterparts think they are superb at English. Careful reading of the interview transcripts shows that there is a fear of making mistakes, and this is also why some think real time chat is easier than forum discussions because it is frustrating to make grammar or vocabulary mistakes in English, when talking with native speakers in particular.

2.3.2 Difficulty in understanding British participants' messages

It is interesting to note that most Chinese learners find it easy to understand the language of British participants' remarks yet difficult to understand what the British counterparts are talking about or what they mean, as saying in interviews "Chinese participants' messages are focused on the topic and it's easy to understand, while British participants' messages are so round-about that it's very hard to recognize the point" or "Chinese participants always expect answers whereas British participants often elaborate on their ideas without offering any answer". Some dislike reading British messages because they seem to be so professional and too abstract to understand, as saying "I don't like reading those messages of British participants that contain concepts or terms" or "British participants' messages look so professional. I don't like reading them because it's difficult for me to understand". This difficulty in understanding British participants' messages has hindered a lot of Chinese from taking part in discussions, as saying "British participants often write long messages. If I'm interested in it and familiar with the content, I can read on. But if not, I'll quit it". Some Chinese learners want to know why they cannot understand the British participants' messages and attribute the reason to Chinese and British learners' difference in expectations, as saying "Chinese learners expect answers to the questions posed, while British learners seldom answer questions directly. Instead, they like asking questions better than answering questions". It is found from the interviews that Chinese learners think their British counterparts care more about exchanging understandings and negotiating meanings than obtaining direct solutions to problems.

2.3.3 Difficulty in putting forward viewpoints

Reading materials in English is not easy and takes a long time for Chinese learners. A lot of them think they have not made enough reading and thus fear that their ideas or viewpoints may be silly or laughed at, as saying “I didn’t have time to read all the reading materials, so I’m not confident with my own ideas” or “Without enough reading of materials, I don’t have a deep understanding of the topics” or “I don’t have much time to read the articles, so my ideas are not in-depth”. Some think they are so inexperienced or are not qualified to discuss with others for their low level of degree in e-learning, as saying “I don’t have much experience in e-learning, so I dare not say much” or “I fear that without a high level degree in e-learning, my ideas may be so shallow and be laughed by others”. Others want to discuss with their learning partners yet do not know how to argue for his ideas with logic, coherence, or clear structure, as saying “I don’t know how to elaborate on my ideas”. Besides the difficulty in expressing their ideas in English, Chinese learners are unconfident with their viewpoints for lack of reading, experience, academic status, or argumentative skills.

2.3.4 Difficulty in obtaining teacher’s direction

Chinese participants have high expectations for tutors’ help and guidance in learning, and they value tutor’s points of view much higher than their learning partners, as saying “I expect tutors to guide us in thinking and their remarks are more in-depth”. Most Chinese participants do not think tutors have played their role to the fullest in the course, as saying “I think students should follow teacher’s direction in online interactions and the discussion topics should be put forth by teachers. Teachers should also summarize the discussions and give us a conclusion. But tutors in this course failed to some extent to do so”. From Chinese interviews it is found that Chinese participants expected more directions and instructions in online interactions from tutors but failed to get them, which made them feel they had not learned much from the course and are not sure whether what they have learned is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’.

3. Discussion

3.1 Impact of Chinese Culture and Traditional Education

3.1.1 Face

Face problem is an important issue in Chinese culture. Chinese people attach much importance to preserving other’s face or maintaining their own face in social settings. It is difficult to define what ‘face’ is, but in general, there are two types of face: one is the avoidance of failure in public and the other is compliance with social hierarchy, which can also be identified in educational settings. For example, many Chinese students are afraid of losing face, so they would not say anything unless they are absolutely sure it is correct (Tarone & Yule, 1989; Liu & Littlewood, 1997). Besides, most Chinese students would “avoiding criticizing anyone, especially superiors, in public; using circumlocution and equivocation in any criticism of another’s performance; according greater social rewards to those skilled at preserving face for others” (Hwang, 1987, p962).

3.1.2 Traditional Face-to-Face Education

In traditional Chinese face-to-face education, teachers and text books are authoritative in the learning process. Students turn to teachers or text books for knowledge and correct answers. In a Chinese face-to-face class, it is usually the teacher who asks questions for students to answer, guides students in reading text books, points out knowledge points in books for students to keep in mind, and summarizes the key points for students to master. The absolute authority of teachers makes students believe that teachers know everything and that teachers are always correct (Murphy, 1987, in Flowerdew, 1998). Therefore, Chinese students are dependent on teachers and text books for ideas and conceptions. Students, in other words, “have not been trained to ask questions” (Katchen, 1989, p81), nor are they trained in analytical thinking—identifying, analyzing, and solving problems. They expect the teacher to tell them what to do and how to do, what is right and what is

wrong. Without teacher's direction and authoritative text books, Chinese students may feel at a loss in the learning process.

Besides, Chinese traditional assessment system places so much stress on obtaining good marks in examinations. To help students achieve a higher score, teachers will give a review class prior to the exam and tell students all the important things to be remembered, including correct answers to questions or where to find them in textbooks. The only task for Chinese students, then, is to memorize, rather than to think.

3.2 Causes for Challenges

The impact of Chinese culture and traditional education on Chinese learners' online interactions with British participants is found in the following three aspects.

3.2.1 Preserving facee

About half of the Chinese participants in the course were English majors or are teaching English as a second language. However, all of them worry about their language competency in the online interactions with native speakers. Analysis of the interview transcripts shows that it is the fear of making mistakes in English that has prevented Chinese participants from being more active in the discussions. Most of the Chinese learners expect their English to be perfect and impeccable, in forum discussions in particular because they are saved on the screen 'permanently', while in real-time Skype sessions they worry less because the chat scripts disappear after a short while. Chinese participants believe that there must be grammatical mistakes or misuse of words in their messages, which makes them feel a lost of face and would rather avoid speaking. For this reason, it usually takes a long time for them to choose a best word, polish the sentence, correct grammar mistakes before uploading it onto the forum. It is a matter of preserving face to avoid making mistakes by writing less.

Besides, most Chinese participants think they are lack in professional experience or academic status compared with British participants and their opinions must be silly or shallow. The unfamiliar terms or jargons used by British learners make them even less confident with themselves. If they have a question Chinese learners usually resort to a Chinese tutor or learning materials rather than discussing it with other learning partners because they may risk losing face if others find the question silly.

3.2.2 Ask for Answer

Chinese participants expect tutors to help more in the course, in the discussions in particular. Like the case with teachers in traditional classrooms, they consider tutors' remarks to be authoritative and correct. In online education, without textbooks, Chinese learners expect more from tutors, offering answers in particular. Discussions with learning partners are not the most important part whereas the tutor's summary, which offers the correct answer or final solution, is the highlight in online learning. A lot of Chinese participants are not satisfied with tutors' less guidance and direction in the discussions, and some even wonder whether they have learned anything from discussions with learning partners, because there is no tutor's judgment offered.

In addition, Chinese participants find it hard to understand British participants' messages, partly because their expectation of correct answers from messages is not met. British learners ask questions, elaborate on their opinions, argue or refute, which does not interest Chinese participants much. What the Chinese learners seek from discussions is the answer to a question or the solution to a problem, yet most of the time they cannot find the direct answer or solution after reading British long messages and then wonder what they are talking about.

3.2.3 Analytical Thinking

Chinese participants are less trained in problem analysis and meaning negotiation than in memorizing conclusions and answers to questions. With teachers and textbooks as authorities, problem analysis and meaning negotiation by students are not necessary in traditional Chinese learning. Even if there is problem

analysis in class, it is under the guidance of teachers instead of led by the students, which is partly the reason why Chinese learners find it difficult to put forward their ideas in discussions. Also almost all Chinese interviewees think British messages are difficult to understand, because British participants always elaborate on their ideas, introduce abstract concepts, and are willing to argue and negotiate, rather than drawing a simple conclusion. This, for Chinese participants who are used to teachers' asking questions, learning knowledge from text books, and remembering everything from teachers, is not what they expect. The variety of British learners' ideas, the uncertainty about opinions involved in discussions, the unfamiliar names, theories, or articles cited, the new questions posed in discussions of another, all drive Chinese learners to a confusion of ideas.

4. Conclusions

This paper analyzes challenges for Chinese online learners in intercultural educational settings with the case study of the eChina~UK project course. Interview with some Chinese participants reveals that there are four types of challenges reported by Chinese: difficulty in 'speaking' in English, difficulty in understanding British participants' message, difficulty in putting forward viewpoints, and difficulty in obtaining teacher's direction. In view of the impact of Chinese culture, face problem in particular, and traditional education on online learning, it is concluded that the need to preserve face, ask-for-answer tendency in learning, and lack of skills in analytical thinking are the three major causes for challenges for Chinese online learners. Conclusions of the study may be useful for online learning designers or researchers to offer better designed course and better learning support for Chinese learners in intercultural settings.

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