

# Intercultural Communication in *iEnglish Integrated Course*

Exemplified by College English Teaching in Harbin Institute of Technology at Weihai\*

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**Abstract**—In a world of international interdependence, the ability to understand and communicate effectively with people from other cultures takes on extreme urgency. Consequently, one of the most important purposes of College English teaching and learning is students' acquisition of intercultural communication competence. The textbook—*iEnglish Integrated Course* (First Edition), in content, well embodies some important parts of intercultural communication. This paper discusses how to help students improve their intercultural communication awareness and develop their intercultural communication competence, taking College English teaching in Harbin Institute of Technology (Weihai) as an example.

**Keywords**—language; culture; intercultural communication; College English teaching

## I. INTRODUCTION

The famous American linguist Edward Sapir said, "Language cannot exist without culture" [1]. The study of triplicity of language, culture and communication also leads people to the importance of culture in language teaching and learning. Language and culture are so closely related that they cannot survive without each other. Culture has impact on language and language reflects culture [2]. Teaching of culture is one important part in language teaching and learning. The learning of a foreign language is actually the learning of culture [3]. Culture and communication are intertwined so closely that Hall maintains that "culture is communication" and "communication is culture." In other words, we communicate the way we do because we are raised in a particular culture and learn its language, rules, and norms.

The term "intercultural communication" is first used by Edward T. Hall in 1959 and is simply defined as interpersonal communication between people from different cultural backgrounds. It occurs when a member of one culture produces

a message for consumption by a member of another culture. Intercultural communication is a common daily occurrence. The communication between cultures today is happening continuously, taking place almost everyday. Today, thousands of Chinese students going abroad to study, millions of foreign travelers coming to China, foreign artists coming to China to give performances and many joint venture enterprises doing business in many cities in China. These are all examples showing how prevalent intercultural communication is today. Therefore, modern society has made intercultural communication a necessity. With the development of science and technology, the world seems to be shrinking. Modern transportation and communication, electronic media and international organizations have brought near the people in the other hemisphere as if they were our next door neighbors. The mobility of people and the contact between countries have greatly increased intercultural communication. In today's world, intercultural awareness has become a prerequisite for successful intercultural communication. Moreover, intercultural awareness cannot grow naturally. It has to be trained. Therefore, it becomes necessary for Chinese students to increase the intercultural awareness in the English language learning. *The Guide to College English Teaching and Learning* also emphasizes the significance of intercultural communication awareness and competence in its "Course Nature", "Course Objective" and "Teaching requirement" [4].

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Meeting the requirements of the world, the nation and individuals on English teaching and learning, the textbook—*iEnglish Integrated Course* emphasizes the humanities and instrumentality of the English course to promote students' language level and abilities comprehensively. Specifically, it exhibits bilateral communication between China and the West in texts and exercises, which helps students enrich their

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knowledge of different cultures and enhance their confidence in our culture and value system so that they can perform better in “telling China stories and spreading China voices” on the international stage and state China’s position more effectively to the world in intercultural communication. How to promote students’ intercultural communication awareness and develop their intercultural communication competence with the rich knowledge of intercultural communication in iEnglish Integrated Course will be discussed in the following, taking College English Teaching in Harbin Institute of Technology (Weihai) as an example.

## II. VALUES IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, values are: one’s principles or standards: one’s judgment of what is valuable or important in life. Values are generally normative. They can be taken as a learned organization of rules for making choices and for resolving conflicts. These “rules” and guideposts tell us what is good and bad, what is right and wrong, what is true and false, what is positive and negative, what to strive for, how to live our life, and even what to die for. Values are broad, abstract concepts which provide the foundation that underlies a people’s entire way of life. Then where can we find them? They are reflected in many aspects as follows:

For example, the core of Chinese values has some relationship with Confucianism. In Unit 8 (iEnglish book 1), the text “The Way” introduces Confucianism and Taoism from a Western perspective, more specifically, by comparing the Chinese view of the world under the influence of the Way with views found in Western cultures. Both Confucianism and Taoism promote the inner peace of individuals and harmony with nature by “following the Way”, which denotes something that is both the source and the force behind everything that exists. In learning of this text, students enrich their knowledge of different values between Chinese and Westerners. Chinese take the views: The world has always existed and shall always do so; The Earth can be Heaven if it achieves order; People behave in accordance to the inherent principle of order; Desires are normal as long as they are kept under control; Paradise can be now and here in a well-ordered society. While Westerners believe: The world is created by God; The Earth is sinful; God tells people how to behave; Desires are things that seduce people into Darkness and Evil; Paradise is something to be hoped for in a hereafter. Additionally, students are given topics for further discussion to think more about the cultural differences: The authors introduce the Way and traditional Chinese thought by describing what it is not as compared to Western thought. Why do you think they do so? What concepts of Western thought can you deduce from the writing? Can you give examples of two or three other characteristics of common ways of thinking in the West? How much of our way of thinking has been changed by Western cultures and globalization? How do you feel about the changes? This kind of discussion could help students construct their own knowledge and competence of intercultural communication with critical reading and deep thinking.

For another example, in Unit 1 (iEnglish book 2), the text “The man who asked questions” introduces one of the most

influential ancient Greek philosophers—Socrates and his pursuit of truth. The ancient Greek philosophers have played a pivotal role in the shaping of the Western philosophical tradition. They initiated investigation into how knowledge is acquired and what knowledge consists of. While in the other text of this unit “The greatest sage in China”, the equally influential figure in Chinese philosophy—Confucius is introduced. Confucius was the founder of the philosophical school of thought, Confucianism, which had been the official imperial philosophy of China during a number of dynasties, particularly the Han, Tang and Song dynasties. During his lifetime, he was dedicated to advocating social and political reforms that could promote the welfare of the common people. As to deeply understand the differences between Confucius and Socrates, in other words, between Chinese and Western philosophical ideas, a presentation—When Socrates Meets Confucius is give to students. Students are required to collect enough information about Socrates and Confucius and make a comparison on their lives, their philosophies and their influences. As a result, students could improve their comparing and contrasting skills by making this presentation, which also helps students identify the similarities and differences in different cultures and stimulate their original knowledge and experience to get their own conclusion. Furthermore, students know more about Confucianism in English, which makes them more easily to introduce China’s main philosophical ideas in intercultural communication.

For the third example, in Unit 2 (iEnglish book 2), the two texts “Demystifying Mona Lisa” and “Mountains and water in Chinese art” reveal some different preferences for the subject matter in Western and Chinese paintings. Several famous and representative paintings in the West and China are shown to the students in class. And students are required to focus on the different subject matter between the Western paintings and Chinese paintings with careful observation. It’s not difficult for students to find the obvious difference on subject matter of those paintings. In classical Western paintings, the portraits of figures take the majority, however, mountains and water are the favorite subject matters in classical Chinese paintings. The different preferences for the subject matter in paintings also reflect different values between China and the West. Then students are given further task to analyze the reasons of different preferences for the subject matter in Chinese and Western paintings to deepen their insights. With discussion in groups, students provide some good ideas. In summary, taking figures as the subject matter in the classical Western paintings’ is related to the early functions of paintings in Western culture. One important function was to serve religious purposes where religious stories were told with religious figures being the focus. Another function was for political purposes which led to the portraits of governors and nobles. While in classical Chinese paintings, landscape, particularly mountains and water, tend to be the most extensive subject matter. The reasons are as follows according to the second text “Mountains and water in Chinese art”: (1) To some extent, China’s geography offers an explanation. China’s natural environment has shaped China’s culture and traditions and molded the minds of Chinese. (2) Ancient Chinese mythology abounds with tales of mountain mysticism. Outstanding peaks were believed to be the dwelling places of immortals, spurring man’s imagination and fuelling

his desire to command the elixir conferring eternal life. (3) The two great philosophies indigenous to China, Confucianism and Daoism, hold a profound faith in nature's powers to uplift and nourish the spirit and to purify the soul. (4) In Six Dynasties period, a large number of people came to view nature as a refuge in a spiritual or political sense. In the arts dealing with nature, mountains and water are fundamental compositional elements. Mountains and water are viewed as the very representative of nature. Drawing an analogy between the Earth and the human body, the Chinese have referred to mountains as the "bones", to water as the "blood" of the Earth.

Based on the previous discussion and analysis, the conclusion is drawn that Chinese pursue the unity between human and nature, which represents Chinese collectivism to some extent. By contrast, Westerners emphasize individualism instead. A collectivist culture is one in which people tend to view themselves as members of groups (families, work units, tribes, nations), and usually consider the needs of the group to be more important than the needs of individuals. Most Asian cultures, including China's, tend to be collectivist. However, an individualist culture is one in which people tend to view themselves as individuals and to emphasize the needs of individuals. In general, Western culture tends to be individualist. After learning this unit, students are required to give a presentation—a comparison between Chinese and Western paintings on the subject matter, the painting technique, the painting tools or the art perceptions, which improves students' artistic cultivation and appreciation of different cultures.

Certain values are held unconsciously, which develop standards and guidelines that establish appropriate and inappropriate behaviors in a society. People usually exhibit and expect behaviors according to their value systems. Without any knowledge of each other's values, participants in intercultural communication may encounter misunderstanding. Therefore, values are the key factors determining how successfully people communicate to a large degree, which is naturally one of the cores of the intercultural communication study.

### III. VERBAL COMMUNICATION IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

In daily verbal communication, there are many routine ways one must observe in order to maintain smooth intercultural communication. Being unaware of the difference, intercultural communication breakdown occurs here and there. With some knowledge of the basic cultural difference, one is likely to survive in other cultures.

For example, in Unit 3 (*iEnglish* book 2), the text "Powerful 'you' for comm-YOU-nication" introduces the principle for effective communication in social life—putting "you" first in communication, which may help you get a much better response and enrich your social communication. Even strangers are more pleasant and helpful when this principle is used. In this text, the author gives several examples of daily verbal communication about invitation, request, compliment and asking for directions:

(1) Suppose you want to ask a colleague, Jill, if she would like to join you for dinner. So you have two different ways to

say to her, "There's a really good new Indian restaurant in town. Will you join me there for dinner tonight?" or "Jill, you will really love this new Indian restaurant. Will you join me there this evening for dinner?" Which way is more likely to be accepted according to the rules in daily verbal communication in the west? Obviously the latter one because phrasing that way, you've already subliminally answered Jill's questions "By 'good' does he mean the food or the atmosphere or both? Indian cuisine, I'm not sure. He says it's good. However, will I like it?" Getting to know the principle in the west, students are guided to think about invitation in China. A successful inviting-transaction is rarely realized in a single utterance, but more often than not takes several talk exchanges, or preferred pairs without Westerners' direct response.

(2) Suppose you want to take a long weekend. You decide to ask your boss if you can take Friday off. Which request do you think he or she is going to react to more positively? "Can I take Friday off, Boss?" Or this one: "Boss, can you do without me Friday?" In the first case, Boss had to translate your "Can I take Friday off" into "Can I do without this employee Friday?" That's an extra thought process. And generally speaking, some bosses hate to think! In the second case, you did Boss's thinking for her. Your new wording made managing without you a matter of pride for Boss. "Of course", she said to herself. "I can manage without your help Friday." Therefore, the second case is more acceptable for the Westerners. On the contrary, in China, it's impossible to ask for leave in the second way because it's quite impolite to the Boss.

(3) Say a lady likes a gentleman's suit. Which compliment is more appropriate in the West—"I like your suit." or "You look great in that suit."? Westerners prefer the latter one because it gives you warmer feelings, while most Chinese prefer "Your suit is great." Another example of compliment is given to a participant asking a good question: "That's a good question." or "You've asked a good question." Which is more preferable? Chinese and Westerners have different answers: Chinese prefer the former one, however, Westerners like the latter one because putting "you" first is the principle for effective communication in the West. As a matter of fact, the difference does not only exist in compliment but also in response to compliment between Chinese and Westerners. Typical Chinese modest attitudes towards compliments are regarded as virtues. In responding to compliments, Westerners accept them as a kind of recognition of their individual efforts, whereas the Chinese would behave more conservatively.

(4) Suppose you ask for directions in the following three forms: "I can't find the Golden Gate Bridge." "Where's the Golden Gate Bridge?" "Could you tell me where the Golden Gate Bridge is?" Sure enough, whenever you ask "Could you tell me where...", people are more pleasant and helpful than when you start the question with "I" or "where", because it is a subtle challenge by phrasing "Could you tell me where...". In essence, you're asking "Are you able to give me directions?" This hits them in the pride button. On this point, Chinese also prefer "Could you tell me where..." because it is very polite to phrase that way and it is also more likely for you to get help even from strangers.



From the analysis, we can see more clearly that different cultures have different verbal styles, which can be understood and interpreted only in their cultural context. We focus on the differences in daily verbal communication to avoid misunderstanding in intercultural communication, but at the same time, we needn't be too worried about cultural differences. Remember: the differences that are discussed in the above are not absolute differences but just a matter of degree, a tendency. They illustrate the complexity and richness that language issues bring to intercultural communication. And there are also similarities, mutual adjustment, tolerance, and understanding between people from different cultures.

#### IV. CHINESE CULTURE IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

China is a country with a rich and diverse culture. For a long time, our country has endeavored to promote our culture to Western society. There were many noticeable figures emerging in the long history of introducing Chinese culture to the world, such as Tang Priest (San Zang) and his disciples on their way to the Western Heaven to obtain Buddhist scriptures, Eastward Sea Voyage of Jianzhen and its influence in Japan, Zhen He's expedition, as well as the Travels of Marco Polo, which played an important role in spreading China to the West. With the rapid economic and social development in China and the rising of her international status, Chinese culture has drawn attention of more and more people in the world. To meet the demand from the people in the world, China needs to find the effective ways to promote her culture into the world.

iEnglish provides us with some knowledge about Chinese culture, which makes us understand Chinese culture from a new perspective, promote our national cultural confidence and then spread China's voice to the world better. For example, in Unit 5 (iEnglish Book 1), the text "China goes global: The partial power" describes that in about 30 years, China has risen from long-standing poverty to being the second largest economy in the world—faster than any other country in history. China has gradually become one of the global media's most watched countries. Issues concerning China make headlines every day. The rest of the world is keeping an eye on China's rise, and various people hold different views on this change. By learning this text, student should know clearly about China's standpoint on the international stage: China is a global actor without (yet) being a true global power—the distinction being that true powers influence other nations and events. Merely having a global presence does not equal having global power unless a nation influences events in a particular region or realm. At the same time, students can also learn to describe how China goes global in the past several decades and the distinguishing feature of China's modernization mission—the national pursuit of "comprehensive power". By contrast, the author of another text in Unit 5 (iEnglish Book 1) "Wake-up call" seems to be so worried that he gives warnings to Westerners and urges them to take action to deal with China's rise. After learning the two texts, "China threat" theory is discussed in class to improve students' critical thinking of China's role in the world. As Chinese college students, they may believe they have the obligation to reaffirm to the world that China's rise is a peaceful one. Then students are encouraged to write a letter to China Daily to explain the

reasons for certain Western countries to propagate the "China Threat" theory; discuss the positive and negative effects of the "China Threat" theory on China and give suggestions on what we should do to respond to the "China Threat" theory.

For another example, in Unit 8 (iEnglish Book 1), the text "The Chinese Writing System" introduces certain merits and drawbacks of the system of Chinese written characters as one of the oldest forms of written language in use today, and also analyzes the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western language. This text deepens students' understanding of Chinese writing system and enhances the national sense of pride of calligraphy because it is a great art in East Asia and the ancestor of all the graphic arts, for the writing brush is also the brush of the painter. In order to arouse students' interest in Chinese traditional culture, they are asked to design a poster: introducing Chinese crafts to people from other countries, such as Chinese paper cutting, Chinese lanterns, Chinese seals, Chinese writing brush, Chinese jade, Chinese kites, shadowy puppetry and bronze vessels, etc. The posters are presented in class and the top 10 posters chosen by students themselves are exhibited on campus.

More knowledge about Chinese culture can also be found in "The Way" of Unit 8 (iEnglish Book 1), "The greatest sage in China" of Unit 1 (iEnglish Book 2) and "Mountains and water in Chinese art" of Unit 2 (iEnglish Book 2). These texts broaden students' knowledge of Chinese philosophy and art perceptions on one hand, and enhance students' competence to spread China's voice to the world better on the other hand.

Owing to the effect of some biased reports about China on Western dominated media, there exists some misunderstanding of Chinese culture and certain stereotype of Chinese image in their minds. In order to improve the national image of our country, we need to let the world know the true and whole state of China and Chinese people by enriching our own knowledge of Chinese culture.

#### V. DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

As we know, communication, language and culture cannot be separated. Successful intercultural communication demands cultural fluency as well as linguistic fluency. Intercultural communication competence means being able to communicate efficiently and effectively with people from other cultures, to achieve mutual understanding and to gain better cooperation. In other words, with adequate competence, we will be able to know when, where, how, to whom to say / do what, understand why and in what ways people are similar and different, to facilitate further understanding and communication worldwide so as to promote friendship that contributes to a better world. The following is what we can do to develop our intercultural communication competence.

(1) Knowing ourselves. It's necessary for developing cultural awareness required for effective intercultural communication, because what we bring to the communication event greatly influences the success or failure of that event. Knowing ourselves involves discovering the kind of image we portray to the rest of the world. If we perceive ourselves in one way, and the people with whom we interact perceive us in

another way, serious problems can arise. We should learn to recognize our communication style—the manner in which we present ourselves to others.

(2) Appreciating similarities and respecting differences. It is true that cultures are different due to a host of various factors, but it doesn't mean that there are no similarities or commonalities. On the contrary, we share a series of crucial characteristics that link the people of the world together. We have to remember that in describing another culture, people tend to stress the differences and overlook the similarities. There are many things people in the world share, otherwise intercultural communication would be impossible. If we can appreciate similarities and respect differences existing in cultures, we are able to better assess the potential consequences of our acts and be more tolerant of those of others. We should know that cultural differences will not necessarily create conflict. Instead, they enrich our world. In fact, beauty is in the coexistence of different cultures.

(3) Developing empathy. To improve intercultural communication we need to develop empathy—be able to see things from the point of view of others or to see oneself in the other fellow's situation. It has been recognized as important to general communication competence and as a central characteristic of competent and effective intercultural communication. To improve empathy, first, we have to remind ourselves to pay attention to the spontaneous emotional expressions of others and the situation where the interaction takes place. Second, since empathy is a reciprocal act, both parties have to be expressive so as to achieve understanding. Third, empathy can be enhanced through awareness of specific behaviors that members of a particular culture or co-culture might find impertinent or insulting. Finally, we have to remember that empathy can be increased if we resist the tendency to interpret the other's verbal and nonverbal actions from our own culture's orientation.

(4) Keeping an open mind. A standard scientific principle is that diversity is adaptive. The more different resources a group has, the more potentials it has for adapting to life challenges. We have come to realize this in biodiversity, but perhaps we still have to realize this in terms of ethnic diversity. The more different ways of experiencing life available to a society, the more resources it has for meeting adaptive challenges. When we encounter people from other ethnic backgrounds, we have an opportunity to learn new ways of seeing and experiencing life which we never knew existed. In a larger framework, we can learn the tremendous potentials humans have for being human. Through intercultural encounters, we can develop more valid and balanced understandings of other cultural ways. We can better understand ourselves, by contrasting our own ways with other life experiences and asking about our own meanings and functions. Facing this opportunity, we should keep an open mind, not only being tolerant of others but also learning from others. A multicultural perspective helps. Multiculturalism requires us to take different cultures as equals. It teaches us to accept as inevitable the contradictions implicit in everything we learn. Multiculturalism is a style of self-awareness which involves frequent questioning about the expandable and arbitrary nature of one's own culture. If we are frequently conscious that cultural context influences our thoughts and

behaviors and that these, while important to us, are neither static nor absolute entities, we will be more open to accept the fact that others can enrich our experience. Thus to be multicultural is to be aware and able to incorporate and synthesize different systems of cultural knowledge into one's own.

## VI. CONCLUSION

In the modern information age, it's of great significance to cultivate the intercultural communication competence for people living in the global village. And iEnglish Integrated Course has a good try in content to broaden students' cultural horizons, emphasizing the development of students' intercultural communication competence. It's believed that College English teachers should make flexible choice and reasonable expansion of the cultural content in the textbook during the whole teaching process with various teaching methods to improve students' intercultural communication competence effectively.

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