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Communication with Chinese International Students: Understanding Chinese International Students' learning difficulties and communication barriers

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Key words: Chinese international students, learning difficulties, quietness, intercultural communication

Abstract:

The problems of communication with Chinese international students are reported in many academic publications related to international students in higher education in the UK. Majority of these problems links to teaching and learning activities: Chinese international students are quiet in classroom, not active in group discussion or group work, and passive in tutorials etc. Such problems not only cause misunderstandings between Chinese international students and their tutors but also have negative influence on their learning outcome. This article is based on an empirical study on Chinese international students' learning experience in University of Huddersfield. 34 Chinese international students from foundation to PhD participate in focus group discussion and personal interview. The participants generally have learning difficulties to some degree, which associate to their communication problems. English proficiency is not a primary factor cause their learning difficulties. External and internal communication and cultural barriers are the key factors behind Chinese international students learning difficulties. The findings of the research can help academic tutors in higher education understand where the communication problems with Chinese international students come from and how to resolve these problems.

The Chinese market has been the largest in HE education worldwide in recent years and a relatively long period of stable expansion of the market is predictable due to the ever growing importance of the Chinese economy and the arrival at the university stage of the affluent 'single child' generation born in the 1990s. Competition in the Chinese education market between Western countries and within the UK will inevitably get more ferocious with the expansions and shifts of the market. It carries huge importance for UK universities to maintain and even increase the existing share of the market in the current economic circumstance. Nevertheless, the key services that the universities provide for Chinese international students, teaching and learning support, are rather challenging. The academic publications about Chinese international students in UK higher educational institutions

indicate that both Chinese international students and their tutors have communication problems in their teaching and learning activities.

Chinese international students' learning difficulties and communication problems

Chinese international students' learning difficulties have been reported intensively in the academic publications related to Chinese international students' learning experience and adaptation in UK HE institutions (Gu, 2005; Fernandes, 2006; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006; Spencer-Patey & Xiong, 2006; Turner, 2006a; Gu & Maley, 2008; Ding, 2009; Gu, 2009; Tian & Lowe, 2009). The negative learning experience that Chinese international students have is summarized as 'learning shock' by Gu and others (Gu, 2005; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006; Gu & Maley, 2008; Gu, 2009).

Learning shock refers to some unpleasant feelings and difficult experiences that learners encounter when they are exposed to a new learning environment. Such unpleasant feelings are intensified and can impose a deeper psychological and emotional strain on learners that are crossing national and/or cultural borders.

(Gu, 2005)

Although some researchers suggest that it is problematic to treat Chinese international students as a homogenous group (Gu, 2005; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006; Gu & Maley, 2008), Chinese international students have common learning difficulties which are different to what their counterparts from West countries experience. Chinese international students are found generally quite in class discussion, not active in group works (Turner, 2006a; Gu & Maley, 2008; Tian & Lowe, 2009), lacking of critical thinking (Choo, 2007; Ding, 2009), and less likely to adopt an active learning strategy (Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010). These common learning difficulties are interpreted as Chinese learners' learning approach shaped by their cultural tradition (Biggs, 1987; Ramsden, 1992; Cleverly, 1994; Biggs & Watkins, 1996; Chan & Drover, 1996; Hammond & Gao, 2002).

Chinese international students come from the so-called Confucian-Heritage-Cultures where Confucianism still has a deep influence in the current educational system, teaching and learning practice in schools, and students' learning motivation and habits in China (Luo, Huang & Najjar, 2007) and other Asian country with Confucian tradition. For Confucianism, education is not only beneficial for personal development towards *Sheng Ren* (sainthood) but also for social order. Therefore, the hierarchy and authority linked to social order are also reflected in the educational system and schools. Students are expected to integrate knowledge, skills, as well as cultural values which are transmitted to them through curricula (Zhu, 2011). In *The Analects* (Confucius, 500 B.C. a), *The Great Learning* and other works,

Confucius and his disciples claim knowledge, thought, emotion and action are important elements in a person's cultivation. Action in Confucian perspective is habit, which is the end of cultivation. *Book of History (Shu King)* (Confucius, 500 B.C. b), a textbook for students of Confucius, claims that long practice makes habit second nature. 'If habit is cultivated when one is young it becomes like one's own nature, habit is then the second nature' (Wang, 1991). Learning and practice (especially ritual) are regarded as the most important way to cultivate habit. Underpinned by Confucian educational philosophy, teaching and learning in Confucian-Heritage-Cultures is teacher-centred, textbook-based, and examination-oriented. Students are encouraged to listen to teachers' teaching, acquire knowledge through memorization and repetition, and present their learning outcome through paper-based examinations.

Because of their previous schooling experience in Confucian-Heritage-Cultures, Chinese international students are more likely to adopt surface learning approaches (Biggs, 1987; Biggs & Watkins, 1996). Surface learning approaches are task-oriented, memorisation-based, and non-holistic, which lack of critical thinking and integrating new knowledge into the existing knowledge system. Similarly, Chinese learner's learning approach is labelled as 'rote' learning and described as meditative, repetitive, and memory-based, in some other researchers' work (Ramsden, 1992; Cleverly, 1994; Chan and Drover, 1996). No matter surface learning or rote learning, Chinese international students' learning approaches are contrary to deep learning approaches which university students in the Western countries are expected to adopt. Deep approaches regard the learning experience as holistic, involving critic-evaluation skills and integrating and synthesizing learning into previous experience (Ramsden, 1992).

Nevertheless, using the dichotomy of surface learning and deep learning to explain the different learning approaches between the Chinese learner and their Western counterpart and labelling Chinese learners' learning approaches as surface learning are criticized by researchers in their relatively recent work (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006; Turner, 2006b; Gu and Maley, 2008; Gu, 2009). Mok *et al.* (2001) point out that meditative, repetitive, memory-based approaches (the so-called surface learning) used in Chinese learning context can also achieve deeper learning. Confucian educational tradition stresses on learning and thinking (Confucius, 500 B.C. a). Chinese international students' difficulties with critical thinking in Western learning context do not mean that they are not able to think critically, but stem from that they are not familiar to 'critical argument' in Western HE discourse (Turner, 2006b). Gu and others argue that Chinese international students are not a homogeneous group as the term, 'Chinese learner', suggested in Biggs' work. Culture is not the only determinant of learning experience and outcome. Interaction in teaching and

learning practice is also an influential factor (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006; Gu and Maley, 2008; Gu, 2009). This viewpoint is echoed by Tian & Lowe's study (2009).

Tian & Lowe (2009) question the stereotypical portrayals of 'the Chinese learner', particularly obedient students who cherish a hierarchical teacher-student relationship because they come from a "high power distance" culture and have been taught to be tolerant to playing a submissive role (Hofstede 1980). The complaints from the Chinese international students showed that they did not 'endure ineffective teaching for a "culturally desired" son-father type of relationship' (Tian & Lowe, 2009: p.666). They found that Chinese international students had 'a shared feeling of being marginalised' (2009: p.666), which was attributed to the communication problems. They rejected another stereotype about Chinese international students' silence in class which was interpreted as voluntarily withdrawal from interaction based on cultural pre-dispositions (Wright and Lander 2003, cited by Tian & Lowe, 2009: p.666). Instead, Tian & Lowe (2009: p.667) explain Chinese international students' communication problems in class as linguistics difficulties and a lack of familiarity with the local academic cultural expectations. They suggest understanding Chinese international students' learning experience and difficulties in a holistic way, e.g. understanding that Chinese international students' learning experience is linked closely to their whole interactions with others in host cultures.

Holms' (2004, 2005, 2010) research strikes same chord on Tian & Lowe's (2009) viewpoint, understanding Chinese international students' learning difficulties in Western HE institutions from an interactionist perspective. For Holms (2005), Chinese international students' learning difficulties in a New Zealand university, which are similar to what reviewed at the beginning of this section, are result from difficulties in intercultural communications. Chinese international students and people in the host culture interpret each other's meaning in their communication based on their own cultural patterns. The unshared cultural patterns may cause misunderstanding (Carbaugh, 1990). Holms uses a different culture-related dichotomy to explain Chinese international students' learning difficulties. Underpinned by Socratic tradition, dialogic learning is generally adopted in the Western educational system, in which communication is central and knowledge is generated through questioning and evaluation. By contrast, dialectic learning is in favourite by educational systems influenced by Confucian tradition. Chinese international students' learning difficulties reflect the dialectic/dialogic tension in their intercultural communications in Western HE institutions (Holms, 2004, 2010).

Holms' study (2010) suggests that students' intercultural communication competence is crucial for students to conquer learning difficulties in Western universities. Whether or not this finding generally applied to the whole Chinese international student group, it needs more empirical research to test. The current research intends to explore Chinese

international students' experience in a UK post-92 university. Do they have learning difficulties or not? If they have, what kinds of learning difficulties they are and how do they relate to intercultural communication? What support do the students need to reduce their learning difficulties and to improve their intercultural communication competence?

Research design and methodology

This paper is based on a research project to explore the learning experience of Chinese international students in the University of Huddersfield. The learning experience links to how Chinese international student perceive and interpret what happens around them and how they feel about it, which can be best understood by the researcher sharing their frame of reference, i.e. from a subjective perspective instead of an objective perspective. Such a perspective is in accordance with the interpretive approach: 'the social world can only be understood from the standpoint of the individuals who are part of the ongoing action being investigated' (Cohen et al., 2000: p.19). Therefore, an interpretive research approach is adopted to examine Chinese international students' learning experience.

Two theories underpin the choice of research methods and the implementation of field work, ethnomethodology and feminism. Ethnomethodology is concerned with how people make sense of their everyday world. 'It is geared to empirical study and the stress which its practitioners place upon the uniqueness of the situation encountered' (Cohen et al., 2000: p.25). Such a theoretical perspective can help the Chinese international students to reflect social reality from their stand point. Feminist research stresses a non-hierarchical researcher-participant relationship, 'empowering to all participants' (Cohen et al., 2000: p.35).

Shaped by the above theories, the research design adopts group interview and personal interview to collect data. The researchers who conducted interviews with Chinese students shared a good frame of reference with the participants because one of them was a Chinese postgraduate student in the university at the time of field work and the other was a Chinese lecturer who did her PhD in the University of Huddersfield. The similarity on identity built an equal relationship between the researchers and the participants. The semi-structural and non-structural style of interview facilitated the participants to present their opinion freely.

34 students enrolled in the University of Huddersfield in 2011 were chosen through snowball sampling with consideration of their representation to the whole population. The distribution of the samples and their population is listed in Table 1.

Table 1: sample size and population of Chinese international students

	Number of Chinese students in the University of Huddersfield- Dec 2010	Interview participants- April-June, 2011
PhD Candidate	30	4
Master Degree Students	77	13
Undergraduate	225	13
Foundation Students	27	4

Learning experience and learning difficulties

The evidence of the current study shows that it can be problematic to treat Chinese international students in the University of Huddersfield as a homogeneous group. PhD candidates interviewed in the current study have more positive learning experience and less difficulty to interact with people in host culture. Master students who did their first degree in cooperative course in China taught by tutors from the University of Huddersfield or graduated from UK universities reported fewer difficulties to adapt to the learning culture in their masters course in Huddersfield. Students in different schools have different experience too. For instance, participants from the School of Education generally have positive comments to their learning experience. Participants with different attitudes, personalities, and motivations report different learning experience. However, majority of the participants talk about their struggle to understand their tutors and classmates in classes and their difficulties in using English to communicate with their tutors and classmates.

'Yeah, language. Sometime can't understand what tutor/ classmates said in class. Can't get their points in class sometime.'

Masters-D

Participants also think that the difficulties in using English to communicate with their tutors and classmates are not specific to them but general to all Chinese international students. They summarized Chinese international students' common characteristics is quietness.

Quietness in classroom

Quietness is frequently mentioned by the participants of the current study when they are asked about their learning experience. The way that they mention it indicates that they treat it as a label to Chinese international students.

Almost the same, Chinese students are quite silent in class.

PhD-13

Chinese international students are generally quiet in class. They lack initiative.

Masters-X

Chinese are too shy... Just like the class in China, no one respond teacher's questions in class.

BA-C

For the participants, the reasons behind the perceived quietness are mainly their limited English proficiency and cultural difference. For the former, they keep quiet to avoid unsuccessful communication in class, e.g. their questions or answers cannot be understood by their tutors or classmates. For the latter, they get used to keep quiet in class as a habituated learning style from their previous schooling experience in China. However, based on the analysis of their whole discourses in their interviews, the causes of Chinese international students' quietness in class are far more than what they perceived.

The analysis of the focus group discussions and personal interviews indicates that the reasons caused Chinese international students' quietness in classroom can be summarized as:

- a) Avoid unsuccessful communications with their tutors and classmates.
- b) Respond not quickly enough to provide innovate ideas. A participant explains 'I have some ideas which my classmates also think the same. Sometimes they shout them out faster than me, which makes me don't want to share mine' (Masters-D).
- c) Prefer resolve problem independently to ask questions in class.
- d) Avoid asking wrong questions to show their weakness.
- e) Prefer ask questions after class to in class because tutors are more patient to answer students' questions in their office than in class.
- f) Personality: some Chinese international students are truly shy or reserved. They are reluctant to share their opinions or ideas in front of all the classmates.

According to the analysis, English proficiency is not primary reason to Chinese international students' quietness in class, because when English proficiency is mentioned by the participants in the study, they always talk about it as a key reason which causes their communication problems in class or in daily life. The quotation in the previous section from Masters-D is a typical example. Moreover, Language proficiency might not be the main factor which causes Chinese international students' communication problems. For instance, Masters-D deems English proficiency as a main barrier of her communication in class. The detailed descriptions of her educational background and communication barriers in class tell

a different story. Overloaded information in her masters course, tutors' fast speaking style, classmates' accent, and tutor's organization of classroom discussion attribute to her communication problems in class more than her English proficiency does. Hence, communication rather than English proficiency should be regarded as the primary cause to Chinese international students' quietness in class.

The other three reasons from b to d, 'respond not quickly enough to provide innovate ideas', 'prefer resolve problem independently to ask questions in class', and 'avoid asking wrong questions to show their weakness', could be reflection of the schooling culture in China. Owing to competitive schooling culture in China (Zhu, 2011) and fear of losing face in front of the class (Holms, 2010), Chinese students are under pressure to provide right answers and innovate ideas in class (Zhu, 2011).

The evidence from the current research show that apart from personal factor (e and f in the list above), communication and culture are two primary factors which cause Chinese international students' quietness in classroom. To support Chinese international students participating class discussion and raise questions more actively, the communication and cultural barriers need to be analysed in detail.

Communication barriers

When Chinese international students cannot understand their tutors or classmates or make others understand them, they generally attribute the communication problem to their English proficiency such as vocabularies and grammars. However, the current study reveals that majority communication problems which the participants talked about in the focus groups and personal interviews stem from lack of understanding the context of communication.

I found that English people like to make jokes; we can't understand what they said when others laugh together. They just said: 'I'm just joking.' But I believe it is hard for us to get those jokes. We can understand the meaning of words but hardly catch the inside meaning.

PhD-14

Lack of common topics is a general barrier of communication between Chinese international students and home students. Some Chinese international students report that they have conversations with home students in other occasions out of class. But their experience of communication is not pleasant because they hardly find common topics to talk about. Even studying the same module, when tutors and classmates' discussions bring in unfamiliar context, Chinese international students also have problems to understand. In such kind of

situation, Chinese international students sometimes feel being left out and achieving nothing from class.

Sometime tutor has lots of conversation with my classmates. There are useful points inside the conversation. But we can't understand what they are saying and this makes me learn nothing from it. We can't understand the questions my classmates' ask, so when tutor answer the questions we learn nothing from it. This is the biggest difficulty I have during class.

Masters-D

Unfortunately, none of participants who mention such kind of communication problems in this study has reported their understanding problems to their tutors immediately in class. One participant points out Chinese international students even lack communication with nonverbal language in class which to his understanding is a clue for tutors to get feedback from the students.

Chinese students prefer to look at blackboard or textbook. They lack of communication with tutors through eye contact or body language... When a tutor makes a new point, s/he will pause a while to observe students' expression from faces and eyes to know if the students understand her/him and to make the decision if s/he need to add more explanations. Chinese students are not very good at giving their feedback actively.

Undergraduate-Z

One of the participants in this study talks about the reason why she is not active in class discussion is difference in age and working experience. Such a difference might link to both communication context and cultural pattern.

I am studying the master course now and my classmates all are older than me, they all have working experience before they join the course. Compare to my classmates, I do think what we lack of is the working experience.

Masters-W

Classmates with working experience are more likely to bring in questions linked to their previous working experience which is difficult to catch up the context-based meaning for Chinese international students who have no working experience or who have different experience. Moreover, age order plays a key role in Chinese people's interaction (Zhu, 2011). The power relationship between senior and junior in Chinese culture might have a negative

suggestion for Chinese international students to keep quiet in class when the senior classmates are talking.

Apart from what discussed above, terminology that tutors use and accent, fast speed of speaking and weak voice of their tutors or class mates are also reported as communication barriers to Chinese international students.

Cultural barriers

Participants in the current study talk a lot about cultural difference according to their schooling experience in China and in the UK. Their experience shows that different cultural patterns do cause misunderstanding sometimes. Cultural patterns are take-for-granted common sense (Giroux, 1997) based on which people can understand each other's meaning. Cultural patterns seem have similar meaning with the term, cultural models, in social linguistic work (Gee, 2005). Both terms have the meaning of shared beliefs, values, norms, and social practices. Zhu's (2011) observation in three high schools in China has identified several shared values in curriculum, schooling culture, and teachers and students' personal values system. These values include teachers' authority, hierarchy of power in accordance with students' academic performance, and following right answer. These values are also been identified from the participants' focus group discussion and personal interview in the current study in Huddersfield, particularly the new comers who have just started their course in the university.

Undergraduate-Z is a typical example. His explanation of Chinese international students' quietness demonstrates how his thought and behaviour are shaped by the cultural patterns in his previous schooling in China.

Quotation of Undergraduate-Z's discourses	Cultural patterns
<p><i>In class, I don't want to break tutors' rhythms of teaching... I know that if a tutor's rhythm of teaching is interrupted or broken, the degree of explaining a point might change.</i></p>	<p>Respect teachers' authority</p>
<p><i>If a student with average performance raises a question, s/he will worry if s/he is the only one who does not understand this and will worry to be laughed by other classmates.</i></p>	<p>Only students at the top of performance hierarchy have power to raise questions in class; face value</p>

Although the freshman Undergraduate-Z only has several months' experience in his UK course, he has already understood the expectations from the higher education system in the UK.

Here, students achieve a good academic performance because they like to raise questions; while in China, students like to raise questions because they have a good performance.

Undergraduate-Z

Different teaching and learning styles, academic writing styles, and academic requirement are also mentioned as barriers cause misunderstandings between Chinese international students and their tutors. Most Chinese international students have difficulties to understand what is critical thinking and to differentiate academic citation from plagiarism.

Discussion: build a bridge for intercultural communication

The participants in the current study all report that they have learning difficulties in the University of Huddersfield to some degree. A few of them suffer failure of a particular module which results to fail to get a degree. Although they generally attribute their learning difficulties to English proficiency, their actual learning experience in the university show that communication and cultural barriers rather than English proficiency are the primary factors which cause their learning difficulties.

The participants in the current study are also well aware of the expectations of their adaptation to the learning culture in UK higher education. However, it takes time for them to change. For some of them, apart from working hard to adapt to the host culture, they also expect their tutors make effort to meet their learning needs. Because they get use to teachers to guide them and feed them with right answer in their previous schooling in China, some of the Chinese international students expect their tutors in the UK to provide more specific feedback to their learning outcome. They expect their tutors to give more guidance on critical thinking and citation in assignment or dissertation which academic requirement is brand new to most of them.

Findings in the current study support Holms (2004, 2010) and Tian & Lowe's (2009) viewpoints, Chinese international students' learning experience link closely to their interactions with their tutors and classmates and communication is the key to help them conquer learning difficulties. However, evidence from the current study reject Tian & Lowe's (2009) explanation of Chinese international students' learning difficulties are linguistic difficulties and their lack of understanding the expectation in UK higher education institutions.

The findings also suggest that to attribute to Chinese international students' learning difficulties to their intercultural communication competence could be problematic too. As analysed in the previous sections, communication and cultural barriers which Chinese international students face contain both internal and external factors. The external factors can be grouped into cultural, contextual, and personal factors. Cultural factor means different cultural patterns in China and in the UK. Contextual factor means context and terminology linked to communication. Personal factor means physical aspects which influence one's efficiency of communication such as the strength of voice, speaking speed, accent, and nonverbal language, etc. To improve Chinese international students' intercultural communication competence can only work on the internal factors but not on external factors. However, the participants' experience of communication with their tutors and classmates in this study demonstrate that not only the students need to overcome their personal and cultural barriers of intercultural communications but also their tutors and HE institutions need to facilitate a better environment for communications.

The culture-based dichotomy is useful to understand the different culture patterns underlying communications between Chinese international students and their tutors and classmates, which might be helpful to avoid misunderstanding. However, to simply attribute Chinese international students' learning difficulties to their learning styles and cultural patterns in their previous schooling experience might cause new cultural stereotype, for instance, quietness is treated as unchangeable characteristics of Chinese international students or critical thinking is something unachievable by them. Chinese international students' learning is shaped by the schooling culture in China, but both the current study and other research (Turner, 2006; Gu, 2009) show the evidence that Chinese international students' learning styles more or less have changed during their study in the UK.

Culture is constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The expansion of international education and international student enrolment in UK higher education institutions and the interactions between the institutions and the international students are constructing new culture. As a result of marketization of international education, there is a strong voice from some of the participants in the current study which ask the university and tutors to meet their learning needs. Whilst make their effort to adapt to the host learning culture, they expect tutors to adapt their styles of teaching, mentoring, and tutorial for the Chinese international students. The bridge for intercultural communication needs to be built from two parties, the university and the Chinese international students.

Conclusion and suggestion

Chinese international students share some similar characteristics, but they are not in a homogenous group. Their learning is holistic which integrated course study and social

interactions with host culture and host people. Communication plays a key role in their learning experience. Majority of their learning difficulties stem from their communication problems. Both internal and external factors attribute to Chinese international students' learning difficulties. UK higher education institutions' policy and practice to support Chinese international students' learning need to consider both factors.

According to the above analysis and discussion, suggestions to practitioners in the University of Huddersfield are made as follow to improve Chinese international students' communication in class.

- a) To organise seminars and workshops to help Chinese international students learn host culture and improve their intercultural communication competence;
- b) To organise seminars and workshops for tutors and home students to learn Chinese cultures and improve their intercultural communication competence;
- c) To provide pre-course instruction or programmes to help Chinese international students understand the context underlying the content of a course;
- d) To provide training for tutors of international education to improve their teaching skills such as how to encourage all students to participate class discussion through empower every student.

Although the current study takes an interpretive approach and the findings cannot be generalized to all Chinese international students, the communication and cultural barriers revealed in this study have been repeatedly reported in academic publications related to Chinese international students in the UK and in some other English speaking countries. The above discussion, conclusion and suggestion can through light to the strategy and practice of supporting Chinese international students and other international students in higher education institutions in the UK and in other English speaking countries.

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