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TRAINING FOR A TRANSCULTURAL WORLD

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Foreword

This issue asked for contributions focussing on research, models, strategies, and also practical exercises which either break new ground on classic linguacultural divides, or are able to reach beyond static, stereotypical 'cultural differences' and make some headway in improving communication and mutual understanding in an increasingly transcultural and virtual world. As we had such a response, boosted through the active contribution of SIETAR Europe papers given at Krakow "Interculturalism Ahead: Transition to a Virtual World?" (September 2011), instead of our usual 5-6 papers we have 10 but, sadly perhaps, no interview this year.

The first papers in this issue offer specific frameworks or models, all of which move us on from the static cultural-difference models, and chart how the transcultural turn is developing; while those on university training and translation give us a stark reality check. Though there is some light, and much investment in training, especially through foreign study, the picture regarding student perception of the training and of 'the Other', along with actual professional translation highlights the fact that there is still some way to go before we can talk of a real 'transcultural turn' in practice.

We hear much about EU supported initiatives in education and training. In particular there is FREPA a Council of Europe 'Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures' (Daryai-Hansen & Schröder-Sura) and INCA, the "Intercultural Competence Assessment" suite of tools (Cano). From the business world we have a fusion of cultural dimensions with the Reiss Life motives (Konigorski), rhizomatic (rather than tree diagram thinking) embodied in the analogy with the Mobius strip (Hale); WorldWork's 'International Profiler' (IP) and International Preference indicator' (IPI) (Ewington & Hill) along with a more communication focussed enhancement (Spencer-Oatey and Stadler).

Areas of perception of cultural difference include a German-American study of Facebook (Reeves), the intercultural benefits of EU supported 'Applied Language Europe' (ALE) European university study exchange

(Morón-Martín) and the 'Mobility in Higher Education' project (Cano). With regard specifically to translation and transculturality there is a discussion on the use of corpora and travel insurance texts (Peruzzo and Durán-Muñoz) and a case study on the translation of film titles.

David Katan
Cinzia Spinzi

Handling Communication in International Partnerships: Insights on Competence from the eChina-UK Programme

Helen Spencer-Oatey and Stefanie Stadler

Abstract

This paper explores the communicative competencies needed in international partnerships. Existing conceptualisations of intercultural competence, developed in various disciplines (e.g. communication studies, applied linguistics, foreign language education, and international business and management studies), all identify communication as a key component. However, despite the insights that existing frameworks offer, they all lack one crucial thing: authentic intercultural discourse data that can provide a contextualised approach and real-life examples. This study aimed to fill this gap. It examined the communication processes that occurred over a 5-year period during a major British–Chinese educational collaboration. The data comprised video recordings of meetings, interview data, and written project records, and these were analysed from an intercultural competency perspective. It resulted in an intercultural competency framework that had four clusters, one of which was communication. This paper reports the communication cluster of competencies, and provides authentic examples from the project to illustrate each of the intercultural competencies within this cluster. It argues that there is a need for greater discourse-based research into intercultural communication, which can complement existing work.

1. Introduction

Competence in communication across cultures is extremely important in today's globalised world, and there is growing interest in what such competence actually entails. A number of conceptual frameworks of intercultural competence have been developed, and in nearly all of them communication is highlighted as being of crucial importance. Yet there is relatively little empirical analysis of intercultural discourse that takes an intercultural competence perspective (cf. Spencer-Oatey 2010).

An early model of communication, the ‘message-model’, assumed that language could provide an automatic pairing of messages and signals (that is, that language could pair exactly the meanings that people send and receive with what is physically transmitted, such as sound or writing), and that communication was thus successful to the extent that senders and receivers each paired signals and messages in the same way. Modern theories of communication, on the other hand, especially in branches of linguistics such as pragmatics, realise that this is incorrect (Akmajian et al. 2001; Žegarac 2008). Although human communication to a large extent exploits a language code (such as English, Chinese or German), it is not feasible for everything to be conveyed explicitly in the code. Much has to be left for the interlocutors to work out, for as Johnston (1985: 325) points out “the interpretation of [a] message is essentially constructed by the perceiver; hence message sent is not necessarily message received”. In intercultural interaction such ‘meaning construction’ can be particularly problematic because people may focus on different clues when inferring meanings, and/or they may arrive at different meanings from the same clues. As a result, mismatches may occur in the messages that people think have been communicated.

Building mutual understanding is a challenging process and requires a range of communicative competencies in order for it to be achieved effectively. Work in a number of disciplines has attempted to identify and describe these competencies with respect to intercultural interaction, yet there have been surprisingly few studies of authentic discourse and/or interactional data that can illustrate and support the conceptualisations proposed. This paper aims to address this weakness by examining the communication issues that arose in a major international education programme known as the eChina-UK Programme and by analysing them from a competence perspective. We start by reviewing current conceptualisations of intercultural competence, focusing on their treatment of communication skills.

2. Literature Review: Communication in Intercultural Competence Frameworks

Frameworks of intercultural competence have been developed in a number of different disciplines, and particularly in communication studies, foreign language education, and in international business and

management. In this section we review key frameworks from each of these disciplines, focusing on the insights they offer into communication aspects of intercultural competence.

2.1. Insights from Communication Studies

Several communication studies scholars have developed intercultural competence frameworks, and some of the most well known are those by Chen and Starosta (2005), Gudykunst (2004) and Ting-Toomey (1999). As can be seen from Table 1, they all include communication, either as an overriding orientation, or else as one of the major components,

Authors	Approach to Intercultural Competence	Major Components of Intercultural Competence
Chen and Starosta (2005)	“The ability to effectively and appropriately execute communication behaviours to elicit a desired response in a specific environment.” (2005: 241)	Personal attributes
		Communication skills
		Psychological adaptation
		Cultural awareness
Gudykunst (2004)	“What it means to be perceived as competent communicators in intergroup encounters.” (2004: 233)	Motivation
		Knowledge
		Skills
Ting-Toomey (1999)	“A wealth of interaction skills that permit individuals to cross cultural boundaries flexibly and adaptively.” (1999: 261)	Knowledge blocks
		Mindfulness
		Communication skills

Table 1: Components of Intercultural Competence proposed by key communication studies scholars

In line with modern theories of communication, all these scholars maintain that effective intercultural communication does not only depend on communication skills per se, but rather involves all of the elements listed above (i.e. not just those specifically labelled communication). For example, Gudykunst (2004: 242) explains that “Generally speaking, the greater our cultural and linguistic knowledge, and the more our beliefs overlap with those of the strangers with whom we communicate, the less

the likelihood there will be misunderstandings.” Similarly, Ting-Toomey (1999: 266) points out that “without culture-sensitive knowledge, communicators cannot become aware of the implicit ‘ethnocentric lenses’ they use to evaluate behaviours in an intercultural situation”. These scholars point out that various types of knowledge are needed, including knowledge of differences between groups. They each describe value dimensions (e.g. individualism–collectivism, high–low power distance, high–low uncertainty avoidance) for which there may be national level differences, and explain how these values can have a major impact on communication behaviour (see also Gudykunst 1998). One form of impact is in terms of preferred style of communication (cf. Gudykunst et al. 1996), and so Gudykunst (2004) and Ting-Toomey (1999) each describe a number of dimensions of communication style and explain how different cultural groups can have preferences for different styles. They both include low-context and high-context communication style and directness–indirectness. Gudykunst (2004) also identifies volubility–taciturnity; patterns of topic management and turn-taking; and persuasive strategies; Ting-Toomey also identifies person-oriented and status-oriented verbal styles; self-enhancement and self-effacement verbal styles; and beliefs expressed in talk and silence.

Chen and Starosta (2005) and Ting-Toomey (1999) both explicitly identify communication skills. Ting-Toomey (1999) identifies four key elements: mindful observation, mindful listening, identity confirmation, and collaborative dialogue. To unpack the first element, mindful observation, she uses the acronym O-D-I-S: observe – describe – interpret – suspend evaluation. She explains that the second element, mindful listening, entails interlocutors double-checking whether they have really understood what the other person has said, such as by paraphrasing it or querying it. Her third element is identity confirmation. This means paying close attention to people’s identity affiliation preferences in particular contexts by, for example, using terms of address that they prefer or by using inclusive language and behaviour. Her fourth communication skill element is collaborative dialogue. She explains that this entails discovering common ground with others, and using dialogue strategies that people feel comfortable with.

Chen and Starosta (2005) also identify four types of communication skills: message skills, behavioural flexibility, interaction management, and social skills, and explain each of their elements as shown in Table 2.

Constituent Element	Explanation
Message skills	Competence in using the host language, along with an ability to use descriptive and supportive messages.
Behavioural Flexibility	The ability to select an appropriate communicative behaviour in different contexts and situations, such as markers of participant distance–closeness.
Interaction Management	The ability to speak in turn in conversation and to initiate and terminate a conversation appropriately.
Social skills	The ability to display empathy (by sensing what is in another person’s mind) and identity maintenance (by affirming the other person’s identity and revealing one’s own).

Table 2: Chen and Starosta’s (2005) Conceptualisation of Communication Skills

In their framework, Chen and Starosta (2005) give greater emphasis to productive skills than to receptive skills. Consequently, they place the responsibility for effective intercultural communication predominantly with the speaker. This stands in contrast to other frameworks that are more receiver-oriented and to the applied linguistic approach to communication, which typically emphasises mutual responsibility for achieving understanding.⁹

Despite the differences within the approaches of these communication studies scholars, there are a number of elements in common. For example, each author emphasises the interconnection between communication and other elements, such as the impact on the communication process of knowledge and of personal attributes/qualities like mindfulness. Similarly, they each draw attention to the importance of cultural values and explain how values may influence people’s generalised preferences for different communication styles. All of these are valuable insights which are important for our understanding of intercultural communication. Nevertheless, they risk functioning as decontextualised generalisations, because they are almost completely bereft of authentic examples which can demonstrate how such processes operate in specific contexts.

2.2 Insights from Applied Linguistics and Foreign Language Education

Linguists have conducted little explicit research into the conceptualisation or components of intercultural competence. There have been numerous

studies of problematic intercultural communication (e.g. Bailey 1997, 2000; Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz 2002; Gumperz 1982; Gumperz and Roberts 1991; Marriott 1990; Miller 2008; Spencer-Oatey and Xing 2003, 2004; Tyler 1995), where detailed analyses have been carried out into the problems that occurred in achieving understanding and/or in managing rapport. However, despite some recent calls for a greater focus on the nature of successful intercultural communication (e.g. Bührig and ten Thije 2006; Verschueren 2008), as yet there have been relatively few linguistic studies of this and even fewer conceptualisations of the nature of intercultural competence.

Within foreign and second language education, the situation is somewhat different in that Michael Byram has made a major contribution. He proposes that intercultural communicative competence comprises four main components, as outlined in Table 3.

Linguistic competence	The ability to apply knowledge of the rules of a standard version of the language to produce and interpret spoken and written language.	
Sociolinguistic competence	The ability to give to the language produced by an interlocutor – whether native speaker or not – meanings which are taken for granted by the interlocutor or which are negotiated and made explicit with the interlocutor.	
Discourse competence	The ability to use, discover and negotiate strategies for the production and interpretation of monologue or dialogue texts which follow the conventions of the culture of an interlocutor or are negotiated as intercultural texts for particular purposes.	
	Attitudes	Curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own.

Intercultural competence	Knowledge	Knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in one’s own and in one’s interlocutor’s country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction.
	Skills of interpreting and relating	Ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one’s own.
	Skills of discovery and interaction	Ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction.
	Critical cultural awareness/political education	Ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries.

Table 3: Byram’s (1997) description of the components of intercultural communicative competence

As can be seen from Table 3, several of the components of intercultural competence are similar to, or have resonances with, the elements proposed by the communication studies scholars, including knowledge, attitudes (compare mindfulness), and skills of discovery (compare Gudykunst’s, 2004, ‘knowledge of how to gather information’). However, unlike those scholars, Byram does not include any discussion of differences across cultures in language use. In fact, he says very little about language use at all. Even though he includes linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse competence within his overall conceptualisation of intercultural communicative competence, he does not expand on them at all. This is presumably because British and European foreign language curricula and frameworks (e.g. the Common European Framework, no date) deal with them extensively, and Byram’s (1997) aim is to provide insights into a less familiar component – intercultural competence. A number of European funded projects have also addressed the issue of intercultural competence, including INCA (n.d.; Precht and Davidson Lund 2007) and ICOPROMO (Glaser et al. 2007), but they have not provided much explication of communication elements.

 2.3 Insights from International Business and Management Studies

There have been numerous business and management studies into intercultural competence (see Spencer-Oatey and Franklin 2009 for an overview), and one of the most comprehensive frameworks produced is that of the company WorldWork (n.d.). Drawing on academic research in different fields and the practical experience of people operating internationally, they identify ten key competencies: openness, flexibility, personal autonomy, emotional strength, perceptiveness, listening orientation, transparency, cultural knowledge, influence, and synergy. Some of these which have elements particularly related to communication are described in Table 4.

Flexibility	Learning Languages	Motivated to learn and use the specific languages of important business contacts, over and beyond the lingua franca in which they conduct their everyday business activities. Ready to draw on key expressions and words from the languages of these international contacts to build trust and show respect.
Perceptiveness	Attuned	Highly focused on picking up meaning from indirect signals such as intonation, eye contact and body language. Adept at observing these signals of meaning and reading them correctly in different contexts – almost like learning a new language.
	Reflected Awareness	Very conscious of how they come across to others; in an intercultural context particularly sensitive to how their own ‘normal’ patterns of communication and behaviour are interpreted in the minds of international partners.
Listening Orientation	Active Listening	Check and clarify, rather than assume understanding of others, by paraphrasing and exploring the words that they use and the meaning they attach to them.

Transparency	Clarity of Communication	Conscious of the need for a ‘low-risk’ style that minimised the potential for misunderstandings in an international context. Able to adapt to ‘how a message is delivered’ (rather than just ‘what is said’) to be more clearly understood by an international audience.
	Exposing Intentions	Able to build and maintain trust in an international context by signalling positive intentions, and putting needs into a clear and explicit context.
Influencing	Rapport	Exhibit warmth and attentiveness when building relationships in a variety of contexts. Put a premium on choosing verbal and non-verbal behaviours that are comfortable for international counterparts, thus building a sense of ‘we’. Able in the longer-term to meet the criteria for trust required by their international partners.
	Range of Styles	Have a variety of means for influencing people across a range of international contexts. This gives greater capacity to ‘lead’ an international partner in a style with which he or she feels comfortable.

Table 4: WorldWork’s (n.d.) description of communication-related intercultural competencies

WorldWork’s framework has many synergies with the conceptualisations discussed above, but as Table 4 indicates, it specifies a more detailed set of communication-related competencies than any of the others. There is also an ‘International Profiler’ questionnaire (available commercially) which has items to assess each of these competencies, but in fairly broad terms.

2.4 Discussion of the Frameworks

Each of these conceptualisations provides valuable insights into communication aspects of intercultural competence. In many respects they complement each other in that they offer somewhat different perspectives on the processes of intercultural communication. In

combination, they deal with receptive skills, productive skills, stylistic variation, and influencing factors. However, with the exception of the WorldWork (n.d.) framework, they give little detail on productive skills, and they all have one major weakness: they provide very few (if any) authentic examples of intercultural language use. This is a critical omission. This is partly because conceptual categories can seem quite abstract without authentic examples and need some genuine examples to illustrate and bring them to life. Even more fundamentally, though, people's communicative behaviour is always crucially influenced by the context in which it occurs. This is not only by the macro context that communication studies describe. Equally importantly, language use is greatly influenced by the micro and meso contexts, where cultural differences can also occur. The micro context includes elements such as the type of communicative event (e.g. business meeting, dinner party), the relationship between the participants (e.g. equal-unequal, distant-close, role relationship), and the physical and social setting (e.g. layout of chairs, tense-relaxed atmosphere). The meso context (which is intermediate between the micro and the macro context in terms of level of detail) includes elements such as the 'location' of an encounter in time (e.g. a first-time or one-off interaction, the beginning or middle of a collaborative project) and the policy context (e.g. educational policy, legal policy). Cultural differences in the micro and meso contexts (e.g. in conventions for chairing a business meeting, or the typical rights and obligations associated with a teacher-student relationship) can have a crucial influence on the communicative behaviour that occurs. Deardorff (2009: 267) acknowledges that most Western definitions and models of intercultural competence "view this construct in a vacuum devoid of context", and that this is a weakness that needs addressing.

One of the aims of our research, therefore, was to examine the discourse, communication processes and communicative issues that occurred during a genuine intercultural collaboration so that we could obtain a bottom-up or data-grounded understanding of the behaviours needed to communicate effectively in specific contexts. We were fortunate enough to be involved in a major Sino-UK educational initiative known as the eChina-UK Programme that provided us with some extremely rich data for achieving these goals. We provide some background to this programme in the next section, and our findings in section 4.

3. The eChina-UK Programme and Research Methodology

The eChina-UK Programme (n.d.) was a collaborative e-learning initiative, funded (£4 million) in the UK by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and supported by the Chinese Ministry of Education (MoE). Key British and Chinese universities were selected to take part, and they were partnered in ‘arranged marriage’ style links to collaborate on the development of e-based teacher training materials. The Programme ran from 2003 to 2009 and had three phases. In Phase 1 there were four materials development projects and one research project and in Phase 2 there were three materials development projects. In Phase 3 (2007–9) there was one reflective project, which was given the overall aim of drawing out generic learning from the projects in Phases 1 and 2. It focused on intercultural interaction issues and was known as the Global People Project. Throughout the three phases, there was a Programme Manager, appointed by HEFCE, who had responsibility for managing the programme as a whole from a UK perspective, liaising across the projects in both Britain and China and with the MoE.

Data for the Global People Project comprised two main types: data that had been collected or produced during Phases 1 and 2, and data that was collected specifically for the purposes of the Global People project. Data that had been gathered during Phases 1 and 2 were as follows:

1. Project written records:
 - All the UK Programme Manager’s extensive formal and informal written records of the management, collaboration and communication issues of the Programme;
 - All the UK Programme Manager’s interim and final reports on the Programme that were submitted to HEFCE;
 - All the individual project reports.
2. Video recordings of Chinese-British meetings:
 - Video recordings of planning meetings made by one of the project teams during exchange visits;
 - Video recordings of a cross-project workshop involving all the core project members, plus stakeholders from HEFCE and the MoE.
3. Interview data:
 - In-depth interviews with all the main eChina-UK project

members during the first six to nine months of collaboration in Phase 1. The interview questions covered a range of issues, including people's backgrounds, goals for being involved in their project, factors that had helped the initiation of the project, and factors that had hindered it. The interviews were conducted by the UK Programme Manager, and were held in English for the UK members and in Chinese for the Chinese members.

- In-depth interviews with all the main eChina-UK project members during the last six to nine months of collaboration in Phase 1. The interview questions covered a range of issues, including the modes of communication used in the interviewee's project, any communication issues that had arisen, any difficulties in collaboration that had arisen, any background knowledge that was lacking by project members, similarities and differences between project members in pedagogic approaches, any personal challenges encountered in participating in the project, and any personal benefits acquired from being involved. Interviews held with the UK members were conducted in English by the UK Programme Manager. Interviews held with the Chinese members were mostly conducted in Chinese by a Chinese researcher attached to two of the projects; a few were conducted in English or Chinese (depending on the level of fluency in English of the interviewee) by the UK Programme Manager.

Additional interview data were gathered during the Global People project from key British and Chinese members of the Phase 2 projects. The interview questions covered the following issues:

- People's preparation for their project (e.g. what information they had access to about their project partners at the start of the project; whether they had researched any cultural differences in advance; any impact this might have had on project success);
- People's reflections during their project (e.g. whether any reflection was formally scheduled; what spontaneous reflection occurred; what the outcomes of any reflections were; whether any reflections led to greater awareness of own

and others' cultural values and behaviour)

- The relevance of the project to the interviewee's institution (e.g. whether the project was part of a larger commitment to intercultural collaboration; whether there was any attempt to share intercultural learning from the project more widely in the institution).

The UK members were all interviewed face to face. Chinese members who visited Britain were also interviewed face to face; those who were in China provided their responses in writing and in Chinese.

The data were analysed in three main ways: from a project life cycle perspective, focusing on the effective management of intercultural collaborations; from an intercultural competency perspective; and from an intercultural learning perspective. In this paper, we report our findings on intercultural competence, focusing on the issue of communication.

We systematically searched the written and interview data for all comments on communication processes and issues, both positive and negative. After this we viewed all of the video recordings and selected the meetings and extracts where the communication seemed to exemplify these comments and/or seemed to be particularly problematic or particularly successful. We then analysed the discourse data to establish what the reasons for effective and/or problematic communication seemed to be, drawing on the frameworks discussed in Section 2. We found WorldWork's (n.d.) framework to be particularly helpful, and used this as the main starting point for conceptualising our findings.¹ We report the outcomes in the next section.

4. Competence in Intercultural Communication: Conceptualisation with examples from the eChina-UK Programme

We identified four clusters of intercultural competencies, one of which was communication (the other three were knowledge and ideas, relationship building, and personal qualities and dispositions – see <http://www.globalpeople.org.uk/>). Within communication, we recognised

¹ Having made that decision, we invited one of the WorldWork staff, Nigel Ewington, to join our Global People project team on a consultancy basis.

seven competencies: communication management, language learning, language adjustment, active listening, attuning, building shared knowledge, and stylistic flexibility. We describe each of them in turn here, explaining their importance and providing a case study example for each.

4.1 Communication management

We found communication management to be one of the most critical factors for project success. It was not something that the project members had anticipated as being particularly problematic, but it turned out to be one of the most challenging aspects of the whole collaboration. It can involve numerous elements, and several of them are described and illustrated below.

4.1.1 Finding the right person to talk to

Successful communication starts with identifying the right person/people to talk to, but this is not always easy, especially in unfamiliar cultures. The following example illustrates this.

In the eChina-UK Programme, academic staff from the British projects visited Beijing in March 2003 to meet their Chinese partners for the first time. They needed to get to know each other, and to agree a specific collaborative project that they would all work on for the next two years (the broad area for each project had been identified, but no specifics). The British members were expecting to meet fellow-academics with whom they could discuss and agree the project, but in several cases they found they were discussing and negotiating with institutional managers rather than academic counterparts. They found this very disconcerting – to be negotiating about academic matters with non-subject experts – and the Chinese partners found it equally unsettling.

It emerged later that this was due to structural/organisational differences between British and Chinese universities in handling distance/online courses. In Britain, online courses are typically handled by academic departments, and so the *eChina-UK* projects were organisationally ‘located’ in Faculties, Departments or Centres whose academic staff had the relevant expertise (e.g. Faculty of Education). In China, on the other hand, the projects were located in special units that were responsible for distance and/or continuing education. These units did not have their own academic staff, but rather had to buy in such

expertise from other parts of the university when it was needed.

This competency, therefore, can require some preliminary research into how the partner organisation is structured and functions, how decisions are made and who makes the decisions. However, head knowledge (i.e. what they know in theory but cannot necessarily put into practice) alone is not enough, for although the British had read about these organisational differences, they had not considered the implications for arranging the initial discussions. So it also requires reflective thinking on the potential implications of structural differences, and sensitivity during intercultural interactions, in order to identify the person(s) who hold(s) the decision-making power.

4.1.2 Establishing the most effective modes of communication

A second important aspect of communication management is establishing which methods and channels of communication suit which purposes the best. The British and Chinese project members were based at opposite sides of the world, and they needed to establish effective modes of communication for different purposes. They initially assumed they would use email much of the time, supplemented by regular face-to-face meetings. However, shortly after the projects had concluded their first joint meetings in March 2003, the SARS epidemic broke out, preventing further face-to-face meetings for several months. Some time later, a major computer virus affected Beijing universities, so that some project partners were unable to have email contact for about 3 months.

It soon became clear that the teams needed to establish and explicitly agree effective modes of communication, taking into account practical constraints. In line with research findings (Maznevski and Chudoba 2000), they found that face-to-face meetings were necessary for complex discussions, and that email was efficient for straightforward, factual matters. People's experiences of video-conferencing were less positive – partly because of poor connection quality, and partly because of the formal way in which they were arranged.

Data Extract 1: Communication Modes by the University of Sheffield team (Project Report)

We used a 'mosaic' of communication tools to support collaboration between members of the distributed team: email, a virtual learning environment (VLE), video-conferencing, and face-to-face meetings. This variety helped us cater

for individual preferences, as well as take advantage of the value of each mode of communication.

- We decided to share key documents by email, so that all group members were circulated and had time to reflect upon key ideas without the immediate pressure of instant communication.
- We decided to use periodic video-conferences to enhance our sense of being together in a shared project. These often had an air of formality that made the exploration of details difficult to achieve.
- We decided that face-to-face contact was important to develop understandings that could not be achieved electronically.
- We used 'action points' in our face-to-face meetings to provide some continuity of working between meetings.

4.1.3 Establishing suitable networks for communication distribution

Most people know what it is like to receive emails that do not concern them or that are not within their area of responsibility or expertise. Yet it can be equally upsetting or infuriating if one is not informed of issues that one should clearly have been consulted on. It is vital therefore in a project, both for the sake of task effectiveness and smooth interpersonal relations, that – at an early stage – assessments are made as to who is responsible for what areas and which people should be informed and updated on which issues. This was a big challenge to the eChina-UK project members. Several of the projects were large, involving up to 35 people in Britain and 35 in China (including senior managers). So for these large projects, establishing effective communication networks was particularly important. This was not always easy to achieve, as one Chinese member pointed out:

Data Extract 2: Communication Networks and the Distribution of Information (Interview comment)

Chinese Researcher: *In your opinion, was the communication effective?*

Chinese 20: *No, it wasn't. Though both Chinese and British sides had their own project managers, they couldn't do all the communications on their own. We should have embedded different communication mechanisms in the project at different levels.*

Although this wasn't necessarily a cultural issue, it could sometimes entail cultural elements, as the following comment illustrates.

Data Extract 3: Communication Networks and the Distribution of

Information (Project email)

Chinese 02: *Sending mass emails is a good way. But when we send such emails, it will infringe Chinese principles. If I send such an email to a person in a higher position, s/he will feel offended. Nowadays we send various materials by email, but Chinese are special, superiors will feel particularly insulted. ... Sending emails to superiors is not a good way, because it shows no regard for status differences between people. Some superiors dislike equality, so the best way to communicate with them is to submit a report, either in written or oral form.*

4.1.4 Establishing communication protocols

It is not only essential for international partners to understand each other's working practices (such as how group members usually make decisions, their preferred styles of interaction, and so on), but also to reach agreement as to how such differences in preferences are handled. As the example below indicates, some Chinese partners found that the way in which the British handled the meetings was very different from what they were used to. However, they were able to make adjustments and overcome the difficulties.

Data Extract 4: Chinese perceptions of their British partners' communication (Interview comment)

Chinese 06: *The UK colleagues are more likely to raise issues directly. Their logic is that issues should be raised first, then they'll try their best to find solutions. Even if they couldn't solve the problems immediately, at least they would know what the problems are. It's their culture, I think. But one part of the Chinese culture is that we are too shy to open our mouths to talk about some things. It's difficult for us to put some things on the table. ... Sometimes the UK project manager sent some suggestions to us. When we got the suggestion, we usually got nervous and wondered 'must we do it immediately?' or 'are they commanding us to do this?' ... But working together with them for a while I gradually realised that I could voice my opinions and take time to think. It wasn't a big problem.*

All project members tended to overlook the need to discuss and agree explicitly what protocols they would adhere to in communicating, although one project team found they had to do so when their interaction became particularly problematic. Ewington et al. (2009) offer a 'communication review' tool that teams can use to help them reflect on and discuss their channels of communication.

4.1.5 Agreeing on choice of language

To fluent speakers of English, choosing which language(s) to use in a project may seem uncontroversial, because English is widely assumed to be the easiest, most ‘natural’ and most convenient option. However, the reality is not so simple. Choice of language turned out to be an important issue in some of the eChina-UK projects. All of the British teams initially relied almost exclusively on the Chinese partners’ abilities to speak English. None of them had any Chinese-speaking team members at the start of the project, and so the burden of interpreting and translation fell almost entirely on the Chinese partners. For one of the projects in particular, this was a heavy burden. It affected not only team interaction but also course development because the course was aimed at middle school teachers who were non-specialists in English and who needed the courseware to be in Chinese. Mutual exchange and evaluation of each other’s materials was thus extremely time consuming, because everything had to be translated from English to Chinese, and from Chinese to English, so that the Chinese and British academic developers could give feedback on each other’s work. This was very unfair on the Chinese partners because it massively increased their workload. Some of them felt disadvantaged in having to use English, as the following interview comment illustrates.

Data extract 5: The Impact of choosing English as a working language (Interview comment)

Chinese 21: The working language was English. Due to the language problems, when we couldn’t express ourselves clearly, it seemed that we were disadvantaged. But as a matter of fact, the British were thinking hard to get what we wanted to say.

As the projects progressed, most of the British teams realised the importance of having a Chinese speaker to work with them in Britain, and so identified suitable people to bring in on an ad hoc basis. In addition, several of them started to take Chinese language lessons.

4.2 Language Learning

Language learning is rarely prioritised in collaborative endeavours and sadly, this is particularly true where native speakers of English are involved. With English being the most widespread lingua franca in the

world, many native speakers assume that they do not need to acquire even some basic phrases in another language. This was an assumption that the British eChina-UK members made during the Phase 1 projects.

In fact, even the most basic skills in another language are helpful. It is clearly unreasonable to expect team members to achieve a high proficiency level in their partners' language, especially during shorter projects, but even learning some key words and short phrases may be extremely beneficial. It can help establish good relationships and create positive impressions, and will almost certainly be very well-received by others. During the first phase of the eChina-UK Programme, no one paid attention to language learning at all. Only the UK Programme Manager, among all the British members, had learned Chinese, and this made a bad impression on some of the Chinese partners. One of them commented as follows:

Data Extract 6: Choosing to learn Chinese (Interview comment)

Chinese 16: *I think we should show consideration for each other in terms of language. China is now developing very fast; they should know some Chinese to communicate with us. ... We have learned a lot of English, it's their turn to learn some basic Chinese, as it is two-way communication. I find it weird that they don't know even a word of Chinese.*

The British partners learned from their mistake in this respect, and in Phase 2 of the Programme, many of them started to take Chinese lessons and learned to use some common phrases. One person was particularly interested in Chinese characters, and learned to recognise quite a lot of them during visits to Beijing. This interest in the Chinese language was hugely appreciated by the Chinese partners, and helped considerably in building rapport.

4.3 Language Adjustment

A complex yet essential skill in intercultural interaction is the ability to adjust one's language to the proficiency level of the other participant(s). This enables them to follow a conversation more easily and to participate in a more meaningful way. This competency is especially important for native speakers because they have a tendency to either over- or under-adjustment. As the follow example illustrates, even with the best of intentions, it can be difficult to implement.

Data Extract 7: Language Adjustment at the start of a meeting (Video recording)²

Chair: *I'm going to ask everybody to speak very clearly and uh without heavy accents if possible*

Everyone: *Laughter [as the Chair speaks with a Scottish accent]*

Chair: *and we may take some pauses just to make sure everybody uhm uh is keeping up with the conversation cause we can sometimes each of us speak very quickly when we get excited. Uh this afternoon is a chance for us really to explore the research issues ... tell each other what we're doing ... tell each other what we hope to achieve what we're aspiring to ... and it would be wonderful if we could perhaps focus on the use of technology in learning ... if that was of interest to you ... so what I'd like to do is I think it would be very helpful for one of our colleagues to volunteer to <as we say in Scotland: start the ball rolling cause we really love football>. Uh I think I think it would be fair to ask one of our colleagues to start the ball rolling and [name of British colleague] if you would like to kick off for us.*

This excerpt demonstrates a number of adjustment practices. The Chair clearly showed a high level of awareness of this competence, by asking participants to speak clearly, to avoid accents, to avoid fast speech and to pause regularly in order to ensure that all participants have the chance to follow the conversation. The Chair then went on to put her insights into practice, speaking slowly and clearly, by pausing regularly (signalled by ...) and trying to avoid the use of a heavy Scottish accent. However, only seconds later she sped up (signalled by < >), fell into a more pronounced Scottish accent, used an idiomatic expression ('to start the ball rolling') which left all but one of the Chinese participants with blank faces, and then went on to repeat the idiom and to use complex vocabulary ('kick off'), which was unlikely to be understood and could easily have been replaced by a simpler word, such as 'start' or 'begin'.

4.4 Active Listening

In order to minimise the risk of miscommunication and misunderstandings, it is vital for people to engage in 'active listening'. Active listening denotes the willingness and ability to listen actively to what the interactional partner is saying, to check whether a message has

² An audio clip of this extract is available at <http://www.globalpeople.org.uk/>

been understood correctly, to check whether one understands the other's messages correctly, and to clarify meaning where required.

4.4.1 Building a common understanding of terms

In order to be able to communicate in a meaningful way, it is necessary for project partners to build a common understanding of the meaning of the terminology used in discussions. All of the eChina-UK project members found that it was vital to spend a very substantial amount of time on this. This was not primarily a language proficiency issue; it was equally important among native speakers. At first, teams needed to clarify use of terms like *course*, *module*, *unit*, *chapter*, and even something like this could be emotionally challenging, as the following example illustrates.

Data Extract 8: Exploring Definitions (Interview comments)

British 09: *When I first joined, I spent weeks if not months on a simple practical confusion as to what is a unit, module, what was the other one?*

British 06: *Activity.*

British 09: *There was no standard definition, so I was like blocked at the first hurdle, and so I wasn't quite sure how much material I'd got to write, because we were given this notion of how many hours the student would spend, I wouldn't know in which box those hours fitted. ... I thought I don't understand this, I can't do this.*

The process was never-ending: finding out the nuances of meaning associated with each person's use of a word, and then developing joint working definitions. There was a continual stream of words and concepts to discuss; for example, blended learning, online learning, formative assessment, summative assessment, forum, e-portfolio, student workspace, evaluation, reflection, criticality, and so on. There was no alternative but to spend considerable lengths of time talking with each other, and gradually building up a common understanding and common language.

The Chinese partners often assumed that their British partners were clear about their use of English terms, when in fact they typically were not, as the quotation above illustrates.

4.4.2 Checking understanding/Asking for clarification

The amount of effort constantly required to ensure shared understanding can be hard work, frustrating and/or embarrassing, so it often seems

easier to ignore potential misunderstandings. However, such a ‘let-it-pass’ (Firth 1996) attitude can lead to latent (i.e. delayed) misunderstandings, which can take weeks, months or even years to resolve. Latent and unresolved misunderstandings can leave both parties feeling dissatisfied with the collaboration and, in the long term, they can have a serious impact on relationships and on the success of a partnership. So detecting misunderstandings at an early stage can prevent more severe problems and misunderstandings arising at a later stage of the project.

An important element of active listening is asking for clarification and/or checking understanding. The following examples from eChina-UK project meetings illustrate this process:

Data Extract 9: Clarifying Meaning (Video recording)³

Chinese 20: [Summing up what he has just said] *So these are the 4 things that the Ministry would like to have.*

British 17: *So these are platform, educational management, IPR and admin.*

Chorus: *Yes.*

Data Extract 10: Clarifying Meaning (Video recording)⁴

Chinese 21: *I direct a group team for making the standards for the courses on the internet.*

British 18: *Sorry, do you mean standards for interoperability or do you mean standards for quality?*

Chinese 21: *Quality.*

Both these examples illustrate how the speakers British 17 and British 18 took steps to clarify the other person’s meaning, thereby helping to ensure that they shared the same understanding as their communicative partners.

4.5 Attuning to indirect signals

Since meaning is often conveyed indirectly, it is extremely important that people pay close attention to subtle verbal and non-verbal signals, such as intonation, eye-contact and body language. If people are attuning, they are able to pick up meaning from such signals. Even a slight hesitation, a slightly prolonged pause, or an absence of signals that are normally present can convey some crucial information. So it is extremely important for participants of international collaborations to learn to ‘read’ their

³ See footnote 2

⁴ See footnote 2

interactional partners and to infer meaning from both the presence and/or absence of such subtle signals. In this way, they will help reduce miscommunication. Such a competence requires careful observation and sensitivity to others.

In the following example, British 18 immediately picks up that the other person does not understand his question. From the video, it seems he was partly paying attention to the other person's facial expressions, and partly to the sudden lack of backchannel particles, such as *Yes* and *uhuh*, or non-verbal cues such as nods that had occurred regularly up to this point.

Data Extract 11: Sensitive Attuning (Video recording)⁵

British 18: *Can I just ask one question? If I understood you, you were talking about [...]. Should I read that into what you say?*

[turns to others]

oh maybe I'm not clear

[immediately rewords question]

4.6 Establishing shared knowledge

Current models of communication (e.g. Žegarac 2007) acknowledge that it is not feasible for all information associated with a message to be encoded in language; a large amount has to be inferred by drawing on background knowledge. In intercultural communication, people typically have less background knowledge in common, and so it is particularly important to take this into account deliberately when arranging meetings or discussions.

The eChina-UK teams found that the establishment of shared knowledge was a particularly important issue. On some occasions, a project leader was very effective in ensuring that meetings started with an opportunity to establish shared knowledge. For example, in one meeting, the Chair did not immediately go into the main business of the meeting, but first encourage people to learn more about each other, as the next example demonstrates.

Data Extract 12: Establishing each other's research interests (Video recording)⁶

Chair: *“Uh this afternoon is a chance for us really to explore the research issues, tell each other what we're doing, tell each other what we hope to achieve*

⁵ See footnote 2

⁶ See footnote 2

what we're aspiring to, and it would be wonderful if we could perhaps focus on the use of technology in learning, if that was of interest to you."

This was followed by a valuable time of individual sharing.

On other occasions, it was much more problematic to achieve this, especially when people were not consciously aware that there were any differences in their mutual knowledge. For example, for one of the eChina-UK projects, it emerged after 18 months of collaboration that the procedures for validating online courses were very significantly different in the British and the Chinese universities concerned. The British members had simply assumed that validation would need to take place prior to the delivery of the online course, whereas that was not in fact the case for the Chinese partner university. The project members had not spent enough time at the beginning of the project establishing shared knowledge around quality assurance regulations and procedures; they had unwisely moved immediately to discussing the joint regulations that would apply to their joint course.

4.7 Stylistic Flexibility

Stylistic flexibility is important at every stage of a project life cycle. It entails noticing prevailing stylistic norms in given cultures and contexts, as well as acquiring a repertoire of styles and using them flexibly and sensitively. Stylistic flexibility is similar in certain respects to the category 'language adjustment'; however, it is not the vocabulary, grammar and tempo that are adjusted to the proficiency level of the interactional partner. Rather, it is the style of language that is adapted (e.g. level of formality) to suit different purposes, contexts and audiences.

The eChina-UK project members experienced many differences in communication style that were not always easy to adjust to. For example, the UK Programme Manager reported that she found the style of many meetings in China, especially with the Chinese Ministry of Education, very different from those she was used to. The most noticeable differences were the 'speaking rights' of the participants, and the length of the speaker turns. For example, it was particularly common for the Chinese chair of a meeting to speak in very long turns, making a whole series of points and with many subordinates carefully writing down everything that was said. The most senior British person was then expected to respond in a

similarly long turn. This was a very clear case of different norms of interaction (Hymes 1986) and the British manager reported finding this different interactional style quite difficult to adjust to – that it was very hard to negotiate on specific points, as each turn consisted of so many.

The eChina-UK project teams also experienced the need to be stylistically flexible. For example, when they were arranging a joint workshop in China, the British initially wanted there to be one day of speeches and two days of ‘working workshops’ when the teams discussed and planned their projects in detail. The Chinese partners, on the other hand, were uncomfortable with so much time for discussion and wanted to fill all three days with speeches. They also wanted the event to be formal and grand – the meeting room was decorated with banners and filled with a large u-shape of tables that were too heavy to move. The British team felt more comfortable with informality, while the Chinese team felt more comfortable with formality.

5. Concluding Comments

This conceptualisation of the competencies needed for effective communication across cultures is not meant to be a rigid and definitive set of categories. We fully acknowledge that there are links with the other competency clusters that the Global People project identified (e.g. with knowledge and ideas), and that some of our sub-categories could have been ‘located’ elsewhere. For example, ‘building a common understanding of terms’, which we have classified here as a feature of active listening, could equally well have been classified as an element of ‘establishing shared knowledge’. In reality, the exact classification does not matter substantively; since communication always involves multiple elements, there are bound to be ambiguities. What we have attempted to do is to articulate and to illustrate the range of different communication competencies that are needed for effective intercultural interaction.

The framework is intended to complement, not replace, the insights provided by the scholars reviewed in Section 2. For instance, Gudykunst (2004) and Ting-Toomey (1999) include helpful descriptions of different types of communication style and provide a level of detail in that respect that our framework does not offer. On the other hand, their conceptualisations give only very limited detail on the discourse of language use, and have very few authentic examples. As a result, we can

only ‘see through a glass darkly’ as to the nature of authentic intercultural interaction, and the crucial role of the micro and meso context in the production and interpretation of language. The foundational work of these scholars needs to be built on in the ways we have suggested so that the nature of intercultural communication competence can be mapped in telling detail through the analysis of empirical data from authentic intercultural interactions.

We strongly believe, therefore, that there is a need for much more discourse-based research into intercultural communication that can illuminate the processes of communication in authentic intercultural contexts, and that can demonstrate how cultural influences interact with other factors (e.g. personality, interactional history, task). This will help provide the more holistic, contextualised approach to intercultural competence that Deardorff (2009) identifies as so important. There is a danger, of course, of getting lost in the mire of overly-detailed linguistic analysis and this definitely needs to be avoided. Too many linguistic studies have made that mistake. On the other hand, there is a great need for authentic communicative evidence as to the features of effective and ineffective intercultural communicative behaviour. Our current research projects are working towards this aim.

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