

Chinese Graduate Students' Narratives and Sociolinguistic Advice on Intercultural Communication at Southern U.S. Universities

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ABSTRACT

Although intercultural communication competence can be developed through cross-cultural experiences and dialogues (Jin, Cooper & Golding, 2016) and involving interactions (Rodenborg & Boisen, 2013), studies show that Chinese graduate students considered advanced English speakers continuously report difficulties in engaging in “intercultural communication” with Native English Speakers (NESs) in the U.S. (e.g., Gareis, 2012; Xiao & Petraki, 2007). Drawn upon co-cultural theory, the narrative-research-design study utilizing 17 scenario-hypothesized interviews reveals the experiences of eight Chinese advanced-ESL graduate students as they describe sociolinguistic struggles and cultural variations in verbal communication with the dominant linguistic group-NESs on their campuses. Four main instructive themes emerged. Specifically, participants felt misunderstood when NESs failed to understand that Chinese students' words were not literal or that their selfless words were self-centered decisions; and they insisted that truly effective intercultural communication would require effort from both sides on their host campuses. Through this underrepresented group's narratives, I outline recommendations for developing intercultural communication competencies for higher education institutions.

Keywords: advanced NESs, Chinese international graduate students, co-cultural theory, ESL, intercultural communication, narrative research, sociolinguistics

INTRODUCTION

Human beings usually subjectively interpret and experience the world in ways based in their core cultural values (the immersive norms of communication and social order in their cultures of origin). When different groups come into contact, many of the breakdowns in their communication can result from the clash in their culturally imbued speech and thought patterns (Ahour & Mukundan, 2012; Jing, Tindall, & Nisbet, 2006; Zhu, 2010). And when these interactions occur on one group's "turf," the intercultural dialog is suffused with a power relation: Native English Speakers (NESs) have the advantage over their Non-Native English Speaker (NNEs) communication partners. Cummins' (2000) definition of coercive relations of power is useful here: "the exercise of power by a dominant individual, group, or country to the detriment of a subordinated individual, group, or country" (p. 44). Thus when NESs naturalize their communication advantages and refuse to acknowledge the impacts of sociolinguistic identity and power in intercultural exchanges, NNEs' sociolinguistic capabilities and even their cultural identity may be devalued to their detriment.

International students on U.S. campuses provide a ready group of informants. Of the more than one million international students in the United States in 2019-2020, nearly 37 percent were Chinese (i.e., from China or Taiwan; IIE, Open Doors 2020). Yet studies show that even Chinese students considered advanced English speakers report difficulties in engaging in "intercultural communication" in the U.S. (e.g., Gareis, 2012; Xiao & Petraki, 2007). Given that one study using a sample of 450 East Asian international students found that half reported having no close U.S. friendships (the sample of students from English-speaking countries reported three or more close U.S. friendships), it is intuitive to ask whether Chinese students' reported lack of intercultural communication skills with NESs is a potential cause of their relative social isolation (Gareis, 2012).

Researchers (e.g., Banks, 2015; Hofstede, 2011; Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019) have put considerable energy into exploring intercultural communication, particularly with respect to increasing globalization and parallel increases in attention to the values of cultural sensitivity and multiculturalism. Still, most have focused on intercultural features and experiences, rather than communication partners' sociolinguistic narratives. Thus, along with documenting their sociolinguistic difficulties in this regard, the present study aims to engage with the lived experience of Chinese advanced ESL graduate students and suggest that NESs and U.S. institutions of higher education must attend to those experiences if they hope to strengthen cultural awareness and further develop the intercultural communication competencies considered so paramount in a connected world. Notably, these students have already gone through the so-called adaptive journey of living and learning abroad, transforming from true cultural outsiders to "welcome guest" or even "at home" identities in the U.S. (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013) and they are willing to communicate effectively with others (Dervin & Dirba, 2006), still they struggle with intercultural misinterpretations and communication breakdowns (Chang, 2009; Yu, 2005).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communicative Features in Collectivism and Individualism

Individualism highlights autonomy, self-esteem, and self-reliance; collectivism represents a self-effacing orientation in which praise, validation, and in-group belonging are earned by obeying group norms and goals. Further, collectivist communicators privilege other people's feelings and avoiding "losing face" (Kim, 1994; Kim & Wilson, 1994; cited in Gudykunst & Lee, 2003). Speaking proverbially, researchers occasionally boil these down to a pair of "truisms": in individualist cultures, "the squeaky wheel gets the grease," while in collectivist cultures, it is said that "the nail that stands out gets pounded down" (Gudykunst

& Lee, 2003, p. 11; Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 234). Thus, in communication, we see that individualists will confidently engage in direct requests, justifying these as the most clear and effective ways to achieve a goal, while collectivists tend toward indirect requests aimed at preserving the relationship between the communicating parties (Toomey, Dorjee, & Ting-Toomey, 2013).

High- versus Low-Context Communication

Recall that studies characterize communication in western, individualist cultures as “low-context.” Low-context communication involves making intentions and desires explicit, bypassing socially palliative small talk in the pursuit of a goal. Americans, for example, often use clear subjects and strong verbal indications of their desires when they speak, frequently starting off with “I want” or “I need” (Okabe, 1983). In contrast, high-context cultural communication may forego a subject entirely, declining to indicate the individual self, and employ flexible qualifiers such as perhaps, maybe, and probably throughout the discourse process (Okabe, 1983). Chinese people, then, are observed communicated with interlocutors in either “physical” or “internalized” context (Hall, 1976 p. 79) which presents implicit messages and implied intentions in communication for group harmony.

Again, previous research hints that intercultural miscommunication is likely when people from low- and high-context cultures meet. In fact, high-context communicators may feel frustration with the indirect style of low-context communicators, and low-context communicators can feel insulted by or uncomfortable with the direct strategies of their high-context peers. First-person accounts will round out the social scientific understanding of these communicative pitfalls.

Self-Disclosure in Individualistic and Collectivistic Cultures

Self-disclosure, in which a person expresses and builds self-esteem by discussing their own accomplishments, is framed in individualist cultures as confident behavior, while in collectivist cultures, this can look more like distasteful bragging. Mindful of the “nail that stands out,” collectivists are far more inclined to adopt humble and self-effacing attitudes as a means of maintaining group harmony. Because the moderation taught by Confucianism is a salient feature in East Asian culture, self-disclosures in international communications could yield cultural conflicts that negatively impact East Asians living in western cultures (Hofstede & Bond, 1987; Yum, 1988). When Chinese ESL speakers are challenged to defend their individual rights and legitimacy in English-speaking countries, they can experience a painful inner conflict between their inclination to save others’ face (a collectivist impulse) and the low-context exhortation to make their own desires plain (as individualist NESs do).

An important caveat, researchers note (Cho, 2010; French et al., 2006), is that people in collectivist cultures actually demonstrate higher levels of self-disclosure than do Americans, provided they are speaking with in-group members like immediate family and close friends. This indicates that in collectivistic cultures, self-disclosure is not verboten. The level of self-disclosure simply depends on the relationship between the speaker and interlocutor. Researchers have attributed this difference to a collectivistic tendency to treat in-groups and out-groups as distinct categories featuring different standards and attitudes (Gudykunst & Lee, 2003) and an opposing, individualistic tendency to “be universalistic and apply the same value standards to everyone,” whether in- or out-groups (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 2002, p. 27).

As such, Chinese ESL speakers tend to share more intimate information privately with their close family and friends, while NESs maintain similar social distance and level of disclosure with everyone. With respect to cross-cultural interactions between Chinese ESL speakers and NESs, close friendships appear to face some roadblocks. How, for instance, could a Chinese ESL speaker make sense of their NES friend sharing private information with anyone and everyone, rather than establishing a special, more intimate in-group relationship that reserves certain self-disclosures for close friends only? More research needs to examine Chinese ESL speakers’ intercultural perceptions of and difficulties around self-disclosure, should we intend to address specific intercultural communication issues, such as East Asian students’ social isolation on U.S. campuses.

Other Key Cultural Dimensions

Though the contrasts set out above are the most widely studied, researchers comparing collectivist and individualist cultural dimensions have identified many other divergences. Among them is called power distance. In high power distance countries such as China and Taiwan, strict and steep hierarchy structures mean that those at the top have enormous power and those at the bottom very little (hence, a high power difference); in low power distance countries such as the United States, values like equality, democratic principles, and meritocracy urge a lower degree of power differences (Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede et al., 2010). High power distance cultures admire, respect, and defer to powerful others while in low power distance cultures, unequal power demands may be great offense. Chinese international students often experience struggles adjusting to equal power relationships with seniors and authorities in the United States.

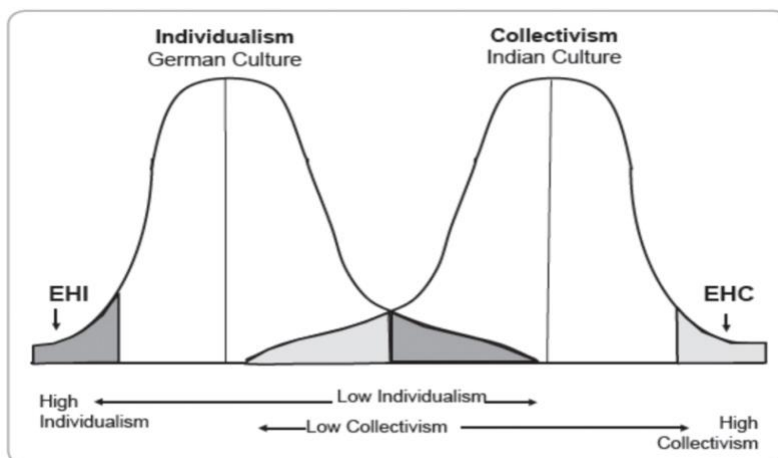
Warning of Categorizations and Complex Central Value Tendencies

While the aforementioned contrastive sociolinguistics approaches by comparing sociolinguistic accuracy between two cultures help us make sense of the ways Chinese international graduate students and NESs communicate in the U.S. university campus environment, the dichotomy approach or simple categorizations cannot accurately interpret intercultural communication due to the nature of its enculturation, dynamic, and complexity (e.g., Dervin 2012, 2016; Holliday 2012, 2019). Figure 1 below (adapted from Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019, p. 165) presents the central value tendencies of two comparative cultures, Germany (on the left) and India (on the right). In general, Germans are highly individualistic while Indians are highly collectivistic. Each contains its own variations. Some outlier Germans are noted as highly individualistic or not at all individualistic; because of unique cultural encounters and experience, some Germans may even become collectivistic over time. Cultural value tendencies can also vary by sociocultural region, socioeconomic status, and the cultural and linguistic diversity of populations sharing geographic space.

Thanks to globalization, scholars confirm, intercultural interaction is on the rise, whether through social media contacts or even in experiences living or moving abroad, and results in many individuals' personal assimilation or adaptation to cultures different from their own. For these reasons, Holliday (2011) emphasizes that "we must not indulge in essentialist Othering. We must not consider people's individual behaviour to be entirely defined and constrained by the cultures in which they live so that the stereotype becomes the essence of who they are" (p. 15). Acknowledging the dynamism of cultural value tendencies not only avoids essentializing individual people, it is also critical if we are to bridge communication gaps and forge intercultural connections.

Figure 1

Central Value Tendencies of Two Comparative Cultures. EHI, Extreme High Individualism; EHC, Extreme High Collectivism



Note: Retrieved from Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019, p. 165.

Intercultural Communication and Co-cultural Theory

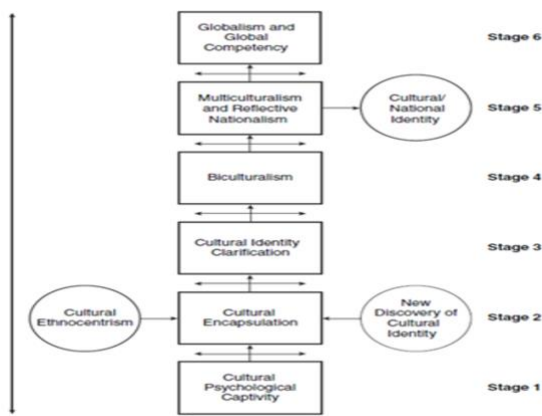
Intercultural communication heavily discusses how culture affects communication, generally at the level of interpersonal interaction between individuals and groups from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Exchanging information in verbal and/or nonverbal ways across such differences is most effective when all parties understand and value cultural differences. But as Hinnenkamp (2009) writes, “intercultural communication is about the confrontation of one language-culture link with another. Specifically, it is human beings bearing the whole burden of culture-in-communicating as individuals, who meet, converse, talk, have conflicts, struggle” (p. 186). Similarly, Chick (1990) regards intercultural communication as a kind of uncomfortable interaction in which the speakers’ divergent socio-cultural backgrounds and norm systems risk poor outcomes. When NESs communicate with advanced NNEs, the lack of a true language barrier can be misleading: even when both parties are speaking the same language, in other words, intercultural gaps can still produce misunderstandings (Hinnenkamp, 2009) and inequity (Dervin, 2011). Co-cultural theory specifically examines how underrepresented group members communicate with a dominant group (Orbe & Roberts, 2012). In order to explain communication outcomes, co-cultural theory looks into personal factors such as preferred identity outcomes (assimilation, accommodation, and separation), communication approaches (nonassertive, assertive, and aggressive), past interaction experiences, situational context, and ability to communicate as well.

Stages of Cultural Identity

Banks (2015) further pointed out the six development stages of cultural identity, including Stage 1: Cultural Psychological Captivity (acknowledging feelings of a self-cultural group), Stage 2: Cultural Encapsulation (Recognizing self-cultural identity), Stage 3: Cultural Identity Clarification, Stage 4: Biculturalism (Understanding cultural identities of self and other groups), Stage 5: Multiculturalism and Reflective Nationalism (developing cultural literacy over knowledge of many global cultural groups), and Stage 6: Globalism and Global Competency (developing a global identity based on social justice and equity). He suggested level-appropriate curricula to enhance learners’ cultural identity proficiency. The figure 2 shows the cultural identity typology; the development from Stage 1 to Stage 6 is dynamic and “in a zigzag pattern” (Banks, 2015) and within each stage, individuals’ characteristics vary. The type of Chinese international graduate students such as participants in this study often falls between Stage 4 and Stage 5. To improve our intercultural competence, Dervin (2020) stresses exercising a critical and reflective approach to examine our own perspective towards intercultural communication and we should not assume that “our models are THE right models” (p. 58). It is crucial to see how international students see their “model,” and how they exercise a critical and reflective approach, if any, to develop their cultural identity and intercultural communicative competencies.

Figure 2

The Stages of Cultural Identity: A Typology



(Retrieved from Banks, 2015)

METHODOLOGY

Hofstede's macro, large-scale, quantitative approach provides generalized cultural dimensions along which to interpret cultural value differences across world countries. To dig deeper, I adopt a qualitative narrative research methodology in this study of Chinese advanced ESL graduate students' intercultural sociolinguistic difficulties in their communication with NESs (Lincoln & Guba, 2003; Quinn, 2005). Among research methods, the narrative research design, which aims to reveal participants' experiences, life stories, and inner thoughts, is best suited to conducting thorough and rich inquiries that allow respondents to articulate and structure their stories and, along the way, reveal their communication tendencies rather than the researcher's (Smith, 2000; Veroff, et al., 1993). Narrative research entails systematically investigating selected participants, analyzing their responses/stories to uniform prompts, and enriching the scholarly understanding of that group's worldviews and values (Webster & Mertova, 2007). By contrast, a case study aims to "illustrate an issue and the research compiles a detailed description of the setting" for the cases (Creswell, 2018, p. 103), so it may not fulfill the purpose of the study.

The guiding research questions used in this study as prompts for Chinese advanced ESL graduate students are: *What cultural values do Chinese ESL speakers use when they communicate with NESs? What intercultural perceptions do Chinese ESL speakers hold when they communicate with NESs? and What intercultural challenges do Chinese ESL speakers experience when they communicate with NESs?* All scenario-hypothesized and open-ended questions for the interviews are designed from the literature review.

Participants

Eight participants, three doctoral and five master's degree students with an average age of 27 years old, were conveniently or purposively recruited from universities in the United States. All are native Mandarin speakers with an average TOEFL iBT score 82. They all majored in engineering, communication, and/or education and met sampling criteria including graduate enrollment at the participating university, at least six months' U.S. residency, and an average of at least five hours spent conversing with NESs each week (their total average weekly conversation hours tallied to 28). Each of the three male and five female respondents are given pseudonyms for the duration of this paper (Participant 1=Andrew; P2=Bailey; P3=Connor; P4=Debby; P5=Erlick; P6=Farah; P7=Georgina; P8=Helen).

Data Collection and Analysis

In-depth and saturation data were gathered through 17 scenario-hypothesized, guiding, and open-ended-question interviews, including 16 individual interviews (two with each participant) and one focus-group interview. To faithfully present their voice and lived stories participants perceived, a second round of the one-on-one individual interviews provides every participant a chance to elaborate inconsistency, ambiguity, or missing pieces to connect the dots among their stories. Beyond the foundational "predetermined questions" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. vii), "responsive interviewing design is flexible and adaptive" allowing the researcher to "find out more about the research questions" through follow-ups and requests to elaborate (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 36). Then, to supplement the individual interviews, I engaged all of the participants in the focus-group interview to provide an opportunity for interaction which, given the topic of communication, often "yield[s] the best information" (Creswell, 2012, p. 164). As the researcher, I served as an objective listener, flexible moderator, and persuasive facilitator, engaging every participant in the focus-group discussion and ensuring that each expressed their voice (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007; Shekedi, 2005).

In social science, there are no uniform, prescribed particular methodologies for the analysis of narrative data (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilbert, 1998). My approach here is two-pronged. First, I conducted a collective analysis, seeking holistic themes across stories (Shekedi, 2005). Then, following Bryman's coding system (Gibbs, 2011), I systematically sorted my data into contextual units, linking codes and indexed themes with my research questions and relevant theories from the extant literature. In order to further strengthen the coding results, I conducted a cross-comparison, using each single-participant dataset to question and confirm the representative notions I had drawn from my collective analysis across participants (Shekedi, 2005).

Language being crucial for this study, I ensured that participants' language choice was honored in conducting our interview, in the verbatim transcription of interview data, and in seeking translation verification and member checking for data validity. With respect to the confirmation of investigator triangulation, I invited the assessment of two fluently bilingual (English and Mandarin) professors with expertise in multicultural education. They concluded that the triangulation of data analysis reached inter-coders' acceptable agreement levels (Schamber, 2000), exceeding the minimal standard of 80% agreement (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Researcher bias, in this study as in any other, is potentially limiting factor, as it can distort interview data. I am a Chinese American who had the similar study background as the interviewees. The ethnic background and academic training and specialization in intercultural communication allowed me to understand cultural identities of self and other groups and recognized many possible factors that stimulated interviewees to reflect more and speak willingly and freely but remained in a neutral position. To assure the credibility of my data collection processes and analysis, I worked to establish trust by carefully examining my own positionality and conducting a self-reflection process (Creswell, 2009; Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

My respondents' narratives about intercultural communication with NESs on American university campuses, after transcription, translation, and data coding, converged on four broad themes. Each theme is stated in this section as a first-person statement from the point of view of the Chinese students, so "our" should be read accordingly.

Theme 1: NESs regarded our literal words as our real thoughts, failing to grasp our inner feelings and affective concerns.

For Chinese people, the saying "silence is golden" encourages thoughtful, indirect expression. Every one of my participants in this study told me that NESs incorrectly assumed the Chinese ESL speakers' words were their literal thoughts, rather than indirect ways to "say less and listen more," be polite, maintain harmony, or avoid appearing self-interested. All of the interviewees *also* agreed on a solution: rather than urge NESs to adapt to their collectivist conversational impulses, the Chinese graduate students urged fellow Chinese ESL speakers to be straightforward and adapt to NESs direct, literal communication style. Georgina explained:

NESs cannot understand my actual inner feelings. They regard my spoken words as my actual thoughts. However, Chinese ESL speakers say things indirectly and thoughtfully. Chinese ESL speakers should directly express their feelings. For instance, if you are asked whether you want Coke, you should say yes—you may even request adding ice, if that is what you want. In this way (and noting that this should not be extended to the topic of sexual consent), a Chinese ESL speaker's "no" may mean yes. It may also mean no, in which case that decline may come out of either politeness or truth. For example, Helen told me that she might say no to something initially, but eventually NESs' hospitality and repeated offers could lead her to yield and accept: "I would be polite by saying no the first and second times. I would say yes when asked the third time, probably because the friends were affectionate and sincere in their insistence."

Another reason Chinese ESL speakers' words may not be consistent with their inner thoughts is their cultural, collectivist preferences. "Chinese ESL speakers always say less and listen more," said Helen. "Very often, Chinese ESL speakers' words may not really mean what they really think, because they may be afraid of losing face or being rejected by others." One respondent, Bailey, cringed as she reported, "My Taiwanese friend's boyfriend is a NES. He often argues over the quality of food with sellers, comparing it to similarly priced food elsewhere." Bailey said her Taiwanese friend described her boyfriend's behavior as "very embarrassing" and "she felt like she was losing face" when he asserted his rights as a customer. Bailey implied heavily that a Chinese ESL speaker would not communicate like this man's unseemly directness or blatant regard for money.

Because he believed NESs “cannot read our intentions behind our spoken words,” Chinese ESL student Connor said, “I will directly say what I really think and want to them.” Still, he added, “this does not work in China, because you are not allowed to directly say what you want.” Debby confirmed, saying, “NESs do not think carefully and deeply over your words. They believe what you say and will not try to find out the intentions behind words. Chinese ESL speakers need to communicate with them in a direct way.”

In this regard, all of the participants commented that NESs would not think deeply about whether their ESL interlocutors’ words held hidden meanings, would not mind if they verbalize their desires and needs, and could not understand their embarrassment with making direct requests. In contrast to Chinese ESL speakers’ high-context conversations, my respondents found it simple to talk to NESs, because yes was usually yes and no was usually no. Farah expanded on this point:

Take a simple example, yes or no answer. In China, when people ask you whether you have eaten, you have to consider their possible intentions. If they want to show you they care, and they receive the message that you did not eat yet, they would try hard to bring you some breakfast. In this case, although you were hungry, you may kindly say, “Yes, I did eat.” By contrast, you can just say no... to NES friends. It is very simple to communicate with NESs, because yes is yes and no means no—based on facts.

As indicated, Chinese ESL speakers’ cultural values encourage people to be restrained and sincere, so they often think thoroughly, listen to others before talking, speak indirectly, and even say things they don’t really mean in order to maintain harmony or avoid showing self-interest. But to avoid miscommunications with NESs, these Chinese ESL speakers suggested they must compromise their own cultural values regarding restrained communication or risk NESs taking their words literally.

Furthermore, Mandarin-Chinese is an ideographic language, in which each character represents an object or idea, whereas English is phonographic, with letter symbols indicating discrete sounds. This core linguistic difference is instructive. Lay (1991) indicates, for instance, that “the Chinese speaker allows the relations between words to be established in the minds of the audience, whereas the English speaker has to make those relations explicit” (p. 45). During intercultural communication with native English speakers, however, it is incumbent upon the Chinese ESL speakers to take pains in order to avoid ambiguity or confusion.

Past researchers (Rhodes, Ochoa, & Ortiz, 2005) have laid out stages of acculturation (approximately from acquaintance to curiosity; adaptive, negative socialization; to integration or assimilation) and the similar U-curve hypothesis (which predicts four assimilative stages from honeymoon to hostility, humor, and home, see Birrell & Tinney, 2008), each a trajectory toward full immigrant incorporation. Accordingly, ESL speakers in the final stage are assumed to be comfortable in their sense of belonging. Yet, this is not necessarily true in Chinese ESL speakers’ cases. Their sociolinguistic struggles on U.S. campuses are concrete evidence that, beyond language, communication styles can prevent them from ever feeling fully understood and comfortable in intracultural exchanges.

Theme 2: NESs considered our selfless words self-centered decisions, so we ought to adapt communication styles and speak our inner feelings.

All of the participants addressed that NESs regarded their selfless words as self-centered decisions. Farah reflected, suggesting that particularly female Chinese ESL speakers are intent on listening to others when making decisions with close friends and family: “They believe that you need to pay careful attention to and figure out what others think and want if you are truly friends or family.” Of course, “you may guess incorrectly about what they want, and it takes effort to make your loved ones happy.” To her, “This kind of affection is not about individual equality or rights. By contrast, it is much easier to communicate with NESs, because they just say what they want directly.”

Georgina agreed and added “NESs think that everyone is independent and should make their own decisions.... Chinese ESL speakers would think deeply about their friends’ or family’s inner feelings, but NESs focus on what they want.” Andrew and Helen used almost the same words—telling me that Chinese people attend to others’ “inner feelings”—with Helen adding that because “NESs regard Chinese ESLs’ words as their individual and independent decisions,” meaning could get lost in translation. Bailey alluded

to this cultural difference in describing a cross-cultural relationship in which a NES professor proudly described “training his [Taiwanese] girlfriend to think independently and make her more like an American.”

Realizing this communication barrier, Georgina said she had consciously shifted toward making decisions based on her own desires first: “For instance, my NES boyfriend suggested that I make a decision regarding applying to Ph.D. programs based on my own goals.... Since he makes decisions based on his goals, I chose to plan for my own future based on my best interests.” A Chinese ESL speaker might need to become more direct, Erick added, because NESs are not inclined to base their decisions on others’ interests:

If you want something, you have to directly say what you want. In NES culture, people would not sacrifice themselves to satisfy others. You have to speak up for yourself. If they cannot understand you, you need to communicate with them for agreement. In their perspective, they believe that you need to say things out loud so people can know what you think and then discuss to reach mutual agreement.

While previous studies suggest that the goal of multicultural language education is integrating diverse races, ethics, classes, and genders toward greater equality and democracy (Alim, 2010; Gay, 2003, 2004; Pennycook, 2001, 2004; Sleeter & Grant, 2006), the participants told me repeatedly that they expected (and were expected) to adapt or assimilate into NES communication styles, indicating stark inequality. Farah indicated “Chinese ESL speakers usually adapt themselves to communicate with NESs based on NESs’ communicative ways,” which she allowed meant they sensed there was no need to guess or worry over the hidden implications of NESs’ spoken words. Bailey seemed less readily acquiescent: “Since I am in the U.S., I have to cope with [NES] culture, following their communicative styles, but I will still let them understand my culture.”

Anglo-American English is often considered a sort of global lingua franca, though researchers (e.g., Alptekin, 2002; Badger & MacDonald, 2007; McKay, 2010) argue this point when it comes to using English norms in conversation with ESL speakers. Broadly speaking, some (e.g., Quirk, 1989) assert that Anglo-American communication norms should be followed when Anglo-American English is used. Others (McKay, 2010; Pennycook, 2003; Yano, 2003) term “English as an international language” (McKay, 2010, p. 95), with “pan-human or universal socio-cultural norms” (Yano, 2003, p. 29) and “a fluid mixture” of cultures (Pennycook, 2003, p. 10). Still others (Alptekin, 2002; Phillipson, 2003) propose using a localized English to respect individual culture and norms, but globalized English as a common communicative tool. Each but the last argument overlooks the ways that language fluency goes beyond vocabulary. Native English speakers are fluent at English linguistic skills, and so they understand proper sociolinguistic usage to convey specific ideas in their local society. Meanwhile, the Chinese graduate students I interviewed were used to gaining communication clues by reading implicit context. The data indicated that in intercultural communication conversations in the U.S., the ESL speakers followed the Anglo-American norms, which conflicted with their own culture, to get their messages across. This finding, which Shi-Xu (2010) cites in calling for discursive equality, again underscores intercultural communication as a power issue. The dominant group holds disproportionate sway in the course of intercultural encounters, such that Chinese advanced ESL graduate students described not only following the Anglo-American norms they observed but also mindfully adopting the dominant group’s direct ways of sociolinguistic expression (regardless of whether the expression conflicted with their cultural values).

Theme 3: We found it difficult to relay our own inner feelings to NESs, and they could not understand our inner feelings and concerns due to different cultural values.

Although it was easy to communicate with NESs because they were frank and honest, restrained Chinese ESL speakers had a hard time speaking up for themselves and felt upset by NESs’ frank self-centered words. My participants seemed sure that NESs simply could not understand their inner feelings and embarrassment in these direct conversations. Bailey mentioned that she initially thought her NES professors on the U.S. campus “were mad because they only replied... with two words. Later on, I found that they were just too busy and I got used to the short replies.” In fact, she continued,

The professors said, “I won’t reply back if you do not make a clear request.” But I always use indirect questions, like “Is it okay? Are you available?” I won’t make direct requests or demands of elders or professors—they should be able to find out my intentions through the email, although I do not point those out directly.

A lack of clear, steep hierarchy could also trip up Bailey’s communication: “In the U.S., there is no vertical, hierarchy social status. Everyone is equal. By contrast, in Chinese culture, you must show your sincere respect to your senior classmates and professors.” Giving an example, she said, “Here, I felt that my junior classmates disrespected me. They rejected or doubted my advice and answers in front of me. I was upset, because I would not tell them the answers if I was not 100% certain!” And when she observed her classmates speaking informally to professors, it was an obvious contrast:

I will be very polite and first ask whether [the professors] are available to meet me. It turns out, professors will not care about whether you are very polite as long as you respect them. ...due to my cultural values, I need more time to adjust, to be casual with my NES professors like my fellow classmates do.

Campuses seemed rife with everyday miscommunications. Time and again, I heard that Chinese ESL speakers self-consciously chose to speak in ways that fit with NES norms and cultural values, especially if they were communicating with an NES they didn’t know well. Andrew, Erick, Connor, and Helen all commented on this form of code switching. Helen memorably called this conversation style “formulaic” and a courtesy, while Debby commented bluntly, “Chinese ESL speakers need to adapt to NESs’ cultural values. The cultural environment will not change for you.”

Over time, students believed they could begin introducing NESs to their cultural values and communication styles. Bailey explained, “I will follow their cultures in order to let them accept me first (I can’t insist on imposing my cultural values like an alien!). Later, I will explain why I act differently or what I think due to cultural differences.” Ultimately, effective communication, the participants agreed, would mean NESs becoming able to “understand your thoughts” (Andrew), but that seemed a distant goal. Farah cautioned that, “It really takes a long time to resolve the intercultural communication difficulties. We need to use many ways to have them understand our different cultural values.” Or, as Erick put it:

Even though you can use English to express your thoughts, NESs cannot understand why Chinese ESL speakers have such and such concerns, worries, and reactions. For instance, NES friends cannot understand why I borrowed so much money to go studying abroad—I want to hurry up and complete my degree without pausing, and I want to succeed for my parents and close friends.

Although NESs had difficulties understanding Chinese ESL speakers’ cultural values, the latter continuously worked to elucidate their cultural thoughts through NESs’ cultural lens. Andrew used a Chinese expression as an example, saying,

NESs may not be able to understand why Chinese people assert that a person should be like a human being not an animal. In order for them to understand this, Chinese ESL speakers need to... help them understand our cultural values through an NES lens or thinking pattern.

Andrew added that “English cannot be used to thoroughly express Chinese cultural values,” suggesting that fellow ESL students employ “many historical stories” to clarify and relate to NESs. As Farah said, “we can tell them our cultural backgrounds to let them know how and why Chinese people think things in certain ways.” Beyond adapting their style to fit NES communication patterns, ESL students positioned themselves as responsible for first hiding, then later teaching others about their own cultural values and forms of expression.

Bicultural participants also reported sensing that Caucasians did not want to take the time to get to know their inner feelings and complex identities (Toomey, Dorjee, & Ting-Tommey, 2013). In what Ting-Tommey (2005) named the process of identity negotiation, individuals like these international students make efforts to introduce their identity, negotiate cultural differences, become influential during interactions, and reach intercultural agreements over time and across contexts. Because bicultural people in this study were bilingual and had at least two cultural perspectives, they may have been better equipped to meet intercultural challenges. Dervin and Gross (2016) further argued that “IC [Intercultural

Communication] should thus help its users to deal with these unfair phenomena and to question them in order to move to a higher level of engagement with others” (p. 4). In terms of the participants’ suggestions on how NESs should respond for effective intercultural communication, Kumaravadivelu (2008) similarly asserted “A critical awareness of the complex nature of cultural understanding” may help NESs open themselves to “alternative meanings and alternative possibilities,” thereby restraining their rush to “stereotype the Other” (p. 64).

Theme 4: Effective communication takes effort on both sides.

The fourth major theme in my participants’ narratives of cross-cultural communication with NESs was their tacit acceptance that they were responsible for creating effective communication—not only by adapting to NES norms, but also by teaching their cultural values to NESs over time. But that meant NESs had to be ready to learn. Andrew stated that “Intercultural communication is like a married couple’s communication [when] each dislikes the other’s habits. Trying to understand the other’s perspective is a more effective way to communicate than forcing the other person to change to the way you like.”

Helen felt working together made for good communication, but doubted that most NES people would invest their efforts:

Effective communication relies on both sides to say what they think, explain their own culture, and tolerate each other’s differences. We need to understand each other. If the other side can *understand* but not *accept* your culture, then you have to discuss how to tolerate the differences. It seems that Chinese ESL speakers have been tolerating NESs... because NESs are too proud of their own culture to see things from other cultures’ perspectives.

International students may never plan to emigrate, though the Chinese ESL students I met will be on this U.S. campus for years as they pursue graduate degrees. Kim (2001) finds that migrants tend to acculturate successfully when they have sufficient internal cultural knowledge, a positive attitude, and external supportive communities in their host country. Ting-Toomey (2005) also underlines the importance of the receiving context for immigrant incorporation: “any effective intercultural cross-boundary journey, members of the host culture need to act as gracious hosts ... Without collaborative efforts, the hosts and the new arrivals may end up with great frustrations, miscommunications, and identity misalignments” (p. 221). The students seem to have intuited this missing cooperation in their acculturation experiences.

From cultural information to cultural transformation learning, international students’ funds of knowledge, cultural awareness, and adaptability often enrich the content of intercultural communication. They “are far ahead in their efforts to come to grips with how people live and express their lives in cultural contact zones” (Kumaravadivelu, 2008, p. 179). Should NESs start to see international students as cultural informants, they may even become able to reflect on their “own cultural roots with a different, critical eye” (Kumaravadivelu, 2008, p. 180).

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this narrative research study was to reveal Chinese advanced ESL graduate students’ interculturally communicative experiences with NESs in a university setting in the U.S. Four main instructive themes emerged from their interview data and suggest ways to improve intercultural communication. Specifically, participants felt misunderstood when NESs failed to understand that Chinese ESL speakers’ words were not literal or that their selfless words were self-centered decisions; they indicated that Chinese ESL speakers ought to adjust their communication approaches to be more direct and intimate, like NESs’; and they insisted that truly effective intercultural communication would require effort from both Chinese ESL speakers and the dominant NESs on their host campuses.

It is worth noting that Chinese graduate students’ cultural identity formulation is multi-contextual (Kumaravadivelu, 2008), informed by global contexts (multicultural awareness, tensions, and cultural commodity within the global market), national contexts (a nation’s cultural orientation), social contexts (social, community, and family events), and individual contexts (background, belief, education, encounters). As the Chinese graduate students in this study move within U.S. society, they must undergo the formation

of a new cultural identity and develop intercultural communicative competence so as to communicate effectively in the host society. Certainly, intercultural communication between Chinese ESL speakers and NESs is improved when everyone endeavors to understand and respect diverse core cultural values for equity and democracy. It is not an easy task to grasp a different cultural perspective, and language and its uses are often deeply entangled with cultural identity, social status, ethnic ideology, and power issues (Alim, 2010). As such, effective intercultural communication requires mindful skills and learning from both sides.

Implications and Contributions

Intercultural communication scholar Holliday reminds readers to “consider the instrumental efficiency or moral implications of a particular cultural practice” (2011, p 15). Chinese ESL speakers’ core cultural value—privileging social harmony over self-interest—speaks to sustaining social order. And this is rational; countries with rare natural resources discourage citizens from pursuing self-interest in order to preserve harmony (Hsu, 2004) and self-restraint is a respectable virtue. On the other hand, resource-rich countries need not be single-minded—they can afford to encourage people to pursue self-interest and happiness based on fair competition. Thus Holliday would suggest the purpose of the Chinese cultural value of selflessness is to maintain harmonious order for a big population with scarce resources. With colleagues Hyde and Kullman, Holliday (2016) writes “rather than reject the way other communities live and the values they have learnt to subscribe to, another way forward is to try to understand and learn what one can from these different cultural outlooks” (p. 286). Should NESs understand that Chinese ESL speakers’ indirect communication styles are a way of building a long-lasting, mutually beneficial relationship, perhaps it would shift their perspective.

Compared with previous research (Gudykunst & Lee, 2003; Hofstede, 1980, 2001, 2010; Kim & Papacharissi, 2003; Kim, Coyle, & Gould, 2009), the present study not only plumbs Chinese ESL speakers’ in-depth perspectives, but also explains the reasons behind their modes of expression and the related challenges that arise during intercultural communication. ‘Intercultural’ has been refined from anti-essentialism, constructivist perspectives, to critical reflection on unbalanced power relations, Dervin (2016) argued “there is no real consensus on the proposed shifts and aims.” However, Chinese ESL speakers’ compromise on their core cultural values and their true voice as an underrepresented group, hidden cultural struggles encoded in language that is not immediately evident, are revealed for critical intercultural communication scholars (e.g., Adrian Holliday, Ingrid Piller, Kathryn Sorrells) to further the consensus discussion in the field of intercultural communication. This discovery, which emphasizes the need for every cultural perspective involved in an intercultural communication to work toward understanding, holds significant promise for establishing equity in applied intercultural communication.

Limitations of the Study and Recommendations

The study includes two limitations. The first is its reliance on convenience sampling, and I addressed it by asking all participants to share both their own experiences and stories and those of other Chinese ESL speakers in their social circles. It is, therefore, possible that 17 interviews and a large focus-group provided information about a much wider set of Chinese ESL speakers, perhaps even a closer picture of the general phenomenon. The study’s second limitation is also a strength: it foregrounds the experiences and perspectives of Chinese ESL speakers in communication with NESs. Put differently, just as NESs failed to understand nuance in the ESL speaker’s speech patterns, the ESL interviewees’ perspectives toward NESs in this study may not match NESs’ *real* cultural values and intentions. Indeed, culture is complex and layered, and the ethnic diversity of the United States further complicates any effort to identify common, immutable cultural features. Nevertheless, through these findings, NESs can gain insight into Chinese ESL speakers’ cultural values and perspective, thereby enhancing intercultural communicative knowledge and practice.

The data infers that speakers-both NESs and NNESs may not be equipped to communicate interculturally and effectively. To effect this change on diverse college campuses in order to pursue equity and inclusion, it is recommended to higher education institutions that there should be level-appropriate multicultural education curricula and in-depth, guiding dialogues for international students and NESs that explore communication styles, encourage curiosity, flexibility, and mindfulness, and ask participants to

consider power dynamics in interpersonal communications. They need to learn through each other, which culture is evolvingly constructed (Dervin, 2016). Otherwise, essentialist views, stereotypes, and even inequalities will be sustained and reinforced. Banks (2015) reminded us that individuals' IC development varies from Stage 1: Cultural Psychological Captivity (acknowledging feelings of a self-cultural group) to Stage 6: Globalism and Global Competency (developing a global identity based on social justice and equity). And the international graduate students may be at a more advanced stage. Also, while ways of expression can be adapted for the purpose of effective communication with NESs on a host campus, core cultural values in each cultural group, either an underrepresented group or a dominant group, should be equal and respected mindfully based on the nature of multiculturalism and equitable and actual intercultural communication thus occurs.

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