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HOW BUSINESS PROFESSIONALS PERCEIVE INTERCULTURAL DIFFERENCES: A SURVEY

ABSTRACT

This article reports the findings of a survey conducted among business professionals who have either worked in China or are US based and have relationships with Chinese companies. The intention is to discover what business culture differences they perceive between the US and China and how they cope with the language and cultural challenges. As a result, Chinese language instructors can then understand business students' needs better and thus teach more effectively by incorporating the findings into the Chinese business language curricula.

KEYWORDS: Chinese business culture, language barrier, business communication

INTRODUCTION

Language instructors recognize the importance of integrating culture into the foreign language curriculum. In addition to providing a context for language use, some knowledge of the target culture also encourages positive attitudes and empathy toward the target language and the native speakers (Christensen; Yu). For a business language class, elements of culture have been shown to be especially crucial. Lack of cultural competence can override an advantage in language. This is because native speakers may have a higher expectation of the foreigners who have language competence to perform more appropriately in the context of culture as well (Du-Babcock and Babcock, cited by Chen). Thus, an understanding of the target business culture will help to avoid misunderstandings and facilitate business relationships.

Previous research has shown that Chinese, as compared to other cognate languages, is not only more linguistically challenging but also presents greater difficulties culturally to Western learners of Chinese because of the greater distance between the two groups of languages (Christensen and Warnick). However, China is one of the most important trading partners of the United States. According to the foreign trade statistics compiled by the US Census Bureau, China is among the top three countries with which the

US trades; the other two being Canada and Mexico. Therefore, the number of students interested in studying Chinese for business reasons is growing, despite any perceived or real difficulties. This has engendered substantial research on the cultural differences between the two countries as well as how to incorporate a Chinese culture component into Chinese business language classes (e.g., Chen; Hong; Zhou; among others). The goal is to better prepare students for their future business interactions with Chinese native speakers since a lack of understanding of Chinese culture may form a significant barrier to communication. For example, through a series of interviews, Hongmei Gao showed that Americans with an unrealistic image of China prior to leaving the United States experienced serious frustrations while living there, although it should be noted that her participants included not only business professionals but also recent college graduates, educators, and diplomats.

Learners may adopt different approaches to acquiring Chinese culture. Through interviews of expatriates in China, Gao and Deanna Womack suggested that the best way to gain an understanding of Chinese culture was through interaction with local people. Several expatriates commented, for example, that their most valuable information about what is considered appropriate behavior came from Chinese friends and colleagues. This conclusion, while valid, is not particularly helpful to learners in the US, since we lack such an environment. Language teaching professionals in the US have also proposed different approaches to cultural instruction. For instance, Wei Hong suggests the contrastive strategy. Students can gain an understanding of Chinese business culture or etiquette through making comparisons with American business culture. Qinghai Chen states that when introducing Chinese business culture, emphasis should be placed on its unique features. These include “collectivism” and “dependence,” as contrasted to “individualism” and “independence” in Western culture. Various materials such as commercials can also be used for culture learning (Zhou). However, as Norbert Hedderich suggested for German instructors, Chinese instructors are hampered by the problem that we often lack first-hand business experience. Furthermore, the rapidly increasing level of contact between China and the United States in the last decade or so would suggest that mutual knowledge of the respective cultures has also increased. Are culture and language in fact still a barrier when conducting business between the two countries? To help answer the question, a survey¹ was conducted among business professionals who have experience working in China and with Chinese companies, or who are located

¹ Please see the Appendix for the complete survey.

in the US and have been dealing with Chinese companies. The intention was to discover how they coped with the language challenge, if indeed it posed one, and what business cultural differences they perceived. The findings can be used to better understand the needs of our students and will assist in developing more specific cultural components that can be most usefully incorporated into our teaching.

BACKGROUND OF THE RESPONDENTS

Ten American business professionals completed the survey. However, one of the participants had not had work-related contact with Chinese people, and had very infrequent contact with Chinese companies (once a year or less). Thus, his comments were not included in the analysis. The other nine participants, eight males and one female, have various business backgrounds and language levels. The age range is broad: two in their twenties, three in their thirties, one in his forties, two in their fifties and one in his seventies. Their job responsibilities also vary: from a chief representative who is responsible for customer service to a president who is in charge of almost everything. The fact that the professional experience of the participants varied is helpful in obtaining a wider range of opinion. All of these business professionals had personal contact with Chinese people, both work-related and in their personal life. All except three have had experience working in China for periods ranging from two to 27 years. Among the three subjects who have not worked in China, all of them have had weekly or monthly contact with Chinese companies. Thus all the subjects have had different degrees of exposure to Chinese business culture.

Even though all of the participants have had contact with Chinese companies and/or Chinese people in their personal life, not all have high Chinese language abilities. In fact, two of the subjects rated their language skills as none or very little, and neither of them has worked in China. Among the other seven, three rated their language skills at a level enabling them to carry on a simple conversation but with little written ability, whereas the other four can speak Chinese fluently and have the ability to write the language as well. The means by which they achieved their language ability also varied. Among the four advanced participants, two had formal classroom instruction in college. The other two acquired their Chinese through self-learning or private tutoring after moving to China. Even though the sample is not large, it is worth noting that none of the participants declared they can read business documents but have no spoken ability. One possible reason is that mastering Chinese

characters presents more difficulties to Western learners than learning to speak the language. It may also suggest that spoken ability is more useful in business communication than written/reading ability (Chen). However, as we will discover from the survey, the written/reading ability cannot be completely ignored.

RESULTS

The analysis of the survey reveals that language and/or culture are still regarded as significant barriers in business communication. The participants commented on four different aspects of the cultural barriers: business deals taking a longer time to complete than in other countries; the impact that the Chinese government and marketplace have on business operations; the age and gender of Chinese business people; and body language.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE ARE STILL BARRIERS

First, even though increasing business communication has led to a higher level of mutual knowledge between the two countries, the business professionals who answered the survey still regard language and/or culture as significant barriers to mutual understanding and efficiency. Whereas seven of them consider both language and culture as barriers, two consider language alone as more significant. One respondent stated that even though he agreed that the more exposure both Americans and Chinese have to one another the better they understand each other, he has found cases where Chinese and Americans have worked together for many years but still had difficulty in communication. This suggests that better understanding does not necessarily grow naturally but rather it takes effort by both parties to understand differences and to overcome them. As to how they cope with the language and/or cultural barriers, the business professionals who work in China and those who work in the United States have different strategies. Whereas those who work in China have the option of relying on a Chinese-proficient colleague, their counterparts in the US have to employ a professional interpreter/translator; or have the business dealings conducted solely in English. However, having the deals done in English does not solve the problem completely. As one participant said, "All of my conversations are in English, and more often than not the other person is struggling with English ... I assume what they *meant* [*sic*] to say ... I am assuming they are smarter in their native tongue than they sound in English."

Despite the fact that all of the participants regard Chinese language and/or culture as barriers to communication, not all of them consider working with

Chinese companies more difficult than working with those in other countries, such as English-speaking countries or European countries. Whereas five of the participants consider working with Chinese companies more difficult, the other four disagreed. One of them stated that “there are unique issues for every country, but these are to be dealt with through a simple set of effective professional procedures.” However, he did not comment on what these procedures were or whether establishing them in different countries is an easy task.

Regardless of their language level, all of the respondents consider Chinese language skills useful in their work. There has been a belief that spoken ability is more useful in business communication than skills in writing and thus business Chinese classes should focus more on spoken language. According to the survey results, only three of the participants regard spoken ability as especially useful whereas the other six consider having the ability to use both spoken and written Chinese would be useful in their work. Furthermore, the assumption that classes should focus on spoken Chinese does not correlate with the participants’ language levels. Among the six, two already possess both written and spoken ability, while the other four have levels that vary from having no Chinese language ability at all to having spoken ability only. In addition, all the participants except one chose both telephone and written communication as formats of contact with Chinese companies. The common written communication formats of business—letters, faxes, and emails—may have led the participants to consider written ability as useful or even necessary. Therefore, while acquiring such written language ability is more difficult to achieve, having no knowledge of written Chinese may be a significant impediment in their business communication.

DIFFICULTIES AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

We should next examine the difficulties and cultural differences commented on by the participants.

First, four participants commented on the length of time it takes to complete deals with Chinese companies. This delay can be caused simply by time differences between the US and China where each side has to wait on the other to open for the day. It can also be caused by the actual language of documents, in that all parties need the same understanding of what the documents mean. That can take time to achieve. In addition, cultural differences can also cause delays. Such differences include both those resulting from the social system and communication itself. The participants mentioned the following three aspects:

(a) Differences in hierarchy: one participant commented that there is more of an emphasis on hierarchy within Chinese companies. Often it is difficult to make contact with the appropriate decision maker because one has to go through many lower levels first.

(b) Differences in modes of communication: it is well-known that Asian cultures often prefer an indirect approach in communication (e.g., Bucknall). This also impacts business communication because, as one participant pointed out, it causes expectations to differ. One participant also noted that Chinese businesses do not value efficiency in the same way as American businesses, and he is frustrated that working with the Chinese can be very time consuming. Another participant said that in general the Chinese are more reserved about their feelings.

(c) Differences in legal systems: two participants commented that the legal systems in the two countries, and how they govern businesses, are significantly dissimilar. As a result, contracts are viewed differently. In addition, the economic structure in China varies considerably from that in the US. Whereas American businesses are rarely government-owned, there are many state-owned enterprises in China. One participant said that Chinese private companies, as compared to the state-owned ones, are far more result-oriented and less afraid about making decisions that could be criticized later. Therefore, private companies seem to be more efficient.

Second, several participants commented on the importance of relationships in Chinese business culture. One noted that Chinese businesses value relationships and connections extremely highly and gave an example of how such a relationship helped a company to gain financially. Another participant said that it is important to give gifts to business partners on important occasions and holidays to help maintain the relationship. Previous researchers have noted how Asian business cultures value relationships and how such relationships are maintained (e.g., Grosse). Clearly, this is an important aspect of the culture that Chinese business language instructors need to incorporate into their teaching.

Third, despite the belief that men and women may have different styles of communication and the fact that China has a long history of inequality between the sexes, not every participant thought the gender of the business person affected communication. The majority believed that the importance of this factor on communication depended on the individuals involved. In addition, some respondents noted that the status of women in China has obviously improved. One participant commented that “despite the Confucian

ideal that it is 'more profitable to raise geese than daughters,' I have met many Chinese females who are more capable than Chinese males in doing business. Sex is no longer an issue in the modern Chinese marketplace." Among the nine responses, only three found that Chinese men and women performed differently in their work. One participant found women to be more reserved and less comfortable giving out as much information. A second participant thought that Chinese women are generally more intelligent than the men in the workplace, and they communicate professionalism and effectiveness more strongly than their male counterparts. The other respondent considered Chinese women to be less status conscious than men. He commented that Chinese men "seem very concerned about position and their relative position to others, which sometimes can be debilitating."

In addition to the gender of the business person, participants were questioned on whether they have experienced differences in communication because of the age and position in the hierarchy of their business partner. Indeed, this can be true in any culture. Among the seven participants who commented on this question, one in fact said that this cannot be applied to the Chinese alone because "a decision maker will always be different from a lower ranking employee." Another participant said that even though he had not personally experienced differences in communication due to age and position, he was sure that these factors impact communication. Chinese business culture is known to promote a stronger emphasis on hierarchy, and yet the rapid changes in Chinese society suggest that the young may not be chained to the ways of the older generation. Five participants felt that the factors of age and hierarchical position can have an impact, with two emphasizing hierarchy and the other three pointing to age. One participant said that the concept of hierarchy is more ingrained into the Chinese way of business. Managers in China "are more willing to override the decisions of subordinates if they personally disagree, even going so far as to renegotiate on contracts." In addition, observed another, "if they feel your position is not equal to theirs they do not want to discuss important matters." This situation has also been noted by Kevin Bucknall (see p. 200). All three respondents who commented on the age factor agree that younger people are easier to work with because they "seem to be more open or have been exposed to some western experience or influence." Older people, on the other hand, are more formal in their communication. One participant said that "older Chinese raised and educated during the Cultural Revolution, regardless of position, have a more difficult time with open communication." He thinks this may be due to the "lack of mutual trust during that period of time in China."

The differences in body language may cause confusion in business communication as well. In fact, one participant said that he “witnessed many American and European businessmen encounter this type of issue.” The following is a list of confusing body language mentioned by the participants:

(a) Laughter: Often Chinese people laugh when they are very uncomfortable or uneasy, not when something is funny.

(b) Hand motions: The Chinese hand motion for “come here” is a lot like the American hand motion for “go away.”

(c) Nodding: Chinese sometimes nod when confronted with a question without actually understanding the question. A Western business partner may assume wrongly that this indicates a positive response.

ADVICE

In the last part of the survey, participants were asked to give advice to business students who want to do business with Chinese companies. Four of the participants commented on the importance of learning the Chinese language. One participant said that if the future business person did not make that effort, the Chinese people they dealt with were “only as helpful as they are able to communicate that to you in English.” In addition to language ability, two of the participants also mentioned as a general suggestion that some understanding of Chinese culture adds value to the advantage of language ability. Several participants also gave more specific suggestions. One participant suggested that patience is very important when dealing with Chinese businesses. This is expected since one important difficulty in cross-cultural communication is the fact that deals can take longer. Two participants emphasized the importance of relationship skills and getting to know their partners personally. This is a reflection of the Chinese business culture where relationships and contacts are crucial. Another participant advised the students of the importance of learning about Chinese legal customs and business procedures. An example given was that Chinese and American banks do not operate in the same way. Finally, a participant reminded students that business skills are most important. Language ability is an obvious advantage, but of secondary importance compared to business skills.

CONCLUSION

This project investigated how business professionals who have been dealing with Chinese companies for some time perceive business cultural differences, especially the barriers to communication. The purpose is to better understand the needs of students of business Chinese and assist in pointing to

more specific cultural components which can be most usefully incorporated into our teaching. It was found that despite the increasing contact between the two countries, business professionals still consider language and culture, language particularly, to be a barrier to effective communication. Therefore, improved language skills and increased cultural knowledge are definitely an advantage in business. The language and culture barriers, together with differences between how Chinese and American businesses work, can cause deals to take longer to complete. An understanding of how Chinese business works may facilitate the process, or at least reduce the frustration, such as an understanding of the importance of hierarchy and relationships in Chinese business. According to the survey results, the following knowledge and skills can be helpful to the students:

(a) Communication skills go beyond verbal language. Body language is an example of this. In addition, the two cultures have different styles of communication. For instance, the indirectness of Chinese people may present challenges for those unfamiliar with Chinese culture.

(b) Cultural knowledge of the Chinese socio-economic system, the differences between state-owned and privately owned companies, and the legal system can be extremely useful in dealing with Chinese companies. In addition, it is helpful to understand that relationship skills are crucial. To quote a respondent, "Learn to relax when it comes to communication and be humble when dealing with Chinese."

The question of how to incorporate culture into business language teaching has been a continuing challenge for language instructors. However, our students are underserved if they were equipped with language skills alone. In reference to the two types of knowledge and skills mentioned above, cultural knowledge is relatively easy to include in teaching materials. Communication skills, on the other hand, are more difficult to acquire. Current teaching methodology emphasizes teaching in context. Matthew Christensen suggests that "how an individual acts in any communicative situation is determined by: time of occurrence; place of occurrence; roles of the participants; script (what is said and done) and audience" (23). These factors can have a more significant impact on what to say, and how to say it, in business communication. Thus language instructors need to remind their students to pay attention to the setting rather than simply the sentence structure and vocabulary. Admittedly it is not easy for instructors in the US to create a language environment that simulates the situation of communicating with Chinese businesses. However, the Internet can overcome the obstacle of distance and can thus be used to provide students with opportunities to interact with Chinese natives.

A successful example occurs at the University of Hawaii, where a China-US Business Café is linked with a partner university in China. This online module deepens the students' "understanding of similarities and differences in cultural values and practices in the business world of China and U.S." (Wang). Every business language instructor needs to keep intercultural communication in mind when designing a curriculum.

APPENDIX

SURVEY ON BUSINESS CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

1. The name of your company:
2. Your job title and responsibilities:
3. Your age: A: 20–29 B: 30–39 C: 40–49 D: 50–59 E. 60–69 F: 70+
4. Your gender: A: Female B: Male
5. Please check one:
 - A: I have not worked in China.
 - B: I am currently not in China but I have worked in China for _____.
 - C: I am currently in China and have been here for _____.
6. How often are you in contact with Chinese companies?
 - A: Daily B: Weekly C: Monthly D: Annually or less
7. What is the format of such contact? Check all that apply.
 - A: In person B: Telephone C: Written
8. Have you had personal contact with Chinese people?
 - A: Yes but not work related B: Yes but only work related.
 - C: Yes, both work related and in personal life.
9. Prior to your contact with Chinese companies, did you have any Chinese language instruction?
 - A: No. B: Formal classroom instruction in college. C: Private tutoring.
 - D: Other (specify _____)
10. Have you begun studying Mandarin since your work with China? If so, for long?
11. How would you rate your Chinese proficiency?
 - A: none.
 - B: can carry on a simple conversation but do not have much written ability.
 - C: can read business documents but do not have much spoken ability.
 - D: have both spoken and written ability.
12. Do you consider having Chinese language ability has been/would be helpful in your work?

A: Yes (Please go to Question 13.) B: No (Please go to Question 14.)

13. If the answer to Question 12 was Yes, which form of language ability would be particularly helpful?

A: Written B: Spoken C: Both

14. If the answer to Question 12 was No, how do you cope with the language barrier?

A: Use a Chinese-proficient colleague

B. Employ a professional interpreter/translator

C. There is no problem because all dealings with the Chinese company are in English

15. In your experience of dealing with Chinese people/colleagues, what constitutes the most significant barrier to mutual understanding and efficiency?

A: Language B: Culture C: Both

16. Is working with Chinese companies more difficult than working with companies from other countries, including those from the United States?

A: Yes (Please go to Question 17.) B: No (Please go to Question 19.)

17. If the answer to Question 16 was Yes, which companies are easier to work with than Chinese companies? (Mark all that apply)

A. English-speaking countries (including US)

B. European countries

C. Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong

D. South and SE Asian countries

E. Latin American countries

F. African countries

18. If so, what kind of difficulties have you encountered in working with Chinese companies? Are these difficulties primarily time-related or legal, for example, or do the language and cultural differences significantly complicate business dealings?

19. Have you ever been confused by the body language of Chinese business people? If so, can you give an example/s?

20. Have you found that the sex of the Chinese business person affects communication? Is one sex more formal or easier to work with than the other?

21. Apart from the sex of the Chinese business person, does the age and position of that person in the hierarchy of the Chinese company impact communication?

22. If you have been dealing with Chinese companies for some time, do you consider that communication and doing business has become easier as Chinese and Americans have become more familiar with each other and are more language proficient?

23. What advice would you give to business students who want to join companies doing business with Chinese companies? What skills do you consider most important for them to acquire?

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