Teaching Foreign Languages by Exploring Intercultural Misunderstanding

Xizhen QIN
University of South Florida, USA

Abstract: While misunderstanding is usually viewed as an undesirable result in intercultural communication, this study attempts to look beyond misunderstanding as a negative end product of problematic interaction and explore how to utilize misunderstanding in teaching foreign languages and cultures. By investigating instances of misunderstanding experienced by twenty American learners of Chinese when interacting with Chinese people, this study finds that the experience of misunderstanding actually can benefit those foreign language learners in three aspects: 1) it reveals the hidden communicative problems, 2) it helps improve learners' cultural awareness, and 3) it establishes long-term memory for learners which guides their future intercultural communication. Two pedagogical implications of this study are discussed: 1) improving foreign language learners' intercultural competence since high linguistic skills with low cultural awareness will cause even more misunderstandings; 2) training foreign language learners to be acute observers and earnest participants of the target culture.

Keywords: Intercultural misunderstanding, intercultural communication, communication between Chinese and Americans, foreign language teaching, language and culture

1. Introduction

As globalization becomes the hallmark of this age, communication between different nations increases rapidly on the basis of common economic, technological, educational, demographic and peace concerns (Lustig & Koester, 2006). Along with the rapid development of intercultural communication, people have encountered increasing misunderstandings at different levels: social *faux pas*, break-ups of important relationships, losses in business, and even changes in foreign policy.

Due to its undesired consequences, misunderstanding in communication has been construed in most previous studies as a negative phenomenon.. For example, Dance (1970) and Schneller (1989) considered misunderstanding as the most serious situation in communication: two-way interaction usually goes on, not on the spiral base of constructive communication, but as an exchange of signs and signals along two parallel lines which never intersect. Misunderstanding has been viewed as a negative or undesirable result and construed as a mis-doing, off-target or an error (Dascal, 1999; Weigand, 1999; Chick, 1996). When misunderstanding occurs, the partners in the communication will experience a high level of frustration and a low level of satisfaction (Aram & Stoner, 1972; Byrnes, 1965), and interaction will eventually break down (Howell, 1979; Schneller, 1989). Miscommunication and misunderstanding experienced at the

intersection of two cultures will lead to diminishing willingness to interact with members of the host community (Goldoni, 2013).

For decades, studies have concentrated on overcoming misunderstanding to achieve successful communication in both foreign language education and intercultural communication training fields. Unfortunately, we still often face misunderstanding in communication (Vendler, 1994; Weigand, 1999). This is because, first, misunderstanding is inherent in communication "because not everything can be explicitly said, and the interlocutor must therefore rely on inferences based on fallible presumptions" (Dascal, 1999, p. 755); second, misunderstanding is the subjective judgment between the speaker's intention and the hearer's interpretation. As Taylor (1992) pointed out, nobody will check constantly whether others catch his meaning and there is no way to look inside the other's head to see whether the speaker's intention is interpreted correctly.

Given the negative consequences misunderstanding causes and the fact that misunderstanding in intercultural communication is almost impossible to avoid completely, research should be conducted on how to confront misunderstanding and utilize it positively. A few studies have mentioned the positive aspects of misunderstanding in intercultural communication. Morain (1986) pointed out that the cases of misunderstanding provide a gold mine for the study of cross-cultural communication. Agar (1994) recognized misunderstanding in intercultural communication as a resource and a rich point to examine the target culture and differences between cultures. Eades (2003) exemplified how knowledge of sources of misunderstanding may lead to effective communication by examining cases between intercultural speakers. Kinginger (2010b) indicated that students' opportunities for success while abroad can be enhanced when students are taught how to turn everyday experiences, events, and activities, including conflicts and obstacles, into opportunities for learning.

However, rarely do we come across detailed studies on what intercultural communicators can learn from misunderstanding. Even rarer are attempts to examine its implications for foreign language education. Therefore, this study aims to explore 1) the facilitative aspects of misunderstanding from the intercultural communicators' perspectives; and 2) the implications of the findings for foreign language teaching. The cases of intercultural misunderstanding presented in this study were collected from the personal experiences of twenty American learners of Chinese when they interacted with Chinese people in the Chinese language.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

Participants in this study were twenty American students of a well-established Chinese MA program in a Midwestern American university. This program "provides American students with the language and cultural expertise necessary for a China-related career" (cited from the introduction of the program on its website). Participants first participated in a two-month intensive study abroad program in China after having enrolled in this program. Then they went back to the U.S. and studied Chinese for nine months at that university. In the second year they returned to China for a one-year internship. Students were fully immersed in Chinese

culture in both China and the U.S. In China, they lived with Chinese roommates; organized all kinds of activities with Chinese people like celebrating festivals, attending 'cultural salon' and going to movie nights; interviewed local Chinese people from all walks of life on hot topics about China; visited factories, schools and rural areas and conducted field trips. In the U.S., the students worked as assistants to Chinese teachers and administrators; they taught Chinese in local Chinese heritage schools; they helped Chinese visiting scholars by providing orientation and helped with their English study; and students received Chinese delegations and served as their interpreters and local guides. The people they interacted with were all native Chinese speakers and the language they used in communication was Chinese.

Out of the twenty American students, five were female and fifteen were male. Their ages ranged from twenty-one to twenty-eight. All of them had studied Chinese for three to five years and most had visited China more than once. Their Chinese speaking proficiency levels were between Intermediate-mid to Advanced-high based on ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) OPI (Oral Proficiency Interview) criteria. They were among the relatively small number of Americans who were capable of communicating with Chinese people in the Chinese language. These students comprised a unique group of individuals with career plans that require clear communication with Chinese individuals and organizations.

All participants have given their permission to be part of this study and pseudonyms are used for them to protect their identity and privacy.

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

A descriptive ethnographic method was adopted for this study. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and written documents. The data gathered include participants' personal stories of intercultural misunderstanding and their reflections or thoughts about the experience.

Participants were asked to "keep a daily journal recording what they observed or experienced about the cultural differences when interacting with Chinese people in order to cultivate your cultural awareness" (cited from the assignment instruction). The purpose of this study was not revealed to the students and the term "misunderstanding" was not mentioned in the journal writing assignment in order not to restrict their observation and writing scope. About 500 cases of misunderstanding were then identified and selected from 2,100 entries of cultural journals for this study.

Each participant had more than five one-on-one follow up interviews with the researcher. Participants were asked to talk about the details of the selected cases as well as their reflections and interpretation of those events. Questions were completely open-ended and varied depending on the particular participant.

Observational data and interview transcripts went through an iterative process of open coding, initial memos, focused coding, and integrative memos (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). After reading all cultural journals and interview transcriptions in detail, the author first identified any possible themes and concepts emerging from the data, which were summarized in the initial memos. Then the author re-read the selected cases that better represent/indicate the themes and concepts to be discussed. As the coding became more focused, analytic themes and

concepts became clearer. The memos started to connect the selected cases with the themes and concepts emerging from the data. This paper presents eight compelling stories or interviews selected to illustrate the facilitative aspects of intercultural misunderstanding.

3. Facilitative Aspects of Intercultural Misunderstanding

The analysis of the collected data indicates that the misunderstandings experienced by these American students actually have greatly helped them better understand the target language and culture. This section explains the facilitative aspects of misunderstanding in detail as below.

3.1. Misunderstanding Reveals the Concealed Communication Problems

Realizing the problems in communication is the start of the learning moment. The study shows that misunderstanding reveals the communicative problems that are usually covered up. Many of the participants said it was those misunderstandings that helped them recognize their longtime incorrect understanding of Chinese language and culture. Without the experience of misunderstanding, probably they would never have been able to reach the correct understanding.

According to Dascal (1999), most misunderstandings are detected immediately after they occur (in the second turn in a conversation), and successfully repaired in the third or fourth turn (p. 754). This might be true for misunderstandings occurring at the referential level or linguistic level. As for the misunderstandings occurring at the cultural level, however, this study shows that, without learning the native's perspective, some are not detected right away. Some misunderstandings can take a long time to be recognized, and some may never be recognized. When misunderstanding occurs, people usually will not attribute the uneasiness or hurt to cultural differences. Instead, they will attribute this difficulty to the other's inherent characteristics. This is especially true in intercultural communication.

For instance, when participant Tom was studying in China, one of his Chinese teachers, Ms. Zhang, wanted him to tutor her son in English. She invited him to dine out to talk about the details of the tutoring, including time and price. When Tom arrived at the restaurant he was surprised to see that Ms. Wu, another Chinese teacher whom he was more familiar with was also there. As the conversation went on, Tom became confused and annoyed because Ms. Wu kept interrupting the conversation and talked much of the time. Finally, when Ms. Zhang asked Tom when would be a good time for him to do the tutoring, Tom said anytime would be fine. Ms. Wu interrupted again, reminding that Tom would go to church every Sunday morning. That last straw angered Tom. He barked at Ms. Wu saying "It is not your business! Why would you like to be involved so much!" Embarrassed and angry, Ms. Wu left the table immediately and has not spoken to Tom since then.

> When telling this story in the interview, Tom was still very confused. He said, In the U.S., constant interruptions or the unwillingness to let others speak for themselves can suggest issues of power and control. I do not understand why Ms. Wu would play the leading role in negotiating all the issues, from the hourly rate to the tutorial arrangement. All of these should be handled between me and Ms. Zhang directly.

When she said I need to go to church and could not do the tutorial on Sunday, I feel like I was under her watch all the time like a monkey in the zoo.

However, according to Chinese culture, what Ms. Wu did was both normal and understandable because she was actually playing the role of a middleman. In Chinese culture, a middleman is frequently used. For example, when Chinese make new acquaintances, it is customary that an intermediary known to both parties makes the introduction. This trusted intermediary is usually involved in both parties' social circles, which effectively brings the two strangers into contact. The two parties will channel much conversation through this intermediary during their first meeting. In addition, the middleman often serves as a buffer against potential interpersonal conflicts. Issues such as price negotiation, complaints or criticism that could bring awkwardness or intensity to the interpersonal relationship are usually conveyed through the middleman. However, in American culture it is believed that direct consultation without an intermediary for the key parties is more likely to achieve these goals.

After a deep and thorough discussion with me about the different social roles of a middleman in China and the U.S., Tom finally recognized that it was his lack of understanding of the role of mediator in Chinese culture that caused him to misread Ms. Wu's behavior. He regretted being rude to his teacher with whom he had previously had a good relationship, and wished he had understood this cultural difference prior to the meeting.

Tom's experience is an epitome of many misunderstanding instances that will remain covered to the interlocutors for a long time because everybody involved in that event could not recognize it as an intercultural misunderstanding. Most of the students' cultural journals recorded this type of misunderstanding. Still, there is another type of misunderstanding: the misunderstanding that was recognized by one party of the communication while unrecognized by the other party, as the one discussed below.

Another American participant, Jack, experienced a big misunderstanding when interacting with a Chinese girl named *Fengying* who was his classmate in a Chinese Professional Sports school. After talking almost daily and dining out several times during the first several months, they became quite familiar with each other. The following conversation took place when they were talking about a friend's wedding.

[Chinese]
1. 美國人：你有男朋友了嗎？
2. 中國人：沒有，我還太小。
3. 美國人：真的嗎？美國的高中生，16,7歲開始約會非常正常。
4. 中國人：在我們隊裡，教練不准談戀愛。
5. 美國人：真的嗎？但教練怎麼知道呢？他知道又能怎麼樣呢？
6. 中國人：傑克，我想我們最好還是只做朋友吧。我還太小，不想談戀愛。
7. 美國人：哦，是嗎，我同意。

[English translation]
1. Jack: Do you have a boyfriend?
2. Chinese: No. I am too young.
3. Jack: Really? It is normal to begin dating at the age of sixteen or seventeen in the U.S.
4. Chinese: Our coach won't allow it.
5. Jack: Really? But how could he know and why would he bother?
6. Chinese: Jack, I would like us just to be friends. I am too young.
7. Jack: Yeah, I agree, I think so too.

In the interview with the researcher, the American young man Jack said he just intended to pick a topic to chat about with the Chinese girl but she apparently misunderstood it as saying he was trying to propose a romantic relationship with her. Jack thought that it is very common to ask whether one has a girlfriend/boyfriend between young friends. However, he did not know that this question is sensitive and intention-laden in some relatively conservative areas in China. And the Chinese girl obviously took it as an indirect way to ask whether she would like to be his girlfriend. With the different interpretations of Jack's question, both sides went to different directions. The Chinese girl tried to repel the American's "courtship" with different speech strategies. The first two, *I am too young* and *our coach won't allow it* were commonly used strategies to turn down a young man's wooing in Chinese culture. Giving such excuses meant to save the man's face by implying that her unavailability was not because she was not interested in the man but because of the external restrictions. However, these scripts are not commonly used as excuses in American culture. Therefore, the poor American man had no clue to get the true meaning behind the scripts. Rather, he took those words literally and made the misunderstanding go further. He did not realize that the Chinese girl misunderstood him until the girl said "*Jack, I would like us just to be friends"*. Although Jack recognized that the Chinese girl misunderstood him at the end, he did not point it out to the girl. He explained,

> Anyways, I replied something like "oh, yes, I agree, I think so too." I didn't want to say, "that's not what I meant" or "Oh, really? That's too bad." I thought by agreeing with her it was a little more ambiguous. I didn't want her to know that's not what I meant and embarrass her and I didn't want her to think I did really like her either.

Jack's experience shows that the Chinese girl's misunderstanding is covered by her seeming understandings. Actually, there were numerous misunderstandings similar to this one. In this study, the participants' Chinese teachers and Chinese friends would point out their misunderstandings and their culturally inappropriate behaviors. Other than that, misunderstandings would remain covered until something serious occurred to reveal it in the end.

3.2. Misunderstanding Helps Improve Learners' Cultural Awareness

This study also found that misunderstanding significantly helps improve the students' cultural awareness. For instance, in the aforementioned story, Jack said although he was somewhat embarrassed at that moment, this misunderstanding greatly improved his awareness of the cultural difference between the two cultures. This misunderstanding urged Jack to reflect on his previous interactions with that Chinese girl and the general relationship between opposite genders in China,

Sometimes other kids would smile at me when they saw the two of us talking together… Two or three times she and I even ate dinner together. Sometimes I thought others might think it strange we were going out together, but I didn't really pay attention to this idea as I was happy to have a friend.

Jack mentioned that in America, it is common for classmates of opposite genders to dine out or spend time together, and not have it mean they are in a romantic relationship. But now he realized, these simple acts in an American's eyes may be fraught with implications in a

Chinese person's eyes. He commented that he probably would never have understood the different cultural expectations when interacting with different genders, were there not such a misunderstanding. After that incident, he became much more cautious and changed his behavior consciously when interacting with Chinese girls.

Another participant, Solon, mentioned that she was often asked many embarrassing questions by Chinese strangers, such as, "How much do your parents earn each month?" "Are you married?" "How old are you?" "Do you want to have a Chinese boyfriend?" or "Do you believe in the Christian religion?" She reflected that, at the very beginning, she felt very annoyed or awkward because she did not know how to respond. She could not understand why Chinese people wanted to invade her privacy. But gradually, she realized the intention of the Chinese was not what she interpreted. It was just a way to engage her in a conversation. And the topics which are very sensitive in American culture are not considered sensitive at all in Chinese culture. Then, one day, when she was faced with these questions again, she wrote her feeling in her cultural journal as below:

> Having past experience in China, this is not an odd occurrence for foreigners… I was just trying to figure out what difference in the history of our cultures makes Chinese people have this similar type of behavior/interaction. In my head there has to be something different when we are raised about how we should engage other people in conversation... Although the words in the conversation make sense, culturally they do not translate, ultimately causing the awkward feelings.

Here we can see that, in regard to the same interaction, her attitudes changed as her experience in the target culture accumulated. At first, she simply felt awkward and annoyed when approached by this type of conversational questions. Then after encountering this so many times, she started to reflect and figured out the underlying reason lies in the different socialization processes. And she even applied her reflection to her foreign language learning and decided that culture is an inseparable part of foreign language learning. We have every reason to believe this student will have a better and more positive attitude when confronting other cultural differences and conflicts.

It is found that most of the misunderstandings collected in this study occurred in the daily commonplace behaviors such as asking for directions, giving and receiving gifts, giving compliments, getting to know people, and offering and requesting help. For most of these interactions, these American students had experienced and practiced thousands of times in their native culture so they just took them for granted and behaved naturally when interacting with Chinese people. However, these seemingly same interactions actually have different cultural rules including what to say and how to say it. For instance, one participant, Eric, observed that expressing opinions different from your teacher's in the classroom will be welcomed and encouraged in American culture. But the same behavior will be considered as disrespecting your teacher in the Chinese environment. After observing the teacher-students interactions for two years, Eric concluded that "the definition of good or bad teacher in the two cultures is different and what behaviors are appropriate when interacting with your teacher are defined differently too in the two cultures".

In fact, besides the roles mentioned above, all the elements involved in intercultural communication such as time, place, scripts and audience have culture-bound divergent meanings. Failing to recognize the underlying cultural divergences and behaving the same as in one's native culture is the major reason for misunderstanding in intercultural communication.

3.3. Misunderstanding Helps to Establish Long-term Memory for Learners

It is also clearly indicated from this study that, when misunderstanding happens, a host of revealing affective responses will arise, such as amusement, apprehension, anger, contempt, curiosity, embarrassment, frustration, exasperation, self-doubt, and sympathy, as summarized by Coleman and DePaulo (1991, p. 83). With those strong emotions, the misunderstanding provides great opportunities for the students to better understand the target culture by accumulating memories of those stories.

Below is an excerpt from an American student Catherine's personal blog, when she was an assistant to a Chinese teacher in the U.S.

> In one week I have been called a useless child, a careless child, a lost child, a child who wants to be an adult, a knucklehead, a brick wall, and threatened with assault if I was disobedient by the professors and surrounding administrators. I'm about thiiiiissss far from being completely done with you people.

Apparently this student was strongly upset with the way she was treated by her Chinese teachers and superiors. Actually, in China, it is not rare to see that Chinese teachers use humiliation and scolding to keep their students in line and the students always keep quiet and never argue back in order to show their respect to the teachers. However, most American students. growing up in a society where hierarchy is not as apparent as that in China, have little tolerance for the obvious language abuse and disrespectful behaviors towards them. Another American student, Ashley, also talked about her personal experience with her Chinese teacher,

> Today my Chinese teacher told me "you are not creative at all" in front of the whole class. This made me very mad. I argued back, "so who do you think is creative in our class?" The teacher pointed to another student and said, "he, he is more creative than you and you should learn from him." I felt as if he was trying to humiliate me in class. I cannot understand how he could say that as a teacher. In some cases, that behavior might even get him into trouble with the administration if he was teaching in an American public high school (from interviews with Ashley).

When I interviewed that Chinese teacher, a 60-year-old professor, he told me that Ashley actually was one of his best students and he thought she was very smart and creative. However, he believed that public humiliation, rather than compliment, could better motivate the good students to study harder and make more progress. Instead, a compliment would make them conceited and self-satisfied, thus leading to less progress and that is why he seldom praised students in class. Interestingly, I noticed he spoke highly of all his students when talking out of

their earshot. When I shared with Ashley my discussion with the professor, she was surprised at first and gradually understood the huge cultural difference in the educational ideas. Now she is much more open-minded and tolerant with the direct harsh criticism from her Chinese teachers since she has already understood the intention behind the criticism.

Other than just recording their emotions about the unpleasant communications which occurred to them, some students went further to explore the reasons behind the misunderstanding. Let's take another participant, Cathy's, cultural journal as an example:

> Just today I had a very hard time dealing with how Chinese people treat newly made friends. In the States, when you make a new friend you tend to approach them quite cautiously and at a suitable pace. Friday evening's activity gave me the fantastic opportunity to meet some new friends, many of whom I hope to develop more than simple relations with, but I am shocked by how strongly and quickly they expect our relationship to develop, as well as the commitment they expect from me. Our Friday evening chat led to dinner, which was quite an experience in itself, but we also ended up hanging out with them again Saturday night. This morning I was contacted again at 9:30am to see if I could be ready to hang out again by 10:15, to which I tried to politely decline. Yet after I replied that I was quite tired and feeling unwell, it was suggested that we meet an hour later. After almost an hour of texting back and forth, myself constantly citing that I would prefer to meet next weekend as it was not convenient to do so today, he routinely responded by offering to push back the time 30 more minutes each time. I finally gave up and agreed to meet for lunch. After lunch concluded, I was asked if I had time tomorrow to hang out, and if not, how about the day after. I don't know if this is the normal pace of development for a friendship, but I've found it to be confusing and slightly uncomfortable.

Through the detailed narration, it is apparent that Catherine was very confused and felt uncomfortable with the way Chinese make new friends. Since this was her first encounter with such an issue, she had no idea or skills to deal with this situation in a sophisticated way. She had to compromise with the Chinese request and recorded her confusion in her journal later. With this experience, Catherine said she would never forget this event and would apply the knowledge when making friends with Chinese people in the future.

Most of the stories in students' cultural journals were not just a plain recording of their daily activities. Rather, they were events that intrigued the students' affective response, happy or sad, mad or moved. Those emotions related to the stories strongly stimulated learners to remember their experience, inspired them to figure out the underlying reasons of the misunderstanding, helped them to remember the experience, and eventually guided their interactions with Chinese people in the future. An interesting finding is that those who paid more attention to the misunderstanding are exactly those who have made a better cultural adjustment.

4. Implications for Foreign Language Teaching

As mentioned earlier, all of the American participants had learned Chinese for more than three

years and their Chinese language skills were beyond intermediate level based on the ACTFL proficiency standards. In a sense, they represented the best students of the Chinese programs in the U.S. Therefore, those misunderstandings experienced by them well reflect the problems and defects in the field of teaching Chinese as a foreign language. Studying how and why these misunderstandings occurred to those students can provide at least two new insights into the field of teaching a foreign language.

4.1. Improving Foreign Language Learners' Intercultural Competence

As discussed above, the analysis of the cases in the study clearly shows that the root cause of intercultural misunderstanding lies in culture, and merely being able to speak a foreign language will not avoid misunderstanding. On the contrary, someone with good linguistic skills but insufficient cultural knowledge will encounter more misunderstandings. Successful intercultural communication cannot be achieved only through native-like language fluency. This is because if a foreign language learner's linguistic skills were so impressive, the native speakers would not think the offenses come as a result of his weakness in cultural awareness. Instead, they would think his rudeness is intentional (Christensen & Warnick, 2006). Therefore, the focus of foreign language teaching should be to improve learners' intercultural competence.

The significance of teaching culture in and through language teaching has been recognized and widely discussed over the last two centuries (Heidari, Ketabi & Zonoobi, 2014). The relationship between language and culture is expressed vividly as "the person who learns language without learning culture risks becoming a fluent fool" (Bennett, Bennett & Allen, 2003). The need to develop foreign language learners' cultural competence is highlighted in the document *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* (ACTFL 1999) in which Culture is recognized as a criterion in guiding and assessing foreign language teaching. It is almost a cliché to say that culture is an inseparable part in foreign language teaching now. However, since the concept of culture is so complicated and inclusive, discussions and debates on what culture is composed of, what cultural content should be taught and how to incorporate it into language classes are still ongoing (Kramsch, 1991; Lange, 1999; Allen, 2000; Yu, 2009; Qin, 2014).

As for the first question, what culture is made up of, scholars have developed at least four influential/representative models to illustrate the various components of culture in the past few decades. The first model is the "Big C" and "Small C" (hereinafter referred to as two Cs) model. The "big C" refers to knowledge of the formal institutions (social, political, and economic). The "small C" means the routine aspects of life. The second one is Hammerly's tripartite model: achievement culture, informational culture, and behavioral culture (hereinafter referred to as Hammerly's model). Achievement culture refers to "the accomplishments in letters, arts and music" (1982, p. 515). Informational culture is "the information or facts that the average educated native knows about his society, the geography and history of his country, its heroes and villains, and so on" (p. 513). Behavioral culture means "the sum of everyday life" (p. 515). The third model is proposed in *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century*: *Cultural perspectives, cultural practices, and cultural products* (hereinafter referred to as three Ps). Cultural perspective represents the culture's view of the world. Cultural

practices refers to patterns of behavior accepted by a society and deals with aspects of culture such as rites of passage, the use of forms of discourse, the social pecking order, and the use of space. Cultural products include both tangible and intangible artifacts of a particular culture. The fourth model, proposed by Tang (2006), includes cultural mind and cultural manifestations (hereinafter referred to as two Ms Model). Cultural mind denotes the attitudes, belief, and value system of a society. Cultural manifestations represent the "externalized forms of the underlying values, beliefs, and worldviews of a given society" (p. 91). Yu (2009) used the table below to compare the similarities and differences between the four models.

Table 1. A Comparison of the Four Models of Categorizing Culture (Yu, 2009, p. 85)

Two Cs Model	Hammerly's Model	Three Ps Model	Two Ms Model
Little C (the routine aspects of life)	Behavioral Culture (the sum of everyday life)	Cultural perspectives (the culture's view of the world)	Cultural mind (the attitudes, belief, and value system of a society)
		Cultural practices (patterns of behavior accepted by a society and deals with aspects of culture)	Cultural manifestations (externalized forms of the underlying values, beliefs, and worldviews of a given society)
Big C (knowledge of the formal institutions)	Informational culture (the information or facts that the average educated native knows about his society)	Cultural products (both tangible and intangible artifacts of a particular culture)	
	Achievement culture (the accomplishments in letters, arts and music)		

Now let's discuss the second question. What components/types of culture should be taught in a foreign language classroom? The cases of misunderstanding collected in this study show that more than 90% of the misunderstandings are due to the lack of knowledge of little C, or behavioral culture in Hammerly's model, or cultural perspectives and cultural practices in the three Ps Model, or cultural mind and part of the cultural manifestations in the two Ms Model. For instance, Tom's unhappy experience is because of his misunderstanding of the role of middleman in Chinese culture. Jack's story shows the cultural discrepancy in the cultural norms on dating and appropriate behaviors when interacting with the opposite gender. Catherine and Ashley's unpleasant experience with their Chinese teachers reveals the different social expectations of the teacher-students relationship between Chinese and American cultures.

Cathy's confusion about her new friend indicates the different ways to make friends and maintain a relationship in the two societies. These kinds of knowledge are all about "doing things in a culture", or concrete ways to communicate with ordinary people in daily life.

The significance of teaching "little C" or behavioral culture has long been noticed in the foreign language education field. Among other scholars, Tang (2006) recognized that behavioral culture is an integral part of human communication whose meanings often do not lie in the linguistic items but in the social and cultural contexts as well as in the physical evidence provided by proxemics, kinetics, and other paralinguistic modalities (Berkowitz, 1982; Galloway, 1980; Seaver, 1992; Walker, 2000; Kubler, 2006). Walker (2000) also pointed out that behavioral culture should be the focus of culture instruction from the early stages of foreign language teaching in order to enable the learners to maintain long-term comfortable relations with natives.

As for the third question, how to incorporate culture into foreign language teaching, practitioners in the field of foreign language teaching have approached this issue in various ways. In the traditional methods including Grammar-Translation Method, Direct Method and Audio-Lingual Method, culture was not placed in any special position. With the increasing development of intercultural interaction, simply being able to "read" or "speak" a language was far from satisfactory in the modern multicultural global world (Xiao, 2001). This change led to the popularity of Communicative Approaches which focuses on the acquisition of communicative competence. However, in Communicative Approaches, the cultural dimension is still secondary to language learning, and cultural instruction is subordinated to language teaching. As Scarino and Crichton (2007) suggested, approaches including Communicative Language Teaching or Task-based Language Teaching, neither adequately acknowledge the culture nor help foreign language learners to be intercultural. Walker (2000) proposed a performed-culture approach to integrate culture into foreign language teaching. According to this approach, language is viewed as "a component of a specific situation in a specific culture" (Walker & Noda, 2000, p. 187) and behavioral culture is placed at the center of teaching. The development of linguistic skills, such as learning vocabulary and grammar, is incidental to the learning of cultural behaviors. In the language classroom, teachers design communicative contexts that simulate the real-life interactions that American learners may encounter. Students then perform in these contexts and get timely feedback on their verbal and non-verbal behaviors from the teacher. In this way, students learn to communicate with people in a culturally appropriate way. Qin (2013) observed a Chinese program adopting this performed-culture approach and found that the teaching of Chinese language is more effective. When speaking the target language, the behaviors of the students in that program are culturally more appropriate and better accord with the rules and norms of the target culture, which smoothes the path towards more successful intercultural communication.

4.2. Training Foreign Language Learners to be Acute Observers and Earnest Participants of the Target Culture

Most cross-cultural practitioners hope to cross the cultural barrier and avoid misunderstandings. However, it can be seen from what is discussed above that misunderstanding in cross-cultural

communication occurs much more often than people realize and it is almost impossible to avoid it totally. In many situations, misunderstanding will never be identified unless both parties' viewpoints are displayed. Realizing the misunderstanding is the starting point to achieving understanding. Therefore, foreign language learners should be trained to become acute observers and earnest participants of the target culture.

Being an observer is the first stage for one to understand another culture. At this stage, the learner "knows something exists" (Shepherd, 2005, p. 161), no matter whether his understanding is right or not. First, to observe another culture requires one to get rid of the belief that one's own culture is the number-one. To experience a different culture is to understand and accept the way the other people's minds work. This is much more difficult than one would expect, but it is the essence of cultural understanding (Hall, 1977, p. 213). Second, observation should go beyond the superficial cultural difference and should reach to those deep discrepancies between the two cultures. The entire system of cultural behaviors is made up of hundreds of thousands of contexts. When entering into another culture, one will first notice some obvious cultural differences like how people dress and what people eat. However, misunderstanding, more often than not, comes from things with familiar exteriors. To recognize the difference underneath the superficial similarities, careful observation is needed. Without careful examination, they will miss or misunderstand a lot of significant information from the new culture.

The key to be an acute observer is to always keep cultural awareness. When entering into another cultural community for the first time, one will recognize lots of things that are interesting and thought-provoking, especially those that are different from one's native culture. However, if one has been to that community several times, one starts to stop taking notice of the cultural differences. Through my observation of those American students, I found that the deeper their thinking about the target culture, the fewer misunderstandings they would have in cross-cultural communication.

The ultimate way to understanding another culture is to experience it and become an earnest participant of the target culture. For instance, when I interviewed Ramon, one of the participants, about his secret of becoming an "old Chinese hand" within one year, his answer was "getting out of the classroom" and "doing things with Chinese people."

Doing things in the target culture is the most compelling reason for learning a foreign language. However, as Walker (2000, p. 223) stated, playing in someone else's culture can be extremely disconcerting, if not actually physically dangerous. It is difficult to change one's cultural behavior (once formed) and when the changes do occur, it requires so much time (Hall, 1977, p. 106).

In many study abroad programs, some students spent most of their time with English speaking people or with people from their base culture. They had a lot of fun. But when they returned to their home, they realized that they did not have any friends from the target country, and their foreign language had not improved much. Going against this kind of xenophobia, the successful students tried to eschew members of their own culture. As the American student John said, he often went to the bars when he was living in the US but he never went to the expat bars in China where foreigners usually gather, because "that is a bad habit to get into, like a drug." He was afraid that going there frequently, he would end up "becoming more disconnected with local people, and resenting them and then being angry with them because of

the inability to interact with them."

In order to immerse themselves in the communities in which they were living, these students learned to play *pingpong*, play cards, and sing Karaoke to socialize with Chinese people. By doing so, they made many Chinese friends who became their culture guides. When asked how many Chinese friends they had in my interview, each of them could show me a long list of names of their Chinese friends.

They tried every opportunity to be surrounded by an ocean of Chinese in their daily lives. They interacted with local people and did what Chinese people would do. For instance, Terry always took the uncomfortable hard seats whenever he took trains in China, because "there are more people in that area and they are eager to talk with me". Ramon did a similar thing. He purposely selected a cheap tour trip in order to gain different traveling experience in China.

By immersing themselves in the target culture, students found that their perspective, relationships and behaviors were changing unconsciously. For instance, they started to get accustomed to different ways of shopping in China. Many enjoyed the exotic bargaining experience in the night markets and street-side stalls which they did not usually do back in their own country. They slowly got used to "being stalked" by the salesperson in small shops, no longer felt uncomfortable being followed around and pressured to buy things. Some learned the appropriate ways to avoid bargains, such as "do not bargain if you do not want the stuff, otherwise, you will be in trouble."

One student, Kevin, recorded the change of his behavior when giving a gift in Chinese culture:

Rather than introducing the gift to the host as I did before, now I will simply leave it beside the entrance or under the table. And I won't be surprised if the host criticizes me for bring a gift to him (from Kevin's cultural journal).

5. Conclusion

People who are socialized within the same cultural community are able to understand each other since they share the same culture including rules, regulations, customs and so on. However, when communicating with members from another community, one is inclined to interpret other's behaviors based on his own cultural experience and he even seldom realizes he is doing so. To reach a practical understanding in intercultural communication, a more positive attitude toward misunderstanding should be adopted. First, misunderstanding should not be viewed as a totally negative phenomenon. It is part of the spiral critical learning process where previous understanding turns to be a misunderstanding and then is replaced with a new better understanding again. Second, instances of misunderstanding coming from a learner's personal experience provide valuable opportunities for them to recognize the hidden cultural differences and communicative problems. Those misunderstandings can be used as important instructional material in intercultural communication training and foreign language teaching programs. Third, as misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication commonly exists, people often get to the final understanding through misunderstandings. The best way to accelerate the process and reduce misunderstandings is to encourage people to experience the target culture first hand

and practice it earnestly. Rather than sitting in the classroom and listening to lectures, learners will understand a foreign culture more effectively by actually doing things in that culture. People learn more from mistakes. The more misunderstandings one encounters, the deeper the understanding of the target culture that he can reach.

References

Agar, Michael. (1994). Language shock: Understanding the culture of conversation. New York: William Morrow and Company.

Allen, Linda Quinn. (2000). Designing curriculum for standards-based culture/language learning. Northeast Conference Review, 47, 14-21.

Aram, John & Stoner, James. (1972). Development of an organizational change role. The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 8(4), 438-449.

Bennett, Janet; Bennett, Milton & Allen, Wendy. (2003). Developing intercultural competence in the language classroom. In Dale Lange & Michael Paige (Eds.), Culture as the core: Perspectives on culture in second language learning (pp. 237-270). Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.

Berkowitz, Pauline. (1982). Foreign language: The university's sleeping giant. Canadian Modern Language Review, 38, 311–314.

Byrnes, Francis C. (1965). Americans in technical assistance: A study of attitudes and responses to their role abroad. New York: Frederick A. Praeger.

Chick, Keith J. (1996). Intercultural communication. In Sandra McKay & Nancy Hornberger (Eds.), Sociolinguistics and language teaching (pp. 329-348). New York: Cambridge University.

Christensen, Matthew & Warnick, Paul. (2006). Performed culture: An approach to East Asian language pedagogy. Columbus, OH: Foreign Language Publications.

Coleman, Lerita M. & DePaulo, Bella M. (1991). Uncovering the human spirit: Moving beyond disability and "missed" communications. In Nikolas Coupland, Howard Giles, & John Wiemann (Eds.), Handbook of miscommunication and problematic talk (pp. 61-84). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Dance, Frank. (1970). The concept of communication. Journal of Communication, 20, 201-210.

Dascal, Marcelo. (1999). Introduction: Some questions about misunderstanding. Journal of Pragmatics, 31, 753-762.

Eades, Diana. (2003). I don't think the lawyers were communicating with me: Misunderstanding cultural differences in communicative style. Emory Law Journal, 52, 1109-1134.

East, Martin. (2012). Addressing the intercultural via task-based language teaching: Possibility or problem? Language and Intercultural Communication. 12(1), 56-73.

Emerson, Robert; Fretz, Rachel & Shaw, Linda. (1995). Writing ethnographic fieldnotes. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Galloway, Vicki. (1980). Perceptions of the communicative efforts of American students of Spanish. Modern Language Journal, 64, 428–433.

Goldoni, Federica. (2013). Students' immersion experiences in study abroad. Foreign Language Annuals. 46(3), 359-376.

Hall, Edward. (1977). Beyond culture. New York: Anchor Press.

Hammerly, Hector. (1982). Synthesis in second language teaching. Blaine, WA: Second Language Publications.

Heidari, Adeleh; Ketabi, Saeed & Zonoobi, Rezvan. (2014). The role of culture through the eyes of different approaches to and methods of foreign language teaching. Journal of Intercultural Communication, Issue 34. Retrieved May13, 2014 from http://immi.se/intercultural/.

Howell, William. (1979). Theoretical directions for intercultural communication. In Molefi Asante, Eileen Newmark & Cecil Blake (Eds.), Handbook of intercultural communication. Beverly Hills: Sage.

Kinginger, Celeste. (2010b). Contemporary study abroad and foreign language learning: An activist's guidebook. University Park, PA: Center for Advanced Language Proficiency Education and Research Publications.

Kramsch, Claire. (1991). Culture in language learning: A view from the States. In Kees de Bot, Ralph Ginsberg & Claire Kramsch (Eds.), Foreign language research in cross-cultural perspective (pp. 217-240). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Kubler, Cornelius. (2006). NFLC guide for basic Chinese language programs (2nd version). Columbus, Ohio: National Foreign Language Resource Center, The Ohio State University.

Lange, Dale. (1999). Planning for and using the new national culture standards. In June Phillips & Robert Terry (Eds.), Foreign language standards: Linking research, theories, and practices (pp. 57-136). ACTFL Foreign Language Education Series. Lincolnwod, IL: National Textbook Company.

Lustig, Myron W. & Koester, Jolene. (2006). Intercultural competence: Interpersonal communication across cultures (5th ed.). New York: Pearson Education, Inc.

Morain, Genelle. (1986). Kinesics and Cross-cultural Understanding. In Joyce Merrill Valdes (Ed.), Culture bound: Bridging the cultural gap in language teaching (pp. 64-76). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Qin, Xizhen. (2013). Teaching behavioral culture in Chinese Classroom. Journal of the Chinese Language Teachers Association. 48(3), 1-24.

Qin, Xizhen. (2014). Exploring the impact of culture in five communicative elements: Case of intercultural misunderstandings between Chinese and Americans. Journal of Intercultural Communication, Issue 34. Retrieved March 3rd, 2014 from http://immi.se/intercultural/.

Scarino, Angela & Crichton, Jonathan. (2007). Why the intercultural matters to languages teaching and learning: An orientation to the ILTLP programme. Adelaide: Research Centre for Languages and Cultures Education, University of South Australia.

Schneller, R. (1989). Intercultural and intrapersonal processes and factors of misunderstanding: Implications for multicultural training. International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 13(4), 465-484.

Seaver, Paul. (1992). Pantomime as an L2 classroom strategy. Foreign Language Annals, 25, 21–31.

Shepherd, Eric. (2005). Eat Shandong. The Ohio State University: National East Asian

Languages Resource Center.

ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages). (1999). Standards for foreign language learning in the 21st Century: Preparing for the 21st century (3rd). Lawrence, KS: Allen Press.

Tang, Yanfang. (2006). Beyond behavior: Goals of cultural learning in the second language classroom. The Modern Language Journal, 90, 86-99.

Taylor, Talbot. (1992). Mutual misunderstanding: Scepticism and the theorizing of language and interpretation. Durham: Duke University Press.

Vendler, Zeno. (1994). Understanding misunderstanding. In: D. Jamieson (Ed.), Language, mind and art (pp. 9-21). Dordrecht: Kluwer.

Walker, Galal. (2000). Performed culture: Learning to participate in another culture. In Richard D. Lambert & Elana Shohamy (Eds.), Language policy and pedagogy: Essays in honor of A. Ronald Walton (pp. 221-236). Philadelphia: J. Benjamins.

Walker, Galal & Noda, Mari. (2000). Remembering the future: Compiling knowledge of another culture. In Diane W. Birckbichler & Robert M. Terry (Eds.), Reflecting on the past to shape the future (pp. 187-212). Linconlnwood: IL: National Textbook Company.

Weigand, Elda. (1999). Misunderstanding: The standard case. Journal of Pragmatics, 31, 763-785.

Xiao, Long-Fu. (2001). Teaching English cultural background: Introducing the target culture in the Chinese secondary school English classes. Ph. D. Dissertation. University of Tampere.

Yu, Li. (2009). Where is culture? Culture instruction and the foreign language textbook. Journal of the Chinese Language Teachers Association, 44(3), 73-108.

Author Note

Xizhen Qin is an Assistant Professor in the World Languages Education Department of the University of South Florida. She received her Ph. D in Chinese Studies from Ohio State University and M.A. in Chinese Linguistics from Shandong University. Her research interests include Intercultural Communication, Chinese Pedagogy, and Chinese Cultural Studies. Her articles have appeared in the *Journal of Intercultural Communication* and *Journal of Chinese Language Teachers Association*. She is also a co-author of the book *Social Evolution and the Change of Social Titles in Chinese Language in the 20th Century of China* published by the Commercial Press of China.