

Miscommunication between Chinese Teachers and Mexican Students – A Case Study of a Confucius Institute in Mexico

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Abstract: The present study examines miscommunication between Chinese teachers and Mexican students, focusing on the sorts and types of misunderstandings in academic settings.

Data for this study was collected through academic diaries, questionnaires, interviews and retrospective interviews. According to the nature of the examples provided, misunderstandings are classified into culture-related, non-culture-related, and the mixed-type.

Results show that misunderstandings in academic settings between Chinese teachers and Mexican students are not always traceable to cultural differences. Some of the misunderstandings (the non-culture-related types of misunderstandings, for example) are caused by certain errors that the learners make when learning the target language (Chinese in this case), which is regarded as a necessary phase in second language acquisition. Others (like the mixed-type of misunderstandings) are caused by both cultural differences and the dynamics of learning a foreign language. The results seem to verify the author's hypothesis that culture elements play an essential role in miscommunication, but are not the sole explanation for misunderstandings in intercultural interactions.

Keywords: Cross-cultural, miscommunication, second language learning, cultural differences

1. Introduction

By the end of the year 2017, China had established 525 Confucius Institutes and 1113 Confucius classrooms in the world and the number of students of Chinese reached 2.32 million,¹ yet that of Chinese teachers, whose foreign language was primarily English, was only 46,000 (by the end of 2016²). The booming of Confucius Institutes in the world will inevitably witness a great increase in miscommunication in academic settings, in which Chinese teachers and international students are situated. As a matter of fact, miscommunication, more familiarly referred to as misunderstandings, between Chinese teachers and students from other cultures has given rise

¹ These numbers come from http://www.xinhuanet.com/2017-12/13/c_1122106910.htm Retrieved 15 June, 2018.

² <http://www.hanban.edu.cn/report/2016.pdf>. Retrieved 15 June, 2018.

to problems that definitely deserve serious consideration. As Zhou (2009, p. 18) points out in her research on Confucius Institutes in the U.S., miscommunication is bound to arise because communication partners from different cultures (her research focuses on Confucius Institutes in the United States) vary in thinking, attitudes, beliefs and cognitive and behavioral ways.

More often than not, communication participants, as well as researchers, attribute the causes for miscommunication in intercultural interactions to cultural differences. Among these scholars is Wood (2014), who remarks that “[m]isunderstandings will always happen between people of different cultures, regardless of whether the same language is spoken or not;”³ Sarangi (1994, p. 413) reflects on such phenomena as “the burden of ‘cultural differences’ in miscommunication analysis.” However, based on the personal experiences and observations of the authors at a Confucius Institute at a Mexican university, miscommunication between the Chinese teachers and their Mexican students are not necessarily caused by cultural differences. Theoretically, previous research on miscommunication has confirmed from various disciplinary aspects that miscommunication is complex and dynamic in nature, but research on repair strategies seems to be scant. Also, compared to studies on miscommunication between native and nonnative English speakers, few studies have explored miscommunication between both nonnative English speakers who engage in cross-cultural communication in not only English as their second language, but also, as in the current study, in their first and third languages. In light of these, the purpose of the current study is to examine the attribution of cultural differences and foreign language proficiency to cross-cultural miscommunication and the contribution of culture and language proficiency to its remedy. Specifically, it aims to investigate types of miscommunication in regard to their relevance to cultural differences and analyse corresponding repair patterns. The authors prefer to use “miscommunication” as the umbrella term to include all types (cultural, pragmatic, or any other type) of problems occurring in communication between the groups of participants involved.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Related Terms and Definitions

Miscommunication is by no means a new phenomenon. It has drawn close scholarly attention since the 1970s. To analyze the phenomenon, various definitions have been used, e.g., “*misapprehension*” was initially used to characterize a conversational sequence governed by the following rule: “if a statement is made and is followed by a demonstration/assertion that a hearer did not understand, then the one who made the statement may/must provide a clarification” (Jefferson, 1972, p. 305). Tannen (1975) refers to “communication mix-up.” “*Misperception*” is used to cover the misunderstandings which occur at the phonological level, which is the first step of the interpretation process (cf. Zaefferer, 1977, p. 333). “*Misinterpretation*” has been used to refer to the misunderstanding which occurs at least at one of the other [than the phonological] levels of understanding, which are defined as syntactic, semantic and situational (see Zaefferer, 1977, p.333). Gumperz and Tannen (1979) refer to “*misunderstanding*” or

³ <http://learnthatlanguagenow.com/cross-cultural-misunderstandings/> Retrieved 15 June, 2018.

“miscommunication,” while Thomas (1983) discusses *“pragmalinguistic failure,”* and Milroy (1986) talks about *“communicative breakdown.”*

Another term, *“communication breakdown”*, is sometimes used interchangeably with *“miscommunication”* and *“misunderstanding”* (Varonis and Gass, 1985; Coupland et al., 1991). McTear (1987, p. 36) points out that “communication failure can be defined broadly or narrowly. In the broad sense, it can refer to any breakdown in communication between people”; in the narrower sense, however, communication failure focuses on “the processes whereby information is negotiated between a speaker and a hearer” (1987, p. 36). If the hearer fails to understand what the speaker is trying to communicate, for whatever reason, then communication failure is regarded to have taken place.

Reilly (1991, p. 283) defines miscommunication as **“any form of misunderstanding or misinterpretation that ultimately leads to a disruption in the flow of dialogue** and to explicit corrective action by the dialogue participants” (emphasis of the authors). The present researchers only agree to part of his definition, i.e. the bold-faced part, because, as will be shown later, some of the misunderstandings or misinterpretations will not be explicitly corrected for one reason or another.

“Mishearing,” as Tzanne (2000, p. 40) maintains, is normally “associated with problems of reception similar to the ones covered by *‘misperception’*”. However, there are also studies (Bilmes, 1992; Grimshaw, 1980) where *‘mishearing’* refers to comprehension problems associated with the hearer’s understanding of a particular utterance.”

Varied as the “mis-” group of definitions is, one thing is in common, that is, communication is problematic, temporarily at least, or is not proceeding smoothly as it should be.

2.2. Present Definition

For the present purpose, misunderstanding is defined as a mismatch between the speaker’s intention and the hearer’s interpretation. Misinterpretation, communication failure and communication breakdown will be used as loose synonyms, all of which refer to the actual consequences of problematic communication. The reason why we choose the “mis-” group of words to describe the phenomena we study instead of narrowing it down to pragmatic failures is that we believe that the causes for miscommunication are often multiple or mixed, and they are not limited to pragmatics only, as will be reflected by the results.

2.3. Related Studies

Although views on miscommunication diverge, related studies in the past five decades on the phenomena per se can be described as putting pieces together to form a whole. Scholars from different cultural backgrounds have approached this field from various perspectives, despite the tendency that studies on misunderstandings are on the decrease in the new millennium. Related studies can be summed up as follows:

2.3.1. Different Approaches to Miscommunication/Misunderstandings

First of all, theoretical approaches are taken to justify miscommunication studies in general and cross-cultural miscommunication in particular (Zaefferer, 1977; Lane, 1985; Coupland et al., 1991; Tzanne, 2000).

Secondly, miscommunication is studied from the perspective of production and perception (Smith, 1970; Hill, 1972; Fromkin, 1973; Celce-Murcia, 1980; Cutler, 1980; Dua, 1990; Bardovi-Harlig, 2013).

Thirdly, miscommunication is associated with cultural and social backgrounds with increased awareness. Scholars like Tannen (1984), Platt (1989) and Chick (1989), Knoblauch (2001), Gumperz (2001), Günthner and Luckmann (2001), Hartog (2006), Dooley (2009) and Lanas (2014) all strive to identify factors contributing to unsuccessful intercultural communication.

Fourthly, miscommunication is studied through the discourse analysis approach. Scollon and Scollon (1981) believe that in interethnic communication it is not grammar that causes problems, but discourse, that is the organization of an argument, the way ideas are emphasized or the emotional information the speaker wishes to convey in expressing certain ideas. The discourse approach also includes the analysis of dialogues (Petit, 1985; House, 2000; Johnstone, 2002). House et al. (2003) analyze 'misunderstanding talk.' These studies are especially interested in how misunderstandings in specific social activities and interactions can be analyzed and understood from different discourse-analytical perspectives.

Fifthly, miscommunication in culture of learning (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999) has been studied with considerable weight. Culture of learning means that different cultures have different beliefs about how teaching and learning should take place, what proper behaviors for teachers and students are, and what is the norm for teacher-student relationship. Christie and Harris (1985) address 'cross-cultural misunderstandings in education' based on the differences they observe between newcomers to Australia and the indigenous people. Kearins (1985) believes that differences in learning between/among cultures may exist in attitudes to knowledge, child-rearing, etc. Anderson and Powell (1991) illustrate these differences well in their 'Intercultural Communication and the Classroom.' Watson et al. (2013) conduct a preliminary study on assessing their subjects' gains in language proficiency, cross-cultural competence, and regional awareness during their study abroad. All these studies point to the phenomenon that culture of learning is different in different cultures.

Sixthly, miscommunication is studied in combination with setting, context, medium and interactants (Williams, 1985; Milroy, 1986; Drummond & Hopper, 1991; Henley & Kramarae, 1991; West & Frankel, 1991; McTear & King, 1991; Eisenberg & Philips, 1991). Gass and Varonis (1991) explore the area of native-nonnative interaction and make efforts in explaining miscommunication in nonnative speaker discourse. They use the term problematic communication, which, in their opinion, covers a wide range of phenomena with reference to NNSs [non-native speakers]. The researchers schematize the most prevalent types in the figure below (Figure 1):

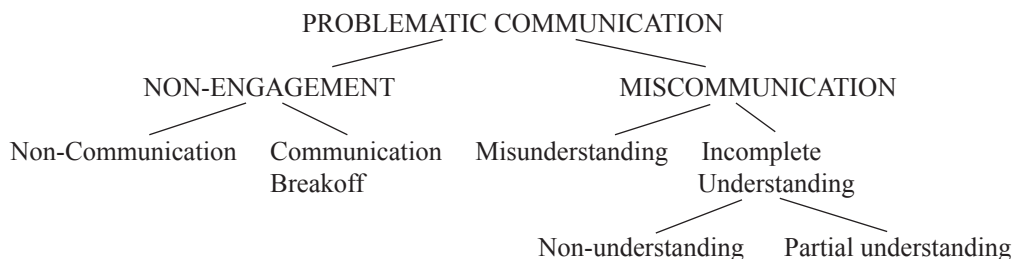


Figure 1. Problematic Communication Types (Gass & Varonis 1991, p. 124)

Scollon and Scollon (2001) make a detailed study of cross-cultural (mis)communication in work settings. Cook-Gumperz (2001) reflects over ‘cooperation, collaboration and pleasure in work: issues for intercultural communication at work.’ House (2003) conducts a survey of ‘misunderstanding in intercultural university encounters.’ Blum-Kulka and Weizman (2003) are concerned with the notion of misunderstanding in institutionalized discourse. Kramsch (2003) claims that identity, role and voice can be the sources of cross-cultural miscommunication, but not necessarily. Stubbe (2010) makes explorations on how miscommunication can be reduced in the work setting.

Seventhly, miscommunication is related to the discipline of pragmatics. Žegarac and Pennington (2000) analyze pragmatic transfer in intercultural communication. Davis, (2007) analyzes why and how resistance to L2 pragmatics exists in the Australian ESL context. Taguchi (2008) studies how cognition, language contact, and pragmatic comprehension can develop in a study-abroad context. Verdonik. (2009) studies why borderline cases of understanding/misunderstanding exist. Using discourse comprehension theory, the researcher regards the level of propositional strategies, local coherence strategies, strategies for the use of knowledge, and interactional and pragmatic strategies as the main sources of reduced understandings.

Eighthly, more recent research on miscommunication seems to steer towards human-robot or human-computer misunderstandings. For example, Gonsior et al. (2010) study how human-robot misunderstandings arise; Meena et al. (2015) conduct research on how automatic detection of miscommunication in spoken dialogue systems is realized; Purver et al. (2018) build computational models of miscommunication phenomena, among others.

2.3.2. Studies on the Nature of Miscommunication

The past few decades have witnessed ambitious endeavors to pin down the nature of miscommunication, which is regarded as dynamic and complex. The dynamic nature of miscommunication is reflected in the following: 1) The interactants themselves are dynamic in the sense that “a speaker and listener cannot be assumed to have the same beliefs, contexts, backgrounds or goals at each point in a conversation. As a result, difficulties and mistakes arise when a listener interprets a speaker’s utterance” (Goodman, 1987, p. 123). Cui (2014) represents a recent effort to pinpoint the source and the dynamics of problematic interactions. 2) The communication encounter per se is dynamic. Tzanne (2000) touches upon this point by

claiming that some misunderstandings develop over a certain “trouble-source turn” (Schegloff, 1987). West and Frankel claim that communication has been traditionally viewed in terms of a sender, a receiver, and a transmission channel. The sender and the receiver are “assumed to have compatible encoding and decoding devices that allow them to send and receive messages” (1991, p. 197). According to this view of communication, “... miscommunication arises if there is ‘noise’ – for example, problems of articulation, lexical choice, syntactic form – in the channel which results in message distortion” (1991, p. 197). Here the problem lies in the physical transmission – dynamic almost in the scientific sense of the term.

Milroy (1986, p. 19) reflects on the complex nature of miscommunication by stating:

When miscommunication does take place, a whole range of factors may be responsible. It is probably the indirectness of the relationship between ‘linguistic knowledge’ – and language use which accounts for the fact that speakers with partly different grammars understand each other much of the time in natural setting; they rely on a wide and varied range of comprehension strategies.

The above studies have well elaborated that miscommunication is complex and dynamic in nature. The question that follows is how misunderstandings are detected and repaired.

2.3.3. Studies on the Recognition and Detection of Misunderstandings

Varonis and Gass (1985, p. 327) study miscommunication in native/nonnative conversation, and show that “a complete analysis of native/ nonnative conversations must minimally invoke notions of correct interpretation, confidence in interpretation, goals of a conversation, shared beliefs, and linguistic as well as cultural systems.” In examining real conversations, they find instances in which a particular message exchange results in a lack of understanding. In such exchanges, according to the authors, there may be seven ways in which the participants can behave. They list the possibilities as follows (1985, p. 328):

1. Immediate recognition of problem but no comment.
2. Immediate recognition of problem and makes comment.
3. Later recognition of problem but no comment.
4. Later recognition of problem and makes comment.
5. Recognition after conversation but no comment.
6. Recognition after conversation and makes comment.
7. No recognition.

In sum, they argue that native and nonnative speakers of English in conversations with one another may be predisposed to breakdowns in communication, because of the fact that they do not share cultural and linguistic systems (including rhetorical strategies) for expressing what they want to say. Apart from this, a variety of social and linguistic factors may influence the eventual resolution of a breakdown.

Schegloff (1987) uses the term “trouble-source turn” (TST) to refer to the turn in

conversation where the misinterpreted item is located. That is, if the TST is located, the misunderstanding is detected.

Kreuz and Roberts (1993) relate their discussion of pragmatic errors to Grice's four conversational maxims, i.e. *quantity*, *quality*, *relation* and *manner*. The authors believe that when speakers fail to observe these maxims, they are committing pragmatic errors. They argue "[u]nlike the lower-level errors, such violations [pragmatic failures] present serious obstacles to the ongoing collaboration" (1993, p. 241). For this reason, they predict that pragmatic errors should be especially salient in conversation. Coupland et al. (1991) have developed an integrative model of miscommunication, regarding aspects of recognition and recognizability:

Level	Characteristics attributed to "miscommunication"	Problem status	Awareness level	Reparability
I	Discourse and meaning-transfer are inherently flawed	Unrecognized	Participants are unaware	Not relevant
II	Strategic compromise; minor misunderstanding or misreadings are routine disruption to be expected	Possibly, not necessarily recognized	Low for participants; easily identified at local level by researchers	Relevant at local level only
III	Presumed personal deficiencies	Problems attributed to individual lack of skill or ill will (or both)	Moderate for participants; directed toward other (or sometimes self)	Deficient people can be "fixed" (e.g., by skills training)
IV	Goal-referenced: control, affiliation, identity and instrumentality in normal interactions	Problems recognised as failure in conversational goal-attainment	High; participants may be fully aware of strategic implications of behavior	Repair is an ongoing aspect of everyday interaction with relationship implications
V	Group/cultural differences in linguistic /communication norms, predisposing misalignments or misunderstandings	Problems mapped onto social identities and group-memberships	Moderate; group identities taken for granted and differences seen as natural reflections of groups' statuses	Acculturation or out group accommodation; socio-cultural learning
VI	Ideological framings of talk; socio-structural power imbalances	Participants perceive only <i>status quo</i>	Participants typically unaware; researchers hyper-aware, galvanized by their own ideology	Only through critical analysis and resulting social change

Figure 2. Integrative Model of Levels of Analysis of "Miscommunication"
(Coupland et al., 1991, p. 13)

This model shows that it is a complex picture whether a case of miscommunication is recognized or not. It depends on a number of factors. Now that misunderstandings are recognized, the next logical step is how they can be repaired.

2.3.4. Studies on Repairs of Misunderstandings

When and where repair attempts are made has already been touched upon (see Figure 2 by Coupland et al., 1991). The present authors believe that repairs are possible only when the participants are aware (even though there are different levels of awareness) that ‘miscommunication’ has occurred. However, other scholars have different beliefs.

Banks et al. (1991, p. 106) believe that “[m]any cases of misunderstanding can go unnoticed or unremarked, either by speakers or hearers: So long as a misunderstanding has no consequences for further interaction, miscommunication is not an issue.” To paraphrase their statement, it means sometimes repairs are not necessary.

Clark and Schaefer (1989) go even further and point out that “Participants... must not only repair any troubles they encounter, but take positive steps to establish understanding and avoid trouble in the first place.” Schegloff et al. claim, “An ‘organization of repair’ operates in conversation, addressed to recurrent problems in speaking, hearing, and understanding” (1977, p. 361). As to indicating the occurrence of a problem in understanding, they are of the opinion that either the speaker or the listener may or may not choose to indicate that an error has occurred. Furthermore the error may be self-corrected (i.e. the person who commits the error corrects the error), or other corrected (the listener corrects the speaker’s error). A further point Schegloff et al. (1977, p. 380) make is that certain correction types are preferred over others, because of turn-taking constraints or politeness considerations (Brown & Levinson, 1987). For example, phonological errors are reported to have been always almost corrected by the speaker, since the speaker still has the floor when they occur. Pragmatic errors, on the other hand, would be more typically other-corrected, because the listener has the responsibility to signal that he or she does not understand what the speaker has said.

Drummond and Hopper observe misunderstanding and its remedies in telephone communication. They argue that in order to “repair” misunderstandings, first of all they have to be located. They address relationships between the distance from repairable to repair-initiation and claim, “as this distance increases, the term ‘misunderstanding’ becomes a better and better descriptor for what occurs. When repairable and repair-initiation become distant in time and speaker’s subsequent turns, it gets harder to make repairs” (1991, p. 305). They further postulate the notion of “repair-initiation opportunity space, which provides a metric for measuring the time or distance from repairable to repair-initiation – and hence a metric for comparing how the problem of locating the repairable material is accomplished at each of the slots in the model of repair-initiation opportunity space” (1991, p. 306). More recent endeavors still endorse earlier studies. Cho and Larke (2010, p. 1), for instance, point out that their subjects in ESL classrooms use the following repair strategies:

1. Unspecified
2. Interrogatives

3. (Partial) repeat
4. Partial repeat plus question word
5. Understanding check
6. Requests for repetition
7. Request for definition, translation or explanation
8. Correction
9. Nonverbal strategies

The above claims, except those by Schegloff et al. (1977), have not addressed reasons why interactants sometimes choose not to make repairs. The choice of repair types seems to depend on many factors, as will be shown in the present study.

2.4. Present Approach

The present study, based on previous studies, examines miscommunication between Chinese teachers and Mexican students from a cross-cultural perspective, focusing on the sorts and types of misunderstandings in academic settings in relation to cultural differences, and analyzing the repair patterns of both groups. The present study includes examination of misunderstandings that occurred in Chinese, Spanish, or English communication.

2.5. Research Questions

- 1) What type(s) of misunderstandings tend to occur between Mexican students and Chinese teachers?
- 2) Are all the misunderstandings reported by the two groups traceable to cultural differences? If not, what are the other types?
- 3) How long does it take for the communication participants to realize that a misunderstanding has occurred? Do they repair the misunderstanding immediately after their realization? Why or why not?
- 4) How can these misunderstandings be avoided or reduced?

3. Research Method

3.1. Research Design

The researchers conducted a mixed-method case study of a Confucius Institute at a university (UANL) in Mexico. The authors consider this a case study because it is a type of research that aims to intensively and holistically examine a phenomenon within a bounded real-life context (Merriam, 1985; Yin, 1994). It provides flexibility for the researcher as it allows for application of both qualitative and quantitative data (Stake, 1995). Its defining characteristic, also its methodological strength, lies in a thick description of the phenomenon under study by means of the variety of data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stake, 1995). Therefore, the researchers employed this methodology in the current study with four data collection methods,

which are specified below.

3.2. Data Collection and Processing

3.2.1. Academic Diaries

The first type of data is academic diaries kept by the seven teachers of Chinese at the Confucius Institute in Mexico. This very Confucius Institute was established in Nov. 2006, and is located in the State of Nuevo Leon. It is composed altogether of seven teachers, four of whom are teachers by profession and the other three are volunteer teachers (college graduates of Chinese origin). Basic demographics are as follows: There are three male teachers, and four females. As to their educational background, four teachers have MA degrees, one has a doctoral degree, and the other two have a bachelor's degree. In terms of age, four of the teachers are in their mid-twenties, two are in their thirties, and one is around fifty years of age. Regarding their specialized fields, three teachers majored in teaching Chinese as a foreign language at the university; two teachers majored in Spanish and started teaching Chinese as a foreign language after graduation from college; one teacher majored in English, and the doctoral degree holder, in business administration. Their lengths of stay in Mexico range from one year to five years. All of the teachers have a relatively high proficiency level in English; except the two volunteer teachers who majored in Spanish, the other five had either studied Spanish shortly before they reached Mexico or had studied the language after they arrived, i.e. their level in Spanish was very basic. Speaking of their overseas experience, the doctorate teacher had overseas experience before he reached Mexico, but the other teachers had no such experience. That is to say their knowledge of the Mexican culture was very limited when they taught there. The daily Chinese teaching was conducted mainly in English. In their diaries the teachers were asked to take down misunderstanding examples they had had with their students, both in and outside class. They kept 14 entries on the average for the duration of six months.

3.2.2. Questionnaire

The second type of data was questionnaires, filled out by 106 Mexican students (see Table 1 below: with an average age of 21.74 years, and with an average of 20.19 months of Chinese learning) at the same Confucius Institute. The misunderstanding examples given by these students were of different types: some were about their miscommunication with their Chinese teachers in English; others, about the misunderstanding in Spanish; the rest, about miscommunication in Chinese. The questionnaires were distributed to the students by email, and they were in three versions, i.e. Spanish, English, and Chinese. Except 19 students who chose the English version, all the rest chose the Spanish one, and no single student chose the Chinese version.

Table 1. Students' Age and Time of Chinese Learning Time Distribution

Descriptive Statistics (TCL = time of Chinese learning in months)					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
age	106	16	28	21.74	2.819
TCL	106	6	48	20.19	9.991
Valid N (listwise)	106				

3.2.3. Interviews

The third type of data was interviews on miscommunication. In order to compare the students' questionnaire results with their oral answers, 10 Mexican students (among them 6 had been on summer camp tours to China) were chosen for interviews with the authors; and the 7 Chinese teachers were interviewed informally on the topic of misunderstandings with their students.

3.2.4. Retrospective Interviews

The fourth or last type of data used for this study was retrospective interviews on some key misunderstanding cases. To account for these miscommunication instances, the authors conducted retrospective interviews with 10 students (among them 4 were in the first round of interviews); and the 7 Chinese teachers were interviewed formally this time for their side of the story of the chosen misunderstanding cases. The purpose of this type of data is to solicit explanations for the types of misunderstandings.

3.2.5. Data Analysis

Both quantitative data and qualitative data were collected through the four data collection methods demonstrated above. Quantitative data were analyzed with the assistance of SPSS to examine correlations between key factors and miscommunication, while qualitative data on the instances of miscommunication were manually coded under three pre-set themes, including culture-related types, non-culture-related types, as well as mixed types of misunderstanding.

After tallying the questionnaire results and transcribing the interviews, the authors classified the examples provided, according to their nature, into culture-related, non-culture-related, and the mixed-type. The first two types are self-evident, while the third type refers to pragmatic failures in communication, that is, it has something to do with the word level structure of the language on the one hand, and with the cultural connotation on the other (For examples of each type of misunderstandings, see the Research Results section).

4. Research Results

To answer the first research question, the two authors did the sorting and tallying work manually, that is, they allotted by hand first the answers in the questionnaires. It turned out that the interrater reliability is higher than 85 percent. They disagree mainly on two types of misunderstandings, i.e. culture-related or mixed-type. After loading the students' answers into the SPSS form, the calculated results are as follows:

Table 2. Type of Misunderstandings

(1=Culture-related; 2=non-culture-related;3=mixed-type)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	30	28.3	28.3	28.3
	2	55	51.9	51.9	80.2
	3	21	19.8	19.8	100.0
	Total	106	100.0	100.0	

The results indicate that a little more than half of the misunderstanding cases are of non-culture-related nature; those related to culture account for about a quarter of all the misunderstandings reported, while one-fifth of the misunderstandings are of the mixed type.

To account for the reasons why cultural misunderstandings are not so frequent as they are thought to be, the teachers interviewed believed that at the beginning of Chinese learning, Mexican students tend to have problems in the most obvious things – they have to learn to read and write the Chinese characters first, and their learning has not reached the stage yet when it is possible for them to have cultural misunderstandings with their Chinese teachers. In fact, the data shows that the longer the students' Chinese learning time is, the more culture-related and mixed-type of understandings they have with their teachers.

To the second research question if all the misunderstandings are traceable to cultural differences, the retrospective interviews show that they are not. The following examples are cases in point:

Example 1: The student interviewee wanted to say “樓上 (be upstairs, indicating a location)” to his Chinese teacher, but said “上樓 (go upstairs, indicating an action)” In this case, the two Chinese phrases look similar and are confused by this student, thus had caused the misunderstanding.

Example 2: Two Chinese characters which look very much alike have caused misunderstandings on the Chinese teacher's part. The two Chinese characters are: “我

(I; me)”vs. “找 (look for)”. In the interview the student remarked that he had wanted to say “找老師 ([I am] looking for the teacher),” but somehow he said “我老師 (my teacher)”, therefore a misunderstanding arose.

Examples like these two also abound in the interviews with the teachers. The instances are mostly about the Mexican students’ mispronunciations or confusion in memory, which had caused them to misunderstand the latter. An example of such nature given by a Chinese teacher is “體驗 (hands-on experience)” vs. “體驗 (medical check-up)”. In this case, communication broke down because of the similarity in the structure of the Chinese characters.

An interesting phenomenon mentioned by a teacher in the retrospective interview is worth noting. When she tried to communicate with her Mexican students in English, the latter’s pronunciation often caused her to misunderstand them. The example she gave was “Do you have a [pet] at home?” The Mexican student repeated the question several times before she could understand him, who actually meant “pet”, yet his pronunciation sounded to her like [bet] or [bat], until finally he asked her whether she had a dog. What the student meant dawned on her only at that moment. In this particular case of misunderstanding, the cause is that the Spanish ways of pronouncing p’s and b’s sound very similar, and the Mexican student has transferred his native pronunciation to English, and had caused his Chinese teacher to misunderstand him. For these kinds of misunderstandings, both the teacher and student interviewees confirmed that culture did not play any role in them. However, not all the miscommunication examples are this simple. The following ones are more complex in nature:

Example 3: A teacher interviewee reported that once a Mexican student of his came up to him and wanted him to correct her Chinese composition for her, and this teacher replied “你知道嗎，今天不方便 (you know, it is not very convenient today)”. Although this Mexican student is the best in her class, and she often has good grades in her Chinese examinations, both oral and written, she had no idea of the pragmatic meaning of this Chinese sentence. Anyone familiar with Chinese culture would understand that this teacher was saying that it was impossible for him to correct the student’s composition that day, yet this Mexican student had not captured the cultural meaning of this sentence or was not familiar with the Chinese indirectness in saying “No.” In the terms of the present research, this misunderstanding is of the mixed-type. As a matter of fact, this type of misinterpretations is not as many as that of the non-culture-related type. In the retrospective interviews the teachers explain the phenomenon with the inadequacy of their Mexican students’ Chinese level. In other words, the longer the Mexican students study Chinese, and the more contact they have with the Chinese, the more culture-related and mixed-type of misunderstandings they will have with their Chinese teachers.

Example 4 was given by another teacher, who reported her experience of being kept waiting by a Mexican student for two hours without any explanation during the time (no telephone call or e-message of any kind). This incident occurred not long after her arrival in Mexico. She made an appointment with this Mexican student to help him prepare for the latter’s national competition in spoken Chinese. The appointment was made for 10:30 a.m. in the morning of a Wednesday, but the student did not show up until 12:30 p.m. Of course when he did show up, the Chinese teacher was very unhappy and she asked the student for explanations. This Mexican student said that he had been standing in line in a bank, and it took him longer than

he thought. However, he had not called the teacher because he was not sure how long it would take for him to be served at the bank counter... The authors allot this kind of communication failures to the culture-related type because it violates the Chinese teachers' cultural beliefs (in China it is polite to be punctual for appointments at least in academic settings) or behavior rules (students should respect their teachers and should not keep their teachers waiting). In this case the teacher was extremely unhappy because she believed that the Mexican student did not have enough respect for her, while the Mexican student did not have such intention at all, since the Mexican way of treating appointments is more casual. In the retrospective interview this teacher even claimed that Mexican students have less respect for their teachers in comparison with the Chinese (it seems that miscommunication not only impedes communication, but also brings hard feelings)! To our delight, the cultural misunderstandings are not always of such hard nature. The following are lighter-natured:

A 5th example is about a Chinese teacher who did not open a present given on the spot at his birthday party. This Chinese teacher received a birthday present from his student, yet the former did not open it right away. This very incident was interpreted by the Mexican student in a retrospective interview as a possibility that his teacher did not like the present he gave him.. Nevertheless this teacher was just being very Chinese, because it is not the customary practice in China to open a gift given on the spot. Instead, the present-receiver would open it afterwards and would thank the giver with a note of thanks either by a message or an email.

The next or the 6th example is an invitation to dinner extended by a Mexican student to a Chinese teacher, their conversation is as follows (recalled by a Mexican student in an interview):

Mex. Student: I would like to invite you to dinner tonight in our house. What hour is OK for you?

Chin. Teacher: I'd like to go. But is that too much trouble for you or your parents?

Mex. Student: (Somewhat confused) No, it is no trouble for them at all. Do you mean that you don't want to come?

Chin. Teacher: No, no, no! I'd love to get to know Mexican families better. I just don't want you or your parents to spend too much time preparing the dinner for me.

Mex. Student: (Seems to understand his teacher's intention at this point): Ahaaa, it is no trouble at all.

Chin. Teacher: OK. In that case, I will be there. Thanks. Oh, give my thanks to your parents too!

In this typical case of culture-related misunderstanding, the Chinese teacher was very polite in the Chinese way. He is a young Chinese teacher (a recent M.A. graduate, and not much older than the student), and in spite of having the intention of "getting to know Mexican families better" (as he himself confirmed in the retrospective interview), he did not want to give the student's parents too much trouble in preparing the formal meal specially for him, so he asked if it was "too much trouble" for the student or his parents. He was being polite in the Chinese way, which was missed or overlooked by the Mexican student, although he is among the best students in this Chinese teacher's class.

A 7th example given by a Chinese teacher in the informal interview is that when his Mexican

student praised him in Spanish “Su español es excelente (Your Spanish is excellent!),” he replied immediately with three “No’s” which set his Mexican student into deep thinking about his judging ability. In this very example, the Mexican student failed to perceive his Chinese teacher’s modesty expressed in the most typical Chinese way, i.e. when a Chinese person is praised about his or her abilities or achievements, the most culturally appropriate way is to diminish them. To explain this case in professional terms, this student’s knowledge of Chinese culture was not comparable to his knowledge of the language (since he had once won the second place in the National Contest for Oral Chinese in Mexico).

An 8th example of misunderstanding is reported by another Chinese teacher. He recalled that once he was asked by a Mexican student whether he would earn more working in Mexico compared to a similar job back in China. He told this Mexican student about his salary without any ill feelings. It is worth pointing out that a friendly teacher-student relationship can reduce the danger of culture-related misunderstandings. About this reported case, the Chinese teachers, commented in a group interview, that when they arrived in Mexico, they strived to raise their cultural awareness by learning what taboo questions are in the Mexican culture. They tried to avoid asking their Mexican students such questions, but when they themselves were asked about their marital status or salary, they regarded these questions as more out of curiosity of the latter than of their lack of cultural awareness. In other words, the Chinese teachers chose not to misunderstand in the first place, and also a harmonious teacher-student relationship has played such a role here that it outruns cultural barriers.

To the third research question, how long it takes the communication participants to realize that a misunderstanding has occurred. As to the correlation between the students’ time of Chinese learning and their immediateness in realizing the misunderstandings, the following results are obtained.

Table 3. Correlation between ‘Time of Chinese Learning’ and ‘Immediateness of Misunderstanding Detection’

Correlations			
(TCL= time of Chin. learning; Q3= immediateness of mis. Detection)			
		TCL	Q3
TCL	Pearson Correlation	1	-.427**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	106	106
Q3	Pearson Correlation	-.427**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	106	106

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4. Correlation between ‘Contact with the Chinese’ and ‘Immediateness of Misunderstanding’

Correlations (Q3=immediateness of mis. Detection; CWC=contact with the Chinese)			
		Q3	CWC
Q3	Pearson Correlation	1	-.554**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	106	106
CWC	Pearson Correlation	-.554**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	106	106

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Tables 3 and 4 have shown two negative correlations. The first (-.427) means that the longer the Chinese learning time is, the sooner it is for the students to realize that a misunderstanding has occurred; and the second (-.554) shows that the more contact that a Mexican student has with the Chinese, the sooner he or she can detect the existence of a misunderstanding.

Mexican students can misunderstand their Chinese teachers when the latter tried to express themselves in Spanish, a language that the Chinese teachers started learning upon their arrival in Mexico. In this case, the misunderstandings between the two groups are really of a very complicated nature. For example, in Spanish the word “actual” means “current” or “present” though spelt the same as its English counterpart. So when a Chinese teacher tries to use the Spanish word in the English way, a misunderstanding caused by transferring between the teacher’s 2nd and 3rd languages occurred (recalled by a Mexican student in a retrospective interview). Yet since the Mexican student had realized that immediately, a repair is initiated right on the spot, and what is more, without any face threat or unpleasant feelings at all.

According to the retrospective interviews with the Mexican students, the non-cultural-related misunderstandings are realized almost immediately, while the ones of culture-related and the mixed-types are realized some time afterwards, or even a long time afterwards. The authors have also obtained confirmation of this opinion in the retrospective interviews with the teachers.

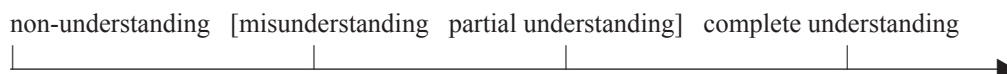
To the question of repairs of misunderstanding, the teachers claim in their interviews that for the non-culture-related type of misunderstandings (like the ones of confusing the Chinese characters) they would point those out on the spot and as soon as the misunderstandings occur; yet for the ones of the other two types, they would prefer to point them out some time later and in an indirect way, for the reason that “Mexican students care more about their face than their Chinese counterparts do,” as one of the Chinese teachers believed. In his opinion, if a

Chinese teacher points out that a Mexican student has committed a cultural mistake in front of the class, the student would feel bad. This shows that in the Mexican culture face issue is of great importance. Two of the teachers even claimed that sometimes they would not point out their misunderstandings for fear of hurting their student's feelings, and they "would let the miscommunication correct itself with the passing of time."

To the last question how misunderstandings can be avoided or reduced, the answers are very much in conformity: the Chinese teachers believe that it is important to cultivate cross-cultural competences of their own and that of their students, while the Mexican students think that they should be given classes on Chinese culture.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The results of the present study can be discussed further. The most significant pattern found in this study on misunderstandings can be illustrated as follows:



That is, if we compare the level of understanding to a continuum, interaction between the two groups of subjects in the present study can fall in anywhere along the continuum. In some cases, they may totally miss each other's point, or they do not understand each other at all.

Another finding is that although misunderstandings can be detected, they are not repaired or corrected at times. This is done by the interactants' choice for face considerations or other factors. These findings are not in total conformity with studies by Varonis and Gass (1985) or Coupland et al. (1991). Besides, the Chinese teachers are more tolerant of their Mexican students' non-culture-related type of understandings in comparison with those of the other two types. In situations or contexts outside class, misunderstandings between the two groups tend to be more culture-related or of the mixed-nature; by contrast, the non-culture-related misunderstandings are more reminiscent of the mechanisms of second language acquisition.

Implications from the study are: 1) Culture plays its part in communication between Chinese teachers and Mexican students at both conscious and subconscious levels; 2) There are more similarities between Mexican and Chinese cultures than the Chinese teachers and the Mexican students realize; 3) Even Chinese teachers with a high proficiency level in Spanish cannot guarantee that cultural misunderstandings will not occur, therefore, target culture learning is a long-term task; 4) When non-understanding and partial understanding occur, both Chinese teachers and Mexican students tend to rely on their common second language, i.e. English, for understanding; 5) The overall tendency of the results show that the lower the Mexican students' level of Chinese is, the more likely it is for them to have non-culture-related misunderstandings. In other words, the higher their level of Chinese is, the more likely it is for them to make cultural and mixed-type of mistakes and thus to incur misunderstandings.

This study contributes to the scholarship on miscommunication with empirical data on communication between both non-native English speakers. It provides analyses from cross-cultural perspective of the factors of cultural differences, cultural awareness and foreign

language proficiency to their respective correlation with misunderstanding, including the types, detection, as well as remedy of misunderstanding. Therefore, it adds to the theoretical discussions on the dynamics of miscommunication.

Based on above discussions, the present study has a couple of suggestions for future research and for the practice of foreign language teaching. So far the results seem to prove that culture elements play an essential role in miscommunication, but are not the sole explanation for misunderstandings in intercultural interactions. The findings that even learners at high proficiency levels make culture-related mistakes that cause misunderstandings imply that effective measures should be taken in teaching, i.e. cultural awareness training is a long-term task. The researchers suggest that the emphasis in foreign language teaching should not only be on the target language, but also on the target culture. For example, comparison and contrast of the Chinese and Mexican cultures are important, with a proper amount of mentioning of the English-speaking culture (in this case, the US American culture).

Limitations of the present study lie in that this study could have been more longitudinal. For example, this study could be carried on for 4 years or more by other Confucius Institutes in Mexico and other Spanish-speaking countries so as to compare the results. Also the relatively small number of teachers could be remedied by comparison from other Confucius Institutes. Perhaps a more profound study could also be conducted as to how Spanish has complicated the misunderstandings.

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The study is the result of joint research by the two professors. The present study is supported by the Hanban 2019 Fund for Research in Chinese Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language and Cultural Exchanges.