



Chinese Intercultural Sensitizer

Brief Summary of Study Findings

Overview

This study aimed to develop material for an Intercultural Sensitizer - a type of intercultural training tool that helps individuals from one cultural group (the “learner” culture) to learn to make explanations or attributions for people’s behaviours that are similar to the attributions made by individuals from another cultural group (the “target” culture).

Intercultural Sensitizers are similar to a multi-choice test with instant feedback. They are made up of a series of critical incidents in which a potential misunderstanding between cultures occurs, or in which an individual acts in a way that seems a little unusual for the learner culture. Under each incident, the learners are asked to choose from a selection of possible explanations for what occurred. Once they have made their choice, they are given feedback that lets them know whether their choice was also the most favoured choice for the target culture. By completing many items, the learner begins to understand which explanations are generally most favoured by the target culture.

Although Intercultural Sensitizers have been shown to be effective intercultural training tools, few culture-specific intercultural sensitizers have been developed, and most of the ones that are available are for North Americans as learners. We wanted to create an Intercultural Sensitizer for New Zealand learners, to help them better understand Chinese (in particular, Chinese international students). We think this is important, because New Zealand has a large number of Chinese international students - more than 13,000 per year, according to recent estimates. These students bring New Zealand many benefits, but there are also challenges in terms of intercultural communication.

Approach

Creating an Intercultural Sensitizer is a resource-intensive process, and involves a number of steps. Students and staff from Victoria University of Wellington have been working on this study for a number of years, conducting background research on cultural differences (from literature reviews, analyses of ethnographic studies, focus groups, and interviews), writing incidents, validating the incidents by conducting surveys with New Zealanders and Chinese, and analysing their responses, and refining the incidents in light of the results.

Most recently, we conducted an online survey to test which of 88 draft incidents we had developed would actually effectively discriminate between New Zealanders and Chinese—that is, which incidents produced a set of significantly different answers for New Zealanders and Chinese when we asked each group to select the explanation that they thought was best.



In total, 334 individuals started the online survey. We analysed the responses of 248 of these participants (155 New Zealanders, 93 Chinese) who met our demographic requirements. Their average age was 24, and more of them were female (74 percent of the Chinese, and 60 percent of the New Zealanders). All New Zealand participants were New Zealand-born, but the Chinese were from a number of different countries: 58 were born in China, 19 in Malaysia, 6 in Hong Kong, 5 in Taiwan, and the remaining five in Singapore, the Philippines, and Indonesia. All participants were given the chance to enter a prize draw as a gesture of thanks for their participation in the survey, and the lucky winner received a \$100 grocery voucher.

Overview

When we analysed the survey results, we found that New Zealand and Chinese participants actually selected more or less the same answers for the majority of the incidents. Only 15 incidents showed statistically significant ($p < .05$) differences in response patterns, which were largely (but not fully) attributable to the country of birth (Cramer's V scores ranged from .339 to .477). These differences included:

- Chinese perceiving avoidance of eye contact as polite, and New Zealanders perceiving it as a sign of shyness or embarrassment
- Chinese perceiving minimal but mixed feedback on a university assignment as lacking in constructive critique to help them improve in the future, and New Zealanders perceiving this feedback as disappointing because the positives were counterbalanced by some negatives
- Chinese attributing hard studying to a commitment to meeting family expectations, and New Zealanders attributing it to a competitive attitude
- Chinese attributing a student's lack of class participation to shyness about language skills, and New Zealanders attributing it to a lack of confidence in their own ideas

These differences were very interesting to find, and fit with theories of cultural differences between Chinese and New Zealanders. We plan to use these incidents in an Intercultural Sensitizer that could be used for intercultural training for New Zealand students and university teaching staff, to help them to better understand the different perspectives and behaviours of the Chinese international students who share their classrooms. Ultimately, better understanding could help to improve classroom harmony and enhance the university learning experience for all students.

However, we also wondered why there weren't differences in the answer patterns for more of the incidents. The reason for this may have been that these incidents were not related to areas of true difference between Chinese and New Zealanders, or that they were not worded in a way that elicited clearly different response patterns.

Alternatively, these incidents might have elicited different response patterns with a bigger or different sample - although hundreds of people responded to the online validation survey, the large number of incidents to be tested meant that, ultimately, a small number of people responded to each specific incident. Perhaps these people did not hold (or express) majority or typical "Chinese" or "New Zealander" cultural views, making them less likely to answer in consistent patterns.



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Thus, as with any research, we have answered some questions, but many still remain to be addressed in future research.

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