1 Ethnographic approaches to developing intercultural competence through intercultural interactions in the higher education context in China

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Abstract

With the recent developing trend of redefining 'culture' across disciplines in intercultural and foreign language education (Corbett, 2003; Shaules, 2007; Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2010), it is widely agreed that culture requires a broader definition to improve the teaching and learning of it. Wilkinson (2012) suggests "a redefinition of culture in anthropological rather than aesthetic terms" (p. 302) to ensure that intercultural and language learning leads to Intercultural Competence (IC). Others (Buttjes, 1991; Risager, 2006) also note the importance of anthropological conceptualization when culture is taught in foreign and/or second language classrooms, because motivation to learn the language is increased. Byram (1991) similarly emphasized the need to include active 'cultural experience' in the foreign language classroom, and provided examples including cooking and geography lessons, in which students learn about the food and geography of the country whose language they are studying. A crucial element in research within the anthropology field is ethnography. Thus, to achieve a fuller understanding of culture "as the full gauntlet of social experience that students of foreign languages both learn and participate in" (Wilkinson, 2012, p. 302), including Holliday's (2004) concept of 'small culture', students should take on the role of

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ethnographer too; ethnography practices, in a variety of forms, have become central to intercultural approaches to culture and language teaching and learning (Corbett, 2003).

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1. Ethnography in language and intercultural education

Brewer (2000) defines ethnography as follows:

> "[e]thnography is the study of people in naturally occurring settings or 'fields' by means of methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally" (p. 9).

Ethnography usually involves an extended period of fieldwork, during which the anthropologist-ethnographer immerses herself within the target culture or society and collects data through participation, observation, interviews and analysis of detailed records of everyone and everything observed (Jackson, 2006; Wilkinson, 2012). However, over the past few decades, ethnography has gained currency beyond the discipline of anthropology. Ethnographic methodologies and techniques have been widely adopted and modified in the relatively newer disciplines of cultural studies, media research and intercultural language education (Corbett, 2003). Though it is clear that the construction of ethnographic accounts of culture demand professional researchers with highly qualified training and dedication, many scholars argue that some training in ethnographic techniques, both in the intercultural classroom and during periods of residence abroad, can benefit learners in classes where intercultural events take place to develop their language proficiency and IC (e.g. Corbett, 2003; Du,

2008; Jackson, 2006, 2010, 2011, 2012; Risager, 2006; Roberts et al., 2001; Wilkinson, 2012).

1.1.   Ethnography and language education

Corbett (2003) emphasized the important role of ethnography in language education by illustrating how ethnography influences curriculum planners and materials designers, particularly in English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) teaching. As Corbett (2003) claimed, the adoption of intercultural approaches in the language classroom "demands a new way of thinking about how language works and a new set of goals for the [learners] to achieve" (p. 102), which has led to some forms of teacher development and curricular change. Corbett (2003) further points out that "at this level of language education, ethnography can support more effective innovation" (p. 102). However, Corbett (2003) also warned that any innovation of curriculum which involves a period of ethnographic exploration must "take into consideration the way in which established practices accord status to members of the educational community" (p. 103).

Some practical researchers also show that the adoption of ethnographic activities in ESL/EFL education and training is both doable and desirable if adequate resources are available. For example, Corbett (2003, pp. 105-113) reported that some ethnographic activities (e.g. concept training, cultural associations, negative etiquette, critical incidents) are designed to deepen learners' understanding of cultural acquisition in language classrooms; he made a general distinction between two types of ethnographic activities in terms of learning aims:

> "those [designed to] promote observations and understanding of the target culture with intercultural mediation as a goal, and those activities [designed to] encourage learners to 'think' [ethnographically] like those in the target culture, and to reproduce their cultural behavior" (p. 106).

However, Corbett (2003) also warned that we must be cautious about 'decentring' home cultures when the latter type activities are undertaken because "they are

not meant to deny or substitute [counterparts] of home culture or to imply that one way of thinking is better than the other" (p. 107). One example is that of the 'critical incident', which is increasingly used in intercultural classrooms to train learners "to think ethnographically, to 'decentre' from their everyday habits of thought, and to realize that the ordinary is culturally constructed" (Corbett, 2003, p. 113). Close-ended critical incident exercises were the more commonly used activities to culturally assimilate or sensitize students, but Albert (1995) and Snow (2015) developed a more open-ended critical incident exercise, which they called the 'encounter exercise'. These were, according to Snow (2015, p. 287), particularly useful for building four aspects of IC: (1) awareness of problematic situations and the habit of switching to more conscious thinking modes; (2) considering multiple interpretations; (3) awareness of actors which may negatively impact the interpretation process; and (4) awareness of the benefit-of-the-doubt choice. An example of where this was shown to be beneficial was reported by Roberts, Davies, and Jupp (1992). Workers new to the UK were given training to assist them in finding and keeping work, and during this training students were involved in data collection, interviews, and other tasks that were similar in many ways to ethnography. Indeed, the UK's industrial language training service viewed these kinds of tasks as essential for the effective training of and improving opportunities for the migrant workers.

1.2.   Developing IC in ethnographic pedagogy

In addition to language proficiency, more and more researchers find that the use of ethnography clearly benefits the development of core capacities related to IC, such as empathy, sensitivity, awareness, and critical reflection. Roberts et al. (2001) suggested that ethnography involves "putting yourselves in someone else's shoes", which does not "make you that other person, but [is] a constant reminder to you that the experience, however temporary and unlike you, has become a part of you" (p. 38). Jackson (2006) proposed that the primary goal of ethnography in intercultural education is to develop in learners a deeper understanding of target cultures from the perspective of an insider. Damen (1987) claimed that ethnography in cultural learning provides learners with the dual perspective of understanding a target culture, through one's own cultural

lens and from inside the target culture. To sum up, the 'understanding' that learners gain from their ethnographic experiences leads to an important capacity related to IC – empathy, which does not "imply a compassion for others' plight" like sympathy, but does "indicate the ability to understand the other, to apprehend their point of view and their felt experiences" (Roberts et al., 2001, p. 39). Empathy usually involves a process of social interaction and dialogue, through which learners develop the ability to look at the world from others' perspectives, understanding and apprehending the differences apart from their own, and developing critical reflections on both the target culture and their own.

Du (2008) also summarized two major characteristics, derived from the principles of ethnography, which may promote learners' IC. First, ethnography requires learners to be more sensitive through participatory observation, collecting data inductively rather than deductively in a cross-cultural context. The inductive approach encourages learners to be more cautious and objective, in order to avoid ethnocentric and judgmental views of target cultures. Secondly, ethnography requires researchers to build up "thick, rich description" (Geertz, 1973, p. 125), which not only applies to data collection, but also to data analysis and interpretation. Compared to thin description, a researcher using thick description does not simply focus on describing and interpreting the event itself, but relates the true meaning of the event to its context. In this sense, ethnography can be viewed as "a holistic research method" (Du, 2008, p. 82) through which researchers are intended to increase their sensitivity to and awareness of different contexts through the processes of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The relationship between ethnography and context may lead to some further questions; for example, about power. Agar (1994) noted:

> "[e]thnography always deals with context and meaning […]. But the last fifteen years have taught us to ask another question – what systems of power hold those contexts and meanings in place? […]. You look at local context and meaning just like we always have, but then you ask why are things this way? What power, what interests wrap this local world so that it feels like the natural order of things to its inhabitants?" (p. 28).

Moreover, much recent research has shown links between the theories of 'experiential learning' – particularly Kolb's (1984) learning cycle – with the adoption of ethnography in intercultural education. Kolb's (1984) model suggests a recurring circularity in which experience, reflection, and learning reinforce each other. Although Kolb's (1984) model is not a typical cultural learning theory and has been criticized for its Western assumptions of selfhood (Tennant, 1997), the model is widely applied in different intercultural education and training contexts. For example, Kohonen, Jaatinen, Kaikkonen, and Lehtovaara (2001) expand Kolb's (1984) cycle by including experience, conceptualization, reflection, and application as the central elements that constitute experiential learning in foreign language education. Roberts et al. (2001) claimed that Kolb's (1984) three elements of experience, reflection and learning may also be integrated in any component of an ethnographic program – i.e. the Ealing Ethnography Program (EEP) – in which language learners are trained as ethnographers.

Holmes and O'Neill (2012) noted the importance of links between theory and practice in intercultural education and training by combining three key approaches – experiential learning, ethnographic inquiry and praxis – in her business-management classroom. Based on experiential learning theories and the ethnographic inquiry approach, Holmes and O'Neill (2012) demonstrated the notion of 'praxis' in the global business and management education. Praxis refers to "the need for self-conscious and ethical actions where individuals question their past behavior as well as future possibilities" (Holmes & O'Neill, 2012, p. 474). In practice, students are encouraged to "reframe past behavior, which they have performed and examined in their intercultural encounters within the context of their research tasks" (Holmes & O'Neill, 2012, p. 474).

To sum up, linking ethnography with intercultural pedagogy has been shown to contribute to learners' understanding of these social and intercultural experiences with otherness conceptually, analytically, and emotionally (Roberts, 2003). To this end, ethnography is proposed "as a teaching and learning method" in intercultural education (Wilkinson, 2012, p. 303). Intercultural researchers and practitioners have designed and undertaken small or large-scale projects as effective interventions in different intercultural education contexts.

1.3. Devising ethnographic projects in language and intercultural education

An increasing volume of literature on the intercultural approach encourages learners to undertake larger or small-scale ethnographic projects of various types to explore target cultures (Corbett, 2003; Damen, 1987; Holmes & O'Neill, 2012; Jackson, 2008, 2010, 2011; Roberts et al., 2001). Looking more closely at the example of Roberts et al. (2001), we see a detailed description of the EEP project conducted at Thames Valley University. Language students in this program were trained to be ethnographers over three years in three distinct stages (Roberts et al., 2001, pp. 12-14). Stage one was an introduction to ethnography during their second year of their BA program. Stage two was an ethnographic study conducted during their year abroad, and the final stage was a written report of their ethnographic projects after they had returned to their home university. The first stage involved acquiring ethnographic skills (e.g. participant observation, from data collection to analysis) as well as anthropological and sociolinguistic concepts (e.g. national identities and local boundaries, belief and action) in the expectation that such skills would transfer to investigation of the target cultures when they were abroad. In the second stage, students went to two different countries, each for a period of four or five months. They were required to design and undertake an ethnographic study in one of these countries. In the last year, students were required to write a report based on their ethnographic studies, which were integrated into the curriculum, including assessment of the ethnographic project as part of the final degree award. Roberts (2003) concluded that, for learners,

> "the ethnographic experience provides an intellectual framework, a set of methods and a new orientation to learning from the everyday things of life which should enhance their period of residence abroad and develop a new consciousness for their future work and learning" (p. 128).

More recently, other researchers have conducted comparatively small-scale ethnographic projects in the context of education abroad. Taking an

ethnographic approach, Jackson (2008, 2010, 2011, 2012) did a series of investigations on the language and (inter)cultural development and self-identities of Hong Kong Chinese university students who participated in various faculty-led exchange programs (short-term, semester- or year-long sojourns) in England. She collected qualitative data from semi-structured interviews, surveys, reflection journals, diaries and field notes, and a language use log. The Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) (Hammer & Bennett, 2002) was used to assess students' development of intercultural sensitivity. What she found was that many factors influenced the outcomes, such as how hosts interacted with students, how much effort was put into language development, students' personalities, the amount of socio-emotional support available, and an array of other considerations. Jackson (2012) suggested that experiential activities related to ethnographic tasks or projects should be integral in the design of study abroad programs, in order to help students sustain intercultural contact with host nationals, through which the sojourners can develop "a sense of belonging in the host environment, thereby facilitating both language and intercultural learning and adjustment" (p. 458). In addition, mixed-method studies, which combine qualitative data (e.g. semi-structured interviews, field notes from participant observation) and quantitative data (e.g. IDI), were recommended to be applied in such programs.

Another example was Holmes and O'Neill (2012), who investigated how 35 international students in New Zealand, guided by an ethnographic approach, developed and evaluated their IC over a six-week immersion period with a previously unknown cultural other. The student researchers conducted an ethnographic field work assignment which aimed at "identifying a cultural informant – a cultural other – and participating in the life world of this informant through dialogue and action" (Holmes & O'Neill, 2012, p. 710). The ethnographic field assignments had two key objectives: (1) to help students gain a better understanding of someone from another culture; and (2) through that engagement, develop and evaluate their IC (Holmes & O'Neill, 2012, p. 709). Guided by the Preparing, Engaging, Evaluating, and Reflecting (PEER) model developed by Holmes and O'Neill (2012), the student researchers had to acknowledge many things in the data collection process, such as stereotyping,

confusion, and fear when it came to interacting with others, but through this, and with guidance, they were able to develop IC.

2.   Developing IC through interviews as intercultural interactions in domestic contexts

As mentioned in Wang and Kulich (2015), intercultural encounters, interaction, and experience are crucial for the development of IC (Corbett, 2003), with Stier (2003, 2006) stating that the processual character is often hidden behind the word 'encounter'. Stier (2003, 2006) set IC into two categories: content-competencies (or *knowing that* competencies) and processual competencies (or *knowing how* competencies including the interactional context in which intercultural communication takes place). Alred, Byram, and Fleming (2003) affirmed that, "it is in the interaction with others that we develop" (p. 3) because human beings are social and cultural entities.

However, an encounter with otherness alone does not automatically lead to being 'intercultural'. Alred et al. (2003) distinguish between 'intercultural experience' and 'being intercultural'. The former is "simply a statement of fact", but the latter implies "a more qualitative judgment about the nature of such an encounter" and requires "the awareness of experiencing otherness and the ability to analyze the experience and act upon the insights into self and other which the analysis brings" (Alred et al., 2003, p. 4). Indeed, an international experience alone does not guarantee the acquirement of IC if there are no well-designed interventions before, during, or after a sojourn. A number of studies on both study abroad and intercultural education have shown that immersion in a different culture is not sufficient (even though it is perhaps a necessary) condition to nurture IC (Jackson, 2011, 2012; Paige, Hegeman, & Jon, 2006). In addition to experience, there must also be reflection, analysis, and action. This implies that experience of any kind of otherness can be viewed as intercultural experience if it illustrates the potential for transformation through reflection, analysis, and action (Alred et al., 2003; Jackson, 2010; Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, & Paige, 2009). Program designs that seek to cultivate 'ethnographic

awareness' can facilitate the requisite engagement, analytical, and reflective processes needed to benefit from these intercultural encounters (Wang & Kulich, 2015).

A key part of this method has historically been the interviewing of informants. Intercultural application of 'ethnographic interviewing' (Spradley, 1979; Roberts et al., 2001) is recommended where fieldwork or participatory observation opportunities are not readily available. Corbett (2003) showed that such an ethnographic theme could be furthered developed by focusing on the key tool of 'interview' as a means of exchanging information and collecting data for ethnographic projects. Many others, as listed in Wang and Kulich (2015), have advocated employing 'ethnographic interview' techniques as a culture learning tool in many contexts, such as in study abroad programs (Barro, Jordan, & Roberts, 1998; Jurasek, 1995; Lam, 2006; Roberts et al., 2001), teacher training (Allen, 2000; Byram & Duffy, 1996), and classrooms (Bateman, 2002; Du, 2008; Robinson & Nocon, 1996).

For example, Du (2008) adopted the ethnographic interview approach in a Chinese as a foreign language classroom in the United States to create real cross-cultural contacts with native speakers of the target culture:

> "[s]tudents were first trained in the skills of ethnographic interview techniques, and then arrangements were made for them to conduct two ethnographic interviews on their desired topics over the time frame of fifteen weeks within a single semester. A concurrent mixed methods research design was employed to capture the [development of learners' IC]. The intercultural developmental inventory […] and a custom-designed survey were used [to collect] quantitative data, [while the qualitative data were collected from four sources:] a custom-designed survey, students' reflective papers, final essays, and focus-group interviews" (p. 83).

Lam (2006) designed an ethnographic interview approach for a group of mainland Chinese students in an undergraduate program in a university in Hong

Kong in order to display the in-depth picture of the underlying adjustment difficulties encountered by the first batch of these mainland Chinese students. Two rounds of formal ethnographic interviews were conducted among these mainland informants and their local counterparts in Hong Kong from 1999 to 2000. The findings revealed that, rather than the commonly addressed difficulties such as diet, language, and environment, the mainland students experienced more significant difficulties when they tried "to immerse themselves into the local Hong Kong network where they met major setbacks due to their social and cultural diversity, and most importantly, the different perception of their identity" (Lam, 2006, p. 93).

The ethnographic interview is still a developing field in China. China has developed greatly in the past few decades and an influx of people from countries outside China has meant some cities have pockets of "multicultural and multilingual fields" for leaning (Jordon, 2002, p. 208). This is one area where work could be done, but with the advent of Virtual Exchange (VE), there are many other options available.

3. Challenges of ethnographic approaches to intercultural teaching

The constraints of ethnographic approaches in intercultural teaching, such as intensive labor and the higher costs of such programs, are significant. Learner training to develop "student ethnographers", attaining "others" to carry out the ethnography with, and being able to reproduce the research if required are all part of these difficulties. In response to these challenges, a distinction between 'real' or 'pure' and 'applied' or 'pragmatic' ethnography has been noted in some intercultural ethnographic approach literature (Barro et al., 1998; Corbett, 2003; Hymes, 1980; Roberts et al., 1992).

Hymes (1980) believes we are born ethnographers but we lose the habit of being so. He further suggests that learners can use ethnography to pursue particular interests and careers instead of struggling to become professional ethnographers.

He views ethnography as a continuum, with two poles and an 'in-between' category:

> "as a general possession, although differentially cultivated. At one pole would be a certain number of people trained in ethnography as a profession. At the other pole would be the general population, respected […] as having a knowledge of their worlds, intricate and subtle in many ways […] and as having come to this knowledge by a process ethnographic in character. In between […] would be those able to combine some disciplined understanding of ethnographic inquiry with the pursuit of their vocation whatever that might be" (Hymes, 1980, p. 99)

Though the UK's industrial language training service (Roberts et al., 1992, pp. 171-244) provides an exemplary extensive ethnographic model, even their research team, which included Holliday (1994), was careful to distinguish between 'practical' or 'applied ethnography' and 'full' or 'pure ethnographic' research (cf. Corbett, 2003, p. 104). According to Corbett (2003), applied ethnographers are different from full or pure ethnographers because they intend to: (1) seek an account of a part of a cultural group or community rather than a comprehensive one; (2) submit their data for more applied discourse analysis than real professional ethnographers; (3) have a practical outcome rather than an academic one.

As noted above, the EEP conducted by Roberts et al. (2001) at Thames Valley University benefited from academic integration, legitimacy, and funding. Though the EEP was elaborated carefully and integrated fully into the degree program over three years, the course team distinguished it from 'real' ethnographic research:

> "[t]he students are not intending to become specialists in social anthropology. They are language students who, we hope, will become even better language students as a result of living the ethnographic life […] They need the cultural tools for making sense of new intercultural contacts and experiences rather than positivistic facts about other

> countries, structures and systems which are, despite the text-books' attempts to freeze-dry them and turn them into fresh-looking, digestible items of information, constantly in a process of contestation and change (Barro et al., 1998, p. 97).

It is with this in mind that the research outlined here was proposed. Application of ethnography was a goal, but it is understood that it could not be done as a specialist would do it. Nevertheless, it is useful in strengthening students' intercultural awareness, understanding and, through that, competence.

4. Adoption, design, and details of the ethnographic interview training approach in a higher education context in China

4.1. The IC course at Hangzhou Dianzi University (HDU)

The research took place at a mid-size university on the east coast of China. Each year, hundreds of foreign students and teachers come to the university, and over a thousand home students and teachers study abroad. Therefore, with the recent trend of internationalization and globalization, the IC courses at the university have rapidly developed in the last two decades and have gradually been taken up by students of various levels: undergraduate, postgraduate, and international.

The first intercultural communication course was offered in 2004 to English majors in the School of Foreign Languages, and has been conducted continuously as a compulsory course for more than 10 years. Since 2009, the intercultural communication course has been offered as an important part of the selective English course and has become one of the largest courses (based on intake) for domestic students, attracting more than 1,500 students annually. Meanwhile, with the increase in the number of international students, the intercultural communication course has been offered as a compulsory course for all the international students, such that 500 students take it annually.

The first Master's Degrees (MA) intercultural communication course at the university was established in 2007 and offered to a group of English post-graduates in the College of Foreign Languages. It has since become a compulsory course in the MA program. A well-trained teaching team has been established, including a full professor, four associate professors, and more than ten lecturers, who are making great efforts to conduct and improve IC teaching and education. It is therefore very apparent that the research outlined here was carried out in an environment that is well developed.

4.2.   IC research and projects at HDU

As reported in Wang and Kulich (2015), in the last decade, increased global flows of people, information, and high technologies have made some students' "home cultures" into "multicultural and multilingual fields" for learning (Jordon, 2002, p. 208). Whenever national or 'foreign' boundaries become less clear-cut, home-based learners may more readily encounter 'difference' without having to leave home (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008; Risager, 2006; Wilkinson, 2012). Furthermore, the rise of the internet as a tool for communication and self-expression also increased language learners' interaction with partners from the other cultures through online intercultural exchange (O'Dowd, 2007). On the other hand, we are aware of the fact that there are many students in the mainland of China who face constraints (e.g. limited funding, inadequate study abroad opportunities, less international exposure domestically) to experiences in intercultural diversity. Therefore, the IC team launched a broader program of research, initiated in Chinese contexts, that seeks to develop learners' IC through small, locally-based interview projects that make use of cultural groups or products that are available 'at home' (Wang, 2016; Wang, Deardorff, & Kulich, 2017; Wang & Kulich, 2015).

With the awareness that younger generations are more familiar with e-life, some scholars suggest that intercultural understanding can happen not only in the obvious cross-cultural interactions abroad, but also 'at home', through virtual online intercultural exchange (O'Dowd, 2007; Merryfield, 2007). The IC team made great efforts to develop the MOOC Course and a blended learning online

platform for the IC course (Miao & Wang, 2014). Since the fall of 2016, the intercultural communication course has been active on the Zhejiang Institutions of Higher Learning Online Open Course Sharing Platform[3] every semester, a platform which includes most of the top online courses from universities and colleges in the Zhejiang province of China. The intercultural communication course provides various resources for students, such as short video lectures, case studies, discussion forums, and intercultural practices and activities. As of October 2020, the course has run eight times and attracted more than 5,000 students from over 50 different universities and colleges all over China. The course was nominated as a Gold Online Course in Zhejiang province in 2019.

The IC research teams has also made great efforts in cooperating with partners from different countries through international projects including RICH-Ed[4] and other international VE projects. The RICH-Ed program aims at supporting Chinese universities in creating learning environments that empower students and staff for global engagement. To this end, the project sets out to define a pedagogical approach for intercultural learning, and to develop learning resources for students and support staff that will be tested at five Chinese partner universities and elsewhere in the Yangtze River Delta and North-east China[5]. As one of the Chinese Coordinators, our IC team took on a leadership role in the first working package, 'preparatory analysis and training', and worked closely with partners on the other seven working packages to provide rich resources for interculturality in Chinese higher education. This shows that the team involved in this research was well qualified to carry it out.

4.3.   Procedures

In a previous paper, Wang and Kulich (2015) outlined in detail how we adopted and designed our ethnographic interview training approach. In brief, we wanted students to have intercultural encounters with "others" from a different

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3. https://www.zjooc.cn/ucenter/teacher/course/build/mooc

4. Resources for Interculturality in Chinese Higher Education is an Erasmus+ CBHE Project (2017-2020).

5. http://www.rich-ed.com/riched/index.php?s=/home/index/index.html

culture. We encouraged students to develop ethnographic awareness and deeper understanding of the relationships between 'self' and 'others'. The procedure we asked students to follow was:

- reflect on and write up one's "Own culture story";
- choose a target cultural group and informant(s) representing that group;
- do library or Internet research on the groups to prepare interview topics;
- establish and extend relationships by sharing "Own cultural stories";
- carry out "friendly conversations";
- write reflective journal entries;
- conduct formal interviews; and
- review the process and write up a final development report.

As noted, the details of this procedure can be found in Wang and Kulich (2015), but needless to say, there is much involved in ensuring this process is successful.

4.4.   The training process

To assist students to successfully conduct the project, ten training sessions were included, and the total training time was more than 350 minutes. The training sessions were organized by the researcher and his teaching assistants, and took place during or after class. The objectives of the training sessions were to (1) acquaint students with the project and ethnographic approaches to intercultural communication; (2) provide students with an overview of the practices and attitudes of the "ethnographic interview approach" and how to apply them in their own project; (3) guide students to conduct their own project as the procedures suggest (e.g. how to write 'My cultural story', select self-representative pictures, find 'Other culture' partners, make preparations for interviews, and structure observational and reflective thoughts in the post-interview journal and final report writing); and (4) cultivate a degree of 'ethnographic awareness' that would improve learners' IC. The training materials were carefully selected from IC textbooks, training guide books, and IC academic papers written by renowned IC and ethnographic scholars such as Corbett, Holliday, Pederson, Holmes, LeCompte, and Schensul.

There were six themes in the ten training sessions: (1) Introducing the project and training sessions, (2) My own culture story writing, (3) The Ethnographic approach to intercultural research, (4) Finding an e-partner for online interviews, (5) Face-to-face communication, and (6) Designing and conducting an intercultural interview. The training session details follow.

A 30-minute in-class instructional training session was arranged in week one to ice-break and introduce the objectives and procedures of the project, and the arrangement of the training sessions as a whole. Course syllabus, project instructions, and the proposed session plan were stated clearly and distributed to students at the very beginning of the course program.

In weeks 2 and 3, two 30-min training sessions were offered after class each week to discuss how to organize and write the first assignment of the project – 'My own-culture story'. In the training session in week 2, students were instructed to overview the 'My own-culture story' and finish one reading chapter, *The story of the self,* which was selected from the textbook *Intercultural communication: an advanced resource book for students,* written by Holliday, Hyde, and Kullman (2010). The chapter includes some short reading passages about personal stories and identity construction. Holliday et al. (2010) also designed three intercultural communication research tasks in their chapter, to "develop reflection and strategies for action which will increase learners' awareness about how they may approach intercultural communication" (Holliday et al., 2010, p. 229). Under the teacher's guidance, students were required to accomplish "Exploring age", "Interpersonal factors" and "Interview as cultural interaction" respectively in the training session. In week 3, another chapter from the Holliday et al.'s (2010) book *Becoming the self by defining the other* was assigned to students with three intercultural communication tasks ("Contrasting yourself with others", "Signaling my characteristics" and "How you manage your identity"). Students were encouraged to understand deeply how culture shapes personal identity by contrasting themselves with others. These intercultural communication tasks were ethnographic in approach through which students were expected to (1) be critically aware of how culture shapes their personal identities; (2) increase their ethnographic interview knowledge and skills as an intercultural

communicator; and (3) understand the etic and emic levels of cultural analysis through contrasting themselves with others.

Two training sessions were conducted in weeks 4 and 5 to introduce the ethnographic approach to intercultural communication. In week 4, one 90-minute training session was arranged to help students become familiar with what ethnography is and how an ethnographic project can be designed in intercultural communication. Before the training session, students were asked to read two book chapters (Chapter 1: *What is ethnography,* and Chapter 5: *Choosing and designing an ethnographic research project*) in LeCompte and Schensul's (1999) book *Designing and conducting ethnographic research*. The key points in these chapters were highlighted in the training session. In addition, the case study outlined by Holmes and O'Neill (2012) above to demonstrate how an ethnographic approach was applied to develop learners' IC was given as a further reading. The PEER model developed by Holmes and O'Neill (2012) was also introduced to students in preparation for the future data collection process.

In week 5, another 30-minute training session was arranged for the second part of "The ethnographic approach to intercultural communication". This training session focused on how to collect and analyze ethnographic data. Chapter 6 (*Collecting ethnographic data*) and Chapter 7 (*Data analysis: how ethnographers make sense of their data*) from LeCompte and Schensul's (1999) book were selected as the reading materials. Students were organized to discuss how they applied what they learned in the training sessions to their projects. Students' first-hand feedback and suggestions were taken into consideration for further discussion.

In order to guide students to select their interview partners and build successful relations, two 30-minute training sessions were organized in weeks 6 and 7. The training materials from these two sessions were selected from Corbett's (2010) IC textbook *Intercultural language activities*. The training session in week 6 was designed to give practical advice on setting up computer-mediated intercultural exchange, finding an e-partner for the interview project, and developing online discussions. Students were instructed to read the chapter *Setting up an online*

community (Corbett, 2010) and finish three specially-designed activities in the chapter: (1) *setting up an online intercultural exchange* teaches learners how to organize an online collaboration with appropriate e-partners elsewhere; (2) *describing an e-partner* helps learners establish relationships with their e-partners; and (3) *starting and developing an online discussion* offers practical suggestions on how to start and develop successful online discussions. In addition, the websites and technological platforms for online exchanges were introduced to students to help them locate an e-partner located in another country.

Different to the topics on online exchanges, the training session in week 7 focused on face-to-face communication to help students establish and extend relationships by sharing 'own cultural stories' and carrying out 'friendly conversations'. Three activities from Corbett's (2010) chapter *Face-to-face* were included in this session: (1) *sharing stories in conversation* focuses on sharing their selected pictures and own culture story highlights as an aid to getting started, opening up, and eliciting reciprocal responses; (2) *supporting talk* is designed to raise awareness of verbal communication – "the impression that the learners are giving to other speakers through their management of support talk" (Corbett, 2010, p. 88), such as 'back-channelling'; and (3) *exploring non-verbal communication* is designed to raise awareness of non-verbal communication such as eye contact, body language, and gestures.

To ensure that the interview project was appropriately conducted, three important training sessions were arranged from week 8 to 10. They served to introduce what ethnographic interview skills are and how these techniques can help learners better understand perspectives from different cultures, as well as providing guidance on selecting interview topics. In week 8, a 45-minute in-class training session included a general introduction to ethnographic interviews and two practical activities from Corbett's (2010) book chapter *Interviewing – developing interview questions* and *Following interview questions*. Students were asked to practice two important ethnographic interview skills: developing interview questions, and eliciting information by asking follow-up questions. In addition, a list of questions (more than 100 questions from nine topics) designed by Pederson (2004) was distributed to students as a guided resource for their

interview project. The list includes topics such as social customs, family life, housing, clothing and food, class structure, political patterns, religion and folk beliefs, economic institutions, arts, and value systems. Although these questions were much more than any interview could cover, they provided potential interview topics and the structure for a comprehensive interview.

In weeks 9 and 10, two more 20-minute in-class review sessions were carried out, with practical activities to help students become more familiar with ethnographic interview techniques. *Exploring assumptions* was arranged in week 9 to focus on how learners might interpret their interviewees' unspoken assumptions. *Preparing an online interview* was arranged in week 10 for the students who were arranging an online interview. Students were again guided on how to best proceed and respond to this type of online interview interaction, through practical training. In addition to the face-to-face training sessions in and after the class, an online environment was created to offer resources and interaction between the teachers and students.

4.5.   Online environment for teacher-student interaction

The online environment consists of two main tools for accessing materials, participating in activities, and processing training for the course project; they are the course blog and the discussion forum.

The course blog is a space on the web where teachers can write and publish (post) about a topic or topics. Different from traditional websites, blogs provide instant 'type-n-click' communications, which can be done anywhere, anytime and from any browser (Dooly, 2007). Obviously, blogs encourage teacher-student discussion and interaction as they allow for comments to be posted.

The course blog is on the most popular blog platform in China – Sina Micro blog[6], which functions as Twitter does in the West. One important function of the course blog is to collect and share case studies of intercultural communication

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6. http://weibo.com/u/2421784760

between teachers and learners. Learners were required to collect at least one case related to intercultural communication from the media or their own experiences and offer their feedback and analysis of the case. After communicating with learners and examining the appropriateness of the cases, the teacher sends the cases to all the course learners though the micro blog.

There are now more than 360 active micro blog fans, most of whom were course students who had been enrolled within the last five years (since 2015), and about 460 IC case studies have been recorded in this online IC course community. Distance students who do not meet face-to-face have been communicating about their experiences in the course, and they comment on the new case studies every semester. The blog has been an "intercultural home community" for all the enrolled students in the course.

Like blogs, online discussion forums can promote discussion and reflection between students and their teachers. The discussion forum of the course was established through a QQ group, a very popular online instant messaging/chat system for the young generations in China, which is often used as a means for complementary interaction between students and teachers for posting materials, clarifying, and further explaining the lecture points, mentioning deadlines or items in the class agenda, or organizing online discussions.

Since the launch of the course in 2016, most of the online interactions have been included in the platform. On the platform, participants could read or download all the requisite materials (course syllabus, training plan, reading materials, appendix, etc.) and a weekly overview of the lectures and training sessions, provided by the teachers and their assistants. In addition, the forum hosted online discussions that took place as part of the training activities during the course's 16-week duration. The online discussions were used to guide the learners to organize and conduct the course project, where teachers and students could communicate, discuss, and coordinate the relevant projects. A final point to make is that student feedback on this was very positive – indeed, another whole chapter could be given over to cover this, but suffice it to say that students enjoyed the activity greatly.

5.   Conclusion

The chapter highlights the value of a descriptive and reflective intercultural ethnographic interview approach as an intervention and means of developing IC, which is particularly effective in the higher education context in China. In recent decades, more intercultural researchers and practitioners have come to believe that the use of ethnography has clear benefits to the development of core capacities related to IC, such as empathy, sensitivities, awareness, and critical reflection (e.g. Corbett, 2003; Du, 2008; Jackson, 2006, 2012; Roberts et al., 2001; Wilkinson, 2012). Though there have been some criticisms of time-limited curricula's ability to implement procedures that are adequately 'ethnographic', the training process in the course outlined here was designed carefully with the aim of cultivating 'ethnographic awareness' in order to facilitate the requisite engagement, analytical, and reflective processes needed to gain full benefit from the intercultural encounters. Corbett (2003) suggests that learners should be encouraged to "live the ethnographic life" (p. 116). Even for those learners who have limited access to native speakers and target cultural products, the basic materials for 'pragmatic ethnography' (someone to talk to and some events to observe) are available to some degree (i.e. via technology). The trainers can develop learners' ethnography skills through 'decentering' activities that analyse the home culture, and make imaginative use of the available cultural resources (Corbett, 2003, p. 116).

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