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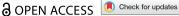
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ABSTRACT

This article thematically analyses 65 written reflections on 'British' culture by Chinese science and engineering students on a short course on intercultural communication at a UK university. Teaching centred on a 'critical incidents' approach (Brislin, 1986), Gibbs's 1998 (2013) 'cycle of reflection' and Holliday's (2016) non-essentialist concept of cultural 'blocks' and 'threads'. Student reflections evidence 'block' thinking, arguably inherent in 'critical incidents', yet some present promising 'threads'. The study contributes to an understanding of student outcomes of short-term study abroad and advances non-essentialist pedagogies in intercultural competence.

本文主題分析了中國理工科學生在英國大學跨文化交際短期課程中對'英國'文化的 65 篇書面反思。教學以'關鍵事件'方法（布里斯林，1986 年）、吉布斯 1998 年（2013 年）的'反思週期'和霍利迪（2016 年）的文化'障礙' 和'線程' 的非本質主義概念為中心 。學生的反思證據'阻礙'了思考，可以說是'關鍵事件'中固有的，但有些人提出了有希望的'線索'。該研究有助於了解短期出國留學的學生成果，並推進跨文化能力的非本質主義教學法。

Introduction

This article critically deconstructs established approaches to teaching intercultural communication. It traces the temporal trajectory from Brislin's (1986) 'critical incidents' approach to intercultural training to Holliday's non-essentialist theoretical perspectives (Holliday, 2016; 2020). It also critically evaluates Gibbs's 'cycle of reflection' 1998 (2013) when applied to intercultural contexts. As educators teaching a short course on English language and intercultural communication at a UK university, we critically reflect on our curriculum and pedagogy, while analysing student outcomes. Our study contributes to current debates within the fields of intercultural communication and competence with the aim of developing more nuanced pedagogies to teaching these skills on short courses abroad.

Context of the study

Intercultural competence in China

Intercultural competence has been championed by international institutions such as UNESCO (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2013) and the Council of Europe (Brotto et al., 2012; Council of Europe, n.d. a) over the past decade to promote world peace, democracy and global citizenship within an increasingly globalised and diverse world.[1] Within a Chinese context, Chinese Higher Education policy has also recently recognised the importance of intercultural competence, particularly within the field of foreign languages, as part of the country's economic opening up (Jia et al., 2019). Intercultural competence is now integrated in the Chinese Ministry of Education's 'National Standards' which guide English language education in Chinese universities (Holmes et al., 2022). Chinese national educational advisory boards, the National College Teaching Advisory Board and the National Foreign Language Teaching Advisory Board also recognise the importance of intercultural competence (Holmes et al., 2022). The RICH-Ed (2021) project, funded by the European Union, supported Chinese universities in creating a learning environment to support global engagement, which included the development of intercultural competence for staff and students. Moreover, the Chinese Ministry of Education estimates that their national policies regarding intercultural competence reached over 41 million students and their teachers at 2,738 educational institutions in 2020 (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2021 in Van Maele & Jin, 2022).

Study abroad: Chinese students in the UK

Within this context of the promotion of intercultural competence in China, study abroad in the UK is popular among Chinese students. Before the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2021, Chinese students were the largest group of international students in the UK. In 2019/20, more than a third (35%) of all international students studying in the UK from outside the European Union were from China (Higher Education Student Statistics [HESA], 2021). Moreover, numbers of Chinese students studying in the UK increased by 51,140 or 56% (more than half) in 5 years (2015/16 to 2019/20) (Higher Education Student Statistics [HESA], 2021). As part of a general disruption to student flows during the COVID pandemic, numbers of Chinese students fell due to the travel restrictions imposed during that period. According to the UK Home Office (UK Government [GOV.UK], n.d. a), the number of sponsored study visas issued to Chinese nationals accounted for 32% of the total of such visas granted in the year ending March 2021 (87,611), but that this was 26% lower than in March 2020 (118,386). With continued localised lock downs (Orr & Zhang, 2022) and corresponding travel restrictions within China (UK Government [GOV.UK], n.d. b) now lifted, we wait to see if numbers will return to their pre-pandemic highs. However, Chinese students are still the largest national cohort of international students, reflecting the continued attractiveness of the UK as a destination for undergraduate and postgraduate study. This includes short-term study abroad whose stated aim is to improve students' English language and intercultural communication over a stay of several weeks. It is this type of course that we are researching in this paper and more details are provided below.

Student outcomes of study abroad

While university promotional materials often claim to develop students' intercultural communication and competence, there is a lack of research evidence reporting on student outcomes in this field (Bloom & Miranda, 2015; Choi & Bae, 2022).

One of the assumptions behind short-term study abroad programmes (including the one forming the basis of this study) is that students will improve their language and intercultural communication skills by being immersed in the 'target language' and 'culture'. However, this is questionable on several grounds. As Humphreys and Baker (2021, p. 260) state, such courses 'risk essentialism in the treatment of local culture as fixed knowledge to be learnt, neglecting variation among individuals, as well as the multilingual and multicultural realities of many programmes in international

university settings'. The literature shows that studying alongside students from other backgrounds is not enough in itself to achieve intercultural learning (Spiro, 2014).

The English language and culture short course
The English language and culture study abroad programme took place over 3 weeks in July 2019 at Northumbria University in the north of England. The 70 students were first-year undergraduates aged between 18 and 21. They were from three partner universities in mainland China and were studying science and engineering. Taken at face value, the groups were monolingual and monocultural,[2] though classroom discussions revealed that they represented several minority ethnic groups.[3] The students had taken a pre-departure English language test and their levels ranged between IELTS levels 4 and 6 and were grouped accordingly. They were not tested on their intercultural competence.

The universities' promotional rationale behind the course was to develop the students' English language and intercultural communication skills through an immersive experience in 'British' culture and contact with 'native speakers'. However, we see this as problematic for several reasons, not least the timing of the course, since most local students were not on campus in June. Furthermore, the host institution in this case is an 'internationalised' university; according to its website in 2022, 23% of the students were international students, originating from 136 countries. The largest group, representing 29% of international students, is from the People's Republic of China. The Engineering Department, where the students in this study would spend their third year following the short course reported here, is particularly diverse, so while all programmes are taught in English, the cultural and linguistic environment is very varied. Therefore, the 'Chinese' students on this course would not necessarily have the opportunity to interact with 'native speakers' of English on campus. Perhaps most importantly, the 'native speaker' is a contested construct, privileging a small number for whom English is their first language (Davies, 1991; Holliday, 2006). We concur with Humphreys and Baker (2021) that in short-term study abroad the persistent fixation on the 'native speaker' and corresponding 'target culture' overlooks the rich opportunities for intercultural communicative competence and intercultural learning within international communities.

Input on 'culture' and 'intercultural communication' was given through weekly lectures, followed by seminars and supported by reading materials and workshops on reflective writing. Brislin's (1986) 'critical incidents' approach to intercultural interaction and Gibbs's 1998 (2013) model of learning by doing, which owes much to Kolb's (1984) notions of experiential learning, were central to the course curriculum. With reference to these models, students were encouraged to observe the 'local culture' as they went about their daily lives during the sojourn. They were also asked to reflect on any differences they noticed, or any misunderstandings which occurred in any intercultural interactions. They were encouraged to think about why these misunderstandings occurred or why they were shocked or surprised by their experiences and to reflect on what they had learned from these encounters.

This approach follows other projects in intercultural competence training (see 'The 3R Tool', Spencer-Oatey and Davidson (2018) and Spencer-Oatey et al. (2022)), in that students were asked to generate their own 'critical incidents' from their observations and interactions. They were able to do this because they were experiencing the 'culture' around them at the time. In other training situations (often pre-departure), 'critical incidents' are prepared and students asked to discuss and reflect on their possible reactions and actions within imagined, future/potential scenarios (for an example of this situation, see Dong et al. (2022)).

The authors, who were teaching on the course, felt that its approach to culture was somewhat essentialist, or could lead to/reinforce essentialist perspectives. To provide a more nuanced approach to 'culture' and its interpretations, we introduced some non-essentialist perspectives into some of the pre-existing reading materials and classroom discussions.[4] Drawing on Holliday (1999; 2016), we deconstructed the concept of 'culture', introducing the idea of 'small cultures' (1999, p. 237) as well as the concepts of 'cultural blocks' (2016, p. 316) and 'cultural threads'

(2016, p. 340) as ways of thinking and talking about 'culture', which are associated with essentialism and non-essentialism, respectively.

Definitions of intercultural communication, competences and competence

The terms 'intercultural communication' and 'intercultural competence' are employed both separately and together throughout this article. We use the term 'intercultural communication' as the title of the short course in our study because its original aims linked language learning with effective communication within the target culture. In this respect, the pedagogic context of our course is similar to Byram's original (1997) framework for teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence within the field of foreign language teaching. His (1997, p. 1.) definition of the term 'intercultural communicative competence' emphasises the negotiation of difference and the connections between language and culture, namely: 'a person's ability to relate to and communicate with people who speak a different language and live in a different cultural context'.[5]

We follow Byram's revised (2020, pp. 40–81) 'Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)' as conceptualising 'competence' which embraces a wider set of knowledge, attitudes and values that go beyond verbal communication skills. UNESCO's definition of intercultural competence attests to this wider sense of competence, relating to abilities to adeptly navigate complex environments marked by a growing diversity of people, cultures, and lifestyles (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2013). Deardorff (2006a) defines intercultural competence as 'the ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills and attitudes that lead to visible behaviour and communication that are both effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions' (p. 243). Her (2006b, p. 480) 'Process Model of Intercultural Competence' encompasses 'individual' 'attitudes', ' knowledge' and 'comprehension' and moves from 'internal outcome(s)' to 'external outcome(s)' through 'interaction'.[6] Students are encouraged: 'to listen, observe and evaluate; to analyse, interpret and relate', to develop intercultural competence. Students in this study were guided through a similar process, recording and reflecting upon cultural encounters in their writing. The course itself aimed at inputting 'knowledge' and 'attitudes', and the writing task assessed the internal outcome (a shift in thinking from essentialist to non-essentialist) of reflections on 'external' outcomes within the critical incident.

Research focus and questions

Our study explores the students' constructions of 'British' and 'Chinese' culture at the end of their 3-week study abroad programme, through a critical analysis of their written reflections in response to the end of study assessment task. We are interested in whether the non-essentialist perspectives we, as teachers and researchers, integrated into what was a predominantly essentialist pedagogy might have influenced their thinking about 'culture'. Thus we analyse the students' reflections, through the lens of Holliday (2016), and consider how these relate to 'block' (p. 319) and 'thread' (p. 340) thinking. This study therefore contributes to non-essentialist pedagogies by an in-depth analysis of the students' conceptualisations of 'culture' as an outcome of short-term study abroad, which are lacking in previous studies, as noted above (Bloom & Miranda, 2015; Choi & Bae, 2022).

Our research project posed the following questions:

1. What are the students' understandings of 'culture' at the end of the study abroad programme, as expressed in their written reflections?
2. How have the pedagogical approaches employed on this course influenced students' understanding of 'British' and/or 'Chinese' culture?
3. Is there evidence of 'block'/ 'thread' thinking? (Holliday, 2016, p. 319 and p. 340).

The students were given an end of study writing task to complete which consisted of an individual, short (150–250 words) piece of reflective academic writing. The writing was not assessed in terms of

pass/fail or a numeric grade, but qualitative, formative feedback was given. Students were asked to write about a (critical) cultural incident which had an impact on them and how this made them reflect on their cultural experience and the differences between their culture and British culture. Critical incidents were defined throughout the course and in the writing task guidelines as incidents that were significant to them. These were events that made them stop and think, that raised questions, perhaps prompting them to question an aspect of their beliefs, values or behaviour. Such incidents could relate to issues of communication, knowledge, treatment, relationships, emotions or beliefs.

Literature review

(Non) essentialist conceptualisations of culture

Within the above frameworks, it is important to note a shift from the thinking of 'culture' linked to 'language' and embedded in the nation state (e.g. the interconnected concepts of 'French' (language), 'the French' (people/nationality) and 'French culture') to more fluid and disruptive interpretations and approaches. Here we turn to Holliday's (2016) concept of cultural 'blocks' (p. 316) and 'threads' (p. 319). He argues that approaches to culture based on the nation state/nationality can create 'blocks' which suggest that differences are unsurmountable. Holliday recognises and celebrates the complexity of 'culture' and individual's complex cultural trajectories which bring people together via 'threads'. It is his non-essentialist approach that provides the theoretical backbone to this article.

As mentioned earlier, through the lens of Holliday (2016; 2020), many mainstream models of culture are considered 'essentialist' on the grounds that they are based on national cultural profiles, which are used to explain perceived cultural difference and predict attitudes and behaviour. These often originate in Cross-Cultural Management Studies and are grounded in Hofstede's (1980) influential model of the five dimensions of culture, which is still widely used, despite criticisms that it is over simplistic and presents a static and deterministic notion of 'culture' (Långstedt, 2018). While softer neo-essentialist models purport to be neutral, Holliday (2020) points out that there is an implied East/West power imbalance rooted in colonial relations, particularly in the widely cited individualist/collectivist dimension of 'culture'. Holliday draws on the work of post-colonial theorist Edward Said's 1978 (2003) concept of 'orientalism' in this regard.

In contrast to large, national cultures, Holliday (1999) introduced the notion of 'small cultures', defined as 'small social groupings or activities, wherever there is cohesive behaviour' (Holliday, 1999, p. 237). This approach recognises the complexity of cultural environments and individuals and their agency. Research in this area is often qualitative as it explores individual experience, complexity and nuance in the way we think and talk about culture and how cultural identity is negotiated in interaction. There is greater emphasis on the self rather than the 'other' through critical self-reflection (Holmes et al., 2016; Zhou & Pilcher, 2018).

Non-essentialist modes of thinking are encapsulated in Holliday's (2016, p. 340) concept of 'cultural threads' where individuals seek common experiences and interests with others by drawing upon their individual cultural trajectories. Sharing and coming together around common threads is made possible by the universal cultural sense-making processes we develop through socialisation. Essentialist and softer 'neo-essentialist' modes of thinking are captured in the opposing concept of 'cultural blocks' (Holliday, 2016, p. 319). Holliday (2016, p. 318) argues that while 'cultural block' thinking can co-exist with an acceptance of diversity, this conceptualisation of culture continues to emphasise cultural difference. This in turn can lead to the idea that national cultural boundaries are 'uncrossable' (Holliday, 2016, p. 318) and limit intercultural communication to an appreciation or tolerance of otherness, while implying that one cannot move in and out of different cultural environments or live in more than one without entailing cultural loss (Holliday, 2016).

While essentialist or neo-essentialist thinking may dominate and be the default mode (Dippold et al., 2019; Zhou & Pilcher, 2018), research suggests that we do not rely on one way of thinking in

order to explain intercultural experiences, but rather alternate between essentialist and non-essentialist modes. Zhou and Pilcher's (2018) study saw students 'fall back on' essentialist modes of thinking when faced with difficulties in intercultural group work, while Amadasi and Holliday (2018) suggest that the two forms are a competing means of sense-making. Dippold et al. (2019) look for the potential in moving from 'blocks' to 'threads' (Holliday, 2016, p. 318), although this does not mean that this is a linear process. Although 'thread' thinking perhaps requires more effort, Amadasi and Holliday (2017) suggest that it ought to be encouraged, as it helps to move away from stereotyping and cultural prejudice and is thus more conducive to positive intercultural relations.

Teaching culture in the short course

The idea of teaching intercultural communication through a discussion of 'critical incidents' is based on Brislin's (1986, p. 215) 'culture general assimilator'. This is a bank of a 100 generic scenarios which describe cultural misunderstandings with the aim of providing pre-departure training to North Americans travelling abroad for study or business or working with immigrant communities. This approach is based on, by the author's admission, the 'major assumption (…) that there are commonalities in people's cross-cultural experiences' (Brislin, 1986, p. 223). Critical incidents are categorised according to sojourners' assumed commonalities of experience of difference: 'emotional experiences, knowledge areas, and the bases of cultural differences' (Brislin, 1986, p. 224). Under the category of 'knowledge', there is a list of characteristics which are imposed on other cultures to better understand differences: 'work, time and space, language, roles, group/individual, rituals and superstitions, hierarchies (class and social status), values' (Brislin, 1986, p. 224). 'Work, time and space' and 'group and individual' are categories that are particularly pertinent to our study, as they are called upon by the student writers to interpret the incidents they describe. After Holliday (2020), we argue here that the student writers interpret these categories in implicitly hierarchical and essentialist ways.

Since Brislin (1989), less essentialist approaches to teaching intercultural competence have evolved, the Council of Europe's 'Autobiography of intercultural encounters' (Byram et al., 2009), the IEREST (Atabong et al., 2015) and RICH-Ed (2020) projects and Deardorff's 'story circles' (2020). The Council of Europe's 'Autobiography of intercultural encounters' (Byram et al., 2009) is particularly relevant to our study in that prescribed 'critical incidents' have evolved into student generated 'intercultural encounters'. While these encounters may still be based on 'difference', the concept of culture is widened from experiences of 'difference' 'abroad', to encounters at home. Students are guided through a cycle of reflection very similar to Gibbs's 1988 'experiential learning cycle' (2013, p. 15), but are questioned about similarities as well as differences in their experiences of perceived 'others', as well as being asked to imagine the thoughts, feelings and motivations of that 'other' within the encounter. In our study, students generated their own 'critical incidents' within the theoretical approaches to 'culture' introduced in the course and guided by examples of such incidents.

The use of prescribed critical incidents also persists as cases to prompt discussion within intercultural training and education. For example, critical incidents are included in English textbooks for Chinese university students as 'participation activities' (Jin & Cortazzi, 2017, p. 30). Moreover, 'purpose designed' critical incidents, inspired by the RICH-Ed approach, were employed in training events for staff in three Chinese universities in Dong et al. (2022, p. 584) recent study. In these training workshops, the incidents prompted classroom discussions that encompassed non-essentialist ideas.

To provide a more nuanced approach to the potentially essentialist 'critical incidents' method of reflecting on intercultural experiences, the authors introduced Holliday's ideas of 'small cultures' (1999, p. 237) as well as the concepts of 'cultural blocks'(Holliday, 2016, p. 319) and 'threads' (p. 340) as ways of thinking and talking about 'culture', which are associated with essentialism

and non-essentialism, respectively. In this paper, we argue for further development of non-essentialist approaches both within and beyond 'critical incidents'.

Students were also introduced to a cycle of reflection which was modelled on Gibbs's 1988 'experiential learning cycle' (2013, p. 15) (which is based on Kolb's (1984) theories on experiential learning) to critically reflect on their chosen critical incidents for the end of course written assessment. Our adapted cycle (which chimes with Deardorff's 2006b, p. 480, 'Process Model of Intercultural Competence') encouraged students to structure their reflections in four stages; Record (describe the incident); Reflect (think about the incident and how it made the participant feel); Analyse (try to explain and give reasons for the incident) and New Action (propose a different course of action in the future).

While our teaching centred on the classic models of reflection outlined above, more recent critical perspectives on self-reflection as a pedagogical approach can be found in the literature. Blasco (2012, p. 475) urges educators to exercise caution regarding a positive bias towards this approach, pointing to three specific issues of this 'Western', 'Cartesian' perspective on the self: that the self is accessible and transcendable, that reflexivity is universal across space and time, and that the self can act as its own remedial change agent or 'inner consultant'. Zhou and Pilcher's (2018) study, which also analyses students' written critical reflections on intercultural group work at university, found that some students produced perfect models of critical self-reflection and resultant learning, which appeared to be instrumentally motivated to pass the assignment.

Methods

We take a qualitative, social constructionist approach to our research which embraces the ontological view that social phenomena (in the case of this study 'culture') is socially constructed rather than an objective reality (Bryman et al., 2021).

Data collection

All students on the English language and culture programme were invited to take part in the study, by consenting to the researchers who were also their teachers, to analyse their response to the end of study assessment task. The assessment was not high stakes – it was not graded, and it did not lead to pass/fail, though written feedback was given. Ethical approval was granted by the University's ethics committee (Northumbria University Ethics Committee, reference number: 17578). 65 of the 70 students consented to take part. Participants were given an information sheet about the project and a consent form detailing the terms of consent, namely that they could withdraw consent at any time and that their data would be securely stored and fully anonymised. The average length of the written reflection was 200 words. Details of the participants are given in section 'The English language and culture short course' above. We have given each writer a pseudonym to protect their anonymity.

Data analysis

Our analysis of the students' reflective writing was influenced by an inductive thematic approach (Bryman et al., 2021), where themes and patterns emerged from the data, allowing them/it to 'speak for themselves/itself' (Bryant, 2014, p. 125). However, we were also aware of critiques of inductive approaches, principally that 'theory-neutral observation' of data is impossible (Bryman, 2016, p. 580), because researchers cannot deny their (prior) knowledge of relevant theories (Bulmer, 1979 in Bryman, 2016). Following the procedure outlined by Braun and Clark (2006), we visited our data several times, coding it in terms of conceptual and descriptive components that we considered to have a bearing on our research questions. As we moved between the data and the literature, we

Table 1. Overarching critical themes by percentage and prevalence.

	Overarching critical themes	Percentage and prevalence
1	Feelings arising from critical incident	27% (46)
2	Difference (comparison UK and China)	23% (39)
3	Explanation (generalisations)	21% (35)
4	Value judgements (positive or negative on 'British' or 'Chinese' culture)	12% (20)
5	Learning from 'British'/UK	11% (18)
6	Deficit (or mistake on part of Chinese)	5% (9)
7	Similarities (comparison UK and China)	1% (2)

Table 2. Overview of 'block' and 'thread' thinking by percentage and prevalence.

'Block' thinking	71% (120)
'Thread' thinking	29% (49)

moved away from semantics, to a focus on meaning in context, therefore the analysis is rich and interpretive (Braun & Clark, 2006). Finally, we developed overarching critical themes.

To avoid being influenced by personal preference in presenting our findings, we counted the frequency of these themes and present our data by prevalence, as can be seen in Tables 1 and 2, where the themes and their frequency of occurrence are expressed as a percentage of the coded responses, followed by the number of instances in the coded sample, drawing on Van Maele et al. (2016).

Results and discussion

Given that our model of reflection (Gibbs, 2013) provided the structure for the task, most students organised their reflections accordingly, describing what had happened, attempting to explain why it had happened, saying how they felt about it, and then stating what they had learned from the experience and what they would do differently in the future.

We note the assumption on the part of the student writers that the people they are observing and interacting with are 'British'. In some cases, the writers refer to those observed/interacted with as 'foreigners', which we in turn interpret as those people who are not 'Chinese' (like the writers). This homogenising binary of self and 'British'/'foreigner' reflects Said's (1978/2003) theorisation of binary thinking. Overall, it can be seen that 'block thinking' dominated the findings, however, this is predictable given the material, tasks and approach, which tend to encourage such thinking, as we have argued above (Brislin, 1986; Långstedt, 2018). This is not to mention the wider global context in which the nation state and research based on corresponding national stereotypes, such as Hofstede (1980) dominate. It is therefore not surprising that some of the themes themselves, noticeably 'deficit' or 'learning from the British' suggest an East/West power imbalance in the students' constructions of 'Chinese' and 'British' 'culture' (Holliday, 2016). The authors/researchers were only able to integrate some non-essentialist perspectives into the course, therefore, that 29% of the reflections suggest the students have taken this on board is a positive outcome, not unlike the results of other studies in the field (Dippold et al., 2019; Zhou & Pilcher, 2018).

We will now analyse the critical themes indicated in Table 1, following its order of prevalence while analysing the pieces through Holliday's (2016) perspectives on cultural 'blocks' (319) and 'threads' (340) (Table 2). We note that the 'critical incidents' embody intersecting themes which contain both 'blocks' and 'threads' and also that in deciding where the boundaries lie, at times involves a subjective judgment on the part of the researchers.

Critical themes

Feelings arising from critical incident

Many writers expressed feelings of confusion, embarrassment and awkwardness when faced with situations where they felt it was difficult to communicate, coupled with feelings of relief and attributions of kindness and friendliness to 'British' people who helped them through these situations.

> A few days ago, I went to shopping with my friend (…) In the end, we used gestures and movements to get our points across. The fact that the shop assistant could not understand us at most of the time made me feel awkward and embarrassed. I realized that my spoken English was very poor through this experience. And there is no doubt that I need to improve my accuracy, fluency and coherency in English. I really appreciate the shop assistant's kindness and patience. (Jia Li)

The writing of this incident would not seem to be describing an overtly 'block' relationship with the 'British' shop assistant, indeed, there are 'threads' of kindness and support. However, there is an unspoken hierarchy implied in this relationship with the 'other'; the writer describes herself as being 'deficient' (Holliday, 2020), she notes that her 'spoken English (being) very poor' and that she needs to improve. She appreciates the kindness of the other from a position of deficit. This theme will be taken up later in this section. Deficiency is also theorised by Said (2003), within West/Non-western binaries, with non-Western cultures being defined as deficient against superior Western norms. This theme will be taken up later in this section.

Difference

'British people/culture' are/is largely described in terms of being in a dichotomous relationship with the ('Chinese') writers, in terms of 'difference' of behaviour or motivation behind behaviour.

When interpreting an incident while queuing, the writer comments:

> While I was at the market (…) I saw a man paying, so I went behind him, then I heard a lady calling me, "I'm at the back of him you should later me", I was very confused at that time, because she's miles away from the man, why she doesn't stand near him? (Haoyu)

The writer concludes that the conception of space in Britain contrasts markedly to that in China:

> … in China, next to the queue is very common, but people in Britain prefer a sense of distance, they respect their privacy and protect the privacy of others. (Haoyu)

The writer compares queueing habits to those in China and although he is not overtly negative about Chinese habits, he assigns a positive value judgement to negotiating personal space to British culture, perhaps indicating cultural 'block' and hierarchical thinking Holliday (2020; 2016). Again, Said (2003) notes that Western cultures are held to be superior to non-Western ones.

Another example of difference is shop opening and closing times. In China, shops are described as being open until late in the evenings. This time structure is interpreted as reflecting a dichotomy between work and life, as described in the following reflection (Qiang):

> As Chinese people spend more time on their careers, the British devote more time to family, friends and themselves.

Here we wonder if this statement implies a value judgement, and if so, whether Chinese or British culture is seen as being superior here.

Explanation (generalisations) and value judgements

The examples below hinge on generalisations about 'British' people and behaviour, which jump quickly to value-laden conclusions concerning the cultural difference noticed.

In the following reflection, the writer observes that young women's dress in the UK is 'more open and sexy' compared with Chinese girls of the same age, who 'dress more modestly, although there are also some girls who dress fashionably'. This difference is explained by a broad reference to 'history' (Chu Hua):

> First of all, it is caused by the historical factor. Britain pioneered modernization in the 18th century, while China was still in feudal period. Most Chinese girls are deep influenced by old thoughts. British women are exposed to openness and freedom earlier than Chinese. Secondly, it is also related to their attitudes toward the beauty. Chinese regard moderation as beauty so they would not choose clothes that are too bright or sexy. But the British girls prefer to show their feminine curves and charms. So it is no wonder that Chinese clothing is closed and implicative.

We note the evidence of 'block' (Holliday, 2016, p. 319) thinking here in the emphasis on historical distance between the two cultures, while searching for explanations and attempting to avoid value judgements. However, as Holliday (2020) argues, value judgements are implicit in any cultural comparison. So the writer describes 'feminine curves and charms' as opposed to 'closed and implicative', but we are left wondering which, if any quality, is preferable (or indeed, superior).

However, there is also evidence of 'thread' thinking (Holliday, 2016, p. 340): the writer concludes that 'Culture is made up of many factors, so it is good to find cultural differences' and 'Different cultures make the world wonderful' suggesting she is open to/ positive about cultural diversity, albeit within a paradigm of difference.

In another reflection, Bao places 'East' and 'West' in a direct dichotomy:

> The openness and innovation of the west and the modesty and humility of the east have their own places.

This seems to suggest cultural 'block thinking' (Holliday, 2020) whereby 'East' and 'West' have their respective strengths; they may both be appreciated, but there is a strong sense of an insurmountable boundary between the opposing cultures (Holliday, 1999). We are unsure if there is a value judgement being made here, and if so, which is qualities are preferable/superior, but the writer concludes:

> As you live in two cultures, you come to realize the hidden secrets. Beauty represents itself with diversity and integrity, so I will bring beauty into my life, and take the moon in the west and the sun in the east with me in the future.

This is an indication that the student is thinking in terms of 'cultural threads' (Holliday, 2016, p. 340). The placing of these two seemingly opposing views side by side could mean that the student is moving between the two positions and suggests that the thread will be taken forward into the future in the spirit of learning from his experience of studying in the UK.

Learning from 'British'/UK deficit

The student writers often imagined themselves in a teacher/student relationship with the UK and 'British' culture. This relationship may seem inevitable since the task was set up as a reflection on learning. However, it can also be argued that our writers see themselves in a hierarchical student/teacher relationship which reflects 'East/West' (and by extension 'developing'/developed') binaries (Said, 2003).

Within this relationship of teacher/student, the writer often positions themselves as lacking, as being 'deficient' (Holliday, 2020; p. 46 after Said, 2003) when faced with situations made unfamiliar by being in the other culture. Again, perhaps this can be explained by the constructs of the task itself, one of learning from intercultural experiences, but the data appears to show our writers adopting a humble attitude to the other culture, one in which they are the deficient party.

For example, one writer, Ming, describes 'foreigners' ('British') disposing of their trays of rubbish at a fast-food restaurant (which the reader assumes that people are not required to do in China) in the following, highly value laden, terms:

> After the experience of summer school, I admire the high quality of foreigners. I decide learn more from the foreigners and manage to become better and better.

Another writer (An) describes 'British' manners in a dichotomous relationship with Chinese, whom he describes in terms of 'lack/deficit' (Holliday, 2020; p. 46 after Said, 1978/2003):

> I have often heard in China that Britain is a civilized country where people are all gentlemen. In its simplest form, almost anyone will say thank you often. You don't see that in China. I think this is a place where Chinese people should learn from. It is very polite and very friendly. What Chinese people lack is politeness and kindness.

In a similar vein, another writer displays a humble attitude to learning. She not only intends to copy 'British' manners when she returns home, 'When I come back to China I will remember these manners and try to use them in my daily life. I think it is helpful not only for myself, but also for others'.

Similarities

There were only 2 reflective pieces out of the sample of 65 where 'British' people and/or their behaviour were presented as being overtly 'the same as in China'. These two pieces describe crossing the road without waiting for the pedestrian crossing light to turn green if there were no cars nearby. The writer (Li Jie) of one of these concludes:

> Maybe I am not be known about the traffic rules of the UK, therefore, to make my impression is wrong. But it let me have a nice feeling about the British. Because at least we have something in common of the different culture.

This can be seen as an acknowledgment that her previous assumptions were incorrect, indicating an openness to 'threads' thinking (Holliday, 2016, p. 340). However, there is greater evidence of 'threads' thinking within the students' writing (as seen in the examples above).

Conclusion

Limitations of the study and future research

A limitation of the study was the time that the students had to experience the host 'culture' due to the short duration of the course. It could be argued that this made it challenging for them to gain a deep understanding about what they have experienced. However, perhaps we can challenge the assumption that time has an effect on understanding of culture. For example, there is anecdotal evidence that Chinese (and other international) students have limited contact with 'UK' students and do not integrate with 'UK culture'. With this in mind, it would be interesting to track students' interpretations of intercultural encounters across a longer time frame in a future study.

The pieces of writing were short (up to 200 words) and we cannot say if the reflections would have been 'deeper' or 'richer' if they had been longer. What we do know is that the students chose these incidents and reflected on them in their words, which we analysed without making subjective value judgements about the writers' quality of analysis.

The study was also limited by the lack of opportunity to discuss the 'critical incidents' with the writers themselves. It was also limited by language; the critical incidents were written in English, in which the participants' level was between IELTS levels 4 and 6. Future research could ask for reflections in the participants' first language, or indeed offer participants a choice of language in which to reflect. Interpreters and translators would be an integral part of the research team (although translation also brings its own challenges and limitations). Participants could be asked to reflect on the possible role of language choice on their reflections.

Pedagogical challenges

While some might reflect that the persistence of essentialist thinking present in the student writers' reflections indicates that the course was a failure, we think that this result is indicative of the pedagogical challenges inherent in a short course. We also note that the largely essentialist 'results' may not have been a result of our teaching, but of other influences in our students' education and lives. In conducting this research, we have had the opportunity not only to reflect on the structural limitations of teaching intercultural competence on a short course, but also to imagine delivering such a course differently.

One of the assumed challenges for short courses abroad is the perceived narrow time frame and lack of sustained contact with people from the target language and 'culture'. It could be argued that this limited students' choice of 'critical incidents' to observable phenomenon and transient interactions. It may also have led students to jumping to conclusions about 'other' cultures based on prior assumptions and 'block' thinking (Holliday, 2016, p. 319). However, it is also important to note that more extended stays may have yielded similar results, with a continued lack of contact

with assumed to be 'British' people and 'culture' (see Spiro, 2014) and continued 'block' thinking (Holliday, 2016, p. 319). We argue here that the challenge is not the context but the framing of 'culture' in terms of 'critical incidents', which leads to conceptualisations of 'culture' in terms of 'difference' or 'blocks' (Holliday, 2016, p. 319).

The 'cycle of reflection' (Gibbs, 2013) is also a well-recognised way of structuring personal thinking on social and professional interactions. We argue here that its employment as a way of reflecting on culture in a study abroad context is problematic as it risks establishing a relationship of student/teacher between the reflector and the culture being reflected on. This is particularly troublesome within 'East'/'West' binaries, where the reflector may position him/herself as being deficient. Reflectors are led to this position by a task that is predisposed to focusing on 'mistakes', from which they will learn to change their behaviour. Another challenge is how to address this potential power imbalance. Again, we argue that it is the framing of 'culture' that needs to be addressed here. We also argue that educators could assume a more equal position with students, sharing their own reactions and reflections on everyday interactions.

Moreover, the 'cycle of reflection' model when it is applied to intercultural situations, asks reflectors to explain their actions/reactions and/or to offer explanations for the behaviour, actions and perceived attitudes of cultural 'others' in terms of 'culture'/ 'cultural difference'. This requirement may lead students to fall back on assumptions and 'block' thinking (Holliday, 2016, p. 319; Dippold et al., 2019) which imply value judgements (of deficit and cultural superiority).

With these findings in mind, we feel it is vital to move away from pedagogies which establish and continue essentialist models of culture. As our findings suggest, Holliday's (2016) ideas on 'blocks' (p. 319) and 'threads' (p. 340) present a positive way forward in conceptualising the ebb and flow between essentialist and more fluid thinking about culture.

We propose that non-essentialist models of culture are introduced to students as an integral part of course design as way of opening up perspectives on culture. While the Council of Europe's 'Autobiography of intercultural encounters' teaching materials (Byram et al., 2009), the IEREST project (Atabong et al., 2015) and the RICH-Ed project (2021) are underpinned by non-essentialist models of culture, the literature on short-term study abroad discussed above suggests there is more to be done to encourage this approach in this context.

We suggest that the curriculum designers should be intercultural educators with a deep understanding of the debates around 'culture' explored in this paper.

Doing 'culture' differently: suggestions for future short courses

Some of our own suggestions for future courses would be:

- An initial class could deal with stereotypes, with students' ideas or words storming 'British' stereotypes to 'get them out of the way'. These could then be revisited throughout the course to see if students' ideas have changed/or if they can start to challenge these. These lessons could also include Chinese stereotypes, but perhaps this would be more sensitive and would need some consideration. Our purpose as educators is to be inclusive and not to offend.
- Examples of intercultural encounters that focus on similarities in experiences, rather than differences, to open up ideas of 'threads' thinking. Students could be encouraged to discuss their own experiences in terms of threads. Students would not be asked to explain 'incidents' in terms of culture, or indeed at all, as interpreting seems to lead to 'block' thinking.
- Reflections by instructors on their identities, positionalities and reflections on social interactions to break down possible perceptions of instructor/student hierarchies.
- Social and cultural activities that focus on common interests, rather than 'stereotypical' UK cultural pursuits/cultural differences.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our analysis suggests that many popular pedagogic approaches and course materials tend to encourage essentialist conceptions of culture and 'block thinking' and this is largely supported by our findings. However, the introduction of some non-essentialist perspectives into the course may be associated with the non-essentialist perspectives evidenced in almost a third of the student reflections. We believe this is a good direction to move towards, to improve intercultural understanding which values equality, diversity, inclusion and social justice. We argue that we as educators need to continue thinking of ways promote non-essentialist approaches to enhance intercultural communication and competences in a diverse and dynamic world.

Notes

1. The authors note the potential 'Western'/Eurocentric bias of approaches to intercultural competence. For non-Western perspectives, see numerous chapters in 'The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence', Deardorff (2006b).
2. Dervin (2011) makes the point that 'Western' researchers essentialise 'the Chinese student' abroad and argues for more dynamic approaches to conceptualisations of 'culture'. Grimshaw (2010) argues against essentialist representations of 'Chinese' students as part of 'a homogenised collective'. In addition, Feng (2009) argues against prevalent binary representations of 'Chinese' and 'Western' educational approaches as 'Confucian' as opposed to 'Socratic' and suggests that 'Chinese' students forge a 'Third Space' (after Bhabha, 1994) during periods of study abroad where they flexibly adapt to their educational contexts.
3. Dong et al. (2022) note the diversity of social, geographical and ethnic backgrounds within the cohorts in their study of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) training.
4. Pre-existing reading materials included an article summarising E.T. Hall's contributions to the field of intercultural communication (Kulich & Condon, 2015) and articles on culture shock and intercultural communication (Kulich, 2015a; Kulich, 2015b).
5. In his revised edition (2020) he adds, 'That context can be in another country or in one's own, since most countries are multicultural, multi-ethnic and multilingual'.
6. Deardorff (n.d.) herself admits that the possible role(s) of language in intercultural competence is absent from this model.

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