

The Influence of Gender on the Intercultural Communication between Chinese Students and German Teachers

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Abstract—Along with the increasing number of Chinese students go abroad to study, the communication between Chinese students and foreigners become a popular topic. Many types of research considered Chinese students as a whole group and were mainly centered on their language abilities. However, little research has been paid attention to the difference between Chinese students and focused on the significance of gender in their communication with foreign teachers. Therefore, this study attempted to explore the influence of gender on communication in the academic context by studying Chinese students and German teachers as research subjects. The research methods were composed of questionnaire survey and interview. Findings showed that the communicative traits based on gender difference did influence the communicative process of Chinese students. Female students were motivated by emotion and relationship in communication with German teachers, while male students were goal-oriented. Besides, German teachers were unaffected by their gender in communication with Chinese students.

Index Terms—gender difference, cultural difference, intercultural communication, communication concerns, Chinese students, foreign teachers, German teachers

I. INTRODUCTION

With the ever-increasing cooperation and exchanges between China and Germany in multiple areas of cooperation, the communication between Chinese and German has become a hot topic of increasing concern among many scholars. Especially in the field of higher education, more and more studies are focusing on Chinese overseas students and attempting to explore their problems and concerns while studying abroad. As an important component of the learning process, the communication between Chinese students and German teachers in the academic context is a topic worthy of discussing, which, however, has been carried out by a little research.

Besides, although many internal and external factors may affect the process and quality of communication, gender as a basic internal but critical influencing factor of communication is always overlooked. Gender is essential in communication because “gender is learned, whereas sex is innate” [1]. Sex distinguishes the biological

classifications of a person while gender indicates a person’s behavioral and psychological traits associated with one’s biological sex, which is defined by his/her cultural context.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to find out what kind of role does gender play in the communication between Chinese students and German teachers in the academic context. The purpose of this study is to explore the answers to the following three questions:

- 1) Does the gender difference affect the communication process between Chinese students and German teachers?
- 2) If yes, how does the influence of gender difference embodied in their communication?
- 3) What are the culture-related reasons behind the scene?

In the end, suggestions will be provided according to the results obtained from data analysis.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

A. Participants

Two target groups were involved in this study, namely Chinese students in Germany and their German teachers.

A total of 123 Chinese students (69 male and 54 female), who enrolled in Justus-Liebig-University Giessen (JLU) and Technische Hochschule Hessen (THM) at all the academic levels, participated in this study. 10 of them volunteered for the follow-up interviews. Table I presents the status of Chinese participants.

Besides, through the introduction of Chinese students, 34 German teachers (29 male and 5 female) agreed to participate in this study. Among them, 4 professors indicated a willingness to participate in the follow-up interview.

B. Instruments

This study combined the research methods of questionnaire survey and interview investigation.

The questionnaires of Chinese students included six sections, containing: 1) an introduction to this study; 2) four open-ended questions in relation to their concerns in communication with German teachers in class and in one-on-one conversation; 3) individual background information; 4) 16 questions based on Likert-scales with respect to communication concerns in class; 5) 22

questions according to Likert-scales in regard to communication concerns in one-on-one conversation; 6) an inquiry for the contact information of their German teachers and an invitation for the follow-up interview. Particularly, the questions in section four and five of the questionnaire were developed on the basis of the "Teacher Communication Concerns Model" of Staton-Speicer (1983) [2] and Feezel & Myers (1997) [3].

The questionnaires of German teachers were designed based on the similar structure and content of the questionnaires of Chinese students, except for a slight modification, with the purpose to enable a comparative analysis between two groups.

A series of follow-up interviews were conducted with both groups after the questionnaires returned in order to find out the potential reasons for the problems reflected in the questionnaires.

C. Data Analysis

First, the quantitative data obtained from the section four and five in the questionnaire, and the qualitative data collected from the open-ended questions and follow-up interviews were classified based on the coding system of this study. As shown in Table II, the coding system is a two-dimensional data array consisting of two kinds of data classification standards, categorization of concerns and potential causes, respectively. The categorization of concerns stands for the source of communication concerns and includes five categories: 1) communicator him/herself; 2) task of communication; 3) reaction of the opposite of communication; 4) non-communication concerns; 5) no concerns in communication. The standard of potential causes refers to the capacity-and culture-based communication barriers and are grouped into four types: language competence (listening and speaking), academic knowledge, emotion (verbal and non-verbal behavior) and perception.

Next, the sorted data were subjected to the descriptive statistical analysis. Gender of each group was used as an

independent variable for the analysis of variance in order to verify the relationship of communication concerns between the genders. The level of confidence was set as .05 for determining whether differences noted were real or attributable to the accident.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Results of Analysis

As shown in Table III, the results of overall mean of female Chinese students were higher than that of male Chinese students and the relation approached significance at the .05 level ($p=.016$). In terms of other domains of communication, female Chinese students expressed significantly higher concerns than the male students in almost all communication domains ($p<.05$). In particular, the concerns related to the opposite side of the conversation ($p=.004$) and cultural perception ($p=.009$) showed the highly significant levels. Only the task-related communication concerns were not different between female and male Chinese students ($p=.055$). Thus, it can be seen that gender played a certain function in the communication of Chinese students. Compared to male students, female students were usually much more anxious than male peers in communicating with German teachers. But it is worth noting that task-based communication gave rise to both female and male students a similar degree of concerns.

Compared with the results of Chinese students, the findings of German teachers presented a different result. No significant differences were found between male and female German teachers among all communication domains (Table IV). This result states that the communication concerns of German teachers were unaffected by their gender. In other words, the variable of gender did not play a decisive role in causing varying degrees of concerns of German teachers in communication with Chinese students.

TABLE I. STATUS OF CHINESE PARTICIPANTS

Status	Full time study (09.2012- 09.2014)				Completion of studies (till 10.2013)			Gender		
Type	JLU			THM	Exchange Program (2012-2013)	Enrolling between 2008- 2010 in JLU		M	F	Sum
	BA	MA	PhD	Diplom		in China	in Giessen region			
Participants	6	63	30	5	5	20	3	72	60	132
Total	99			5	28					
Acceptable	6	60	28	5	5	16	3	69	54	123
Total	94			5	24					

TABLE II. DATA CLASSIFICATION AND CODING STANDARD

Categorization of concerns	Potential causes of concerns
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Communicator him/herself - Task of communication - Reaction of the opposite - Non-communication concerns - No communication concerns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capacity-related concerns: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Language competence (Listening & Speaking) - Academic knowledge Culture-related concerns: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personal emotion (Verbal & Non-verbal behavior) - Cultural Perception

TABLE III. ANALYSES OF VARIANCE FOR THE CONCERNS OF CHINESE STUDENTS WITH RESPECT OF GENDER

Research Domains	Overall	Situations		Concerns categories			Capacity-based barriers		Culture-based barriers	
		In Class	Alone	Self	Task	Opposite	Language	Knowledge	Emotion	Perception
P value	.016	.041	.010	.016	.055	.004	.038	.022	.041	.009
Mean (M)	2.885	2.928	2.854	3.038	2.642	3.095	2.707	2.554	2.871	3.197
Mean (F)	3.186	3.199	3.177	3.339	2.900	3.475	2.988	2.911	3.115	3.542

TABLE IV. ANALYSES OF VARIANCE FOR THE CONCERNS OF GERMAN TEACHERS WITH RESPECT OF GENDER

Research Domains	Overall	Situations		Concerns categories			Capacity-based barriers		Culture-based barriers	
		In Class	Alone	Self	Task	Opposite	Language	Knowledge	Emotion	Perception
P value	.134	.157	.130	.101	.132	.132	.224	.090	.228	.076

B. Reasons behind the Scene

John Gray (1992) [4] in his book describes that men and women are so different in many aspects that “men are from Mars and women are from Venus”. They hold different values, approaches to things and views toward the world as they live on different planets. Throughout the previous psychological studies on gender and communication, some common male stereotype traits can be portrayed as rational, dominant, forceful, self-confident and unemotional; and women are generally considered as sentimental, affectionate, mild, sensitive and emotional [5]-[7].

Without exception, such different gender stereotypes between male and female also reflect the common phenomenon of communication features between Chinese men and women. Particularly, due to the domination of male-centralism in the old Chinese society for a long period of time, such different stereotype traits between genders become even more evidently compared to Western countries [8]. Gender is learned from enculturation. The gender stereotypes of Chinese men and women naturally embody the characteristics of Chinese culture. Cao Xueqin in his famous classical novel “The story of the stone¹” described that women are made of water while men are of mud [9]. This metaphor reflects not only the physical but also the psychological differences between men and women. In modern Chinese literature, similarly, women are usually compared to water and men are likened to the mountain. Women are naturally soft and amiable, whereas men are strong and fearless [10]. Though water and mountains are mutually interdependent, the different characteristics and traits of each side cannot be ignored. Therefore, Chinese female students were more sensitive and emotional in communication than their male peers, which resulted in their high level of concerns. Some students described their communication with German teachers in this manner.

“I (female) feel that my Chinese male peers are more active, or rather brave, than Chinese female peers, including me, when communicating with German teachers. Maybe guys are not that sensitive as girls.

(S01)”

“I do not feel I (male) have any serious communication problem with my German supervisor, neither in group meeting nor in private talk. Sometimes it is inevitable that we misunderstood each other because my imperfect English. But I do not think this will cause concerns between us. (S07)”

“Before I (female) want to say something to my German teacher, especially in class, I usually think through the possible reaction of my lecturer in advance in order to reduce the level of my embarrassment as much as possible. (S03)”

Specifically to the findings in this study, different communication traits between male and female Chinese students can be embodied in three aspects: communication styles, the manner of communication and influence strategies.

To begin with, the reason that male and female students had different ways to communicate with one another, known as communication style, was because they view the purpose of communication from different angles, which in turn resulted in different approaches to a conversation. Some statements of Chinese students reflected in this regard.

“It is normal for me (male) if I have some problems with the communication with my German adviser, such as I used the wrong verb or did not understand my teachers immediately. I don’t think this really matters or influence on me negatively. The most important thing is that I catch the main purpose and content of the conversation. (S07)”

“I (male) only care about what and how my adviser wants me to do the tasks. The rest of information in our communication I normally automatically ignored. (S08)”

“I (female) want to give my lectures good impression of me during our communication. Therefore, I am always sensitive when talking with them. (S03)”

“For me (female), the conversation itself (with my adviser) is important. I can maintain relationship and connection with my German teachers during our talk. Sometimes I also like to share my private things with my teachers, such as my family and job experiences. (S04)”

It can be perceived from the statements quoted above that while female students were expected to improve self-recognition and enhance the relationship with teachers by using communication as a tool, male students tended to consider conversation as a method for the results and outcomes they quested for. In other words, female students were normally process-oriented as they

¹ *The Story of the Stone*, also called *Dream of the Red Chamber*, written by Cao Xueqin in the middle of the 18th century, is one of China's Four Great Classical Novels, which describes a love story between two young people under the background of four families' prosperity and decline vicissitude.

define the quality of communication by the relationship and the impression they established and maintained, while male students mainly lay emphasis on the final result they achieved in conversation and normally neglected the details of the communicative process [11], [12].

Different communication styles further resulted in different manners of communication between male and female students. Since female students valued highly relationship and interaction during the process of communication, they were expressive, social-emotional and tended to use tentative and polite language in conversation in order to give German teachers a good impression [13]. Conversely, male students were more likely to be objective and independent in communication and preferred to use assertive and conclusive means of communication to achieve tangible results.

It was because of the unlike communication styles and manners between male and female Chinese students, the approaches that they attempted to respond to, and then, in turn, affected their German teachers were eventually dissimilar. Compared with male students, female Chinese students more commonly used emotional influence strategies in communication with German teachers, particularly with the teachers of the same gender. They liked to rely on interpersonal relationships and emotional resonance to influence teachers in communication and further to achieve personal aims. Differently, male Chinese students, on average, were more inclined to apply unemotional influence strategies in conversation and manifest themselves as impersonal and rational [14], [15]. Some students described their relationship with German teachers this way:

"I (female) think that it is a good way to build a close relationship by digression in communication, such as sharing with my private things, especially with my female teachers and peers. This is common in a Chinese university. A good relationship is half done. (S08)"

"Most of the time, I (male) went the points directly with my supervisor in our conversation. Just to judge the matter as it stands. I don't like to involve sentimental things in a talk. (S07)"

In addition, there are still two points with respect to Chinese students need to be explained. First, since this study emphasized on the common concerns in the communication between students and teachers, some special influencing details such as situational circumstances and individual characters were not considered. Besides, both male and female Chinese students expressed a similar level of concerns in regard to the task-related communication. That is to say, for Chinese students, there was not a direct causal relationship between gender-based communicative behaviors and task-based communication concerns.

Last but not the least, on the basis of the results of German teachers, teachers of both genders did not show a significantly different level of concerns in communication with Chinese students. This phenomenon does not mean that the sexual characteristics of German teachers were not evident in communication. However,

this can be explained that German teachers usually did not add personal emotion and preference in communication with Chinese students and attempted to treat both male and female students fairly and equally [16]. Although male and female Chinese students had unlike approaches to conversation and showed differing reactions, German teachers seemed more focus on the content of communication rather than be affected by the mode of communication and reactions of students. The statements of German teachers also supported this view, such as two teachers expressed below:

"I treat every student equally without discrimination. I do not change my ways of communication according to female or male students. (G02)"

"In view of the different background of culture and language, I am more patient with Chinese students than with German students in communication. But I do not differentiate between male and female Chinese students because I consider them as a group. (G04)"

C. Limitations

Considering the number of participants in Germany, 123 Chinese students and 34 German teachers represented a sample of fairly small size. In other words, the findings cannot be readily generalized to the populations of all Chinese students and German teachers in Germany. Moreover, many teachers recommended by their Chinese students did not participate in the study, which led to the imbalance in the two samples and could have further affected the results of the data comparison between the two groups.

Besides, according to the low response rate of German teachers, a self-selection bias was evidently represented in this study. On the basis of the data obtained from German teachers, it is not difficult to find out that these teachers who participated in the research survey and returned their questionnaires soon to the author tended to care more about their Chinese students. As a result, the responses of these teachers were culturally sensitive and understanding. They endeavored to accommodate the communication deficiencies of Chinese students in order to stimulate the study enthusiasm of students. Hence, accordingly, the responses of their Chinese students also showed positively.

A more inclusive sample is suggested to future research, which could be realized by involving participants from more than one university so that the external validity of findings would be enhanced. Besides, in order to increase the answer rate of research participants and minimize the self-selection bias, the cooperation between future research and departments of university is recommended.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study has investigated the influence of gender on the communication between Chinese students and German teachers in the academic situations, and further analyzed the potential reasons from the perspective of culture. The findings of this study revealed the different approaches and attitudes toward communication between

male and female Chinese students, which resulted in their different responses and behaviors in communication. Female students were more likely to be motivated in communication by emotion, whereas male students tended to be guided by the goal of conversation. However, although it is reasonable that German teachers were used to treating male and female Chinese students equally, the communication with Chinese students would be more effective if teachers can take into account the different communication traits between male and female students in conversation. The results of this study can also be applied for reference for the students from other Asian countries.

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