Influence of Chinese International Students’ Intercultural Communicative Competence to Their English Proficiency in the U.S.

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With an increasing number of Chinese international students who come to study in the United States (U.S.), they inevitably meet problems or difficulties related to language barrier, educational experiences, cultural adaptation, and social interaction. The purpose of this study was to investigate the perspectives and understandings of Chinese undergraduate international students about their English proficiency in the U.S., as well as examine in what ways do their intercultural communicative competence influence their English proficiency in the U.S. To serve the purpose of this study and to address the research questions, individual interviews, public document analysis, and photo analysis were applied in this study. Three themes were identified from the data, which included being courageous to start or join the conversation, finding common interests or topics during the communication, as well as being respectful to the social norms and avoiding disputes. This study is relevant to Chinese undergraduate international students in the U.S., professors who interact with Chinese international students in the U.S. universities, college and language preparation programs, student affairs colleagues, as well as policy-makers for this issue.

Keywords: Chinese international students, English proficiency, intercultural communicative competence

Introduction

In the academic year of 2018 to 2019, 369,548 Chinese students (including undergraduate, graduate, non-degree, and optional practical training program students) studied abroad in the United States (U.S.) (Institute of International Education, 2019). For the 10th consecutive year, China remained the largest source of international students study abroad in the U.S., accounted for 33.7 % of international students in the U.S. (Institute of International Education, 2019). Due to the differences among language, culture, social structure, and political ideology between China and the U.S., Chinese international students study in the U.S. inevitably meet problems and difficulties during their adaptation to American university life (Dong & Chen, 2015; Lin, 2013; Wang, 2011; Zhou, 2012).

Common problems exist in Chinese international students in the U.S. can be divided into several categories: language barriers, educational experiences, cultural adaptation, social interaction, and communication (Dong & Chen, 2015; Lin, 2013; Wang, 2011; Yan & Berliner, 2009; Zhou, 2012). Problems and difficulties in students’ English proficiency and academic study which included students having difficulty
understanding class lectures and after class readings, not being able to actively participate in class discussions, having difficulty in communicating with professor and classmates, also lack of adequate writing skills (Lin, 2013; Wang, 2011; Yan & Berliner, 2009; Yuan, 2011). On the other hand, Chinese students in American universities also report having problems adapting to a different culture, social interaction, and making friends with American students (Dong & Chen, 2015; Lin, 2013; Yuan, 2011).

Intercultural communicative competence serves as an important skill for Chinese international students to adapt to American university life and achieve academic success (Spitzman, 2014). Intercultural communicative competence refers to the ability to “effectively and appropriately execute communication behaviors that negotiate each other’s cultural identity or identities in a culturally diverse environment” (Chen & Starosta, 1998, p. 241). Ruben (1976) identified seven dimensions and foci of intercultural communicative competence which included the capacity to be flexible, to be nonjudgmental, tolerance for ambiguity, respectfully communicate, personalize one’s knowledge and perceptions, the ability to display empathy, and the capacity for taking turns.

The conceptualization understanding of intercultural communicative competence includes cross-cultural adjustments, personal adjustment, intercultural understanding, and satisfaction with overseas experience (Gudykunst & Mody, 2001). Intercultural communicative competence is important for students adapting to a different culture and prepare them as global citizens studying and living in multicultural environments (Wu, 2015; Zhi, 2015). International students in colleges who possess intercultural communicative competence are capable of adjusting themselves in different cultures and being involved in the interaction with professors and other students, thus influencing their English proficiency, academic achievement, and overall well-being in the U.S. (Wakefield, 2014).

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perspectives and understandings of Chinese undergraduate international students about their English proficiency in the U.S., as well as examine in what ways do intercultural communicative competence influence their English proficiency in the U.S.

Research Questions

There are the research questions as below:

1. In what ways do Chinese undergraduate international students’ intercultural communicative competence influence their English proficiency in the U.S.?

2. What are the issues about the English proficiency for international students from non-English speaking countries?

3. What are the perspectives and understandings of Chinese undergraduate international students about their English proficiency in the U.S.?

English proficiency and intercultural communicative competence are essential aspects for international college students from non-English speaking countries to get involved in the U.S. The investigation of Chinese international students’ intercultural communicative competence in influencing their English proficiency could provide references to international students themselves, college and language preparation programs, and college instructors to incorporate intercultural communicative competence into their curriculum.
Methodology

This study employed a single instrumental case study to obtain an in-depth understanding of in what ways do Chinese undergraduate international students’ intercultural communicative competence influence their English proficiency. In a single instrumental case study, the researcher selects only one bounded case to focus on an issue or concern and then to illustrate the issue (Creswell, 2013). In this study, the author selected two Chinese international students who studied at a private four-year university in California in the year of 2017.

Research Site

In this case study, the bounded system is the research site which is a private four-year university in California from March 2017 to April 2017. The research site was located on the main campus of this university which had about 5,200 students in 2017. Among them, 3,810 students were at the undergraduate level of study, 635 of them were professional pharmacy students, and 781 of them were graduate students. Approximately 87% of students were from California, the rest of the students were from 27 other states in the U.S. and 31 other countries. In the academic year of 2017, there were 332 international students at the research site which accounted for 6% of students on this main campus. Among those 332 international students, the largest international student origin country was China, which accounted for 39.7%. Among the 132 Chinese international students, 97 of them were undergraduate students, and 35 of them were graduate students. The International Program Services (IPS), which is the main international student service organization on campus, has services in the fields of education abroad, international student and scholar services, intensive English programs, and the International Programs and Services Advisory Committee.

Respondents Selection Strategies

Two participants at the same research site were recruited in this study to provide different perspectives on the issue. A combination of purposeful sampling and convenience sampling was applied in this case study. Convenience sampling was applied because of the accessibility and efficiency of the research participants. Purposeful sampling was used in this study in consideration of the purpose of this study and the selected characteristics of the participants.

Because of the purpose of this study, it is important to select international students who have been studied in the U.S. for at least one year for them to get enough exposure to intercultural communication experiences. The participants needed to be international students from China who studied at a four-year university in the U.S. in the year of 2017 since the experience for students who study at community colleges might be different from students who study at four-year universities. The participants needed to be over eighteen years old and were undergraduate students in the U.S. A balanced gender of participants were recruited in this study to reduce the differences of opinions influenced by gender. Meanwhile, the two participants were selected based on different majors and grades to represent different perspectives of the issue.

In considering the purpose of the study and getting an in-depth understanding of participants’ perspectives, the author selected and contacted Anna (pseudonym) and David (pseudonym) in participating in this study. Both participants immediately agreed to participate in the study and signed in the consent form to acknowledge their rights and purpose of the study.

Data Collection

The data were collected during a length of six weeks from the middle of March until the end of April in
the year of 2017. Data were collected through individual interviews, public document analysis, and photo analysis as the triangulation methods (see Table 1). The author conducted a one-on-one interview with each participant which lasted about 45 minutes. A semi-structured interview protocol was designed to solicit the participants’ understandings and perspectives about their English proficiency and intercultural communicative competence. The interview protocol was designed in both English and Chinese, however, the interviews were only conducted in Chinese since both participants felt that they can provide more responses to the interview questions by using their native language (see Appendix A).

Table 1

| Methods            | Instruments and documents                                                                 | Purposes                                                                 |
|--------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Individual interviews | Student interview protocol (see Appendix A), interview transcripts                      | Research question 1, 2, & 3                                              |
| Public document analysis | International Student Welcome Packet brochure                                           | Research question 1: What are the issues about the English proficiency of international students from non-English speaking countries? |
| Photo analysis     | Photo analysis protocol                                                                   | Research question 2: What are the perspectives and understandings of Chinese undergraduate international students about their English proficiency in the U.S.?  
Research question 3: In what ways do Chinese undergraduate international students’ intercultural communicative competence influence their English proficiency in the U.S.? |

The interviews were conducted at places that are quiet, free of distractions and based on the interviewees’ convenience. Anna’s interview was conducted at her living place and David’s interview was conducted at a study room chosen by him. The interviews were recorded through a password protected phone recorder, then translated and transcribed into English by the researcher. Member checking was used to ensure the accuracy of the interview transcripts. Both participants agreed with the translated versions and did not suggest any changes. Open-ended interview questions were designed to understand more perspectives of the participants, the sample interview questions include “Tell me a little bit about how you perceive your English proficiency,” and “Tell me a little bit about how you perceive your intercultural communicative competence when you interact with American professors and students during the class.” A total of six interview questions were designed to have a deeper understanding of the research questions (see Appendix A). The interviews were designed to address all three research questions. The first two interview questions were designed to have a deeper understanding of number one and number two research questions of this study, while the last four interview questions were designed to focus on the main research question which is the third research question of this study.

The public document was selected from the International Student Welcome Packet provided by the IPS at the research site offered to every international student at this university. In the packet brochure, the chapter “Adjusting to a new environment” includes topics and discussions related to intercultural contact, stresses of study abroad, culture shock, and coping with cross-cultural stress. Several quotes from the document were selected to support the themes emerged from the data.

Photo analysis, as a third method of this study, served as a supplement to the interviews and public document analysis in understanding the participants’ perspectives about their English proficiency during their intercultural communication experiences. Photo analysis was conducted for one week in the middle of April,
2017. The participants were provided a photo analysis protocol (see Appendix B) written in both English and Chinese to guide their process in collecting photos and writing photo analysis. The participants were asked to take or select a photo that can be representative of something helpful to their English proficiency during their intercultural communication experiences. After collecting the photo, each participant included a paragraph of narrative in Chinese which described their thoughts and feelings towards the photo. The participants can choose to write their narratives in either Chinese or English based on their choice. The photos from the two participants were taken by their cell phones; Anna chose to write the narrative in English while David chose to write the narrative in Chinese, the narrative from David was then translated by the researcher.

Data Analysis

First of all, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim for interview transcripts data (Creswell, 2013). The interview transcripts, public documents, and photo analysis were created and organized as the methodological triangulation for data analysis. Secondly, the author read through the interview transcripts, public documents, and photo analysis to find a few key issues that recurred from the data to understand the complexity of the case (Creswell, 2013). The author used categorical aggregation to seek a collection of instances from the data to generate issue-relevant themes or meanings (Creswell, 2013). Color coding was used to mark each instance by using different colors based on different categories. Margin notes were taken to paraphrase or summarize the meaning of the quotes to form initial codes. Thirdly, the data were analyzed by providing a detailed description of the respondent profiles. The author used a table to describe the basic information of the two participants (see Table 2). Fourthly, the author collapsed the categories into several major themes which included being courageous to start or join the conversation, finding common interests or topics during the communication, and being respectful to the social norms and avoiding disputes. Peer debriefing was used since the author showed the initial findings to a professor in the field of intercultural communication to provide recommendations for adjustments. After making adjustments to the findings, the author used direct interpretation to re-story the data and made conclusions and discussions of this study. For the last step, the author incorporated an in-depth description of the themes by using a table to present the information (see Table 3).

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, firstly, the author provided a detailed and thick description of the participants which set up the bounded system for later data analysis. Secondly, interviews, public document analysis, and photo analysis were used as the triangulation methods to ensure the trustworthiness of the data. Thirdly, member checking was used to ensure the accurate translation and verbatim transcription of the interviews. Fourthly, peer debriefing was conducted to share the initial findings with a professor who works in the field and asked for his suggestions and modifications. The peer debriefing process “provides an external check of the research process” (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). Lastly, a large number of quotations were used in the finding section to represent the voices of the participants (Creswell, 2013).

For the ethical considerations of the study, the research participants were provided pseudonyms in this study to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the research participants (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The participants were asked for permission to voluntarily participate in this study and signed the consent form to acknowledge their rights and the purpose of the study. The data were safely preserved in a secure location.
which only the researcher could get access to. The research data included interview transcripts and photo analysis could only be used for this study with the participants’ permission.

**Respondents Profiles**

Anna (pseudonym) was a 23-year old female junior student who studied at a private university in California majored in Music Management and minors in Communication. Anna was very famous among the Chinese international student population on campus since she was always invited to have piano performances on all kinds of Chinese international students evening gala, parties, and volunteer activities. Anna was from Shenzhen, a big city in Southeast China and had been studied in the U.S. for three years. Before coming to the U.S., Anna was studying at an International High School in Shenzhen. The International High School offers International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IB) courses, which means all subjects other than the course of Chinese were taught in English. Anna had been studying English since she was six years old for 17 years. When asked about her English proficiency, Anna perceived her English proficiency as all right compared with her peers.

David (pseudonym) was a male senior student who majored in Business at the private university in California. He was from a big city in Southeast China named Guangzhou and had been studied in the U.S. for four years. He was 23-year old and had been the president of the Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA) at this university for three years. He was a member of the Student Investment Fund (SIF) at the university during the time of the study. David was very social and outgoing and was well-known among the Chinese international student population at this university. David started learning English in Grade 6 in elementary school and had been studying English since then for 11 years. He was attending regular high school in China but went to the “international class” in regular high school. The “international class” prepares students who are intended to study abroad and offers Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) preparation courses. David perceived his English proficiency at the middle level and felt the time he spent taking TOEFL classes in China was very helpful for his English learning. The table showed below describes several important information about the research participants (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

| Overview of Case Study Participants |
|-------------------------------------|
| **Age** | **Gender** | **Grade** | **Major** | **Time stays in the U.S.** | **Home city in China** | **Type of high school attended** | **Years for English learning** |
|--------|-----------|----------|-----------|--------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Anna   | 23 Female | Junior   | Music management (minor in the communication) | Three years | Shenzhen | International high school | 17                            |
| David  | 23 Male   | Senior   | Business  | Four years | Guangzhou | “International class” in regular high school | 11                            |

**Findings**

Both participants identified the importance of intercultural communicative competence in influencing their English proficiency. Anna described in the interview that intercultural communicative competence could influence students’ exposure to communication in English, thus influencing their English practice.

The author feels the better your intercultural communicative competence is the more opportunities you will have in communicating with others, and the more chances you will get in practicing your English.
In answering how did she perceive her English proficiency, Anna said that “I perceive my English as all right compared with my peers.” She provided the example that when she was a child she always listened to the movie cassettes which contributed to her English listening skills and oral English ability. From that time, she always tried to use her way of English learning instead of only following how the school taught her English.

Similarly, David also mentioned in his interview that intercultural communicative competence is important in influencing his English learning. When asked about how he perceived his English proficiency, he said his English ability was at an intermediate level.

I feel … I am at an intermediate level. To be honest, I have not felt much progress ever since I came here. Because I was not always together with students from other countries, so the only opportunity I could speak English was during class with professors or after class discussing homework with other students, like doing group work. So, unless you are immersed in an environment where there are all people from other countries, otherwise your English can not improve a lot.

Based on the interviews, public document analysis, and photo analysis, three themes were identified from the data which included be courageous to start or join the conversation, finding common interests or topics during the communication, and be respectful to the social norms and avoid disputes (see Table 3).

Table 3
Themes From the Data Analysis

| Themes                              | Methods                                      |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Being courageous to start or join the conversation | Individual interview or public document analysis |
| Finding common topics or interests during the communication | Individual interviews or photo analysis |
| Be respectful to the social norms and avoid disputes | Individual interviews or public document analysis |

**Be Courageous to Start or Join the Conversation**

The participants expressed being courageous to start or join the conversation as an important aspect of intercultural communicative competence in influencing their English proficiency. When Anna recalled her intercultural communication experience while interacting with American professors and students during the class, she mentioned the phenomenon that Chinese international students always have difficulties in joining the class discussions or group activities, Anna expressed her reasons.

One reason is the language barrier, another reason the author thought is related to the problem of courage. Whether you would break up your are to own habitual ways of interaction and to join the discussion.

Anna mentioned that something she did well was that she successfully joined all kinds of discussions during her study in the U.S. She caught every opportunity she could speak well to express her opinions, from those opinions people felt that she was easy to communicate with and invited her to join all kinds of group discussions. Anna also perceived the public speaking course she took in the spring semester of 2016 as extremely helpful for her English learning, since this course was beneficial in breaking her fears of speaking in the public.

David also stressed on the importance of being courageous to improve his English proficiency during the interview.

The premise of having good English is that you need to be courageous; you need to be not shy and willing to speak.

An example for him to be courageous and always spoke to others was that during the class instead of
gathering together with other Chinese students as a group, he always sat with people from other countries. He believed that in this way he would finally find something to talk.

When you enter into the classroom, simply find a spot and ask if any other people who would like to sit here, if not you can just sit there and start chatting with your desk mate.

However, the experience for David to be courageous and willing to speak was not successful at the beginning. He described a story when he was entered into the university during the first or second day of college as a freshman. He was deeply hurt by a friend.

When I was a freshman I was deeply hurt by a friend, when I was chatting with him I really cannot understand what he was talking about. I asked him three times but still could not understand, when I asked him the fourth time he just said “never mind …” I felt so awful and my heart got deeply hurt. Since then, I did not as much willing to talk with others anymore. Until my sophomore and junior years, I gradually cheered up again, then I feel like whatever, since it has happened for so long it does not matter anymore.

David expressed his frustration that when he wanted to learn, the student just said “never mind.” He also expressed at that time he did not know that the intention for the phrase “never mind” was not that strong, people did not say that on purpose and may not expect that word to be disrespectful. This phenomenon was also mentioned in the “International Student Welcome Packet” from the IPS in this university. In the chapter “Adjusting to a new environment,” under the section of “Stresses of studying abroad,” the author mentioned that “Making every effort to learn the language or culture and failing to make the kind of progress you expected” as one of the most common sources of stress for studying abroad. But finally, David was able to cheer up again and be courageous to talk with others.

Therefore, I feel that your English must be good, when you dare to practice your English very well, then your intercultural communicative competence is what I mentioned …

Anna also expressed her ideas about the importance of English proficiency in one’s intercultural communication.

Since language is the tool of communication, if you cannot understand the language, you cannot survive very well here. No matter how friendly people are, how much they would like to help you, you will feel the estrangement.

Therefore, both participants perceived the intercultural communicative competence of being courageous to start or join the conversation promotes English proficiency, and good English ability is also important to contribute to successful intercultural communication experiences.

Finding Common Interests or Topics During the Communication

The second intercultural communicative competence that participants identified to help improve their English proficiency during communication is to find common interests or topics. For communication with students from other countries out of class, David mentioned in the interview that recently he found a new way which was to watch sports games together with others, such as watching hockey, basketball, and many other kinds of sports games. David had his thoughts for finding common interests or topics with American students during the out of class communication.

Just like talking with foreigners, people always say that it is hard to find topics. To be honest, I think for girls it is easy to find topics, girls all wear make-up and clothes, right? You all care about that, why cannot talk about that? For boys, we can talk about sports or others. Recently, I start to chat with them about baseball and everything. Although, I do not
understand baseball or football, just ask them some rules. You must find commonalities with them, otherwise, how can you talk with them, right?

From the conversation, it can be seen that David thought it was very important for people to find common interests or topics during the conversation. Moreover, David perceived finding common interests or topics as very important during communication with people in general, no matter with people from the same culture or during intercultural communication.

To be honest, no matter when you communicate with people from other countries or when you communicate with Chinese, you need to identify their interests, right? I need to know your interest, and you need to know my interest. When we are under the same interest can we talk with each other.

When talked about the SIF David joined in the year of 2017 (see Figure 1), he said that before participating in the SIF he would also talk with students from other countries, but his English proficiency improved since joining the SIF. The main reason is that since everyone is in the fund and interested in stocks, everyone will talk about stocks. That is why David could have good conversations with the other members.

![Student Investment Fund](image)

Figure 1. Student investment fund.

David elaborated further about the benefits when they shared common interests and topics, and things they could learn from each other.

Including that there are things in our Chinese market where the American market does not have, so I will tell them about that. In addition to my way of thinking like a Chinese, my thinking is different from them, their thinking is also different from us. That is why when analyzing every profession we have a variety of things that are different from each other. That is why they will listen to me patiently …

From the interview, David expressed utilizing the opportunity at SIF to exchange ideas with students from other countries about the same topic stocks. In the photo analysis, David also mentioned how the SIF contributed to his English learning through multiple aspects.

We can exercise ourselves by finding resources to analyze the stocks and looking up much news about companies through reading lots of information written in English. After doing the report, we also need to do presentations that build up my oral English skills. The next step involves classmates vote for the stocks and asks questions, that’s how I increase my English listening skills. In addition to that, sometimes I also discuss with students from other countries about things related to stocks, through understanding their investment ideas thus knowing their culture. Also, they would discuss some international issues with me.

The analysis of Figure 1 showed how David thinks joining the SIF improved his oral English skills,
English listening skills, English reading skills, and his understanding of the American culture. The process of finding common topics while communicating in this organization much influenced David’s English proficiency and cultural adaptation in the U.S.

Similarly, Anna also shared the importance of bringing benefits or common interests to communication.

The way how I did it was exhibited my value for being a member of this group … Everybody would love to communicate with someone who communicate, and able to bring some value to the group study. I think we should try to be this kind of person.

Anna gave a specific example of how she cooperated with other students in designing a history study guide through a spontaneous study group which helped her oral English skills and final exam. Anna mentioned that through the study group, every student asked questions and shared their answers through the efforts of deep thinking. Through combining that information, she found that there were always better ways for you to understand and connect the materials.

Another point is that through articulating your ideas and organizing the logic, it would greatly benefit your memory. Especially when you need to promptly express those ideas, you will find this memory helpful. This way of practicing is so helpful to your memory. You cannot really understand these if you do not participate in the group discussion task which is required by the professor.

In the photo analysis, Anna also expressed how the intercultural communication of musical knowledge and terms contributed to her English proficiency by analyzing the music score of Debussy’s piece (see Figure 2).

![Figure 2. Music score of a Debussy’s piece.](image)

My piano instructor required me to look up every term in the score to understand the piece thoroughly. The terms are in French, and many of their translations could be only found in English, though not in the professional forms when I was using the Google translation. As a result, I have to re-write many of the translations in English, to better understand them, memorize them and interpret them for my practices. I studied not only French but also many practical English skills through these exercises. Sometimes, I also need to translate between English and Chinese, if I can find the translations in Chinese first.

In analysis of Figure 2, Anna expressed her gratitude towards how music contributes to her intercultural
communication by knowing the meaning of many music terminologies. Interestingly, this kind of communication happened not only between two cultures but involved the cultural exchange of Chinese, English, and French. Also, this communication was special in written form rather than through face-to-face communication, but it is undeniable that language is an important representation of cultural communication. Through looking up the meanings of those terms, Anna achieved the intercultural communication among three languages which also improved her English proficiency.

David also mentioned an example of how he found common interests or topics while cooperating with American students during group work.

Every time I would find classmates from other countries to cooperate with. Whenever I cooperate with them, I would be very strategic. For example, if we are doing a project, I would choose examples like Uber or IKEA, I would choose something that both America and China have, not things that only exist in America.

Through finding the same interests and bring benefits to the communication during the cooperative group work, both Anna and David found their way for the successful intercultural communication experience which also contributed to their English proficiency.

Be Respectful to the Social Norms and Avoid Disputes

Respectfully communicate is one of the most important factors among the intercultural communicative capacity based on Ruben’s (1976) research about assessing communication competency for intercultural adaptation. During the interview, both students identified being respectful to the social norms of the society and avoiding disputes to controversial issues as an important part of their intercultural communicative competence. Anna mentioned in the interview about paying attention to the social norms and culture of American society while communicating with American professors and students during the class.

Another point is to pay attention to your wording and ways of expressing opinions. Because no matter what is the current status, American society stresses political correctness to some degree. The society stresses that it is a kind of social norm. You need to have a piece of knowledge about this kind of social norm as you listen and study and your language cannot offend others.

Anna provided an example in which she heard some English learner students had no idea about some disparaging names of addressing black people. She mentioned that if the student called a black student by using disparage name during class, it is extremely offending and possibly damaging the student’s impression from others. However, the reason for the student’s action might because he or she simply does not know that this word is offending, and because of political correctness and being respectful to minorities this word cannot be used anymore. Anna also gave her suggestions for having the awareness and knowledge of being respectful and avoided offending others.

Therefore, in my opinion, the best way to avoid this is to have more communication with domestic students, to understand their ways of communication, as well as how quickly and in what kind of comfortable status you can respond and have comparatively smooth communication with them. Paying attention to that and you will understand from the interactions in general what are their taboos.

However, both participants expressed that compared with teachers or professors in China, the American professors are kind and are not so strict about the politeness students need to be while communicating with people in higher positions or people in older generations. They felt that it would be fine if the students were
showing respect and being polite at a basic level.

Such as when I sometimes talk with my professor, at first, the professor asked me to directly call her name since I am used to calling her name during the class. So when I emailed her I was thinking about should I type “Dr.” and then her last name, or is it better for me to call her name. Later I tried once to call her name. You know how did she respond? She did not address my name at all and emailed me like someone that is familiar with you and directly went into the topic.

Anna was very excited while explaining this example during the interview, she said at that time she felt that communicating with professors were not as difficult as she thought, it was the same as interacting with family members. She understood that it was not because the professor had the power of deciding her grade that the professor was imperially and cannot be offended at a single point, and it was not necessary for many Chinese students to feel frightened while seeing their professors. Anna expressed that when she was meeting with a professor, the professor said that the way she shared her ideas made the professor find a way to communicate with the student. Similarly, David also agreed on American professors’ communication styles and said that if he is going to be a professor in the future he would allow his students to eat during class and freely express their opinions.

I think they should just let the students speak, right? Whatever the students think let them speak, then they can have enthusiasm, right? I think a lot of professors here are good at telling jokes, they will not be very serious from the beginning of the class till the end.

In addition to being respectful about the social norms of American society and respectfully communicate with professors, David also expressed his opinions about how to avoid disputes while discussing controversial issues relate to their home country. David suggested avoiding a direct argument with people who held different opinions and used clever ways to express his opinions and reasons to others.

You need to first acknowledge some of their opinions, and then explain what you think, based on our national conditions to analyze it to them. We cannot base on our thinking to tell others to follow our rules, whatever I said is correct. There is no point in being aggressive. I think it all depends on your methods.

David expressed some strategic ways of thinking to avoid disputes or arguments while communicating with people who hold different opinions about controversial issues.

You need to avoid others’ “explosion point,” talk with people nicely and explain things very patiently to others. Sometimes if you can explain things well and make people understand that’s good, if you cannot just forget about it. You cannot force others to think according to your mind, someday they will understand it.

David’s coping strategies while having different opinions with people from another culture is aligned with the suggestions from the International Student Welcome Packet brochure. In the chapter “Adjusting to a new environment,” the author introduced some strategies about coping with cross-cultural stress, one of the suggestions the author give is about “keep an open mind.”

Keep an open mind. People here might do or say things that people at home would never do or say. Try to understand that they are acting according to their own set of values, and these values are from a culture very different than yours. Avoid evaluating their behavior by the standards of your own country.

The strategy provided by the author has many similarities with David’s understanding of how to avoid evaluating others’ behavior based on the standards of his home country. From this understanding, David was able to achieve respectfully communicate with people who had a different set of cultures or values with
him.

Apart from discussing controversial issues, Anna also mentioned using the strategy of acknowledging others’ ideas and being patient while trying to communicate respectfully with her American friends out of class.

For example, if everyone is having fun talking about one thing, like on the stage there might be someone who is telling a joke, probably I do not really understand it, but if an American student who stands beside me is happily laughing, he or she might turn around and talk to you things like “Is not it fun?” … I would think you can echo them a little bit by using the way you can come up with. In this way, you would not look awkward. Otherwise, if you are keeping a straight face and look like suddenly got frightened, perhaps next time this person will not sit beside you, or will not talk with you anymore.

Being respectfully communicate includes paying attention to the social norms and culture of the American society, while also avoiding disputes to the controversial issues of international students’ home country. Both participants had their awareness or strategic ways to make efforts toward communicating respectfully during the conversation through being aware of the political correctness in the society, as well as being patient and tolerant of people who hold different opinions with them. Both participants identified acknowledging others’ ideas and as the way to seek common points while reserving differences during the conversation. However, they also expressed that the American professors were not so strict about the etiquette and were more inclined to establish an equal relationship with the students.

**Conclusions**

Through the one-on-one interviews, public document analysis, and photo analysis, three themes were identified from the data which included being courageous to start or join the conversation, finding common topics or interests during the communication, and being respectful to the social norms and avoiding disputes. From the public document analysis and interviews, it can be seen that the common issue about English proficiency for international students from non-English speaking countries is that international students studying abroad make every effort to learn the language or culture and failing to make the kind of progress they expected.

In this study, the two participants perceived their English proficiency as all right or in the middle level compared with their Chinese peers. Both participants identified the importance of intercultural communicative competence in influencing their English proficiency. Three themes were identified from the data to support this argument. The first theme is that intercultural communicative competence influences whether students were able to be courageous to start or join the conversation in the U.S., thus influencing their English proficiency. One participant Anna was able to break up the habitual ways of interaction and catch every opportunity she can speak well to express her opinions, thus successfully joining all kinds of discussions. The other participant David always tried to sit with students from other countries during the class to find more opportunities to talk in English. It can be concluded that both participants stressed the importance of being courageous to start or join the conversation during and out of the class, and they utilized this intercultural communicative competence to improve their English proficiency. However, during this process, one obstacle they found was that sometimes their English proficiency can influence whether they can successfully join the intercultural communications at a certain level. Therefore, both participants identified that the influence of intercultural communicative competence and English proficiency is mutual.

The second theme identified from the data is that finding common interests or topics during intercultural
communication is important in influencing the participants’ English proficiency. David always watched sports games with other American students to find common topics during the out of class communication. He also said joining the Student Investment Fund organization was important in improving his English proficiency because he can find the same topic stocks with other American students in the organization. Through sharing the same topic with other American students and professors, both participants felt that they made contributions to the group, and found their identity and values during the communication. Also, it is interesting to notice that intercultural communication can be either face-to-face communication or written communication, intercultural communication happened not only among two cultures but also can involve three or more cultural groups.

The third theme identified from the data is being respectful to the social norms of American society and avoiding disputes during intercultural communication is important in influencing participants’ English proficiency. On the one hand, this theme involves being respectful of the social norms of American society. Anna mentioned that it was important to pay attention to the wordings and ways of expressing opinions since American society stressed on political correctness. Anna felt that the best way to have this kind of awareness was through having more intercultural communications with other domestic students in the U.S. On the other hand, this theme also includes avoiding disputes or arguments while communicating with people who hold different opinions about controversial issues. David suggested avoiding having a direct argument with people who hold different opinions and use strategic ways to state his opinions and reasons for others. David expressed his awareness of respecting others’ thinking and avoided asking others to follow rules in his home country. It is important to be tolerant, patient and flexible to acknowledge some of the others’ opinions. Based on this point, David was able to communicate respectfully with people who had different opinions or values with him. Interestingly, both participants expressed that it was easier to communicate with American professors since they were not so strict about the rules of being respectful, and encourage students to be more freely express their ideas.

Discussions

In answer to the first research question, “What are the issues about the English proficiency for international students from non-English speaking countries,” public document analysis was used to analyze issues related to the English proficiency for international students from non-English speaking countries. From the International Student Welcome Packet brochure, one of the common sources of stress for international students studying abroad is to make every effort to learn the language or culture and failing to make the kind of progress they expected.

To address the second research question, “What are the perspectives and understandings of Chinese undergraduate international students about their English proficiency in the United States,” individual interviews and photo analysis were used in the study. Anna perceived her English proficiency as all right compared with her Chinese peers, and David perceived his English proficiency at a middle level because of the lack of English communication with American students and professors. David expressed that it was important for people to be immersed in an English environment where all people are from other countries to have progress in their English.

For answering the third research question, “In what ways do Chinese undergraduate international students’ intercultural communicative competence influence their English proficiency in the United States,” both participants agreed that intercultural communicative competence was important in influencing their English
proficiency. Anna believed that intercultural communicative competence can influence people’s exposure to English, thus influencing their English proficiency. David also stressed that the amount of intercultural communication in English had a huge effect on his English proficiency. Three themes were identified from the interview transcripts, public document analysis, and photo analysis to support this argument, including being courageous to start or join the conversation, finding common interests or topics during the communication, and being respectful to the social norms and avoid disputes. Both participants identified their strategies to achieve the three points. It is worth mentioning that both participants agree that the relationship between intercultural communicative competence and English proficiency was mutual. Also, communication can be either face-to-face communication or written communication. The communication can happen among two or more different cultures.

Limitations and Recommendations

This study has many limitations due to the constraints of the time and the ability of the researcher. The first limitation of this study is the convenience sampling strategy. Convenience sampling strategy saves time, money and effort in conducting the study, but often at the expense of getting information that has less credibility (Creswell, 2013). In this study, the convenience sampling strategy might influence the credibility of the data and the trustworthiness of the research.

The two participants might not able to be representative of the Chinese undergraduate international student population. There might be some other factors or variables which influenced the participants’ opinions because of the unique characteristics of the participants such as personality, majors, types of high school attended, and the amount of time they spend on social during their spare time. Further research could explore different education levels to see in what ways do Chinese graduate-level international students’ intercultural communicative competences influence their English proficiency in the U.S.

An essential criterion for evaluating a case study is the length of field time spends on conducting the study. Because of the time constraint, the length of time for conducting the study was only one and a half months, intensive and long-term involvement at the research site is essential in getting a deeper understanding of this issue.

Recommendations for Further Study

During the process of identifying three major themes to serve the purpose of this study, many new questions emerged from this process. One question is to distinguish the concepts of intercultural communicative competence and communicative competence. Although in this study, being courageous to start or join the conversation and finding common topics or interests during the communication were perceived by the participants as their intercultural communicative competence, the two points can also be counted as communicative competence in general. Therefore, it might worth further exploration about in what ways do Chinese international students’ communicative competence influences their English proficiency.

Some other new emerging questions during the exploration process involve in what ways do Chinese international students’ intercultural communicative competence influence their academic study. In what ways do intercultural communicative competences influence Chinese international students’ acculturation or adaptation in the U.S.? In what ways do intercultural communicative competences influence Chinese international students’ oral English proficiency? Also, in what ways do intercultural communicative
competences influence Chinese international students’ class participation?

**Recommendations for Practice and Implications**

This study is relevant to Chinese undergraduate international students in the U.S., professors who interact with Chinese international students in U.S. universities, college and language preparation programs, student affairs colleagues, as well as policy-makers for this issue. First of all, this study provides recommendations to American universities for creating more opportunities to involve international students participate in various kinds of social activities.

Secondly, language preparation programs, international high schools, or study abroad training programs in China need to understand the importance of intercultural communicative competence in influencing students’ English proficiency. In addition to offering courses to improve students’ English proficiency, intercultural communication course or cultural preparation courses are important in contributing to Chinese undergraduate international students’ adaptation and acculturation in the United States.

Thirdly, student affairs colleagues and American professors who interact with Chinese international students in the U.S. need to be aware of the influence of intercultural communicative competence in influencing international students’ English proficiency and try to encourage Chinese international students to express their ideas during and out of the classroom.

Fourthly, policy-makers relate to this issue need to be aware of the challenges and opportunities for Chinese undergraduate international students to participate in intercultural communication and create policies to encourage intercultural communications in universities and society.

Last but not least, Chinese international students themselves need to have the awareness of intentionally cultivate their intercultural communicative competence and English proficiency, being courageous to communicate with American students and professors, and seeking common grounds while reversing differences during the communication.

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Appendix A

Student Interview Protocol

Intercultural communicative competence and English proficiency

Questions:

1. Tell me a little bit about how you perceive your English proficiency.
2. What were the education you received in China that influence your English proficiency during your study in the United States?
3. Tell me a little bit about how you understand the idea of intercultural communicative competence.
4. Tell me a little bit about how you perceive your intercultural communicative competence when you interact with American professors and students during the class.
5. Tell me a little bit about how you perceive your intercultural communicative competence when you interact with American domestic students out of class.
6. In what ways do you perceive the influence of your intercultural communicative competence to your English proficiency during your study in the American universities?

Appendix B

Photo Analysis Protocol

Please take a photo or select a photo that can be representative of something helpful for your English proficiency during your intercultural communication experience.

After collecting or selecting the photo, please include a short narrative in Chinese with the title of the photo that describes your thoughts or feelings about the photo.

The purpose of this photo collection is to understand in what ways do intercultural communicative competences influence your English proficiency. The photo and narrative can only be presented or used in the research paper with your permission.