

Report of Shantou University's 3rd International Conference on Intercultural Competence

By Anthea Tse

Shantou University's English Language Center held their third international conference, themed 'Teaching Language Toward Intercultural Competence', from April 25-27, 2014. The goal and purpose for this conference was to:

Make foreign language classes better vehicles for building students' understanding of other cultures, building understanding of the process of intercultural communication, and for building the skills and habits that will make students effective intercultural communicators (Shantou University, 2014).

Some 100 educators from China and around the world attended the conference, coming together to share and exchange ideas to reach a greater depth of understanding of this important topic. The overall conference content covered three aspects of Intercultural Communication (IC): 1) the use of media and broadcast video material for developing intercultural competence, 2) teaching approaches to IC and teachers' extensive reflections on these approaches, and 3) findings of primary research into the experiences of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners. Beyond this, there was a general sense that developing intercultural competence revolves around the use of English as a lingua franca, an overarching concept that increasingly overlaps with recent academic scholarship in the field of IC.

Most notably there was learning through film and TV as well as other educational tools utilizing video and other media content for IC skill acquisition. One presentation focused on using an American television drama to help Chinese students compare their own perception of American culture before and after watching the program. Through this task, students learned how to consider other options, rather than making quick judgments or resorting to stereotypes when thinking through intercultural situations and responding to (cultural) differences. Perhaps in future conferences however, the presenter could consider discussing the criteria used in choosing a drama for teaching intercultural competence to EFL learners.

Ryan Hunter from University of Macau spoke about assignments that used media tools, such as self-video recordings and online writing to encourage students' awareness of the lingua franca within their own school and city setting. In one assignment, students wrote their own restaurant reviews on the world-wide-web. In another assignment, students recorded themselves speaking English with a camera. Each student then critiqued two other students in the class. The presenter subsequently noted a difference in the quality of students' final product from assignments not requiring an awareness of their audience. The usage of media tools and the relevance of the assignment to their own lives sparked students' investment in their language learning and language production. The presenter concluded therefore,

that students desired to put in the time required for an end product that reflected their effort and attention to detail.

Attention to detail and effort are important to an assignment, just as extensive reflection on the part of teachers is important to their own teaching approach. In one presentation, Collin Tham and Kristine Adams spoke on “Perceptions of Communication About the Aims of Activities Between Teachers and Students from Different Cultural Backgrounds.” The presenters pointed out the problem that teachers unintentionally plan and execute activities without considering the effectiveness for students of varying cultural backgrounds. In order to resolve this issue, presenters suggested teachers to focus on the delivery of an activity. Delivering an activity well means keeping expectations in mind. However, although the presenters considered the diversity of students in China, the audience would perhaps have benefited more from an outline of techniques to introduce learners’ cultural backgrounds positively into classroom activities.

Also on the same note of teacher reflection was Thu Phong Vuong’s presentation on “Teaching Open-Mindedness in a Classroom Setting.” Vuong challenged teachers who are

teaching in a foreign culture to rethink how they view and respond to their students objectively in a classroom setting. In his presentation he demonstrated how people often have a very subjective understanding of others. To demonstrate this point, he showed the audience an optical illusion with two images in one. Part of the audience saw one image and the rest saw another image. Through this experiment, Vuong helped the audience realize that people have different perspectives about the same topic.

Thirdly, the last aspect of the conference focused on findings in qualitative research that showed the need for intentional IC learning and education. Plenary speaker, Jane Jackson, spoke about the contrasts between active and passive Chinese students’ intercultural competence communicating appropriately with the people of the host culture. Contrasts showed that students who actively interacted with native English speakers gained more intercultural competence than those who passively interacted with people in the host country. Passive students often remained on their own, and only interacted with people in the host culture as needed. Perhaps due in part to this lack of interaction, Jackson observed that the



Figure 1: Academic socialization model for international students (Nelson, 2014)

journals of passive students even reflected a negative perspective and lack of understanding of the host culture.

Gayle Nelson, another plenary speaker, echoed Jackson's sentiment that there is a need for intentional intercultural competence learning. Her study focused on a Chinese doctoral student she had followed through a two-year qualitative study. Her findings conveyed to the audience how international students can gain intercultural competence, appropriately communicating with people of the host culture, when they are fully immersed in it. International students gain such competence by thinking through questions including: "Who am I in this new context? How am I supposed to act in this community?" Nelson's visual aid (Figure 1) illustrated the different degrees of perception of a foreign graduate student's understanding of the world around her.

In closing, the three main themes discussed in the duration of the conference were: use of media and broadcast video material, teaching approaches to IC and teachers' extensive

reflections on these approaches, and findings of primary research into the experiences of EFL learners. From a total of thirty sessions over two and a half days, therefore, the conference attendees took home with them many valuable tips and proven techniques for improving their students, and their own, intercultural competence.

References

Nelson, G., (2014). Negotiating academic practices at a US university: A Chinese student's experiences. Presented at *Teaching Language Toward Intercultural Competence* at Shantou University, Shantou, P.R.C., 25-27 April, 2014.

Shantou University, (2014). *Teaching Language Toward Intercultural Competence*. Conference Program, English Language Center, Shantou University, Shantou, P.R.C.

Anthea Tse is from Seal Beach, California. She holds a Master's in TESOL from the University of Southern California. She has taught in California to elementary aged students through university students. She is currently teaching Level 4, *Making My Case*, at Shantou University.



anheat@stu.edu.cn