An Investigation of the Intercultural Communication Competence of Chinese Employees in International Organizations

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Abstract. There is scant research on the Chinese employees' intercultural communication competence (ICC), despite increasing recognition of the importance of ICC as a qualified staff in international organizations. To explore the ICC of Chinese employees and their perceptions, this study used mixed methods by drawing on the semi-structured interview and follow-up questionnaires on the intercultural sensitivity with 7 participants. The findings show that the participants were excellent in terms of intercultural sensitivity, a key indicator of ICC, and that they did not complain much about the ICC challenges, although they did mention some related to work style and target communicating language. They also had different insights about how to cope with the challenges, which have implications for international educators when developing ICC-related curriculum planning and suggest prospective strategies for developing ICC knowledge and practice for those who aspect to pursue a career in international organizations.

1 Introduction

Intercultural communication competence (ICC) can be regarded as a key part of success in an international business environment [1]. Working in an international environment requires consideration of cultural diversity, such as how to work with people of different beliefs, languages, and backgrounds [2]. Therefore, it is crucial that employees working in an international environment consider cultural differences and enhance intercultural communication to better adapt to the international business environment [3].

With China's rapid economic and social development, China is closer to the center of the world stage than ever before. International organizations are the epitome of the world stage. Improving China's voice and influence in international organizations has become a new issue that needs to be solved urgently. In recent years, the number of China's staff in international organizations has increased, but there are still problems such as insufficient representation and low level of positions. Taking the United Nations Secretariat as an example, the data in December 2020 showed that there were 36,827 staff in the office, of which 545 were Chinese staff, accounting for 1.48% of the total number, the lowest proportion among the five permanent members [4]. To explore how to increase the representation of Chinese staff, some scholars studied the requirements of international organizations in order to design curriculum or education programs accordingly. Teng et al. (2014) selected and studied 674 job descriptions for P (Professional) positions and D (Director) positions

published by recruitment websites of 15 United Nations specialized agencies. At the same time, they conducted semi-structured interviews with 6 international civil servants and 2 external experts from international organizations. They found that talents in international organizations need to possess ten qualities. Among them, respect for multicultural values and language communication skills are crucial [5].

Therefore, talents in international organizations need to have "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from different cultural backgrounds" [6], that is, intercultural communication competence (ICC). They need to be proficient in foreign languages, to be able to communicate with colleagues from different countries and cultures from a global perspective, and to handle affairs with multicultural backgrounds. Intercultural communication competence has become a necessary ability to be competent in the work of international organizations. ICC has three main dimensions: (1) intercultural awareness; (2) intercultural sensitivity; and (3) intercultural effectiveness [7-8], among which intercultural sensitivity is a basic element in the process of intercultural communication [7, 9-10].

Accordingly, intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication have become issues of wide discussion and research[8, 11-15]. However, much of the ICC research from the Chinese perspective has put the emphasis on the ICC and foreign language education and higher education[16-18], little has been done to examine the ICC from the perspective of Chinese employees who are working in international organizations. Hence, this study aims to have a clearer understanding of

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intercultural communication competence of Chinese staff in international organizations by studying their intercultural sensitivity level and its influencing factors, so as to provide strategies to improve intercultural communication competence of China's international civil servants.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Intercultural communication Competence

The definition of intercultural communication competence (ICC) has always been a controversial topic. Scholars at home and abroad have theoretically explained the connotation of intercultural communication competence from different perspectives. Byram (1997) believed that ICC includes five components: knowledge, contact skills, discovery skills, attitude and awareness [7]. Samovar and Porter (2004) proposed that ICC includes three aspects: knowledge, motivation and skills [20]. Graf (2004) believed that ICC includes cross-cultural knowledge, intercultural competence and intercultural sensitivity [21]. Scholars at home also defined ICC from their perspectives. Wen (1999) held that ICC includes communication competence and intercultural competence [22]. Yang and Zhuang (2007) divided ICC into four parts: global awareness, cultural adaptation, knowledge transmission and communication practice [23].

Chen and Starosta (2000) defined ICC as speaking and communication skills in a multicultural community, which involves intercultural sensitivity, awareness, and adroitness, and emphasized the effectiveness and appropriateness of ICC [12]. In intercultural interactions, individuals should conform to effective and appropriate behaviors [24]. Thus, effectiveness and appropriateness have become central to the ICC concept [25-26]. Lazar, Huber-Kriegler, Lussier, Matei and Peck (2007) extended the definition of ICC to include the speaker's communication ability, skills, and attitude in an intercultural context [27]. Understanding of ICC should evidently not focus exclusively on personal qualities, but also the cultivation of abilities. Some scholars have suggested that language skills also play a key role in intercultural communication skills [7, 28]. This may be because the understanding of cultural relations is conveyed through contextualized language. Especially in today's globalized business and ethnocultural diversity, it is very important to master the communication competence of language [29]. Scholars have made several efforts to reach consensus on ICC, albeit in a variety of ways. For example, Deardorff (2006a, 2006b) surveyed 24 university decision-makers and 23 top scholars and concluded that, although scholars have different perceptions about ICC definitions, there is relative consistency about the principal components of ICC definitions: accepting knowledge, skills, and attitudes [25-26].

After conceptualizing ICC, the researchers continued to explore the evaluation of different groups' ICC, especially those who have frequent exposure to intercultural communication, such as sojourners, immigrants, foreign language learners, diplomatic personnel and etc. [30], from measuring attitudes and affection [12, 31], knowledge and awareness [32-33], and behavior [34].

To assess the ICC, various research methods have been used, including questionnaire, interview, experiment, case study, ethnography and portfolio [25, 35]. Given the high complexity of ICC, no single method can make a comprehensive and accurate assessment of it, and one of the basic principles is to use both qualitative and quantitative, self-assessment and other evaluation methods for comprehensive assessment [25, 35]. Matveev (2002) investigated the perception of ICC by American and Russian managers with experience on multicultural teams [36]. The researcher employed a survey method to solicit information about ICC and multicultural team performance from 124 American and Russian managers. Qualitative semi-structured interviews of 40 American and Russian managers enriched the data collected by using questionnaires. This study yielded a number of conclusions about the importance of intercultural communication competence in the performance of multicultural teams. Xiao and Petraki (2007) explored the ICC of Chinese students who were studying at an Australian University from the perspectives of. the frequency of interactions between Chinese students and students from other countries, the difficulties they encountered and the reasons they attributed to these difficulties using questionnaires among 32 Chinese students and interviews with 10 randomly chosen from the participants [37]. The study revealed that the Chinese students encountered many difficulties when interacting with students from other countries which they ascribed to lack of knowledge of intercultural communication, cultural shock and differences in nonverbal communication and politeness strategies. Yang, Cheung and Li (2020) studied the understanding of cultural diversity in China's hotels by examining hotel employees' ICC practices. After developing a measurement scale through collecting quantitative and qualitative data from 16 multinational hotel companies in China, the participants demonstrated low importance and low performance of intercultural communication awareness from the results, which suggested that the identification of competency gaps can help hotels to improve service quality through enhanced resource allocation [3].

Research on ICC in China has mainly focused on developing ICC in foreign language teaching [38-39], although the components of ICC and its performance under various communication circumstances has attracted more interests. Shi (2014) analyzed the social needs of ICC. Her research showed that the cultivation of international talents requires not only the improvement of foreign language skills, but also the development of intercultural skills, and that foreign language syllabuses and teaching materials should be arranged accordingly [40]. Peng and Wu (2016) used structural equation models to examine the role of cultural contact in ICC development and found that cultural contact contributes to ICC, and that social media is a

channel of direct intercultural contact, and cultural products are an important channel of indirect intercultural contact, which has a greater impact than multimedia and courses [41]. Although there are many researches done within and without China, few were taken to study the ICC of Chinese employees who work in international organizations.

2.2 Intercultural Sensitivity

Bronfenbrener, Harding and Gallway were the first scholars to put forward sensitivity. They believed that sensitivity to one's own culture and individual differences are two important communication competences [42]. Hart, Burks, Carlson and Eadie see sensitivity as a thought pattern that is often used in daily life. They thought that sensitive people should be able to accept individual differences, avoid sticking to their own opinions in the process of communication, and be able to accept and agree with the views of others [42]. In 1984, Milton Bennett put forward the concept of intercultural sensitivity and conceived it as an affective, cognitive and behavioral development process with six stages, i.e. denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation and integration [42]. However, due to the lack of effective measurement methods, this field has not been further developed. Bhawuk and Brislin (1992) developed the Intercultural Sensitivity Inventory (ICSI) to measure the intercultural sensitivity from the perspectives of individualism and collectivism [43]. However, the reliability and validity of this measurement was doubted by researchers [12, 44].

Chen & Starosta (1997) held the view that the concepts of "intercultural sensitivity" and "intercultural communication competence" have been confused and lack a clear boundary [42]. Based on previous research results, they conducted repeated research on intercultural communication competence and intercultural sensitivity, and argued that "intercultural communication competence" includes three levels of cognition, affection and behavior. The concept of intercultural sensitivity refers to the emotional dimension of intercultural communication competence. Therefore, "intercultural sensitivity" is defined as people's subjective willingness to understand, appreciate and accept cultural differences. This concept should be limited to the emotional level. As an independent concept, intercultural sensitivity includes six elements, that is self-esteem, self-monitoring, open-mindedness, empathy, interaction involvement and non-judgment[12]. Chen and Starosta (2000) believed that people with high intercultural sensitivity have a good sense of self-esteem when communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds, and can adapt to unfamiliar environment more quickly, view stress and setbacks more optimistically, and deal more calmly with various cultural differences [12]. When communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds, people with strong self-monitoring ability can adjust their behavior according to different communication situations, adopt different communication strategies, and at the same time can concentrate better. They can also

consider issues from the other party's point of view, and use different expressions according to different contexts. Open-minded people are willing to open their views to each other, but also willing to listen to the views of others. They are able to identify, accept and appreciate different viewpoints as well as various cultural differences more frankly in the process of intercultural communication. Empathy has always been considered an important part of intercultural sensitivity. People with higher intercultural sensitivity are more able to put themselves in the other person's shoes. They are more sympathetic, more caring for each other, more sensitive to each other's various psychological activities, and more able to identify with each other's emotions. Interaction involvement refers to people's sensitivity to communication, including reaction ability, cognitive ability and attention to communication. When communicating with people from various cultures, they can better understand each other's messages, respond more effectively, and are more likely to build harmonious relationships with others. Non-judgment refers to the ability to listen carefully to each other in the process of intercultural communication and not rush to conclusions. People who are being non-judgmental are more able to recognize and accept various cultural differences, and feel satisfaction when communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds, so that the other party has the feeling of being heard and understood. At the same time, they can avoid arriving at irrational and too hasty conclusions.

Based on the conceptualization and components above, Chen and Starosta (2000) developed the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) to measure the intercultural sensitivity [12]. ISS is a 24-item instrument and includes five factors, i.e. interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment and interaction attentiveness. The following research undertaken by Fritz et al. (2005), Tamam (2010) and Matsumoto and Hwang (2013) have proved that the scale has a relatively high validity and reliability, although it needs to be further studied [13, 45-46].

Empirical research on intercultural sensitivity was carried out in a range of areas. For example, in the field of education, Olson and Kroeger (2001) used 52 faculty members of New Jersey City University as subjects and found that the degree of intercultural sensitivity was significantly related to the level of the second foreign language and the experience of studying abroad. The higher the level of the second foreign language and the richer the international experience, the higher the degree of intercultural sensitivity [14]. Altshuler, Sussman and Kachur (2003) studied the changes in the level of intercultural sensitivity in 24 medical staff after intercultural training and found that multimedia training had a positive effect on their intercultural sensitivity [47]. A survey by scholars such as Sizoo et al. showed that in the service industry, service personnel with high intercultural sensitivity have stronger interpersonal skills, higher job and social satisfaction, and focus on service [48].

The research on intercultural sensitivity in China emerged at the end of the 20th century, and gradually developed from introducing and evaluating foreign research results [49] to measure and improve intercultural sensitivity of different groups [50-55]. Some studies also focus on intercultural sensitivity of English teachers in middle schools, colleges and universities [56-58]. However, there is seldom research focusing on the intercultural sensitivity of Chinese employees in international organizations, and do not consider the challenges occurred while communicating inter-culturally.

Therefore, this research aims to examine the ICC of Chinese employees working in international organizations by studying their intercultural sensitivity level and exploring the challenges they encountered during intercultural communication, variables attributed to as well as corresponding strategies.

3 Research Questions

1) What are the Chinese employees' intercultural sensitivity in the international organization context?

2) Do Chinese employees in international organizations have any challenges in intercultural communication? What are the challenges?

3) What variables do Chinese employees consider lead to the challenges with regard to intercultural communication in international organizations?

4) What strategies do Chinese employees believe may help to deal with the challenges?

4 Methodology

4.1 Participants and setting

International Organizations normally have branches, i.e. representative offices, world widely apart from their headquarters, so as to enable them to deal with international issues conveniently. The commonly used working language in international organizations is English even though the staff work in the branches. Thus, the participants in this research are seven Chinese employees who are now working in the representative offices and the headquarter of the international organizations for more than one year. Participants were selected from three influential international organizations (i.e. the United Nations, the World Bank and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies) by using a convenience and purposive sampling strategy.

Table 1. Participants' General Information (N = 7)

IC	R 1	R 2	R 3	R 4	R 5	R 6	R 7
Age	24	31	32	40	25	32	24
Gender	Female	Female	Male	Female	Female	Male	Female
Major	International Organization and International Public Policy	Geographic Information System	English & Business Management	English & Public Health	English & International Organizations and International Exchanges	Accounting	International Organizations and International development
Employer	The United Nations (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund)	The United Nations (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization)	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies	The World Bank	The United Nations (The United Nations Development Program)	The United Nations (The United Nations Development Program)	The United Nations (The United Nations Development Program)
EP	IELTS 7.0	IELTS 7.5	IELTS 8.0	TEM 8	TEM 8	CET 6	TEM 8
WL	1 year	2 years	7.5 years	13 years	1 year	3.5 years	1.5 years

Notes:
IC=Identification code
EP=English proficiency
WL=Length of working in International Organizations
IELTS=International English Language Testing System
TEM 8=Test for English Majors (Band 8)
CET 6=College English Test (Band 6)

4.2 Instruments

Data in the present study were gathered via questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, as detailed below.

4.2.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire is modified based upon the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) designed by Chen and Starosta (2000) [12]. The validity and reliability of ISS have reached an ideal level, so it has been used to measure the intercultural sensitivity of subjects in many studies at home and abroad [30]. There are 24 questions in the scale, 15 of which are positive questions and 9 are negative questions. Each question provides five possibilities, from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The respondents need to make choices according to their actual situation. The scale includes five dimensions, namely, interaction engagement (questions 1, 11, 13, 21, 22, 23, 24), respect for cultural differences (questions 2, 7, 8, 16, 18, 20), interaction confidence (questions 3, 4, 5, 6, 10), interaction enjoyment (questions 9, 12, 15) and interaction attentiveness (questions 14, 17, 19). Thus, the ISS generates a total score and five subscores. The higher the score, the higher the level of intercultural sensitivity.

Apart from the scale, the personal information part was added for the needs, including gender, length of working in international organizations, major, and overseas study experience. The questionnaire is both in Chinese and English version to guarantee the authenticity of the scale as well as make the participants feel at ease.

4.2.2 Semi-structured Interview

Interviews are highly effective methods to assessing people's perceptions of situations and constructions of reality [59]. Bell (1999) argues that interviews are subjective and prone to bias [60]; however, the exploratory nature of this research makes interviewing the best way of offering rich and in-depth data to answer the research questions [61]. Furthermore, compared with structured and unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews guarantee that the topics are relevant to the research questions, and interviewees are free to provide in-depth verbal information whenever necessary [62]. Therefore, semi-structured interviewing was chosen as the most appropriate method to answer the research questions.

In order to collect more in-depth perceptions and to answer the other three questions, an interview guide was developed based on the survey items. To ensure the participants felt comfortable and were willing to share their experiences [59, 63], some warm-up questions relating to their personal information such as English proficiency, length of working in international organizations and studying abroad experience were asked. The main part covered such questions as attitudes towards different cultures, feelings when communicating with people from different cultures, the perspectives of challenges during intercultural communication, the corresponding strategies and the possible causes.

4.2.3 Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in September and October 2022. Each interview lasted for between 20-40 minutes, depending on the amount of detail each participant was willing to provide. Although Robson (2011) suggests that the interviews that are less than half an hour may fail to provide enough information [64], longer than an hour interview would be too demanding for the interviewees to experience. All the interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy of the data collection. The use of a recording pen also permitted me to be more attentive to the interviewees [65].

4.3 Data Analysis

All the survey data were analyzed using SPSS 20. Means and standard deviations of the ISS scales were computed to examine to what extent the participants were inter-culturally sensitive. Correlation analysis was run to explore associations among the ISS and background variables.

All the recordings were transcribed, double-checked, and the results were then subject to content thematic analysis to identify the participants' expectations, experiences, and feelings of living and studying in China [66].

Interview data was analyzed qualitatively. Firstly, the audio recordings of the participant interviews were transcribed verbatim, according to transcription conventions [67]. The transcripts were then summarized in the form of matrices[68] to record the categories systematically on the basis of the research questions. Content analysis was then used to analyze the interview data. Content analysis, as defined by Patton (2001: 381), involves "identifying, coding, and categorizing the primary patterns in the data" [65], which means analyzing the content of the interviews. Then, the qualitative data was coded into different themes, as thematic coding is believed to be a realistic method to report the experiences and reality of participants [64].

5 Results and Discussion

5.1 Research Question 1: What are the Chinese employees' intercultural sensitivity in the international organization context?

To explore Chinese employers' intercultural sensitivity level, means and standard deviations of the ISS scales were computed, the results of which are reported in Table 2. The participants scored 4.286 (Interaction Attentiveness) to 4.875 (Interaction Enjoyment) on all ISS scales, all exceeding the scale midpoint 3, suggesting that all the 7 participants were excellent on Interaction Engagement, Respect for Cultural Difference,

Interaction Confidence, Interaction Enjoyment, Interaction Attentiveness and the overall intercultural sensitivity level. The results suggest that The Chinese employees all have a relatively high intercultural sensitivity level.

Table 2. ISS Scales (N = 7)

	Cronbach's Alpha	Maximum	Minimum	Mean
Intercultural Sensitivity Scale	0.915	4.917	4.25	4.586
Interaction Engagement	0.93	5	3.857	4.652
Respect for Cultural Difference	0.923	5	4.333	4.786
Interaction Confidence	0.755	5	3.800	4.400
Interaction Enjoyment	0.75	5	4.333	4.857
Interaction Attentiveness	0.585	5	3.333	4.286

From these results, it is clear that participants' intercultural sensitivity level had no correlation with their English proficiency, working years in international organizations or intercultural training experiences, although there existed a positive tendency between intercultural sensitivity level and English proficiency, and intercultural sensitivity level and intercultural training experience. In contrast, there was a negative tendency between intercultural sensitivity level and working years.

Table 3. Relationship between ISS and Background Variables (N = 7)

		English Proficiency	Working Years	Intercultural Training Experience
ISS	Pearson Correlation	0.302	-0.290	0.662
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.511	0.528	0.105

To explore participants' perceptions of cultural differences while working inter-culturally, related questions (e.g. personal experience with cultural differences in the organization; attitude towards Chinese culture and foreign culture; feelings when communicating with people from different cultures) were asked in the semi-structured interviews. Three key words were mentioned frequently, i.e. respect for different cultures, inclusiveness and open-mindedness. Being open-minded allows us to "avoid the mistake of imposing our meanings on others' behaviors and to open ourselves to learning about meanings and communication styles that differ from our own" [69]. Also, four interviewees explicitly expressed that they had a sense of enjoyment during intercultural communication and the feeling came from their expectation or interest to learn diverse culture and sympathetic response aroused during intercultural communication shown as below:

I enjoy multiculturalism. In the era of globalization, we need to deal with different cultures, purposefully open ourselves to different cultures,

and become more inclusive, so as to better understand the world. (R1)

When communicating with employees from different cultures, I feel easy, because we try to learn different cultures and understand the taboos of different cultures. (R3)

It is satisfying and happy when you are recognized and resonates. Personally, I like the geography and history of various countries and different cultures. (R6)

It was quite pleasant, because we both respected each other's culture and ideas. I also look forward to learning different cultures and being open and inclusive to them. (R7)

The results from the content analysis of the qualitative data align, to a large extent, with those of the quantitative data, that is, Respect for Cultural Difference and Interaction Enjoyment scored the highest and the second among the five factors of ISS.

5.2 Research Question 2: Do Chinese employees in international organizations have any challenges in intercultural communication? What are the challenges?

The participants all have a relatively high level and intercultural sensitivity from the results of ISS. Thus, it is interesting to explore whether they have experienced any challenges in intercultural communication and what them are. All participants said that they generally did not suffer any challenges or difficulties, although they did experience some which were related to work per se and target language.

5.2.1 Work Efficiency

Five interviewees mentioned that working with people from diverse cultures, the tempo of work was not in a rush, and their projects had to be postponed under the circumstances of vacations, elections and strikes. For example,

Foreign employees would not work overtime and their rhythm of work is not too fast. (R1)

When organizing an event with the participation of different partners and different countries, the work efficiency is not high. We would encounter unpunctuality because the event would be postponed by holidays or elections. (R4)

They pay more attention to work-life balance. They (foreign colleagues) usually don't deal with work on weekends or during their holidays, except for very, very urgent work needs. In the past, every summer, because many foreign colleagues took vacations, much work cannot process on. (R6)

Among the five, two interviewees shared their views that the different positions and work styles also made an impact on the progress of work, which are shown as follows:

Colleagues with different positions don't understand each other's work nature and role. For example, people who work with G(General) positions normally follow the process, people who work with P (Professional) positions hope to push forward work quickly. (R2)

From the work itself, there are obvious differences. The western working style is relatively free, which allows direct communication. Whereas, the decision-making power is a top-down process in Chinese working culture. Thus, it will cause some difficulties in doing things, such as promoting the process of projects when coordinating between the parties from different working cultures. (R3)

5.2.2 Miscommunication

Three interviewees mentioned that occasional miscommunication happened during work is the challenge they experienced.

As R1 said:

I felt embarrassed when we both sides didn't understand each other, which might be caused by they talked too fast or used slang.
R5 reported that:

During the translation, we need to use details or facts to describe a phenomenon specifically instead of an adjective. For example, we received the translation feedback about the word "inconsistent", and we need to use details to make the "inconsistency" specific.
The above miscommunication issue is associated with English, the most frequently used language in international environment. Apart from English, two participants also mentioned other languages. One interviewee (R6) said that When I was on a business trip to Belarus, a local greeted me warmly after seeing my oriental face and said a lot of Russian to me. But because he did not understand English, and my poor Russian, we didn't have further communication. R2 also shared her experience that because of her poor French, she had some misunderstandings with the cleaning personnel during the early days at the Paris headquarters of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

5.3 Research Question 3: What variables do Chinese employees consider lead to the challenges with regard to intercultural communication in international organizations?

5.3.1 Work Style

When trying to figure out what variables lead to the challenges with regard to intercultural communication in international organizations, the participants attribute them to different values about work. For example, foreign colleagues place more importance on work-life balance (mentioned above by R1, R4 and R6). They value individualism and individual goals are sanctioned in relation to group interests. Thus, they will seldom deal with work issues over time or in their holidays. Also, people with different positions have different work styles, as R2 said above. Two interviewees believed that the different work styles are associated with cultures. As R5 further reflected:

Different ways of thinking and values. Different ways of expressing views. Chinese employees habitually use conceptual and summative words to express problems, while foreign colleagues tend to express their opinions in a direct tone.

R3 held the similar point of view that "The western working style is relatively free, which allows direct communication. Whereas, the decision-making power is a top-down process in Chinese working culture. As Yuan (2006, p. 6) discussed "Individualistic cultures encourage people to speak up and express themselves openly; collectivist cultures teach people to control their feelings and express them in a subtle way. Thus, it will cause some difficulties in doing things, such as promoting the process of projects when coordinating between the parties from different working cultures[70].

5.3.2 Language Proficiency

The challenge of miscommunication is resulted from target language proficiency. Although the participants all have a good command of English, the official working language of international organizations, they reflected that they would encounter some challenges occasionally when the counterpart spoke too fast or used slang as R1 reported. As discussed in the current literature[71-73], learners may be competent in the target language but still unable to successfully handle real-life situations, because cultural contexts are required for effective negotiation of meanings. Not to mention the situations where the participants would use the target language they were even not good at to communicate, as R2 and R6 reported above.

5.4 Research Question 4: What strategies do Chinese employees believe may help to deal with the challenges?

To deal with the challenges the participants encountered in intercultural communication, they shared with the researcher some strategies. After the thematic coding of the qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews, the strategies were categorized as instant strategies and preparation strategies. Instant strategies refer to those which are adopted to cope with the awkwardness or challenges immediately, while preparation strategies are those need to be learned, with the possibility of preventing similar future problems.

5.4.1 Instant Strategies

5.4.1.1 Respect for Differences

Two interviewees commented that they would be respectful for the differences when they held different views.

> *I would respect others' ideas and be neutral when we didn't accord with the views of each other. (R1)*

> *I would be patient and try to find the common ground instead of denying immediately. (R3)*

In addition to respecting for different views, R2 said she would use the target language as an opener to show respect to the audience, shown as below:

> *You can say hi in French as an opener before your formal speech, which would make the person you are talking with feel respected. (R2)*

5.4.1.2 Be Active

In terms of the miscommunication, one interviewee expressed that they would take the active role to communicate and ask for clarification. For example, R1 said she would positively participated in discussion and expressed her opinion to avoid being a passive communicator. Even though she did not understand clearly what the people talked about, she would turn to the person who was near her for help. R2 reported that she would adopt the strategy of being active to start a topic to discuss compared with her French colleagues.

5.4.2 Preparation Strategies

5.4.2.1 Learn to be A Multilingual

The importance of language to be a successful intercultural communicator has been identified by many researchers [25, 72, 74]. The participants shared the same viewpoint with previous studies and added that it is more helpful to be a multilingual working in an international organization.

As R6 said:

> *The most important thing is to improve your foreign language proficiency. If you can't understand or speak well, you can't be an effective intercultural communicator. And sometimes being good at English may not be enough. You can also learn other foreign languages. For example, I feel that the English level of French is relatively average. Even in Paris, many people cannot speak English well or are unwilling to speak English. Thus, French is also an important language in international organizations.*

R7 agreed with R6 and pointed it out that "You would gain an advantage if you can speak more than one foreign language."

5.4.2.2 Learn More about Cultures

Most interviewees mentioned learning more about cultures could help them communicate better, although the ways are diverse. As Charlene Solomon and Michael Schell (2009, p. 8) argued, "In the twentieth century, you needed to be culturally adept to do business 'over there', but now, in the twenty-first century, you need to understand culture to do business 'over here'" [75]. The ways to learn more about cultures were reported by the interviews below:

> *I would watch some video logs and talk shows to learn more authentic life of foreign cultures. (R1)*

> *I would actively participate in the activities organized by colleagues to learn their cultures and*

work experiences to help me adapt myself to diverse cultures. The organization (UNDP) offers on-board training about intercultural communication, which is a good way to get prepared. (R3)

We need to learn how to express our Chinese culture in English and also learn some traditions or customs about different cultures. If you have the opportunity, the best way is to experience the culture in person, e.g. traveling to different countries. (R6)

An optimal amount of interaction with native speakers may be beneficial for gaining cultural sensitivity [76]. Their engagement in international interactions can also help improve their respect for different cultures [77], either through virtual interactions or in-person interactions. Lee and Markey (2014) discussed that people can gain cultural knowledge and become more aware of their own beliefs and attitudes toward their own culture through social engagements, and this practice leads to a better understanding and appreciation of the host culture [73].

6 Conclusion

The present study assessed the intercultural sensitivity level and their intercultural communication status quo of Chinese employees when working in international organizations. Quantitative analysis of the data indicated that the participants were excellent in terms of intercultural sensitivity and that their intercultural sensitivity were not statistically significantly correlated with their background variables. Through thematic coding analysis of the qualitative data, the research revealed that the participants did not encounter obvious challenges during intercultural communication while working in the international organizations, although they did suffer some which are related with work efficiency and target communication language. To cope with the challenges, both instant and preparation strategies are considered.

These findings have some implications for both in-service Chinese staff and those who aspect to find position in international organizations. Since how good they are at the target language is the precondition for a successful career in an international working environment, it is advisable for them to take all means to improve their proficiency in the target language. Although the most frequently used language in international organizations is English, it is advisable that mastering a second foreign language would give the employees an advantage. In addition, it is beneficial for both universities and the international organizations to offer intercultural communication courses and on-board training to students and employees, which should be designed and delivered to meet the needs of deep understanding of cultures, including norms, values, and philosophy [78-81]. Hes, Koubová and Chlumská (2015) suggested that the conflicts of current intercultural society mainly resulted from different values that were connected with the social, economic and cultural poverty, and lack of education rather than the different level of civilization [82].

The most obvious limitation in this research is the small sample size. The ages and genders have not been considered in this study. Furthermore, the results may be affected by the unique context of the research, few challenges regarding to intercultural communication were identified. With a larger sample, including a greater number of participants who work in the headquarters rather than the representative office in China, any intercultural communication difficulties or challenges would almost certainly emerge.

Further research is suggested that involves a larger number of participants with gender balance. Gender difference might result in different levels of anxiety during target language communication, as male students have been observed to be more anxious when communicating in the second language than female students [83]. However, due to the gender imbalance situation in the program of investigation in this study, the influence of gender had to be excluded from the research, which may have reduced the variety of variables obtained from investigation.

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