



# Briefing Note

## INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

### **Some basics about intercultural communication and the development of intercultural communicative competence**

English is taught to Chinese students with little reference or attention to culture and interculturality. They learn a great deal about English grammar but they have very limited exposure to authentic English language text. This means that many of the students who come to study in Australia have very little knowledge about Australia and about English language use in real contexts (academic and social). They are unable to put language and culture together and yet this is what is required in order to be successful (particularly within postgraduate programs). This situation can be very daunting and research indicates that as a result, Chinese students demonstrate a reluctance to engage with 'locals'. Chinese students report that they "don't know how to". Even initiating 'small talk' can be difficult. Mark Heyward (2002, p.17) describes this as:

*"living alongside rather than living with."*

Limited functional proficiency in English results in "engagement distancing" and works against students being able to become interculturally literate (pp.16-17).

At the same time, it also has to be said that many academics (both in Australia and China) have little knowledge of the 'other' and how language, learning and living are 'operationalized' in the other's context. Therefore it is incumbent on students and academics alike to take steps to enhance their intercultural communication and become interculturally competent.

## What Chinese postgraduate students say about interculturality:

(Based on interview data collected for this project)

Advice for future Chinese students	Advice for Australian academics
<p>"The postgraduate students from China should learn to socialise with the others."</p> <p>"Do not always stay with your Chinese friends."</p> <p>"Talk more and make friends with local classmates to better understand local community and teaching."</p> <p>"Open mind and accept / tolerate multi-cultures."</p>	<p>"Take an interest in us."</p> <p>"Chinese students is a little bit shame (<i>sic</i>) compared with Western students. So the organisation can help Chinese students to meet the culture - to help [them] know more about Western lifestyles. It will be helpful to Chinese students to establish their confidence."</p>

Discussions about interculturality may be very new for some people – students and academics alike – so the information included below is provided to give support to those who want to explore this area just a little further.

### Elements within the process of developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC)

Going beyond one's own culture and learning to operate effectively within another linguistic and cultural community is extremely challenging. For Chinese postgraduate students studying in Australia this involves learning to operate linguistically and socially within, and beyond, the university community at increasingly complex levels. Such engagement and functioning requires specific knowledge, understanding, and behaviour that are associated with the use of the English language and with interacting with English language speakers. The areas to which this knowledge, understanding and behaviour pertain are identified and elaborated in the following:

## **Social practices**

The process of developing intercultural competence requires Chinese students to learn about behaviours, practices, concepts, attitudes, beliefs, values, traditions, conventions, rituals and lifestyles that are intrinsic to Australian cultures, as well as about how these all impact learning in an Australian university and living in (and not alongside) an English speaking community.

## **The connection between literacy practices and social practices**

Chinese students who are interculturally competent have come to an appreciation of how social practices are fundamentally connected to, and interwoven with, language use and with literacy practices. They appreciate how these practices shape language, and how they formulate and condition ways of thinking and being in English speaking communities.

## **Social and political consciousness**

In addition to being able to acquire the discourses of English, and engage in, and use them appropriately, Chinese students, and the academics who teach them, need to be able to problematise the textual and social realities that they encounter as well as interrogate their own social realities and the belief systems and ideologies that underpin them.

## **The dynamism of culture**

We all need to view culture as being dynamic. We also need to recognise that variables such as gender, ethnicity, religion and age combine in an infinite number of ways of both being in the world and viewing the world (Kern, 2000; Papademetre & Scarino, 2000; Browett & Bresnehan, 2001).

## **Discourses**

James Gee (1999) has coined the phrase "Big D Discourses". In essence, Gee's phrase encapsulates all of the elements described above. Gee states that "Big D" discourses are always language plus "other stuff". It is worth quoting him more fully:

*Making visible and recognisable who we are and what we are doing always involves a great deal more than "just language". It involves acting-interacting-thinking-valuing-talking (sometimes writing-reading) in the "appropriate way" with the "appropriate" props at the "appropriate" times in the "appropriate" places.*

*Such socially acceptable associations among ways of using language, of thinking, valuing, acting, and interacting, in the "right" places and at the "right" times with the "right" objects (associations that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or "social network"), I will refer to as "Discourses," with a capital "D". I will reserve the word "discourse", with a little "d", to mean language-in-use or stretches of language (like conversations or stories)*

*( Gee, 1999, p.17.)*

Developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is about being able to identify the "language plus other stuff" – the Big D Discourses of the language that is being learnt. It is also about becoming able to use "language plus other stuff'. In addition, it is about viewing the Big D Discourses of our own and other communities from a critical perspective. We would all do well to take heed of the advice provided by Gee:

*Seeing your own Discourses as the world's horizon is endangering us all.  
(Gee, 2008)*

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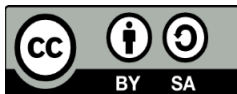
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Additional materials and resources are available from  
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