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INTERNATIONAL TEACHING ASSISTANTS AND THE ESSENCE OF THE  
DEVELOPMENT OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

BY

MARY JO FLETCHER LAROCCO

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

IN

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AND

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2011

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY DISSERTATION

OF

MARY JO FLETCHER LAROCCO

APPROVED:

Dissertation Committee

Major Professor

JoAnn Hammadou-Sullivan

Peter Adamy

Ying Hui Michael

Mustafa Ozcan

RIC:

Alexander Sidorkin

Dean, Feinstein School of Education – RIC

URI:

Nasser Zawia

Dean, The Graduate School - URI

UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND  
AND  
RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE

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## ABSTRACT

Intercultural competence is an essential, but understudied, aspect of communication for successful interactions between international teaching assistants (ITAs) and undergraduate students. This qualitative study employs transcendental phenomenology to describe the essence of the development of intercultural competence from the lived experiences of Chinese ITAs studying at a mid-size university in the northeast. The initial pool of participants was international graduate assistants from mainland China with a minimum of one semester experience as a teaching assistant. Two participant screening tools were employed. First, department mentors were asked to nominate potential participants with good levels of intercultural competence. Second, nominees were invited to complete the online Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003). As a result, seven individuals who had both mentor nominations and mid to high scores on the IDI participated in interviews. The result of this study is a composite textural-structural description of the essence of the factors that challenge, support, and influence the development of intercultural competence. The essential structure involves perceptions of cultural difference, intercultural experiences and interactions with others, and strategies to communicate with undergraduate students, to teach effectively, and to intentionally develop intercultural competence. This study provides a description of the unique perspectives and firsthand accounts that experienced ITAs offer on how they have developed effective ways of communicating with those who are culturally different from themselves. Rather than emphasizing a deficiency model of what ITAs are lacking or an ethnocentric model of what undergraduate students are demanding,

the study focuses on a strength-based, intercultural model of what effective ITAs share from their perspectives. Suggestions are made for ways to apply the findings of the study to the fields of intercultural communication and ITA training.

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I want to express my deep appreciation for the participants of this study. I am indebted to their willingness to participate, to give their time, and to share about their personal life experiences, which made this study possible. I thank my friend and transcriptionist, Nancy Holt, who invested an immense amount of time in producing such high quality transcripts for this project. I am amazed at your skills and efficiency and am truly grateful for your willingness to be involved.

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I want to thank Diane Geaber for encouraging me to begin this adventure. We never dreamed she would not be here to see its completion, but I treasure the years I

was blessed to know her as my friend and thank her for watching baby Dante so many times during my first years of classes. We miss you greatly.

To my Mom and Dad, I love you and could never fully express how thankful I am for giving me the gift of education throughout my life. I would never be who I am or where I am today without your love, support, encouragement, generosity, prayers, and faith since the day I was born. To Rob and Dante, I am deeply blessed to have you in my life and thank you for your generous sacrifice and constant support in pursuit of this degree and in all areas of life. You are my greatest joy, and I love you with all of my heart. My life is indebted to the sustaining grace of God and His ever-present help. I am grateful for the verse that has been a source of strength throughout this journey of life: “I lift up my eyes to the mountains – where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.” (Psalm 121:1).

## DEDICATION

*To my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,*

*To my dear husband Rob and precious son Dante,*

*And*

*In memory of Diane ~ words cannot express how much I miss you, my friend.*



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iv
DEDICATION.....	vi
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vii
LIST OF TABLES .....	xii
LIST OF FIGURES .....	xiii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	1
The “Foreign TA Problem”.....	2
Oral Proficiency in English Policy.....	4
ITA Training Programs.....	5
Beyond Oral English Skills.....	7
Personal Connection to this Study .....	7
Purpose of the Study and Research Question .....	9
Significance of the Study .....	9
Definition of Key Terms.....	10
Summary and Outline of the Study.....	12
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	14
Introduction.....	14
Intercultural Communication .....	15
Defining Communication and Culture.....	15
Defining Intercultural Communication.....	16

Defining Intercultural Competence.....	17
Distinguishing global competence from intercultural competence.....	18
Assessing intercultural competence .....	20
Theoretical Models of Intercultural Competence .....	21
Deardorff’s Process Model of Intercultural Competence .....	21
Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity.....	23
Intercultural Development Inventory.....	26
International Teaching Assistants .....	29
Pronunciation and Intelligibility .....	29
Pedagogical Effectiveness.....	30
ITA Training Programs and Assessment .....	32
Intercultural Communication and ITAs .....	35
Perspectives of Undergraduate Students.....	38
Perspectives of ITAs .....	41
Chinese Culture and Communication .....	44
Collectivism .....	44
Guanxi Networks .....	45
Saving Face .....	47
Indirect Communication.....	47
Power Distance.....	49
Conflict Management.....	49
Chinese Educational Culture.....	51
Conclusion .....	53

CHAPTER 3: METHOD .....	56
Research Design.....	56
Setting for the Study .....	63
Calendar of Events in Conducting the Study .....	63
Sampling Design.....	64
General Characteristics of the Participants .....	65
Data Collection Procedures.....	66
Phase One: Mentor Nominations .....	66
Phase Two: Intercultural Development Inventory.....	69
Phase Three: Interviews .....	71
Data Analysis .....	75
Validation of Data.....	78
Statement on Researcher as Instrument .....	78
Validation in Phenomenology.....	81
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS.....	85
Structural Theme 1: Perceptions of Cultural Difference.....	89
Textural Theme 1a: Perceptions of Chinese Culture and Communication..	89
Textural Theme 1b: Perceptions of American Culture and	
Communication.....	92
Textural Theme 1c: Perceptions of Differences Between Educational	
Cultures .....	93
Structural Theme 2: Intercultural Experiences and Interactions with Others .....	96

Textural Theme 2a: Intercultural Experiences and Intercultural Friendships .....	96
Textural Theme 2b: Interactions with Undergraduate Students .....	99
Textural Theme 2c: Interactions with Professors and Fellow Graduate Students .....	103
Structural Theme 3: Communication Strategies .....	108
Textural Theme 3a: Strategies to Communicate with Undergraduate Students .....	108
Textural Theme 3b: Teaching Strategies .....	110
Textural Theme 3c: Strategies to Develop Intercultural Competence .....	112
Sub-theme: Learn language and culture.....	112
Sub-theme: Communicate with others .....	114
Sub-theme: Focus on cultural similarities.....	116
Sub-theme: Learn and respect cultural differences .....	117
Sub-theme: Learn through experience and time .....	119
The Core Essence of the Phenomenon.....	120
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION.....	123
Summary of the Study.....	123
Interpretation and Implications of the Study.....	126
Finding 1: Perceptions of Cultural Difference .....	127
Finding 2: Intercultural Experiences and Interactions with Others .....	131
Finding 3: Communication Strategies.....	133
Implications for the Field of Intercultural Communication .....	138

Implications for the Field of ITA Training .....	139
Limitations of the Study.....	143
Suggestions for Future Research.....	146
Conclusion .....	149
APPENDICES .....	150
Appendix A: Letter to Department Mentors Describing and Proposing the Study .....	150
Appendix B: Mentor Informed Consent Form.....	152
Appendix C: Mentor Nomination Form.....	154
Appendix D: Letter to Nominees Describing and Proposing the Study .....	156
Appendix E: Nominee Informed Consent Form .....	158
Appendix F: Letter to Participants Inviting Participation in Interviews .....	161
Appendix G: General Interview Guide for First Interviews .....	162
Appendix H: General Interview Guide for Second Interviews.....	165
Appendix I: Thank You Letter to Participants Requesting Validation of Results .....	167
Appendix J: Example of Individual Textural Description, Structural Description, and Textural-Structural Description.....	168
Appendix K: Composite Structural Description: Integration of Structural and Textural Themes.....	176
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	177

## LIST OF TABLES

TABLE	PAGE
Table 1. General Characteristics of the Participants .....	66
Table 2. Horizontalized Relevant Statements .....	86
Table 3. Textural Themes and Relevant Statements .....	87

## LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE	PAGE
Figure 1. Data analysis steps for individual and composite descriptions. ....	90

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Statement of the Problem**

Intercultural communication has become an increasingly important field, particularly in higher education, due to the rise of globalization and internationalization (American Council, n.d.; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005). In the past twenty years, there has been a sharp increase in the number of international graduate students and an increasing use of international teaching assistants (ITAs) in U.S. universities (Finder, 2005; King, 1998). For example, the number of international students in U.S. universities during 1954/55 was 34,232 (King, 1998) compared with the number during 2009/10 of 690,923 (Open Doors, 2010). The number of students from China alone has increased from 50 in 1978 (King, 1998) to 127,628 (Open Doors, 2010). As ITAs are increasingly employed on university campuses, communication problems among ITAs and undergraduate students arise due to difficulties with pronunciation in English, challenges in developing pedagogical skills, and the complexities of intercultural communication (Althen, 1991; Bailey, 1984; Finder, 2005; Gravois, 2005; Hoekje & Williams, 1992; King, 1998; Smith, Byrd, Nelson, Barrett, & Constantinides, 1992). In this study, I address one understudied aspect of communication that is essential for successful interactions between ITAs and undergraduate students, namely the development of intercultural competence (Chen, 2005; King, 1998; Morley, 1991), which is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people of different cultures.



## **The “Foreign TA Problem”**

ITAs are graduate students from other countries studying at universities in the United States, who often fund their studies through teaching assistantships that provide a tuition scholarship and stipend (Byrd, 1991; King, 1998). Responsibilities of ITAs may include teaching undergraduate courses, facilitating lab sessions, meeting with study groups, tutoring, holding office hours, and grading assignments and tests for professors (Bailey, 1984; Dick & Robinson, 1993). The use of ITAs was first implemented at universities in the 1970s in order to provide a more cost-effective way for universities to staff multiple undergraduate courses as well as to provide a more cost-effective way for graduate students to pay for their education (King, 1998; Smith et al., 1992). International graduate student enrollment increased, particularly in the science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) disciplines as well as the field of business yet the numbers of ITAs have not increased without problems (Finder, 2005; Gravois, 2005).

Communication between ITAs and undergraduate students is often complicated and at times problematic (Bailey, 1984). These communication difficulties have been commonly referred to as the “foreign TA problem” (Bailey, 1984, p. 3). Complaints from students having difficulty understanding the spoken English of their ITAs began as the use of international TAs increased (King, 1998; Smith et al., 1992). These complaints were typically first communicated in student newspapers on campus but then spread to the media, increasing national attention on the issue in the mid-1980s (King, 1998). The complaints of undergraduate students about the “foreign TA problem” have prompted legislation in at least 22 states

regarding oral English proficiency in classroom instruction (Finder, 2005). The “foreign TA problem” is directly related to (1) the teaching responsibilities of under-experienced ITAs; (2) the increasing emphasis on TA training and accountability since the 1970s as well as students’ and parents’ attitudes of consumerism; (3) the decrease of American students and the increase of international students in STEM disciplines; (4) the ethnocentrism at times displayed by undergraduate students towards ITAs; and (5) the short-term and long-term benefits of international educational exchanges, including employing qualified ITAs (Bailey, 1984).

Graduate schools throughout the U.S. have become increasingly diverse settings due to the influx of international graduate students. For example, students from India and China alone comprise over 45% of all international students studying at U.S. graduate schools (Fischer, 2009). Furthermore, Open Doors (2010) reports that 24.1% of all international students receive funding through a U.S. college or university, indicating that a substantial number of international graduate students most likely have graduate assistantships. Business and management continues to be the top field of study, followed by engineering and then physical and life sciences (Open Doors, 2010). The use of ITAs in STEM fields is due to an inadequate supply of U.S. graduate students in these fields (King, 1998). In 2003, approximately 30% of students who earned doctorates were international students. In engineering, 50% of graduate students are international, and in math and physical science, approximately 41% of graduate students are international (Finder, 2005). Dick and Robinson (1993) found that 41% of TAs were international based on a survey of chemistry, math, and physics departments at the three largest state supported research institutions in

Indiana, which corresponded with national figures. “Under these circumstances, the odds increasingly are great that many if not most undergraduate sections in science at most institutions will be taught by ITAs” (Dick & Robinson, 1993, p. 2).

While ITAs who are non-native speakers of English have been increasingly employed to teach undergraduate courses, undergraduate students have increasingly complained of not understanding their ITA and have demanded a solution. In addition, ITAs commonly teach undergraduate courses in mathematics, statistics, chemistry, and physics that are often important requirements or prerequisites (King, 1998). The laws passed by the 22 states require universities to address the concern of adequately screening ITAs assigned classroom duties (Finder, 2005). These laws led to the development of ITA training programs that focus on language, pedagogy, and culture in order to reduce the negative effects of the “foreign TA problem” (Hoekje & Williams, 1992). As stated by Dick and Robinson (1993), “Much of the quality of U.S. higher education is linked inextricably with the effectiveness of communication between ITAs and their undergraduate students” (p. 3).

### **Oral Proficiency in English Policy**

The first law on oral English proficiency was passed by the Oklahoma State Legislature in 1982 (Thomas & Monoson, 1993). This law stated that “all instructors now employed or being considered for employment at institutions within the Oklahoma State System of Higher Education shall be proficient in speaking the English language so that they may adequately instruct students” (as cited in Thomas & Monoson, 1993, p. 196-197). Since that time, numerous policies and programs have come into existence to certify or strengthen the minimum required level of oral

proficiency in English for instructional personnel in higher education due to the concerns of students and parents regarding difficulty understanding the spoken English of ITAs and, therefore, course content (Dick & Robinson, 1993). Typically, state legislatures and institutional administrations have been the primary respondents to these specific concerns, resulting in the establishment of training programs and certification criteria (Sequiera & Constantino, 1989). For example, in 1979, the Faculty Council at Indiana University Bloomington issued a mandate for oral English proficiency assessment due to a pending lawsuit alleging a student failed a science course as a result of being unable to understand the ITA (Dick & Robinson, 1993). Fifteen states passed legislative mandates during the 1980s and 1990s regarding English proficiency assessment of instructional personnel in higher education while some universities implemented non-mandated initiatives (King, 1998). The institutions that adopt oral proficiency in English policies tend to be large, research institutions that have a significant number of graduate TAs (Thomas & Monoson, 1993), which often results in programs to assess, train, and support ITAs while smaller institutions provide fewer resources and support for ITAs. One of the outcomes, however, of oral English proficiency policy has been the increased attention to provide more effective preparation and training for both domestic and international TAs in order to improve the quality of classroom instruction (King, 1998; Thomas & Monoson, 1993).

### **ITA Training Programs**

The most significant outcome of oral proficiency in English policy has been the existence of ITA training programs. Most public and private universities have

now implemented programs, typically housed in English as a second language (ESL) programs, to assess and train ITAs, reflecting an increased awareness of the importance of oral English proficiency for ITAs (Dick & Robinson, 1993; Finder, 2005; Ross & Krider, 1992; Sequiera & Constantino, 1989; Thomas & Monoson, 1993). ITA training programs came into existence in response to the concern of the English language abilities of ITAs and include both short, pre-semester orientation programs as well as semester-long courses (Bailey, 1984).

ITA training is facilitated in multiple ways at various institutions. For example, the ITA program at the University of Washington requires ITAs from all university departments to participate in a one week training program which focuses on “group facilitation, giving assignments, grading assignments, lecture preparation, classroom procedures, expectations of students, and techniques for overcoming language difficulties” (Ross & Krider, 1992, p. 280). ITAs at the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa complete an intensive program for two and a half weeks before the fall semester, including management strategies and teaching methodologies for American classrooms, campus dynamics, language fluency, and American culture (Gravois, 2005). Vanderbilt University and the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities utilize undergraduate students to meet with ITAs and discuss American students’ behavior and speech (Gravois, 2005). The University of Michigan at Ann Arbor incorporates role-playing exercises and a student theater group in ITA training for classroom scenarios (Gravois, 2005). “Regardless of the nature of these training and orientation programs for the ITAs, the aim is to help ITAs adjust to their new

surroundings and prepare them to enter the unique atmosphere of the American classroom” (Ross & Krider, 1992, p. 280).

### **Beyond Oral English Skills**

Increased ITA training is a great improvement, but solutions to the “foreign TA problem” must extend beyond focusing solely on accent and English language proficiency and should include knowledge of culture and pedagogy (Bailey, 1984; Dick & Robinson, 1993; Thomas & Monoson, 1993). According to Sequiera and Costantino (1989):

Because legislators, parents, and undergraduates who are concerned about ITAs as instructors have tended to focus on ITAs’ oral English skills, there has been a trend toward legislation and development of policies for screening oral proficiency in English. Today most universities continue to admit and place international graduate students in programs on the basis of standardized screening tests...The advantage of standardized tests is that they provide comparative data for use in making decisions about placement of ITAs. (p. 80)

Thomas and Monoson (1993) surveyed 240 institutions and found that 74% of institutions in mandated states assess linguistic ability of ITAs but do not assess cultural knowledge or pedagogical skills. Thomas and Monoson further note that oral proficiency in English alone does not guarantee good teaching skills in the classroom. In addition, intercultural competence and pedagogical skills may possibly have an even greater impact on classroom instruction and students’ reactions to the English proficiency of ITAs than pronunciation abilities (Chen, 2005; King, 1998; Morley, 1991).

### **Personal Connection to this Study**

My interest in the topic of this study stems from my experience in working with ITAs since January of 2005 teaching courses on oral communication skills,

facilitating testing for oral proficiency in English, and administering an ITA training program with limited resources. Furthermore, I spent three and a half years from 1997-2000 living and working in Sarajevo, Bosnia, so I have experienced firsthand the joys and challenges of living and communicating cross-culturally and cross-linguistically. The richness of my time in Bosnia and my interactions with international students in the United States have cultivated my deep interest in the intercultural experiences of ITAs. I want to learn more about how they have experienced intercultural communication as ITAs and as graduate students. What have they had to learn the hard way? What has been helpful for them and what has been most challenging? Each semester, I have multiple Chinese ITAs who all have high levels of linguistic knowledge of the English language yet few seem to transition successfully into communicating in ways that are culturally appropriate. I want to know more about what has contributed to their experiences in developing this intercultural ability. What can we learn from their experiences that would deepen our understanding of the development of intercultural competence and possibly enable us to provide more effective ITA training programs?

I believe the experiences of ITAs can provide a wealth of insight for professionals involved with ITA training programs. More studies are needed that give voice to ITAs' perspectives and allow their experiences to inform and shape the fields of ITA training and intercultural communication. Rather than emphasizing a deficiency model of what ITAs are lacking or an ethnocentric model of what undergraduate students are demanding, I want to focus on a strength-based,

intercultural model of what effective ITAs can share firsthand from their own perspectives and experiences.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Question**

In order to further understand the firsthand experiences of ITAs and intercultural communication, the purpose of this study is to describe the development of intercultural competence from the lived experiences of Chinese ITAs studying at a mid-size university in the northeast. This qualitative study employed transcendental phenomenology to address the following research question: What is the essence of the factors that affect the development of intercultural competence from the perspectives of ITAs? The research design and rationale for using transcendental phenomenology is explained in Chapter Three. The result of this study is a synthesis of textural and structural descriptions of the factors that both challenge and support the development of intercultural competence based on the lived experiences of Chinese ITAs (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Significance of the Study**

The literature on ITAs widely recognizes that language, pedagogy, and culture are essential components of effective training programs for ITAs (Althen, 1991; Bailey, 1984; Finder, 2005; Gravois, 2005; Hoekje & Williams, 1992; King, 1998; Smith et al., 1992); however, the predominant focus in the literature on ITAs addresses issues of pronunciation and intelligibility (Dick & Robinson, 1993; Morley, 1991; Pickering, 2001; Thomas & Monoson, 1993; Tyler, 1992; Williams, 1992), pedagogical effectiveness (Luo, Grady, & Bellows, 2001; Ross & Krider, 1992; Twale, Shannon, & Moore, 1997), undergraduate student perspectives (Kavas &



Kavas, 2008; Plakans, 1997; Rao, 1995; Rubin, 1992; Smyrniou, 1994; Twale, Shannon, & Moore, 1997; Yook & Albert, 1999), and various aspects of assessment and training for ITAs (Byrd & Constantinides, 1992; Fleisher, Hashimoto, & Weinberg, 2002; Halleck & Moder, 1995; Hoekje & Linnell, 1994; Hoekje & Williams, 1992; Jenkins & Parra, 2003; Rubin, 1993; Tanner, Selfe, & Wiegand, 1993). Few studies specifically address the role of culture in the assessment and training of ITAs (Hill & Lakey, 1995; Chen, 2005; Luo, Grady, & Bellows, 2001; Smith, 1993), and even fewer studies focus on what we can learn directly from ITAs themselves (Luo, Grady, & Bellows, 2001; Ross & Krider, 1992; Trebing, 2007). No study has addressed the development of intercultural competence from the perspective of experienced ITAs.

The current research base focuses too narrowly on ITAs' language and pedagogical deficiencies. This study shifts the focus to their assets and what we can learn from their experiences to facilitate intercultural interactions in university settings. This study provides a significant contribution to the fields of both intercultural communication and ITA training by describing the unique perspectives and firsthand accounts that experienced ITAs offer on how they have developed effective ways of communicating with those who are culturally different from themselves.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

Key terms that are used in this study are defined as follows:

- 1) *Intercultural competence*: the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people of different cultures due to a person's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitude (Deardorff, 2008)
- 2) *Transcendental phenomenology*: an approach to qualitative research that describes the experience of several individuals regarding a specific phenomenon (central topic or concept); reduces the experiences to the unifying elements or essence of the phenomenon; emphasizes setting aside prejudgments and preconceptions of the phenomenon; and utilizes intuition, imagination, and universal structures to understand the experience (Creswell, 1998; Husserl, 1969; Moustakas, 1994)
- 3) *Epoche*: the process in which the researcher sets aside prejudgments in order to begin the research interview with an unbiased, receptive presence (Moustakas, 1994)
- 4) *Phenomenological reduction*: the process describing *what* one sees or has experienced of the phenomenon using textural language, meaning verbatim descriptions by the participants of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994)
  - a) *Bracketing*: clearly specifying the phenomenon under investigation devoid of prejudgments or preconceptions (removed through Epoche)
  - b) *Horizontalization*: listing each significant statement relevant to the phenomenon in order to give each statement equal value
  - c) *Delimited horizons or meanings*: horizons (statements) that stand out as invariant (experienced by all individuals) qualities of the experience
  - d) *Invariant constituents or themes*: meaning units that are non-repetitive and non-overlapping, clustered or grouped into themes

- e) *Individual textural description*: an integrated description of *what* each participant experienced in relation to the phenomenon, using descriptive language
  - f) *Composite textural description*: an integration of all of the individual textural descriptions into one synthesized textural description
- 5) *Imaginative variation*: the process describing *how* one experiences the phenomenon; seeking possible meanings by considering varying frames of reference and different perspectives or vantage points
- a) *Individual structural description*: an integrated description of *how* each participant experienced the phenomenon, meaning the common themes
  - b) *Composite structural description*: an integration of all of the individual structural descriptions into one synthesized structural description
- 6) *Individual textural-structural description*: an integrated description of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon in the individual textural description and the individual structural description of each participant, incorporating the invariant constituents and themes
- 7) *Composite textural-structural description*: the process of integrating the composite textural descriptions and the composite structural descriptions that provides a synthesis of the essence (the essential, invariant structure) of the phenomenon being investigated

### **Summary and Outline of the Study**

In Chapter One, I provided an introduction and overview of ITAs and the “foreign TA problem” as well as an explanation of oral English proficiency policy for

ITAs, ITA training programs, and my personal connection to this topic. I also introduced the research problem addressed in this study on intercultural competence and ITAs, the purpose and significance of the study in relation to the broader context of ITA research and the field of intercultural communication, and my specific research question. The chapter concluded with a list of key terms and their definitions that will be referred to in the following chapters.

In Chapter Two, I review the literature pertinent to this study, namely a theoretical overview of intercultural communication and a discussion of research studies on ITAs. Next, in Chapter Three, I explain the research design of this study, in particular the method used for data collection and data analysis. In Chapter Four, I present the findings of this study, and finally, in Chapter Five, I discuss the implications of these findings and make suggestions of ways to apply the findings of the study to the fields of intercultural communication and ITA training.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### **Introduction**

Due to the rise of globalization and the increasing numbers of international students enrolled on university campuses in the United States (Open Doors, 2010), intercultural communication is a growing area of importance and emphasis in higher education. The focal point of intercultural communication is the ability to communicate effectively with people who are culturally different than oneself. The American Council on Education (n.d.) recognizes the importance of cultural diversity and effective communication skills in higher education by stating that strengthening diversity among all members of the university community and preparing students “to live and work in a globally interdependent and culturally diverse world” are priorities in its strategic plan. Furthermore, a common learning outcome often cited at institutions of higher education in the United States is to graduate students who are “interculturally competent” (Deardorff, 2009a, p. 477). In addition, the increasing use of ITAs to teach undergraduate college courses has contributed to a greater awareness of issues related to intercultural communication and their importance. This chapter presents a review of the theoretical underpinnings of intercultural communication, the literature on ITA concerns, and important elements of communication in Chinese culture.

## **Intercultural Communication**

Intercultural communication is the foundation and theoretical background of this study. Since the field uses a multitude of similar and overlapping terms, clear definitions for the purposes of this study are essential.

### **Defining Communication and Culture**

A general understanding of communication and culture is fundamental to understanding the unique characteristics of intercultural communication (Lustig & Koester, 1996). Communication is “a symbolic process in which people create shared meanings” (Lustig & Koester, 1996, p. 29). In order to communicate a meaning or message, symbolic representations are employed, such as words, actions, or objects, and are then interpreted through the process of sense-making by others. Messages can be communicated in conscious and unconscious ways and may be interpreted differently by different people.

Culture is defined as “a learned set of shared perceptions about beliefs, values, and norms, which affect the behaviors of a relatively large group of people” (Lustig & Koester, 1996, p. 35). This definition is most appropriate for this study because it recognizes that culture is learned and involves “shared perceptions” of a group of people. As Vygotsky (1978) noted, people are not born with culture; they learn culture as they interact with other members of their culture through the process of socialization (Lustig & Koester, 1996). An emphasis that culture exists within people’s minds, not in external objects, is an important frame for understanding intercultural communication.

## **Defining Intercultural Communication**

Intercultural communication seeks to explain how people who do not share a common cultural experience can understand each other and is defined as

“communication between people of different cultures” (Bennett, 1998, p. 2).

Intercultural communication focuses on person-to-person interactions and the effect of cultural differences on the interaction (Bennett, 1998). Difficulties in intercultural communication develop when similarities are assumed, when nonverbal communication is misinterpreted, when preconceptions and stereotypes are employed, and when high levels of anxiety or stress exist (Barna, 1998).

There are distinct differences between intercultural communication, intracultural communication, and cross-cultural communication. Intercultural communication refers to communication between people of different cultures, and intracultural communication refers to communication between people of the same or similar culture (Gudykunst & Kim, 1984; Lustig & Koester, 1996). Although the term “cross-cultural” is at times used synonymously with the term “intercultural,” cross-cultural refers to “a comparison of some phenomena across cultures” (Gudykunst & Kim, 1984, p. 14). For example, a study regarding forms of politeness used among Chinese focuses on intracultural communication; a study regarding the forms of politeness used among Chinese and the forms of politeness used among Americans focuses on cross-cultural communication; and a study regarding the forms of politeness used by Chinese *with* Americans and used by Americans *with* Chinese focuses on intercultural communication.

## **Defining Intercultural Competence**

While the field of intercultural communication addresses the broader processes of communication between two or more people who are culturally different from one another, intercultural competence focuses on a person's *ability* to communicate appropriately and effectively in intercultural contexts. In other words, people from different cultures who are communicating with each other may be engaged in intercultural communication but that does not necessarily mean they are communicating successfully if comprehension is lacking or if messages are misinterpreted (Hall, 1998).

More than twenty similar and overlapping terms have been used in relation to intercultural competence (Fantini, 2009). The abundance of terms and varying definitions has limited the growth and development of understanding intercultural competence since researchers have not agreed on what they are actually talking about to begin with (Fantini, 2009; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). In an attempt to reach a consensus on a definition of intercultural competence, Deardorff's (2004; 2006; 2008) seminal work surveyed twenty-three intercultural experts using a combination of two research methods, a questionnaire and a Delphi Technique. The highest rated definition of intercultural competence was the "ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitude" (Deardorff, 2008). Since Deardorff's work is the only study to date that brings together the insight and experience of twenty-three well-known interculturalists, Deardorff's definition of intercultural competence is currently the strongest available in the field.



Various interculturalists have offered explanations on how a person develops intercultural competence though these explanations are based more on theoretical research rather than investigative studies. For example, Bennett and Bennett (2004) state that in order for intercultural competence to develop, knowledge, attitude, and behavior must work in conjunction. Allport (1954 as cited in Deardorff, 2009b) proposed that intercultural competence cannot be developed simply by having contact with people from the target culture but must be intentional and requires adequate preparation, interactions with those of other cultures, as well as relationship building (Deardorff, 2009a; Pusch, 2009). According to Deardorff (2009b), a central component of developing intercultural competence is developing authentic relationships that include trust, respect, and dialogue about cultural differences. In addition, Hunter, White, and Godbey (2006) note that the development of intercultural competence cannot be viewed as simply a by-product of learning a second language. In the studies by Deardorff (2006) and Hunter, White, and Godbey (2006), which both involved surveying panels of intercultural experts, the panels could not agree on whether or not language proficiency is an essential component of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006) or global competence (Hunter, White, & Godbey, 2006). Therefore, language proficiency alone does not necessarily lead to intercultural competence because developing intercultural competence further requires the ability to think, behave, and communicate in intercultural contexts (Deardorff, 2009b).

**Distinguishing global competence from intercultural competence.** Global competence is a term within intercultural communication that is used frequently in

relation to higher education, international education, business, and engineering, particularly in regards to the dearth of global competence among undergraduate students and the necessity of global competence for an increasingly international workforce (Grandin & Hedderich, 2009; Hunter, 2004; Hunter, White, & Godbey, 2006; Olson & Kroeger, 2001). Global competence is similar to intercultural competence in that there is no consensus on a specific definition of the term yet most definitions include the importance of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences (Hunter, White, & Godbey, 2006). The work by Hunter (2004, as cited in Hunter, White, & Godbey, 2006) used a Delphi Technique with a panel of international experts in order to reach a consensus and proposed the definition of global competence as “having an open mind while actively seeking to understand cultural norms and expectations of others, leveraging this gained knowledge to interact, communicate and work effectively outside of one’s environment” (p. 277).

The primary difference between intercultural competence and global competence is that both intercultural communication and intercultural competence emphasize *culture-general skills* (knowledge and ability that can apply to any intercultural situation) while global competence seems to include an emphasis on *global or world knowledge and perspective*, (specific knowledge of world events, globalization, world history, and geography) (Hunter, White, & Godbey, 2006). In sum, Hunter, White, and Godbey (2006) state that global competence requires the ability to identify cultural differences in order to compete globally, the ability to work collaboratively across cultures, and the ability to be an effective participant in cross-cultural social and business contexts.

**Assessing intercultural competence.** Deardorff's (2006) study also found that it is possible to assess degrees or levels of intercultural competence and that it is best to use a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods in the assessment, including interviews, observation, and judgment by self and others. More specifically, ninety percent of the panel of expert interculturalists agreed that interviews, mixed measures, qualitative measures, self-report instruments, and triangulation were effective ways to assess intercultural competence, while interviews and case studies received the strongest agreement for methods of assessment (Deardorff, 2009a, p. 478). Deardorff's (2006) findings are significant because the field now has an agreed upon term, an agreed upon definition, and agreed upon methods of assessment; however, these findings simply provide a foundational understanding of what intercultural competence is, but they do not adequately explain how a person develops this ability. How is the development of intercultural competence perceived by those who have experienced it? What are the values and benefits of developing intercultural competence? What do these experiences mean for specific groups of people who have a shared cultural background or life experience? Additional studies are needed to learn more about people who have effective levels of intercultural competence and how they developed this ability.

In sum, a plethora of concepts, terms, and definitions have been used when discussing aspects of intercultural communication. Many of these terms overlap and focus on different components. For the purposes of this study, communication is viewed as the process in which people create shared meanings, and culture is understood as a learned set of shared perceptions of a large group of people about

beliefs, values, and norms. Intercultural communication refers to any communication between people of different cultures, while intercultural competence more specifically refers to the actual ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people of different cultures based on intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitude. Both intercultural communication and intercultural competence apply to any intercultural situation. In addition, global competence is the ability to communicate effectively in intercultural interactions but emphasizes the importance of global knowledge, such as is required in foreign diplomacy and international business negotiations.

### **Theoretical Models of Intercultural Competence**

During the past five decades, various theoretical models of intercultural competence have been proposed, along with over three hundred related terms and concepts to reflect the different constructions (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). However, Deardorff's (2004; 2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence and Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity have been the most significant influences on the current understanding of intercultural competence.

**Deardorff's Process Model of Intercultural Competence.** Deardorff's (2004; 2006) grounded theory-based model of intercultural competence was developed through the only study to document consensus of leading interculturalists on a definition of intercultural competence. This model is a causal path model, meaning it reflects how the various components of intercultural competence are interrelated (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). The model consists of four levels in which the development of intercultural competence moves through a cyclic process

beginning with attitudes and then knowledge/comprehension and skills, which are individual levels. The process continues on to desired internal outcomes and then desired external outcomes, which are the interaction levels. The levels are summarized as follows:

***Individual levels.*** The first level is *attitudes* and consists of respect (valuing other cultures and cultural diversity), openness (to intercultural learning and to people from other cultures; withholding judgment), and curiosity/discovery (tolerating ambiguity and uncertainty). The second level is *knowledge/comprehension and skills*. Knowledge/comprehension consists of cultural self-awareness, deep understanding and knowledge of culture (including contexts, role and impact of culture and others' worldviews), culture-specific information, and sociolinguistic awareness. Skills are the ability to listen, observe and evaluate as well as to analyze, interpret and relate.

***Interaction levels.*** The third level is *desired internal outcome*, characterized as informed frame of reference/filter shift, including adaptability (to different communication styles and behaviors; adjustment to new cultural environment), flexibility (selecting and using appropriate communication styles and behaviors; cognitive flexibility), ethnorelative view, and empathy. The fourth level is *desired external outcome*, characterized by effective and appropriate communication and behavior in an intercultural situation or specific context (based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes) that is deemed successful or not by the other person(s) involved in the interaction.

Based on this model, the degree of intercultural competence a person develops (and manifests through outcomes) is dependent upon the degree of attitudes, knowledge/comprehension, and skills that a person develops. Deardorff (2009a) also notes the following: (1) the development of intercultural competence is an ongoing process so it is important for individuals to have opportunities to reflect and assess their own development; (2) critical thinking ability is an essential skill in reflecting on one's development of intercultural competence; (3) attitudes are the foundation of the model and affect all other components of intercultural competence; and (4) the ability to understand the perspectives and the worldview of others is essential to developing intercultural competence and was the only component of the model with unanimous agreement among expert interculturalists (Deardorff, 2009a). This model is a first important step in developing consensus in the field of intercultural communication on what is involved in the development of intercultural competence and now needs to be further tested and refined.

**Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity.** One of the most influential theoretical underpinnings of intercultural communication is the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) (Bennett, 1993; Paige & Goode, 2009; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Vande Berg & Paige, 2009). Based on cognitive psychology and constructivism, Bennett (1993) defines the development of intercultural sensitivity as a person's construction of reality that is increasingly able to accommodate cultural difference. Intercultural sensitivity emphasizes a person's perspective, mindset, or worldview, which is one component of intercultural competence as identified by the notion of attitude in Deardorff's (2006) definition of

intercultural competence. Bennett (1993) notes that the development of intercultural sensitivity is not a natural process and needs to be intentionally cultivated.

Similar to a Piagetian (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969) view of development that involves a successive progression through stages, the DMIS identifies six stages of increasing sensitivity to cultural differences on a continuum of ethnocentrism in the first three stages and ethnorelativism in the latter three stages (Bennett, 1993; Bennett, 1998; Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003). Bennett (1993, 1998) defines ethnocentrism as “using one’s own set of standards and customs to judge all people, often unconsciously” and ethnorelativism as “being comfortable with many standards and customs and having an ability to adapt behavior and judgments to a variety of interpersonal settings” (Bennett, 1998, p. 26). The developmental stages are centered on the concept that intercultural competence increases when a person’s understanding of both personal cultural differences and worldview differences increases (Bennett, 1993). The six stages of the DMIS are summarized as follows:

- 1) *Denial*: The denial stage refers to people who often live isolated from other cultures and are unaware cultural differences exist, consider cultural differences irrelevant, or maintain broad stereotypes based on minimal information of people in other cultures. When faced with cultural difference, they tend to dehumanize others.
- 2) *Defense*: The defense stage refers to people who are more aware of cultural difference than those in the denial stage yet cultural difference is viewed as negative and threatening. When encountering cultural difference, people in the defense stage seek to protect their identity and deny

opportunities to outsiders. At times, some people may enter a reverse defense stage where they view their own culture negatively yet defend a host culture or adopted culture.

3) *Minimization*: The minimization stage refers to people who minimize cultural difference and emphasize that all people or cultures are generally the same; however, this assumption of similarity often results in an ethnocentric perspective (all people are basically the same as oneself).

4) *Acceptance*: The acceptance stage refers to people who recognize and enjoy cultural difference. They accept different ways of thinking and behaving as valid even if they do not personally like these differences.

5) *Adaptation*: The adaptation stage refers to people who empathize with cultural differences and modify their behavior according to the appropriate norms of another culture. They have a level of intercultural competence that reflects the ability to maintain their own cultural identity but also adapt or shift to another cultural frame of reference.

6) *Integration*: The integration stage refers to people who do not identify with any one culture but are in the process of creating a new intercultural or multicultural identity, reconciling the various cultures they know. Their cultural worldview is a collective construct.

Each of the stages of the DMIS represents the underlying cultural worldview manifested through observable behavior and attitudes. Bennett (2003) defines a cultural worldview as “the set of distinctions that is appropriate to a particular culture” (p. 423). Rather than focusing on describing the changes of behavior and



attitudes, the model as a whole represents the changes in structure of a person's cultural worldview (Bennett, 2003). The DMIS does not emphasize "cultural literacy" but emphasizes the capacity to develop intercultural competence (Bennett, 1993, p. 23). Although some interculturalists may emphasize theories based on cultural similarities (Brislin, 1981 and Samovar, Porter, & Jain, 1981, as cited in Bennett, 1993), the emphasis of understanding cultural difference is critical to developing intercultural competence (Bennett, 1993), and the process of becoming multicultural is directly connected to one's worldview (Adler, 1998).

**Intercultural Development Inventory.** Based on the DMIS, the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) is a statistically reliable and cross-culturally valid assessment tool that was developed by Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman (2003) to assess both an individual's and a group's orientations and sensitivity toward cultural differences. The IDI has been the only assessment tool that provides a valid and reliable way to understand how people perceive cultural difference and has been widely used in studies related to the development of intercultural competence (Altschuler, Sussman, & Kachur, 2003; Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2006; Deardorff, 2009a; Endicott, Bock, & Narvaez, 2003; Klak & Martin, 2003; Olson & Kroeger, 2001; Paige, Jacobs-Cassuto, Yershova, & Dejaeghere, 2003; Straffon, 2003; Vande Berg & Paige, 2009). The online IDI v3 contains fifty multiple-choice items, has been translated into twelve languages, and is applicable to people from various cultural backgrounds (<http://www.idiinventory.com/about.php>; Fantini, 2009). Based on the six stages of increasing sensitivity to cultural differences reflected in the DMIS, the IDI indicates

that intercultural competence increases when understanding of cultural differences increases. The IDI has been used extensively in both corporate and educational settings to identify training needs and to facilitate research projects on intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2009a).

The IDI is significant and especially important for this study because Deardorff's (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence recognizes that attitude is foundational to developing intercultural competence and affects all other components. Furthermore, intercultural sensitivity or the ability to understand other worldviews is the only component of Deardorff's model that received unanimous agreement by the panel of interculturalists as essential for developing intercultural competence. The IDI is an extremely useful assessment tool because it is able to assess the development of intercultural sensitivity, and when combined with other methods of assessment such as interviews and judgments by others (Deardorff, 2006), a person's level of intercultural competence can now be determined.

Paige, Jacobs-Cassuto, Yershova, and Dejaeghere (2003) employed psychometric analysis, including factor analysis, reliability and validity testing, and social desirability analysis, in order to empirically assess the properties of the IDI and to generate a single, overall IDI score for research and training purposes. The authors found the IDI to be a reliable measure of the DMIS and produced an overall developmental score for the IDI.

Straffon (2003) explored the level of intercultural sensitivity of high school students from over forty different countries attending an international school in Southeast Asia. The study used the IDI to quantify levels of intercultural sensitivity

based on the DMIS for 360 participants and then used follow-up, structured interviews with thirteen participants to crosscheck the IDI scores and to explore how students with varying levels of intercultural sensitivity viewed cultural differences. The study found that levels of intercultural sensitivity as scored on the IDI were positively correlated with the length of attendance at an international school.

The IDI has also been used to assess the relation between moral reasoning and intercultural sensitivity in the work by Endicott, Bock, and Narvaez (2003), which found a significant correlation between the development of moral judgment and the development of intercultural sensitivity. Olson and Kroeger (2001) incorporated modified elements of the IDI in their survey of fifty-two faculty and staff at a university to assess relationships between international experience, global competencies, and levels of intercultural sensitivity. The study found that both proficiency in a second language and extensive experience in cross-cultural contexts independently increase the development of intercultural sensitivity.

To summarize, the specific models of Deardorff's (2004; 2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence and Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity as well as the intercultural assessment tool of Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman's (2003) IDI have significantly influenced the field of intercultural communication by furthering understanding of intercultural competence. Together, these three major components provide a framework and initial assessment tool most appropriate for this study on the development of intercultural competence from the perspective of ITAs.

## **International Teaching Assistants**

For the purposes of this study, an understanding of the current knowledge base regarding the use and training of ITAs is essential because this understanding explains the importance of the development of intercultural competence for ITAs.

### **Pronunciation and Intelligibility**

The literature addressing issues and concerns related to ITAs has primarily centered on ITAs' oral English skills and the impact on communication with undergraduate students (Derwing, 2010; Dick & Robinson, 1993; Jun & Li, 2010; Morley, 1991; Pickering, 2001; Thomas & Monoson, 1993; Tyler, 1992; Williams, 1992). In particular, research studies and expert opinion have focused on pronunciation skills (Derwing, 2010; Dick & Robinson, 1993; Morley, 1991), discourse structure and comprehensibility (Tyler, 1992; Williams, 1992), and the role of tone choice and communication in the classroom (Pickering, 2001). This research has provided important insight regarding the effect of pronunciation and intelligibility on communication; however, these studies investigate ITA concerns from a linguistic perspective that does not adequately address or acknowledge the role and effect of intercultural competence on successful communication between ITAs and undergraduate students.

Even though most ITAs have been admitted for graduate level study at universities based upon advanced proficiency in English as reflected in high scores on the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), they often have limited experience using oral English which results in difficulty communicating with students who are native speakers of English

(Hoekje & Williams, 1992; Tyler, 1992). When undergraduates complained that they could not understand their TA, the reaction of many state legislatures and university administrations was to create policies to regulate oral proficiency in English, assessments to measure pronunciation and comprehensibility, and programs to provide support for improving oral English skills (Dick & Robinson, 1993). These policies tend to emphasize the pronunciation skills and intelligibility of ITAs who are non-native speakers of English (Thomas & Monoson, 1993) yet often overlook the complexities and additional components required for successful intercultural communication. Oral English skills are important for ITAs, but successful communication in the classroom also requires effective teaching skills.

### **Pedagogical Effectiveness**

Several studies have investigated the pedagogical effectiveness of ITAs and student evaluations of ITAs (Fleisher, Hashimoto, & Weinberg, 2002; Jacobs & Friedman, 1988; Kavas & Kavas, 2008; Plakans, 1997; Smyrniou, 1994; Twale, Shannon, & Moore, 1997; Wang, 2000). A common misconception of undergraduate students is the notion that ITAs are less effective teachers than instructors who are native speakers of English; however, multiple studies provide evidence that there is no difference in student performance in courses taught by ITAs as compared to students in courses taught by domestic TAs (Fleisher, Hashimoto, & Weinberg, 2002; Jacobs & Friedman, 1988; Luo, Grady, & Bellows, 2001; Smyrniou, 1994). For example, Fleisher, Hashimoto, and Weinberg (2002) studied the effectiveness of ITAs teaching economics courses and found that when ITAs were properly screened and trained in oral English skills and pedagogical skills that

they were at least as effective in teaching economics courses as domestic TAs. A caveat, though, is that Fleisher, Hashimoto, and Weinberg attribute an ITA's effectiveness to the training received in spoken English and teaching skills but fail to address whether or not intercultural competence was actually a factor that influenced teaching effectiveness.

The perception of undergraduates on the teaching effectiveness of ITAs may be strongly influenced by the levels of intercultural competence of both undergraduates and ITAs (Chen, 2005; King, 1998), which is why it is important to gain a better understanding of how effective ITAs have developed high levels of intercultural competence. Although attempts at determining the pedagogical effectiveness of ITAs has at times been based on student evaluations (Fleisher, Hashimoto, & Weinberg, 2002; Jacobs & Friedman, 1988; Kavas & Kavas, 2008; Smyrniou, 1994; Twale, Shannon, & Moore, 1997), this method of assessing teaching effectiveness is difficult if not impossible due to the bias resulting from each person's level of intercultural sensitivity. For example, Twale, Shannon, and Moore (1997) investigated self-ratings of ITAs and domestic TAs with corresponding student evaluation ratings from math and science courses on nine factors of teaching effectiveness. The study found that ITAs and TAs both consistently rated their teaching effectiveness higher than did their students and that ITAs generally rated their teaching ability higher than domestic TAs rated their own ability. Furthermore, student ratings were consistently higher for domestic TAs than ITAs. Twale, Shannon, and Moore conclude that the discrepancies seem to be based on differences in cultural background and classroom expectations and recommend

that universities increase intercultural training for ITAs, domestic TAs, and undergraduate students. Therefore, appropriate measures to address concerns regarding the pedagogical effectiveness of ITAs need to focus not only on oral English skills and teaching ability but also on the role of intercultural competence (Luo, Grady, & Bellows, 2001; Smyrniou, 1994).

### **ITA Training Programs and Assessment**

As explained previously, complaints by undergraduate students regarding the pronunciation skills and teaching effectiveness of ITAs led to the creation of policies on oral English proficiency in many states and universities throughout the country. A direct result of the adoption of these policies was the development of training programs for ITAs to strengthen the quality of classroom instruction (Dick & Robinson, 1993; King, 1998; Thomas & Monoson, 1993), which also resulted in numerous studies and publications investigating best practices of ITA training and effective methods of assessment (Byrd & Constantinides, 1992; Fleisher, Hashimoto, & Weinberg, 2002; Halleck & Moder, 1995; Hoekje & Linnell, 1994; Hoekje & Williams, 1992; Jenkins & Parra, 2003; Rubin, 1993; Tanner, Selfe, & Wiegand, 1993).

Programs for ITAs vary in content and focus, but most professionals in ITA training agree that language, pedagogy, and culture are essential components (Althen, 1991; Bailey, 1984; Bengu, 2009; Finder, 2005; Gravois, 2005; Hoekje & Williams, 1992; King, 1998; Luo, Grady, & Bellows, 2001; Smith et al., 1992). However, as Hoekje and Williams (1992) state, “The question of the relative importance of each [component] and the relationship of one area to the other

remains” (p. 244). Although many ITA training programs are situated within ESL programs, the training content needs to be broader than traditional ESL concerns since it needs to include pedagogical skills and intercultural competence. However, deciding which department or program should ultimately be responsible for coordinating ITA training can be problematic. For example, ESL professionals are trained to deal with the linguistic needs of non-native speakers of English but are not necessarily professionals in training others in pedagogy and intercultural communication. Programs at universities that develop excellence in teaching may not necessarily be equipped to deal with the linguistic and intercultural concerns associated with ITAs. Furthermore, ITA trainers often address culture from the vantage of undergraduate students’ expectations or prescriptive information on U.S. culture rather than from a theoretical understanding of intercultural communication and an intentional focus on developing intercultural competence, which is essential in order to promote successful intercultural interactions and to reduce misunderstandings due to cultural differences between ITAs and undergraduate students.

Measures of assessment for ITAs primarily concern oral English skills, such as pronunciation, intelligibility, comprehensibility, and fluency, though some assessments also include teaching skills and cultural knowledge (Briggs, 1994; Dick & Robinson, 1993; Smith et al., 1992), but no method of assessment for ITAs specifically addresses intercultural competence even though it may be an essential component for ITAs to have successful intercultural interactions with undergraduate students. Assessments vary depending on the resources and funding available and



are often used to determine whether or not an ITA can be assigned teaching duties and whether or not an ITA is required to participate in further training on pronunciation, communication, culture, or pedagogy (Dick & Robinson, 1993; Kaufman & Brownworth, 2006). No consensus exists in the field as to which method of assessment is most appropriate and authentic (Hoekje & Linnell, 1994). One method of assessment that addresses pedagogical skills and general intercultural communication skills is a micro-teaching or oral communicative performance test, which assesses ITAs' abilities to perform various tasks such as explaining a term or concept, summarizing or discussing a discipline-specific article, reading aloud, pronouncing discipline-specific terms, describing or explaining a chart or diagram, role-playing office hours or phone conversations, making classroom announcements, and fielding student questions (Smith et al., 1992). This type of test is often rated by ESL professionals, undergraduate students, departmental representatives, and/or staff from the ITA training program (Briggs, 1994; Gorsuch, 2006; Smith et al., 1992). Although methods of assessment have developed significantly from an initial exclusive focus on oral English skills to more comprehensive measures of the communicative needs and responsibilities of ITAs, further research is needed on assessments appropriate for ITAs that are statistically valid, reliable, and authentic (Hoekje & Linnell, 1994) and that also measure levels of intercultural competence.

ITA training programs have continued to evolve to increase the professional support offered to ITAs. To understand how ITA training programs have changed during the past five years, Kenyon and Pettit (2009) surveyed the ITA training programs of thirty-two universities. The study found an increase in the use of

technology, an emphasis on the use of authentic materials, a focus on discipline-specific needs, and an increased emphasis on pedagogy. Program content has shifted from initially being language-focused to now being communication-focused (Rubin, 1993). Some advocate for an increase in discipline-specific training for ITAs that can more intentionally address vocabulary, content, culture, and procedures unique to the culture and focus of a specific academic discipline (Smith, 1994; Tanner, Selfe, & Wiegand, 1993). These changes have been helpful, but they still do not place a strong enough priority and emphasis on providing training in intercultural competence, which promotes successful intercultural interactions in diverse university settings.

### **Intercultural Communication and ITAs**

ITA training programs that include a cultural component in their curriculum and program objectives use a wide and confusing array of labels, rarely define their terms, and fail to use definitions drawn from research in intercultural communication (Kaufman & Brownworth, 2006; Madden & Myers, 1994; Smith et al., 1992). When varying terms without precise definitions are used in reference to intercultural communication, it implies that all these terms are referring to the same thing and conveys a simplistic understanding of the complexities involved in intercultural communication. Furthermore, ITA training programs that address culture tend to emphasize the need for ITAs to adapt to the expectations of undergraduate students (Kaufman & Brownworth, 2006; Madden & Myers, 1994; Rubin, 1993; Smith, 1994; Smith et al., 1992) and provide little emphasis on developing intercultural competence. For example, Hoekje and Williams (1992) note that culture in ITA

curriculum emphasizes objective cultural topics such as time, space, and relationships, as well as the culture of the U.S. classroom through readings about U.S. education and some involvement with undergraduate students as mentors in ITA training. As Hoekje & Williams (1992) state, “Although the information provided in the typical culture component of the training program is useful, it is only a very small part of the picture” (p. 254). Effective intercultural communication requires an understanding of cultural communication styles and underlying cultural values so as to understand how to communicate effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds (Deardorff, 2009b).

Since it is widely recognized that culture is an important aspect of effective interactions between ITAs and undergraduate students (Althen, 1991; Bresnahan & Cai, 2000; Fitch & Morgan, 2003; Gorsuch, 2003; Hill & Lakey, 1995; Hoekje & Williams, 1992; Jenkins, 2000; Kaufman & Brownworth, 2006; Kuhn, 1996; Luo, Grady, & Bellows, 2001; Madden & Myers, 1994; Ross & Krider, 1992; Smith, 1993; Smith et al., 1992), it is surprising that few studies specifically focus on intercultural communication and ITAs (Jenkins, 2000; Smyrniou, 1994). One important study in this area is by Jenkins (2000), who conducted an exploratory case study to examine the patterns of miscommunication between seven Chinese ITAs and nine faculty members in a mathematics department. The study found that the ITAs and faculty members had differing cultural expectations of appropriate communication styles, which resulted in patterns of miscommunication and a lack of understanding the other’s perspective. For example, when the Chinese ITAs used silence to show politeness and avoidance strategies to save face, the faculty members

interpreted this as lack of motivation, isolationism, and an unwillingness to cooperate. In addition, the ITAs felt that stressful pressures and mixed messages from faculty contributed to their communication behavior. Jenkins' study provided useful findings on factors that contribute to intercultural miscommunication between ITAs and professors; however, it is most important for the field to gain an understanding on what contributes to *successful* intercultural communication between ITAs and professors as well as ITAs and undergraduate students.

In the classroom, ITAs often encounter cultural difference in the areas of what it means to establish rapport with students, be approachable, teach with enthusiasm, and treat students with impartiality (Davis, 1991). ITAs also find it difficult to understand differences between mainstream American culture and the multiple subcultures in existence (Althen, 1991; Luo, Grady, & Bellows, 2001). Programs that have experienced some measures of success in helping ITAs adjust to these cultural differences have utilized reciprocal teaching activities with content and culture between ITAs and undergraduate students (Miller & Matsuda, 2006) and have employed undergraduate students as cultural consultants (Cotsonas, 2006) and evaluators (Petro, 2006) in ITA training.

Despite the challenges, some ITAs are able to overcome the intercultural difficulties and achieve outstanding success. Bresnahan and Cai (2000) interviewed thirty ITAs from fourteen countries who had all received department or university awards for outstanding teaching. Participants identified the following factors as contributing to their success: an openness to communicate, a willingness to seek help when needed, a sense of humor about mistakes, an attitude that welcomed cross-

cultural learning from mistakes, and the availability of formal and informal networks for teaching support (p. 72). Even though these findings provide a positive approach for promoting successful intercultural communication, Bresnahan and Cai (2000) admit that not all ITAs are able to have this high level of comfort with achieving success through making and learning from mistakes and need training to help manage the difficulties encountered.

Assessment and training for ITAs that focuses solely on language competence will not necessarily result in more effective interactions between ITAs and undergraduate students. Universities need to place a more intentional focus on the development of intercultural competence for ITAs as well as for undergraduate students in order to foster more successful intercultural interactions on campus and to produce more interculturally competent graduates entering a globalized world (Smyrniou, 1994). As Rubin (1993) states, “One ramification of this trend toward internationalization is certain: the continued excellence of American higher education hinges on the success of American undergraduates on the one hand, and international instructors on the other, in learning intercultural communication skills” (p. 184).

### **Perspectives of Undergraduate Students**

Difficulties in communication and in the differing expectations between ITAs and undergraduate students are often caused by cultural differences (Chen, 2005; Kavas & Kavas, 2008). Although ITAs have received much of the blame for the communication problems with undergraduate students, research indicates that undergraduate students’ perspectives of ITAs can be influenced by ethnocentric

attitudes and a lack of preparedness to listen to and communicate with people of cultural backgrounds different from their own (Fitch & Morgan, 2003; Kavas & Kavas, 2008; Plakans, 1997; Rao, 1995; Rubin, 1992; Smith et al., 1992; Smyrniou, 1994; Yook & Albert, 1999). For example, Rao (1995) conducted a quantitative study with 330 participants to explain the cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes related to the language expectations that undergraduate students have when they realize the TA for a course is an ITA. According to Rao, when students watched a videotaped segment of an ITA entering a classroom, students expected the ITA to speak with accented English that would be difficult to understand, referred to as the “Oh No! Syndrome.” If the ITA’s speech was indeed difficult to understand, then the students became angry, anxious, and were likely to want to drop the class.

In addition, Rubin (1992) investigated the responses of sixty-two American undergraduate students as they listened to the same recorded lecture of standard spoken English by a native speaker while looking at a picture of the supposed instructor who was either a Caucasian woman or an Asian (Chinese) woman. Rubin found that the student responses of those looking at the Asian photo made significantly more errors when completing missing words on a printed transcript of the lecture and that the students complained about the instructor’s supposed accent. According to Rubin (as cited in Gravois, 2005):

Students who expect that nonnative instructors will be poor instructors and unintelligible speakers can listen to what we know to be the most standard English speech and the most well-formed lecture, and yet experience some difficulties in comprehension. All the pronunciation improvement in the world will not by itself halt the problem of students’ dropping classes or complaining about their instructors’ language. (n.p.)

Although these findings are interesting and somewhat useful in understanding undergraduate students' perspectives of ITAs, both Rubin (1992) and Rao (1995) created artificial scenarios with videos and audio tapes. If they had used authentic experiences in an actual classroom with an actual ITA, the results may have been different and more helpful in understanding undergraduates' perspectives.

In order to continue to strengthen effective communication between undergraduate students and ITAs, undergraduate students need support to nonprejudicially comprehend world Englishes and need to also be willing to compromise and adapt to acceptable expectations of their classes taught by ITAs (Rubin as cited in Gravois, 2005; Sarkodie-Mensah, 1991). Plakans (1997) seems to best summarize the perspective of undergraduate students as follows:

The picture that emerges from the data is of undergraduate students who are trying to cope with a difficult situation: Required courses outside their majors are frequently taught by inexperienced TAs whose manner of speaking English and whose cultural and pedagogical expectations may be different from their own. (p. 112)

Although many ITA training programs incorporate the use of undergraduate students as evaluators, mentors, and conversation partners to help ITAs learn more about American culture (Cotsonas, 2006; Kaufman & Brownworth, 2006; Miller & Matsuda, 2006; Papajohn, 2006; Petro, 2006), there is a need for greater interaction between ITAs and undergraduate students in order to increase reciprocal understanding (Sarkodie-Mensah, 1991) and to further develop the intercultural competence of both ITAs and undergraduate students (Petro, 2006; Plakans, 1997).

## **Perspectives of ITAs**

The majority of studies that focus on the interactions between ITAs and undergraduate students have emphasized the attitudes and beliefs of undergraduate students toward ITAs, but few studies have focused on what we can learn directly from ITAs themselves. More specifically, the studies that have explored ITAs' perspectives have primarily addressed what ITAs think about teaching experiences (Bates-Holland, 2008; Bengu, 2009; Bresnahan & Cai 2000; Luo, Grady, & Bellows, 2001; Meesuwat, 1992; Ross & Krider, 1992; Tavana, 2005; Trebing, 2007) and their attitudes toward and understanding of undergraduate students (Han, 2008; Numrich, 1991; Tavana, 2005; Trebing, 2007). These studies have provided important insight on ITAs' experiences and perceptions which has been useful for improving ITA training. For example, Bates-Holland (2008) conducted a qualitative multi-case study to explore the perspectives of ITAs on learning to teach in a university setting. One important finding of the study is that ITAs' ways of teaching and interacting in the classroom were influenced by their own beliefs about teaching and personal experiences with learning, which often conflicted with the expectations of teaching and learning held by undergraduate students, faculty advisors, and university administrators; however, the study failed to address how an ITA's level of intercultural sensitivity influences his/her perception of cultural differences and how levels of intercultural competence affect an ITA's ability to manage these cultural differences in the classroom.

A common struggle for ITAs is adjusting to the educational culture of the U.S. which is often very different from educational cultures in their countries of



origin (Kuhn, 1996). For example, Luo, Grady, and Bellows (2001) used a questionnaire to investigate the perceptions of both domestic TAs and ITAs on instructional issues and found that the most significant challenges encountered by ITAs were language difficulties and cultural differences. To address these challenges, Luo, Grady and Bellows advocate that training in intercultural communication skills is essential for both TAs and ITAs in order to foster effective communication in the classroom with an increasingly diverse student population. In addition, the phenomenological study by Ross and Krider (1992) explored the teaching experiences of ITAs in the department of speech communication at a university without an ITA training program. The most common difficulties identified were lack of instructional preparation, classroom procedures, English language usage, instructor's expectations of students, cultural awareness, and interpersonal communication. Ross and Krider note that these difficulties can be adequately addressed through university-wide or departmental orientation programs. Indeed, universities with ITA training programs that do adequately address the linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical skills of ITAs have significantly reduced the number of student complaints (Rubin as cited in Gravois, 2005).

Even though many of the studies on ITAs' perspectives include aspects on how ITAs perceive cultural differences, the vast majority of the studies emphasize the deficiencies of ITAs in navigating cultural differences, such as what they do not understand about American culture and the communication problems they have had in the classroom due to these cultural differences. For example, in a qualitative study utilizing interviews, class observations, and participant narratives, Han (2008)

examined how both ITAs and undergraduate students perceive intercultural communication in a college classroom. The study found that undergraduate students perceived ITAs as ineffective teachers, limited in English proficiency, and unaware of cultural differences. Furthermore, ITAs perceived themselves as well-prepared teachers and viewed the students as not actively engaged in the learning process. Although it is useful to establish the perceived differences that ITAs have of undergraduate students and that undergraduate students have of ITAs, not enough studies have approached the concerns of ITAs from the perspective of what they do well and what can be learned about the experiences of ITAs who are viewed as effective and successful. It is now critical that the field move to a more positive stance that emphasizes the strengths of ITAs and explores effective ways of developing intercultural competence.

In addition, most of the studies on ITAs' perspectives utilize a small group of ITAs from diverse ethnic backgrounds. For example, Bates-Holland (2008) had seven participants from Antigua, China, Kenya, Iran, Nigeria, and Switzerland; Meesuwan (1992) had six participants from Arab and Indian backgrounds; and Ross and Krider (1992) had six participants from England, Thailand, Japan, and China. However, ITAs from different cultural backgrounds with varying levels of experience with intercultural interactions have different needs in developing intercultural competence (Hill & Lakey, 1995). Research that does not distinguish between the cultural-specific needs and differences of ITAs naively implies that all ITAs face the same challenges that can be met in the same way. More research is needed on the experiences and firsthand perspectives of ITAs from specific ethnic

and cultural backgrounds to more adequately address their unique concerns and to learn what factors they would identify that affect the development of intercultural competence.

### **Chinese Culture and Communication**

Since the participants in this study are all ethnic Chinese ITAs from the People's Republic of China, this section provides an overview of the basic principles of Chinese culture and communication which are pertinent to this study. The notion of Chinese culture and communication is vast and encompasses an extensive amount of literature, history, multiple regions, and ethnicities; therefore, the principles presented in this chapter are simply foundational concepts that provide a brief introduction into the values and norms of communicating with people from China.

#### **Collectivism**

China is traditionally described as a collectivist culture, which shapes how a person develops self-identity. The concept of personal identity is defined differently in individualist cultures versus collectivist cultures (Storti, 1999). In an individualist culture, a person is concerned primarily with taking care of self and places a high value on independence and personal freedom, such as is typically found in Western cultures; however, in a collectivist culture, a person's identity is defined in relation to a group, (Storti, 1999). A person's well-being is the responsibility of the group, and harmony and the interdependence of group members are highly valued; furthermore, there is no meaningful existence apart from connection to the group (Brick, 2004). As Brick (2004) states, "The duties of a Chinese to his or her family, to society and the country, tend to outweigh rights as an individual" (p. 111), and individualism is

perceived as selfishness. Garrott (1995), however, questions the usefulness of broad descriptions of culture that might result in stereotypes and misconceptions. For example, in a quantitative study, Garrott (1995) used a questionnaire to investigate the cultural values and attitudes of 512 Chinese male and female students studying English at fifteen colleges in China and found that students strongly associated with individualism rather than the traditional notion of collectivism; however, the study did not indicate whether the students were undergraduates or graduates, where in China the students were from nor where the colleges were located, and did not offer a specific explanation as to why the finding of associations with individualism were more pronounced than associations with collectivism. Although all cultures contain elements of both collectivist and individualist orientations (Storti, 1999) and the influence of globalization is producing some cultural changes (Smith, Lochner, & Lei, 2007) as potentially reflected in Garrott's (1995) study, China is still traditionally viewed as a predominantly collectivist culture, and the value placed on group membership results in an emphasis on the distinction between who is a member of an in-group versus who is considered to be an outsider or member of the out-group, referred to as "guanxi" (Boden, 2008; Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Storti, 1999).

### **Guanxi Networks**

Guanxi is a central and complex value of Chinese culture and relationships and refers to "the development and use of the network of mutual obligations that bind people together" (Brick, 2004, p. 107). A person is born into certain networks, continues to develop these networks, and fulfills social obligations via these

networks throughout one's entire life. Chinese culture centers around family life (both immediate and extended) (Smith, Lochner & Lei, 2007), which is the primary in-group of society, but in-groups can also consist of friends, neighbors, and relationships from shared experiences or interests (Boden, 2008; Brick, 2004). Relationships with those outside of the in-group are purely functional or utilitarian with no lasting commitment (Boden, 2008). For example, a foreigner might have a great relationship working with a Chinese colleague on a project; however, when the project is complete, regardless of how close the relationship was during the work, the relationship typically ends because the purpose or function of the relationship is complete and the foreigner is not a member of the in-group (Boden, 2008). Though Chinese culture is becoming more open, the concept of guanxi networks makes it difficult for foreigners to become part of the in-group and often requires an intermediary to make the introduction (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). Furthermore, when Chinese live abroad, they typically rely upon each other, the in-group, and do not rely on the host culture (Boden, 2008), as is often reflected in the housing arrangements and social connections of Chinese international students at U.S. universities. This is because in Chinese culture a person has responsibility for members of the in-group but does not have responsibility or trust for outsiders (Boden, 2008). For example, Chinese ITAs might ask for advice or assistance from other Chinese ITAs but may be hesitant or even resistant to asking for advice or assistance from an American due to a lack of trust and in-group relationship.

## **Saving Face**

Another important value of Chinese culture and communication is the concept of face, meaning “a projected image of one’s self in a relational situation” and “an identity that is defined conjointly by the participants in a setting” (Boden, 2008, p. 131). Some aspects of face are based on conditions or situations, such as age, gender, and education, and some aspects are negotiated through the interactions of giving and receiving face from others (Brick, 2004). Face is an abstract concept connected with reciprocity, social position, and a dignified appearance and is something that can be saved, lost, or even traded (Boden, 2008). For example, face can be gained by increasing one’s status in society; it can be lost by not fulfilling social obligations; and it can be traded by giving face to those who have given face to you (Boden, 2008). The give and take of face is important in Chinese culture because it is the foundation for establishing harmony. Individuals in cultures that emphasize face are concerned with how others view them, particularly the other members of one’s in-group. In addition, in collectivist cultures, saving face is important because it protects the honor of the group (Boden, 2008). An example of how this cultural practice may influence Chinese ITAs in the U.S. is that a Chinese ITA might not ask for help in how to address a situation of conflict with an undergraduate student due to wanting to save face and not show a weakness in teaching and communication skills.

## **Indirect Communication**

Since Chinese culture and communication places a high value on developing guanxi networks and on saving face, a corresponding value is an emphasis on using

indirect communication. The goal of communicating with others in Chinese culture is to achieve harmony in relationships which requires the use of indirect communication (Chen, 2010; Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). Storti (1999) states that “the dimension of communication on which cultures differ the most and the one affecting more aspects of the communication dynamic is the matter of directness” (p. 91). Cultures that employ an indirect communication style are considered high-context, meaning they rely on references, inferences, and suggestions and meaning is understood based on the *context* of what is said (Hall, 1998; Storti, 1999). In high-context communication most of what is communicated is implicit and very little of the communication is explicitly transmitted (such as in China and some other Asian cultures) (Hall, 1998). In contrast, cultures that utilize a direct communication style are considered low-context because they interpret meaning based on the words that are *actually spoken* and do not rely as much on the context for understanding the meaning. In low-context communication most of what is communicated is explicit (such as in northern American cultures) (Hall, 1998). Collectivist cultures, such as China, typically use indirect communication styles and emphasize the role of context in order to avoid confrontation and conflict, maintain harmony, save face, and strengthen relationships within the in-group (Boden, 2008; Hall, 1998; Smith, Lochner, & Lei, 2007; Storti, 1999). Furthermore, this indirect style of communication results in Chinese being much more comfortable with periods of silence in a conversation than Americans are used to having (Bond, 1991). When the role of indirect communication and high-context culture is misunderstood, Chinese can be perceived by persons from direct cultures as quiet, compliant, or even non-

participatory (Lin, 2002). Therefore, intercultural competence is imperative for successful communication to occur between members of high-context cultures and members of low-context cultures.

### **Power Distance**

Chinese culture and communication is characterized by a high level of power distance, meaning that people accept inequalities of power as natural (Storti, 1999). The notion of power distance is reflected in the respect for hierarchy in Chinese culture. For example, people who are older or have authority are in positions of power, including rulers, parents, teachers, and husbands, though this is a traditional practice (Brick, 2004; Chen, 2010). In order to maintain harmony of the group, it is essential that the hierarchy of the group members is respected (Boden, 2008). Since saving face includes protecting the honor of the group, this also means it is important to respect and obey the members of the group who have authority and power.

### **Conflict Management**

Chen (2010) refers to harmony and conflict as the “two faces of Chinese communication” (p. 2). As previously indicated, a core value of Chinese culture that governs communication behavior and is rooted in the teachings of Confucius is the value of harmony (Boden, 2008; Chen, 2010); however, the emphasis in the literature on Chinese culture regarding the desire for harmony and avoidance of conflict can potentially portray an inaccurate and oversimplified notion that Chinese society is conflict-free (Chen, 2010). In addition to understanding the role of harmony, it is important to understand the role of conflict. When harmony is



disrupted, issues of power are intricately involved. In order to protect harmony when managing conflict, Chinese often use indirect action such as an intermediary in order to avoid direct confrontation and to save face so that the harmony of the relationship is protected (Boden, 2008; Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). In addition, Chinese are likely to handle conflict by using self-restraint or self-discipline, indirectly expressing approval, saving face for their counterparts, using reciprocity, and emphasizing a particular relationship such as one of authority (Chen, 2000). As explained in the high level of power distance, Chinese interactions are initially ruled by courtesy and respect; however, if respect is violated then conflict is inevitable and may even result in the use of direct communication and emotional responses (Chen, 2010). Furthermore, Chinese are more likely to be involved in conflicts with strangers rather than with close relationships because levels of respect and trust for in-group members are much deeper and more meaningful than respect for out-group members. Conflict in Chinese culture is not regulated as tightly as the notion of harmony and often results in behaviors to gain compliance (Chen, 2010). As Chen states, “The direct and open expression and confrontation is not a way of interaction encouraged by the harmony paradigm, but for the purpose of personal or national gain, harmony becoming a tool for achieving the goal is quite common in Chinese communication” (p. 10). To resolve conflict, Chinese are likely “to be non-confrontational, avoiding, obliging, integrating, and authoritarian” (Chen, 2000, p. 19). The Chinese style of managing and resolving conflict can create problems in intercultural communication between Chinese ITAs and undergraduate students because the Chinese ITA may choose to avoid the conflict, talk about it indirectly, or

possibly emphasize a role of authority. All of these approaches would potentially increase the conflict with an American undergraduate student who would likely expect an instructor to address a conflict directly and engage in a style of explanation and negotiation rather than emphasize authority.

### **Chinese Educational Culture**

Chinese values are also reflected in the educational culture. Flowerdew and Miller (1995) summarize the influence of Confucian values on Chinese educational culture as follows: (1) respect for authority of the lecturer; (2) the lecturer should not be questioned; (3) students are motivated by family and the pressure to excel; (4) a positive value placed on effacement and silence; and (5) an emphasis on group orientation to learning (p. 348). In Chinese culture, learning is viewed as mastering knowledge (Brick, 2004). In contrast to learner-centered classrooms in the U.S., Chinese classrooms are more teacher-centered where teachers are expected to be masters of the knowledge, to decide what students need to learn, and to present the material in clear, logical steps (Brick, 2004). Students are expected to master this knowledge, to develop strong memorization skills, and to provide correct answers to teachers' questions when called upon (Boden, 2008; Brick, 2004). Students tend to rely heavily on memorizing content in textbooks and listening to what teachers say as the primary sources for learning knowledge (Brick, 2004; Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998), and assessment is usually based on multiple-choice exams (Brick, 2004). At the age of eighteen, all Chinese students face tremendous pressure to score high on the national exam for university entrance (Boden, 2008). An individual's score on

this exam determines whether or not the person can attend university and which university, resulting in a fiercely competitive environment (Boden, 2008).

Most international students in the U.S. face difficulties in the adjustment process to a new culture and academic institution; however, the challenges seem to be especially difficult for students from Asian countries due to the wide differences in culture, language, and communication styles between American culture and Asian cultures (Jenkins, 2000; Li & Gasser, 2005). In contrast to Chinese educational culture, Western educational culture tends to value the following: (1) the lecturer is valued as a guide and facilitator; (2) the lecturer is open to challenge; (3) students are motivated by the desire for individual development; (4) a positive value is placed on self-expression of ideas; and (5) an emphasis on individual development and creativity in learning (Flowerdew & Miller, 1995, p. 348). Due to these differences in educational cultural values, Chinese international students can have a particularly difficult adjustment to U.S. classroom culture (Brick, 2004; Li & Gasser, 2005). Furthermore, Chinese education places a high priority on the skills of listening, reading, writing, and memorizing and very little emphasis on speaking (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998), so the expectation for ITAs in the U.S. to have appropriate speaking skills and intercultural competence can be especially challenging for Chinese ITAs. In conclusion, the Chinese values of collectivism, guanxi networks, saving face, indirect communication, power distance, conflict management, and educational culture are important factors of intercultural communication with Chinese ITAs.

## Conclusion

This chapter identified important definitions and concepts of intercultural communication, a critique of the literature on ITAs relevant to the purposes of this study, and a summary of important elements of communication in Chinese culture. Specifically, this literature review showed that the majority of ITA studies address the areas of pronunciation and intelligibility, pedagogical effectiveness, ITA training programs and assessment, and perspectives of undergraduate students. Few studies have addressed the important role of intercultural communication and very little is known on how successful ITAs develop high levels of intercultural competence. No study has investigated the perspectives of ITAs who have experienced this phenomenon and who could provide useful insight on their experiences. Further understanding of how the development of intercultural competence is viewed by experienced ITAs themselves is an essential next step in deepening the knowledge base of and relationship between intercultural communication and ITA training.

This study directly asks experienced ITAs to talk about the development of intercultural competence. What have they experienced in developing intercultural competence? How did they experience this and what does it mean to them? What factors have influenced this process? The development of ITA training programs in response to oral English proficiency policy and undergraduate students' perspectives without taking into account the perspectives of ITAs themselves is ethnocentric and at best superficial. In order to support successful intercultural interactions in university settings, there must be a shift from focusing on the deficiencies of ITAs to learning from their strengths and assets. Furthermore, the field of intercultural

communication acknowledges that misinterpretation and miscommunication occur when hidden cultural dimensions of communication differ and are not understood, so more research is essential to gain a better understanding of what affects the development of intercultural competence from the people who have actually experienced how to effectively communicate with those who are culturally different from themselves.

In the future, intercultural communication will remain important to the objectives of higher education since the dependence on ITAs at universities is likely to continue and even increase (Sarkodie-Mensah, 1991). As long as ITAs are employed at universities, the controversy surrounding communication problems between undergraduate students and ITAs will most likely continue. The complexities of the “foreign TA problem” indicate that ITAs should not be the targets of criticism and scrutiny (King, 1998). Instead, ITA training programs that adequately address the linguistic, pedagogical, and intercultural needs of ITAs should be supported by institutions for they are essential in order to fulfill the democratic purpose of oral English proficiency policy and to shift the social construction of ITAs to a more “powerful, positively constructed group” (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, p. 345). Providing such support for ITAs serves to strengthen the educational experiences and interactions for all members of institutional communities. However, in order to provide effective support for ITAs, the notion of how intercultural competence is developed needs to be more adequately understood. Therefore, this study is important because it addresses both the development of intercultural competence and the firsthand perspectives of ITAs who have

experienced this phenomenon and identifies the essential structure and meaning of these experiences. The findings of this study provide a useful contribution that furthers understanding of these important areas.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHOD

#### **Research Design**

In this research study, I sought to understand the lived experiences of Chinese ITAs who have developed a mid to high level of intercultural competence.

Intercultural competence is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people of different cultures and is an essential component of successful intercultural interactions between ITAs and undergraduate students. An understanding of how Chinese ITAs have experienced the development of intercultural competence may be useful to the fields of intercultural communication and ITA training programs.

I employed the qualitative method of phenomenology to answer my research question: What is the essence of the factors that affect the development of intercultural competence from the perspectives of ITAs? My goal in this study was to identify the core essence of what it means to experience the phenomenon of developing intercultural competence as an ITA, and I believe that it is important and useful to understand this phenomenon from the perspective of those who have actually experienced it. Some qualitative researchers argue that phenomenology is more closely aligned with a postpositivist paradigm rather than a constructivist paradigm, and there is some debate among qualitative researchers as to whether phenomenology is truly qualitative since some researchers advocate that contexts are determined by each participant and that invariant experiences do not exist (Guba,

1990). However, I am committed to the notion that people who experience the same phenomenon share a common essential experience and that they can transcend that experience by describing it in order to expose meaningful structures of the phenomenon under investigation (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). Therefore, I consider the core essence of what it means to experience intercultural competence for the ITAs in this study as valid and useful knowledge.

Learning to communicate linguistically in a language as a non-native speaker is a challenging task; furthermore, learning to communicate in another language in ways that are both culturally effective and appropriate is far more difficult. Due to the complexities of effective intercultural communication, an understanding of the essence of this experience is needed. In this study, I wanted to learn about the experiences of Chinese ITAs who have learned to navigate the complexities of effective intercultural communication and have developed mid to high levels of intercultural competence. I specifically focused on teaching assistants, rather than research assistants or general graduate assistants, who have developed intercultural competence in an academic setting. Through interviews, I sought to learn what was helpful in their experiences in learning to communicate interculturally with others, what they found challenging, and how they would describe their experiences. I hope that the themes and findings of this study will be useful to ITA training programs, but my fundamental purpose in this investigation is simply to gain a better understanding of the essence of the perspectives of the Chinese ITAs who have experienced this phenomenon and what they might share with future Chinese ITAs who could have similar experiences.



To explore human experience, researchers use various qualitative methods (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002). For example, grounded theory is used to study multiple individuals who are connected to a phenomenon for the purpose of generating theory related to the phenomenon. Ethnography uses multiple forms of data to describe and interpret the behavior or shared patterns of a cultural group. A case study explores one or more bounded systems or cases over time to provide an in-depth perspective on the case(s). Although these qualitative methods all explore human experience, phenomenology was most appropriate for this study because it is the qualitative research method that specifically seeks to describe the meaning or essential structure of a particular phenomenon as experienced by multiple individuals (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989).

In phenomenology, the emphasis is on the unifying elements of how individuals consciously experienced the phenomenon, what they experienced, and how they remember and describe it. The phenomenologist adheres to the assumption that "...there is an essence or essences to shared experience. These essences are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced" (Patton, 2002, p. 106.) Upon completion of a phenomenological study, the researcher should be able to refer to the phenomenon as described by Polkinghorne (1989): "I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that" (p. 46). In this study, I am not seeking to discover theory on intercultural communication, such as a grounded theory study. I am not aiming to interpret or create a portrait of the cultural behavior patterns of Chinese ITAs as in ethnography, nor am I seeking to provide an in-depth description of all aspects of being a Chinese ITA as in a case

study. In this research study, I focus on the concept of intercultural competence and how to generally describe what it means to experience this phenomenon from the firsthand perspectives of multiple Chinese ITAs based on their experiences, which best fits the research method of phenomenology.

More specifically, I employed transcendental phenomenology as advocated by Moustakas (1994) because the emphasis on “transcendental” means to set aside prejudgments and preconceptions of the phenomenon as much as possible, through the process of Epoche, and to see the meaning of the phenomenon new and afresh through the descriptions of the participants. Transcendental phenomenologists also utilize phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and universal structures to understand the experience, view perception as the primary source of knowledge, and emphasize in-depth interviews as the primary method of data collection (Husserl, 1969; Moustakas, 1994). Furthermore, Moustakas presents detailed, rigorous steps for conducting a phenomenological study, analyzing the data, and reporting the findings (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002).

In this study, I interviewed Chinese ITAs on their experiences in developing intercultural competence and employed the tenets of transcendental phenomenology by first engaging in the process of “Epoche” (Husserl, 1969), which is a Greek word meaning “to refrain from judgment, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). Moustakas further explains the process of Epoche as “setting aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions, and allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness, and to look and see them again, as if for the first time” (p. 85). To

engage in the process of Epoche, I wrote out my values and biases that might shape the interpretation of this study (see “Researcher as Instrument” in “Validation of Data” in this chapter) in an attempt to set aside my prejudgments and preconceptions of my own experiences in developing intercultural competence as well as my past observations of and interactions with Chinese ITAs. In addition, I took a few moments before each interview to think about the topic and research question and to clear my mind of thoughts and reactions to the topic. I wanted to hear the experiences of the participants describing afresh what it means to develop intercultural competence. Second, I utilized the process of phenomenological reduction to describe *what* the participants experienced in developing intercultural competence. This process involves the following steps: (1) bracketing or clearly specifying the primary research question at the start of each interview to focus attention solely on this topic; (2) horizontalizing the data by listing every statement that is relevant to the topic and giving it equal value in order to consider “the textural qualities that enable us to understand an experience...and to disclose its nature and essence” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 95) and to not marginalize any aspect of the experience; (3) delimiting horizons, meaning I looked for statements that stood out as invariant qualities of the experience of all the participants; (4) identifying invariant constituents that are non-repetitive and non-overlapping and grouping them into themes; (5) creating an individual textural description for each participant of *what* the individual experienced by using descriptive language; and (6) integrating the individual textural descriptions into one synthesized composite textural description. Third, I used what Moustakas refers to as “imaginative variation” (p.

35) by considering different perspectives or vantage points and by varying frames of reference in order to understand the essential, universal structure of *how* each participant experienced the development of intercultural competence. I used the essential, universal structure and common themes to create individual structural descriptions of *how* each participant experienced intercultural competence as well as a composite structural description, integrating all of the individual structural descriptions. Finally, I synthesized the composite textural description and the composite structural description to create a composite textural-structural description of what it means to develop intercultural competence from the perspective of Chinese ITAs.

There are several underlying assumptions of transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). First, the appearance of things and the unifying elements of multiple perspectives are emphasized. I adhered to this assumption in this study by identifying the unifying textural and structural elements of experiencing intercultural competence as it appeared from the perspectives of the Chinese ITAs who participated. Second, transcendental phenomenologists seek meanings associated with and vivid descriptions of the conscious acts of experience. In this study, I sought to learn the meanings that the Chinese ITAs associated with developing intercultural competence and their vivid descriptions of these experiences as shared in the interviews. Third, a transcendental phenomenological study is rooted in questions and themes that stem from what a researcher wants to know and is driven by the personal interest and connection of the researcher with the topic. Moustakas states that “the researcher has a personal interest in whatever she or he seeks to

know; the researcher is intimately connected with the phenomenon” (p. 59). I addressed this assumption by explaining in Chapter One how my personal experiences have driven my interest in this study due to my experiences developing intercultural competence during my years in Bosnia, teaching communication courses for ITAs for several years, and wanting to know more about how successful ITAs perceive their experiences with intercultural communication. Fourth, in transcendental phenomenology, the researcher accepts the integration of the subjective and the objective. As Moustakas explains:

Subject and object are integrated – what I see is interwoven with how I see it, with whom I see it, and with whom I am. My perception, the thing I perceive, and the experience or act interrelate to make the objective subjective and the subjective objective. (p. 59)

By engaging in phenomenological research, I accept that the subjective perspectives of the Chinese ITAs on developing intercultural competence can be combined with objective research through systematic, rigorous steps of data analysis. In this way, I determined an underlying, unifying structure of developing intercultural competence through the descriptions of experiences as shared by the participants. Finally, in transcendental phenomenology, perception is valued as the primary source of knowledge in which “every perception counts; every perception adds something important to the experience” (p. 53). Though some researchers emphasize performance as the primary source of knowledge, for a phenomenologist, “perceptions are the only ways that we can understand the experience of others” (p. 54). More studies are needed that focus on ITAs perceptions and experiences, and my ultimate goal for embarking on this phenomenological study was based on my

assumption that ITAs' perspectives are a primary, valid source of knowledge from which we can learn much about experiencing intercultural competence as an ITA.

### **Setting for the Study**

The research setting for this study is a mid-size university in the northeast, due to the number of international graduate students enrolled and the number of international graduate assistants employed, which is between seventy-five and one hundred per semester. There are approximately 13,000 undergraduate students and 3,000 graduate students enrolled at this university. During the academic year of 2009/2010, 387 international students were enrolled from forty-one countries; however, the vast majority of international students at this university come from China and India. Due to these small numbers, this university does not have an exceptionally large population of Chinese students so that it is a bit more difficult for Chinese students to isolate themselves from American culture and interactions with Americans in contrast to the situation at some universities that have much larger numbers of Chinese students and, therefore, more opportunities for the Chinese to interact exclusively among themselves. Since I am an instructor at this university, I have access to the setting and the international graduate students.

### **Calendar of Events in Conducting the Study**

In June, I received approval from the Institutional Review Board to conduct the study. Then, from June through early October of 2010, departmental mentors were recruited to complete the first participant screening tool: mentor nominations. In late September and October, nominees were recruited to complete the second participant screening tool: the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). Then,

selected participants who received both mentor nominations and the highest scores on the IDI were invited for first interviews in October and November and for second interviews in December.

### **Sampling Design**

A phenomenological study utilizes a criterion sample, meaning that multiple participants all meet the minimum criteria of having experienced the same phenomenon and are willing to describe those experiences through one-on-one, in-depth interviews (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). A criterion sample was appropriate for this study because I wanted to investigate the perspectives of multiple Chinese ITAs who had all experienced the phenomenon of developing intercultural competence. After reviewing the records of the office of international students and scholars, I identified forty-four Chinese graduate students with assistantships in thirteen departments and graduate programs. The records did not specify whether the student held a research assistantship or a teaching assistantship.

In order to ensure that all participants met the criteria of the sample, I used the following requirements for potential participants: (1) may be either a male or female graduate student at the university in this research setting; (2) must be a nonnative speaker of English; (3) must be an international graduate assistant with a minimum of one semester of experience as a teaching assistant; (4) must be from mainland China; (5) must be nominated by a mentor as having a good level of ability to communicate in intercultural situations; and (6) must have a cultural worldview core orientation on the IDI of Minimization, Acceptance, or Adaptation. Based on the required TOEFL score, participants had been screened by admissions for a

threshold of advanced English language proficiency appropriate for communication in English related to graduate studies, which was deemed a sufficient level of proficiency for participating in this study without a translator.

Fifteen Chinese ITAs received mentor nominations, ten of the nominees agreed to participate in the study, and all ten completed the IDI. Seven of the participants met all the criteria of the sample and were invited for interviews, and all seven participated.

### **General Characteristics of the Participants**

The seven participants for this study are Chinese graduate students who are non-native speakers of English from mainland China and are or have been employed as ITAs. They are all full-time students who have attained the required admissions scores on the TOEFL, demonstrating language proficiency appropriate for graduate level study. In addition, all seven participants work part-time to fulfill assistantship responsibilities in order to receive a tuition waiver and a stipend. The length of time that they have resided in the United States typically correlates to the length of time they have spent in graduate studies. Table 1 provides an overview of the general characteristics of the seven Chinese ITAs who participated in the study. Although more information about the participants, such as brief descriptions of each, would better depict the individuals, it might also reveal too much and make them identifiable. Therefore, to guard their privacy and confidentiality, only a minimum amount of information can be shared.



Table 1

*General Characteristics of Participants*

Pseudonyms	Gender	Field of Study	Age Range	Marital Status	Housing	Years in U.S.	Semesters as a TA
Amy	Female	Chemistry	22-30	Single	On campus	1-2	More than 2
Bill	Male	Business Administration	31-40	Married w/children	Off campus	Over 10	1
Eric	Male	Mechanical Engineering	31-40	Single	On campus	3-5	More than 2
Lee	Female	Electrical Engineering	22-30	Single	On campus	3-5	More than 2
Martine	Female	Chemistry	31-40	Married	On campus	3-5	More than 2
May	Female	Chemistry	22-30	Single	On campus	3-5	More than 2
Miles	Male	Pharmacy	22-30	Single	On campus	1-2	More than 2

**Data Collection Procedures**

In order to recruit the criterion sample and conduct the study, I employed the following three phases, utilizing two participant screening tools, a recruitment incentive, and two rounds of interviews:

**Phase One: Mentor Nominations**

The first step in finding potential participants involved a mentor nomination process. As previously mentioned, at this university, I have access to records of international graduate students who have graduate assistantships, but the records do not indicate whether the position is a research assistantship or a teaching assistantship. In reviewing the records in the office of international students and scholars, I identified forty-four graduate students from China with assistantships in thirteen departments and graduate programs. Then, I contacted the chairs of these

departments and the directors of the graduate programs via email with a letter introducing the study (see Appendix A). I followed-up the letter by email and/or phone asking to make a ten-minute appointment with those who agreed to complete mentor nomination forms. Of the thirteen departments, six departments participated in the mentor nomination phase. Five departments said that they only have Chinese research assistants not teaching assistants or that they did not have an appropriate candidate to nominate. Two departments simply chose not to participate.

During the appointments with each department chairs and/or graduate program directors in the six departments, I asked the mentor to complete an informed consent form for submitting nominations (see Appendix B) and then offered to leave the room while the mentor completed the mentor nomination form (see Appendix C). The mentor nomination form on intercultural competence was developed using a modified version of Jarrett's (2003) peer nomination form on appreciating cultural difference. The purpose of the mentor nomination form is to not limit the study to self-reported data and to strengthen the credibility of the sample. Furthermore, when assessing intercultural competence, it is best to use a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods, including judgments by others, mixed measures, quantitative assessment tools, self-report instruments, and qualitative interviews (Deardorff 2006; 2009a); therefore, I used a combination of methods in this study, including judgments by others, a quantitative assessment tool, and qualitative interviews, to verify participants' levels of intercultural competence.

The mentor nomination form explained the study, defined intercultural competence, and listed the names of any and all Chinese ITAs in this department or

program for which I had a record as well as additional blank lines where the mentor could write-in any names for which I did not have a record. I asked the mentor to place a checkmark next to any person's name that had demonstrated a mid to high ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from different cultures. I emphasized that this nomination process was only one step in identifying a criterion sample of Chinese ITAs as potential participants for this study.

Seidman (1998) advocates accessing participants through peer recommendations and avoiding accessing participants through any type of hierarchy. I recognize that having mentors nominate ITAs for the study could place pressure on ITAs to participate in the study. To mitigate this effect, I emphasized multiple times throughout emails, informed consent forms, and oral communication with both mentors and ITAs that the nomination process for this research study does not connote whatsoever any type of official or unofficial support of the study by any department or graduate program, is completely independent of the University's oral English proficiency policy for ITAs, and is in no way connected with current or future positions as a teaching assistant. In order to ensure that participants met the criteria of the sample as having a certain level of intercultural competence, I felt that it was essential to have potential participants nominated by people who had communicated with them in intercultural situations. It did not seem feasible to find peers who could effectively participate in a nomination process, and so the mentor nominations seemed to be appropriate for use as one participant screening tool.

## **Phase Two: Intercultural Development Inventory**

The second step in finding potential participants utilized the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) as a participant screening tool. The mentor nomination forms resulted in fifteen Chinese ITAs receiving nominations as potential participants for the study. I utilized the university's online student directory to find contact information for the nominees and followed up with their respective departments if email addresses or phone numbers were not listed. I contacted the nominees via email with a letter describing and proposing the study and explaining how the person was nominated (see Appendix D). As an incentive to participate in the study, the letter noted that three participants who completed the IDI would be randomly selected to receive one of three \$10 gift cards for Dunkin Donuts. I then scheduled a five-minute appointment with each person who agreed to participate in the study to obtain signatures on the informed consent form for completing the IDI and participating in one or two interviews if later contacted (see Appendix E). Then, I emailed instructions for completing the online version of the IDI.

Ten of the nominees agreed to participate. Two nominees had graduated, are now working full-time, and were too busy to participate. One nominee was still a graduate student on campus but too busy to participate, and I was unable to successfully contact the remaining two nominees for whom I had phone numbers but no email addresses as they did not respond to my phone calls.

The IDI is a statistically reliable, cross-culturally valid measure developed by Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman (2003) to assess both an individual's and a group's

orientations and sensitivity toward cultural differences based on the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). Intercultural sensitivity emphasizes a person's perspective, mindset, or worldview, which is one component of intercultural competence as identified by the notion of attitude in Deardorff's (2006) definition of intercultural competence. The IDI is an extremely useful assessment tool because it is able to assess the development of intercultural sensitivity, and when combined with other methods of assessment such as interviews and judgments by others (Deardorff, 2006), a person's level of intercultural competence can now be determined.

According to the DMIS, intercultural competence increases when understanding of cultural differences increases. The IDI v3 contains fifty multiple-choice items in an online version (requiring a username and password) and takes 20-30 minutes to complete. The IDI identifies five core developmental orientations (Denial, Polarization/Defense/Reversal, Minimization, Acceptance, and Adaptation) of increasing sensitivity to cultural differences on an intercultural development continuum, progressing from a monocultural mindset to an intercultural mindset (Hammer, 2008). The IDI is used by thousands of corporate, government, military, not-for-profit organizations and educational institutions throughout the world to identify training needs and to facilitate research on intercultural competence (<http://www.idiinventory.com/about.php>; Deardorff, 2009). Therefore, the IDI was deemed an appropriate additional participant screening tool for identifying Chinese ITAs with mid to high levels of intercultural competence.

Of the ten nominees who completed the IDI, the developmental orientation scores were as follows: Cusp of Polarization (meaning just below the minimal score for Polarization) – one person; Polarization – one person; Cusp of Minimization (meaning just below the minimal score for Minimization) – one person; Minimization – six people (One participant’s score needed to be retrieved manually when her “submit” did not register but was confirmed to be complete by IDI administrators.); and Acceptance – one person. Based upon the criteria established for the sample, the seven nominees with developmental orientation scores in Minimization or Acceptance were appropriate potential participants for the study.

### **Phase Three: Interviews**

After identifying the seven potential participants who met all criteria of the sample, I invited them via email to participate in the study (see Appendix F). I explained that they would be asked to participate in one or two interviews and asked to schedule the first interview within the next two to three weeks. All agreed to be interviewed, and each participant was interviewed twice.

In-depth, one-on-one interviews are the central focus for conducting a phenomenological study (Creswell, 1998; Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002; Polkinghorne, 1989; Seidman, 1998). As Seidman (1998) states, “The method of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing applied to a sample of participants who all experience similar structural and social conditions gives enormous power to the stories of a relatively few participants” (p. 48). Furthermore, phenomenological interviews are open-ended, must consist of enough time to explore the topic in depth, and generally last approximately sixty to ninety

minutes (Polkinghorne, 1989; Seidman, 1998). Before conducting interviews, Moustakas (1994) recommends that phenomenological researchers engage in the process of *Epoche* as the first step in data collection “as a way of creating an atmosphere and rapport for conducting the interview” (p. 181). Prior to each interview, I took a few moments to engage in *Epoche* by thinking about my own perceptions of ITAs and intercultural competence and intentionally clearing my mind of these preconceptions so as to begin each interview with “an unbiased, receptive presence” as much as possible (p. 180).

In this study, I used two general interview guides (see Appendices G and H) for the semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection tool to obtain “rich, vital, substantive descriptions of the co-researcher’s [participant’s] experience of the phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 116). As recommended by Moustakas, I began both first and second interviews by *bracketing*, which means to clearly specify, the research topic and primary question on which the participant was to focus and describe experiences: What factors affect the development of intercultural competence from the perspectives of international teaching assistants? The questions for the first interview guide (see Appendix G) were drawn from other phenomenological sources (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Jarrett, 2003; Moustakas, 1994) and modified for the purpose of this study. In the first interviews, I focused on having participants describe their experiences with intercultural communication as international teaching assistants and as graduate students.

The questions for the second interview guide (see Appendix H) were developed upon reflection of the first interviews, a review of literature on Chinese

culture and communication, and in consultation with my major professor. I hoped to approach the topic of intercultural competence from a different angle to possibly draw further reflections and additional examples from participants' life experiences. In the second interviews, I focused on having participants describe life experiences of communicating in Chinese and life experiences of communicating in American English. I also asked participants to describe life experiences in both Chinese and American education systems. In semi-structured interviews, each interview flows according to the participant's responses, and the interview guide simply serves as a general guide, not a mandate, for the direction of the interview. Therefore, the list of questions in both guides were mostly used, at times altered, or sometimes not used in explicating the participants' experience of developing intercultural competence (Moustakas, 1994). The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed by a professional. At the end of the interviews, each participant was asked to provide a pseudonym to be used in the transcripts and data analysis so as to protect their respective identities. I also asked each participant if I could email them their individual results after analyzing the data to check if I missed anything and all agreed that we could communicate by email if anything needed clarification.

The most important factor in a phenomenological study is that the participants have all experienced the same phenomenon and are willing to describe their experiences through interviews; however, the number of interviews needed varies according to the study (Creswell, 1998). Moustakas (1994) recommends conducting one lengthy interview with each participant and a follow-up interview if needed. Seidman (1998) recommends a series of three phenomenological interviews



focusing on (1) the context or life history related to the participant's experience of the phenomenon, (2) the details and examples of the participant's experience, and (3) a reflection on the meaning of the experience for the participant. In Jarrett's (2003) phenomenological study for her doctoral dissertation, she modified Seidman's approach and used two interviews, sensing that three interviews would be too much to ask of participants and would decrease participation in the study.

Although some qualitative researchers advocate for conducting interviews until the point of saturation is reached, meaning the interviewer is no longer hearing anything new from participants, "saturation" is not a term commonly used in connection with the purposes of phenomenological research. For example, saturation is used in grounded theory studies where the purpose is as follows:

To collect interview data to saturate (or find information that continues to add until no more can be found) the categories...How many passes one makes to the field depends on whether the categories of information become saturated and whether the theory is elaborated in all of its complexity. (Creswell, 1998, p. 56-67)

However, as previously explained, the purpose of phenomenological studies is to explicate what it means to experience the phenomenon for the participants in the study. Furthermore, qualitative research does not seek to generalize its findings to a larger population, such as in quantitative research. Phenomenological studies acknowledge that an underlying essence exists and focus simply on understanding the meaning of the experience of the phenomenon *for the particular individuals involved in the particular study*. Therefore, the nature and focus of the two interviews used in this study fulfilled the purpose and concept of phenomenological studies by investigating the essence of the development of intercultural competence

from the perspectives of the Chinese ITAs who participated. Furthermore, even though saturation is not a concept commonly used in reference to phenomenology, I did begin to hear similar and repetitive information in the responses of the participants by the end of the second interviews and felt the topic had been exhausted, which was confirmed as all participants concluded the interviews by saying they had nothing further to share on the topic.

### **Data Analysis**

In order to strengthen credibility of the study, I followed rigorous, systematic steps of data analysis (Creswell, 1998; Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004; Moustakas, 1994). Data was analyzed according to the following steps as recommended by van Kaam (1966) and modified by Moustakas (1994, p. 120-121):

1) *Listing and preliminary grouping*: I fully read each interview transcript while listening to the recordings to check for accuracy. The transcripts were then imported into NVivo 9, a computer software system that aids data management and analysis for qualitative research

([http://www.qsrinternational.com/products\\_nvivo.aspx](http://www.qsrinternational.com/products_nvivo.aspx)). This software is a useful tool for organizing and keeping track of the data; however, all analysis was done by me, the researcher, not the computer. Then, I read each interview transcript again and listed every statement that directly pertained to the phenomenon being investigated to horizontalize the data, meaning to give each statement equal value.

2) *Reduction and elimination*: I examined each statement to determine the invariant constituents based on two requirements:

(a) Is the statement necessary for understanding the phenomenon?

(b) Is it possible to abstract and label this statement?

If yes, then this statement was labeled for its specific meaning unit and was considered a horizon of the phenomenon. If no, then this statement was eliminated. I eliminated overlapping and repetitive statements that were the same word for word, and vague expressions were at times presented in more specific terms. The remaining horizons are the invariant constituents or meaning units of this phenomenon.

3) *Clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents*: I clustered the invariant constituents into relevant themes, which are the core themes of the phenomenon. Where appropriate, I used terms that already exist in the literature on ITAs and intercultural communication.

4) *Final identification of the invariant constituents and themes by application*: I compared the invariant constituents and their specific theme with the full transcript for each participant to check for validity as follows:

(a) Are the invariant constituents and themes explicitly expressed in the full transcripts?

(b) If they are not explicitly expressed, are they compatible representations?

(c) If they were not explicit or compatible with the full transcripts, they were not relevant to the participant's experience and description of the phenomenon and were deleted.

5) *Individual textural descriptions*: Using the validated invariant constituents and themes, I constructed an individual textural description for each participant on the experience of the phenomenon, including examples from the transcripts (i.e., *what* they experienced in developing intercultural competence).

6) *Individual structural descriptions*: Using the individual textural descriptions and imaginative variation, I constructed an individual structural description of the experience for each participant (i.e., *how* they experienced developing intercultural competence). Moustakas uses the term “imaginative variation” to refer to the process of describing *how* one experiences the phenomenon, seeking possible meanings by varying frames of reference and different perspectives or vantage points.

7) *Individual textural-structural descriptions*: Using the individual textural descriptions and the individual structural descriptions, I constructed a textural-structural description for each participant that synthesized the invariant constituents, meaning, and themes, providing an integrated description of the essence of the experience of the phenomenon for each individual.

8) *Participant validation*: I sent a copy of the textural-structural description to each participant along with a letter thanking him/her for participating in the study (see Appendix I). The letter asked for the participant to verify if the textural-structural description accurately reflected his/her experience and to respond with any necessary corrections or additions.

9) *Composite textural description*: Using the individual textural descriptions, I constructed a composite textural description of the experience of the phenomenon for the group as a whole.

10) *Composite structural description*: Using the individual structural descriptions and imaginative variation, I constructed a composite structural description of the experience of the phenomenon for the group as a whole.

11) *Composite textural-structural description*: Using the individual textural-structural descriptions, I constructed a composite textural-structural description that synthesizes the meanings and essences of the experience of developing intercultural competence.

### **Validation of Data**

Moustakas (1994) uses the term “validation of data” to refer to what other qualitative researchers refer to as “trustworthiness” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) or “verification” (Creswell, 1998). “Validity” is typically thought of as a term used in association with quantitative studies; however, in explaining phenomenological research methods, both Polkinghorne (1989) and Seidman (1998) use the term validity to refer to “whether or not the findings can be trusted” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 57).

### **Statement on Researcher as Instrument**

All researchers carry cultural bias, but in qualitative research, the researcher is the research instrument so an important element of validation is for the researcher to identify values and biases that may shape the interpretation of the study (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002). As Patton states:

Any credible research strategy requires that the investigator adopt a stance of *neutrality* with regard to the phenomenon under study. This simply means that the investigator does not set out to prove a particular perspective or manipulate the data to arrive at predisposed truths. (p. 51)

In phenomenology, the researcher is both the questioner and the interpreter and, therefore, influences the data of the study. Transcendental phenomenologists combine objective methods of research through rigorous, systematic steps of data

collection and data analysis with subjective methods of research by choosing a research topic directly connected to the researcher's interests, by utilizing the researcher as the interviewer, and by interpreting the data to describe the essential structure of what it means to experience the phenomenon. However, transcendental phenomenology addresses the issue of researcher bias by advocating for the process of Epoche as a first step. In this study, I used the process of Epoche (Moustakas, 1994) before each interview to set aside the preconceptions I have of intercultural competence based on my experience in order to see this phenomenon afresh through the descriptions of the participants during the interviews and also engaged in Epoche by writing out the following assumptions and preconceptions.

My role as the researcher in this study is shaped by my previous experience with ITAs at this university. My interactions with ITAs during the past five years have contributed positively to my role as a researcher in that I have experience communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds with varying accents and ways of speaking English. In addition, I have traveled extensively internationally and have lived in another country (Sarajevo, Bosnia) for over three years and have experienced firsthand the joys and challenges of developing intercultural competence in an intercultural setting. I believe that both my teaching and cross-cultural living experiences enhance my awareness, knowledge, and sensitivity to the challenges and issues faced by ITAs and assisted me in working with the participants of this study.

Due to my previous experiences in working with ITAs, I brought certain biases to this study. Although every effort was made to ensure neutrality as a

researcher, these biases shaped the way I understood, collected, and interpreted the data. I approached this study from the perspective that the role and responsibilities of an ITA are complex and often difficult. The academic, linguistic, and cultural challenges for an ITA to be successful are immense, and I view ITAs with great respect and admiration. I also approached this study with preconceived ideas about developing intercultural competence based on my years in Bosnia. While studying the Bosnian language and culture, I found it essential to engage with Bosnian people to seek to develop friendships as much as possible. I learned a vast amount about the culture and ways of interacting by observing family dynamics in homes, drinking endless cups of coffee at local cafes and in apartments, and asking a multitude of questions of many individuals, particularly three people with whom I developed close friendships. I needed to think about these biases that I have on what is involved in learning ways to interact effectively and appropriately in another culture and to set them aside in order to hear as if for the first time with a neutral mindset the ways that Chinese ITAs perceive and experience intercultural competence. I feel that my experiences did not negate my role as a researcher, rather they strengthened it because although I am not Chinese and I have never been a TA, I do share a commonality with the participants of this study in that I have experienced the daily difficulties and successes of living, working, and communicating in another culture and language. As Patton (2002) states, “Neutrality does not mean detachment” (p. 51). I sought to preserve neutrality in this study by not seeking to prove any particular perspective or manipulating the data to reach a preconceived conclusion. Rather, I listened to what the participants shared about their experiences, attempted

to accurately identify and convey the essential structure of their experiences, and confirmed my understanding of their perceptions with the participants themselves.

### **Validation in Phenomenology**

Since validation of data in phenomenology is primarily related to the researcher's interpretation of the data, it is important to follow rigorous, systematic steps in data collection and data analysis (Creswell, 1998; Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). The phenomenologist researcher needs to ensure that the data collected is a vivid portrayal and description of what the participant experienced and that the data analysis accurately represents the core meaning of how the participant experienced the phenomenon. Validity in phenomenological studies is directly related to whether or not readers are convinced that the findings are accurate (Polkinghorne, 1989).

Moustakas (1994) emphasizes that participant validation is most important in validation of data. Participant validation means that the researcher shares the individual textural-structural description with each participant and asks for any necessary additions or corrections so as to confirm whether or not the findings accurately portray the participants' experiences of the phenomenon. As Polkinghorne (1989) states, validity for phenomenological research is centered on the question, "Does the general structural description provide an accurate portrait of the common features and structural connections that are manifest in the examples collected?" (p. 57). More specifically, the phenomenologist researcher needs to address the following questions to validate the data:



- 1) Did the interviewer influence the contents of the subjects' descriptions in such a way that the descriptions do not truly reflect the subjects' actual experience?
- 2) Is the transcription accurate, and does it convey the meaning of the oral presentation in the interview?
- 3) In the analysis of the transcriptions, were there conclusions other than those offered by the researcher that could have been derived? Has the researcher identified these alternatives and demonstrated why they are less probable than the one decided on?
- 4) Is it possible to go from the general structural description to the transcriptions and to account for the specific contents and connections in the original examples of the experience?
- 5) Is the structural description situation-specific, or does it hold in general for the experience in other situations? (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 57)

In this study, I took multiple steps to address validation of data and Polkinghorne's (1989) questions stated above. First, as indicated in the interview guides (see Appendices G and H), I tried to be as general as possible and non-leading in the questions I asked during the interviews so that the participants' descriptions would accurately reflect their experiences. Second, I employed a professional transcriptionist to transcribe the audio-recordings of the interviews and then checked the transcriptions with the recordings to ensure accuracy. Third, I checked my analysis and conclusions of the individual textural descriptions, individual structural descriptions, individual textural-structural descriptions, group textural description, group structural description, and composite textural-structural description with my major professor to ensure that my analysis and conclusions were accurate. In addition, I utilized participant validation of the findings by sending each participant the individual structural description and textural-structural description to ensure an accurate representation of the findings and their experiences. All participants confirmed that the descriptions were accurate. Furthermore, I discussed potentially

socially acceptable answers in the data with a professor on my doctoral committee who is Chinese. Fourth, I followed the rigorous, systematic steps for data collection and data analysis as proposed by Moustakas (1994), which requires the researcher to check the general structural description with the textural themes, relevant statements, and full transcripts to verify the contents and connections. Fifth, the confirmation of all participants that the structural descriptions and textural-structural descriptions accurately conveyed their multiple perspectives ensured that the composite structural description is not situation-specific and encompasses the experiences of all the participants.

The quality of a phenomenological study is based on the ability of the study to engage the reader with the findings so that the reader is able to see “the worlds of others in new and deeper ways” (Finlay, 2008, p. 7). When evaluating the quality of phenomenological research, “it is worth emphasising that the best phenomenology highlights the complexity, ambiguity and ambivalence of participants’ experiences” (Finlay, 2008, p. 7). In this study, I sought to learn and convey an accurate description of the essence of developing intercultural competence from the experiences of the Chinese ITAs and their varying perspectives to provide a new and deeper level of understanding for ITA trainers and the field of intercultural communication. As Seamon (2000) states:

One can conclude that the conclusions of any phenomenological study are no more and no less than interpretive *possibilities* open to the public scrutiny of other interested parties...The best phenomenological work breaks people free from their usual recognitions and moves them along new paths of understanding. (p. 14-15)

The result of this study is a composite description of the essence of developing intercultural competence, and it is my desire that the results of the study would indeed move us along “new paths of understanding” the perspectives of Chinese ITAs.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

This study produced a synthesis of the experience of developing intercultural competence from the perspectives of seven Chinese ITAs. The resulting composite textural-structural description reveals the essence of the experience of the phenomenon for this group of participants and consists of three major themes: perceptions of cultural difference, intercultural experiences and interactions with others, and communication strategies.

As explained in Chapter Three, seven Chinese ITAs who received both mentor nominations and mid to high scores on the IDI participated in this study, and each participant was interviewed twice. The purpose of the first interview was to have participants describe their experiences with intercultural competence as ITAs and as graduate students, and the purpose of the second interview was to approach the topic of intercultural competence from a different angle to learn further reflections and examples of their life experiences communicating and studying in China and communicating and studying in America. Participants' initial answers to questions were at times general and very positive; however, follow-up questions elicited more specific responses and both positive and negative reflections on their experiences. From the fourteen interview transcripts, I identified 1,498 statements relevant to the phenomenon of this study. For each participant, I followed Moustakas' (1994) steps for data analysis and reduction by checking each statement to be sure it was necessary to understand the phenomenon and was labeled

accurately. This process reduced the horizontalized statements to 1,473 invariant constituents. Table 2 provides an example of several horizontalized relevant statements from one participant named Miles.

Table 2

*Horizontalized Relevant Statements*

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- At first it was hard – I want to help the students but when they get confused they don't want to ask you questions – you feel bad
  - It's impossible to just study the language separately and not steep yourself in the culture
  - I don't want students thinking they don't know what I'm talking about
  - Be nice, easy to talk, easy to communicate so people would be willing to talk to you so you don't have any problems
  - The most important thing for TA is to be open-mind – pay attention to a lot of details especially when you learn from the lab from the students
  - Knowing people's names shortens the distance between you and your students
  - It will be easier for TAs to do things the American way – the way you say hello, shake hands with friends or student – do it in their own way
  - Chinese culture is quite different from American culture in teaching
  - The competition in China is super fierce
  - Here people are free – if you have question don't even have to hands up your hand, just say it – let the professor know what you are saying, that's it
  - If I have a questions I will just bring it up at the TA meeting and we discuss about this but it's not a regular meeting or session
  - American students even have different personalities – some are very nice, eager to learn – some students appear they don't care
  - Sometimes I saw some of my Chinese TAs, grad students – they still trying to use the way we learned in China to teach students here
  - I live with Chinese students – good thing because it's convenient but keeps you away from exploring American culture
  - Americans value independence – like men and women are the same, equivalent
  - If Chinese exaggerate too much people will envy you
-

I then clustered the statements for each participant into core textural themes and sub-themes that represented *what* was experienced. By comparing the invariant constituents and textural themes with the full transcripts, I ensured that the themes were explicitly expressed and compatible representations of each participant’s experience. Table 3 provides an example of several textural themes with corresponding relevant statements for the participant Miles.

Table 3

*Textural Themes and Relevant Statements*

Textural Themes	Relevant Statements
Struggles Communicating with Undergraduate Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At first it was hard – I want to help the students but when they get confused they don’t want to ask you questions – I feel bad</li> <li>• I don’t want students thinking they don’t know what I’m talking about</li> <li>• If students don’t understand you they just stay away</li> </ul>
Perceptions of Differences between Educational Cultures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chinese culture is quite different from American culture in teaching</li> <li>• The competition in China is super fierce</li> <li>• Here people are free – if you have question don’t even have to hands up your hand, just say it – let the professor know what you are saying, that’s it</li> </ul>
Interactions in the Department	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If I have a questions I will just bring it up at the TA meeting and we discuss about this but it’s not a regular meeting or session</li> <li>• TAs deal with culture difference when communicating with advisor, faculty, and students</li> <li>• Made friends with Egyptian American student because he was a new grad student in our lab and I have the responsibility to teach him everything in the lab</li> </ul>

Upon verification of the textural themes, I used imaginative variation to identify the core essential structure of each participant's experience, meaning *how* they experienced the phenomenon. For each participant, I then developed an individual textural description of what they experienced including examples from the transcripts, an individual structural description of the experience using the textural and structural themes, and an individual textural-structural description integrating the invariant constituents, textural themes, and structural themes of the essence of the phenomenon (See Appendix J for example). I sent each participant his or her respective structural description and textural-structural description and asked them to validate whether the descriptions accurately represented their experience and welcomed suggestions for additions or corrections. All participants responded that the descriptions were accurate, and three participants made suggestions for minor changes to the wording of a theme or stated a clarification. I incorporated all three suggestions and clarifications.

Using the individual structural descriptions, I created a composite structural description of the core essential structure of the experience of the phenomenon for all of the participants as a group. Three structural themes, nine textural themes, and five sub-themes were identified as the core essence of how the participants experienced the development of intercultural competence (See Appendix K). Using the individual textural descriptions, I developed a composite textural description of what the group of participants experienced including examples from the transcripts. In the final step of data analysis, I created a composite textural-structural description that integrated and synthesized the invariant constituents, textural themes, transcript

examples, and structural themes to identify the essence of what and how these Chinese ITAs perceived and experienced the development of intercultural competence. Figure 1 illustrates the data analysis steps for the individual and composite descriptions.

In the following composite textural-structural description, I use the structural and textural themes to describe how and what the participants experienced and include direct quotations that best illustrate the theme. In order to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, I use pseudonyms provided by the participants themselves. Three primary structural themes emerged as essential elements of how the Chinese TAs who participated in this study perceived the development of intercultural competence. Specifically, the participants experienced the development of intercultural competence by perceiving cultural difference, by interacting with others, and by using communication strategies.

### **Structural Theme 1: Perceptions of Cultural Difference**

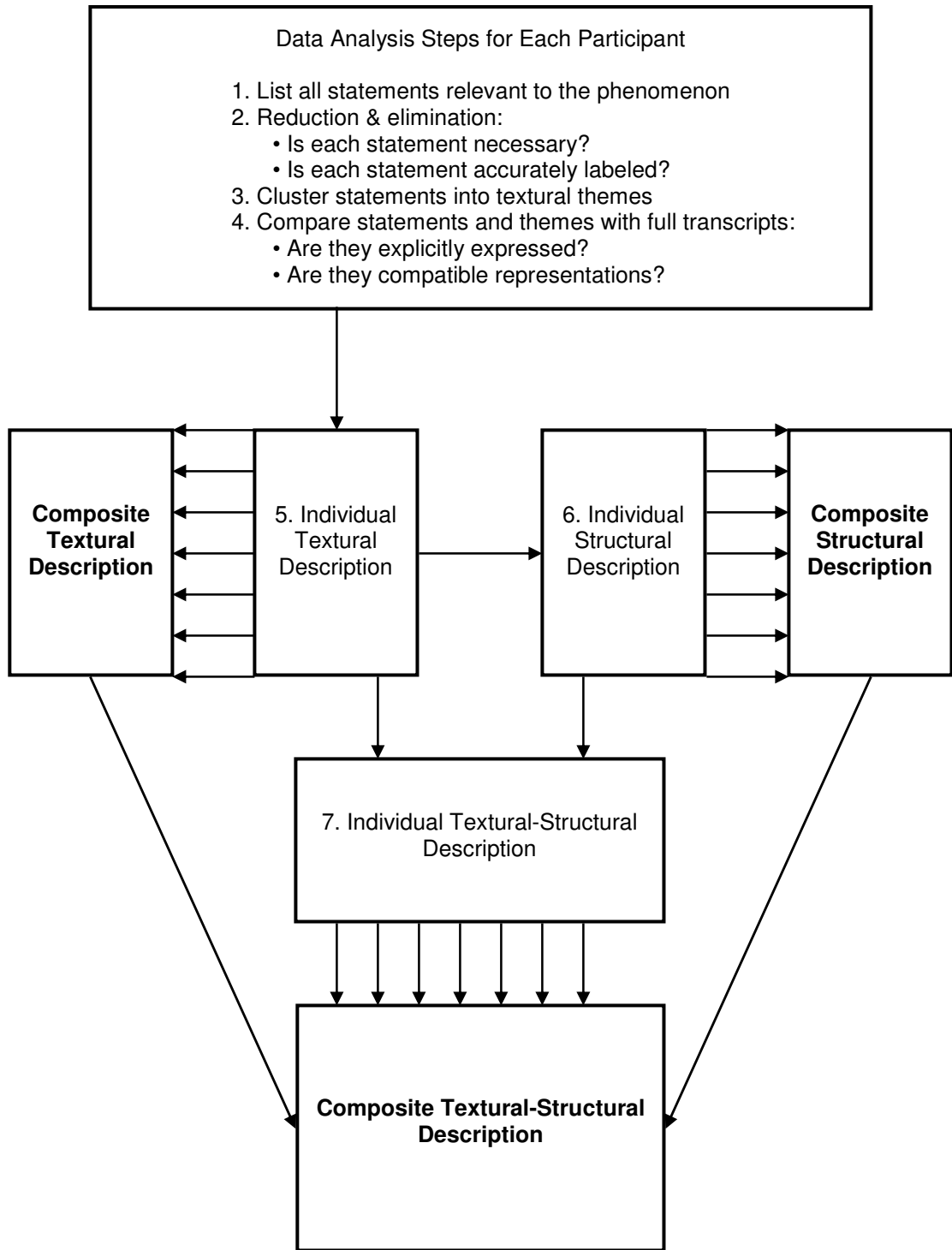
The participants' perceptions of cultural difference shaped their attitudes toward and understanding of Chinese culture, American culture, and educational differences between these cultures.

#### **Textural Theme 1a: Perceptions of Chinese Culture and Communication**

Participants described several aspects of Chinese culture and communication. For example, several participants noted that Chinese do not greet strangers:

Like when we walk on the road - oh so many people - so crowded like this. So you cannot say hi or hello to a person just that come face to face...but for China you just [greet] for people you know. And it depends on how close you are. (Amy)





*Figure 1.* Data analysis steps for individual and composite descriptions.

But in China - it's maybe there are too many people in the street so you just do what - do your own thing so you won't say like 'hi' to others or something. (Lee)

Participants explained that important values in Chinese culture include politeness, respect, and competition and that topics such as age, jobs, or marital status are not considered sensitive or private and are the most frequently asked questions when developing new friendships. In describing the style of Chinese communication, participants felt that Chinese speak softly and wait for others to talk:

In China people doesn't like people in the first talk - first communicate - doesn't like you're too confident, you're too confident. People want you to respect him so he doesn't like you if you feel you're very full of knowledge and know everything - people won't like you. (Eric)

Participants noted that Chinese find it difficult to trust others and emphasized that they prefer indirect communication. For example, Lee explained that speaking directly "might make the person not feel very good" and that if people do not like something, they will not tell you:

I think it is common [to communicate indirectly]. As I said, if they don't like something, they won't tell you. If they don't enjoy the conversation, they won't tell you - I want to go or something. They may just still talk to you and but just still politely. (Lee)

Numerous other statements also described Chinese communication as indirect and an important component of "saving face":

In Chinese culture it is very rude to just say no to somebody - we use to do this thing in an indirect way - I can't go because I am busy. (Martine)

Chinese people they're always - when they speak - it's always indirect manner. So it's kind of like we quite philosophy way to speak. I think it's just like sometimes it's for saving other people's face. It's also typical Chinese term. (Miles)

Furthermore, participants explained that mistakes need to be pointed out indirectly and never in front of other people and a person's age affects the style of communication and the level of respect that must be shown:

For example, when I was working in a company, my manager and I went out for meeting. First of all, I would let this manager just talk, ya talk most of time. Let people show he is in charge - it's very important. Secondary if I have a different opinion, don't confront him in the meeting. Instead I would suggest - I would give my suggestion later personally. They won't take any advice in front of other people. They call it - a Chinese word for this - face. That's face. (Bill)

### **Textural Theme 1b: Perceptions of American Culture and Communication**

Based on their experience, participants described several characteristics of American culture and communication. In particular, Miles described Americans as "friendly," "nice," and "direct" though he felt they "like to exaggerate things" to show they are confident, such as saying they had an "awesome weekend" when it was just "good." May described Americans as "independent" and "friendly," noted they "like fun and really like to talk," and said if Americans find a common interest, they will invite you to join them:

For example, I like to watch baseball game. When they [Americans] find it out they are very, very happy to see that. Like see something in common... they will invite me to a bar and to watch the game together. And when I ask - are you fishing - one day I saw a picture like they are fishing and they want to tell me everything about fishing and they, are you interested? - you can join us for the fishing. (May)

Eric viewed America as a "mixed culture" that is "very open" where people like to "relax when communicating," and Amy described her experience in American culture as "positive" and "pushed to learn new things":

When the first time I come to U.S., this country, just like I find it will give you good mood to push you to learn the different things. (Amy)

Several participants noted that in American culture strangers commonly greet others with a smile or hello and like to be helpful:

Here the people, they're helpful. They help in a way - I would say more general. They will rather give advice. If you have any problem they help you definitely. They will introduce you to their friend and tell you where to find the solution. In China this probably would take some time. (Bill)

Numerous participants noted that Americans communicate in a "straightforward" or "direct" style to show respect and to be honest:

I think that a good thing in America - people just talk directly so if you do something that makes the other people uncomfortable they will just tell you so you know next time I won't do this. I think it's just okay I won't feel offended or something but in China you never know - even if you did the people won't tell you. So you don't know. So I think it's easier to learn the American people's way compared with the situation in China. (Lee)

Here, if you want to communicate with people, people just want you to be honest and straightforward. That means you respect him, respect him if you speak honest and never lie on him. Always straightforward. If you have something you want to say you speak to him. (Eric)

Just telling the truth no matter it is good or bad. It is pleased or uncomfortable. You have to face it. You have to say the truth - speak out the truth. That's I think what is I am learning in America. (Miles)

Though the participants all recognized many differences between Chinese and American culture and some challenges in adjusting to life here, Bill stated he has many American friends and emphasized, "You cannot just separate from the life here."

### **Textural Theme 1c: Perceptions of Differences between Educational Cultures**

The participants noted several differences between the educational cultures of China and America. Specifically, they explained that Chinese education is very

competitive and values hard work, test scores and memorization more than creativity:

In China it's more like I learn something that already existed. I memorized that. And the creativity is not very important. So people can be super smart but they are not creating anything new. So that's the major difference. (May)

In addition, May felt that the ability to memorize is not very helpful in American education because it places more emphasis on students' thoughts:

You can be very, very smart but maybe you will do very poor here because if you cannot... if you don't have your own thought, you are unable to write something yourself but even though you can memorize everything it's not an advantage because people can go to find reference. It's quite different I find. (May)

Participants perceived differences in teaching styles between China and America.

For example, Miles felt that American teachers value "creativity" while Chinese teachers focus on "technique," and Eric noted that Americans emphasize ways to get knowledge and projects that show a student's ability. Bill explained that the Chinese teaching style emphasizes the teacher's knowledge and correct answers, while

American students expect to have discussions in class:

One most important things is the different teaching styles with different culture students. For most of the students from China they rather the teachers teaches things step by step - write on the things on the board and have a correct answer. Sometimes only correct answer. And the students in my classes - especially the American students - they are on the opposite side. They like the teacher to talk a lot instead of writing a lot. They don't want something with only answer. They want to have a discussion. So they can - to me - for me - I think at first I saw this I thought they are lazy. They don't need to prepare for the class. They just came and this class they don't need to prepare for that. They can easily talk from their experience. But after I think I have been here for awhile I realize both teaching styles is good. (Bill)

Participants shared that important aspects of Chinese education are to study hard and get good test scores but felt that important aspects of American education are grades,

working as a team in a study group, and freedom to learn whatever students are interested in learning. In contrast to Chinese educational culture, Bill perceived that American students can be popular even if they are not good at studying:

The definition of a good student in China definitely student studying well, not student doing that in other area or performance or other kind of social activities or even the sport but in here a student, even he is not good at study, but is good at any other activity like sports, he will be still the star in the class...more social life, more popular. (Bill)

Lee described the relationship between Chinese professors and students as having “power distance,” which does not encourage questions and emphasizes following rules and completing tasks. In contrast, participants perceived American professors as equal with students, as encouraging questions, as welcoming new ideas, and that they use positive words to encourage students:

Here, from the beginning - I think here the professor and the students they are just equal so - and they encourage you to ask questions. They encourage you to think about something by yourself. Any idea is encouraged. Any new idea. (Lee)

I came here, my professor here is American – he’s quite nice. Every time - even you do a tiny job, you finish something he say - great job... well done. Even you fall behind the schedule - he say not that big deal, no rush. That is huge different. Much more comfortable this way. (Martine)

Other participants noted that American students have more freedom and are not as concerned about classroom manners as Chinese students, which would be shocking to a Chinese professor:

When teacher teaches something, here for example in classroom, the teacher is teaching at the blackboard and someone if just raise his hand and say oh professor that is right or wrong. That is really, really bad manners in China... but here, they will just point out - how you write this that’s wrong. In fact sometimes people, if you are teaching, you write something maybe you not pay attention, you make a mistake, that’s not big a mistake, but

American guy like that way - so you're wrong... that's not right. So that's a very different. (Eric)

I mean if the Chinese professor, he just jump off the plane and enter into the university classroom and give a lecture to the American student, I think he will be shocked like how leisure the student could be. They can sit in any position in any seat. They can do not anything they want but people here, I feel like the professor, they don't pay too much attention to the classroom manners. (Miles)

Altogether, participants shared similar perspectives on the experience of cultural difference in Chinese culture and American culture. They perceived that Chinese culture values politeness, respect, competition, and indirect communication, and they felt that American culture values friendliness, being helpful, and direct communication. The participants experienced differences between the educational cultures of China and America by perceiving that competition, hard work, test scores, and memorization are important in Chinese education, while creativity, projects, students' interests, and discussions are important features of American education.

### **Structural Theme 2: Intercultural Experiences and Interactions with Others**

Intercultural experiences and interactions with others significantly influenced participants' development of intercultural competence.

#### **Textural Theme 2a: Intercultural Experiences and Intercultural Friendships**

All participants described a variety of intercultural experiences and intercultural friendships that impacted their lives. For example, Amy talked about her childhood experience in developing a close friendship with a Muslim girl that helped her learn to communicate with people of other cultures, to respect cultural differences, and to be interested in other cultures:

We are quite close friends so I really like to join some family meeting or family party like that in her family and eat food and something...Chinese people use chopsticks and they [her friend's family] just use hands so I learned some rules to eat at like the family parties from how to celebrate some important days. (Amy)

May's perception of cultural differences was also shaped by her childhood experiences. For example, May was exposed to multicultural stories and photos during her childhood of her dad's studies in Germany and her grandmother's Japanese heritage. She explained that her parents are "open-minded" and encouraged her to live in a "wider, global world":

At least my parents, I think they are open minded. They want me to go outside and see what is happening and communicate with people from other places, other culture. They encourage me to do that. That's why I went to the foreign language school. To pay a higher tuition fee to get those training...so I think they did it on purpose. They think it is better for you to live in a wider world - global world. (May)

During Lee's first semester in graduate school, she had a summer internship as a software engineer for an American company. She shared that she experienced a "sudden" change from sitting everyday facing her computer "like a machine" to joining others for lunch, talks, and parties in their home that continued even after her job with the company was finished:

I really appreciate that they invite me to their home to have their personal parties - something like that. Right now we still communicate with like Facebook sometimes - ya. But I really don't remember how this thing change from my just sit there every day to suddenly one day I can talk to them. (Lee)

Others described interactions with multicultural friends on campus and their intercultural experiences as a graduate student:

I have a lot of friends here. American friends, Indian friends, and Chinese friends as well, of course. I have been invited to a lot of parties, okay. Some



of them I rarely have time to go so I say - sorry I can't go but I went to quite a few of them. I really had a good time there. Ya so I would say - I really had a good time here, I enjoy to be here as a PhD student. (Martine)

Several participants explained that intercultural friendships are developed by first finding things in common through conversation in order to become friends, but this is not always easy to do. For example, May felt it was easy to be friendly and to make friends with cultures that were similar to her own but hard to know what others were thinking and to be close friends, especially with westerners:

Although she [Sri Lankan friend] is from different culture, however her culture and my culture is very similar. She is a Buddhist and you know Chinese we are kind of like Confucian so we are both tender, and quiet, and sometimes shy. So it's like I feel very - I knows - I feel like I knows what she thinks, but for others - some other people - mostly western people I don't really know. (May)

Furthermore, Miles explained that he learned a lot of tips from many friends here about ways to interact with people and noted that food can be something that "makes you distant or close" with Americans because it emphasizes similarities:

Food can be something you can distant or close you and other Americans. This way - I was in a potluck party with Chinese, Americans - they're all together - bring some food and one of those American students asked me... do you like fast food, do you like pizza, do you like a burger. Many Chinese students - they would answer no - I prefer Chinese dishes anytime. They asked me - I was like - do I like Burger King - I was like no I don't like it - I love it. So that certainly like closed our distance - so they feel like - oh really, me too. So they feel like - you are more similar to them. (Miles)

In addition to positive intercultural experiences, participants also encountered intercultural experiences that were challenging. For example, Martine shared that one aspect she could not get used to was that Americans drink too much and have too many parties:

For another other parties most of the time it turns out to be a drink party. That part I can't get used to it. I really can't. There's a few kids - they like drinking a lot. Sometimes we went to Rhody Joe's on Mondays – there's chicken wing day happy hour ...so every time that we went to a party it turns out to be a drink party. Not what I like. They drink a lot. That's the one thing - the only thing I can't get used to. If this is real American culture, I don't know but I can't get used to it so I say no to most of the parties.  
(Martine)

Despite encountering some intercultural challenges, Martine shared that her attitude of life has become “more positive now” and that she is a “better person” due to her intercultural experiences and also feels comfortable being herself here:

Here in the United States, just myself speaking a different language - that's it. I am doing the same thing here as what I did in China. I just be myself here - I think it's okay – there's no much difference for me - I am the same myself here. So I didn't feel any difference in communication between people.  
(Martine)

### **Textural Theme 2b: Interactions with Undergraduate Students**

Participants described various interactions with undergraduate students, including positive experiences as well as struggles they encountered in communicating effectively. For example, Martine described American undergraduate students as “adorable,” “cute,” “intelligent,” and “quick learning” and tried to encourage students in their work in the lab. Lee talked about having a great experience getting to know an undergraduate student. In her first semester, Lee had to take an undergraduate course where she needed to communicate with other students in the lab and work closely with an undergraduate lab partner. This experience shaped Lee's understanding of undergraduate students, and she was surprised to learn that they often have to manage both studying and working:

I think that experience was great. And from her I learned something - I knew something of the life of the American student because the girl - for graduate

student I only have two courses to do in one semester but for the undergraduate student she had like four or five courses. I just really surprise because I think two graduate courses was enough for me and she got four courses and four projects so I just don't know how she survived. She also got a part time job to do so often we sent email to each other to talk about the project we do and she often responds at about 2 or 3 in the morning and saying she was just back from work. So then I knew that American students often need to do the part time job to earn the money for tuition and for the lab expenses. It's different with the students in China 'cause in China we just need to study, study, study. The parents will pay all you need so for most students we don't need to care about the money. (Lee)

Bill noted that American students are used to communicating with first names, but he felt better when students call him "professor" instead of "Bill." He explained that he knows how students feel based on their feedback, talking with them, and their emails, and he knows that he is communicating effectively when students understand, look at him or the power point, and pay attention in class:

If the communication is effective, the people will look straight to me or at the PowerPoint. Ya and they will pay attention. If the communication is not that effective I can see people just... I think they don't actually look at the PowerPoint or me. (Bill)

Although Eric said he "does not feel much cultural difference" in the review sessions he leads as a TA, all other participants talked about struggles they faced in communicating with undergraduate students, particularly during the first semester. During Martine's first semester as a TA, she did not feel "confident," "comfortable," or "prepared" and struggled with how to explain terms and answer unexpected questions:

I would say in the first semester I really - I met a lot of challenges because I - it was my first semester - I didn't feel confident about teaching so I am a kind of timid in that class. I speak very low voice. (Martine)

May expressed difficulties communicating at the beginning, particularly due to the language, a lack of confidence, a fear of talking, and feeling challenged by the students:

It is very different when I first came here. In my first class there was a student and he said, “[May], I have a better solution than yours”...because I’m teaching, physical chemistry and there are a lot of calculations so but what he said is not right, so I thought he wants to challenge me and he doesn’t respect me. I am very embarrassed at that time. I take it personally actually so I didn’t tell anyone about it but...afterwards I tried to talk to this student and see whether he has any problem with me or whether he is not very happy and I found that it is not true. He just think it is a better solution - that’s it. There’s nothing personal. So this is what I have learned. (May)

Lee mentioned she struggled with spoken English, confidence “talking to the whole class,” “how to start a lab,” and just tried to “survive”:

At the beginning I just wanted to survive. I didn’t think about much how to teach with best benefit to the students. I just wanted to two hours - about three hours - just want to survive this three hours. (Lee)

Miles shared that communicating with undergraduate students is a “learning process” and at first it was hard because he wanted to help students in the lab, but he felt “awkward” if students could not understand what he was saying:

So it’s a learning process - for me - for the student so I was trying to learn everything, every week, every section of the lab. So finally I think I’m getting better to interact with students cause sometimes we explain something - maybe there’s some - you get the student confused. And that moment is the I think the most awkward feeling cause you are trying to help them but you don’t want to confuse them. They may like - I don’t understand this TA...I don’t even know what he’s talking about. (Miles)

The first year as a TA was “terrible” for Amy. She felt that the students here were not used to differences, blamed the TA’s English, were unprepared, did not want to listen or learn, and did not ask questions. She was “heartbroken” when a student

complained and dropped her class and felt sad about the communication barrier with students:

I look at them and they look at me and it's quite sad... you know, it's like. At that time I'm thinking about - is that clear? And the students are going why is she stopped. It's like this maybe so it's like a barrier you know for you communications. (Amy)

Furthermore, Amy noted that the lack of confidence and trust between TAs and students can create problems:

They are not confident with this lab so like two people [student and TA] do not have any confidence so that makes big problem. (Amy)

Participants also noted difficulties communicating with students and understanding their behavior when it differed from the TA's expectations. From Bill's perspective, students in America should "be more open, more active because they are more independent," so he found it confusing when students were silent in class and was unsure if this was because they were shy or because they did not care. In addition, he encountered a problem when some students did not attend his review session for an exam and complained they were treated unfairly since they did not have the same preparation for the exam as the students who did attend the review session:

In the review class the students ask the examples for the topics so I make up some and also pick up some from the past exam - also pick up some from the exact exam and to my understanding - in China, student will appreciate that because they think you go on example to help them to understanding better...I think that is common sense for me. But I did get troubles in here. Some of the students here they didn't come to the review section - they complain it's not fair because they didn't come. So they think it is not fair because I use the example - some example I say part from the exact exam and part from the past exam. They complain about the exam part. (Bill)

Even though most of the participants had experienced some difficult interactions with undergraduate students, they felt that they were learning from their experiences and mistakes and that their communication abilities had improved.

### **Textural Theme 2c: Interactions with Professors and Fellow Graduate Students**

All participants, except Bill, talked about their experiences interacting with professors and fellow graduate students in their departments. Several participants had regular interactions with professors that they found to be very helpful in being a graduate student, being a TA, and adjusting to American culture. For example, Miles shared that faculty in his department were from different countries, encouraged him as a TA, and this was a positive experience:

There's lot of like faculties come from different country in the world and they know our way, we're international TA's - we may have trouble at first. We may not get comfortable to teach or to interact with students but most of them, they are encouraging me to be a better TA... to interact with students... to try my best so I think generally I have a very positive experience in terms of like face to the culture difference. (Miles)

Amy mentioned that meeting regularly with her professor helped her feel at ease, strengthened her confidence, and improved her teaching skills because she felt her professor understood her concerns:

So I think - I ah... because that I know she [professor] understands my problems and these things so after TA meeting I do have troubles or I feel not good for this lab or something I will talk with her in her office. (Amy)

May interacted daily with her major professor and felt this helped her be comfortable and learn the way Americans make jokes:

He's [major professor] an American and now he is almost 80 years old but is still very active but he has a lot Chinese, Indian, and some Asian graduate students so he knows, like he knows how to make us comfortable. And he is

very - I mean - he likes to make jokes and that is how I learned the American way like the jokes. (May)

and:

So I got to know the American way of humor from my professor and he helped me to communicate with Americans and I hope I will learn that sense of humor from him. Because I feel like Americans, they love jokes and if you can say something funny it will really make two people close to each other. (May)

Furthermore, May explained how her professor's support gave her opportunities to talk with her labmates when she was having difficulty with different cultural styles of communication in lab meetings:

They [Indian labmates] are very comfortable to show that they know things and to speak a lot, for example, during a meeting. So I feel - before I feel - stressed out because I don't have a chance to talk. I think it is... if they all Chinese, we will wait others to talk - we don't talk much but they are talking and they are showing their results and I feel they are very professional and not very as professional as them - something like that but my major professor - he gives me - he gave me the chance to talk like the others. He said 'oh it is [May's] time - you two, like stop.' He knows that I am shy and that I don't know how to take the chance to talk so he give me the time and the chance. I think it is part of... it's challenging than before because I do things and I have results but I don't know how to show it to people. The Indian, they are more, they are very good at like showing their things to people. So this is part of the... I think it is challenging. (May)

Eric's professor encouraged him to ask a lot of questions to show his ability, to interact with the group, and to join his labmates when they spent time each week at a local pub:

My supervisor, he's an Indian, he was born in India. He also recommend us to do this - to go [to the Mews] - he liked that way. He said "don't focus too much in the lab because the lab is so small and the world is big." He recommended to do that in fact - I like that idea. (Eric)

Participants described both positive interactions with fellow graduate students as well as situations that were uncomfortable. Martine felt "close friends" and in

“harmony” with her labmates from India, China, America, Nepal, and Thailand and said that they communicate well with each other as “researchers to researchers”:

I would say we [lab] get quite a - quite well along... ya. We're all friends. I would say close friends. We talk to each other about what happen in your life everyday when you come here so we know what happened to everybody. It's like quite in harmony I would say. (Martine)

Every week, May met with fellow TAs about teaching, with labmates to discuss their research, and with labmates for a relaxing coffee hour and said these meetings have helped her learn how to communicate with other cultures. As mentioned previously, Eric spent time hanging out with guys from the lab at a local pub every Friday afternoon, which helped him to understand American ways of thinking and to adapt to communicating in a “relaxed environment.” Amy’s department had weekly TA meetings that were helpful because the TAs could discuss what they would be teaching that week, could predict questions students might have, and could address communication problems with undergraduate students. Amy felt that communicating with American TAs and fellow graduate students was much easier than communicating with undergraduate students because TAs and graduate students share “the same world” and “the same purpose”:

I just like communicate with the TAs like is much easier than communicating with the students. (Amy)

However, some participants described experiences communicating in the department that were difficult. When Eric first came to America, he was not used to the interactive format of questions during presentations and group meetings and needed to adapt to this style of communicating. He found it easy to talk with others about



research but difficult to “try new things” and to talk about “life,” especially topics of conversation that he found “boring” or certain types of jokes:

Ya sometimes it [difficulty communicating because not interested] happen because for example just like a joke - the joke looks like talk about some very interesting thing but totally boring for me. So sometimes we sit there talking something I just ignore them – just focus on my own things... they talk about some TV series - I never saw that - sometimes they talking that because of some sentence in the TV show they speak that as so interesting. Those sentences must have some context in some environment they relate to but I don't know. I never watch it. I even do not know the name of that TV series so I feel so boring. It's like... they get a kick out of this conversation but I feel boring ...In fact that's - that's maybe a difference because I think most of American guys all watch those TV series. (Eric)

Amy also mentioned that she did not like some topics of conversation:

It's like even the sports I don't like here - even what they talk about I don't like. I think just depend on yourself. (Amy)

Several participants shared that humor makes communication difficult. Martine explained that humor is the hardest thing to understand between cultures so sometimes she does not get American jokes or stories:

I would say that [humor] is the hardest thing between cultures... ya the hardest thing about joke. It's more related to background - it's a multi-cultural thing. If you think it's funny, that means you, I would say, that's the thing you grow up with - the whole background. You think something's funny - something's not funny. (Martine)

Eric explained that the Chinese and American guys in his lab had differing perspectives on the workloads which could sometimes feel unfair:

So this is also a difference with - the American guys always want like this - they work 20 hours - the professor hires them for 20 hours so they just work 4 hours every day for example they come here at 10 in the morning and do a lab at most to 3 o'clock in the lab and they don't work more. They don't care about how about the research going on - is that good or is that bad - no, no - I want to enjoy life - I want to go outside to play - I don't want to stay inside but for us - for Indian guy, for Chinese guy - normally we work for long time so the supervisor only hire us for 20 hours but normally we work for maybe

40 hours or even more. It's just - for myself I want to work - not because the professor pushes you to work...just that sometime we feel a little bit of unfair. They all enjoy life but we have to stay here to work hard but I understand the differences because sometimes when need to study harder to get a degree if we want to stay here - if we want to keep our status we need to get more respect from our ability to keep the status. (Eric)

A final communication challenge expressed by Lee was that her department is more than half Chinese and also has many Indian students, so students in her department typically do not have opportunities to communicate with Americans unless they are TAs:

Actually the problem is that right now our department has too many Chinese students and if you are only a research assistant - if you are not a teaching assistant - maybe you can just - everyday you just talk to Chinese people and because we also have like 5 or 6 Chinese professors. Maybe your professor is Chinese and then who are working with you is Chinese - actually you don't have many opportunities to talk to American people if there's... unless you are a teaching assistant - you have to communicate with Americans. (Lee)

To summarize, all participants experienced the development of intercultural competence through intercultural experiences and interactions with others. They talked about developing various multicultural friendships and focused on finding things in common in order to make friends with people from different cultures. Most participants described both positive and negative interactions with undergraduate students and felt this was a learning process. Most participants also described interactions with professors and fellow graduate students, which provided support for engaging with American culture. In addition, regular meetings with fellow graduate students and TAs both inside and outside of the lab helped ITAs learn how to communicate with other cultures, though humor and stories were continually challenging.

### **Structural Theme 3: Communication Strategies**

Participants used specific communication strategies to communicate effectively with undergraduate students, to teach effectively in the classroom and lab, and to develop intercultural competence.

#### **Textural Theme 3a: Strategies to Communicate with Undergraduate Students**

In order to strengthen communication with undergraduate students, participants emphasized that TAs need to interact with them. May said “don’t be afraid,” “be yourself,” “walk around and talk to the students,” and “interact with questions and jokes to build connections.” She emphasized that students want explanations and help, so if TAs are willing to communicate with them then students are not concerned about the TA’s pronunciation and are understanding of mistakes:

They [American students] are more straightforward and they want to communicate with the teachers and they take me as - how to say - it’s not somebody higher but somebody who can help them and they know that I am also a student, you know, and I can make mistakes. (May)

Martine felt that it was important to avoid negative words and to use encouraging words when communicating with undergraduate students:

Encourage the students to their work, of their work - their job. Encourage - say good job, well done. Use that words a lot. Don’t say anything like you’re wrong. In China we always say you are wrong. Here we say you’re right, you’re right. Different way. (Martine)

Miles explained that you cannot easily build a connection with students if you are always trying “to stay in your own way” and that TAs need to interact with students, help them with the simplest detail or question, and “remember students’ names.” He further emphasized that TAs do not have to adopt an American style but should focus on how to be “more approachable”:

I think the problem here is not who adapt to who. I think - you don't have to change your style into American. American students don't have to change their way to your style. The point here is how can you be more approachable. (Miles)

In addition, Miles felt TAs can be more “approachable” for students if TAs do whatever they can in the “the American way” by paying attention to details and by having friends who explain things to you. He explained that TAs do not need to be “Americanized,” but they need to at least try to know how American students think:

So that's why I think at least graduate student - international teaching assistant - they don't need to be American. They don't have to be Americanized but they have at least to try to know how American students think and what is really they want from you. (Miles)

After gaining some experience as a TA, Lee felt more comfortable interacting with students and helping with their questions. She emphasized the need to be “very patient” and “very kind” to students' needs and learned from another TA about the importance of communicating with students on lab reports. In addition, May viewed communication with undergraduate students as an opportunity to learn from them and to show that a TA cannot do everything:

For example, I don't know that “all set” but then my students when they handed in their report and they wanted to leave the lab and they will say – “am I all set?” And I don't know what that does it mean but then I know it means – “am I okay, can I leave, am I done.” And ya so I learned it in this way - a lot of words like that. (May)

and:

I am a Chinese - they know that - and actually yesterday, one of my students, he just came to me and he said, “[May], it is amazing that you can speak - you can pronounce all these chemicals in English. How did you do that?” He knows that I am not perfect but he's also aware that I am a Chinese and my education background is like all from China. You know what I mean? You show that you are not capable of everything and they will understand

that. So it is good. It is different from what I experienced. But I changed.  
(May)

### **Textural Theme 3b: Teaching Strategies**

Participants developed specific teaching strategies to communicate effectively with undergraduate students. For example, Lee thought about what she could do better “to really teaching something to students” and spent “a lot of time preparing before the lab”:

I think first that being a teaching assistant no matter if you are from China or America, firstly you need to care about the work you are doing. You need to spend a lot of time preparing for the work. I think that’s the same for every teaching assistant. (Lee)

Participants noted that TAs should use simple, step-by-step explanations and should be sensitive to when students do not understand:

Just start with the simplest idea - teach them to do the simplest formulation and it’s a graduating process. You cannot expect them to come to the lab and do everything correctly. (Miles)

and:

For most of the times they won’t say that I don’t understand - I was lost - but they just stand there and maybe - okay, um well. I will just continue so which part do you think you have a problem and do you understand this part maybe from the beginning - maybe do you understand this part - ya this part is fine. Like step by step. (Lee)

Furthermore, Lee shared that students become more willing to ask questions if they feel confident the TA is willing to help, and numerous TAs mentioned the importance of walking up to students in the lab to see if they have any questions:

And if you let them know that you are willing to help them with the lab and project they will I think - there will be no problem that if they have questions they will just ask you. And when I am a TA I’ll always walk to them and ask them if they have questions so there’s not very - not many difficulties when I doing my work or job. (Lee)

May explained that TAs should not take students' questions as a personal challenge but should welcome and encourage questions because this is how they learn:

Don't get offended if they [students] challenge you. Encourage them. It's nothing personal. It's their culture and I think they are trained in this way. They want to speak and communicate with their teacher. And they don't care whether you are a professor or not. They want to talk to you and show that they know things so just don't get offended and take it as a good, good thing. Because your students are understanding and they are willing to communicate - it's good - ya. And speak louder. (May)

Because students are busy with jobs outside of class, Bill gave "more chance to practice in class or group assignments" and encouraged students to talk with him to prepare for exams:

So the students here, instead, I learned that there is not much time left for their after class. If they want to learn something - the best way for them to do it is to learn in the class... as much as possible. (Bill)

Several participants noted that they learned teaching strategies from their own experience. For new TAs to communicate more effectively with undergraduate students, Martine recommended that they talk with other graduate students about ways of teaching and observe differences to learn better teaching techniques and strategies:

Talk more with your pal graduate students in different cultures to learn the way they are teaching the students. Ya... to observe the differences of the way they are teaching with the way you are teaching and to learn the better part of them... some of them... if you have your own good ways - keep them. (Martine)

In addition, participants mentioned that using visual aids and providing feedback on lab reports can increase effective communication:

You don't have to speak too much - you use something like pictures to show them how the things going on that day. (Amy)

and:

For the first semester I wrote a lot of comments to their lab report and I always - sometimes I just wrote that if you have any question on the report or if you want to rewrite your report you can talk to me at any time so. That's another way I communicate with the students using the lab report. (Lee)

Although Miles felt it would be helpful to have some sessions for TA training offered throughout the semester in his department, he said that to develop teaching skills it is important for TAs to merge into the culture and be willing to “try something new.” In sum, participants developed the following teaching strategies to communicate effectively in the classroom: spent a lot of time on preparation, gave step-by-step explanations, encouraged questions from students, compared teaching techniques with others, used visual aids, and tried new approaches.

### **Textural Theme 3c: Strategies to Develop Intercultural Competence**

Participants employed specific strategies to intentionally develop intercultural competence. Some of their strategies were similar or overlapping, and some were even contradictory; however, the essence of the strategies identified by participants are as follows: learn language and culture, communicate with others, focus on cultural similarities, learn and respect cultural differences, and learn through experience and time.

**Sub-theme: Learn language and culture.** Several participants noted that language and culture are important components of effective communication. Bill emphasized paying attention to language more than culture because he felt language is the most important aspect of communication. He explained that “people come

from different backgrounds but to be good people is common to every human being”

so communicating is easy when there is no language problem:

Honest I think most of the problem is the communication problem. It's the languages problem - it's not the culture problem. When people they can communicate clearly there is no much difference for the base behavior of a human being. Wherever you come from - United States or China - the people - most of the people still good behavior...The only problem is when people cannot speak clearly or efficiently - that's cause the problem. It's a language problem more than a culture problem. (Bill)

Others placed a stronger emphasis on the role of culture in developing intercultural competence. Martine said that it is important to embrace the culture and that American culture has influenced her to “become more outgoing,” to “speak aloud” what she is feeling, to not “keep everything” to herself, and to speak with Americans directly. Miles stated that language and culture are “twins” so it is “impossible to just study the language” and “not steep yourself in the culture”:

I mean can they really be separate - tear apart? I think they are twins. Ya it's like or it's - the culture is the vector for the language... something that carries that. Culture is the boat. So you cannot really give an example that somebody can only study language without culture... maybe that kind of like weird. (Miles)

To develop knowledge about American culture, numerous participants said they watched TV and movies, listened to music, used the internet, and observed other people's behavior. For example, Amy became familiar with people, with the language, and with what people do in public places and recommended learning about popular culture through magazines, movies, music, fashion, and the internet to learn new words that undergraduate students commonly use:

All the students, they are young people - quite young boys, girls - like pop stars, like music, something with fashion things so just that really if you want have the good communication with them like to learn some new words on the



internet. You know some words maybe just appeared recently or just very popular. (Amy)

In another example, Eric stated that the most important communication strategy is to be familiar with “interesting things, like jokes, TV shows, and movies,” and Miles talked about how his love of basketball and watching American TV shows in China helped him understand American culture:

Before I came here there’s definitely something that’s affected me. So before I came here, I was kind of like, I like American culture. I mean before I came here my favorite sport is basketball. And definitely the NBA is the highest level of basketball in the world. So I was trying to watch as much of the game I can and know as much as in the information about the players, about the coach, about the team, so it helps me to understand better about Americans. And you know, there’s an NBA culture - it’s unique...So that’s given me a time to get used to the American culture and I watch a lot of TV shows in China - American TV shows in China. So for me, when I come here, I think I have the open mind to everything American. (Miles)

Lee explained that she learned about American culture and how American people communicate through observation:

I just observe what other people - how American people communicate with each other. Then I should learn from them and maybe at the beginning I still in some cases I still behave the same as when I was in China and I see the reaction of the American people then I know maybe I did something un-properly or I did something good or not. (Lee)

**Sub-theme: Communicate with others.** Most participants explained that in order to develop intercultural competence it is essential to communicate with others. Miles shared that to make friends you have to get involved with other Americans and be willing to try something new. He emphasized it’s important to be friendly, to treat people with respect, to be nice, to be helpful, and to know people’s names so that people will be willing to talk with you:

You have to be friendly. That's obvious. You have to be nice, friendly to everybody else cause the way you treat people - treat other people is exactly how they will respect you. That's the way they will treat you. So first off I would say you have to be nice... you have to be helpful... easy to talk... easy to communicate. So in that way people would be willing to talk to you so you don't have any problems. (Miles)

Martine stressed that you should pay attention to getting to know people's personalities. In addition, Amy felt that talking with others in English as much as possible is important in order to get to know people's personalities and to respect them. Amy's experience of making friends was influenced by the attitudes of "be confident," "be strong," "be positive," "be friendly," "join the culture," and "don't be shy":

So I just think I make friends with them and they just - they think maybe I'm a good TA also. (Amy)

Amy tried to talk about new things with others even if they were topics she was not particularly interested in:

Because if you feel shy or don't want or you just like I don't want, I don't want to do this - if you always do this you can never get a good relationship with other people - with American people. (Amy)

Lee shared that although it may be difficult to be close friends with Americans, it is important to "greet others first" and "walk the first step":

What I feel is that when I came into a new community I need to talk to them - greeting to others first. And then if you talk to others they are always friendly - they're friendly to you and they will like to talk to you but you need to walk the first step - you need to talk to them first. (Lee)

May felt that daily life experiences in the U.S. surrounded by native speakers of English have been especially helpful in developing her ability to communicate with

different cultures since there was “no break,” and she talked about the various roles in which she needed to communicate in American culture:

Like when I first came here. You have all those foreign people around you. You need to communicate with them in a different way and you have to act as a different ummm roles. You went to the grocery store and you had to talk to the counters and you have to work as a TA and you have your professor as an American so that's.... no break... right. So it helped me a lot like more after I came here to this country but the former experience [foreign language high school] also helped me. (May)

In addition, May learned that smiling at others was not enough; it was important to actually greet them:

And the American greeting to each other you cannot just smile in your face. I used to do that and people say - you look like ice queen - you never talk so it's just kidding but they used that kind of different so no matter what but now when I see somebody I will just hi - how you doing - fine. (May)

Based on her experience, the best way to have contact with others, show friendliness, build relationships, and develop intercultural competence is to interact more with others, be open-minded, and find common topics of conversation:

Don't be so - don't close yourself into a single room - a single space. Don't close yourself - just try to contact with each other - with the outside world and talk. (May)

**Sub-theme: Focus on cultural similarities.** Several participants expressed that when communicating with people from other cultures, it is important to focus on cultural similarities. For example, Eric said that he focuses on similarities and never on differences:

People always have differences. You cannot make people all the same so I most - I would like to focus on similarities. I never focus on differences. (Eric)

Lee emphasized that paying attention to similarities and sharing feelings are the most important things for communicating with others because “feelings are always similar between people with different cultures” so “just share your feelings”:

I think if you're very happy or something people also know that you feel very good right now and your friend will be happy too - they will just share your feelings and I think that's the basic thing that people can communicate with each other with different culture backgrounds - just they can share the feelings - it's all the same no matter what culture you have. (Lee)

May also said she pays attention to similarities and felt that differences should not be emphasized nor viewed as barriers:

I would say similarities [are more important to pay attention to]. Ya. And - but you don't have to take difference as a barrier. You just take it but I will - for example when I am teaching and when my students and I both want to - I mean - I want my students to get higher grade and they too. So this sort of similarity - we have the same purpose and as I mentioned we are all human beings so we love the kindness - show your kindness to people and it helps and just don't take... don't always emphasize that - oh I am from China, and I am very different - something like that. (May)

**Sub-theme: Learn and respect cultural differences.** Participants also talked about the importance of learning about and showing respect for cultural differences. For example, Amy said she pays attention to cultural differences and does not feel that similar things matter because if she understands differences then she knows how to avoid being rude:

You won't make a fault like make something wrong - make some feel you're rude or something. So that's why I want to learn this [differences]. (Amy)

Based on her experience, it is also important to accept culturally different ideas without thinking too much about why cultures do things differently:

Some like a rules in the culture is not come from one day - it's come from thousands of years. You cannot ask them - why you do this. It's not good to ask. (Amy)

To develop intercultural competence, Bill emphasized it is more important to pay attention to differences because “similarity is easy to understand, but small difference will cause a big problem.” To understand differences, he said “know about society as much as possible” and “try to do things their way”:

I would say try to know about a society as much as possible. That the people here have a different environment like the belief - right - what they are interested or what - how they do. This lot of things has difference - even slight difference. (Bill)

Eric expressed that everybody has differences between them, so he felt that differences make things interesting “like salt makes food delicious” and that respecting differences is important because changing people is difficult.

Furthermore, Martine noted that the most important thing in intercultural communication is to respect differences between different cultures, to adapt to them if possible, and to respect them even if you cannot adapt:

Embrace this culture...notice the differences and pay attention to them. For some of them, you can respect them yourself, for some of them you can adapt them. If you can't adapt to them, respect them. (Martine)

May also talked about changing and adapting to cultural differences, such as learning to speak louder in American culture. She explained that to develop intercultural competence it is important to be willing to change and to adapt, which has made her feel comfortable and confident in a new environment. She also shared that she is able to make some changes but still be herself:

I know my responsibility I feel that if I make this change [speak louder] and it can help me to communicate better with people who are from different culture and I feel its improvement because I consider that as ability just to get to used to the environment and people and actually it is nice to have them feeling that you can change yourself a little bit to like adapt the environment.

I like it... ya. Because I am still [May] and I can still react as what I was. I keep myself and I make some changes of that. And I am happy like this.  
(May)

Though Miles felt it is easier to “seek similarities,” he said that you have to learn about both similarities and differences to communicate effectively with others and that the most important thing in developing intercultural competence is to be “open-minded,” “take it easy,” and “don’t get stressed”:

Keep your mind open. Everything could be reasonable. It is not wrong if it is not your way. So I would say take it easy... don’t get a stressed out. (Miles)

In sum, participants felt that learning both similarities and differences are important in developing intercultural competence. Some emphasized one over the other, while others stressed both. The essence of their perspectives is to focus on cultural similarities but also learn about and respect cultural differences.

**Sub-theme: Learn through experience and time.** Participants shared that experience is an effective strategy for developing intercultural competence and is a process that takes place over time. Based on Bill’s experience, the ways he communicates with others have “changed a lot over the past ten years,” but he stressed that changes in communication and understanding difference takes place “step by step”:

So this change take place smoothly. You don’t see the sudden change. (Bill)

Based on Eric’s perspective, the best way to learn to communicate with people from other cultures and to adapt to cultural differences is through experience but this “costs time”:

I think experience is much, much better. Every people can give advice but it’s like ... if you learn something for example like traffic rules... if you learn

that, you try to remember that, you cannot remember everything... but sometime you make a mistake and you caught by cops, you will remember the very, very, clear - you never forgot it.. like that way so I prefer experience. But sometimes experience will cost time... (Eric)

Although the development of intercultural competence can be difficult, Amy said that “time helps” and “TAing gets better with experience.” In addition, Martine felt it is easier to communicate with time because you know people better and that “time will change everything.”

Altogether, participants developed communication strategies to communicate effectively with undergraduate students, incorporated specific teaching strategies, and used intentional strategies to develop intercultural competence. They learned language and culture and communicated with others. Some focused on cultural similarities, while others emphasized learning about and respecting cultural differences. In addition, they emphasized that developing intercultural competence takes place through experience and over a process of time.

### **The Core Essence of the Phenomenon**

The core essence of the phenomenon in this study is what it means to experience the development of intercultural competence from the perspectives of Chinese ITAs. First, these Chinese ITAs experience the development of intercultural competence through perceptions of cultural difference. They perceive that Chinese culture values politeness, respect, competition, and indirect communication, and they feel that American culture values friendliness, being helpful, and direct communication. The participants also experience differences between the educational cultures of China and America. They perceive that competition, hard

work, test scores, and memorization are important in Chinese education, while creativity, projects, students' interests, and discussions are important features of American education.

Second, these Chinese ITAs experience the development of intercultural competence through intercultural experiences and interactions with others. They often have multicultural friendships during childhood, through work, or on campus and focus on finding things in common in order to make friends with people from different cultures. They experience both positive and negative interactions with undergraduate students. Though Chinese ITAs often face challenges during the first semester of teaching by lacking confidence, feeling uncomfortable, and struggling to communicate effectively with undergraduate students, they feel that this is a learning process that improves. Chinese ITAs interact with professors and fellow graduate students who are often multicultural. Regular interactions with professors provide support for ITAs in developing intercultural competence and in understanding how to engage with American culture. In addition, regular meetings with fellow graduate students and TAs both inside and outside of the lab help ITAs learn how to communicate with other cultures, though humor and stories are often challenging.

Finally, these Chinese ITAs experience the development of intercultural competence by using communication strategies. They use strategies to communicate effectively with undergraduate students, such as walking around and talking to them, being approachable, and looking for opportunities to learn from the students. They incorporate the following teaching strategies: be well-prepared, be sensitive to students' needs and questions, talk about teaching with other TAs, and be willing to



try something new. Chinese ITAs use intentional strategies to develop intercultural competence. They learn language and culture by watching TV and movies, by using the internet, and by observing people's behavior. They communicate with others by getting involved, by being open-minded, and by having a friendly, positive attitude. In addition, Chinese ITAs develop intercultural competence by focusing on cultural similarities and by learning about cultural differences. They adapt to differences if possible, but if not then they respect them. Most importantly, Chinese ITAs develop intercultural competence through experience and over a process of time.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

#### **Summary of the Study**

In the final chapter of a phenomenological research manuscript, Moustakas (1994) recommends beginning with a brief summary of the study “from its inception to its final synthesis of data” (p. 184). This study was initially formulated based on my interest in and respect for ITAs cultivated during my experience in teaching communication skills courses for several years in an ITA training program as well as through my growing interest in intercultural communication. Intercultural communication is a field gaining importance in higher education, and the increasing use of ITAs by universities to teach undergraduate courses can result in communication problems between ITAs and undergraduate students. The literature on ITAs widely acknowledges that language, pedagogy, and culture are essential components of ITA training programs and of effective intercultural interactions between ITAs and undergraduate students (Althen, 1991; Bailey, 1984; Finder, 2005; Gravois, 2005; Hoekje & Williams, 1992; King, 1998; Smith et al., 1992), but research related to ITAs has primarily investigated the areas of language (Derwing, 2010; Dick & Robinson, 1993; Jun & Li, 2010; Morley, 1991; Pickering, 2001; Thomas & Monoson, 1993; Tyler, 1992; Williams, 1992) and pedagogy (Jacobs & Friedman, 1988; Fleisher, Hashimoto, & Weinberg, 2002; Kavas & Kavas, 2008; Plakans, 1997; Smyrniou, 1994; Twale, Shannon, & Moore, 1997; Wang, 2000) and few empirical studies have addressed the role of intercultural communication for ITAs

(Jenkins, 2000; Smyrniou, 1994). More specifically, the literature has focused more on the deficiencies of ITAs rather than their strengths and assets. In addition, training programs for ITAs tend to emphasize oral English skills, presentation skills, and teaching skills and do not adequately address the development of intercultural competence, which is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people of different cultures. Furthermore, few studies on ITAs have focused on what can be learned directly from ITAs themselves (Luo, Grady, & Bellows, 2001; Ross & Krider, 1992; Trebing, 2007).

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to learn directly from ITAs about their perspectives and experiences in developing intercultural competence. I sought to answer the following research question: What is the essence of the factors that affect the development of intercultural competence from the perspectives of ITAs? To answer this question and to identify participants who had all experienced the same phenomenon, I conducted the study at a mid-size research university in the northeast and interviewed seven Chinese ITAs who were nominated to participate in the study based on intercultural competence being a strength in their interactions with others.

This study consisted of three phases. In the first phase, I asked department chairs and graduate program directors to nominate any and all Chinese ITAs whom they felt had a good level of intercultural competence to potentially participate in the study. In the second phase, I contacted the fifteen nominees and invited them to take the online IDI. Ten nominees completed the IDI. I identified seven nominees who had developmental orientation scores on the IDI in the categories of Minimization or

Acceptance and invited them to participate in interviews. In the third phase, I first engaged in the process of Epoche by setting aside prejudgments of the phenomenon and then conducted two semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with each of the seven participants to learn about their experiences in developing intercultural competence as a teaching assistant and as a graduate student and to learn about their perspectives of Chinese culture and American culture. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed.

I followed rigorous, systematic steps for data analysis in phenomenological research as recommended by Moustakas (1994). First, I checked the accuracy of the transcripts and then listed and labeled every relevant statement to horizontalize the data. I reviewed each statement to ensure it was relevant to understanding the phenomenon and was accurately labeled. Then, I clustered these invariant constituents into textural themes and checked that they were explicitly expressed or compatibly represented in the full transcripts. Using the invariant constituents and textural themes, I constructed an individual textural description of *what* each participant experienced. In addition, I identified structural themes and constructed a structural description of the core essence of *how* the phenomenon was experienced. Finally, I used the individual textural descriptions and individual structural descriptions to construct a textural-structural description of the essence of the phenomenon, integrating the invariant constituents, transcript quotes, textural themes, and structural themes. I verified the textural-structural descriptions with each participant, made any suggested modifications, and then synthesized all of the individual descriptions into a composite textural description, a composite structural description, and finally a

composite textural-structural description of the essential structure and core experience of the development of intercultural competence for these Chinese ITAs.

The result of this study is a synthesis of textural and structural descriptions of the factors that challenge, support, and influence the development of intercultural competence based on the lived experiences of these Chinese ITAs. Based on the findings, there are three essential components of the development of intercultural competence. First, interculturally-competent Chinese ITAs develop perceptions of cultural difference, particularly perceptions of Chinese culture and communication, perceptions of American culture and communication, and perceptions of differences between Chinese and American educational cultures. Second, interculturally-competent Chinese ITAs engage in intercultural experiences and interactions with others, specifically through intercultural friendships, interactions with undergraduate students, and interactions with professors and fellow graduate students. Third, interculturally-competent Chinese ITAs use communication strategies, including strategies to communicate with undergraduate students, teaching strategies, and strategies to develop intercultural competence. They intentionally develop intercultural competence by learning language and culture, by communicating with others, by focusing on cultural similarities, by learning and respecting cultural differences, and by learning through experience and time.

### **Interpretation and Implications of the Study**

The interpretation of findings in a phenomenological study emphasizes the views of the participants based on the meanings that they attribute to their own experiences. As Patton (2002) states:

Interpretation is essential to an understanding of experience and the experience includes the interpretation. Thus, phenomenologists focus on how we put together the phenomena we experience in such a way as to make sense of the world and, in so doing, develop a worldview. There is no separate (or objective) reality for people. There is only what they know their experience is and means. The subjective experience incorporates the objective thing and becomes a person's reality, thus the focus on meaning making as the essence of human experience. (p. 106)

The meaning making of the participants in this study produced a composite textural-structural description, synthesizing their perspectives and experiences on the development of intercultural competence. Many similarities in textural themes existed among the participants' responses even though their individual experiences varied. Their perspectives often overlapped and at times contradicted one another or even contradicted certain things they said themselves, such as whether it was more important to pay attention to cultural similarities or cultural differences. However, the rigorous process of data analysis accounted for both the similarities and contradictions in a way that ultimately clearly identified an underlying structure of the essence and meanings of their experiences. These findings confirm and extend the literature that currently exists in the fields of intercultural communication and ITA training and are centered on the three essential, structural components of how they experienced the development of intercultural competence, specifically perceptions of cultural difference, intercultural experiences and interactions with others, and communication strategies.

### **Finding 1: Perceptions of Cultural Difference**

All participants of the study shared extensively about their thoughts and perceptions of cultural difference in developing intercultural competence. They specifically talked about the areas of Chinese culture and communication, American

culture and communication, and differences between the educational cultures in China and America. Their common perceptions were that Chinese culture values politeness, respect, competition, and indirect communication and that American culture values friendliness, being helpful, and direct communication. In addition, the participants experienced differences between the educational cultures of China and America. They perceived that competition, hard work, test scores, and memorization are important in Chinese education, while creativity, projects, students' interests, and discussions are important features of American education.

The participants' perceptions on cultural difference reflect their attitudes toward and knowledge of their own culture and American culture, which influenced their development of intercultural competence. The finding of cultural difference as a core structural element in the development of intercultural competence for these Chinese ITAs is in congruence with Deardorff's (2008) definition of intercultural competence and the individual levels or first steps in Deardorff's (2004; 2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence. Intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitude are essential components of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2008). Participants shared specific values, concepts, and examples to indicate and reflect both their knowledge of Chinese culture and their knowledge of American culture. They demonstrated an attitude of respect toward differences by using words with positive connotations such as "very open" or "friendly" and described differences, even those that they did not necessarily understand or accept such as "like to exaggerate things" or "relax when communicating," without using words of disdain or anger. Their experiences revealed an orientation of openness to new things, and their level of

knowledge and reflections about practices and beliefs in both Chinese and American cultures indicated cultural self-awareness and knowledge of culture-specific information. The intercultural knowledge and attitudes reflected in the participants' perspectives and experiences in developing intercultural competence supports the first and second levels of development in Deardorff's (2004; 2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence. The first level in this model focuses on the attitudes an individual needs to have as a first step in developing intercultural competence, such as respect, openness, and curiosity or discovery. These attitudes are the foundation of the model, affecting all other components (Deardorff, 2009a). The second level in this model emphasizes the intercultural knowledge that an individual needs to develop intercultural competence, including cultural self-awareness, cultural knowledge, and sociolinguistic awareness. Based on the participants' perspectives and experiences with cultural difference, attitudes and knowledge are key elements in the process of developing intercultural competence.

The majority of participants described various aspects of Chinese culture such as spending much of their time with other Chinese students, preferring Chinese food, and relying upon one another for help and friendship. Only one participant talked about how his Chinese friends view him as "Americanized" and thought it might be due to the amount of time he spent with American friends and his love of American food. These perspectives support Storti's (1999) notion of how personal identity and well-being are developed in collectivist cultures based on relation to the group. In addition, the participant who was viewed as "Americanized" for displaying characteristics of individualist culture supports Garrott's (1995) findings that it is



important to avoid stereotypes and misconceptions in describing Chinese culture because globalization is producing cultural changes and some Chinese university students associate more strongly with individualism than the traditional notion of collectivism. Also, all participants described the indirect communication style of Chinese culture and the emphasis on context as supported by the literature (Chen, 2010; Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). Participants noted that a direct style is more frequently used by Americans, which they learned to employ to communicate with undergraduate students and labmates.

Participants' perceptions of the differences between the educational cultures of China and America support most of the values identified by Flowerdew and Miller (1995) yet offer a distinct difference on the learning styles in Chinese and American education. The combined reflections of the participants on Chinese educational culture were in agreement with Flowerdew and Miller in the areas of respect for teachers, not questioning teachers, pressure to excel academically, and being silent; however, participants emphasized that Chinese culture values independent learning and fierce competition which conflicts with Flowerdew and Miller's notion that Chinese educational culture places an emphasis on group orientation to learning. In addition, participants' experiences supported Flowerdew and Miller's description of Western educational culture in that the teacher is a guide, the teacher is open to challenge, students are motivated by desire for individual development, self-expression is viewed positively, and individual development and creativity is valued in learning, but participants expressed that American culture places a greater emphasis on cooperative learning in study groups, group projects, and classroom discussions,

which is not acknowledged in Flowerdew and Miller's list of Western educational values.

### **Finding 2: Intercultural Experiences and Interactions with Others**

All of the Chinese ITAs in this study engaged in intercultural experiences and interactions with others, specifically through intercultural friendships, interactions with undergraduate students, and interactions with professors and fellow graduate students. They often had multicultural friendships during childhood, through work, or on campus and focused on finding things in common in order to make friends with people from different cultures. They talked about experiences of both positive and negative interactions with undergraduate students. During the first semester of teaching, they often felt challenged with lacking confidence, feeling uncomfortable, and struggling to communicate effectively with undergraduate students, but they also felt that this was a learning process that improved. The participants interacted with professors and fellow graduate students who were often multicultural. Regular interactions with professors provided support for ITAs in developing intercultural competence and in understanding how to engage with American culture. In addition, regular meetings with fellow graduate students and TAs both inside and outside of the lab helped ITAs learn how to communicate with other cultures, though humor and stories were often challenging.

The participants' descriptions of their intercultural experiences and their interactions with others reflected levels of intercultural knowledge, attitudes toward others of different cultures, skills in navigating intercultural interactions, understanding of context, and capacity for intercultural relationship building, which all

support the essential components of intercultural knowledge, attitude and skills reflected in Deardorff's (2008) definition of intercultural competence. In addition, participants' experiences with intercultural contexts and building intercultural relationships directly support the notion that the development of intercultural competence requires interactions with those of other cultures (Deardorff, 2009a, Pusch, 2009), relationships that include respect and dialogue about cultural differences (Deardorff, 2009b), and an understanding of intercultural contexts (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Furthermore, participants' descriptions of the struggles they first encountered in communicating with undergraduate students and with people in their departments typically reflected a lack of confidence or a level of discomfort in these intercultural settings due to an initial lack of knowledge and skills of how to effectively and appropriately navigate these intercultural situations, which participants explained improved over time as their understanding, knowledge, and intercultural skills also increased. These perspectives of how intercultural competence increased through intercultural experiences, interactions with others, and the development of intercultural friendships support Deardorff's (2004; 2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence in that an individual initially develops an attitude of respect and openness as well as intercultural knowledge and skills which then produces interaction levels of a desired internal outcome and a desired external outcome. Participants reflected desired internal outcomes by sharing how they learned to adapt communication styles and behaviors based on intercultural contexts and then demonstrated external outcomes of developing intercultural competence by giving examples of situations where they had developed the ability to communicate

effectively and appropriately in intercultural interactions within the department and within the classroom.

The finding that ITAs viewed regular interactions with professors as supportive and helpful contradicts the finding of Bates-Holland (2008) in which ITAs' conflicted with the values of faculty advisors regarding beliefs about teaching and learning. In addition, this finding contradicts the results of Jenkins' (2000) study in which Chinese ITAs used silence and avoidance to demonstrate deference and saving face in interactions with faculty; however, this behavior was interpreted by faculty as low motivation and an unwillingness to cooperate. The participants of this study did not express feelings of conflict or avoidance with faculty advisors; in contrast, they expressed that those interactions strengthened their development of intercultural competence.

### **Finding 3: Communication Strategies**

All of the participants developed and implemented strategies for communication, including strategies to communicate with undergraduate students, teaching strategies, and strategies to develop intercultural competence. They used strategies to communicate effectively with undergraduate students, such as walking around and talking to them, being approachable, and looking for opportunities to learn from the students. They incorporated the following teaching strategies: be well-prepared, be sensitive to students' needs and questions, talk about teaching with other TAs, and be willing to try something new.

The participants' use of communication strategies with undergraduate students and teaching in the classroom or lab reflect the importance of interacting with others,

learning from others, being sensitive to others, and having a willingness to try new things. This finding is in agreement to the results of the study by Bates-Holland (2008) in which ITAs shared that they learned to teach by participating in the act of teaching. Furthermore, these concepts are similar to the findings of Bresnahan and Cai (2000) who interviewed thirty ITAs from fourteen countries considered to be outstanding TAs and identified the following factors as contributing to their success: an openness to communicate, a willingness to seek help when needed, a sense of humor about mistakes, an attitude that welcomed cross-cultural learning from mistakes, and the availability of formal and informal networks for teaching support. However, the findings of this study on Chinese ITAs emphasize a more active role of the ITA in increasing intercultural knowledge and skills, rather than just having a passive, open attitude reflected in the results of Bresnahan and Cai's study. The Chinese ITAs stressed that it is not enough for ITAs to simply be open to communicating with undergraduate students; it is essential to intentionally communicate with them by walking directly up to students and asking if they have questions or need help, by conveying a sense of approachability to increase undergraduate students' comfort in seeking help from the TA, by being well-prepared for the class or lab, and by proactively seeking advice on teaching strategies from experienced TAs. These findings also support the concept in Deardorff's (2004; 2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence that an intercultural attitude is important, but it is just the first step in developing intercultural competence. The development of intercultural knowledge and skills that are first internalized and then manifest through

behaviors and outcomes is a process in which the ITA needs to fully engage to strengthen intercultural communication with undergraduate students.

Furthermore, the participants emphasized the notion of being approachable to increase effective communication with undergraduate students. They found ways to both approach and manage the cultural differences they encountered with undergraduate students. The ITAs' stories of undergraduate student responses seemed to indicate potentially low levels of intercultural competence for students who blamed the ITA or simply dropped the class versus those who responded by helping the ITA learn new words and pronunciation or were persistent in finding ways to communicate with the ITA in the class. This finding supports the concept that the perception of undergraduates on the teaching effectiveness of ITAs may be strongly influenced by the levels of intercultural competence of both undergraduates and ITAs (Chen, 2005; King, 1998) and underscores the importance of developmentally-appropriate training in intercultural competence in ITA programs to increase the success of ITAs in the classroom. Appropriate measures to address concerns regarding the pedagogical effectiveness of ITAs need to focus not only on oral English skills and teaching ability but also on the role and development of intercultural competence (Luo, Grady, & Bellows, 2001; Smyrniou, 1994). In addition, universities need to seek ways to intentionally develop the intercultural competence of undergraduate students so as to enable them to interact more effectively with multicultural TAs, professors, fellow students, and even a multicultural world upon graduation.

The participants also used intentional communication strategies to develop intercultural competence. They actively sought to develop intercultural competence

by learning language and culture, by communicating with others, by focusing on cultural similarities, by learning and respecting cultural differences, and by learning through experience and time. They learned language and culture by watching TV and movies, by using the internet, and by observing people's behavior. They communicated with others by getting involved, by being open-minded, and by having a friendly, positive attitude. In addition, they developed intercultural competence by focusing on cultural similarities and by learning about cultural differences. They adapted to differences if possible, but if not then they respected them. Most importantly, the participants developed intercultural competence through experience and over a process of time.

The participants' acknowledgement of specific strategies to develop intercultural competence supports Deardorff's (2004; 2006; 2008) definition and Process Model of Intercultural Competence. By learning language and culture, by communicating with others, and by learning through experience and time, participants increased their intercultural knowledge and skills. Participants did not unanimously agree on whether it was more important to pay attention to cultural similarities or cultural differences. The majority said it is more important to focus on cultural similarities but all said that cultural differences need to be respected even if not understood or embraced. These findings reflect the participants' attitudes of respect in valuing other cultures and cultural diversity, an openness to intercultural learning and withholding judgment of other cultures, as well as attitudes that tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty; all of which are characteristics of an attitude or mindset that promotes the development of intercultural competence (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003;

Deardorff, 2004; 2006). Furthermore, the lack of agreement on whether to focus more on similarities versus differences seems to reflect the fluid aspects of the developmental orientation scores on the IDI (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003). The IDI score represents the current stage of development but also recognizes that within each stage there will be variation as an individual resolves perceptions of cultural difference. For example, all of the participants except one had IDI scores within Minimization, indicating a tendency to focus on commonalities across cultures that can overlook important cultural differences such as values, perceptions, and behaviors. One participant who had been in the U.S. the longest amount of time had an IDI score that was borderline within the Acceptance stage, indicating a mindset that is aware and appreciative of cultural difference in one's own culture and other cultures. This participant did emphasize that it is more important to pay attention to cultural differences; however, IDI scores are simply reflecting participants' intercultural mindset which correlates to Deardorff's intercultural attitude. While extremely important, attitudes that promote the development of intercultural competence are just the first step in the process and need to be combined with intercultural knowledge and skills in order to develop intercultural competence.

Participants also emphasized that intercultural competence does not develop instantaneously and is best learned through the process of experience over time. This notion correlates with the full cycle represented in Deardorff's model in that the development of intercultural competence begins with attitudes, knowledge and skills that are first manifested internally and then exhibited externally in intercultural interactions. Through this process, the degree of intercultural competence a person



develops is dependent upon the degree of attitudes, knowledge, and skills that a person develops. Although the findings of this study do not indicate what actually took place when the Chinese ITAs were involved with intercultural interactions, an understanding of their own perspectives of their experiences is a critical first step in furthering understanding of how people perceive and experience the development of intercultural competence. Furthermore, the findings also support the understanding that intercultural competence is developed as a process in which it is important to have opportunities to reflect and assess one's own development (Deardorff, 2009a).

### **Implications for the Field of Intercultural Communication**

The first implication of this study for the field of intercultural communication is a confirmation of the components in Deardorff's (2004; 2006; 2008) definition and Process Model of Intercultural Competence. The textual and structural themes of the participants' experiences in developing intercultural competence confirmed that they developed intercultural attitudes, knowledge, and skills in their perceptions of cultural difference, through their intercultural experiences and interactions with others, and by developing communication strategies. The perspectives shared by the participants reflected the development of intercultural competence as a cyclic, ongoing process which begins on an individual level of cultivating attitudes, knowledge, and skills and then moves to an interaction level where the internal ability to adapt or be flexible manifests externally through successful outcomes of intercultural interactions. Though this study did not include observing or assessing participants' intercultural interactions, the focus of this study was to determine how Chinese ITAs perceived this process. This study sought to uncover the meaning they made of interactions that they

considered to be successful or unsuccessful in order to further understand how they perceived the development of intercultural competence. Their perceptions support both Deardorff's definition and Process Model of Intercultural Competence, which should be further assessed and utilized in the field of intercultural communication.

The second implication of this study for intercultural communication is that the results extend the literature in the field by providing a more detailed understanding of how Chinese ITAs perceive and experience the development of intercultural competence. The literature on intercultural competence emphasizes existing theoretical models that need to be further refined and tested (Deardorff, 2004; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009), which this study has done, but the field of intercultural communication needs a deeper understanding of how the development of intercultural competence is perceived by those who have experienced it and what these experiences mean for specific groups of people who share a cultural background or life experience. The results of this study provide unique insight into the essential structural components of the experiences of Chinese ITAs who have developed a level of intercultural competence that can be further explored with other Chinese participants or ITAs from diverse cultural backgrounds to continue to learn about how people with effective levels of intercultural competence developed this ability.

### **Implications for the Field of ITA Training**

The first implication of this study for the field of ITA training is that the results provide an increased understanding of Chinese ITAs. Much of the literature on ITAs addresses small groups of participants from diverse ethnic backgrounds; however, ITAs from different cultural backgrounds with varying levels of experience with

intercultural interactions have different needs in developing intercultural competence (Hill & Lakey, 1995). It would be naïve to imply that all ITAs face the same challenges that can be met in the same way, so the findings of this study provide a first step in distinguishing the cultural-specific needs of Chinese ITAs who were nominated as being successful intercultural communicators and how they perceived the development of this ability.

The second implication of this study for the field of ITA training is the timing and content of training programs and curriculum. Participants expressed the importance of learning to develop intercultural competence through a process of observation, experience, time, and learning from others. This implies that pre-semester training programs would not be as effective as programs that meet during a semester or throughout the academic year. ITAs need opportunities to learn about strategies for teaching and effective communication by talking with experienced TAs, by observing experienced TAs in action, and by having the time to reflect upon those experiences. Participants also emphasized the importance of language proficiency in developing intercultural competence. Although the studies by Deardorff (2006) and Hunter, White, and Godbey (2006) were not able to conclude whether or not language proficiency is an essential component of intercultural competence, the participants in this study felt strongly that it is and placed a high level of importance on developing language skills. However, ITA training that focuses exclusively on strengthening English proficiency and enhancing pedagogical skills needs to add more intentional training on the development of intercultural competence to increase effective communication between ITAs and undergraduate students.

The third implication of this study for the field of ITA training is that programs need to offer training that intentionally increases intercultural competence at developmentally-appropriate levels and begins by cultivating intercultural attitudes. Based on the DMIS (Bennett, 1993) and the IDI (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003), intercultural sensitivity refers to a person's intercultural mindset that is increasingly able to accommodate cultural difference based on successive progression through stages. Training programs need to recognize that ITAs most likely have varying levels of intercultural sensitivity, and it would be useful to incorporate the IDI into ITA assessment in order to provide training in intercultural competence that is developmentally appropriate. In other words, if a training program includes curriculum for identifying culturally different practices and values that influence teaching and learning in the university classroom, a person in the Acceptance stage may easily think about how these concepts are different for undergraduate students in America and may readily accept educational practices that might be different from that person's own cultural experience. However a person in the Polarization stage of development may reject teaching strategies that represent differences in educational cultures that the person finds inferior to one's own cultural ways of teaching and learning, and a person in the Minimization stage might find the suggestions to identify differences in teaching strategies irrelevant due to placing an over-emphasis on cultural similarities. ITA training programs need to recognize that a "one size fits all" approach does not exist in developing intercultural competence, and it is essential to design training that fits the unique needs and stages of development of the ITAs participating. In addition, training in intercultural competence for ITAs needs to avoid

emphasizing objective cultural knowledge and instead needs to stress an understanding of varying cultural communication styles and underlying cultural values so as to most effectively strengthen the development of intercultural competence.

The fourth implication of this study for the field of ITA training is that programs need to find ways to increase opportunities for ITAs to interact with others. Many programs currently have ways to strengthen connections between undergraduate students and ITAs by having undergraduates be consultants, mentors, or even assist in the assessment of ITAs. Although participants talked about the impact of interacting with undergraduates, they shared much more about the influence of interactions within their departments on their development of intercultural competence. ITA trainers need to find ways to share these findings with department chairs and program directors and encourage them to mentor ITAs. ITAs who met regularly with advisors, major professors, or TAs within the department shared that this significantly helped them learn to communicate in ways that were interculturally effective and appropriate. One participant's department simply offered an orientation for TAs at the beginning of the semester, and the ITA wished the department offered something regularly throughout the semester to discuss what was happening in the classroom. Furthermore, ITA trainers should look for ways to increase interactions between experienced TAs and ITAs on campus with novice ITAs. ITA trainers should not underestimate the importance of interactions within the department or research lab and the influence that can have on strengthening interactions between ITAs and undergraduate students. In addition, ITA trainers should find ways to increase intercultural experiences and opportunities for ITAs to develop intercultural friendships. This could be done by

inviting families from the community to serve as host families for each ITA or group of ITAs or promoting conversation partner programs on campus that facilitate intercultural exchange in a non-stressful environment. The participants noted that these types of non-academic communication contributed to their development of intercultural competence and overall sense of successful interactions in academic settings. Furthermore, interactions with others solely for the purposes of academic communication are unlikely to be enough to promote the development of intercultural competence. A myriad of services could be offered through ITA training programs that encourage and strengthen intercultural experiences and intercultural interactions for ITAs on university campuses that may result in increased levels of intercultural competence and greater success and levels of comfort in communicating in the undergraduate classroom.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The research design of this study presents several possible limitations. First, the findings of this study represent the core essence of the experience of developing intercultural competence for the seven Chinese ITAs who participated but cannot be generalized to say that all Chinese ITAs have this same experience. Qualitative research in general and this study in particular often utilizes small sample size. Although small sample size leads to information-rich and in-depth data, it also contributes to the inability to generalize the findings to a larger population. Furthermore, the university's records indicated that forty-four Chinese graduate assistants were employed on campus. Since the records did not differentiate between research assistant positions and teaching assistant positions, it was not possible to

identify the total possible number of Chinese ITAs on campus. Due to the design of the mentor nomination process, it is also not possible to know if any Chinese ITAs might have been overlooked based on either an omission of the mentor or as a result of the decision of some departments to not participate in the study. The findings may have been different if additional participants had been included in the study.

Second, the majority of participants of this study had IDI scores in the Minimization stage, one participant had a score in the Acceptance stage, but none had scores in the Adaptation stage. The participants met the minimum criteria for participation in the study, but given that the IDI is based on a developmental model of stages of increasing intercultural sensitivity, it would have been preferred to have participants in higher stages of intercultural sensitivity. It would be interesting to know how the findings might have been different if the majority of participants had higher IDI scores reflecting either the Acceptance stage or the Adaptation stage.

Third, the scope of the study was limited to Chinese ITAs. To strengthen the credibility of the sample and the validity of the results, I limited the study to Chinese ITAs yet ITA training programs provide support for ITAs from all ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The study does not reveal what similarities, differences, or overlapping perspectives and experiences exist in the development of intercultural competence among and between ITAs from varying cultural backgrounds. In addition, the participants of this study were graduate students in business and hard sciences. It would be useful and interesting to know if the core essence of the development of intercultural competence for ITAs would have been similar or different for those

seeking degrees in social science fields who might possibly be more naturally driven to engage with and learn about people, relationships, communication, and cultures.

Fourth, this study relied primarily upon self-reported data. The IDI scores are based on what the participants say they think or believe about cultural difference yet these responses are decontextualized so there is no way to verify whether or not participants actually employ these perspectives in their daily lives and interactions with others. The interviews emphasized the perspectives of the participants and provided opportunities of reflection for the participants, but the data was also confined to the willingness and ability of the participants to reflect and articulate their perspectives of intercultural experiences. The participants may have chosen to not share about certain experiences or may have had imperfect recall on the intercultural experiences that they encountered which would have influenced the responses. Furthermore, there is no way to know how my own cultural identity as an American may have influenced participants' responses. In addition, each participant was only presenting one component of a communication process that in actuality involves multiple interactants and perspectives. Even with several limitations, the findings of this study may be useful to further understanding of the development of intercultural competence from the perspectives of the Chinese ITAs who participated. Again, as Finlay (2008) states, "Beyond the use of particular procedures to ensure quality, it is worth emphasising that the best phenomenology highlights the complexity, ambiguity and ambivalence of participants' experiences" (p. 7).



## **Suggestions for Future Research**

This study provides several implications for future research. First, additional research using larger groups of Chinese participants would be useful to know whether it would confirm, contradict, strengthen, or expand the findings of this study. Additional phenomenological studies on Chinese ITAs and the experience of developing intercultural competence might expand the current core essential structure or maintain this core essential structure but provide a deeper complexity of additional and expanded sub-themes. More interviews with other Chinese ITAs and analysis of the data could seek to identify additional best practices in developing intercultural competence. Currently, ITA training programs incorporate aspects of developing intercultural competence by providing opportunities for ITAs and undergraduate students to increase interactions with one another, gain a deeper understanding and sensitivity towards one another, and to engage in intercultural friendships. However, based on the findings of this study, participants often spoke more about their interactions within their respective departments than they did about interactions with undergraduate students. Future studies need to further investigate the impact, influence, and importance of the role that major professors, department advisors, and fellow graduate students, labmates, and other TAs play in the development of intercultural competence for Chinese ITAs. Additional insight is also needed on the varying experiences of ITAs studying and working in departments that have predominantly native English speakers versus those that are in departments which have predominantly multicultural persons and the outcomes that this produces on the development of intercultural competence.

Second, future research is needed on participants who have higher IDI scores, particularly those with a minimum score in the range of Acceptance and Adaptation, to identify how the core essential structure of developing intercultural competence might be experienced differently at higher stages of development in intercultural sensitivity. If participants have higher levels of intercultural sensitivity, how does this shape their experiences and development of intercultural competence and how is this demonstrated in their intercultural interactions? In addition, comparison studies of participants with Minimization, Acceptance, and Adaptation scores would be useful to identify whether the core essential structure of developing intercultural competence is the same or what might be different. These findings could be especially useful for ITA training programs to incorporate a more intentional focus on the development of intercultural competence but in a developmentally-appropriate way. Furthermore, case studies on those who are in the Adaptation range would be helpful in increasing understanding of how Chinese ITAs reach advanced stages of intercultural sensitivity and of how that impacts their interactions with others and even the potential effects upon their responsibilities as a TA.

Third, additional studies on the development of intercultural competence from the perspectives of ITAs of different ethnic and cultural groups would be useful. Is there a core essential structure of the experience of the development of intercultural competence that applies to ITAs from all cultures and ethnicities? How do ITAs of various cultural and ethnic backgrounds experience this differently and what similarities do they share? Furthermore, future research needs to explore the development of intercultural competence from the perspectives of ITAs in a variety of

disciplines, such as social science fields. Are there similarities or differences in the experiences of those in the social sciences versus those in the hard sciences? Since ITAs in the social science fields are engaged in studying aspects of the humanities, education, communication, and culture, it would be interesting to know whether this focused area of study also impacts a person's interest in or development of intercultural competence. Furthermore, are there experiences that are unique to specific disciplines? In other words, it is possible that the core essential structure of the development of intercultural competence is different for chemistry ITAs than for ITAs majoring in pharmacy. Again, the results of these studies would be useful in developing more comprehensive training for ITAs to increase their abilities in communicating effectively and appropriately with people of different cultures, which would strengthen their intercultural communication skills within their departments, with undergraduate students, and with the campus community at large.

Fourth, an important understudied area of intercultural communication is what actually takes place during intercultural interactions. Conceptual models typically focus on traits or characteristics of the interactant and place little emphasis on describing the nature of intercultural encounters and the behavior manifested during intercultural interactions (Van de Vijver & Leuong, 2009). There is a need for models to account for the relational aspects and complexities of interactions with multiple interactants (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). In addition, research and conceptual models are needed on what components of intercultural communication occur in ways that people are unaware or unconscious. Intercultural experts need to determine

whether competence is possessed by and located within an individual or whether competence is located within the interaction itself.

### **Conclusion**

The field of intercultural communication is important to the objectives of higher education. The dependence on ITAs at U.S. institutions of higher education is likely to continue and even increase in the future (Sarkodie-Mensah, 1991). As long as ITAs are employed at universities, the controversy surrounding communication problems between undergraduate students and ITAs will most likely continue. The result of this phenomenological study on the development of intercultural competence from the perspectives of Chinese ITAs provides a unique contribution to the fields of intercultural communication and ITA training and emphasizes the strengths and assets that ITAs bring to a campus community. Based upon the participants' lived experiences, the essential structure of the development of intercultural competence involves perceptions of cultural difference, intercultural experiences and interactions with others, and strategies to communicate with undergraduate students, to teach effectively, and to intentionally develop intercultural competence. It is my hope that this study will help to promote an increased emphasis on the development of intercultural sensitivity and intercultural competence in higher education in order to strengthen the educational experiences and interactions of international teaching assistants, undergraduate students, and members of the university community as a whole and to enable us all to see "the worlds of others in new and deeper ways" (Finlay, 2008, p. 7).

## Appendix A

### Letter to Department Mentors Describing and Proposing the Study

Dear [name],

I am a doctoral student in the Ph.D. in Education Joint Program with the University of Rhode Island and Rhode Island College. The reason I am contacting you is because I am doing a research study on the experience of Chinese international teaching assistants in developing intercultural competence, which is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from cultures that are different from one's own culture.

In order to facilitate this study, I need to identify 6-10 Chinese international teaching assistants with a high level of intercultural competence whom I could interview about their experiences. To select people to interview, I plan to use two participant screening tools: an instrument that assesses intercultural sensitivity and a mentor nomination procedure.

I am writing to you because your department and/or graduate program employs Chinese international teaching assistants. I am wondering if you would be willing to participate in the nomination process and if I could make a 10-minute appointment with you to complete a mentor nomination form and informed consent form to help me identify appropriate participants to invite for interviews.

If you feel you have not communicated with the Chinese international teaching assistants in your program/department well enough to complete the mentor nomination form, I would greatly appreciate it if you could recommend to me someone else in your department/program who might be able to do so.

This nomination process is the first step for me to identify a criterion sample of Chinese international teaching assistants with a high level of intercultural competence as potential participants for this phenomenological study. The second step will be to contact potential participants who receive mentor nominations and invite them to take the online Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI).

Potential participants will be informed that they were nominated by their department/program as having a good level of intercultural competence, but the names of those who complete the nomination forms will be kept strictly confidential. I will also emphasize to potential participants that the nomination process does not connote whatsoever any type of official or unofficial support of the study by any department or graduate program, is completely independent of the University's oral English proficiency policy for international teaching assistants, and is in no way connected with the person's current or future positions as a teaching assistant. The

informed consent form for potential participants will ask for the participant to agree to complete the IDI as well as to participate in an interview if contacted.

Thanks so much. I will plan to call you sometime next week after you have had a chance to read this over to see if I could schedule an appointment with you if you are willing to participate. If you would like, you can contact me at [phone] or at [email].

Thank you,

Mary Jo Fletcher LaRocco  
Doctoral candidate  
School of Education  
University of Rhode Island

## Appendix B

### Mentor Informed Consent Form

The University of Rhode Island  
URI/RIC PhD in Education Program  
School of Education, Chafee Building  
Kingston, RI 02881  
Title of Project: A Phenomenological Study of International Teaching Assistants  
and the Development of Intercultural Competence  
Date of IRB approval: [date]

#### CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH

You are being invited to take part in a research project described below. The researcher will explain the project to you in detail. You should feel free to ask questions. If you have more questions later, Mary Jo LaRocco, the person mainly responsible for this study, [phone], will discuss them with you.

*Description of the project:*

You have been asked to take part in a research study on the experience of Chinese international teaching assistants in developing intercultural competence, which is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from cultures that are different from one's own culture. The purpose of the study is to describe the development of intercultural competence from the lived experiences of Chinese international teaching assistants studying at a mid-size university in the northeast.

*What will be done:*

If you decide to take part in this study here is what will happen: You will be asked to complete the mentor nomination form, which will ask you to identify those Chinese international teaching assistants in your department/program whom you believe exemplify a middle or high level of intercultural competence. Completion of this form should take 10 minutes.

*Risks or discomfort:*

This study will not pose any risks or discomfort to you.

*Benefits of this study:*

Although there will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in this study, the researcher may learn more about how international teaching assistants develop ways to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural interactions. Your reflections may help us assist new international teaching assistants in the future.

*Confidentiality:*

Your part in this study is confidential. Only the researcher will have access to the completed mentor nomination forms. All email communication with mentors and all electronic records of data will be kept on the researcher's password-protected home computer to which only the researcher has access. Computer data will be backed up on an external hard drive. All paper records will be kept in locked storage in a private office on-campus to which only the researcher's major professor has access. All records will be retained by the researcher for seven years and then destroyed. Mentors will not know who, in the end, actually becomes a participant in the study, and the researcher will not tell the mentors the IDI scores of their graduate assistants nor whether their graduate assistants agree to participate or not. In any sort of report the researcher might publish or present, the researcher will not identify any mentors or participants by name nor include any information that would make it possible to identify the mentors or the participants of the study.

*Decision to quit at any time:*

The decision to take part in this study is up to you. You do not have to participate. If you decide to take part in the study, you may quit at any time. Whatever you decide will in no way adversely affect you. If you wish to quit, you simply inform Mary Jo LaRocco, [phone], of your decision.

*Rights and Complaints:*

If you are not satisfied with the way this study is performed, you may discuss your complaints with Mary Jo LaRocco, the principle investigator in this study, or with Ms. LaRocco's major professor, Dr. JoAnn Hammadou-Sullivan, [phone], anonymously, if you choose. In addition, if you have questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Vice President for Research, 70 Lower College Road, Suite 2, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, Rhode Island, telephone: (401) 874-4328.

You have read the Consent Form. Your questions have been answered. Your signature on this form means that you understand the information and you agree to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Typed/printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Typed/printed name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

***Please sign both consent forms, keeping one for yourself.***



## Appendix C

### Mentor Nomination Form: The Development of Intercultural Competence

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this activity is to identify the Chinese graduate assistants in your department or graduate program who have been teaching assistants for a minimum of one semester and who seem to have developed intercultural competence, which is a good ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from different cultures, according to the description provided below. This activity will require you to think carefully about the students listed on this form and your observations of how they interact in English with people from cultures that are different than their own. Please remember that the focus is on intercultural communication ability and is *not* on English language ability.

#### **Introduction**

We all come from cultural backgrounds that are unique to us. Our personal sense of culture may include many factors (e.g. race, ethnicity, gender, language, nationality, sexual orientation, socioeconomics, education, and religion). Some people are more comfortable interacting with others from different cultural backgrounds, and they are more effective in doing so. One way to characterize the different abilities people have with intercultural communication is to think of them along a continuum from a low level to a high level. Some people's communication skills may be generally ineffective/inappropriate in intercultural situations, others are somewhat effective/appropriate in intercultural situations, and still others are highly effective/appropriate in intercultural situations.

LOW: Generally \_\_\_\_\_ MID: Somewhat \_\_\_\_\_ HIGH: Highly \_\_\_\_\_  
Ineffective/inappropriate \_\_\_\_\_ Effective/appropriate \_\_\_\_\_ Effective/appropriate

#### **Description of Intercultural Competence**

An individual's ability to communicate with people who are culturally different from themselves may be referred to as intercultural competence. For the purpose of this study, intercultural competence is defined as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people of different cultures due to a person's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitude. *Individuals who have developed high levels of intercultural competence are sensitive to cultural differences, appreciate cultural differences, and are able to adapt how they communicate to accommodate these differences.* This is not the same as English language ability because a person may have a high level of English proficiency yet communicate in ways that are not effective or appropriate for a specific culture. Furthermore, a person may have a low level of English proficiency yet a high level of intercultural competence due to understanding various culturally effective and appropriate ways of communicating.

**Instructions**

Keeping the above description of intercultural competence in mind, please think about the Chinese graduate assistants in your department or graduate program (listed below) who have been or are teaching assistants. Do any of these individuals appear to have developed a high level of intercultural competence? Please put a checkmark next to all appropriate names to nominate these persons. If you think of a person(s) in your department or graduate program who has a high level of intercultural competence but is not listed below, please add the name(s) to the list.

____[name 1]	____[name 4]	____[name 7]
____[name 2]	____[name 5]	____[name 8]
____[name 3]	____[name 6]	____[name 9]

I understand that I may be contacted to provide clarification regarding my nominations. I also understand that while individuals who are nominated may be contacted, they will be told that they were nominated by someone in their respective department or graduate program but will *not* be told *who* nominated them. Nominated individuals will also be informed that the nomination process does not connote whatsoever any type of official or unofficial support of the study by any department or graduate program, is completely independent of the University's oral English proficiency policy for international teaching assistants, and is in no way connected with the person's current or future positions as a teaching assistant.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix D

### Letter to Nominees Describing and Proposing the Study

Dear [name],

I am a doctoral student in the Ph.D. in Education Joint Program with the University of Rhode Island and Rhode Island College. The reason I am contacting you is because I am doing a research study on the experience of Chinese international teaching assistants in developing intercultural competence, which is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from cultures that are different from one's own culture. The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of people who develop ways of communicating effectively and appropriately with people from different cultures.

You are invited to participate in this research study of developing intercultural competence. You were selected as a possible participant because you are or have been a teaching assistant and have been nominated by either your department or graduate program as being a person who has a good level of intercultural competence.

The nomination process for this research study does not connote whatsoever any type of official or unofficial support of the study by any department or graduate program, is completely independent of the University's oral English proficiency policy for international teaching assistants, and is in no way connected with your current or future positions as a teaching assistant.

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to complete the Intercultural Development Inventory, which can be done online and takes 20-30 minutes. The IDI will ask you about your perceptions toward your own culture and other cultures.

You may be contacted at a later date to participate in one or two follow-up interviews that may be audio-recorded. If you are contacted, and you agree to participate, you will be asked to talk with this researcher for up to 90 minutes on one or two occasions, focusing on your experiences in developing intercultural competence as a graduate student and as an international teaching assistant.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please reply to this email, [email], or call me at [phone]. I will then ask to make an appointment to meet with you for five minutes on campus to ask you to sign the informed consent form. Then, I will email you the username and password for the online Intercultural Development Inventory. Three participants who complete the IDI will be randomly selected to receive one of three \$10 gift cards for Dunkin Donuts.

Please let me know if you have any questions. Thanks so much.

Sincerely,  
Mary Jo Fletcher LaRocco  
Doctoral candidate  
School of Education  
University of Rhode Island

## Appendix E

### Nominee Informed Consent Form

The University of Rhode Island  
URI/RIC PhD in Education Program  
School of Education, Chafee Building  
Kingston, RI 02881  
Title of Project: A Phenomenological Study of International Teaching Assistants  
and the Development of Intercultural Competence  
Date of IRB approval: [date]

#### CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH

You are being invited to take part in a research project described below. The researcher will explain the project to you in detail. You should feel free to ask questions. If you have more questions later, Mary Jo LaRocco, the person mainly responsible for this study, [phone], will discuss them with you.

*Description of the project:*

You have been asked to take part in a research study on the experience of Chinese international teaching assistants in developing intercultural competence, which is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from cultures that are different from one's own culture. The purpose of the study is to describe the development of intercultural competence from the lived experiences of Chinese international teaching assistants studying at a mid-size university in the northeast.

*What will be done:*

If you decide to take part in this study here is what will happen: You will be asked to complete the online Intercultural Development Inventory, which will ask you about your perceptions toward your own culture and other cultures. Completion of the IDI should take 20-30 minutes. You may be contacted at a later date to participate in one or two follow-up interviews that may be audio-recorded. If you are contacted, and you agree to participate, you will be asked to talk with this researcher for up to 90 minutes on one or two occasions, focusing on your experiences in developing intercultural competence as a graduate student and as an international teaching assistant.

*Risks or discomfort:*

This study is unlikely to pose any risks or discomfort to you.

*Benefits of this study:*

While it is possible that reflecting on your perception of developing intercultural competence could be unpleasant, it is more likely that the experience will be one allowing you to reflect on and better understand your own attitudes and perceptions

of communicating with people from different cultures. Although there will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in this study, the researcher may learn more about how international teaching assistants develop ways to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural interactions. Your reflections may help us assist new international teaching assistants in the future.

*Confidentiality:*

Your part in this study is confidential. Only the researcher will have access to the scores and results of the online IDI. Departments/graduate programs will not know who, in the end, actually becomes a participant in the study, and the researcher will not tell the departments/graduate programs the IDI scores of their graduate assistants nor whether their graduate assistants agree to participate or not. Additionally, the researcher will not share any information with your department/graduate program that would make it possible to identify a participant. Audiotapes of interviews will be transcribed and coded so that participant names are not attached. All email communication with participants and all electronic records of data will be kept on the researcher's password-protected home computer to which only the researcher has access. Computer data will be backed up on an external hard drive. All audio-recordings and paper records will be kept in locked storage in a private office on-campus to which only the researcher's major professor has access. All records and recordings will be retained by the researcher for seven years and then destroyed. In any sort of report the researcher might publish or present, the researcher will not identify any participants by name nor include any information that would make it possible to identify the participants of the study.

*Decision to quit at any time:*

The decision to take part in this study is up to you. You do not have to participate. If you decide to take part in the study, you may quit at any time. Whatever you decide will in no way affect your status as a graduate student or your status as a teaching assistant. If you wish to quit, you simply inform Mary Jo LaRocco, [phone], of your decision.

*Rights and Complaints:*

If you are not satisfied with the way this study is performed, you may discuss your complaints with Mary Jo LaRocco, the principle investigator in this study, or with Ms. LaRocco's major professor, Dr. JoAnn Hammadou-Sullivan, [phone], anonymously, if you choose. In addition, you may contact the office of the Vice President for Research, 70 Lower College Road, Suite 2, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, Rhode Island, telephone: (401) 874-4328.

You have read the Consent Form. Your questions have been answered. Your signature on this form means that you understand the information and you agree to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Typed/printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Typed/printed name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I give permission for audio-recording of my interview(s).

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Typed/printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

***Please sign both consent forms, keeping one for yourself.***

## Appendix F

### Letter to Participants Inviting Participation in Interviews

Dear [name],

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this research study by completing the Intercultural Development Inventory. As you know, I am trying to understand the experiences of Chinese international teaching assistants in developing intercultural competence. I value the unique contribution that you can make to my study.

The research model I am using is a qualitative one through which I am seeking comprehensive depictions or descriptions of your experience in developing intercultural competence as a graduate student and as a teaching assistant. In this way, I hope to answer my question: What factors affect the development of intercultural competence from the perspectives of international teaching assistants?

As a next step in the study, I am interviewing individuals who have a high level of intercultural competence. You have been identified as one of those people because you were nominated by either your department or graduate program as being a person who has a high level of intercultural competence and because you had a high score on the IDI. Only people with both of these criteria have been selected.

To understand how you and some others have developed intercultural competence, I am going to conduct interviews. May I interview you? You will be asked to describe specific situations or events that you experienced in developing intercultural competence as a graduate student and an international teaching assistant. I am seeking vivid, accurate, and comprehensive portrayals of what these experiences were like for you: your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, as well as situations, events, places, and people connected with your experience.

I value your participation and thank you for the commitment of time, energy, and effort. The results of this study will be very valuable, and your insights are very important. When the study is complete, I will share the results with you if you would like to receive them.

Thank you so much for your consideration of this request. Please let me know if you agree to participate. If you do, I will contact you to schedule an interview within the next two to three weeks.

Sincerely,  
Mary Jo Fletcher LaRocco  
Doctoral candidate  
School of Education  
University of Rhode Island



## Appendix G

### General Interview Guide for First Interviews

Bracketing the topic and primary question (Moustakas, 1994, p. 181):

The purpose of this interview is to learn about your experiences in developing intercultural competence. Intercultural competence is defined as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from cultures that are different from your own culture. Through this study, I hope to answer my question: What factors affect the development of intercultural competence from the perspectives of international teaching assistants? For this interview, try to think about experiences you have had in communicating with people from different cultures. Think about the experience of developing intercultural competence as both a graduate student and as an international teaching assistant and the influences on that process.

- 1) How much experience have you had with intercultural communication or communicating with people who are culturally different from yourself? Could you describe these experiences?
- 2) Can you describe for me some experiences you have had communicating with people of different cultures that you considered successful?
- 3) Can you describe for me some experiences you have had communicating with people of different cultures that you felt were unsuccessful?
- 4) Can you identify any influences on your ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations? Could you describe these influences?
- 5) What do you think is important when communicating with people from different cultures?
- 6) What do you think is easy about communicating with people from different cultures?
- 7) What do you think is difficult or hard about communicating with people from different cultures?
- 8) Do you consider yourself to be an effective communicator with people from different cultures? Why do you have this perspective of yourself?
- 9) Why do you think you were nominated by your mentor as being a person who has a good ability to communicate with people from different cultures?
- 10) What are some things that helped you develop intercultural competence?

- 11) What are some things that made it difficult for you to develop intercultural competence?
- 12) What advantages or opportunities do you see related to developing intercultural competence?
- 13) What disadvantages or problems do you see related to developing intercultural competence?
- 14) When I say the term “cultural difference”, what does that mean to you?
- 15) What do you think is more important to pay attention to - cultural differences or similarities?
- 16) How much do you try to learn or understand about other cultures?
- 17) How has communicating with people from different cultures affected your life?
- 18) How did you become a graduate student in the United States?
- 19) How did you become a teaching assistant?
- 20) Can you describe your experiences with intercultural communication as a graduate student?
- 21) Can you describe your experiences with intercultural communication as a teaching assistant?
- 22) What or who has influenced you the most about communicating with people from different cultures? How and why did they influence you?
- 23) What do you think has been the greatest influence on your ability to communicate with people from different cultures?
- 24) What do you think has changed in the way you communicate with people from different cultures based on your experiences of being a graduate student and an international teaching assistant?
- 25) One of the things that is important in communicating effectively and appropriately with people from different cultures is what others think about how you communicate. How do you know what others think about your intercultural communication ability?
- 26) What advice would you give to future Chinese ITAs?

27) Are there any things about you or about your experiences in developing intercultural competence that I should have asked about?

28) In order to protect your privacy and to keep all of your responses confidential, would you please recommend a pseudonym that I could use to represent you in the data analysis for this study?

## Appendix H

### General Interview Guide for Second Interviews

Bracketing the topic and primary question (Moustakas, 1994, p. 181):

The purpose of this interview is to learn about your experiences in developing intercultural competence. Intercultural competence is defined as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from cultures that are different from your own culture. Through this study, I hope to answer my question: What factors affect the development of intercultural competence from the perspectives of international teaching assistants? For this interview, try to think about experiences you have had in communicating with people from different cultures. Think about the experience of developing intercultural competence as both a graduate student and as an international teaching assistant and the influences on that process.

- 1) How would you describe typical ways (patterns, behaviors, verbal & nonverbal elements, etc.) people communicate in Chinese? What is valued?
- 2) For someone learning Chinese or living/working in China, what things would be important for that person to know about communication and culture in China?
- 3) How did you come to believe these things are important?
- 4) How would you describe typical ways people communicate in American English? What is valued?
- 5) For someone learning English and living/working in America, what things would be important for that person to know about communication and culture in America?
- 6) How did you come to believe these things are important? Can you give examples from your experience?
- 7) What is similar about communication behaviors in Chinese and American English? What is different? Can you share any examples based on your life experience?
- 8) How would you describe what it is like to be a student in China? What things are valued in Chinese education?
- 9) How would you describe education and learning in America? What things are valued?

- 10) What similarities have you experienced between the education system and ways of learning in China and America?
- 11) What differences have you experienced between the education system and ways of learning in China and America?
- 12) Often, when a person learns a language, they also learn culture – can you describe your experience with this?
- 13) Is there anything more you would like to share or any final thoughts?

## Appendix I

### Thank You Letter to Participants Requesting Participant Validation of Results

Dear [name],

Thank you again for your willingness to participate in my study on the experience of developing intercultural competence. I greatly appreciate your willingness to meet with me for an extended interview and to share your thoughts about your experiences, which were extremely informative and useful.

Based upon the transcripts of the interviews, I have attached a textural-structural description of both what and how you experienced developing intercultural competence. Would you please review this description and verify if this accurately reflects your experience? Please feel free to respond with any necessary corrections or additions. If you are willing to do this, it will help to guarantee that I am accurately understanding and summarizing what you have shared with me. Your comments will be extremely helpful.

I have greatly valued your participation in this research study and your willingness to share about your experience. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me. Again, thank you so very much for your time and effort that made this research study possible.

With warm regards,

Mary Jo Fletcher LaRocco  
Doctoral candidate  
School of Education  
University of Rhode Island

## Appendix J

### Example of Individual Textural Description, Structural Description, and Textural-Structural Description

#### **Textural Description for Miles**

##### **Theme 1: Interactions in the department**

1) TAs deal with cultural difference when communicating with advisor, faculty, and students - very positive experience, faculty are supportive - many faculty from other countries – students are Chinese, Indian, European and Americans – we have a rule in our lab we cannot speak in Chinese because other people may feel isolated – in Pharmacy, all the foreign students work very well with each other because we just want to get the job done fast so distribute the work - we're all international students, we're kind of like equal to each other, just try our best to understand each other - made friends with Egyptian American student because he was a new grad student in our lab and I have the responsibility to teach him everything in the lab

*Example (Miles): "There's lot of like faculties come from different country in the world and they know our way, we're international TA's - we may have trouble at first. We may not get comfortable to teach or to interact with students but most of them, they are encouraging me to be a better TA... to interact with students... to try my best so I think generally I have a very positive experience in terms of like face to the culture difference."*

2) International faculty know international TAs have trouble at first, not comfortable to teach or interact with students, encourage me to be a better TA - department has TA meeting beginning of every semester to distribute duties, encourage you to communicate well with students, but not too much details or suggestions, doesn't focus on teaching skills – during the semester some professors will give you advice for TA problems – having session throughout the semester would be better

3) If need help, talk to some other high level graduate students, some other TAs – professors want the lab to keep going well and everything finish their lab work, the rest of how you communicate with students might be important to you but honestly they don't care about too much

##### **Theme 2: Communicating with undergraduate students**

1) American students are generous, nice, willing to talk, but sometimes very narrow when they met situations they are not used to, not familiar – some are eager to learn, some appear they don't care - can't easily build a connection with students if you are always trying to stay in your own way – don't have to change your style into American – how can you be more approachable

*Example (Miles): "I think the problem here is not who adapt to who. I think - you don't have to change your style into American. American students don't have to change their way to your style. The point here is how can you be more approachable."*

- 2) Remember students name is very important - if you remember students names they will remember my name, people will get to know you - if you can speak their name, they'll definitely give attention to you
- 3) It's very important for me to interact with students and make friends of them – from the very beginning of the lab, I try to help students with very small details, simplest thing – no question is stupid, every question is great - students get nervous, need help, make mistakes, that's why TAs are there

### **Sub-theme 2a: Teaching strategies**

- 1) I start with the simplest idea and teach them to do the simple formulation – it's a graduating process, cannot expect them to do everything correctly – sometimes I saw some of my Chinese TAs still trying to use the way we learned in China to teach students here - I think when you come to a country like America that's totally different you should try to merge into it, at least have an open mind, try something new, I think that's something related to your teaching skills

*Example (Miles): “Just start with the simplest idea - teach them to do the simplest formulation and it's a graduating process. You cannot expect them to come to the lab and do everything correctly.”*

- 2) Professor told me to treat lab students as high school students, they are pharmacy students, smart, have good grades but not too much experience – professor asked TAs to take the test before giving it to students because if you don't understand the test itself very well how can you grade the students' work or give appropriate credit

### **Theme 3: Intercultural experiences**

- 1) I know a lot of people here - learned tips from many friends, the way to interact with all people around you – learned a lot from graduate student friend, born in Egypt but raised in America, explains everything to me so you know something is different
- 2) Chinese and Indian TAs grading exams differently, that was a trouble, everybody used different ways to grade the paper - if Chinese students come to a problem they do nothing until they know the correct way to do it, but the Indian students like to trust their own judgment
- 3) Food can be something that makes you distant or close with other Americans - many Chinese here have Chinese stomach, don't get used to American food, always prefer Chinese dish - Americans at potluck party ask me if I like Burger King – said no I don't like it, I love it – that certainly closed our distance – they feel like you are more similar to them

*Example (Miles): “Food can be something you can distant or close you and other Americans. This way - I was in a potluck party with Chinese, Americans - they're all together - bring some food and one of those American students asked me... do you like fast food, do you like pizza, do you like a burger. Many Chinese students - they would answer no - I prefer Chinese dishes anytime. They asked me - I was like - do I like Burger King - I was like no I don't like it - I love it. So that certainly like closed our distance - so they feel like - oh really, me too. So they feel like - you are more similar to them.”*



4) I improved my English after I came to the U.S. – studied English hard in China but didn't have really too much chance to talk to native speaker, what people are saying here are different than we learned in China - even though Chinese students speak English but even the way they speak is more like Chinese, not American

#### **Theme 4: Perceptions of American culture and communication**

1) Here people like to exaggerate things, shows they are confident like always say had an awesome weekend, great – it is more appreciable to be brave than to be smart, that's how I think - people here value independence much more than what we have in China - American dream is valued by both Americans and Chinese, can achieve whatever they want by hard working

2) Here people are friendly, nice, direct, tell you what I want, you did a good job or bad – Americans don't pay too much attention to details, don't make further assumptions based on those small details like Chinese - it's very important to be honest, just telling the truth no matter it is good or bad, pleased or uncomfortable – it's simpler in America, if I don't say that, that means I don't think in that way – call somebody's name to close the distance between you and the student

*Example (Miles): “Just telling the truth no matter it is good or bad. It is pleased or uncomfortable. You have to face it. You have to say the truth - speak out the truth. That's I think what is I am learning in America.”*

#### **Theme 5: Perceptions of Chinese culture and communication**

1) Chinese people speak always indirect manner, saving other people's face – make judgments by small details in behavior even you don't say that - when Chinese people have a situation that you have problems with others you cannot say that in front of their face, use some gentle words - Chinese speak English like they are Chinese by not saying something directly, don't want to share their success, don't tell people if they fail - if Chinese exaggerate too much people will envy you, it's not very good to exaggerate things even good things

*Example (Miles): “Chinese people they're always - when they speak - it's always indirect manner. So it's kind of like we quite philosophy way to speak. I think it's just like sometimes it's for saving other people's face. It's also typical Chinese term.”*

2) Learned what was important in Chinese culture as a child, parents' behavior, treat their parents with respect, not argue with them - parents communicate directly in the home, can order you in a direct way but you cannot do this to other people somewhere else

3) In Chinese culture be polite, respect other people, show respect and politeness in a lot of ways – table manners, seating around the table, a lot of tricky stuff - things are changing in China, faster lifestyle, people don't have too much energy time for those tricky manners - we don't usually mention the people's name who we are talking to, call a name when discussing something serious

## **Theme 6: Perceptions of differences between the educational cultures**

- 1) Chinese culture is quite different from American culture in teaching styles - American education doesn't pay too much attention to students' technique, value more creativity of the student, have more freedom to learn whatever you are interested in even if it's not a popular major, people are encouraged to work as a team as a study group, they can help each other
- 2) In China it's a different system, students have to be smart, have to work hard and harder, too many students so professors want you to learn facts by heart, just memorize everything, are not learning the pattern of thinking, learning the pattern to answer questions to take exams, students know theory well but don't know how to do that by their own hand - people study something that will be considered easy finding a job, make money – competition is super fierce
- 3) Chinese kids train the first day in class how to sit, how to ask questions, how to raise your hand, how you answer questions from teachers, show respect to professor, we are taught in kind of like manners - American people don't care too much about those manners, situation here in the classroom would be chaos in China – if Chinese professor jumped off plane and entered university classroom to lecture American students will be shocked at how leisure American students could be, here people are free, sit in any position, if you have question don't even have to hands up just say it  
*Example (Miles): "I mean if the Chinese professor, he just jump off the plane and enter into the university classroom and give a lecture to the American student, I think he will be shocked like how leisure the student could be. They can sit in any position in any seat. They can do not anything they want but people here, I feel like the professor, they don't pay too much attention to the classroom manners."*
- 4) Both Chinese and American education value integrity, emphasize honesty, emphasize application of knowledge but American students have more opportunity to apply that than Chinese students – if American students fail a course, they would seek help, Chinese wouldn't want to tell people

## **Theme 7: Strategies to develop intercultural competence**

### **Sub-theme 7a: Be open-minded**

- 1) Most important thing for TA is to be open-minded, more friendly – sometimes people have negative feeling when they come up to something different from what they are used to doing - it may not be wrong, just different from way you did it in the past, take it easy, don't get stressed out - when communicating with Americans, don't be a racist, it does sound harsh but it is true, at least you have to treat people fairly, evenly

*Example (Miles): "Keep your mind open. Everything could be reasonable. It is not wrong if it is not your way. So I would say take it easy... don't get a stressed out."*

### **Sub-theme 7b: Do things the American way**

- 1) It will be easier for new TAs to do whatever they can in the American way, it makes you more approachable, students may feel like easy to connect with you – the problem is to know how to do that, to know their way - had to learn how you could

know which way is the appropriate, the better way — to learn American ways, pay attention to details, how they do that and have a friend, but not sure new TA has a friend can explain everything to him or her

2) International TAs don't need to be American or Americanized but have to at least try to know how American students think and what is they really want from you - some student from Turkey said you are the most Americanized of the Chinese people that I ever see – all my Chinese friends they said I'm like getting Americanized - speaking the truth, valuing brave over smart, being nice, don't be racist – those things help you to be Americanized

*Example (Miles): “So that's why I think at least graduate student - international teaching assistant - they don't need to be American. They don't have to be Americanized but they have at least to try to know how American students think and what is really they want from you.”*

### **Sub-theme 7c: Interact with others**

1) To make friends you have to be friendly, the way you treat people is how they will respect you, treat you – be nice, helpful, easy to talk, easy to communicate so people would be willing to talk to you so you don't have any problems - remember students' names, it's very simple but it's quite important, knowing people's names shortens the distance between you and your students

*Example (Miles): “You have to be friendly. That's obvious. You have to be nice, friendly to everybody else cause the way you treat people - treat other people is exactly how they will respect you. That's the way they will treat you. So first off I would say you have to be nice... you have to be helpful... easy to talk... easy to communicate. So in that way people would be willing to talk to you so you don't have any problems.”*

2) Some Chinese students still struggle with communication with other people with Americans cause they're still Chinese, feel like they are still behavior like Chinese - my behavior here is not so typical Chinese because maybe I'm more active for getting involved into other Americans, willing to try something new or different - not sure what they mean that I'm Americanized – maybe I have more American friends, usually hang out with American students

### **Sub-theme 7d: Learn language and culture**

1) It's impossible to just study the language separately and not steep yourself in the culture, exposing yourself to American culture is very important – culture and language are twins, culture is the vector for the language, something that carries that – culture is the boat, can't only study language without culture, kind of like weird

*Example (Miles): “I mean can they really be separate - tear apart? I think they are twins. Ya it's like or it's - the culture is the vector for the language... something that carries that. Culture is the boat. So you cannot really give an example that somebody can only study language without culture... maybe that kind of like weird.”*

2) You have to work on both side of similarities and differences, easier to seek similarities, if something similar to share easier to work with him or her – after you

learn about differences, in that point I think about which way is correct or more appropriate

3) Learn by observing - watch a lot of American TV shows in China to get used to American culture, I think I have the open mind to everything American – liked American culture before I came here, like basketball, watched NBA to know about players, teams and understand Americans

*Example (Miles): “Before I came here there’s definitely something that’s affected me. So before I came here, I was kind of like, I like American culture. I mean before I came here my favorite sport is basketball. And definitely the NBA is the highest level of basketball in the world. So I was trying to watch as much of the game I can and know as much as in the information about the players, about the coach, about the team, so it helps me to understand better about Americans. And you know, there’s an NBA culture - it’s unique...So that’s given me a time to get used to the American culture and I watch a lot of TV shows in China - American TV shows in China. So for me, when I come here, I think I have the open mind to everything American.”*

### **Theme 8: Struggles communicating with undergraduate students**

1) At first it was hard, I want to help the students but when they get confused they don’t want to ask you questions, you feel bad – sometimes English is not good and you don’t have much teaching experience – new TAs don’t know what’s going to happen in the lab, what kinds of questions people may ask, what is the personality of students - it’s a learning process for me, trying to learn everything every week, finally think I’m getting better to interact with students, to explain something

*Example (Miles): “So it’s a learning process - for me - for the student so I was trying to learn everything, every week, every section of the lab. So finally I think I’m getting better to interact with students cause sometimes we explain something - maybe there’s some - you get the student confused. And that moment is the I think the most awkward feeling cause you are trying to help them but you don’t want to confuse them. They may like - I don’t understand this TA... I don’t even know what he’s talking about.”*

2) First problem for Chinese student is the language - most awkward feeling is when you are trying to help students, trying to explain, but don’t want to confuse them – they may be like I don’t understand this TA, don’t know what he’s talking about - if students don’t understand you then they ask for help from classmates or professor, they just stay away from you – it’s easier for TAs to adapt, harder for American students to get used to the TAs’ style – you teach American student for just one semester, people cannot change in such a short time

3) Students who don’t care may get less information which they supposed to know equally as other student, feels bad - don’t want to talk to much to him cause you know the situation can get awkward - feel badly, it’s not equal here, feel in America everybody want to be treated equal so it’s hard situation, not sure how to handle students who don’t care – you can tell a student doesn’t care because he interrupts you, wants to jump into the conclusion, doesn’t want to listen to the details of the

lecture or introduction or directions – I’m not blaming American students for being narrow, most are not, not trying to be mean, they just want to protect themselves

### **Structural Description for Miles**

Structural theme #1: Perceptions of cultural difference (attitude, knowledge)

Textural theme: Perceptions of Chinese culture and communication

Textural theme: Perceptions of American culture and communication

Textural theme: Perceptions of differences between the educational cultures

Structural theme #2: Interactions with others (knowledge, attitude, skills, relationship building, context)

Textural theme: Interactions in the department

Textural theme: Intercultural experiences

Textural theme: Struggles communicating with undergraduate students

Structural theme #3: Communication strategies (skills, knowledge, relationship building)

Textural theme: Communicating with undergraduate students

Sub-theme: Teaching strategies

Textural theme: Strategies to develop intercultural competence

Sub-theme: Learn language and culture

Sub-theme: Interact with others

Sub-theme: Do things the American way

Sub-theme: Be open-minded

### **Textural-Structural Description for Miles**

Note: In phenomenological studies, a textural-structural description integrates both *what* (texture) and *how* (structure) participants experienced the phenomenon, namely the development of intercultural competence.

#### **The Development of Intercultural Competence from the Perspective of Miles:**

Miles experienced the development of intercultural competence by perceiving cultural differences, by interacting with others, and by using communication strategies. Miles’ perception of cultural difference has shaped his attitude toward and understanding of his own culture, American culture, and educational differences between these cultures. For example, Miles explains that Chinese people always speak in an “indirect manner, saving other people’s face” and value being polite and showing respect. Miles describes Americans as “friendly,” “nice,” and “direct” though he feels they “like to exaggerate things” to show they are confident, such as saying they had an “awesome weekend” when it was just “good.” Miles notes several differences between the educational cultures of China and America. Specifically, he perceives that Chinese students have to be “smart,” “work hard,” “memorize everything,” and show respect to the professor with classroom

manners. In contrast, he feels American education values “creativity” more than “technique,” working as a team in a study group, and freedom to learn whatever students are interested in. Americans do not care too much about classroom manners and the “situation here in the classroom would be chaos in China.”

Interactions with others have significantly influenced Miles’ development of intercultural competence. In particular, he feels the experience in his multicultural department has been “very positive” although it would be helpful to have some sessions for TA training throughout the semester. Miles explains that he has learned a lot of tips from many friends here about ways to interact with people and notes that food can be something that “makes you distant or close” with Americans because if you like their food then they feel you are more similar to them. Miles shares that at first it was hard because he wanted to help undergraduate students in the lab, but sometimes they get confused. It is an “awkward feeling” when you are trying to explain something but students don’t understand you. If students don’t understand you, then they just stay away from you and you feel bad. Miles explains that communicating with students is a “learning process” and that he is “finally getting better.”

Miles also uses specific communication strategies. To communicate more effectively with undergraduate students, he explains that you can’t easily build a connection with students if you are always trying “to stay in your own way.” You need to be “more approachable,” interact with students, help them with the simplest detail or question, and “remember students’ names.” Miles says to develop “teaching skills” it is important to merge into the culture and “try something new.” To develop intercultural competence, Miles emphasizes that language and culture are “twins” and it is “impossible to just study the language” and “not steep yourself in the culture.” Though it is easier to “seek similarities,” you have to learn about both similarities and differences. Miles says to make friends you have to get involved with other Americans and be willing to try something new, be friendly, treat people with respect, be nice, helpful, and know people’s names. In addition, Miles feels TAs are more “approachable” if they do whatever they can in the “the American way” by paying attention to details and having friends who explain things to you. TAs don’t need to be “Americanized,” but they need to at least try to know how American students think. Based on his experience, Miles says the most important thing for developing intercultural competence is to be “open-minded,” “take it easy,” and “don’t get stressed.”

## Appendix K

### Composite Structural Description: Integration of Structural and Textural Themes

#### Structural theme 1: Perceptions of cultural difference

Textural theme 1a: Perceptions of Chinese culture and communication

Textural theme 1b: Perceptions of American culture and communication

Textural theme 1c: Perceptions of differences between educational cultures

#### Structural theme 2: Intercultural experiences and interactions with others

Textural theme 2a: Intercultural experiences and intercultural friendships

Textural theme 2b: Interactions with undergraduate students

Textural theme 2c: Interactions with professors and fellow graduate students

#### Structural theme 3: Communication strategies

Textural theme 3a: Strategies to communicate with undergraduate students

Textural theme 3b: Teaching strategies

Textural theme 3c: Strategies to develop intercultural competence

Sub-theme: Learn language and culture

Sub-theme: Communicate with others

Sub-theme: Focus on cultural similarities

Sub-theme: Learn and respect cultural differences

Sub-theme: Learn through experience and time

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