

# The Effects of High and Low Context Perception on Second Language Acquirers

-- Chinese students with bilingual backgrounds have relatively different receptivity to specific behavioural content under the influence of different linguistic contexts (Chinese and English).

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**Abstract:** There is a difference between high-context and low-context cultures, which will bring difficulties to cross-cultural communication, and the study of the difference between high-context and low-context cultures is bound to have important guiding significance for cross-cultural communication and foreign language learning. With the acceleration of globalisation, people have come into contact with the cultures of countries with different contexts and have been subjected to culture shock to a certain extent. In this paper, we start from the comparison between high-context and low-context cultures to explore the cultural conflicts brought about by different contexts and the acceptance of specific behavioural contents under the influence of different linguistic environments (Chinese and English). By analysing the deep philosophical, ethical, and linguistic backgrounds that give rise to conflicts, ways and principles of conducting successful intercultural communication are drawn out.

**Keywords:** High Context; Low Context; Culture Clash.

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## 1. Introduction

Differences between high-context and low-context cultures hinder cross-cultural communication, so it is becoming increasingly important for people to understand and be familiar with the cultures of countries in different contexts, and to respect and learn from each other's cultures[1]. This paper attempts to illustrate the differences between Chinese high-context cultures and English low-context cultures and their effects on second language learners by comparing the two. At the same time, this study asked the same question in Chinese and English, in order to find out whether Chinese students with bilingual backgrounds have different acceptance of the same specific behavioural content in the English context or the Chinese context, and then suggest corresponding cross-cultural communication methods.

## 2. Literature Review

"High-context culture" and "low-context culture" are a pair of important concepts in cross-cultural communication, which was proposed by the American anthropologist Hall in his book *Crossing Cultures* in 1976[1]. According to Hall, people in high-context cultures are more sensitive to the details of the environment, and the information exists more in the connotations of the cultural environment and seldom in the clear words, that is to say, a large amount of information is embedded in the implicit environment, while in low-context cultures the information of the discourse can be clearly expressed through the language, and it does not need to be inferred through the environment, that is to say, most of the information generated in the communication process is carried by the explicit code[2,3].

In high-context cultures, people's communication is often more indirect and subtle, and the transmission of information can be accomplished through body movements, facial expressions, and body distances (e.g., stepping back,

approaching), without much verbal communication. However, in low-context cultures people's expressions are often more direct, clear and frank[2].

Hall also pointed out that every culture combines some features of both high- and low-context cultures, but most cultures still have distinct tendencies. (as shown below: some of the world's cultures arranged from high-context to low-context)

High-context culture → Japan → China → Korea → African Americans → Indians → Arabs → Greeks → Latins → Italians → British → French → Americans → Scandinavians → Germans → German-Swiss → Low-context culture[2].

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Research Method

In order to investigate the effect of high and low context perception on second language learners, specifically, whether Chinese students with bilingual backgrounds have different levels of acceptance of specific behavioural content under the influence of different linguistic environments (Chinese and English). This study used a survey method in the form of a questionnaire, which was set for 52 Chinese students with bilingual backgrounds, such as Chinese students who have studied abroad, Chinese students who have attended international schools, Chinese students majoring in English, and other Chinese students with bilingual backgrounds. Meanwhile, these other Chinese students with bilingual backgrounds were restricted to Chinese students who had learnt English.

The questionnaire was set with 24 multiple-choice questions. The questionnaire was divided into two versions, one Chinese version of the questionnaire and one English version of the questionnaire. And the order of the questions and options were switched between the Chinese and English

versions of the questionnaire, as well as the same group of respondents for both versions of the questionnaire, to ensure the accuracy of the experiment.

### 3.2. Data Analysis

Overall, the proportion of option choices for each multiple-choice question was different in both the English and Chinese versions of the questionnaire.

**Table 1.** Question 3 of the English version of the questionnaire.

Strangers express their love to you and say "I love you", do you think this way is()		
Options	Subtotal	Proportion
Euphemism	9	17.31%
Direct, feel offended	22	42.31%
Normal, acceptable	21	40.38%

**Table 2.** Question 4 of the Chinese version of the questionnaire.

(cn)Strangers express their love to you and say "I love you", do you think this way is()		
Options	Subtotal	Proportion
Euphemism	4	7.69%
Direct, feel offended	25	48.08%
Normal, acceptable	23	44.23%

In question three of the English version of the questionnaire, the percentage of "euphemism" is 17.31 per cent, while in question four of the Chinese version, the percentage of "euphemism" is 7.69 per cent. However, in both the English and Chinese versions of the questionnaire, the percentage of the option "direct, feel offended" is more than the percentage of the option "normal, acceptable". Chinese students with bilingual background have similar acceptance of this question in different contexts.

**Table 3.** Question 4 of the English version of the questionnaire.

When they greet you, do you accept the way the other person (a stranger) kisses you on the face?		
Options	Subtotal	Proportion
Yes	16	30.77%
No	36	69.23%

**Table 4.** Question 3 of the Chinese version of the questionnaire.

(cn)When they greet you, do you accept the way the other person (a stranger) kisses you on the face?		
Options	Subtotal	Proportion
No	37	71.15%
Yes	15	28.85%

In the fourth question of the English version of the questionnaire, 16 people chose "Yes" and 36 people chose "No". In the third question of the Chinese version of the questionnaire, 15 people chose "Yes" and 37 people chose "No". There are slight differences in the data, but the overall direction is the same.

**Table 5.** Question 5 of the English version of the questionnaire.

In class, you understand all the questions the teacher says, and then the teacher says, "If anyone thinks they know all these, they don't need to write this assignment." Your response is ()		
Options	Subtotal	Proportion
Do the assignment	29	55.77%
Don't write this assignment	23	44.23%

**Table 6.** Question 11 of the Chinese version of the questionnaire.

(cn)In class, you understand all the questions the teacher says, and then the teacher says, "If anyone thinks they know all these, they don't need to write this assignment." Your response is ()		
Options	Subtotal	Proportion
Don't write this assignment	28	53.85%
Do the assignment	24	46.15%

In question five of the English version of the questionnaire, 29 people chose "Do the assignment" and 23 people chose "Don't write this assignment". In question 11 of the Chinese version of the questionnaire, 24 people chose "Write this assignment" and 28 people chose "Don't write this assignment". In the English version of the questionnaire, more people chose "Do the assignment" than "Don't write this assignment". In the Chinese version of the questionnaire, fewer people chose "Do the assignment" than "Don't write this assignment". Chinese students with bilingual backgrounds have very different receptivity to this question in different contexts.

**Table 7.** Question 6 of the English version of the questionnaire.

Do you take relationships between men and women very seriously?()		
Options	Subtotal	Proportion
No	20	38.46%
Yes	32	61.54%

**Table 8.** Question 5 of the Chinese version of the questionnaire.

(cn)Do you take relationships between men and women very seriously?()		
Options	Subtotal	Proportion
Yes	36	69.23%
No	16	30.77%

There is also a slight difference between the data in Question 6 of the English version of the questionnaire and Question 5 of the Chinese version of the questionnaire, but the overall direction is the same. In different contexts, the majority of Chinese students with a bilingual background consider interactions between men and women to be a very serious matter.

**Table 9.** Question 7 of the English version of the questionnaire.

Can you call people older than you by their first name?()		
Options	Subtotal	Proportion
Yes	20	38.46%
No	32	61.54%

**Table 10.** Question 6 of the Chinese version of the questionnaire.

(cn)Can you call people older than you by their first name?()		
Options	Subtotal	Proportion
Yes	11	21.15%
No	41	78.85%

Question seven of the English version of the questionnaire is compared to question six of the Chinese version. There is a big difference in the data of this question, but the general direction is the same. In the Chinese version of the questionnaire, 41 people thought they could not call people by their first names, but in the English version of the questionnaire, there were nine fewer people and 32 people thought they could not call people by their first names.

**Table 11.** Question 8 of the English version of the questionnaire.

Are you okay with people you know whispering to your face? ()		
Options	Subtotal	Proportion
Yes	36	69.23%
No	16	30.77%

**Table 12.** Question 7 of the Chinese version of the questionnaire.

(cn)Are you okay with people you know whispering to your face? ()		
Options	Subtotal	Proportion
Yes	25	48.08%
No	27	51.92%

The results of the English version of Question 8 and the Chinese version of Question 7 were opposite, with Chinese students with bilingual backgrounds having very different receptivity to this question in different contexts.

**Table 13.** Question 9 of the English version of the questionnaire.

Do you avert your eyes when you see sanitary napkins?()		
Options	Subtotal	Proportion
No	27	51.92%
Yes	25	48.08%

**Table 14.** Question 8 of the Chinese version of the questionnaire.

(cn)Do you avert your eyes when you see sanitary napkins?()		
Options	Subtotal	Proportion
No	37	71.15%
Yes	15	28.85%

There is a big difference between question 9 of the English questionnaire and question 8 of the Chinese questionnaire, but the results are in the same direction, the number of people who chose "No" is larger than the number of people who chose "Yes".

**Table 15.** Question 10 of the English version of the questionnaire.

Do you prefer to safeguard collective interests or individual rights and freedoms?		
Options	Subtotal	Proportion
Tendency to safeguard the collective interest	15	28.85%
The tendency to uphold individual rights and freedoms	37	71.15%

**Table 16.** Question 9 of the Chinese version of the questionnaire.

(cn)Do you prefer to safeguard collective interests or individual rights and freedoms?		
Options	Subtotal	Proportion
Tendency to safeguard the collective interest	13	25%
The tendency to uphold individual rights and freedoms	39	75%

The data difference between Question 10 of the English version of the questionnaire and Question 9 of the Chinese version of the questionnaire is relatively small, and the general direction is the same.

### 3.3. Summary

In the analysis of these partially multiple-choice questions, it can be seen that in different contexts (Chinese and English), Chinese students with bilingual backgrounds have different levels of acceptance of certain behaviours and the same level of acceptance of certain behaviours. In general, across different contexts (Chinese and English), Chinese students with bilingual backgrounds have the same practices and are more or less equally receptive to whether or not they view male-female relationships as a very serious matter, the way of kissing on the face when they greet each other, and the way of strangers' frank expression of affection and whether or not they can call their elders by their first names, and whether or not they avoid looking at sanitary napkins and whether or not they tend to defend the interests of the collective or individual rights and freedoms, and the situation when they encounter strangers greeting them in the lift and the situation when they get hugs from their friends of the opposite sex, and the way of wearing sexy clothes and being complimented by passers-by, and borrowing money and the question of whether or not it's acceptable to have an exaggerated friend and whether or not they can accept parents' rules on the time of going home and the AA system for payment, and the way of giving presents, and the way of reacting to compliments, and their practice of trying to ask a stupid-sounding question.

In different contexts (Chinese and English), Chinese students with bilingual backgrounds had very different levels of acceptance when it came to the meaning of their teachers' words, how they reacted when someone said, "Come to my house for dinner," when familiar people whispered in front of them, and whether they focused on emotional experience or rational thinking.

In both Chinese and English contexts, for most of the cases Chinese students with bilingual backgrounds would do the same thing, and in some cases they would do something very different. This shows that different contexts have certain effects on Chinese students with bilingual backgrounds, and therefore, different contexts can also cause certain misunderstandings or conflicts when Chinese students with bilingual backgrounds face these situations.

### 3.4. Corresponding Intercultural Communication Methods

Recognising differences: understanding the difference between high-context and low-context cultures. High-context cultures rely more on non-verbal expressions and have more information hidden in social and cultural situations or within the communicator. Obvious discourse contains less

information than in low-context cultures. In high-context cultures, people are reserved and restrained in their linguistic expressions. Low-context cultures pay more attention to the meaning and connotation of the language symbols themselves, and the language in the communication process is mostly explicit code. Therefore, both parties in intercultural communication should recognise and understand the difference between high and low contexts.

**Listening carefully:** Both parties watch and listen carefully to each other, trying to surmise what the other is trying to say[4].

**Language restructuring:** attention is paid to putting the information received from the communicative object into the cultural context of the communicative object, restructuring the language from the cultural point of view of the communicative object, and understanding the real communicative meaning of the communicative object[4]. People in high-context cultures pay attention to harmonious relationships in interpersonal interactions, mutual understanding and empathy, and communicate in a subtle and euphemistic way. People in low-context cultures pay attention to personal expression, communicate in a direct and clear way, generally do not consider the feelings and face of the other party, and are self-centred[5]. Therefore, when we get along with people in different contexts, we should pay attention to the way of speaking and semantics, and look at things from others' point of view.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The basic task of intercultural communication is to make the receiver understand the basic semantics of the sender, and cultural differences are one of the major impediments to the smooth progress of intercultural communication. The concepts of high-context and low-context cultures further suggest that learning a foreign language is not simply about learning language skills, but more about acquiring the cultural

information carried by the language through language learning. Language learning and cultural knowledge learning complement each other and promote each other.

**Shortcomings:** This experiment may appear that Chinese students directly translate the English questions into Chinese questions to do the answers, which leads to some errors in the experimental results. This is because for languages of low-context cultures, the meaning of the original text must be accurately translated into the target language without over-interpretation, addition or alteration. As for high-context cultural languages, they should be translated according to the characteristics of the contexts on which they depend to ensure that target language readers can accurately understand the information and cultural connotations conveyed in the original text, and to achieve positive interaction between different contexts, so when Chinese students translate English topics into Chinese topics, they may add some scenarios to the translation leading to comprehension bias.

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