

# Open Centre for Languages and Cultures

## Distinguished Speaker Series, 13 March 2023



**Professor Zhu Hua,**

**Director of the Centre for Intercultural Communication, the Institute of Education, University College London**

***Open Culture Open Language: The Key Intercultural Communication Issues for Language Learning***

### **Edited Transcript**

**Dr Mirjam Hauck**

Our guest today is Zhu Hua, Professor of Language Learning and Intercultural Communication and director of the International Centre for intercultural studies at the Institute of Education, University College London. She's also a fellow of the UK Academy of Social Sciences and she's Chair of the British Association for Applied Linguistics, BAAL. Her scholarly work draws on her experience of intercultural living and working in China and the UK and focuses on multilingual and intercultural communication and language development. Her talk today is about key intercultural communication issues for language learning. Over to you!

**Prof. Zhu Hua**

Thank you very much.

I really want to take this opportunity to congratulate Dr KAN Qian and Dr Mirjam and many colleagues here for the successful series. I'm delighted and honoured to be the first one in this year's *Distinguished Speaker Series* and very much inspired by the name of your centre: Open Centre. When I planned for this talk, I have been thinking about the ideas of open culture, open language, and open communication and I love it so much I have kept it in the title and made it the first part of today's talk.

Today is really a good opportunity for me to have a pause and think about the two areas I have been working on: one is intercultural communication, the other is language learning and use. I have been thinking about what it means given so much has happened and developed between different fields. What is the field of intercultural communication about? and particularly along the direction the travel – I am using the metaphor and thinking in particular about the area of open culture, language and communication. And then I also want to use this opportunity to reflect three interrelated intercultural communication issues for language learning, and I have framed it as three issues. One is conceptual, the second one is current pressing issues, particularly given we spend so much time these days on online teaching, learning and the communication. So, what are the perks and perils of digital intercultural communication encounters for language learning? And the third is a very critical question for me, how it links up with the focus of a centre for social justice: how can we make use of what we know and learn from intercultural communication research to contribute to, to inform our social justice agendas in language learning. So, that's the plan for today.

I will start with some reflections on where we're going with intercultural communication research. On the slide, you can see a picture from HSBC bank, they used to have this everywhere at the airport. So, this is a picture about a different perspective. But with this particular picture, they're also very keen to emphasise that despite differences, we have so much in common.

Conventionally and broadly speaking, intercultural communication is commonly understood as interaction between people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds and they also include comparative studies and communication patterns across cultures. But more recently, my work, and also others', particularly in language and intercultural communication, we have been working towards a more contextualised approach, looking at intercultural communication as a process of navigating meaning, relevance of cultural identities and differences between ourselves and others, and what impact these interactions might have on group relationships, as well as individuals identities, attitudes, and behaviours. I have highlighted the need to think about *navigating* rather than *negotiating*. In the past I have been using negotiating, but recently I've been thinking about actually negotiating implies they are in a position to negotiate. There's a status quo issue. But in many cases, which I'm hoping to show you later, it is more about navigating rather than negotiating within the broad field of intercultural communication. It is very multi-, cross-, and interdisciplinary.

I would say there are four broad fields of studies that are actually both making a significant contribution to understanding of intercultural communication as a process - for example, inter-person and inter-group communication, that's very much seen in intercultural communication as a specific case of interpersonal and intercultural communication. The other is where people, as with many colleagues here, are very much coming from a language/linguistic background, in particular sociolinguistics, applied linguists, looking at the interconnection between language and intercultural communication.

So, in terms of direction of travel, there seem to be a more broadened open approach to what we mean by culture. So, on the screen is a screenshot from a Google Ingram which charts the frequencies of the key words. For example, I put in *crosscultural*, *transcultural*, *intercultural*, and *multicultural*. The charts tell us the frequencies of these key words in the printed sources between the 19th century up to 2019. And this is a rough measure of how frequent a word is used in books for example, or journal articles. So, as you can see, *multicultural* is still the highest frequency, but you see a decline in the use of *multicultural* and it is being replaced by *intercultural* and *transcultural*. There are there are lots of debates about what interculturality means, but here, roughly speaking, *intercultural* refers to interaction, co-constructions of meaning and identities. *Transculture* is a relatively new kid on the block, this is more about emphasising fluidity of cultural identification and communication practices. So, you can see the direction of travel seems to be towards a more open approach to the notion of *cultural*. People are mostly connecting the notion of culture with fluidity and moving over and across, in addition to thinking about culture as *inbetweenness*, between different cultural boundaries.

This next slide is actually something I have been working on for the translanguaging project with some colleagues here and others on the Zoom call today as well. In terms of languages, I think it's fair to say, we see *open language* as the trend and in particular the notion of translanguaging. This is a screenshot a Padlet. I use in my teaching, contributed by the MA students on the module I taught at the Institute of Education. I asked them to put in examples of what they think are examples of translanguaging. As you see translanguaging as a new way of understanding language and transcending artificial ideological boundaries, very much encourages, foregrounds communication as semiotic communication. So instead of looking at whether this is Chinese or English, we're looking at the meaning together across different languages. Just for fun, for example, here you see 'add oil'. Many people have probably heard this phrase and people who are familiar with Chinese languages, will probably laugh and stop because this is a pun in Chinese. 'Add oil' or 'add petrol' also means 'go on' or 'cheers'. This word has been included in the Oxford English Dictionary recently and become a recognised English word, I would say a translingual word, to indicate this is 'go on, go for it'. And

there are many other examples on the slide and I'm sure you have come across yourself examples where you can't really tell which languages it is coming from, but more about different modalities, meaning-making and sense-making through different semiotic signs.

So, in terms of the implications of trends, if we embrace the trends in translanguaging, what does it mean? The trends, in particular for intercultural communication, challenge the lingual bias in intercultural communication, I'd say, the last four decades for example, so, encourage people like us who have been working predominantly on language, to look at the full range of semiotic resources for intercultural encounters, in which gestures, gaze, body movement, touch, taste, smell, colour, materiality, all matter in the same way as the linguistic code. It also challenges us to think about the deficit and difference models, which are still relatively prevalent in intercultural communication research, and urges us to think about the agency of individuals in creating, deploying, and interpreting signs for communication. We are no longer just inter-coder communicators, we're no longer there to just decode or encode coding; we have input and then decide how we actually co-create meaning.

This leads to my next slide for reflection, particularly looking at communication. If we are thinking about new trends such as the agency of individuals, what does it mean for the old, traditional model of communication? When I started as an MA student looking at communication, learning communication, we were taught a model that looked at communication as encoding and decoding - basically, the two people you see on the slide - and there is no middle bit, no co-creating bit. Nowadays, with the greater emphasis on co-creation meaning, the co-creation model, there is a tendency to open up communication as a process, in which communication creates meaning, but also creates social realities through a variety of contexts and, for example, physical, psychological, and also social-cultural relations in human relations are also important. All these contextual factors create meaning. So, this is actually encouraged us to think about communication not just about decoding, encoding, but also about creating meaning relationship and form intercultural alliances and also developing self, the idea of *self-identity*.

In communication studies, there are also studies – in particular from our team of critical intercultural communication scholars - that are asking the question, 'is intercultural communication neutral?' They have argued that the notion of communication as an ideologically uncontaminated space allowing for the free play and exchange of ideas needs to be challenged. So, along these lines, the questions I would like to ask, the questions, we need to think about, are, 'what is lost in the process of the intercommunication? What is it lost, what is gained or transformed and what is assumed, imposed or challenged in the process of intercultural communication?' These are key super-contextual issues, particularly for intercultural communication studies, that we need to think about. How we solve, embrace these key intercultural communication issues for language learning.

So, moving on. As I mentioned earlier, the three key issues for language learning, building on what we know, from the research on intercultural communication: the conceptual issue, the current issue, and the critical issue. I will go through them one-by-one.

In terms of the conceptual issue, where is the culture in language learning/teaching? Or what is the goal of language learning, language learning or teaching? And this is a challenging question, partly because everyone has a view about what culture is, what culture should be, and we don't really have time to go around the core, but I'm sure everybody has a view about what culture is. I have put down some of the ideas, possibilities there as you can see, and it ranges from 'culture can be a bunch of facts to memorise' to 'values and practices' or 'lingua culture', which emphasises the close relationship between lingua and culture, or 'culture is everywhere', and 'culture as discourse' is about the membership of particular discourse practices where people work together to construct the meaning of our practices. So, that's the first challenge. Everybody has a view about what culture is and what culture should be.

A related challenge is that language and culture are diverse, multifarious, complex, continuous and semiotic resources, which you do not parse out into neat, formal, structuring entities. We used to think about language and culture as a couple of facts, but that's no longer true anymore if we look at the example on the slide.

So, a quick question, what do you think are in common among those phrases on the slide? This is a screenshot from Twitter: #VeryBritishProblems. For those who have responded, you've probably noticed all these different ways of speaking could all mean 'no' in English. They can mean 'yes' in many contexts, but they can also mean 'no' in many other contexts. So, what you have seen is that culture or languages, do not strictly map on to each other; the meaning, the cultural meaning, of a particular language use is very much contextualised and co-constructed through interaction.

The third challenge around language learning particular on the conceptual issue is: cultural in their typical form as the geographically and often nationally - I think this really important: we talk about Arabic culture, Chinese culture, English culture, as if one language, one long one culture. This is the one view for example, on the slide. You see this textbook, the first page, they're talking about China and pandas and the Golden Monkey, the Chinese language is totally different from your language. It's very much language as a different identity, a distinct identity, and perhaps in this particular case, is a foreign, a different identity. This is one view. The other more recent view is really looking at culture as postmodern subjectivities, historicities of living speakers and writers who occupy changing subject positions in a decentralised and globalised world. On the bottom of slide there is an example from our field work where teachers and students are talking about their identities. The phrases in the list are probably very common phrases when we are learning language in a textbook. Who we are: we are Chinese, you are British, he is Japanese. These are typical phrases, which we found very often used in textbooks, but it's not as simple as just the grammatical structure of personal pronouns plus nationality noun because it is also about identity-making. And here there are a couple of cases where the students are saying they're not just Chinese as per se, but they are British, they are British Chinese.

So, what does it mean and how do we go from here? What it means, if we look at cultural meaning, is that they no longer just map on to each other very conventionally as we perhaps used to. We need to look at the goals of language and cultural learning in the local contexts, and allow varieties, good approaches, different meaning, different ways of teaching and learning to take place in the classroom. The motivations and goals behind learning Chinese, for example, in a secondary school in North London are different from the students learning English in a middle school in rural areas of Sudan [?], for example. There have been a variety of models and theories, a framework for looking into the relationship between the purpose, the goals, of language and cultural learning, and many of us here might be familiar with Mike Byram's *intercultural communication competence* model and Claire Kramsch's model, looking at *third space*, and also later on, *symbolic competence*, and Tony Liddicoat's model, of *intercultural mediation*.

Recently, I have been working on, looking at, language learning as the process of translanguaging, and cultural translation, whereby learners adopt, appropriate, and transform symbolic values of sense and meaning-making practices that have evolved in a specific community to another community. And here, I see the value. Perhaps this model is very much developed with what people do with L1, or other language or languages the speakers, the learners already know, and the funds of knowledge, including the cultural knowledge and the contextual knowledge; what we do with these knowledges which speakers, learners already have, and it also very much informed the idea of looking at in learning. It is about the process of translating the cultural in-situ. What is lost, what is gained, or what is transformed through language learning? So that's some quick discussion on the first issue, the conceptual question.

So then, moving on to the second one, and in particular, this is where I know many colleagues here and our colleagues from the Open University have a lot of experience and and lots of lots to say. So

here I'm actually looking at language learning and intercultural learning in the study-abroad context. What are the perks and perils of intercultural encounters mediated through digital technology? Even before COVID, language learning, study abroad, going and visiting and spending some time in a different culture where the target language is spoken, was a very common practice. During COVID, lots of these intercultural encounters moved online. It also prompts people to ask the questions, to reflect and to consider the role of this virtual student exchange experience: how does it impact on the future direction of learning and pedagogy?

I want to go very quickly, because I think we know about study abroad before COVID - there have been lots of studies looking at the benefits and impact of study on language learning. The conclusion is really interesting: in a sense, yes, there is strong pedagogical preferences for real experience, but then there are also questions emerging about exposure alone - just living – that it is not adequate. There are challenges from real experience in what is real: adjustment, adaptation, and also fluency. Pragmatic skills versus accuracy. There's also a tension that hasn't really resolved and is still part of the ongoing debate about the benefits of study abroad. And there has been lots of emphasis on what the difference is between online and offline intercultural communication, and that's actually very interesting, in a sense. People have been reflecting and thinking, comparing online/offline, what is *normal*? What is *typical*? With COVID, lots of us have embraced online learning, and online learning is really part of our everyday work, as you know, just as we're talking on Zoom right now. So there is a real question in reflections on the debate about what we mean by *real, true, virtual or shallow*, and whether these dichotomies are really helpful or useful in understanding what's going on in digital intercultural encounters. For some people, what is real for online learning seems to be that you can have more control over your social interactions. Some students may feel online encounters are more real than their face-to-face classroom because their video partners were there, in the target, in the area where they were communicating. There has been some recent work, quite recent work, emphasising that technology is important, but whatever beneficial outcomes emerge, are not products of technology, *per se*, but rather of the people. It is you and me, learners and teachers, who are involved in communication that makes a difference. This really makes me reflect on a recent piece of work I have done together with my current team in the MEP (Monitoring Excellence Programme). Over the summer - last summer, when everything moved to the virtual intensive study as part of Year 7 and 8 students learning Mandarin. As a team we did an ethnographic study looking at what happened during that intensive, online learning, summer study, where secondary school students learning Mandarin had an opportunity to interact and to learn from the courses provided by our partners in China.

So here are a couple of examples. We have been thinking about the idea that if we are going to make learning successful, we have to show investment in each other. Here is a task where students are given a speaking task. This is perhaps a very typical speaking task, where a learner was asked to interview their partner in China. They paired up, went to a Zoom breakout room and had a conversation. The idea is they use Chinese to communicate with each other. The following conversation slide didn't happen in Chinese – well with a bit of Chinese vocabulary - but most

28:21

Of the conversation was conducted in English. However, what our colleagues who observed this conversation actually found is that despite the fact that both students were off-task, off the language the task we set them, their communication in English shows, they're really interested in each other, and some level of intercultural understanding. So, what they have seen there is real interaction, meaningful interaction, rather than following a script they have been given. There are some other examples in these intensive online learning experiences of moments of perspective-taking and making space for intercultural dialogue. There are plenty of activities on chat, either in Pinyin or using characters in the chat. When we asked them how they managed to include characters in the

chat, some students said they actually used Google Translate to translate the English words into Chinese characters, and then copied and pasted it into the WeChat, which was a relatively new phenomenon for us, because in face-to-face classroom teaching, we don't really have that kind of opportunity, they don't really have opportunity to play with these words. There were also opportunities for really meaningful reflections and thinking to come through. For example, in one language exercise, the teachers were encouraging them to try out the target phrase '买/mai... plus something'. This is a perhaps typical language exercise where you play with different nouns and also collocation with '买/mai [going to buy] ... something', but one student said, yes, they could buy things in souvenir shops, but they are ugly. So here is really meaningful space for intercultural conversation, dialogue, and perspective-taking.

So, what does this mean? What we have seen is, if we think about learning through this digital medium technology, we need to have a broader view of learning. If we believe in open culture, we need to focus on global issues and themes with an emphasis on problem-solving. I really like Robert O'Dowd's ideas about a *transnational model*, where students are grouped and instead of comparing what you do in a particular country, a particular culture, they are given a task with global themes and issues to problem-solve. Instead of focusing on one particular culture, they emphasise this trans-border modal. If open language is the direction of travel, we need to look at how technology affords us multimodal communication, opportunities to communicate through other means. Means we aren't able to incorporate, or simply don't have the space to, in face-to-face communication. Digital literacy, digital writing literacy that masters writing using this technology to facilitate their learning and give them agency in order to do to develop their written character-writing skills. Open communication technology can be used to facilitate and enable communication across borders. So that's just some thoughts about the current pressing issue, particularly engaging with what we're going to do with digital communication, digital means in language learning and teaching.

Moving on to the third part is the question of the 'critical'. How can ICC research contribute to the social justice agenda in language learning? For people who are based in the UK you probably remember, last December, there was a headline talking about a former lady in waiting to the late Queen Elizabeth II. She had to resign from her role as a royal aide after she was heard repeatedly asking the question to the boss of a charity at a social event at Buckingham Palace, repeatedly asking the question, 'where do you really come from?' And this slide shows a tweet from the boss of the charity. She says she has 'mixed feelings about yesterday's visit' and there is some of the conversation transcript in the tweet as well. This kind of 'where are you really from' conversation is probably not a coincidence. This is a kind of conversation we looked at a while ago and we have defined it as *nationality and ethnicity talk* (NET), referring to these discourses that invoke or orient towards ethnicity or nationality either explicitly or implicitly. So, questions like: 'where are your people coming from? When are you going back? What is like back home? Your English is so good! What is your real name?' These are examples of *nationality and ethnicity talk*. They might actually look friendly, but behind these questions, there are lots of assumptions. So here, through these studies and also the examples on the previous slide, what we can see is that language is a resource for negotiating power differences. They are very useful, but at the same time its very use is also subject to power difference. Intercultural encounters, very often involving these questions, probing questions, nationality ethnicity talk that people use to figure out the 'who' in each other's identities, but at the same time, they also reflect hidden, forgotten hierarchies in conversation. And these cultural differences are produced and reproduced through intercultural encounters. So, within ICC, the emphasis has been moving away from a cultural account of 'misunderstanding' to a 'politics of cultural differences'. Ingrid Piller (2011) comments: 'without studying inequality and asking the question 'what makes culture relevant to whom in which context for which purposes?', culture is 'nothing more than a convenient and lazy explanation'. In my own work, together with colleagues, we have looked at *acts of distinction at times of crisis*, looking at who talked, who actually talks about cultural, in what context, why culture, why people draw hard lines around culture. Similarly, when we

talk about how communication can be fluid, about translanguaging, why do people sometimes talk about Chinese language versus Japanese languages and so on. Why is Japanese culture brought in in contrast with Chinese culture as central. So, this is the politics of cultural differences and who makes it relevant.

So, some thoughts on the way forward. If we accept communication is not neutral, and there is a hidden power awareness in language learning, the questions with open use were taken for granted in the exercise of 'language as a task' – 'where are you from?' so when we ask those questions, we need to be aware of power dynamics. I have collaborated with Claire Kramsch over many years and I find her notion of symbolic competence really important for us to think about and to give it space in language learning. Symbolic competence for Claire Kramsch is not just about appropriating or, approximating for oneself somebody else's languages - for many in learning language is just about the needs to learn to speak like somebody else - but also about shaping the very context in which language is learned and used. Learners and others embody history and subjectivity. We don't just need intercultural competence and awareness, but also to go one step further, to look at context, learn the skills, and to become aware of power dynamics, and also learn the skills to shape the very context where language is learned and to become a *symbolic-competent* speaker.

So, to wrap up, we have talked about, three questions. For two, in terms of a main message, we need to learn instead of debating and thinking about where our culture is, we need to think about, situating goals and language or cultural learning in the local context, and also to reconceptualize what counts as learning success strategies, learning targets, and outcomes, in particular drawing out what we have learned from the digital intercultural encounters, and what we mean by learning, what should count as learning, and also to raise awareness of the hidden power dynamics and politics and cultural differences in language learning questions, such as, 'where are you from?', 'who are you?'. They are full of hidden power dynamics. We need to be aware of their potential impact on reifying cultural differences.

So, finally, this last slide. Seeing intercultural learning as the lived experience, requires a different approach to conceptualise what counts as success, strategies, learning targets and outcomes which we have often defined as measurable, rational decisions, because they are not. We need to look for a situated approach that pays attention to choices, negotiation and relationships and the shift to details and variation. So, I want to finish with this slide. Thank you.

#### **Dr Mirjam Hauck**

Thank you very much. We have to wrap up. This has been amazing. Thank you also to Steffi and to Lucy and to everyone who has helped pull this event off the ground. Dee as well. Zhu Hua, thank you. I hope we will be doing more good work together. Be well.

#### **END OF TRANSCRIPT**

#### **The next talk will be on May 12, 2023**

It will be given by Professor Roger T. Ames, Humanities Chair Professor at Peking University and Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of Hawai'i. His talk will relate to his latest book *Human Becomings*.

For more information, please contact:

[oclc@open.ac.uk](mailto:oclc@open.ac.uk)