Tolerance of Ambiguity in Culture Acquisition —Based on Differences in Cultural Perception*

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This paper probes into a psychological construct named Tolerance of Ambiguity (TOA) to find out how well Chinese college students psychologically tolerate cultural differences between China and Britain. Term papers written by 71 students expressing their opinions on BBC's behavior (rehearsing announcement of the queen's death while she is alive) were used as data to identify them either as tolerant learners of culture or intolerant learners of culture according to their psychological state concerning perception of death and attitude to cultural differences. Opinions gathered from the data show great differences between two cultures in terms of the concept of death and also great differences between two types of learners in terms of their degree of tolerance. This paper is a qualitative analysis of the data about the students' cultural opinions and psychological tolerance. The analysis of the data sheds light on the existence of TOA & ITOA (Intolerance of Ambiguity) in the process of culture acquisition and shows that a certain degree of TOA is needed for better adaptation to an unfamiliar culture in case the students go abroad for further study in the future. It is concluded that fostering higher degree of TOA should be taken into consideration not only by language teachers but also by teachers of culture courses because TOA is crucial for acculturation in this era of globalization. A few strategies are suggested at the end of the paper for teachers to raise intercultural awareness and boost tolerance of differences among students who take culture courses.

Keywords: tolerance of ambiguity, culture acquisition, cultural differences, perception of death

Introduction

Globalization has necessitated the learning and teaching of foreign cultures. Courses for students to get acquainted with cultures in different countries have been offered in Chinese universities during these years. These courses give lectures either on "British Society & Culture" or "American Society & Culture", or "Australian Society & Culture" etc., with the hope to prepare students for further study in English-speaking countries. Such courses aim to make students aware of cultural differences and be better adapted to future life in a certain overseas country. Having given lectures on British Society & Culture for a semester, the author of this paper intends to investigate how well Chinese students accept cultural differences after having learned about the target culture (British culture) and how much they are restrained by their native culture (Chinese

* **Acknowledgements:** This paper is supported by the following projects on "Tolerance of Ambiguity" in teaching and learning:

1. Project of Teaching Quality & Teaching Reform in Higher Education, Funded by Department of Education, Guangdong Province, China (#2013[113]);
 2. Breeding Program of Guangdong Education & Teaching Achievement Award, Funded by Department of Education, Guangdong Province, China (#2015[72]);
 3. Humanities and Social Sciences Project, Funded by China Ministry of Education (15YJA740017).
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culture). From the point of view of this paper, the degree they accept cultural differences shows their degree of Tolerance of Ambiguity (TOA), which is a psychological construct used in the field of second language acquisition, defined as the ability to tolerate differences between two languages. TOA is known as one of the learning styles which may have considerable influence on students' success in language acquisition. This paper aims to show that Tolerance of Ambiguity (TOA) is needed in the acquisition of foreign cultures as well as in the acquisition of foreign languages. In this paper, culture acquisition refers to the learning of another culture in classroom. In the process of culture acquisition students may unconsciously show their degree of tolerating differences between two cultures. One aspect of cultural differences chosen by the author of this paper to test students in terms of their TOA is the difference in perceiving "death" between Chinese culture and British Culture. The following section will first give an account of TOA and make clear the cultural perception of "death" before discussing the students' cultural opinions.

Theoretical Basis

Tolerance of Ambiguity

Learning style refers to an individual's natural, habitual, and preferred way(s) of absorbing, processing, and retaining new information and skills (Reid, 2002, p. F34). Tolerance of Ambiguity (TOA) is one learning style which refers to the ability to tolerate differences between new information and old information. Intolerance of Ambiguity (ITOA) may lead to difficulty in absorbing new information or accepting new concepts. TOA/ITOA is a term originally used in psychology, later adopted in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). In SLA, the word "Ambiguity" in "Tolerance of Ambiguity" basically means uncertainty commonly experienced in second language learning due to differences between the target language (= new information) and the learners' mother tongue (= old information). It means ambiguous items in the target language which are different from the learners' mother tongue, so the learners are uncertain about the usage and their psychological state in learning might be affected by this kind of ambiguity. Budner (1962) and Norton (1975) both defined the construct of ITOA (Intolerance of Ambiguity) as a tendency to perceive ambiguity as actual or potential sources of psychological threat and discomfort (see Ely, 2002). TOA, on the other hand, is defined as the degree to which a person is cognitively willing to tolerate ideas and propositions (= new information) that run counter to his/her own belief system or structure of knowledge (= old information) (WANG, 2000, p. 143). The author of this paper thinks the above definition of TOA fits in well not only with language acquisition but also with culture acquisition.

McLain (1993) found that learners who were more tolerant of ambiguity were also more willing to take risks and more receptive to change (See Ely, 2002). In SLA, this means certain degree of TOA (Tolerance of Ambiguity) is needed in second language learning for learners to accept differences between the two languages, to take risks in using the target language and thus facilitate the reception and acquisition of the target language. This paper holds the view that Tolerance of Ambiguity is also needed in culture acquisition as well as language acquisition. In culture acquisition, learners who are intolerant of ambiguity (i.e. ITOA learners) will find it hard to accept differences or changes and thus may not adapt very well when they live abroad for further study. Learners who are tolerant of ambiguity (i.e. TOA learners), however, will be more receptive to differences and changes, and thus be more adaptable to an unfamiliar culture and to a different life in a foreign country.

Learners may thus show different degrees of TOA/ITOA both in language acquisition and culture acquisition. According to Ehrman (1999) (cited from LAI, 2009), degrees of ITOA/TOA are laid out on a

continuum (shown in Figure 1), with those who are highly intolerant of ambiguity at one end of the continuum and those who are highly tolerant of ambiguity at the other end of the continuum. Those in the middle are neutral ones, who are neither intolerant of ambiguity nor tolerant of ambiguity.

Figure 1. The continuum of “ITOA-TOA”

Cultural Perception of “Death”

The perception of things is affected by culture, which strongly influences our subjective reality (Samovar et.al, 2000, pp. 56-60). The perception of death is an example to show great cultural differences.

For Western people who believe in Christianity, death is not something horrible, instead, it’s a journey to heaven, to the other world, a better world. Christians perceive their life in this world as the time to clear their original sins so that they can be admitted into the heaven after death. Thus, death may mean a better next life in the heaven. Relatives will pray for the dead instead of crying for them, as it is believed that crying might wet the clothes of the dead and impede their journey to heaven, whereas praying will help their soul to ascend into heaven (WANG, 2011). But for Chinese people who are under the influence of Confucianism or Taoism, to die is to be deprived of life and everything in this world, that is, they believe life will fade away and turn into nothing. Confucianism attaches more importance to life before death instead of the next life after death in another world (QIU, 2013). Taoists try very hard to prolong life and prevent death. In a word, people in China perceive death as the end of life in this world but people in the West may perceive death as the beginning of a better life in another world. Death is perceived more positively in the West than in China. It can be clearly understood that the difference in perception of death results from the influence of culture.

There are direct links among culture, perception, and behavior, in other words, behavior—how we react to our perceptions of the universe—is largely a result of our learning and cultural conditioning (Samovar et.al, 2000, pp. 56-60). In the following sections, we are going to look into the Chinese students’ reaction to BBC’s behavior of reporting the queen’s death while she is alive, and it will be revealed how differently British people and Chinese people perceive death and how much their perception is influenced by cultural beliefs and values.

Methods

Data were collected from students who had been studying British Society & Culture for a semester (eighteen weeks). It is a course given in English introducing British culture, shedding light on cultural differences between Britain and China. At the end of the semester, students (as the respondents of this study) were required to write a paper about an event which took place in Britain. They were expected not only to analyze the event to show British values and cultural characteristics but also to give opinions about their perception of the cultural differences and whether they accept the differences. The event they had to write about was presented to them through a piece of news from a British newspaper about what happened in Britain in 2011: Television presenters/anchormen at the BBC were being trained on how to correctly announce the death of the queen (who is still alive) in order to avoid a gaffe like the one when a veteran news anchorman wore a burgundy tie while announcing the death of the queen mother in 2002. Having been heavily criticized for the improper way of dressing when announcing the queen mother’s death, the BBC provided training to their staff to ensure nothing would go wrong when announcing the death of the queen, actually alive at the time. They

practised reporting the death of the queen and even made mock videos which announced that the queen had passed away. (Note: Such behavior or practice would never happen in China, as Chinese people tend to avoid mentioning death, and it is especially unlikely to talk about somebody's death when he/she is alive, because death is perceived as something ominous and terrible in Chinese culture, to avoid mentioning it shows politeness and respect. But BBC's behavior shows that in Britain death is not perceived as something ominous as it is in China, and not treated as a terrible topic as it is in Chinese culture, and that's why they could practise reporting the death of somebody as respectable and as high above as the queen, even when she is alive. It can be seen that great difference in perception of death results in great difference in behavior. Behavior that never happens in China did happen in Britain.)

At reading this piece of news about BBC's behavior/practice, Chinese students did perceive great cultural difference between Britain and China, especially in terms of the attitude to death. Some of them even felt shocked at the British way of doing things. They were then required to write a paper in class (within 3 hours) making analysis about British values and cultural characteristics reflected from this piece of news, and giving opinions about whether they would accept this if they were the queen in this news report who was announced to have died while being alive.

By analyzing the opinions in their papers, we can get some idea about their psychological state at reading about this typical British behavior and how well they tolerate cultural differences in terms of death. Altogether 77 students/respondents submitted their written paper about this event. But 6 of them didn't clearly state whether they would accept BBC's behavior (reporting the death of the queen) if they were the queen who is still alive. So these 6 papers were not valid for study. This paper will look at the papers by 71 respondents who showed their opinions about whether they would accept this if they were the queen who was announced to have died while being alive, as this will show their perception of death and their tolerance of cultural differences. Basically, this paper is a qualitative analysis of 71 respondents' attitudes toward death and their tolerance of cultural differences. The following analysis of the respondents' papers reveals the existence of TOA/ITOA in culture acquisition and sheds light on cultural differences in terms of the perception of death.

Results and Discussion

Overview of the Results

As this paper is to study the respondents' tolerance of ambiguity in culture acquisition, we first need to make clear the definition of culture. Culture is defined as a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts that the members of a society use to cope with their world and with one another and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning (Bates and Plog, cited from Samovar et.al, 2000, p. 36). So culture acquisition means the learning of a different system of beliefs, values and behaviors, etc. By analyzing the written data from the respondents, we can get some idea how they react to a new system of beliefs/values/behaviors and how great the cultural differences are in terms of the perception of death, which reflects the influence from cultural beliefs and values.

Among the 71 respondents whose papers have been read and whose attitudes to death and cultural differences have been analyzed, 22 of them showed intolerance of ambiguity (i.e. they were intolerant of cultural differences in terms of death and thus they couldn't accept BBC's behavior), whereas 33 of them showed tolerance of ambiguity, which means they tolerated the cultural differences in terms of death and accepted the behavior of reporting their death while being alive. What the 22 ITOA learners and the 33 TOA

learners wrote respectively in their papers concerning their attitude to BBC's behavior will be analyzed in the next sections for revelation of cultural differences.

Sixteen of the respondents seemed to be neutral, which means they were in the middle of the continuum "ITOA-TOA" and they could be leaning toward either ITOA or TOA depending on the situation (e.g. whether he/she is the queen or an ordinary person, whether he/she is from China or Britain, etc.) or they felt they might accept it but it would be accepted with reluctance or unpleasantness. In other words, they were not clearly TOA or ITOA (neither TOA nor ITOA), because most of these 16 students stated that even if they may accept BBC's behavior or find it understandable, they may still feel displeased or uncomfortable deep at heart, or they may feel BBC's behavior strange or even weird. Namely, even if they could accept it, they accepted with difficulty, not heartily. That's why they were categorized by this study as neutral learners in terms of ITOA-TOA, who could be leaning toward neither ITOA nor TOA, basically laid out in the middle of the continuum (see Figure 1).

The others either clearly stated they could not accept it or clearly stated they could accept it. The distribution of the respondents in terms of ITOA-TOA is shown in Figure 2, with the percentage for each type of respondents shown in Table 1.

Figure 2. Distribution of respondents in terms of ITOA-TOA.

Table 1

Percentage of Respondents in Terms of ITOA-TOA

ITOA learners	Neutral learners	TOA learners
31%	22.5%	46.5%

ITOA Learners: Intolerant of the Target Culture, Sticking to Native Culture

Among the 22 respondents who said they could not accept being reported dead while alive, 9 of them used the word "angry/mad/irritated/terrible" to describe their psychological feelings, which proves that they were strongly intolerant of cultural difference in terms of death. 3 of them felt that being reported dead while alive is "weird/absurd", which shows that they were quite intolerant of BBC's practice. 4 of them felt

“unhappy/uncomfortable/unwilling”, which indicates that they were moderately intolerant of this kind of practice. 2 of them said they couldn’t accept it because it would make them feel “embarrassed”. 4 of them didn’t use adjectives to describe their feelings but simply said “it’s difficult for me to accept it” or “I can’t accept it”. The way they describe their feelings or the verbal statements they made about their feelings can show their different degrees of intolerance of ambiguity, laid out along the continuum (in Figure 1) between “high ITOA to moderate ITOA”.

For these ITOA learners who felt reluctant to accept new perceptions or new cultures, if they go to foreign countries, they might find themselves under culture shock, which is defined as “the shock, anxiety or even anger that is felt when experiencing cultural differences” (HU, 1999, pp. 188-197). The words that most of these 22 ITOA learners used to describe their psychological feelings at BBC’s behavior clearly reveal the shock/anger they felt at the totally different behavior resulting from totally different perception of death.

As to the reasons why these 22 ITOA learners felt shocked and couldn’t accept BBC’s behavior, 7 of them thought it means disrespect (unfriendliness). Another 7 thought it is like a curse, which would bring bad luck to the person who was reported dead while being alive. Among these 22 respondents, 10 of them clearly stated the influence of Chinese culture on them, and we can see it is the influence of Chinese culture which perceives death as terrible that made them think this kind of practice (reporting the queen’s death while she is alive) is like a curse and is thus complete disrespect. 2 of them said although they understood the reason why BBC did that, they still could not accept it, which shows Chinese culture is deep rooted in their mind. For example, one of them wrote: “I would not accept it and would feel angry, because I am Chinese and I have been affected by the Chinese values since I was a child.” Another one of them wrote: “To Chinese, it is like a curse. It violates the traditional customs and sends (= conveys) disrespectful emotions. Thus, I won’t accept it.” The following respondent clearly said that fear of death is deep rooted in Chinese culture: “If such a thing happens to me, maybe I will feel uncomfortable, because in China, we think death is a terrible thing, we tend to avoid talking about death. Fear of death is deep rooted in our culture.” The above statements by the respondents clearly show the strong influence of Chinese culture on their mindset and we can see it is the negative perception of death in traditional Chinese culture that resulted in their intolerance of cultural differences, differences between one’s native culture and the target culture.

The reason some of them perceived BBC’s behavior of reporting the queen’s death as disrespect is that they looked at things from the perspective of Chinese values, shown from the following three interrelated aspects:

(1) According to Chinese perspective, mentioning somebody’s death while he/she is alive is like a curse on that person, because Chinese culture deems death as a terrible thing, the end of life, the deprivation of everything they have in this world. To mention death is thus perceived as ominous in Chinese culture. The perception of BBC’s behavior as a curse is shown in the following sentences that the respondents wrote: “In China, talking about somebody’s death while he/she is still alive will be considered a curse on him/her.” “If TV presenters practise reporting my death while I’ m still alive, I will be very angry. I can’t accept it at all, because I think it is a curse on me. They hope that I will die soon. Almost every Chinese avoids talking about death when they are still alive, because we think death is a terrible thing in our life.” “If I were the queen whose death was reported while she is alive, anger and loss of hope would fill my heart. Certainly I can’t accept it for it is a curse on me by others.” From the above statements we may understand that to talk about somebody’s death while he/she is alive is as impolite and disrespectful as cursing somebody. Topic about death is thus a taboo in

China (CHEN et.al, 2006, p. 41). Due to the influence from Chinese culture, these respondents couldn't tolerate BBC's behavior because they didn't feel like being cursed or hearing a taboo.

(2) According to Chinese superstition, mentioning somebody's death while he/she is alive will bring bad luck to him/her. To perceive BBC's behavior as a curse is due to this kind of Chinese superstition, which some respondents were quite aware of, as one of them explicitly used the term "superstition": "I am an indigenous Chinese and I am affected by traditional superstition in China." Chinese superstition can also be felt in what the other ITOA learners wrote, as they do tend to believe that mentioning their death while they are alive would bring them bad luck. "If I were the queen I would be very angry and can't accept it, because I think it will bring me bad luck." "Reporting my death while I'm alive makes me feel really unlucky." "I think rehearsing somebody's death is unlucky. I can't accept TV presenters practising announcement of my death while I'm still alive, because I think it may accelerate my death." Although these students didn't explicitly use the term "superstition", their belief that BBC's behavior would bring them bad luck and accelerate their death is typically superstitious belief rooted in Chinese culture. This superstitious belief made them intolerant of things that may seem ominous and look like a curse. As Samovar et al. put it, "belief systems are at the core of our thoughts and actions. Beliefs are such an influential factor in intercultural communication because they affect our conscious and unconscious minds" (Samovar et.al, 2000, p. 56-60). Belief systems affect people's perception of things and they're hard to be changed. ITOA learners tend to stick to their own belief systems which affect their perception of things and make it hard for them to tolerate a new belief system or adapt to an unfamiliar culture. But actually it's important for students of intercultural communication to stand apart from the bias of their own belief systems and try to understand other belief systems and behavioral patterns for the purpose of cultural diversity.

(3) According to Chinese culture, to say something like a curse to somebody would bring him/her bad luck, that's why it is perceived as totally disrespectful behavior, i.e. it is complete disrespect to talk about somebody's death when he/she is alive. What the following respondents wrote explicitly used the word "disrespect" or similar terms like "unfriendly, impolite, no respect" to show their negative opinions toward BBC's behavior: "If you ask me, I will be extremely irritated were BBC to broadcast my death when I am alive. It makes me feel disrespected. I can absolutely NOT accept it." "Chinese people can't stand the presenters rehearsing their death report when they are alive, because it's disrespect in their eyes." "Rehearsal of reporting a living person's death is an unfriendly behavior, which shows no respect." "As a Chinese, indeed, I could not accept that if the TV presenters report my death while I'm still alive, because it means no respect." "If I were the queen in this report, I would feel really awkward and embarrassed when TV presenters practise reporting my death. Certainly I wouldn't accept it. In my opinion, the behavior shows disrespect to life, which does harm to people who are alive and doesn't respect the emotion of the queen." "In China, it's very impolite to discuss a person's death when he/she is alive". As mentioning somebody's death while he/she is alive is perceived as disrespect and impoliteness, Chinese people tend to avoid mentioning death in the face of elderly people or people of higher status, as is shown in what this student wrote: "In Chinese culture, the word death/dead is prohibited, no one dare to say these words to their parents or to people with higher social status". This again confirms that talking about death is a taboo in Chinese culture. And these ITOA learners seem to be quite influenced and restrained by Chinese culture—their native culture, which makes them unwilling to hear taboos in their culture, without trying to consider the perspective of the target culture (British culture).

From the statements by the respondents listed above in the three interrelated aspects, it can be seen that their perception of BBC's behavior as a curse and their understanding of such behavior as disrespect are greatly influenced by Chinese values and Chinese superstitions which perceive death negatively. We can see the great gap in values between the two cultures. The real difficulty of adapting to a new culture does not lie in the language or customs, but lies in the gaps in values (HU, 1999, pp. 188-197). Influence from Chinese values is the cause of these 22 respondents' intolerance of things that run counter to their beliefs. Being closed to new belief systems (new concepts or new ideas) and being restrained by native culture are typical characteristics of intolerant learners, which may make them less adaptable to a new culture.

A few of the ITOA learners actually understood why BBC did that, but they still felt uncomfortable at the taboo topic of death and was thus unwilling to accept this kind of behavior or tolerate this kind of difference in perception, as is shown from what the following two respondents wrote: "Maybe it is a taboo for me if TV presenters practice reporting my death while I'm still alive. In traditional Chinese culture, it is like a curse to let me die as quickly as possible. Even though I really know their respect towards me and the true intension for the practice, I will still feel very uncomfortable for the behavior. " "If I were the queen, I am really unwilling for them to discuss my death while I'm still alive, because I'm Chinese, I can't accept this kind of deed although I know the reason why they did it." This shows influence from one's native culture can be so strong that it may hinder the acquisition of a different culture. According to Ely, "discomfort (caused by differences between two languages) can lead students to resist the acquisition of individual elements of language" (Ely, 2002), similarly, we can say that discomfort caused by differences between two cultures can lead students to resist the acquisition of an unfamiliar culture. Psychological studies revealed that gaps in values are inversely proportional to cultural adaptability, i.e. the greater the gaps in values between two cultures, the lower the cultural adaptability to the different culture (HU, 1999, pp. 188-197). With the great gap between Chinese values and British values in terms of the perception of death, it's very difficult for closed-minded ITOA learners to adapt to new belief systems in a foreign culture, i.e. they may have very low adaptability to an unfamiliar culture. That's why fostering tolerance of ambiguity is important not only for language learners but also for culture learners. Without tolerance of ambiguity, for these ITOA learners, culture acquisition might be hindered.

TOA Learners: Tolerant of the Target Culture, Not Restrained by Native Culture

Thirty-three respondents showed tolerance of ambiguity in terms of BBC's behavior, i.e. they accepted being reported dead while alive, in spite of the huge differences between China and Britain concerning the attitude to death. They understood British people's positive perception of death and strict sense of duty, so they looked at BBC's behavior from the British perspective instead of the Chinese perspective.

Among the 33 respondents, 15 of them said they could accept it because they think BBC's behavior showed respect/attention/care to the queen, as shown in the following sentences they wrote: "If I were the queen in this report, I would accept it happily, because I know that the reason they trained to announce my death properly is that they respect me so much that they would not like to make a ridiculous mistake at reporting my death." "If I were the queen in this case, I would accept this action, because I understand that BBC only wanted to perform well and announce news perfectly, and this action didn't mean disrespect." "If I were the queen, I will accept their practice. I would regard it as a symbol of attention to me from BBC and from the British people". The same behavior, reporting the queen's death while she is alive, was perceived by TOA learners as respect but perceived by ITOA learners as disrespect (shown in the previous section). The reason for

this complete difference in perception between TOA learners and ITOA learners will be illustrated in the next section which makes a short comparison between TOA and ITOA learners.

Four respondents thought BBC showed its responsibility or efforts to make everything satisfactory and keep the dignity of the announcement, so they could understand it and accept it. They wrote: “Personally, if I were the queen in this report, I would accept that TV reporters practice reporting my death while I’m still alive. I would be glad that they value their job and be responsible for it.” “If I were the queen in this report, I would not feel angry but would appreciate their responsibility. They did the right thing and I will not die because of their behavior. It’s happy to see everything in order.” In the lectures given in classes about British culture, they have learned about British values, one of which is the sense of duty/responsibility that most British people value. Values may be defined as enduring beliefs that a specific mode of conduct is personally or socially preferable to another (Samovar et.al, 2000). From what these 4 respondents wrote, it can be seen that they look at things from the perspective of British belief systems (belief that responsibility is a preferred positive value), not from the perspective of Chinese belief systems (superstitious belief about a negative curse).

Five of the respondents said they would accept it as a (harmless) joke, based on the British values of humor, as shown in the following sentences they wrote: “If I were such an important person that my death would impact the whole country, this kind of practice links with the nation’s interests and foreign relations. It does not mean a curse or any other evil intension, I will accept it happily, as a joke.” “If I were the queen of Britain, faced with this condition, I think I would be OK and adapt it as soon as possible, as a result of my British values—humor at the bottom of my heart.” “If I were the queen of Britain and the BBC practiced reporting my death before I die, I might just laugh out of it. After all, as an English, sense of humor is running through my vein.” It can be seen that these respondents understood British values and tolerated BBC’s behavior from the perspective of British culture. They not only appreciated British people’s sense of humor, they also seemed to have internalized this kind of humor if they were to think of themselves as the queen of the U.K. This proves that certain degree of tolerance of ambiguity can promote culture acquisition—acceptance and internalization of the belief systems and value systems in another culture.

Five other respondents clearly stated they understood it as typical Englishness, i.e. British character/style, for example: “As for me, if I were the queen of Britain, I would accept this situation because I understand this is the British character, the British style. Their thinking modes are totally different. Their culture is different too.” “If I were the queen, I’ll appreciate what BBC has done. This training shows Englishness perfectly. It tells the world that British people are strict, taking a lot of time and money to avoid making mistakes. I don’t think it will bring bad luck to the queen.” Englishness/Britishness is the topic of another lecture that was given in class about British culture, in which they learned about British character and typical British behaviors. These statements they made show that they have got an idea about differences between cultures in terms of national character and they could accept and tolerate such differences.

Three of them thought it is freedom of speech, and the media (BBC) did it for media’s interest without harming the queen’s interest, which can be seen from the following sentence: “If I were the queen in this case, I will accept it. On the one hand, it’s legal for BBC to do that, it is their freedom. On the other hand, the reason why BBC did it is to announce my death in a more correct way. For these two reasons, I accept the BBC’s behavior.” This respondent looked at BBC’s behavior from the perspective of British values, drawing on what he/she has learned from a lecture on British media culture, understanding that freedom of speech is what most British people value.

One of the respondents stated that he/she is an open-minded person so that BBC's behavior could be accepted by him/her: "As an open-minded person, I can totally accept it if I were the queen." A person with a high tolerance of ambiguity is relatively "open-minded" in accepting ideologies and events and facts that contradict his own views (WANG, 2000, pp. 143-145). A person with a low tolerance of ambiguity is "closed-minded" and tends to reject items that are contradictory or slightly incongruent with his existing system (WANG, 2000, pp. 143-145). So this respondent who claimed to be open-minded clearly belongs to the TOA type of learners.

To a certain degree we can see that these 33 respondents tolerate the differences between British culture and Chinese culture quite well, even in terms of the most undesirable taboo topic among Chinese people (e.g. talking about death). This shows they have accepted or even internalized British values such as sense of duty/responsibility, sense of humor and freedom of speech. They are aware of the differences and they try to accept the differences, because they perceived BBC's behavior from the perspective of target culture, not restrained by their native culture. Some of them clearly stated their positive attitude to differences (between cultures), as shown in these sentences they wrote: "The world is moving toward multi-polarization and economic globalization. More respect and understanding should be given to cultural difference." "Different attitudes reflect the difference of culture. I have to say that there is no absolute right or wrong. Each social behavior is the embodiment of its unique culture and history. In fact, it is the communication and integration of these different cultures that make our life more colorful and wonderful." Clearly, this kind of open-mindedness to cultural differences contributes to their tolerance of ambiguity and promotes their acquisition of another culture, another belief system or value system.

Comparison: ITOA Learners and TOA Learners

Looking at things that happened in Britain from the perspective of British culture, the above 33 TOA learners understood that BBC's behavior does not mean a curse and will not bring bad luck. Therefore, TOA learners who are tolerant of other cultures are actually free from the influence of Chinese culture and Chinese superstition, shown in the following sentences they wrote: "I will not die because of BBC's behavior." "I don't think it will bring bad luck to the queen". Thus, they perceived BBC's behavior not as disrespect, but as respect, due to their acceptance of British values, due to their open-mindedness to other cultures and different perceptions. They appreciated BBC's sense of responsibility in doing this, and they thought BBC's responsibility means respect to the queen, for example: "From my perspective, the practice reflects the media's efforts to make everything satisfactory and therefore reflects respect toward me (if I were the queen)." "If I were the queen I would not feel offended or provoked, because BBC is showing respect to me by trying to report news related to me perfectly." Compared with the perceptions of ITOA learners, we can see that the same behavior can be perceived very differently by ITOA and TOA learners. In this study, BBC's behavior of reporting the queen's death was perceived as disrespect by ITOA learners who were under the influence of Chinese culture, but was perceived as respect by TOA learners because they looked at things from the perspective of British culture instead of being restrained by Chinese culture. This reveals that perception of the same behavior can be quite different according to the cultural perspective that one adopts. The perception of BBC's behavior is strongly affected by cultural influences, influences from the native culture for the ITOA learners as opposed to influences from target culture for the TOA learners. It can be seen that TOA learners are better at acquiring the target culture and thus achieve more success in cultural acquisition and intercultural communication.

In summary, ITOA learners perceive things from the perspective of their native culture, which has strong influence on their perception of BBC's behavior and their attitude to death. As they cling to their own cultural beliefs, they feel reluctant to accept and tolerate different way of thinking/perceiving/behaving in an unfamiliar culture. Difference in way of thinking and way of perceiving things between different cultures will result in difficulty in intercultural communication (JIA, 1997, p. 96). Thus they may have difficulty in adapting to an unfamiliar culture if they go abroad for further study in the future. On the contrary, TOA learners tend to perceive things that happen in the target country from the perspective of that target culture, so they are not restrained by cultural beliefs in their own native culture. This enables them to tolerate cultural differences better and have more adaptability when faced with an unfamiliar culture. It can be predicted they will do better in the process of acculturation, which is defined as "the process by which individuals acquire some (but not all) aspect of the host culture" (Gudykunst, 2007, p. 244). Analysis of these TOA learners' papers shows that tolerance of ambiguity is a good psychological trait which is needed for successful culture acquisition. High degree of tolerance in these TOA learners enables them to acquire a new belief system and unlearn some of their old cultural habits, while low degree of tolerance in the ITOA learners hinders them from effective culture acquisition.

Conclusion

Analysis of these respondents' opinions revealed great differences between Chinese culture and British culture concerning values and the perception of death. One of the respondents wrote: "I can't help imagining what if it happened in China. Perhaps it will never occur, because nobody would like to annoy others by reporting his/her death when he/she is still alive. In China, we suppose it's impolite, unlucky, etc. However, in the U.K., it seems reasonable." Although BBC's behavior of rehearsing announcement of the queen's death while she is alive astonished quite some of the respondents, most of them showed understanding of BBC's behavior (this includes the 33 TOA learners and some of the neutral learners), and quite a few of them clearly stated "Difference makes the world colorful/wonderful". Their awareness and acceptance of the stark differences between the two cultures reveals the effect of culture acquisition through the course: British Society & Culture. Without the introduction to British culture and those lectures on British values, maybe almost all of them would not accept BBC's behavior, which is deemed as intolerable ill-meant curse and complete disrespect in Chinese culture. But after a semester's lectures on this course, 33 of them turned out to be tolerant of BBC's behavior based on their acceptance of British values, and most of the 16 neutral learners found it understandable though not acceptable. It can be seen that culture teaching which opens students' eyes to a world of differences will improve their tolerance of ambiguity, except those ITOA learners who are too much influenced by their native culture and who cling too tightly to their own culture.

In terms of the ITOA learners who are intolerant of differences, teachers of culture classes should raise their consciousness about the importance of TOA and help them to view cultural differences in a more positive light. Successful language learning necessitates tolerance of ambiguity (WANG, 2000, pp. 143-145), so does successful culture learning. Too much intolerance can close the mind, especially if ambiguity is perceived as a threat (WANG, 2000, pp. 143-145). To help the ITOA learners open their mind, teachers of culture classes may adopt a few strategies to improve their intercultural awareness and make them more willing to accept change, thus better prepared to adapt to the target culture. Description of strategies such as improving cultural sensitivity and changing cognitive behavior could be found in HU's book (1999, pp. 195-197). Other strategies

like developing empathy could be learned from “Communication between Cultures” (Samovar et.al, 2000, p. 259). In this era of globalization, sensitivity to other cultures, empathy of people from different cultures and adaptability to unfamiliar cultures is especially needed for successful intercultural communication. And they all call for tolerance of ambiguity. Thus, reasonable tolerance of ambiguity is not only important to successful language learning (WANG, 2000, pp. 143-145), it is also important to successful culture learning, as revealed in this paper. Teachers should make students aware it is cultural differences that make the world colorful and enjoyable, so when faced with totally different things in different cultures, students may achieve higher degree of tolerance for cultural differences.

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