

## “Excellent” or “Outstanding”-- A Case Study of My Son’s Intercultural Adaptation

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### Abstract

*One word is not only a symbol of language, but also reflects the cultural values where people live in a society. It is no doubt that different language reflect different cultural values. Hence, it is extremely crucial for oversea students to understand some fundamental knowledge about the relationship between language influence and cultural value in their intercultural adaptation and communication. Only in this way, the oversea students will be adapted to a new society and a new culture, and show their own academic abilities on some competitive occasions including applying for their graduates or post-graduates in colleges and universities. Therefore, the author will take his son’s application for Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)’s a post-graduate as a case, comparatively analyzes and discusses that the concept of cultural values directly affects applicant, especially owing to the relative function between language modification and cultural impact, and finally focuses on the intercultural adaptation’s influence on application, so as to success in his or her study career in a new culture.*

**Keywords:** language, culture, intercultural communication, application letter, intercultural adaptation, intercultural communication competence

### 1. Introduction

“Language and culture, intrinsically dependent on each other, have evolved together through the history. Their mutual interdependence can find proof in the rise of civilization, the development of writing and human communication.”(Dai, 2008) In intercultural communication, people with different cultural backgrounds should write some things to have verbal communication with native people. To some extent, the verbal communication is not only difficult thing, but also a fundamental method in intercultural communication.

Thus, any foreigner wants to communicate with native people, He or she should have a good knowledge of the target language and target culture. He or she will be adapted to a new society and a new culture. In this way, any foreigner will show his or her own ability on some competitive occasions, so that he or she will know and understand how to write quite well for special purpose, such as for application letters including personal statement, resume and et al. Every year, many Chinese students of undergraduates and graduates apply for their graduates or post-doctoral post in American universities. If they show their academic abilities properly in applicant process, they will be admitted by the American universities. The author will takes his son’s application for Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)’s a post-doctor as a case, comparatively analyzes and discusses that cultural values affect applicant, especially the relative function between language modification and cultural impact, focuses on the intercultural adaptation’s influence on application, so as to success in his or her study career in a new culture.

## **2. A Case**

One year ago, my son would finish his PHD in an American university, and then he wanted to continue his study for post-doctor. One day, my son finished his application letter and resume for his post-graduate in MIT, and then sent them to me by email, and asked me to point out some shortcomings on the application letter and resume he made.

After reading, I found that my son had made greater progress in English writing during five years' study in American university for his doctoral degree. At the same time, I couldn't point out any big mistakes on his application letter or resume.

However, it was only one adjective word which was used to modify himself in one sentence that I didn't agree to. He wrote in this way, "I am an outstanding student on the field of xxx research.

The word is "outstanding" to be used to modify himself as "an outstanding student". The word "outstanding" is only used to modify some famous persons including statesmen, singers, artists and scientists. I just judge the usage of this word "outstanding" in Chinese cultural outlook. Everyone should be modest to the others, the others would respect him or her. No one could say that he would be an outstanding person in some field or in a country. If so, no one could like or respect him or her. He or she will be regarded as an arrogant person. Due to this reason, Chinese people never introduce themselves with the powerful modification words or expressions. If do so, the person will be looked down upon by the other.

Considering that I thought of, I called my son by phone and hoped that he would change word "outstanding" into the word "excellent". My son did not agree to my suggestion and told me that if you were not confident and thought you were the best one person who was qualified for the post-graduate post, and who could believe that you were the best qualified person for the post-doctorial post. Particularly, American tutor always thought the applicant's confidence, academic ability, potential competence as one of important requirements. Later, my son still persisted in his position and hand on his application letter and resume. Finally, my son luckily got the admission letter to accept the post-doctorial post in MIT. Now, he has worked in MIT for near a year.

## **3. Analysis and Discussion**

From the above case, we can easily find that the opinions between the author and his son are apparently different from their diversity cultural values. Though the author and his son were born in China, their cultural outlooks have had a big difference. It is necessary for us to analyze and discuss about such a big different from Chinese cultural value and American cultural value. Maybe, we will realize that person lives in a new culture, adapts to a new culture and finally accepts a new culture. His or her cultural value will be altered with the gradual intercultural adaptation.

Therefore, "culture has an impact on language at various levels. In verbal communication we find differences at phonemic, lexical, syntactical and discourse levels. Phonemic and syntactical variations are often taken for granted. At the lexical, pragmatic and discourse levels, there are a lot worth studying concerning intercultural communication."(Tou, 2011)

As a result, the author will further analyze and discuss the above the case that demonstrate the influence of culture on verbal communication.

### 3.1 Language Reflection and Cultural Values

Word is “a single unit of language which means something and can be spoken or written”(Hornby, 2004). To some extent, word is just a symbol of language, but language reflects the environment in which we live. We label things that are around us. Sometime words have different connotative meanings because of the different geographical environment. In addition to the environment, language also reflects cultural values. Language is a mirror of culture, because language reflects human relationships and the way the society operates.

Nevertheless, different languages reflect different cultural values. At the same time, language is a reflection of culture, and culture is a reflection of language.

In China, traditional cultural values attached great importance to collective interest. The Chinese value of collectivism was cultivated by the forceful tie of the patriarchal relations and the culture of ideology and institution that gave prominence to centralization and unity. The interest of the society, the country and the family was always counted number one while that of the locality, the part, or the individual sometimes was ignored. Individuality gave way to universality. The values asserting collective interest fostered in China the spiritual tradition of patriotism national development, abandoned individual interest, even disregarding their own lives and families, to go through fire and water for the cardinal principle of national interest. The spirit embodied by them has been adored generation after generation which has finally been condensed and crystallized into the spiritual tower of Chinese nation. (Fan and Yu, 2011)

To some extent, the Chinese characteristics “lead to specific behavior, such as the avoidance of direct “no”, the walking away from potential argument, conflict or confrontation, a low profile, the hiding of one’s strengths, the depreciation of one’s success. (Yan and Tao, 2012)

In America, however, the stress of cultural value is laid on equality of opportunity, individuality and personal effort instead of conformity and control. Everyone knows that The Declaration of Independence says, “All men are created equal.” The American belief in equality of opportunity is illustrated by the Horatio Alger myth. “These popular ‘rags-to-riches’ stories exemplified the American Dream- the belief that any individual, no matter how poor, can achieve wealth and fame diligence and virtue. For many immigrant Americans, this dream became reality. At the same time, American initiative to experiment was encouraged by a generally optimistic outlook. The typical American believed in trying something new in an attempt to make life better. He had a firm faith in the possibility of progress, This attitude was based on his own and his family’s past experiences.(Yan and Tao, 2012.p.7)

Contrary to the Chinese people, Americans are more individualistic. As George Kateb states, “The essence of all the revisions of human ties is a movement toward allowing individuals to make up their world as they go along. This is a principal aspect of individualism, and the hidden spring of self-centered behavior.”(Kateb, 1992)

As Edward T. Hall points out, “culture hides much more than it reveals, and strangely enough, what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants”. And he also says that “culture controls behavior in deep and persisting ways, many of which are outside of awareness and therefore beyond conscious control of the individual.”

Although each of us has a unique set of values, there also are values that tend to permeate a culture. These are called cultural values. Cultural values generally are normative in that they inform a member of a culture what is good and bad, right and wrong, true and false, positive and negative, and the like. Cultural values define what

is worthwhile to die for, what is worth protecting, what frightens people and their social systems, what are considered proper subjects for study and for ridicule, and what types of events lead individuals to group solidarity. Cultural values also specify what behaviors are of importance and which should be avoided within a culture. Values represent a learned organization of rules for making choices and for resolving conflicts.(Xu,2012)

China and America have their own different cultures, and cultural values which greatly determines their language expressive ways and communicative ways. It is cultural values' difference that gives rises to many miscommunications. Both cultural values have some good qualities that are worth learning from. Thus, we should raise awareness of "the other culture" to build bridges across misunderstanding among different cultures. Furthermore, we should also respect our cultural differences in cross-cultural communication and improve our communicative abilities including verbal communication and nonverbal communication in order to avoid unnecessary misunderstand and conflict in intercultural communication.

From the above case, it fully evidences that someone will success in intercultural communication if he or she does any things by its own cultural values in verbal communication and nonverbal communication of a new cultural environment. If not so, person must fail in intercultural communication.

### **3.2 Intercultural Adaptation and Intercultural communication**

Through the above case, we can easily find that any foreign students have lived in another country for some time and have known some fundamental cultural knowledge of the another country, especially have known how to adapt to a new cultural environment. Also, the foreign students have accepted a new culture and have known how to show his academic ability to his future tutor properly and then made their applying letter and resume be satisfied with requirements from both university and the tutor. American culture has gradually changed my son's and other foreign students mindset. They have really known how to think, behave and realize their own desires or dreams in an American way.

#### **3.2.1 Adapt to a new culture**

When people sojourn in a foreign country, some of them can adapt well the new environment within a short period of time, while others find the new environment to be a nightmare. One of the main reason why some find new environments problematic is that must familiar symbols they use in daily life have changed suddenly in the strange culture. They then begin to reject, consciously or unconsciously, the new ways of life which cause discomfort, withdrawal from the culture, and fear of contact with people. (Chen, 2010)

Day-to-day living in another culture is undoubtedly an educational experience. While traveling and living abroad people learn second language, observe different customs, and encounter new values. Many people who have lived in other countries feel that exposure to foreign cultures enables them to gain insight into their own society. When facing different values, beliefs, and behavior, they develop a deeper understanding of themselves and of the society that helped to shape their characters. The striking contrasts of a second culture provide a mirror in which one's own culture is reflected. (Xu, 2012,307p.)

The more different ways of experiencing life available to a society, the more resources it has for meeting adaptive challenges. It is believed that one of the United State's greatest strengths is its ethnic diversity, for they have adaptive resources from peoples all over the world.(Zhang, 2008)

Facing a new culture, people should keep an open mind, not only being tolerant of others but also learning from others. Thus, positive self-concept and high levels of self-esteem are critical factors in foreign students' development, motivation, and academic success. Theorists distinguish between individual and academic self-concepts. Individual self-concept refers to how students see themselves—their cultural, racial, or national origins; their religious and gender identities; as well as other significant elements of personal identity. Academic self-concept refers to whether or not students see themselves to the educational process, students need to be excited about what they are learning and confident of their ability to learn. They must also see education as a critical component of an American Dream that they can realistically hope to achieve. (Morrison, 2003)

Positive cross-cultural learning experiences typically:

- involve change and movement from one cultural frame of reference of another;
- are personally and uniquely important to the individual;
- force the person into some form of self-examination;
- involve severe frustration, anxiety, and personal pain, at least for a while;
- cause the person to deal with relationships and processes related to his or her role as an outsider;
- encourage the person to try new attitudes and behaviors;
- allow the person to compare and contrast constantly.

The strong, creative person can deal with culture shock positively, instead of sinking into steady complaints about the culture, wallowing in very real physical ailments, or running away at the first opportunity. Culture shock can become an opportunity for growth.

Only in this way, to make the intercultural interaction productive, one needs to have the ability to construct meaning and rapport with people from different cultural back grounds through appropriate and effective use of verbal and nonverbal language.

By this time, the person is able to accept both the similarities and the differences between his home culture and the new culture. He is becoming more sensitive to local people and as a result his relationships with them are becoming warmer and more personal. The person has added important new skills to his cultural software and has some confidence that he can deal with new situations as they arise. Life is definitely becoming more comfortable. (Davis, 2010)

#### **4. conclusion**

Now, we can easily receive the findings through our analysis and discussion about the case. Any foreign students intend to success in their studying career. They should know that the application for different degrees at different learning levels, are a complicated process, meanwhile, it is an important intercultural communication. Thus, it is crucial for foreign student to know some fundamental knowledge about the relationship between language influence and cultural value, and intercultural adaptation and intercultural communication. Especially, they should know that it is not enough for them to learn a foreign language, they must learn culture and do culture, so that they will satisfy with the requirements not only from colleges and universities but also from a foreign society.

As a result, knowing a new culture, especially a new cultural value, it is more important than just learning a language whatever, people have verbal communication and nonverbal communication. Learn, and experience foreign culture. In this way, the foreign students will adapt to a new culture very soon and really master local cultural history and customs well. Finally, the foreign students' mindsets, outlooks and behaviors will match a new culture.

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