Chapter 4

Becoming Interculturally Competent in a Third Space

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Introduction

Most chapters in this book illustrate how formal courses or training programmes help nurture willingness and open-mindedness towards otherness and develop intercultural awareness and skills for intercultural interaction. With ever-increasing mobility of people in the new century and widely perceived trend of economic globalisation and internationalisation of education, courses and training programmes provided by educational institutions and organisations are evidently in high demand in all societies. It is hoped that through systematic examinations of the processes to become interculturally competent, as we do in this volume, educators and trainers gain better insights into the developmental stages of this process and will be able to design better curricula and conduct more meaningful programmes.

While the book centres on presenting and evaluating what intercultural trainers and educators do, mostly in formal settings, it is important to keep in mind three observations or facts noted in the literature or in the real world. First, people in need, such as internationally mobile students and workforce, may not have easy access to institutionalised and accredited courses and training programmes designed to develop intercultural knowledge and skills. Second, researchers and scholars including those in this book have demonstrated that programmes developed on the basis of thoroughly researched contexts and well-founded theories do help build up competence for intercultural interaction and extend people’s perceptions of the world. Accessibility to educational and training opportunities, however, does not automatically lead to development of the competence
desired for the real world. Formal programmes that adopt an orthodox approach, as Jack (2002; this volume) argues, too easily enhance stereotypes and ethnocentricity of the participants. Third, organisations or individuals who perceive the needs for intercultural knowledge and skills and take initiatives to develop them on their own may become interculturally competent to meet challenges in the changing circumstances. Mughan (in this volume), for example, shows with empirical data how under-resourced small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) engage in experience-based learning while developing overseas markets. Mughan argues that their intercultural paradigm is driven by the business and market imperatives, rather than following a structured, formal trajectory familiar to a large company or organisation.

The third phenomenon discussed above is also the focus of this chapter, but attention is given to how students living and studying abroad develop intercultural competence and negotiate identity in an academic environment different from their own (see also Ryan, this volume). After an overview of widely adopted approaches to evaluating the experience of internationally mobile students, with an emphasis on theories of thirdness, the chapter presents empirical data collected from a group of students from CHC1 countries currently studying at a British university. This study takes such notions as Socratic and Confucian cultures of learning as a starting point for analysis. On such basis, the chapter argues for a redefinition of the notion of third space, to refer not only to highly individual, heterogeneous and ‘discursive conditions of enunciation’ (Bhabha, 1994: 37), which may give rise to something that ‘displaces histories’ when individuals, particularly those of different sociocultural background, interact, but also to intermediate zones where individuals are found to negotiate identity and mediate between a system of values, beliefs and norms internalised through earlier socialisation and a new system.

Theories of Thirdness

There is a substantial body of literature on globally mobile personnel, including international students, and two major approaches stand out in this literature on evaluating the experience of those living, working or studying abroad. One way researchers traditionally follow is to use models such as those developed by Bennett (1993), Berry (1990) and Kim (1988) to describe or depict developmental stages of acculturation and intercultural sensitivity, or adaptation and accommodation. Numerous inventories or checklists developed on the basis of principles or axioms specified for these models enable researchers to study mobility and diasporas through
either or both quantitative or qualitative data. An alternative approach adopted by an increasing number of researchers in recent years is the interpretive paradigm, notably the grounded theory perspective, to evaluate the process and outcome of international mobility (Byram & Feng, 2006; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). Several authors such as Tarp (2006) and Lam (2006), for example, used grounded theory to analyse patterning or grounded themes of intercultural growth or intercultural tension, or increased understanding or enhanced stereotypes of otherness, that are emergent from empirical data collected mostly through qualitative methods from international students living and studying abroad.

While many of the studies following the first approach have thrown new lights on the lived experience of internationally mobile personnel, immigrants or refugees, critics often question the generalisability or applicability of such models or inventories to studying and analysing human relationships and human behaviour that not only depend on knowledge, skills and psychological inclination for communication with otherness but also a complex web of social factors such as power and dynamics of social and individual identities. Research claimed to follow an interpretive paradigm, particularly the grounded theory perspective, is not without criticisms too. Thomas and James (2006: 767), for example, argue that the perspective constrains and distorts qualitative inquiry for ‘what ultimately materializes following grounded theory procedures is less like discovery and more akin to invention’. Strong critiques of this kind do not seem to prevent researchers from adopting this perspective to analyse research data for its theoretical base is generally acknowledged as sound. Dey (1999) in a comprehensive critique of grounded theory sees it as capable of development and as offering a ‘middle way’ between idiographic and nomothetic theorising. However, criticisms remind researchers adopting the grounded theory perspective of the dynamic and intriguing nature of social science study and the ethical responsibility of researchers, who are also agents having the capacity of action in the research process, to truthfully present emergent theories by uncovering multifaceted and ambivalent phenomena in interplay.

Recent scholarship in foreign language education and intercultural communication has shown a growing interest in concepts such as the third place or a culture of a third kind in language education (Kramsch, 1993, 1999; Lo Bianco et al., 1999), third culture kids in international education (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001), third culture building in intercultural communication (Starosta & Olorunnisola, 1995), and the notion of third space developed by cultural studies theorists and human geographers (Bhabha, 1990b, 1994; Crang, 1998; Soja, 1996). What these concepts, collectively
called theories of thirdness in this chapter, and the grounded theory perspective have in common is the emphasis not on using existing schemata or theories to understand social phenomena but on examining spatial, temporal and social dimensions of human communication in the performative present (Bhabha, 1994). Definitions of theories of thirdness differ from one theorist (or academic area) to another, but all these notions suggest in metaphorical language a conception that reflects new insights into each of these academic areas by challenging binary opposites such as the here and the there, self and other, the present and the past, the local and the global, and of course the traditional view that sees ‘education’ and ‘training’, ‘deep learning’ and ‘surface learning’ as polarities (see Introduction to this volume). Theories of thirdness, in a practical sense, provide us with useful vocabulary to critique binary conceptions of social phenomena and to analyse and problematise culture by turning all physical places, symbols, customs, ideas, etc. into lived zones of trans-cultures and trans-ideologies.

While arguing strongly for the transformational and performative nature of communication between cultures, some researchers and scholars in intercultural communication appear keen to get to the heart of intercultural studies by challenging conventional views of culture itself. Fay (1996), Holliday (1999, 2005), Holliday et al. (2004) and Keesing (1998) argue that research in intercultural studies is often dominated by a ‘standard’ view of culture that is limited to locating essential features of a particular social group, that is, the shared values, established norms and patterned behaviours. This is an essentialist or reductionist approach to theorising culture. Bhabha (1990a, 1990b, 1994) is one of the most prominent critics of the conventional approach. His writings question many frequently used but elusive concepts such as culture, cultural difference and intercultural as opposed to intracultural communication. To begin with, Bhabha (1994: 136) holds the view that culture is first of all ‘heimlich’ with ‘its disciplinary generalizations, its mimetic narratives, its homologous empty time, its seriality, its progress, its customs and coherence’. It is through cultural translation, appropriation and rehistoricisation by individuals in specific contexts, that is, in the in-between space, that culture becomes interdisciplinary, dynamic, ambivalent and even self-contradictory. Bhabha (1990b: 211) states that ‘all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity’.

In his critique of cultural unity and homogeneity, Bhabha (1990a: 4) questions the commonly perceived difference between intercultural and intracultural communication arguing that ‘The “other” is never outside or beyond us: it emerges forcefully within the cultural discourse when we
think we speak intimately and indigenously “between ourselves”. In theorising cultural differences, Bhabha (1994: 162) challenges traditional views stating that cultural differences ‘should not be understood as the free play of polarities and pluralities in the homogeneous empty time of the national community’. Instead, they should be regarded as a process that is built into the very condition of communication in the performative present. In this process, he continues (Bhabha, 1994: 37), the two places (‘You’ and ‘I’) are mobilised to produce meaning in the passage through a **Third Space** which ‘constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricised and read anew’.

The notion that culture has no ‘primordial unity or fixity’ and ‘can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricised and read anew’ highlights the openness and heterogeneity of culture, permeable by otherness, susceptible to interpretations in different contexts and times by individuals of a social group and therefore often ambivalent and self-contradictory. In this sense, the notion of ‘third place’ discussed in length in Lo Bianco *et al.* (1999) and Kramsch (1993) is most attuned to third space. According to these authors, the third place suggests individual opportunities for change by virtue of being confronted with the unfamiliar when learning a foreign language or when living abroad. Kramsch (1993: 257) maintains that the opportunities for transformation are embedded in cultures in contact, but not enslaved in them. Therefore, this third place is located in somewhere different for each learner and ‘will make different sense at different times’. Discursive conditions of enunciation as a result of individuality and heterogeneity and ambivalence of culture seem to characterise the third place or third space which, in Bhabha’s (1990b: 211) words, may displace histories and give rise to ‘something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation’.

In short, the third space perspective not only challenges traditional views of the elusive notion of culture but more importantly problematises our ‘normal’, polarised or binary perceptions of the relationships between, for examples, the West and the East, intercultural and intracultural communication, education and training, and deep learning and surface learning as discussed in the Introduction. In what ways will these insights out of the discussion help analyse the perceptions and experience of internationally mobile students? What implications will this analysis have for studies into development of intercultural competence? The pages that follow address these questions by examining the academic experience of a particular group of international students, the CHC students at a UK university. Empirical
research data showing their experience will be analysed with the third space concept, but prior to this, let us look at the notion of Confucian culture of learning that forms the starting point for the analysis.

**Confucian Culture of Learning**

In the scholarship of living and studying abroad, the so-called Socratic–Confucian cultures of learning and teaching (Greenholtz, 2003; Tweed & Lehman, 2002) or other similar binary oppositions such as Western versus Chinese cultures of learning (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996a, 1996b; Jin & Cortazzi, 1998), learning and teaching in individualistic versus collective cultures (Trumbull et al., 2001) and dialogic versus dialectic education (Hammond & Gao, 2002) are notions widely used in studying and discussing the experience of CHC students in their year(s) abroad, often in Western countries such as the US, the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Many provide empirical evidence to show that between the two broadly defined cultures there are huge differences in terms of values and beliefs in learning and teaching. Hence, they argue that, while students need to be made aware of the differences, educators in Western countries that host the students should take into account the differences in the cultures of learning and accommodate accordingly.

A culture of learning is usually defined as values and beliefs of good teaching and learning shared by a particular social or cultural group and their learning behaviours that are built on these values and beliefs. Many educators and researchers believe that the discovery of these values, beliefs and expectations is the key to developing curricula for intercultural education. Among them are Jin and Cortazzi (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996a, 1996b, 2001; Jin, 1992; Jin & Cortazzi, 1993, 1995, 1998) who have conducted empirical studies comparing perceptions and observable behaviours of Chinese students and their counterparts in the UK and have recently extended their research to include learners from other places such as Japan, Malaysia and Turkey (Cortazzi & Jin, 2001). On the basis of the findings, they propose a cultural synergy model that they define as cultural extension of accommodation theory necessary to ‘encourage conscious awareness of the differences in learning and teaching through explicit discussions’ (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996a: 74) so that both parties (e.g. CHC students and British lecturers) are clear about each other’s expectations and accommodate each other accordingly. Not surprisingly, their writings reporting findings and analyses often show clearly contrastive sets of beliefs and values (Table 4.1) which, they claim, are meant to promote a synergy model to bridge the gaps.
Different values, beliefs and approaches to learning and teaching typically associated with learners and teachers in these two countries are contrasted in unambiguous terms in this table. The binary oppositions are often claimed to be supported by empirical evidence and raising awareness of the differences, they argue, can help bridge the gaps in communication between the two sets of established norms and between these two cultural groups. Similar contrastive tables can also be found in Trumbull *et al.* (2001) and Hammond and Gao (2002).

Some other researchers, on the other hand, give evidence to counter-argue that the widely believed differences in terms of established norms are never empirically coherent and many are simply ‘myths’. Contradictory empirical findings and the debates have led to the questioning of the existence of different norms in educational traditions and the necessity to mediate (the lack of) them in intercultural education. From a survey among a group of teacher trainees from China, Stephens (1997) reported findings that negate many statements made by Jin and Cortazzi. He critiques ‘the air of typicality’ shown in their selective data and warns of the danger of over-generalisation of differences between ‘east’ and ‘west’ orientations. Debates related to the Confucian culture of learning are noticeable in many other discussions and empirical studies reported by language teachers and researchers in direct contact with students from China and other Confucian Heritage Cultures (e.g. Garrott, 1995; Harris, 1997; Hess & Azuma, 1991; Kember, 2000; Littlewood, 2001, 2003; Maley,

### Table 4.1 Contrast of learning cultures in China and UK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>China</strong></th>
<th><strong>UK</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge from authority</td>
<td>Skills in communication and learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective consciousness</td>
<td>Individual orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching and learning as performance</td>
<td>Teaching and learning as organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning through practice and memorisation</td>
<td>Learning through interaction and construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listener/reader responsibility for communication</td>
<td>Speaker/writer responsibility for communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hierarchy, face, respect</td>
<td>Equality, informality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher as model and centre</td>
<td>Teacher as organiser</td>
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</tbody>
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*Source: Cortazzi and Jin (1996a: 74)*
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1995; Watkins & Biggs, 1996, 2001). Among them, Littlewood’s (2001) findings from a large-scale survey are perhaps most striking. A survey of perceptions of and attitudes towards classroom English learning was conducted among 2656 students in 11 countries, eight in Asia (CHC countries) and three in Europe. Littlewood gives graphical representation of his findings to suggest that difference in cultures of learning is perhaps an illusion as the students from different cultures seem to have the same perceptions and preferences as far as learning is concerned.

Apparently, contrastive studies do not seem to provide much valid insight into the dynamics of two cultures of learning in contact. On the contrary, discrepancies in empirical findings as shown above challenge the notion of culture of learning itself. Critics in intercultural studies would ask whether the discussion on the notion makes any sense at all if little valid evidence of contrast or divergence is found between Confucian and Socratic cultures of learning, which have been traditionally believed to be vastly different. This would in turn lead to fundamental questions on culture, cultural difference and intercultural communication, as theorists of third space do. However, if we take their view that culture is on the one hand dynamic, ambivalent and even self-contradictory, but on the other hand it has ‘its seriality, its progress, its customs and coherence’ (Bhabha, 1994: 136), an interesting question could be whether the application of theories of third space, rather than a contrastive perspective, to empirical studies helps shed new light on the academic experience of CHC students living and studying abroad.

Durham Research

Diverse and even contradictory data from the empirical studies as exemplified above suggest that Confucian culture of learning, like any form of culture, is context dependent. ‘Essential features’ may be found evident in certain situations but not in others. Quantitative surveys used by researchers reviewed above are unlikely to explain human attitudes, perceptions and behaviour simply because of the context-dependent, multifaceted and dynamic nature of culture. For such studies, adopting an ethnographic approach as defined by Agar (1980) and Spradley (1980) to examine the perceptions and behaviours of individuals or social groups and to study their engagement in a third space is more likely to reveal the dynamics and multifacetedness of the cultures in contact, leading perhaps to a new culture in the forming.

In the following pages, I shall briefly describe the methodological principles followed by this ethnographic study carried out at a UK university
starting in the summer of 2004 and ending before the summer of 2005. This study involved 21 students, including 17 postgraduates and 4 undergraduates, mainly from three departments of the university: business school, school of education and computer science. Data were also collected from five local lecturers involved in an e-forum group. Three ‘foreshadowed questions’, in Hammersley and Atkinson’s (1983) words, were initially formulated. These are anticipated problems, not for testing or (dis)proving but for sustaining a researcher’s curiosity and involvement during the long period of study, and may be reformulated during data collection in the field:

(1) Do CHC students truly experience the differences between Confucian and Socratic cultures of learning and mediate between the two?
(2) Or do they (co)create, with others, a third space that is new and displaces histories?
(3) Or both, or neither?

Methodological principles

The research involved ethnographic interviews or informal conversations with CHC students, complemented by observations of classroom behaviour of a specific group of students in naturalistic classroom settings. The study followed the general principles set by methodologists such as Agar (1980), Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) and Spradley (1979, 1980), which are briefly summarised by Hammersley (1998: 8–9). The first principle is the pursuit of naturalism that primarily aims to capture the characteristics of emergent human behaviour by ensuring that research data are collected from the everyday, naturalistic setting of the participants. The second aims for in-depth understanding of complex human behaviour rather than drawing quick conclusions on causality. This in-field work meant examining the social phenomenon that emerged by carefully studying the context and other factors that may be associated with it, and thick descriptions of the social phenomenon (Geertz, 1973) are expected for data analysis. The third is to give emphasis to inductive rather than deductive inquiry, that is, to discover the meanings of new and unfamiliar social phenomena not to test hypotheses.

Emergent themes

Because of the nature of ethnographic study and the methodological principles followed in the study, many of the data, including the ‘quotes’
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presented below, are field notes jotted down during an observation or after an informal conversation retrospectively. Except for the e-forum postings, none of the data are recorded verbatim. For the purpose of this chapter, three themes are selected for presentation on how the CHC students self-direct their own learning to become competent. These themes focus on studying abroad, although inevitably competence in living abroad is touched upon in some places.

‘Norms’ versus change

Data from ethnographic interviews (26 interviews, many of which were casual conversations, were conducted) and from about a dozen e-forum postings by lecturers (most are local British) suggest that differences in terms of established norms of learning were commonly perceived and in some cases observed. Perceptions were usually illustrated by such expressions as ‘of course, there are differences …’ and ‘I knew it is important to speak up here …’. On two occasions, one Chinese and one Taiwan student said, ‘I noticed that here … but back at home …’, which showed their observations of differences. However, it is important to note that most students and teachers did not find their perceptions proven by their empirical experience. Expressions recorded to show this pattern include ‘I was surprised to see some local students were also shy …’, ‘In fact, more than half of us are from Asia and even the lecturer is originally from China. I don’t see much difference …’, ‘The [Asian] student, surprisingly, was quite active …’ (e-Forum P-3, posting by a British lecturer in English literature), these being just a selection from a larger number of similar statements.

More importantly, data suggested that once different norms were observed some developed strategies to address the differences, resulting in a change or transformation in behaviours and beliefs. One MA student in law from China, for example, originally took a local student’s behaviour of asking ‘simple’ questions in lectures as ‘shocking’ and ‘Hou Lian Pi’ (thick-skinned), which means ‘not ashamed of looking unintelligent’. In time, she said she saw the advantage of doing this and began to adopt this behaviour. When asked if she actually asked questions in lectures; however, she hesitated a while and answered,

Well, yes, I never seem to have asked any question in front of so many people during lectures. I would start asking a friend first, or ask in a small group. (FN-11, 17/11/04, my translation from Chinese and emphasis)
An undergraduate student of economics with early primary and secondary school experience in Singapore and Hong Kong described her change of classroom behaviour from a relatively reactive listener to a proactive participant. When explaining why, she said:

In Hong Kong and Singapore, you are expected to be attentive in class. Here, I found all students talk. I began to try to contribute more in the classroom and found it interesting. This can also impress the teacher. (FN-26, 12/05/05, original English, my emphasis)

The two examples show self-directed learning in practice. Both students identified issues in their circumstances and made their own decisions to address them. The ‘quotes’ (translated or lifted from the field notes) indicated that both felt happily transformed, at least partially, by adapting their way of thinking and behaviour in the new environment while maintaining to some degree traditional values of ‘face’ (by asking a friend first) and respect for authority (by impressing the teacher) as listed in Cortazzi and Jin (1996b). In other words, they brought the two cultures of learning into relationship and mediated between them.

Data from this study show that CHC students and local tutors perceive differences prior to interaction, although the perceived differences in terms of cultures of learning may or may not prove true empirically. The students depend on these perceptions at the initial stage to make sense of specific situations, to bring their expectations into relationship with the experienced realities and to mediate between them. The findings are apparently explicable by the schema theory developed by cognitive psychologists such as Moscovici (1984) and Rumelhart (1980). A schema, according to Rumelhart (1980: 34), is ‘a data structure for representing the generic concepts in memory’. The list of values and norms as given by Cortazzi and Jin (1996) could be seen as the ‘data structure’ internalised through early socialisation. When this schema is challenged in the real world, particularly when the real world is foreign, two processes are activated (Moscovici, 1984: 29): ‘anchoring’ in which an individual draws things foreign and intriguing and compares them to the paradigm of a system which the individual thinks is suitable; and ‘objectifying’ which ‘saturates the idea of unfamiliarity with reality’ (p. 38). In other words, new experience is assimilated to and in turn modifies the existing data structure (Byram, 1989). The data presented above show that few CHC students rigidly followed the set of ‘norms’ internalised in early socialisation or were found to be transformed entirely. As time went on, many existing schemata were modified. An intermediate zone was created,
usually through a repeated process of mediation between the perceptions of the two cultures of learning with the experienced reality.

**Classroom dynamics**

Classroom observations, participant or non-participant, did seem to present a contrast between cultures of learning; local students tended to look more ready and more articulate in airing views than CHC students in the classroom. The linguistic barrier is undeniably a significant factor in the tendency towards relative quietness of CHC students. A closer observation revealed that in a classroom mixed with local and CHC students of about 15-in size, two patterns might emerge. If a classroom was dominated by local students, CHC students tended to be reluctant to participate, particularly in whole class discussions (FN-23, 21/02/05; FN-4, 22/07/04). When the majority in a classroom were from CHC countries or regions, which is often the case in departments that offer courses popular with Asian students such as business administration, international law and computer science, this difference was less evident. Some CHC students could be as active as their local counterparts.

Classroom behaviour was found to be affected by some other factors such as class activities and tutor’s mediation. Small group activities tended not to be dominated by native speakers as ‘quiet, foreign’ students looked more willing to participate. For whole class discussions (which were common for small classes of, say, less than 20), the first student to speak up would determine the outcome of the discussion, that is, a triggering effect in which contributions that followed tended to trail the line of thinking and be made by those from the same cultural group. Tutors have a clear role to play in influencing classroom behaviour. In an education classroom, for example, the tutor took measures to fill in the cultural gaps to prevent CHC students from getting ‘lost’. The tutor also deliberately encouraged quieter voices (usually international students), often by silencing a few ‘over-expressive’ native speakers (FN-2, 20/07/04; FN-23, 21/02/05; FN-4, 22/07/04).

Some lecturers make special efforts after seminars or lectures to ensure that learning is taking place. A British lecturer in the Business School wrote in an e-forum posting, ‘[classroom debate and discussion] is normally left to the British students..., at the end of the lecture I always try to make myself available for about half an hour. So far I have not had a single British student approach me after the lecture. However, I do find that the Chinese students will approach me,
normally in a small group of around five or six and ask for some additional clarification of some topic in the lecture. (e-Forum P-6)

However, not all measures taken by tutors can achieve the intended or desired outcome. Some tutors choose to slow down the pace of presentation for classes dominated by CHC students, or show special concern about quiet students, for example, by asking them individually if they could follow (this happened twice to a computer science student from China during breaks between lectures). Such efforts, according to this student during a casual conversation after a tennis game,

were OK at the initial stage. In time, many of us got fed up with it ... because slow pace in lectures are *not authentic teaching* and special concerns looked irritating as they made us look stupid. (FN-17, 06/12/04, my translation and emphasis)

The ‘quiet’ behaviour was found common in the classroom among CHC students. However, of the students approached during breaks or after lectures, not a single student was found to readily remain content with a listener’s role in the classroom while others are talking, accept whatever knowledge the teacher presents and remain obedient and submissive in learning.

... the majority of my classmates are British. Honestly, I often couldn’t follow what they were talking about. They often talk about the local system. But I don’t wish to look Ben (slow-witted), so I spoke up when sometimes I only sort of understood what was going on. ... (FN-8, 26/10/04, my translation and emphasis)

This was given by an MA student in education from China. She was obviously eager to join in the discussion even though she only partially understood what the issue was because of her limited understanding of references to the local system. She tried to negotiate her identity and representation (Bhabha, 1994) according to her evaluation of the situation.

Some CHC students with better fluency in English were in a better situation. An MA student of mass media from Taiwan found herself ‘more and more brave’ in the UK classroom as she realised that difficult points could be more easily dealt with by being brave in the classroom. ‘If a question can get answered quickly, why do I have to waste time figuring it out myself?’ (FN-25, 30/04/05, my translation). A most interesting narrative was given by a female student from Singapore, who spoke fluent English,

... When I started my study here, I noticed some local students tended to think few Asian students can express views in English in the
classroom. When you do speak up, they would look stunned. ... Though I was relatively quiet in class when I was in Singapore, in the UK, I become more and more active than before. The advantage is that you need to be more alert in class. (FN-23, 21/02/05, original English)

This student apparently created herself a new identity by transforming from a reactive learner to a proactive one, a new self in the new environment. This may be seen by Bhabha (1990b: 211) as a clear example of an individual exploring a third space, which resulted in ‘something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation’.

**Surface or deep approaches to learning**

A student’s behaviour in a classroom is an important indicator of how the student would approach a learning task. A learner who actively participates in classroom discussions is usually believed to be one who takes a deep approach because it is widely argued that active classroom participation requires higher levels of cognitive engagement (Biggs, 1999). On the other hand, a quiet student is often viewed as a surface learner who tends to use lower-order thinking skills such as memorising and note taking. Fleming (in Introduction) points out that, a polarised view of the notions of deep and surface learning, just as the polarised concepts of education and training, ‘does not do justice to the complexity of what is involved in becoming intercultural’. Indeed, data from my study suggest that, when facing a challenging concept in learning, an active and ‘deep’ CHC student with adequate linguistic competence participates in classroom discussions to check, confirm or show understanding. A ‘deep’ learner without such competence, on the other hand, ‘listens attentively’, makes use of all available means to figure out the meaning, or finds an answer outside the classroom. The higher-level cognitive engagement of such a learner can be demonstrated by the outcomes such as assignments the learner produces. A ‘quiet’ student from Taiwan who was observed closely, for example, came up with two highly engaging assignments that showed many features of a deep learner who analyses, relates and theorises competently. It is, therefore, problematic to use classroom behaviour as an only indicator of deep/surface learning.

The strategy of achieving understanding through memorisation (see Watkins & Biggs, 1996, 2001) could also be seen as an indicator that signifies a deep learning approach adopted by CHC students. Evidence of the
use of this strategy often emerged in informal interviews with CHC students. Most individuals studied saw it as both a deeply entrenched belief and a sign of commitment to learning that prove effective everywhere. Some claimed that they value and actually use this learning strategy in their studies in the UK. However, the following given by an MA student of finance from China seems to represent the views of most postgraduates in social science departments:

... in the UK extensive reading required by all module lecturers in fact helps me retain knowledge even more effectively than memorising hard facts and isolated bits of information. In China, I used to, better say, had to memorise a lot of these in order to pass exams. (FN-12, 18/11/04, my translation and emphasis)

This claim is interesting because, on the one hand, the student seemed to negate the approach to memorising hard facts and bit of information, but on the other hand, the notion of ‘retaining knowledge’ indicates the value of keeping learned knowledge in memory. Retaining what has been learned through extensive reading, rather than through rote learning of hard facts, may well be seen as evidence of appropriating and translating an aspect of a new learning culture to the advantage of the international students.

As stated before, using a foreign language for study and research is the most challenging task faced by CHC undergraduates and postgraduates. Individual learners adopt different attitudes and approaches to meeting the challenge according to their circumstances or priorities. A highly motivated student may feel disempowered for lack of linguistic competence and does not exhibit the features of a deep learner of any kind, irrespective of any particular culture of learning. Therefore, some students, like this MA student in economics, prioritise opportunities to learn the language over all other matters:

...Yes, I have to be quiet and passive in the classroom. I struggled with some tasks and assignments and only focus on things assessed. My English was quite weak ... I tried hard to improve my English outside the classroom. Though I don’t drink much, I often go to the pubs with my British friends and I joined a student tennis club, instead of a Saturday football team self-formed by Chinese students I very much wanted to join…. (FN-9, 29/10/04)

The social activities this student was involved in may not look directly related to his academic work but for him they were necessary undertakings to acquire the language skills needed for academic work and
future career. To categorise this student as a surface learner would clearly reduce the theoretical relevance of the notion of surface/deep learning.

However, the data do yield some ‘typical’ cases of surface learning. The economic student mentioned that some Chinese students he knew never seemed to care about their English nor to make friends with English speakers or international students of other cultures.

They often play together, eat together, and even take turns to attend lectures. They compare lectures notes and past exam papers ... What they try to do is to *Hun* (do the minimum to get) a degree before returning home. (FN-9, 29/10/04)

This phenomenon was noted by a few other students as particularly prominent among those who take a one-year master degree course and who live together with other students from the same country (FN 26, 12/05/05; FN-17, 06/12/04).

**Discussion**

The theoretical analyses and the research findings presented above focus on three aspects in relation to the cultures of learning in contact: norms versus changes, classroom dynamics and learning approaches. Data obtained provide some evidence to the foreshadowed questions for the study. The findings suggest that differences between Confucian and Socratic cultures of learning are commonly perceived not only by CHC students but local lecturers, even though the perceived norms may not be empirically evident. The perceived norms of learning and teaching associated with the Confucian culture of learning, their preliminary schemata, are useful as both students and lecturers seem to depend on them to make sense of the realities they face and use them as the basis for negotiating their identities and mediating learning and pedagogical strategies. During mediation, their preliminary schemata underwent a process of modification and transformation. Furthermore, the data indicate that ‘something new and something unrecognisable’ did occur when the two cultures were in contact. Quite a number of students were found to be doing something they would never do if they had stayed in their home academic environment. Examples include the ‘stunning’ Singaporean student who co-created a new identity of proactive learner (perhaps temporarily) with others in the classroom, the MA student in education who decided to take the risk of participating in class discussions to avoid looking *Ben* (slow witted), the student with limited linguistic competence who gave priority to improving language skills over all other matters, and perhaps even the students who
tried to Hun (do the minimum to get) a degree before returning home. These cases give evidence that some CHC students were exploring ‘a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation’ (Bhabha, 1990b: 211) in a third space constituting the ‘discursive conditions of enunciation’.

As shown by the overview and the data presented in this chapter, the concept of third space is particularly insightful when we study the experience of internationally mobile students. The most relevant of the concept of third space to this volume is its strong proposition to contest binary or polar opposites such as Confucian and Socratic cultures of learning, ‘education’ and ‘training’ and ‘deep learning’ and ‘surface learning’. The notion of ‘discursive conditions of enunciation’ represented in third space allows researchers and theorists to investigate heterogeneity and ambivalence of culture and cultures in contact from different perspectives and from multidimensions. The third space concept opens up new and productive ways of understanding the dynamics of identity negotiation in relation to power, language and individuality in intercultural interactions. However, current conceptualisation of third space places disproportional emphasis on fluidity and ambivalence due to hybridity and individuality in defining culture, on the performative present of interpretation in analysing interactions and on ‘newness’ that is neither part of the continuum of the past nor that of the present in predicting outcomes of cultures in contact. Less stressed by third space theorists are the processes of internalisation of social realities through earlier socialisation, preliminary schemata and modification of them through later socialisation long argued for by schema theorists as reviewed before (Moscovici, 1984; Rumelhart, 1980) and by theorists in tertiary socialisation (Byram, 1990, 1997; Doyè, 1992, 1999, 2008) who maintain that exposure to otherness through learning a foreign language or studying abroad may enable individuals to extend their perspectives to see the world and reconcile their identities in three dimensions: cognitive, moral and behavioural. Excessive emphasis on newness by third space theorists cited in this chapter suggests negation of mediation and reconciliation, although not explicitly stated in the literature.

On the basis of the evidence shown in this study, I would argue that the concept of third space should be reinterpreted to strike a balance between the ‘heimlich’ and ‘unheimlich’ nature of culture and between newness and mediation of the past and the present as a consequence of intercultural interaction. To be meaningful, third space needs to be seen as interactive space in which intercultural interaction is a process of enunciation, or ‘negotiation of contradictory and antagonistic instances that open up hybrid sites and objectives of struggle’ (Bhabha, 1994: 25). Through the process enunciation, something entirely new and unrecognisable can arise.
out of a specific context at a specific moment that is ‘blasted out of the continuum of history’ (Bhabha, 1994: 38). This space, at the same time, is an intermediate zone where mediated ways of behaving and modes of thinking are identified and individual identities are negotiated and transformed, usually partially.

It is important to note that while the process of enunciation would give rise to something new, which can be desirable or undesirable from the standpoint of international mobility (the latter is illustrated by the observation that some were trying to *Hun* (to do the minimum to get a degree), the process of mediation as the data show would usually lead to competence that is desired for intercultural communication. This study as well as other studies (e.g. Coleman, 1998) show that mere exposure to otherness, by living and studying abroad for example, does not automatically result in intercultural competence. To become interculturally competent, it (exposure) has to go with willingness to relate to otherness, skills to mediate between cultures and actions to explore third space.

**Notes**

1. Confucian Heritages Cultures are often used to refer to those national groups in Asia that are generally said to share values articulated by Confucius (551–479 BC), a thinker and educator who founded the Ru School of Chinese thought. These national groups are often said to include China, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong (Biggs, 1999; Greenholtz, 2003). Some such as Phuong-Mai *et al.* (2005) extend the notion to include Viet Nam and Malaysia.

2. None of the students we studied had attended a regular course or training programme, although three students mentioned that they had once or twice attended occasional talks or lectures on British culture before their sojourn abroad.

3. When asked about the main challenge, many informants immediately pointed to language as the main hurdle for studying and living abroad. Some also listed culture as a chief barrier.

**References**


