# Intercultural Communication in English Courses in Asia: What Should We Teach About?

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**Abstract** When intercultural communication skills are taught in foreign language courses, three high priority factors to address are (1) ethnocentrism, (2) stereotyping, and (3) ingroup bias. These factors are important to understand not only because they can bias interpretations, but also because they can potentially short-circuit the interpretation process through a mechanism known as "attribute substitution."

Dual process views of thinking hold that the human mind has two basic thinking processes, an intuitive process often called System 1 and a reflective process called System 2. Most interpretive judgments are made rapidly and intuitively by System 1, and in its rush to make rapid interpretive judgments System 1 will often replace a relatively difficult question with one for which easier answers are more readily accessible. Ethnocentrism, stereotypes, and ingroup bias offer highly accessible substitute questions that make it easier for System 1 to make automatic, unreflective judgments.

Teaching explicitly about these factors in foreign language courses helps learners better understand how the interpretation process works and what factors affect it in intercultural encounters. Furthermore, teaching about these factors helps build learners' conscious awareness of the interpretation process itself, which may ultimately be the most valuable contribution to their intercultural communication skills.

## 1 Introduction

*Teacher Li is a young English language teacher at a university in China. One day her department asks her to go to the airport to pick up a professor who is visiting from Canada to give a workshop. When she meets him at the airport, she sees that he is an older man, perhaps in his sixties, and he also has quite a lot of luggage - two large suitcases and several smaller bags. They aren't able to find a luggage cart, so Teacher Li offers to carry one*

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*of the large suitcases, but he insists that he is able to carry all of his luggage by himself. However, as they head toward the car, he seems to be having some trouble moving all the baggage, so at a point when they are stopped in an elevator and he has put down the suitcases, Teacher Li simply picks one of them up. The professor says "I can handle these by myself," but Teacher Li assumes he is just being polite, and when the elevator door opens she heads off with the suitcase. Soon they reach the car, but now the professor seems quite annoyed with Teacher Li, and hardly speaks with her at all when she tries to make conversation during the ensuing ride to the university.*

This story is an example of a critical incident, so called because it is likely to be both noticeable and memorable for those involved, a point captured in the term used by Pham – "most noticeable positive and negative incidents" (2018). Critical incident exercises are frequently used in intercultural competence training workshops (Brislin and Yoshida 1994; Albert 1995; Wight 1995; Cushner and Brislin 1996; Cushner and Landis 1996; Fowler and Blohm 2004; Apedaile and Schill 2008), and the basic format of the activity is that trainees are first presented with a critical incident, and then asked to discuss possible explanations for what happened. Critical incident activities are also sometimes used in English language courses because they provide both language practice opportunities and an opportunity to build intercultural communication skills (Corbett 2003; Snow 2015). In fact, the incident above is taken from a textbook for learners of English (Snow 2014). While this particular incident is fictionalized to some degree for teaching purposes, it is closely based on an actual experience related to me by an English teacher in China, and I have included it here as an example of a kind of interaction that is increasingly common not only in China but throughout Asia and indeed the rest of the world.

As a result of globalization, ever larger numbers of people around the world will have intercultural encounters like Teacher Li's, and this is particularly true in the Asian region where one of the most dramatic examples of the magnitude of the changes taking place is provided by China. It was only a few short decades ago that most people in China would live out their entire lives without ever meeting anyone from a foreign country. However, now it is not at all unusual for Chinese people to have face-to-face encounters with foreigners, either because of the increasing number of foreigners streaming into China, or the similarly substantial outpouring of Chinese who go abroad for schooling, employment, conferences, or tourism. Similarly, whereas it was not long ago that Chinese were almost entirely cut off from indirect intercultural encounters of the kind that take place through the media, now a great number of Chinese have easy and regular access to the rest of the world via media and the Internet. This leads to a dramatic increase in intercultural encounters in which Chinese people see powerful and sometimes disturbing images of other cultures, and also have the opportunity to see how people from other cultures perceive China. The growing frequency of encounters like those illustrated by the story of Teacher Li raises the question of what can and should be done to better prepare the people of Asia – and the rest of the world – for interaction across cultural lines. At the individual level, the question would be one of how Teacher Li prepares herself – and presumably also her students – for effective interaction in such encounters. At the international and institutional level, the question is what

governments and educational institutions should incorporate in teaching curriculums to ensure that more people are well-equipped to interact effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds.

Clearly the definition of what constitutes effective intercultural communication is quite complicated. For example, in the case of Teacher Li, whether or not her interaction skills were "effective" in this case is probably a matter of more than just her personal satisfaction with the outcomes of the encounter. She probably also needs to consider the expectations of her university and department, and whether or not they will be happy with her interaction. There may even be a national level for her to consider. After all, it is quite possible that in this encounter, to some degree, she perceived herself as an ambassador and representative for China (Chen 1998), and wanted to create a good impression of her country. However, as China's world role grows, the traditional Chinese desire to be a good host may also be tempered by a sense that pleasing foreign guests is not necessarily always desirable, particularly if those foreigners behave in ways that seem unreasonable. In short, the issue of what constitutes effective intercultural interaction is quite complex, and goes well beyond what is possible to deal with here. So, for the purposes of this chapter, we will use a relatively simple definition of "effective" interaction as striking a reasonable balance between achieving one's own goals in the situation and also achieving the goals of others who have a stake in the encounter.

This chapter considers the issue of **what** aspects of intercultural communication should be taught in foreign language courses, especially English language courses, and what should be taught about those aspects. Of course, the question of **how** to teach intercultural communication skills is also very important. However, I have recently addressed this question elsewhere (Snow 2015), so here I will simply note that there are a number of activities which can be used in English classes that build both language skills and also intercultural communication skills; the critical incident activity above is but one of many possible examples. Rather than focusing on method, this chapter will focus on the question of content, of what we should teach learners about intercultural communication.

This chapter will discuss the role played in intercultural communication by three factors: ethnocentrism, ingroup bias, and stereotyping. The idea that these three factors play a substantial role in intercultural communication will not come as a surprise as these are all well-established "usual suspects" found in any discussion of intercultural communication, so there is little need to argue their importance. The goal of this chapter is to explore what should be taught about them, and what the goals of teaching about these factors should be.

My argument will be that in intercultural communication training in English language courses, our primary focus should not be on teaching about British and American cultures, which is the approach often taken when issues of culture are addressed in ELT materials in Asia. Instead, I will argue that our goal is to prepare learners for what Kecskes (2018) refers to as a success approach in intercultural communication, and that one way we can do this is by helping learners gain a better understanding of the processes by which they go about interpreting – making sense of – intercultural encounters. I will also argue that one good way to do this is by

teaching learners about the three factors identified above, and helping teachers and learners develop a mental intercultural encounter checklist that will help them attend to these factors during problematic, challenging or difficult intercultural encounters.

A secondary goal of the chapter is to argue that our understanding of the interpretive process in intercultural communication will be enhanced if we draw on recent findings from the field of psychology, particularly what are known as dual-process views of human thinking, and if we explore the implications that a concept called "attribute substitution" has for intercultural communication. However, before exploring these issues, it is necessary to first explicitly discuss several assumptions that underlie the arguments in this chapter.

## 2    Working Assumptions

I have discussed these four working assumptions in more detail elsewhere (Snow 2015), but brief re-statement of them here will help set the stage for points to be made below.

### 2.1    Incorporating Intercultural Communication into English and Other Foreign Language Courses

The first assumption is that foreign language courses should be an important vehicle – perhaps the most important vehicle – through which people receive basic training in intercultural communication. Of course, people receive intercultural communication training in many different kinds of settings, including not only courses in universities but also various kinds of workshops in businesses, hospitals, and the hospitality industry. However, in many countries foreign language study is required for all students, especially at the secondary and tertiary levels, and for many of these students foreign language courses are the main form of preparation they receive for dealing with people from other countries and cultures.

I would argue that intercultural communication training should be a part of all foreign language courses, but I feel it is especially important in English language courses, not only because English is the foreign language most widely taught in Asia, but also because "English as Lingua Franca" (House 2018) is the language most frequently used in intercultural communication, even in encounters where no participants speak English as their first language. Why should English courses become a major site for intercultural communication training? The answer is simple – English courses provide the only formal training for intercultural encounters that most learners ever get. It is easy to lose sight of this fact in a world where intercultural communication courses are gradually becoming more common on univer-

sity campuses and curriculums. However, for the foreseeable future, the kind of pre-intercultural encounter training which reaches the most learners in Asia – and in which they invest the most time – consists of English language courses.

Of course, many English language courses already have a culture component of some kind, often focused on British and American cultures. However, learning basic facts about British and American cultures is not at all the same thing as gaining a working knowledge of intercultural communication, and the latter is actually more valuable in a world where many or most of the people from other cultures that learners will need to interact with are from countries other than Britain and the US. What learners need most is an understanding of the basic dynamics of communication with people whose culture is unfamiliar to them, and the factors that affect such communication.

## 2.2 Limiting the Number of Intercultural Communication Concepts Addressed

A second working assumption is that, if we incorporate intercultural communication training into English and other foreign language courses, it is neither possible nor desirable to try to cover all the topics and concepts that would normally be included in a typical intercultural communication course or textbook. One reason is that intercultural communication is a very broad and complex field of study, and even an introductory textbook will normally cover dozens of major concepts. Taking just one relatively recent textbook as an example (Liu et al. 2011), we find more than 50 different topic areas listed in the table of contents, and under each of these multiple concepts are introduced, explained, and illustrated. Clearly, there simply is not enough extra time in English language courses – which obviously need to focus first and foremost on language skills – to cover so many different concepts, and attempting to cover them all would make it very difficult to address any of them in any depth.

Furthermore, not all English teachers have had training in intercultural communication, and it seems somewhat unreasonable to expect that English teachers – who are often busy people facing large numbers of students and heavy workloads – will add mastery of so many new concepts to their teaching repertoire. While it is reasonable and desirable for language teachers to develop some understanding of intercultural communication, it also seems more practical and reasonable that they familiarize themselves especially with a limited number of key concepts which are likely to affect many kinds of intercultural encounters. In other words, when considering how to best incorporate intercultural communication training into English language courses, we need a short list of high priority items.

## 2.3   Focusing on the Interpretation Process

My third working assumption is that, as we look for a short list of high priority items, it is desirable to focus particularly on the issue of interpretation, in other words, the process by which one goes about making sense of the words and actions of "strangers". (Here and below, I use the word "strangers" to refer to people who are from other and unfamiliar cultural backgrounds.) By way of example, in the case of Teacher Li, interpretation would be the process by which she generates one or more explanations for why the Canadian professor seems to be unhappy, and by which she decides which possible explanation to adopt. This interpretation, in turn, will influence how she proceeds in her further interactions with the Canadian professor.

Why focus on the interpretation process? The first reason is that it plays an important role in all intercultural encounters (Chen and Starosta 1998; Gudykunst and Kim 1997; Scollon et al. 2012). Here it may help to contrast an interpretation-focused approach with approaches that emphasize teaching students information about the cultures of English-speaking countries, usually Britain and the US. For example, teaching students proper table manners for a dinner in a British or American home may help students if they are ever invited to such a meal. However, this approach has two major limitations. The first is that such information is only useful if the strangers with which a student needs to interact are British or American, and – as noted above – this will often not be the case. The second is that such culture teaching generally consists largely of broad generalizations that may well not apply to many actual situations where one is dealing with individual British or Americans; for example, the norms of politeness that hold sway at a formal family dinner in the US would not be quite the same as those that would apply among college students at a fast food restaurant – or for that matter, in some respects, at a formal dinner in the UK.[1] In short, in many intercultural encounters, much of what students learn about British and American culture will not really help them very much, and attempts to apply whatever limited culture information they have learned may actually do more harm than good, leading to inappropriate interpretations or behaviors.

The second reason to focus on the interpretation process is that interpretation is the basic starting point of virtually all communicative acts. A common sense description of a communicative act might look more or less like the following:

*I have idea → I encode idea into message → I transmit message →You receive/interpret message*

However, as reasonable as this formula seems, it is misleading in that it may suggest the chain of events begins with the generation of an idea, and that interpretation only enters the process later on. In reality, the chain actually begins with interpretation because, in the chain of communication moves, most moves are impacted by

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[1] I am keenly aware that concepts and terms such as "British culture" or "American culture" – not to mention "Western culture" or "Asian culture" – are not only extremely broad, but also potentially dangerous, especially if they lead us to believe that all of the people in these huge categories are essentially the same. I use such terms in this chapter only for the sake of expediency, and also because they to reflect how people often talk and think about cultural groups.

one's interpretation of whatever move came before. For example, most if not all of the communication moves made by Teacher Li in the story above are responses to things the professor said or did, and are based on her interpretation of those things. Even when she appears to be the one who initiates the chain of communication acts, as she presumably did when she first spoke upon meeting him, her choice of words and actions will be shaped by her interpretation of the general situation and what she feels is expected of her in the situation (Scollon et al. 2012).

Of course, interpretation is not the only aspect of a communicative act that is worthy of attention; for example, learners could also benefit from training in how to generate and evaluate response strategies. However, interpretation is worthy of particular attention in intercultural training because one's interpretations have such a significant impact on responses. My argument below will be that, as we consider how best to incorporate intercultural communication training into English language courses, one of our main goals should be to help learners gain a better understanding of the interpretation process and the factors that affect it in intercultural encounters.

## 3   Interpretation and Dual Process Views of Thinking

To understand how factors such as ethnocentrism, stereotyping, and ingroup bias affect interpretive judgments in intercultural encounters, we need to first make a quick detour into the field of psychology, and what are known as dual processing views of thinking. Many psychologists subscribe to some version of the idea that the human mind takes two basic approaches to thinking (e.g. Wilson 2002; Kahneman 2011; Evans 2010; Evans and Stanovich 2013). While there is not yet complete consensus as to the terms that should be used for these two approaches, many scholars use the terms "System 1" and "System 2".

System 1 consists of those human thinking processes which function instinctively and generally below the level of conscious awareness. These processes are largely or entirely automatic, and are often described as a kind of automatic pilot. They function very rapidly and efficiently, and involve relatively little effort or conscious control. Interaction and communication require that we make a large number of rapid interpretative decisions, as often as once every second (Scollon et al. 2012), so by necessity System 1 handles most interpretive judgments and is our default system for dealing with such judgments (Evans 2010). For example, from the moment Teacher Li meets the Canadian professor, her mind is constantly making interpretive decisions such as:

Should I speak first, or wait for him?
Should I shake his hand? How long? How hard do I squeeze?
Do I look him directly in the eye? How long?
What do I talk about first? Should I ask about his trip? Should I introduce myself? Should I ask how he is feeling?
What do I think of him? Does he seem reasonably friendly or not? Does he seem to be relatively formal or informal?
How tired does he seem to be? How physically able does he seem to be?

These are all interpretive decisions Teacher Li's mind is likely to be dealing with even in the first minute of her acquaintance with the professor, and it would be impossible for her to consider all of these issues – and no doubt more – deliberately and consciously. However, rather than being overwhelmed, Teacher Li is able to deal with all of these issues because her mind (System 1) deals with most of them automatically and often without the need for conscious attention and awareness.

In contrast, System 2 is the term used for the kinds of thinking we are more consciously aware of, the conscious application of reasoning to judgments and decisions. In fact, System 2 is essentially what we think of when we use the term "thinking". System 2 requires much more investment of mental effort than System 1, and as a result it functions much more slowly. However, it is also more careful and thorough, and we are more likely to engage this system when we feel that an issue demands deliberate thought. For example, the Canadian professor's unexpectedly negative response to Teacher Li's attempts to help may cause her to make a conscious effort to ponder the question of why he responded as he did – at least if the intervention of System 2 is not pre-empted in some way by the faster and more efficient System 1.

Even though System 1 functions very rapidly and automatically, its judgments tend to be fairly accurate, and there is a growing literature, both scholarly and popular, that encourages us to "go with our gut" more often when confronted with problematic decisions (e.g. Gerdzinger 2007; Gladwell 2007). The reason System 1 tends to be fairly accurate, especially when dealing with familiar tasks in familiar settings, is that it has been honed and trained through previous exposure to similar situations (Evans 2010). However, in less familiar settings with which our minds have less experience, System 1 is prone to certain kinds of errors; one of these is the attribute substitution error which we will discuss in more detail below. When dealing with novel situations, what Evans and Stanovich (2013) refer to as "hostile environments" for System 1 processing, System 2 is generally more reliable because it is more painstaking and thorough, and better at noting and processing new clues from the situation, rather than relying on past experience. But it is also more effortful and time-consuming, so the natural tendency is to employ it as little as possible (Kahneman 2011). The trick, therefore, is to make good choices about when to trust fast and efficient System 1, and when to engage the more effortful but more reliable System 2. As Kahneman puts it, "System 2 is much too slow and inefficient to serve as a substitute for System 1 in making routine decisions. The best we can do is a compromise: learn to recognize situations in which mistakes are likely and try harder to avoid significant mistakes when the stakes are high" ( 2011, p. 28; see also Evans and Stanovich 2013; Portnoy 2012).

In general, intercultural encounters such as that of Teacher Li with the Canadian professor involve interaction with someone whose culture is relatively unfamiliar, and in such situations it is generally desirable to have more conscious control over the interpretation process than is necessary when interacting with people from a familiar cultural background. This suggests not only that System 2 should be engaged more often, but also that learners should have a better understanding of how the interpretation process works and what factors are likely to affect it in inter-

cultural encounters. For this reason I suggest that an important aspect of building effective intercultural communication skills in English courses is enhancing conscious awareness of the interpretation process, and also enhancing understanding of the factors that often affect interpretation in intercultural encounters, factors such as ethnocentrism, stereotypes, and ingroup bias. These factors not only have the potential to bias interpretive judgments made in intercultural encounters; they also have the potential to short-circuit the interpretation process, allowing it to function at an unconscious (System 1) level when it would be better to engage System 2 more and interpret more consciously. This happens particularly because of one of the systematic errors to which System 1 is prone – attribute substitution.

Attribute substitution is probably best described as a short cut that System 1 takes when it is confronted with a complex or difficult problem. As Kahneman puts it: "If a satisfactory answer to a hard question is not found quickly, System 1 will find a related question that is easier and will answer it" (Kahneman 2011, p. 97; see also Kahneman and Frederick 2002). Because System 1 needs to make judgments very rapidly, it often deals with difficult questions by replacing them with similar but simpler questions, and then answering those. For example, when confronted with a difficult question like "How popular will the president be six months from now?" System 1 may replace it a simpler question involving fewer unknown variables, such as "How popular is the president now?". Similarly, confronted with a complex question like "How should financial advisors who prey on the elderly be punished?", System 1 may suggest a similar but much simpler question like "How much anger do I feel when I think of financial predators?" (Kahneman 2011, p. 98).[2]

Such substitutions are most likely to be made when two conditions are met: (1) the original question is relatively difficult to deal with, and no satisfactory answer is readily accessible; (2) a similar but easier question is readily accessible. Under these conditions, System 1 is likely to replace the more difficult "target question" with a simpler "rule of thumb" (heuristic) question (Kahneman and Frederick 2002). Of course, as Kahneman notes, "[…] System 2 has the opportunity to reject this intuitive answer, or to modify it by incorporating other information. However, a lazy System 2 often follows the path of least effort and endorses a heuristic answer without much scrutiny of whether it is truly appropriate" (Kahneman 2011, p. 99).

This is all highly relevant to intercultural encounter situations because they almost inevitably constitute hostile environments for the operation of System 1, in other words, environments which offer few familiar clues that would aid System 1 in rapidly making accurate judgments, and which instead confront System 1 with interpretation questions that are generally more difficult than those faced when interacting with people from one's own culture. For example, even though Teacher Li presumably knows something about Western culture, accurately interpreting the behavior of the Canadian professor will still be more difficult for her than assessing the behavior of a Chinese person would be. She may find it difficult to determine whether his behavior is normal for a Westerner, or the result of individual personal-

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[2] Substitute questions suggested by System 1 often have a significant affective component, as is the case in the second example here (Snow 2016).

ity features. She may not know whether there are Western cultural rules that she inadvertently broke and, if so, what they were. She may not even be sure of the degree to which his silence represents displeasure with her, rather than grumpiness after a long flight. When dealing with someone from her own culture, there would be a rich body of shared norms, values, and knowledge that would help her rapidly and accurately assess the situation; without this shared fund of cultural knowledge, interpreting his behavior becomes much harder. As Teacher Li struggles to make sense of the Canadian professor's behavior, the three factors discussed below – ethnocentrism, stereotypes, and ingroup bias – offer temptingly easy substitute questions and answers.

## 4   Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism should quite clearly be included on any short list of topics for intercultural training in English language courses. It plays a role in the great majority of intercultural encounters, and is one of the most frequent sources of problems because, as we attempt to make sense of the stranger's behavior, it is virtually certain that our thoughts will be shaped to a considerable degree by the norms and values into which we have been socialized from childhood (Brislin and Yoshida 1994; Triandis 1995; Chen and Starosta 1998).

The most obvious problem caused by ethnocentrism is bias. The very essence of ethnocentrism is the human tendency to assume that the norms of our own culture are universal and should apply just as much to other cultures as they do to our own. While this tendency is quite natural, it also causes problems in intercultural communication because it tempts us to view any behavior that deviates from the norms of our own culture as at least abnormal, and often simply wrong or bad. This is a widely discussed feature of ethnocentrism which does not require further elaboration here (Brislin 1993; Gudykunst and Kim 1997; Ting-Toomey 1999).

My focus here is on a second way ethnocentrism causes intercultural communication problems – it is a fertile source of substitute questions on which System 1 can draw when confronted with difficult interpretation questions. To illustrate this point, let's go back to Teacher Li's encounter. As Teacher Li attempts to interpret the behavior of the Canadian professor, it will be relatively difficult for her to see the situation from his perspective, and to know with any certainty the norms by which he would judge the appropriateness of his behavior in this situation. In contrast, the norms of her own culture, learned through years of experience, are quite readily available to her. Keep in mind that System 1 works precisely because people learn through repeated exposure to situations, and the main reason System 1 is often quite accurate when it makes rapid and automatic judgments is that it draws on lessons learned through similar previous experiences. It is quite likely that Teacher Li has previously had multiple experiences with hosting situations (which is probably how she frames this particular encounter), and through these she has internalized a set of

norms that are now familiar to her and readily accessible as she attempts to interpret the situation.

"Accessability" is a concept from psychology that relates to how easily and quickly an idea comes into one's mind. As Wilson (2002) notes, one important factor determining accessibility is:

> how often a concept has been used in the past. People are creatures of habit, and the more they have used a particular way of judging the world in the past, the more energized the concept will be. Our unconscious minds develop chronic ways of interpreting information from our environments; in psychological parlance, certain ideas and categories become chronically accessible as a result of frequent use in the past (Wilson 2002, p. 32).

Naturally, as Teacher Li reacts to the Canadian professor's behavior, the ideas which are most accessible to her System 1 and which most automatically come to mind will generally be based on her previous experience, most of which probably took place in a Chinese setting and cultural context.

So, as Teacher Li confronts the relatively difficult and complex target question "Why didn't this particular Canadian professor in this particular situation respond positively to my efforts to be a good host?", ethnocentrism offers System 1 a tempting heuristic – a simple rule of thumb – that facilitates quick, easy and even automatic interpretive judgments: "Use the norms of your own culture". In this situation, such substitute questions might be:

> (According to my cultural standards), did the Canadian respond appropriately?
> Why might a normal (Chinese) person respond negatively to my efforts to help?

We want to teach students about ethnocentrism not only because it may bias interpretive judgments, but also because it offers a tempting short-cut which may pre-empt more careful and mindful interpretation. Students should actively be on the lookout for ethnocentrism, and one of the questions on their mental intercultural encounter checklist should be: Am I judging based on the norms of my own culture, or trying to consider the norms of the stranger's culture?

## 5 Stereotypes

A second phenomenon that definitely belongs on any short list of topics to be addressed in intercultural communication training is the tendency to stereotype. Like ethnocentrism, this is a very natural tendency, based on the need to learn and manage information by categorizing and generalizing (Hall 2002). However, it can also cause problems in intercultural communication (Bar-Tel 1997; Scollon et al. 2012).

One way stereotypes influence interpretation is through bias. Of course, not all stereotypes are negative, and positive stereotypes at times cause people in intercultural encounters to interpret the behavior of strangers in ways that err on the positive side (though this can also be a source of problems if it creates overly high expectations that are later dashed). However, as Brewer notes: "Stereotypes about out-

groups most often are predominantly negative and consequently lead to expectations that are likely to organize our interaction with a previously unknown member of the out-group in ways that promote hostility, rejection, or conflict" (2003, p. 72).

A second important way stereotypes affect interpretation is by offering readily accessible substitute questions for interpretative judgments. In fact, we could say that stereotypes are pre-packaged judgments, learned from the media, from direct contact, or from stories we have heard others tell, that are ready and waiting to be applied in intercultural encounters. For example, Teacher Li may be influenced by stereotypes that portray Westerners as rather demanding and difficult to deal with, as very concerned about privacy, or perhaps as generally being rather suspicious toward Chinese. Then, when confronted with the relatively difficult question of what the intentions of a particular stranger are in a particular situation, System 1 substitutes an easier rule-of-thumb question – what are people from that group generally like? In the case of Teacher Li, easy and tempting substitute questions would include:

> What are Westerners/foreigners like?
> How do Westerners/foreigners normally act?

These are questions to which stereotypes offer convenient ready-made answers – all that is necessary is to identify the group to which the stranger belongs and then apply the relevant stereotype. (Of course, the very broad nature of categories like "Westerners" and "foreigners" facilitates the attribute substitution process.) Such stereotype-driven substitutions are especially likely when someone faces time pressure or is distracted; as Evans (2010, p. 115) notes, "if people are required to respond very quickly or while carrying out a second mental task […] the intuitive belief-based response is more likely to dominate" (see also Triandis 1994).

One would think that in an actual encounter situation visible clues would serve as an effective check on System 1's tendency to find easy answers in stereotypes, either by calling attention to discrepancies between the stereotype and the reality before our eyes, or by reminding us that not all members of a group are necessarily the same. To some extent this does happen, especially if contact with the stranger continues over time and there is opportunity for learning more about the stranger's culture – as well as the extent to which particular strangers are typical of their cultures. However, it is also important to recognize that once a stereotype-based judgment is made, it is often quite resistant to modification. In fact, through a mechanism called the anchoring effect (Kahneman 2011), System 1 often tends to shape evidence to fit conclusions. In other words, if Teacher Li decides that the professor's reaction is due to the fact that Westerners are very suspicious of Chinese people, her judgment will tend to guide her interpretation of new evidence that emerges later. Essentially, she is now primed to look for evidence that will confirm her judgment, and is likely to interpret any further evidence in ways that that confirm the original judgment. This makes it easier for stereotype-based judgments generated by System 1 to survive any scrutiny System 2 may offer, and decreases the chance that System 2 will feel compelled to intervene. As Kahneman notes: "System 2 is more of an apologist for the emotions of System 1 than a critic of those emotions – and an endorser rather than an enforcer. Its search for information and arguments is mostly

constrained to information that is consistent with existing beliefs, not with an intention to examine them" (2011, pp. 103–4).

To sum up, teachers and students should be aware of the tendency to draw on stereotypes when making interpretive judgments, and of the potential for bias that this introduces. People are more likely to question or reject interpretations if they are consciously aware these interpretations are based on stereotypes (Evans 2010). They should also be aware of how stereotypes may facilitate attribute substitution, replacing difficult interpretive questions with easier "what are they (generally) like?" heuristics. For their intercultural encounter checklist, the question students should develop the habit of asking is: Am I judging the stranger based on evidence in this person's actual behavior, or based on things I have previously heard about the stranger's group?

## 6 Ingroup Bias

A third factor which often impacts interpretive judgments in intercultural encounters is ingroup bias. This tendency to categorize people as either ingroup members or outsiders is deeply rooted in human nature, and creates a degree of natural bias against outsiders. This is not to say that we are always negatively disposed toward outsiders and strangers. But, in general, we are less concerned about their welfare, have less sense of obligation toward them, and are somewhat less willing to trust them than would be the case for ingroup members (Brislin 1993; Triandis 1994; Gudykunst and Kim 1997).

As with ethnocentrism and stereotyping, ingroup bias not only has obvious potential to bias our interpretation of the behavior of strangers, but also affects interpretation by offering substitute questions that may allow System 1 to make relatively fast and easy interpretive judgments. When dealing with strangers from unfamiliar cultures, it is often difficult to make reliable interpretive judgments about how much they can be trusted, how well disposed they are toward us, and so forth. It is far simpler to answer the basic ingroup/outgroup question. Thus, when confronted with the puzzling behavior of the Canadian professor, rather than engaging System 2 to consciously go through the effort of trying to sort out his intentions and motivations, it is possible that Teacher Li's System 1 will offer an easier question:

Should I treat him as one of us or one of them?

The danger, of course, is that Teacher Li's System 1 will have asked and answered this question before System 2 even becomes engaged, much less before Teacher Li has opportunity to gain a better understanding of what happened, for example, by talking with the professor. If the professor has been assigned to the "them" category, any subsequent conscious thinking Teacher Li engages in may take on something of a negative tint.

However, the other problem created by ingroup bias-driven attribute substitution is that it may well discourage any engagement of System 2 at all. As mentioned above, when we are trying to interpret the actions of a stranger, System 2 does have

opportunity to review substitutions offered by System 1, and does not always accept them. However, because engaging System 2 requires extra time and effort, we tend to be reluctant to use it – unless there appears to be especially good reason. When we are interacting with ingroup members, if they do or say something that is puzzling or problematic, we have a relatively high level of vested interest in working out the problem; in other words, there are good reasons to go through the effort of engaging System 2. However, one of the core characteristics of the in/outgroup dynamic is that we tend to have less sense of obligation toward outgroup members than we do toward ingroup members. When dealing with strangers we have categorized as outgroup members, it seems likely that we would be somewhat more likely to accept automatic System 1 substitutions because we would feel less obligation to invest the time and effort to engage System 2 in a more careful review of the situation.

In summary, we want students to be consciously aware of the role the ingroup/outgroup dynamic may play in intercultural encounters, not only its potential to bias judgments against the stranger but also its potential to facilitate automatic System 1 processing and discourage more deliberative System 2 processing. Learners should actively look for this factor, using an intercultural encounter checklist question like: Am I judging the stranger differently – more harshly – than I would judge a member of my own group?

## 7   Teaching Goals

As Teacher Li attempts to figure out the behavior of her Canadian guest, there are two reasons why it would be good for her to be consciously aware of the three factors discussed above and to understand how they might affect her interpretation process. The first is that awareness of these factors in and of itself may be helpful (Lian and Sussex 2018). There is some evidence that attribute substitution is less likely to take place when people are consciously aware of factors that may influence interpretative judgments (Kahneman and Frederick 2002), so a higher level of awareness of these factors and the role they play may be useful in managing them.

The second is that by studying these factors and gaining a better understanding of them, attention is called to the interpretation process itself, and to the need to engage System 2 more often during intercultural encounters. It is possible for System 2 to monitor judgments suggested by System 1, which it may then "endorse, correct, or override" (Kahneman and Frederick 2002, p. 51). Put another way, Teacher Li is more likely to handle the situation well if she is thinking about an encounter consciously and carefully, and making a deliberate attempt to manage the factors that are relatively likely to short-circuit the process and lead her to easy but less reliable interpretations.

For Teacher Li – and for all of us – we are more likely to attend to these factors and manage them appropriately if we have a short intercultural encounter checklist of potentially problematic factors, and develop the habit of consciously running through

it when in confronted with puzzling or problematic behaviors during intercultural encounters. By way of review, the checklist questions I would suggest are as follows:

Am I judging the stranger based on the norms of my own culture?
Am I judging the stranger based on things I have previously heard about the stranger's group?
Am I judging the stranger by different rules than I would use to judge a member of my own group?

These three questions do not call attention to all of the factors that may influence our interpretive judgments when problems arise in intercultural encounters. However, they do call attention to three factors that are very likely to be at play in virtually any intercultural encounter, that have high potential to bias judgments against the stranger, and that have high potential to short-circuit the interpretation process if we don't consciously manage them and engage System 2.

## 8    Conclusion

As we consider how to build the intercultural communication skills of learners in Asia – and the rest of the world – we should give serious attention to the role that English language courses can and should play. As its lingua franca role grows, English is increasingly the language that is used when people from different countries and cultures interact with each other. Therefore, for learners of English, building effective intercultural communication skills is at least as important as building linguistic accuracy, if not more so. By addressing concepts such as ethnocentrism, stereotyping, and ingroup bias in English language courses, we have the opportunity to build students' awareness and understanding of the role these factors play in intercultural communication. We also have the opportunity to help students develop the habit of consciously checking for these factors when they encounter problems in intercultural encounters. Learners will be more able to fairly and effectively manage the influence of these factors if they are consciously on the lookout for them and understand how they may affect interpretive judgments made during encounters with strangers.

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