

Promoting Cross-Cultural Understanding and Communication: International Chinese Students' Use of Laughter as a Means to Modify the Meaning of Speech

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Abstract

Student mobility across national borders has been increasing at an extraordinary pace. Correspondingly, much research has been conducted into issues concerning learners that move internationally to pursue learning in a culturally different country. To a great extent, vigorous debate and research did promote cross-cultural diversity, understanding and communication. However, few studies have looked into international Chinese students' use of laughter in much detail, given that laughter plays a significant part in shaping or molding meaning. This article demonstrates with examples of a group of ICSs on how their use of laughter alters the meaning of utterance in speech. The findings offer insights that aim at promoting cross-cultural understanding and communication so that a much smoother and a more inclusive and successful adjustment of these learners can be facilitated.

Keywords: International Chinese Students (ICSs), Use of laughter, Meaning of speech, Adjustment, Intercultural communication

1. Introduction

In recent years, student mobility across national borders has been increasing at an extraordinary pace. The so framed 'Chinese learner': also known as learners of the Confucian heritage cultural background, is "increasingly visible at all educational levels internationally" (Slethaug, 2010, p. 2). Correspondingly, much greater attention has been paid into issues concerning students from China who have gone overseas to study (Arkoudis & Tran, 2007; Liu, 2002; Tran, 2008, 2009; Yates & Wahid, 2013; Wang, 2012). International students who are affluent and proficient in their host language yet are not competent with their host cultural

knowledge that is required for interpretation, understanding and appreciation of laughter may not be able to adjust/adapt well to their host learning context. Nevo and colleagues (2001) argue “the humour of a particular culture or group often seems pointless or puzzling to the foreigner who lacks knowledge and information regarding cultural nuances” (p. 144). To interpret and appreciate laughter, or further to become an in-group, an understanding or familiarity of host cultural knowledge is therefore a necessity. In Lee’s (2006) study, the opening quote “I understand everything that goes on in class except when everybody laughs. Then I’m a total alien again” emphasizes this importance (p. 49). This strongly illustrates the complexities and/or difficulties involved in international students’ adjustment to their host learning context. International students’ feeling of being an “alien” implies that there is still so much more that educators of the multicultural classroom could do. The aim of this article is to raise an awareness of one potential area that educators and policy makers could choose to work on to create a possibly more inclusive atmosphere for those “alien” learners.

Laughter as a phenomenon is universal in any human race or culture; however, use of laughter seems to be culturally dependent and does not flow well across cultural boundaries (Lee, 2006; O. Nevo, B. Nevo, & Janie Leong Siew, 2001). Nevo et al. (2001) further contend that the “set of values, norms and unwritten rules of what is appropriate” is culturally specific and is therefore, shared by members of that particular cultural group (p. 144). To foster a more inclusive classroom, educators can increase their knowledge of their learners. The aim of this study is to offer some understanding of these students’ use of laughter (not lecturers’ use of humor with Chinese students, which is a different subject) through looking at features of stimulus of laughter.

Many researchers (for instance, Adelswärd, 1989; Provine, 1996) studying laughter have found that there is no direct connection between laughter and humor; however, theories of humor are often referenced by various researchers when they interpret the feature of the stimulus and in relation to its cultural aspect (Cheung & Yue, 2012; Lee, 2006; Nesi, 2012). This study looks into ICSs’ use of laughter through an examination of how laughter is used to modify the meaning of speech in oral discourses. An examination of philosophical attitudes toward humor and laughter aids this analysis.

2. Philosophical Attitudes Toward Humour and Laughter

The participants of this study are international Chinese students studying in a Western educational context. For a better understanding of these students’ use of laughter, “Western” philosophical views of humor and the ones in the Chinese tradition were briefly looked at for comparison and understanding. However, it is also worthwhile to note that the kinds of laughter that are observed in these students might also be visible in other cultures. As Nevo et al. (2001) argue “all cultures laugh and smile at incongruities and their solution” (p. 144). Techniques of humor production between the ‘East’ and the ‘West’ can therefore, be quite similar.

There exists three commonly referenced philosophies of humour: i.e. superiority/hostility, incongruity and relief theory (Morreall, 2009; Nelson, 2012; Nesi, 2012). The superiority theory focuses on laughing at others, the incongruity theory appreciated the incongruities

between expectations and reality, whereas the relief theory is concerned with the physical aspect of laughter (Morreall, 2009; Nelson, 2012; Nesi, 2012). Correspondingly, in the Chinese tradition, the Confucian philosophy depreciates humor; whilst the Taoist philosophical attitudes appreciate the incongruities and also believe laughter could promote emotional tranquility (Yue, 2010).

The superiority/hostility theory believes “humor makes people [the person who cracks the joke] feel stronger or more successful than others” (Nesi, 2012, p. 80). What is typical about this theory is that its jokes always have a winner and a loser (Nesi, 2012). To contrast with the superiority theory, the Confucian school of philosophy depreciates and despises the use of humor, regarding it as “an act of uneducated and uncivilized man” (Yue, 2010, p. 410). Making an “other” the object of laughter is typical from the superiority theoretical perspective (Cheung & Yue, 2012). In contrast, making “self” the object of laughter: self-critique is a common form in the Confucian tradition (see the “Analects” (Jenco, 2007)).

The incongruity theory perceives humor lies in the incongruity between expectations and reality (Morreall, 2009). Based on this theory, “people perceive humor when something is absurdly out of place” (Nesi, 2012, p. 80). Jokes according to this theory, “must carry two different or opposing ‘scripts’ and incongruity lies in ‘the clash between two registers’” (Nesi, 2012, p. 80). To be comparable to this theory, Taoist philosophy appreciates conflicts and paradoxes (Clasquin, 2001). Laozi and Zhuangzi being the founders of Taoism, both appreciate conflicts and paradoxes (Yue, 2010). To be similar to the Taoist tradition, Zeng Buddhism is contended to be inherited from the Taoist tradition towards humor and laughter in terms of appreciation of conflicts between opposing perceptions (Clasquin, 2001).

The relief theory, however, focuses on the physical aspect of laughter especially relating to the nervous system (Morreall, 2009). This theory perceives that “laughter provides a safe valve to release pent-up tensions ... as a means of releasing suppressed thoughts about taboo subjects” (Nesi, 2012, p. 80). Like the relief theory, Taoist philosophy also sees laughter as being natural that can enable people to merge with nature (Yue, 2010). Both Laozi and Zhuangzi share a passion for laughter and believe humor helps promote emotional tranquility (Yue, 2010).

3. On Modifying the Meaning of Speech in Oral Discourses

Laughter molds or shapes “the meaning of utterance in speech” (Adelswärd, 1989, p. 108). This change of meaning in oral discourses can be illustrated by for instance, signaling what has just been said as not being serious (Glenn, 1991) or clarifying ambiguity (Adelswärd, 1989). It could also simply indicate a friendly signal meaning that others can relax (Nelson, 2012).

To understand how laughter modifies the meaning of speech, an interrogation of features of stimulus of laughter and its communicative functions in interactive contexts is central. Laughter can communicate affect (Nelson, 2012), various emotions (Szameitat et al., 2009), can imply whether listeners’ implicit preferences are congruent with those of the speakers (Lynch, 2010), can also communicate the speaker’s face needs (Partington, 2006). In the

Chinese culture, face is perceived as particularly important (Wang, 2012). Chinese face is closely related to the community and concerns an individual's consideration of community judgement (Liu, 2002). Positive face, either "competent" or "affective" (Partington, 2006, p. 97), is particularly important in understanding ICSs' use of laughter.

The stimulus of laughter could feature criticism towards other, could also feature self-deprecation/self-critique or conflict (Fang & Faure, 2011; Nesi, 2012; Yue, 2010). In situations where the referent of laughter focuses on self, featuring competence for instance, the speakers' competent face is usually enhanced (Partington, 2006). However, inadequacy or incapability of any type can impair speaker's competent face (Partington, 2006). When this happens, speakers usually tend to choose to enhance their affective face to compensate (Partington, 2006). Apart from focusing on self, the object of laughter can also feature criticism towards other (Nesi, 2012). Laughter in these instances can help to express criticism towards those who are different (Nelson, 2012). Regarding any unbalanced power structures, laughter can be used by the ones who sit at the less powerful end to shake these established structures (Holmes, 2000). In these situations, laughter functions as a cover for accusation (Holmes, 2000). When the referent of laughter features conflict, laughter is usually seen as a response to incongruities (Nelson, 2012).

Learners of the Confucian heritage background seem to view themselves as non-humorous and also tend to believe that loud laughter could make others nervous or being uncomfortable (Liao, 2001). Humor is seen as "an act of low taste, improper manners, social informality" (Yue, 2010, p. 415). It is also viewed as the least important factor influencing personal character and is seen as an informal act (Yue, 2010). Too much laughter is considered for instance as "destroying one's will and spirit" (Yue, 2010, p. 410).

International Chinese students, however, laugh frequently. Laughter changes or at least modifies the meaning of utterance in oral discourses (Adelswärd, 1989). Yet to what extent their use of laughter changes the meaning of their utterances has rarely been documented. ICSs' attempts at humour could potentially be misinterpreted by their foreign peers and educators of the multicultural classroom, who do not take laughter into account. This can potentially risk misinterpreting this group of learners, let alone facilitating a much smoother and a more inclusive and successful adjustment.

4. This Study

This article is based on the author's doctoral work. The doctoral study is a qualitative based enquiry. It explores international Chinese students' transition to study in a new country from a historical and cultural vantage point with the aim to explore the ways in which their past institutional, peer, family and/or work networks framed their learning, and how this in turn influenced their experience of and approach to issues in Australia. Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987, 1991, 2000, 2001, 2004) informed the methodological approach taken in the thesis, in which the Change Laboratory Approach (CLA) (Engeström, Virkkunen, Helle, Pihlaja, & Poikela, 1996) was adapted to highlight the historicity, complexity and dynamism of these ICSs' processes of adjustment.

This article presents an analysis of nine international Chinese students' use of laughter on their emigration to Australia to undertake tertiary study. They were all female aged between 20 to 35 years of age and were studying postgraduate coursework programs in teacher education programs across four universities in Australia. The analysis of laughter was not initially an intention of the study. The original purpose of the interview questions was to examine how ICSs' prior experiences impacted their experience of and approach to challenges with learning in Australia. However, during the analytical phase, ICSs were found to laugh very frequently in formal conversational settings like the research interview. What made these students laugh so frequently, how did their use mold the interactions and to what extent this reflects their inscribed cultural values? This article sets these questions as its focus.

For analysis, laughter as an event is marked in all nine interview transcripts. The concordance package Wordsmith Tools (Scott, 2011) was used to search the number of instances of laughter as well as laughs per 1000 words in each interview event. ICSs used laughter quite frequently: up to 15.63 laughs per thousand words. To understand their use of laughter, nature of stimulus of laughter was initially examined. This examination was carried out through analyzing the "laughable [meaning] whatever speakers display as laughter's object or referent" (Glenn, 1991, p. 140) within "laughter episodes" (Wulff, Swales, & Keller, 2009, p. 85). Laughter episodes in this article refers to segments of texts in which the interviewees laughed at least once. The contexts of laughter episodes were then looked into with an attempt to discover how laughter modifies the meaning of their speech. Reference was also made to Chinese traditional cultural values wherever relevant to examine to what extent their use of laughter reflects their cultural values.

5. ICSs' Use of Laughter

After the initial identification of the laughter episodes, the referent of laughter was then examined to understand international Chinese students' use of laughter. Three broad themes were identified: laughing at self, criticism towards another and conflicts were referenced to understand features of stimulus of laughter. Wherever relevant, some cultural knowledge is also offered to further understand how laughter modifies the meaning of the utterance concerned. The author was born and raised in China and shares the same cultural heritage as those participants. The Chinese origin is also apparent in the author's appearance. This could influence the interactions that occurred during the interview process. This similarity, however, could also enable her to add to the ways in which the meaning of participants' speech was modified. The author will show that there are extra meanings communicated by laughter, which modifies or shapes interactions in formal conversational settings (*e.g.*, research interviews).

The following presents ICSs' use of laughter with the object focusing on laughing at self, criticism towards other and co-existence of conflicts.

5.1 Object of Laughter Focusing on Self

Relating to object of laughter focusing on self, there are two variations with the stimulus

either featured self-deprecation or competence. As observed from the following excerpts:

(1) Chen: I felt I was lucky that I have the opportunity to go overseas and wide my narrowed mind [laugh].

Interviewer: [laugh], did you question, or did you reflect often?

(2) Lu: actually, I was a very lazy student [laugh].

Because I lived in the school dormitory when I went to senior high school, because my dad wanted me to live more independently, I found most my classmates got up really early to study, till very late in the evening, but I was not like that [laugh].

(3) Zhang: all my classmates could recite, except me [laugh]. I said, “I cannot memorize, I really could not remember it, I do not understand why we need to memorize English paragraphs.”

In the first excerpt, Chen laughed after stating “wide my narrowed mind”, she stopped adding further information, the interviewer responded with a laughter. Chen here made herself as the object of teasing and laughter (Glenn, 1991). The stimulus featured self-deprecation/self-critique. When Chen made those remarks, she was possibly intending to present herself as being modest and being in a state of mind for learning and improvement of self (Li, 2001). She very possibly just wanted to convey the message that she was modest, meaning “I only use ‘narrowed mind’ to show that I am modest, therefore, do not take me literally”. Laughter in this episode molded the interactions and also shaped the meaning of the utterance. Laughter here therefore, altered the meaning of the utterance and implies the “non-seriousness” of her talk (Glenn, 1991, p. 149).

In the second excerpt, Lu laughed after the utterance of herself as being “a lazy student”. She then added further information meaning that she was lazy and that she meant what she claimed. Here, her inefficiency: being lazy acted as the object of teasing and laughter (Glenn, 1991). The stimulus featured self-deprecation/self-critique. Perceived inefficiency of any form can impair a speaker’s positive face (Partington, 2006). When their positive face is softened, they usually choose to boost their “affective face in recompense” (Partington, 2006, p. 98). Laughter here helps to express speakers’ aspiration of wanting to “belong to the in-group” (Partington, 2006, p. 97). Laughter here therefore, functions as a communicative signal (Nelson, 2012) and very possibly acted to communicate the speaker’s positive face needs (Partington, 2006). Zhang’s use of laughter in the third excerpt, functioned the same as the one in the second, functions as a communicative signal (Nelson, 2012) and also very possibly acted to communicate Zhang’s positive face needs (Partington, 2006). In all three laughter episodes, participants all laughed at self, and made self the object of laughter with the stimuli all featured self-deprecation/self-critique (Glenn, 1991). Laughter in all three instances modified the meaning of the speech. The extent to which laughter modifies the meaning of utterance differed. Chen used laughter to possibly want to convey the message that she was modest, whilst Lu and Zhang possibly wanted to use laughter to meet their positive face needs.

Within the broad category of laughing at self, compared to the number of laughter episodes with the stimulus featuring self-deprecation, the amount of laughter episodes with the stimulus featuring competence are relatively small. As observed from the following excerpts:

(4) Lu: another one is through my observation of other international students' behaviors, I can also do a PhD, I can also do research [laugh], I like to observe other people and learn from them because I was not satisfied with my own behaviors the first year.

(5) Xin: for me, yes, like I own it, that is my study, I own it, how I do it, what I do it, no one can have a say [laugh].

Interviewer: so you prefer you have control over everything?

In the fourth excerpt, Lu laughed after the utterance of herself as being competent in that she could also do research. She offered explanation of why she believed she could do so. Here, her competence: being capable of doing research acted as the object of teasing and laughter (Glenn, 1991). The stimulus here, instead of featuring self-deprecation/self-critique, featured competence/confidence. Intending to persuade the interviewer that she was capable, Lu aimed at boosting her competent face (Partington, 2006). Laughter here serves to express her positive face needs (Partington, 2006).

The stimuli in the fifth one featured exercise of control in that Xin declared firmly that she had the right to decide how to learn. Instead of trying to persuade the interviewer that she was capable, Xin intended to express the message that she was in control of her learning. This is another strategy that speakers adopt to help enhance their competent face (Partington, 2006). The use of laughter here is the same as how Lu used it: it similarly serves to meet Xin's positive face needs (Partington, 2006).

Both interviewees used laughter to serve their positive face needs. However, their objectives differed: Lu tried to persuade the interviewer that she was capable whilst Xin intended to express that she was in control of her learning. Laughter in these two episodes shaped the interactions in such conversational settings and functioned to meet the speakers' positive face needs.

5.2 Object of Laughter Focusing on Other

The object of teasing and laughter in the above excerpts all focused on self (Glenn, 1991). Apart from focusing on self, the object of laughter can also feature criticism towards other. Criticism here is congruent with the superiority theory of humor and laughter (Nesi, 2012), which is typically shown by laughing at other. Teasing others, typically absent others, helps maintain belonging to an in-group (Partington, 2006). Laughter in these instances can be used to express "hostility toward others with whom we have differences" (Nelson, 2012, p. 34). This "other" in this study includes teachers and exercise papers. Relating to the teacher-learner dyad, learners are argued to sit at the less powerful end (Wang, 2012). Laughter was used by students, who attempt to attenuate the unequal power structure and functioned as a cover for accusation (Holmes, 2000). As the following excerpts demonstrate:

(6) Interviewer: since you arrived here, what have you found most unexpected/surprising

about the way teachers teach here?

Xin: racist, seriously, it happens, it is real, yes, [laugh]. Some teachers, ... they just do not include you; they do not even try to help to understand you, I mean they are educated people, but they still have that you know, they have the 'otherness', they think you are not us.

(7) Interviewer: how did your teachers teach when you studied high school?

Sarah: very simple, stand in the front of the classroom, write on the board, sometimes, have a walk in the isles to see who is not paying attention [laugh].

(8) Zoe: There were those teachers, who just read textbooks one sentence after another, why do I have to listen to them to read it for me, I can read it myself [laugh].

(9) Interviewer: how did you learn?

Chun: no, it was the teachers, who forced me to learn for passing the exams, me, personally I hated the exams [laugh]. We had many preparation exams, how well you do in these exams, I did not care that much.

All focus on laughing at another as the object of laughter, as in Xin's, Sarah's, Zoe's and Chun's episodes. The stimuli of laughter all featured criticism towards other: the teacher in Xin's, Sarah's and Zoe's cases and the preparation tests in Chun's case. When Xin made those remarks, she was possibly trying to convey the message that the teacher failed to act "in accordance with the standards which the community accepts as proper" (Partington, 2006, p. 144). Through teasing the absent teacher, Xin very possibly tried to create belonging with the interviewer aiming at reinforcing her affective face within the in-group.

Similar to Xin's excerpt, laughter in Sarah's and Zoe's cases also showed criticism toward the teacher. In the teacher-learner dyad, learners are expected to show respect to their teachers (Zhou, Lam, & Chan, 2012). Having "regard for authority" (Samuelowicz, 1987, p. 125), or "rarely challeng[ing] the teacher" (Burns, 1991, p. 62) are argued by researchers as examples of this respect. In Sarah's and Zoe's laughter episodes, they laughed after they made remarks about how their teachers taught. Here, they might have perceived their comments as having the potential to show disrespect of the teachers and therefore, used laughter as a cover for their criticism of the teachers (Holmes, 2000). Laughter, therefore, functioned to soften their critical tones: they did not seem to have wanted to appear as disrespectful as what the speech by itself would have indicated.

In Chun's laughter episode, the object of laughter features criticism towards the exercise papers (i.e. this particular teacher's way of teaching). Chun laughed after she expressed her strong dislike of these exercise papers. The way that Chun used laughter here resembled how laughter was used by Sarah and Zoe. She might have perceived her expressions as having the potential to challenge the way that this particular teacher taught and therefore, used laughter as a cover for her criticism of this teacher (Holmes, 2000).

In all four episodes, all interviewees offered further explanation, which showed their

seriousness of their utterance: they meant what they said. However, they all used laughter after their expression of criticism. However, how it is used differed. Xin very possibly tried to create belonging to the interviewer aiming at reinforcing her affective face within the in-group, whilst Sarah, Zoe and Chun used laughter as a cover for their criticism of the teachers and the way that particular teacher taught respectively.

Nevertheless, it is also worthwhile to note that as participants of this study were studying in Australia for a period of time at the time of the research, Australian educational practices might have made or starting to impact these learners in various visible or invisible ways as well. Articulating their criticism of teachers seems to show some level of ‘divergence’ (Zhou, Lam, & Chan, 2012). This also implies that they might have made shifts towards their host-learning context: have adjusted or adapted.

5.3 Object of Laughter Focusing on Conflict

An additional theme identified to understand features of stimulus of laughter is the coexistence of conflicting perceptions, realities or practices. Among those laughter episodes with its stimulus featuring conflict, laughter generally happens when there is a conflict either between two realities or a clash between perceptions (Clasquin, 2001). As observed from the following excerpts:

(10) Chenoa: it does not matter if you disagree with other students’ points or not, you still hear different opinions, ... and even if you disagree with them ... you can extend to learn their background and their culture.

Interviewer: is this helpful for you to cope?

Chenoa: if I stay here, yes [laugh], if I go back to my hometown, people will think I am annoying [laugh].

Interviewer: why do you think they think you are annoying?

Chenoa: talk too much, you have too many ideas, yes ... sometimes this confuses people, which idea is actually yours [laugh].

(11) Interviewer: how different do you think?

Liu: like in my hometown, we normally write what we think, what we think without any references, but here, I have to reference [laugh] and prove what I want to write down. My opinion, I have to justify. So, in my hometown, I do not need to justify my opinions.

In Chenoa’s laughter episode, she laughed after stating a perceived conflicting perception: expressing and emphasising with her laughter that many varied views are exercised in class in Australia. The same exercise, however, might be perceived as being annoying and indecisive in her hometown. The stimulus of laughter here featured underlying conflicting perceptions over the same behavioral practice. Banas and colleagues (2011) argue contradiction plays an essential role in comprehension of humor and this understanding is based upon people’s resolution of incongruities. Laughter in Chenoa’s episode helped to express the existence of conflicting practices and functioned to communicate her resolution of this contradiction. This

resolution is shown by her selection of varying behaviors based upon what is accepted as appropriate by the context. This also seems to show that Chenoa appears to have made a successful adaptation to the new cultural context: recognition of the variations and consciously selecting different practices corresponding to the varied learning settings. In Liu's laughter episode, she laughed after stating perceived conflicting practices with writing. The stimulus here featured conflicting practices. The same as Chenoa, laughter in Liu's episode also helped to express the existence of conflicting practices and also functioned to communicate her resolution of this contradiction.

International Chinese students' use of laughter with the stimulus featuring conflicts also appears to illustrate that they have made shifts towards their host-learning context: have adjusted or adapted well. Their use here could be influenced by Taoist philosophical attitudes toward laughter; however, influence from their direct exposure to Australia, an ethnically and culturally different country from that of China might have been occurred as well.

In those laughter episodes with the stimulus featuring conflict, laughter helped to express the existence of conflicting practices and also functioned to communicate the speakers' resolutions of contradictions. In the above instances, it is observed that these learners laughed over a perceived conflict enacted either by acceptable conventions or by writing practices. In instances of culturally approved practices, laughter might have been chosen to mask or cover a perceived "unacceptable" act.

6. Promoting Cross-Cultural Understanding and Communication

It is worth noting that results of this study need to be interpreted with caution as it involved a limited number of participants. This small size means that conclusions that this study arrived at are not generalizable. The results only represent these participants' views, which cannot be taken as evidence for understanding other learners of the same tradition. However, the findings hopefully can inform and stimulate further discussion around how educators of the multicultural classroom could better promote cross-cultural understanding and communication.

International Chinese students frequently used laughter in their oral discourses. Through analysis of stimuli of laughter, laughter was found to have either altered or modified the meaning of their speech. There are complexities regarding how they used laughter. There are variations when the stimulus focuses on self: deprecation and competence. Within the broad category of deprecation, laughter functioned differently. Chen used laughter to convey the message that she was modest and therefore do not take her utterance literally. Her use of laughter to some extent reflected her inscribed cultural values for instance exhibiting modesty (Li, 2001). Interpreting and decoding her use of laughter here requires an understanding of her home cultural knowledge. In situations where they use laughter to alter their meaning of utterances, this understanding becomes particularly important. Lu and Zhang however, used laughter to meet their positive face needs. When stimulus of laughter features competence, participants in this study used laughter to express their positive face needs. In these laughter episodes, stimulus of laughter featured competence: being capable and being in control. This shows some level of 'divergence'. There are differences regarding the object of laughter

featuring criticism towards another. Xin for instance used laughter to create affinity with the interviewer, aiming to reinforce her affective face needs whilst Sarah, Zoe and Chun used laughter as a cover for their criticism of teachers and the exercise papers respectively. This again shows some level of ‘divergence’ (Zhou, Lam, & Chan, 2012). In those laughter episodes with the stimulus of laughter focusing on conflict, participants of this study were found to use laughter to help express the coexistence of conflicting practices and to communicate their resolution of contradictions.

Interpretations without taking laughter into account can, therefore, be inappropriate or misleading, which can block cross-cultural understanding and communication. How the findings engender a more inclusive learning context for ICSs? I conclude by offering some suggestions at this point that are aimed at optimizing cross-cultural communication and promoting a more positive and inclusive educational experience for these students. To promote cross-cultural understanding and communication, Chinese learners’ use of laughter in meaning making needs to be considered. In instances when laughter functions to alter or modify the meaning of utterance, this consideration is particularly pivotal. Understanding to what extent laughter modifies the meaning of speech based on analysis of ICSs’ use of laughter requires cultural knowledge and understanding. I therefore suggest educators of the multicultural classroom/of Chinese learners make attempts at familiarizing with this knowledge so that a much smoother and a more inclusive and successful adjustment of these learners can be facilitated. Future research can explore educators’ use of humorous speech, which hopefully can enhance students’ understanding of educators’ humorous talk. This endeavor will hopefully lead to these learners’ appreciation and sense of belonging.

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