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An exploratory study on intercultural communication research contents and methods: A survey based on the international and domestic journal papers published from 2001 to 2005

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ABSTRACT

With the progressive acceleration of globalization in the world, the study of intercultural communication is accordingly flourishing day by day on both domestic and international levels. In order to discern the current trends of intercultural communication research in China and abroad and furthermore provide suggestions for future research, the present study has made an analysis of 368 intercultural communication articles published between 2001 and 2005 in 11 major international and domestic academic journals, among which 203 articles are from 10 major domestic academic journals and 165 ones from the American journal entitled *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*. Each article is analyzed from two perspectives: the research contents and research methods. The results indicate that intercultural communication research in China is sharply different from research abroad with regards to research contents and methods. The main concern of researchers abroad is intercultural adaptation and intercultural training while the Chinese researchers are mainly concerned with cross-cultural pragmatics. As far as research methods are concerned, most studies abroad are conducted using empirical research methods, the majority of which adopt the quantitative research method. On the contrary, most studies in China are non-empirical research. Of the small number of empirical studies, considerable attention is paid to the mixed use of both qualitative and quantitative research methods. At the end of the paper, constructive suggestions are made for future research.

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1. Introduction

The acceleration of globalization in the world has increased people's need to be involved in international activities in such fields as education, business, medicine, religion and even the military. In fact, people with different cultural backgrounds are becoming more and more interdependent on each other, and the term *intercultural communication* is no longer new to them. In order to educate people to acquire a greater global awareness and equip them with effective and appropriate communication skills in their intercultural encounters, the academic research of intercultural communication has sprung up and aroused progressive interest among researchers in this field. Many scholars and researchers have ventured deep into the field and produced a myriad of works on various topics related to intercultural communication.

In spite of the considerable amount of books and journals published, there is relatively little systematic information on the current trend of intercultural communication research at both domestic and international levels. Domestically, some scholars have done some general review about the current research on intercultural communication in China (Li, 2002; Peng,

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2005a; Zhang, 2003). Whereas those studies might be informative, they appear to be largely personal summaries and suggestions rather than data-based information. Two related studies worth mentioning are conducted respectively by Shiyong Peng (2005b) and Wenzhong Hu (2005). By collecting and analyzing 1,109 research papers on intercultural communication published in 564 academic journals in China from 1994 to 2003, Peng (2005b) points out there exist big differences in intercultural communication research between China and the West. Nevertheless, the author fails to sample the international data, which has made the East-West comparison unpersuasive. Another similar study is made by Wenzhong Hu (2005), the leading figure in the field of intercultural communication in China. His article on the empirical research of intercultural communication is data-based; however, what is lacking in this article is the detailed analysis of the domestic data indicating what kind of research methods are adopted in their papers by Chinese intercultural communication researchers and their related effect on the results of research, which is what this study intends to examine. Internationally, the review of some important Western academic journals (*Journal of Intercultural Studies*, *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, *TESOL Quarterly*, *Language Learning*, *Modern Language Journal*, *Language Teaching Research* and *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*) indicates no specific papers on the current research of intercultural communication abroad, except for Fitzgerald's (2004) emphasis on the power of research participants in intercultural communication research.

Therefore, it is the purpose of this study to provide a more complete and holistic picture of the current trend of intercultural communication research in China and abroad. Moving beyond merely describing what intercultural communication should study or what acceptable research methods should be adopted, based on adequate and representative data, this study intends to review the intercultural journal papers both at home and abroad, attempts to make a comparison between research at home and abroad from the perspectives of research contents and research methods, and furthermore, endeavors to sketch the current trend of intercultural studies both in China and abroad. As the academic research of intercultural communication was first launched in America in the 1950s and brought to China in the 1980s, revealing the gap between home research and research abroad and identifying the real situations of intercultural research at home and abroad is of great significance in shedding some light on future research and promoting more effective and appropriate communication between the East and the West.

1.1. *Intercultural communication research contents*

In literature, many scholars have identified areas they consider important topics of study in the field of intercultural communication. Some scholars (e.g., Gudykunst, 1987; Rich, 1974; Stewart, 1978) set a general research scope for the study while others (e.g., Hu, 2004; Jia, 1997; Porter, 1990; Samovar, Porter, & Stefani, 2000) believe the more specific variables should be examined in intercultural communication research. The general classification of the research contents is made by Rich (1974). He argues that the contents of intercultural communication can be classified into five forms: intercultural communication, international communication, interracial communication, interethnic or minority communication, and contracultural communication. Parallel to Rich's classification, Gudykunst (1987) maintains that intercultural communication research should include four categories: intercultural communication, cross-cultural communication, international communication and comparative mass communication. Another scholar Stewart (1978) points out that the study of intercultural communication should emphasize the practical application of real-life situations, which refers to the implementing of intercultural training programs. He states that intercultural communication training should lead the trainees through nine stages of gradual change, enabling them to perceive another culture more thoroughly.

In addition to the above-mentioned general classification of the contents of intercultural communication study, some other scholars (e.g., Hu, 2004; Jia, 1997; Porter, 1990; Samovar et al., 2000) think intercultural communication study should deal with more specific variables affecting the quality of intercultural communication. Porter (1990) divided those variables into eight elements: attitudes, social organization, patterns of thought, roles and role expectations, language, space, time, and nonverbal expression. Later, Samovar et al. (2000) summarized the eight elements into four general interacting groups: perception, verbal processes, nonverbal processes and contextual elements. It is because all these elements can be identified, analyzed and categorized that the research of intercultural communication is able to be conducted (Jia, 1997). Therefore, the main concern of these scholars is to examine the elements that may influence intercultural communication and try to determine how to remove the communication barriers caused by differences in language, food, dress, attitudes toward time, work habits and social behaviors.

In sum, no matter what variations scholars have made on the classification of intercultural communication research contents, it is generally agreed that the study of intercultural communication aims to understand the influence of culture on our attitudes, beliefs and behaviors in order to reduce misunderstandings that result from cultural variations (Chen & Starosta, 1997). To put it more simply, intercultural communication research should be concerned with the specific elements affecting actual intercultural communication in real life, no matter whether it is regarding intercultural, cross-cultural, interracial or interethnic communication. As to each individual element, there exist some slightly different views on what exactly should be examined.

In this study, based on the actual analysis of the collected data, we adopt the categorization suggested by Hu (2005) as a reference to categorize the research contents of the collected articles. In his study, Hu (2005) classified the intercultural communication research contents into the following five categories: summary, theory and research methods, cultural comparison and contrast, intercultural adaptation and training, special topics. Among the five categories, special topics refer to the articles that do not belong to any of the other four categories.

1.2. Intercultural communication research methods

It is well known that intercultural communication is influenced by many social science disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, linguistics, communication, sociology and philosophy (Harman & Briggs, 1991; Hart, 1999; Hu, 1999, 2004; Samovar et al., 2000), which intercultural communication scholars identified as the interdisciplinary characteristics. In fact, some scholars have conducted meaningful research to demonstrate the interdisciplinary characteristics of intercultural communication. For instance, Harman and Briggs' study (1991) and the study of Hart (1999) demonstrate the dominant influence of psychology, anthropology and linguistics on intercultural communication research.

As intercultural communication is a mixture of many social science disciplines, the methods to conduct intercultural communication research are various. As a matter of fact, there is no fixed pattern for the research methods of intercultural communication (Hu, 2004; Korzenny & Korzenny, 1984). As a multidimensional field, intercultural communication research has adopted the methods preferred by scholars with different academic backgrounds. Generally speaking, anthropologists tend to use the method of observation and interview to collect first-hand, holistic data, which is the qualitative method of data-collection. Psychologists are keen on precise quantitative numbers and careful analysis of data, which is, in their opinion, more reliable and persuasive. Linguists collect specific language data to reveal problems that appear in the process of intercultural communication, and communication scholars are interested in the exploration of theories about intercultural communication. When studying intercultural communication, it is recommended by some scholars (e.g., Chen & Starosta, 1997; Hu, 2004; Korzenny & Korzenny, 1984) that more than one method be adopted to achieve a comparatively more complete result. As there is no definite research method for intercultural communication research, it is held that the empirical nature of any kind of research, be it intercultural or not, is just the same (Hu, 2005) and the traditional qualitative and quantitative methods used in social science research are also applied to the study of intercultural communication (Korzenny & Korzenny, 1984).

1.3. Empirical research versus non-empirical research

Based on current research experience at home and abroad, the classification of intercultural communication research methods appears to fall within both the empirical and non-empirical dimensions. According to Bachman (2004), empirical research refers to an activity in which the researcher observes some phenomenon in the real world, interprets it in some way, and then uses this interpretation to reach a decision or generalization about the research. In the intercultural communication context, it requires researchers to observe how people with different cultural backgrounds interact with each other, both verbally and nonverbally, and interpret the results of these observations in a way that is meaningful to the field. To make it simple, empirical research is data-based, characterized by systematic collection and analysis of data (Gao, Li, & Lü, 2001; Hu, 2005). Empirical research usually follows a systematic format that begins with proposal of the research question, followed by descriptions of related literature review; processes of data-collection and data-analysis; detailed explanation of adopted research methods; and reports of the results, followed by a comprehensive conclusion summarizing the research.

Contrary to empirical research, non-empirical research does not rely on first-hand data and often consists of theories and implications or personal experiences and views (Gao et al., 2001; Hu, 2005). In the intercultural communication context, non-empirical research usually reports the researchers' personal views and experiences about the process of intercultural communication by using such sentences as "I think . . .", "I believe . . .", or "From my experiences . . .", which is the "sentimental anecdote" (Hopkins, 1993, p. 171) instead of empirical research. According to Long and Li (2000), non-empirical research puts emphasis on theoretical exploration of theories rather than factual data supporting those theories. Non-empirical researchers usually follow the theory-examples-conclusion format without including in their research substantial literature review, purposeful research planning, details of operational procedures and solid data.

The criterion used in the present study to categorize the collected articles into empirical or non-empirical research is to examine whether the research is data-based or not (Gao et al., 2001; Long & Li, 2000).

1.4. Qualitative research versus quantitative research

Qualitative and quantitative research methods are two traditional modes of doing research; both fall into the category of empirical research. McDonough and McDonough (2000) distinguish qualitative and quantitative research as interpretive and normative research, respectively. Since the two differ in many ways, it is difficult to define the two terms in one or two sentences. The simplest definition is given by Punch (1998, p. 4): "Quantitative research is empirical research where the data are in the form of numbers; Qualitative research is empirical research where the data are not in the form of numbers."

Some other scholars (e.g., Gui & Ning, 1997; Malhotra, 1993; Reichardt and Cook, cited in Nunan, 1992) argue that this numeric-narrative contrast oversimplifies the two terms. They try to define them by analyzing their specific differences. Comparing the unique characteristics of qualitative and quantitative research methods, the Chinese scholars Gui and Ning (1997) make a more explicit description of the two methods as follows:

First of all, qualitative and quantitative researches differ in the form of data. Qualitative data are narrative while quantitative data are numeric. Qualitative research includes detailed descriptions of collected data from a holistic, natural perspective while most of the data in quantitative research are numbers concerning a large sample. Usually, the results from the large

sample need to be filtered through statistical techniques to be generalized to make the results more powerful in a certain research field.

Secondly, qualitative and quantitative researches are different in the way of collecting data. Qualitative research often makes naturalistic observation to collect data because qualitative researchers believe any manipulation or interference in the research context would distort the nature of the data, which would eventually affect the collection, interpretation, and presentation of the data. In contrast, quantitative research artificially sets some control or manipulation on some of the researched participants so that some variables can be controlled to examine the relationship among different variables.

Thirdly, qualitative and quantitative designs are often used to achieve different objectives. Qualitative research is inductive because the research investigation progresses from the general to the specific. Researchers develop concepts, insights and understandings from patterns in such data as interviews, diaries and recordings. Since the research question is suggested by these recurring patterns which emerge from the data itself, qualitative research is adopted to generate hypotheses. By contrast, quantitative research is deductive as researchers have already formed a hypothesis before they collect the needed data. Unlike qualitative research, the investigation progresses from the specific to the general and the purpose to conduct the research is to either support or refute that hypothesis, so quantitative research is a hypothesis-testing process.

Another difference deals with the process of data analysis. In the initial stages of qualitative research, the researcher will enter the research context without a particular focus and try to consider the data in an open manner. At later stages, some narrowing of focus is necessary as the research progresses and the research question crystallizes, so qualitative research is viewed as an organic development (Seliger & Shohamy, 1999) and to some degree the process is synthetic and dynamic. In a quantitative research, as all the data are quantified requiring the researcher to analyze the numbers through use of statistical tools and hence draw a conclusion, it is an analytic and stable process.

Due to the complexity of different features of qualitative and quantitative research, it is difficult to find a sole criterion for judging the two forms of research. This study made its categorization of empirical research into qualitative and quantitative research according to the criterion put forward by Grotjahn (cited in Nunan, 1992), which will be referred to in Section 2.2.

1.5. Research questions

As a young research field in China, intercultural communication began to receive attention only in the early 1980s. At present, in spite of the fact that more and more scholars are getting involved in the research of intercultural communication and that an increasing number of Chinese universities have begun teaching the course of *intercultural communication* to different levels of students, there is relatively little systematic information on the conceptual framework of research contents and methods of intercultural communication study. Moreover, the lack of mature and reliable official intercultural communication journals in China contributes to the hindering of progress in this discipline in China. Based on these considerations and the previous literature reviewed, we propose the following two research questions for this study:

RQ1: Regarding research contents and methods, what are the similarities and differences between domestic and international intercultural studies?

RQ2: What enlightenment can domestic and international intercultural researchers attain from each other as far as research contents and methods are concerned?

2. Method

2.1. Data collection

The data source consists of two parts: domestic journal papers and international journal papers.¹ Domestically, the researchers chose the articles on intercultural communication published in 10 major foreign language teaching journals as the sample of this study. The journal of *Intercultural Communication Research*, the official journal of China Association for Intercultural Communication, was excluded as this journal was not created until the end of 2009 and has just published one volume. Since the end of the 20th century, although some journalism and communication journals (e.g. *Modern Communication* published by Communication University of China, *Journal of International Communication* published by the School of Journalism, Renmin University of China, and *Global Media Journal* published by the School of Journalism and Communication, Tsinghua University) have also begun to publish on intercultural communication, these journals mainly focus on intercultural communication in the context of mass media. It is reported that the top two fields dealing with intercultural communication research in China are foreign language teaching and the comparative study between the English and Chinese language (Peng, 2005b). In his study, Peng (2005b) demonstrated that 44% of the collected journals fall into the field of foreign language teaching and the comparative study between the English and Chinese language. Therefore, as foreign

¹ The list of domestic journal papers and international journal papers is available from the corresponding author.

Table 1
Information of ten major domestic academic journals.

Title	Abbreviation	Publisher	Type
<i>Foreign Language Teaching and Research</i>	FLTR	Beijing Foreign Studies University	Bimonthly
<i>Foreign Language World</i>	FLW	Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press	Bimonthly
<i>Journal of Foreign Languages</i>	JFL	Shanghai International Studies University	Bimonthly
<i>Foreign Language Education</i>	FLE	Xi'an International Studies University	Bimonthly
<i>Modern Foreign Languages</i>	MFL	Guangdong University of Foreign Studies	Quarterly
<i>Foreign Languages Research</i>	FLR	PLA International Relations University	Bimonthly
<i>Journal of PLA University of Foreign Languages</i>	JPUFL	The PLA University of Foreign Languages	Bimonthly
<i>Journal of Sichuan International Studies University</i>	JSISU	Sichuan International Studies University	Bimonthly
<i>Shandong Foreign Language Teaching Journal</i>	SFLTJ	Shandong Normal University	Bimonthly
<i>Foreign Languages and Their Teaching</i>	FLTT	Dalian Foreign Languages University	Monthly

language teachers devoting themselves to intercultural communication research in China, the authors of the present study selected the journals of foreign language teaching as their research sample in order to get a general glimpse of their peer research, and furthermore, to obtain a more precise picture of intercultural communication research in China. All the articles were collected through manual search by the researchers involved in this study and the detailed information of the selected 10 major academic journals is listed in Table 1.

The authors sampled the 2001–2005 journal papers on intercultural communication in light of two historical facts: China's entry into the WTO and its college English teaching reform. At the end of 2001, China officially entered the WTO, which resulted in more frequent contact with the international world and thus promoted the rapid development of intercultural communication and its research. With this background, it is imperative to understand the new trends in intercultural communication research in China with the aim of achieving more fruitful communication between China and the rest of the world. Beyond doubt, the rapid social, economic and cultural development in China with its entrance into the WTO has inevitably brought about changes in the field of foreign language teaching. In 2004, China's Ministry of Education issued the trial version of *College English Curriculum Requirements (CECR)*, which for the first time included intercultural communication as one of the main teaching tasks of college English teaching (China's Ministry of Education, 2004). However, the corresponding evaluation system CET 4 and 6 (College English Test Band 4 and 6) did not change its format until 2006 to reflect college English teaching under the guidance of *CECR*. The researchers of this study sampled the 2001–2005 journal articles, intending to make a comparison in their future studies about intercultural communication research before 2005 and thereafter. This comparison is significant as the majority of intercultural communication researchers in China are foreign language teachers in universities, and the change in their teaching tasks as set in the 2004 version of *CECR* would surely affect their research interests.

The reliability of domestic data was improved through the researchers' repetitious checking on the articles to determine whether a certain article belongs to the dimension of intercultural communication. The theoretical base for selecting the needed articles on intercultural communication is consistent with the four general interacting groups of elements summarized by Samovar et al. (2000): perception, verbal processes, nonverbal processes and contextual elements. In addition to guaranteed reliability, the collected data were considered valid as the 10 major academic journals are recognized as key journals in the field of foreign language teaching, which is exactly where intercultural communication is mainly practiced in China.

Internationally, the papers published in *International Journal of Intercultural Relations (IJIR)* during the same time period were selected as potential data. Although National Communication Association has created an official journal a couple of years ago called *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, this journal has a much shorter history and may not tend to publish on intercultural adaptation and training as much as *IJIR*. As the official publication of the International Academy for Intercultural Research, the leading organization of American intercultural communication study, *IJIR* is the representative journal of intercultural communication research in the West publishing academic papers on intercultural communication research from all over the world. The process of collecting international data provides a perfect guarantee of their reliability and validity, as all the articles in *IJIR* concern precisely intercultural communication and can represent the mainstream trend of intercultural communication research abroad.

From 2001 to 2005, 203 articles on intercultural communication in the above-mentioned 10 major Chinese academic journals have been collected, together with 165 articles excluding book reviews and the special issue 6 of volume 29 in *IJIR* during the same time period.

2.2. Measures

This study employed three criteria as its measures of data analysis: (1) for research contents, with the actual analysis made by the researchers, the categorization classified by Hu (2005) was adopted as a reference to divide the collected data into different categories; (2) the criterion to distinguish empirical research from non-empirical research is to examine whether the research is data-based or not (Gao et al., 2001; Long & Li, 2000); (3) the criterion to distinguish qualitative

research from quantitative research is to take three factors into consideration: the method of data collection (whether the data have been collected experimentally or non-experimentally); the type of data yielded by the investigation (qualitative or quantitative); and the type of analysis conducted on the data (whether statistical or interpretive). The third criterion is suggested by Grotjahn (cited in Nunan, 1992) and shared by Wen (2001) to specify a study on data form and data analysis to further determine whether a study is qualitative or quantitative.

2.3. Data analysis

For data analysis, the study employed a three-step qualitative approach: open coding, axial coding and consistent comparison between the data in China and those abroad (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding is performed during a first pass through the collected data (Neuman, 2003). To process the large quantity of data, the method of open coding was used to capture the theme of each collected article and assign initial codes or labels in a first attempt to condense the mass of data into categories. It was an open process as the data were examined with no prior assumptions about the results. During this process, with no personal preference, we slowly read each article, examined and identified it from the perspectives of its content and research methods. That is to say, each article was categorized by noting the researchers' observations about content and research methods.

Axial coding is a second pass through the data. In axial coding, we focused on the initially coded themes more than on the original data (Neuman, 2003), which means that in this study we identified which category applied to each article according to the set criteria concerning research contents and methods. More specifically, the labeled articles resulting from the open coding process were reviewed and classified into a particular category according to Hu's (2005) categorization of intercultural research contents. With respect to research methods, the data derived from the open coding were first categorized into two large groups of empirical and non-empirical in accordance with the criterion described in Section 2.2. More specifically, if a certain study was conducted on the basis of solid data, with detailed description of the related literature review, the detailed process of data collection, research methods, the data analysis that led to reasonable results, this study is labeled as an example of empirical research. Otherwise, if a study reflected solely the summary of personal experiences and thoughts, we labeled it non-empirical research. Subsequently we conducted a further analysis of the empirical articles emerging from the axial coding. By further axial coding of the empirical data, the subcategories of qualitative research, quantitative research or the mixing of qualitative and quantitative research were examined and grouped. To examine which subcategory a study may belong to, we analyzed it in three dimensions: the method of data collection, the type of data obtained from data collection and the method of data analysis. Identifying the empirical articles, we first examined how a study collected its data. A qualitative research study generally collected data through interviews, observations, questionnaires, transcripts and so on while a quantitative research study usually collected data through numerical evaluations. Secondly, we examined whether the data yielded from data collection were in the form of numbers. Finally, the method of data analysis was identified. A qualitative research study often generated results by way of analyzing and interpreting the data and a quantitative research study tended to follow the statistical method. If any research reflected the characteristics of both qualitative and quantitative research on the three dimensions, it was grouped according to the mixing of the two methods.

After finishing the process of open coding and axial coding, we made a consistent comparison between the domestic and international data. During this process, all the categorizations emerging from the open coding and axial coding were quantified and illustrated by numbers. By comparing the frequencies and percentages, the basic framework of domestic and international intercultural communication studies was demonstrated and implications for future study in this field were also foreseen.

To improve the reliability and validity of the process of data analysis, the technique of *triangulation* was used, thus taking into account other researchers' interpretation of the data at different times or locations (Johnson, 1997; Patton, 2002). In this study, the two authors and a graduate student, who majored in applied linguistics in our university, reviewed the data and conducted the coding process separately. When disagreement on coding the data occurred among the three parties, the original data were reexamined and identified until a final agreement was reached on the coding and category development.

3. Results

3.1. Intercultural communication research in China

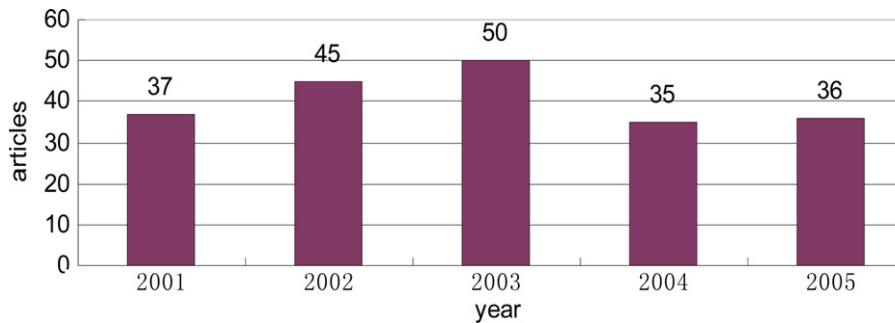
3.1.1. General publication of intercultural communication articles in China

The review of ten major domestic academic journals indicates that 203 articles on intercultural communication have been published in China from 2001 to 2005. The detailed information is reflected in Table 2 and Fig. 1. As seen in Table 2, the journal that most frequently published intercultural papers from 2001 to 2005 is *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching* (28%). This is partly due to the special column of intercultural communication research in this journal; the journal that least frequently published intercultural communication articles is *Foreign Language Teaching and Research* (2.46%) as it is the most authoritative linguistic journal in China and its main focus is on the learning and teaching of foreign languages, as well as general linguistics. The fact that intercultural communication research is a newly-established area in China contributes to

Table 2

General publication of intercultural communication articles in ten major academic journals in China.

Journal	2001	2001	2003	2004	2005	Total	Percent
FLTR	1	0	0	1	3	5	2.46%
FLW	3	2	4	0	2	11	5.42%
JFL	3	2	2	3	3	13	6.41%
FLE	6	7	7	2	2	24	11.82%
MFL	1	2	1	3	2	9	4.43%
FLR	1	6	5	2	4	18	8.87%
JPUFL	4	4	2	2	3	15	7.39%
JSISU	4	6	8	4	6	28	13.79%
SFLTJ	0	3	6	6	7	22	10.84%
FLTT	14	13	15	12	4	58	28.57%
Total	37	45	50	35	36	203	100%

**Fig. 1.** Yearly published intercultural communication articles in ten major academic journals in China.

the least frequent publication of intercultural communication papers in the leading journal of *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*.

Fig. 1 shows that within the first three years of the five-year period, intercultural communication research increased. However, the yearly publication during the last two years suggests a decreasing tendency. Thus, intercultural communication research in China should expand in order to meet the need of the ever-increasing intercultural communication activities around the world.

3.1.2. Research methods adopted by Chinese researchers

The Chinese intercultural communication researchers have adopted both empirical and non-empirical research methods to conduct their research. As shown in Table 3, only a small number of articles (10.34%) in China fall into the category of empirical research, among which more than half (52.38%) of the researchers adopt both qualitative and quantitative approaches in their empirical studies.

Table 3

Categories of research methods adopted by Chinese researchers.

Empirical research			Non-empirical research
Qualitative	Quantitative	Mixed	
5	5	11	182
23.81%	23.81%	52.38%	89.66%
	10.34%		

3.1.3. Research contents preferred by Chinese researchers

Based on different research interests of Chinese researchers, the collected domestic data are categorized into seven categories in Table 4. As seen in Table 4, the biggest share (36.45%) goes to cross-cultural pragmatics. The second important area is cultural comparison and contrast, followed by topics on intercultural communication and foreign language teaching. In the category, "special topics" refers to those articles that do not belong to any of the other listed categories.

Table 4
Categories of research contents preferred by Chinese researchers.

Categories	Content	Number	Percent
1	Summary	13	6.40%
2	Theory & research methods	4	1.97%
3	Cultural comparison & contrast	45	22.17%
4	Intercultural communication & foreign language teaching	29	14.29%
5	Intercultural communication & translation	5	2.46%
6	Cross-cultural pragmatics	74	36.45%
7	Special topics	33	16.26%

Table 5
Categories of research methods adopted by researchers abroad.

Empirical research			Non-empirical research
Qualitative	Quantitative	Mixed	
15 10.49%	93 65.03% 86.67%	35 24.48%	22 13.33%

Table 6
Categories of research contents preferred by researchers abroad.

Categories	Content	Number	Percent
1	Summary	3	1.82%
2	Theory & research methods	20	12.12%
3	Cultural comparison & contrast	24	14.54%
4	Intercultural adaptation & intercultural training	84	50.91%
5	Special topics	34	20.61%

3.2. Intercultural communication research abroad

3.2.1. Research methods adopted by researchers abroad

The specific categorization of different methods adopted by intercultural researchers abroad is shown in Table 5. Unlike Chinese research, most of the intercultural research abroad represent empirical studies (86.67%), among which, quantitative research occupies a greater proportion (65.03%) while only a small number of researchers (10.49%) adopt qualitative research in their studies. Moreover, despite the emphasis on empirical studies abroad, the mixed use of qualitative and quantitative research methods does not seem to receive the same degree of attention as quantitative research does.

3.2.2. Research contents preferred by researchers abroad

Based on different research interests of researchers abroad, the collected international data are categorized into five categories shown in Table 6. As seen in Table 6, the research area that most attracts western researchers' interest is intercultural adaptation and intercultural training (50.91%). The majority of intercultural communication research focused on how to better adjust to a new culture and how to develop better intercultural training programs. Another popular focus of western intercultural researchers is cultural comparison and contrast, similar to Chinese researchers.

4. Discussion

In this study, we collected significant data concerning intercultural communication research in China and abroad, and analyzed them from the perspectives of research contents and methods. Furthermore, we conducted contrasting analysis on the domestic and international data. The research findings provide demonstrative answers to the two research questions proposed by the authors.

4.1. Similarities and differences concerning research contents in China and abroad

The research findings of this study suggest more differences than similarities in intercultural communication research contents between Chinese researchers and international ones. As mentioned in Section 3.2.2, both domestic and international researchers showed similarity with respect to cultural comparison and contrast as a topic of interest. However, they approach comparison and contrast in totally different ways. Chinese researchers usually include in their studies some detailed examples of different customs and behaviors conveyed by the use of language in different cultures and attempt to present the cultural variations based on those examples, while the studies abroad often display the cultural comparison and contrast through experiments conducted among different cultural groups.

Besides the common research interest of cultural comparison and contrast, this study demonstrates several different research areas among domestic and international intercultural researchers. As displayed in Table 4, Chinese intercultural researchers' strongest interest lies in the study of cross-cultural pragmatics. According to Leech (1983), pragmatics can be defined as the study of how utterances have meanings in situations. In simple words, pragmatics is the study of meaning and context. Cross-cultural pragmatics takes intercultural communication as its context and tries to make cultural comparisons of different language interactions in different cultural contexts. The fact that more than one third (36.45%, see Table 4) of the domestic data is on cross-cultural pragmatics illustrates that most Chinese intercultural communication research studies focus on the use of language in their related cultural contexts. In other words, Chinese researchers pay significant attention to the pragmatic strategies and their functions in the process of intercultural interactions.

Cultural comparison and contrast is the second popular topic for Chinese researchers. As they become more and more aware of the importance of *culture* in communication studies, Chinese researchers have published papers on cultural comparison and contrast in different journals. A typical example from the collected data is the journal of *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*. Among the collected 58 articles published in that journal, 24 deal with cultural comparison and contrast. Through the comparison and contrast of different values, customs and ways of thinking, Chinese intercultural researchers attempt to remind people how to avoid improper views and behaviors about other cultures, to furthermore suggest better ways to acquire successful intercultural communication skills.

The research findings also demonstrate the popular trend among Chinese researchers to associate the study of intercultural communication with foreign language teaching in China (see Table 4). Mainly, Chinese researchers do research on how to improve students' intercultural communication competence in the process of foreign language teaching. This research trend is unique in China (Li, 2002) since a large proportion of intercultural communication researchers in China are foreign language teachers. As they are now acquiring an increasing awareness and sensitivity of the cultural element in their teaching, they make every effort to train and improve their students' intercultural communication competence so that the students can better develop skills fit for the ever-developing globalized society.

In summary, Chinese intercultural communication researchers are mainly concerned with three research areas: cross-cultural pragmatics, cultural comparison and contrast, and intercultural communication competence in foreign language teaching. Although the three research areas are highlighted by the findings of the present study, a more recent similar study, which is based on the data from the same source between 2006 and 2009, presents a remarkable shift in the contents of intercultural communication research in China. In the study made by the first author and her graduate student, the biggest share of 30.94% concerning research contents focuses on intercultural translation (Hu & Yang, unpublished results, June 2010), followed by the same sequence of cross-cultural pragmatics, cultural comparison and contrast, and intercultural communication competence in foreign language teaching. To some degree, this change reflects China's fruitful achievements in disseminating Chinese culture effectively. In recent years, the Chinese government has succeeded in advocating different cultural exchange programs, such as the establishment of Confucius Institutes all over the world, the visiting scholar programs funded by China Scholarship Council and other exchange programs. With more and more Chinese citizens participating in those programs and gaining more intercultural experiences, the research on intercultural translation may equip them with more appropriate tools to convey Chinese culture to the rest of the world.

In contrast to research areas preferred by Chinese researchers, intercultural adaptation and training is the main focus of intercultural communication researchers abroad. This preference in research contents seems reasonable since America, as a powerful and representative country of the Western world, is a "melting pot" of many cultures. With immigrants from everywhere in the world, there is such an urgent need for people with different cultural backgrounds to successfully communicate with each other that it has become the main concern of intercultural communication studies to guide people in adapting to the new culture they encounter. Meanwhile, it is the duty of intercultural communication researchers to develop effective training programs to help people become accustomed to their new culture as soon as possible to help forestall social difficulties. Thus, many Western researchers devote themselves to the exploration of new modes of intercultural training programs.

Although most researchers abroad focus on intercultural adaptation and training, they often explored the theme from different perspectives such as education, healthcare, business, the military and religion. Since education, healthcare and business are the most common contexts in which intercultural communication takes place, many papers study the acculturation problems and the relevant strategies to deal with those problems in the process of studying abroad or meeting new cultures in the classroom at home, undergoing medical tasks in another culture or being culturally attuned to patients, and achieving business cooperation (e.g., Cemalcilar, Falbo, & Stapleton, 2005; Gibson & Zhong, 2005; Vance & Ensher, 2002).

In addition to the common intercultural contexts of education, healthcare and business, intercultural adaptation strategies are essential in the military and religious fields as well. Sharlom and Horenczyk (2004) focused on immigrant soldiers who emigrated from the former Soviet Union to Israel during 1989 to 1999 and concluded that while national identity was positively related to the adjustment to the military setting, ethnic identity was negatively correlated with the adjustment, providing suggestions for an ideal multicultural policy in Israeli army. Navara and James (2005) chose missionaries residing in foreign countries as their research participants, discussed the impact various religious orientations had upon the adaptation process and put forward some theoretical framework, which will fuel future research into the acculturation process of missionaries.

From the discussion above, it can be inferred that the issue of intercultural training and adaptation looks at every aspect of people's life and reaches every social group in modern Western society. As more and more countries experience multicultural

changes, an increasing number of researchers will be involved in the exploration of intercultural adaptation and intercultural training programs.

4.2. Similarities and differences concerning research methods in China and abroad

With respect to intercultural research methods in China and abroad, sharp differences, rather than similarities, can be seen in the research findings. As seen in [Tables 3 and 5](#), Chinese researchers adopt totally different methods from their Western counterparts to conduct intercultural communication research. In fact, a majority of domestic research (89.66%, see [Table 3](#)) belongs to the category of non-empirical research, while a large proportion (86.67%) of the research abroad (see [Table 5](#)) is empirical research.

As discussed in [Section 2.2](#), the main criterion to judge whether a research study is empirical or non-empirical considers whether that research is data-based or not. Usually non-empirical research reflects a common sense or personal summary about certain experiences in life. This kind of research lacks factual support. Empirical research is often based on certain data that a researcher selects from everyday life. Using the data, the researcher makes certain findings. Compared with non-empirical studies, empirical research findings are more reliable because they are more scientific and more accurate. According to [Seliger and Shohamy \(1999\)](#), one function of empirical research is to provide empirical or factual support for common sense or to disprove what has become accepted as common sense. Therefore, approaches based on common sense or reflections on life experiences are significant only after they are examined through empirical research. The different effect of empirical and non-empirical research can be demonstrated in the following examples:

In his article entitled “Culture-related self-concept and the discourse strategies in Chinese and English”, [Ren \(2003\)](#) first defined the notion of “self-concept” and then compared its different connotations in Chinese and English, and then the author continued to illustrate the relationship between self-concept and language, self-concept and discourse strategies. Lastly, the author analyzed how self-concept was respectively related to discourse strategies in China and abroad by giving some examples rather than identifying the relationship from a series of data. Reviewing the whole article, the author’s personal views and some famous quotations can be found. If some data such as answers to a questionnaire about self-concept or records of authentic dialogues could be collected, the results based on the detailed analysis of these data would be more valid and generalizable for future study as well.

Contrary to the above-mentioned example, the research done by [Peleg-Popko, Klingman, and Nahhas \(2003\)](#) is a typical empirical study. This study examined differences between Israeli-Arab and Israeli-Jewish adolescents in perception of family environment and its relation to test anxiety and trait anxiety. The study took 427 Arabs and 332 Jews in Israel as participants who completed some questionnaires. At the beginning of the research, the researchers put forward two hypotheses; after the participants finished completing the questionnaires, the data were collected, analyzed, and numerically displayed. The researchers used quantitative methods to reach their results, some of which were consistent with the predictions made earlier while others were not. In the end, the study was reported according to what the results had suggested. Through investigating specific research participants, the results from the study are much more reliable than results based on one’s personal summary of certain kinds of experiences. The “empirical” aspect of this study provides significant theoretical guidance to educators and therapists when treating adolescents who suffer from test and trait anxiety.

From the above comparison, it is clear that empirical research is often based on first-hand data and therefore tends to be more valid and reliable. Most importantly, it can be generalized to other similar situations and can make practical contributions to people’s real life.

Another important feature differentiating intercultural communication research methods in China from those abroad is related to the different use of qualitative and quantitative methods. As two basic traditional forms of research methods, whether to use qualitative or quantitative research has remained a controversial and complex issue in the study of methodology. Traditionally, a binary distinction between qualitative and quantitative research is made. However, recently many scholars argue that qualitative and quantitative research is in many respects indistinguishable because “researchers in no way follow the principles of a supposed paradigm without simultaneously assuming methods and values of the alternative paradigms” ([Reichardt & Cook, cited in Nunan, 1992, p. 3](#)).

As many scholars (e.g., [McDonough & McDonough, 2000](#); [Seliger & Shohamy, 1999](#); [Wen, 2001](#)) have pointed out, qualitative and quantitative research each has their strengths and weaknesses. In general, qualitative research allows researchers to study individual samples, but can hardly be representative of other contexts or situations beyond those in which the data were collected, and is therefore of questionable value for generalization. In contrast, the reality that quantitative research reveals remains true in all contexts if the sample is large enough, but such research usually has limitations in making deep investigations into the sample.

From the above discussion, it is evident that there is no simple formula that can guarantee good research, and there is no necessity for researchers to restrict themselves to only one method. The suggestion scholars put forward is to employ *triangulation* ([Johnson, 1997](#); [Patton, 2002](#)), which refers to the combination of methods of data-collection and data-analysis in terms of a specific research.

As shown in this study, international intercultural communication researchers (65.03%, see [Table 5](#)) mainly adopt quantitative research method for their research. This is partly due to the traditional belief that quantitative research supported by statistics is far more reliable than qualitative research based on interpretations. Although in recent years, researchers in the West realize that many phenomena in intercultural communication cannot be explained with the sole help of quantitative

research, qualitative methods do not receive equal attention. Besides, international researchers neglect the mixed use of the two methods. As for Chinese intercultural researchers, despite the small number of empirical research studies, they pay attention to the mixed use of both qualitative and quantitative methods. Through careful analysis of the empirically-based articles, it is obvious that a mixture of the two research methods can result in more convincing empirical studies, as demonstrated by the following example:

In the example identifying the relationship between home environment and test and trait anxiety among Arabs and Jews in Israel, the researchers (Peleg-Popko et al., 2003) collected their data by way of questionnaires. Inevitably, there were some limitations stemming from the examined variables in the questionnaires and the actual setting of the questionnaire administration. If a certain sort of qualitative methods, such as the use of interviews, was adopted to collect data, the data will be more complete and valid. By analyzing the qualitative data, the researcher can find some categories that were not included in the original questionnaires. By adding the new categories from the interview, the researchers may design a more objective questionnaire. That is to say, the data can be collected or analyzed first qualitatively and then quantitatively in terms of means, standard deviations and other parameters. Thus, the study conducted by both qualitative and quantitative methods would strengthen the research results and have greater validity.

4.3. Implications for future study

The present study provides theoretical and practical implications for future study, thereby also answering the second research question: What enlightenment can domestic and international intercultural researchers attain from each other? Theoretically, the strong reliability of this study strengthens the appeal for conducting future empirical research in the field of intercultural communication in China. In this study, the research conducted by the famous Chinese scholar Wenzhong Hu (2005) was introduced. Hu's study (2005) is based on the data of domestic and international journal papers published from 1999 to 2002. As mentioned in 4.1, in June 2010, the first author and her graduate student made a similar study based on the data of domestic and international journal papers published from 2006 to 2009. Despite the different time period of the gathered data, each of the three studies yielded similar results. Regarding research methods adopted by researchers abroad, the percent of empirical studies in *IJIR* is respectively 72.85% (Hu, 2005), 86.67% (the present study) and 86.11% (Hu & Yang, unpublished results, June 2010). On the contrary, the percent of empirical studies in Chinese journals is only 10.34% (the present study) and 14.71% (Hu & Yang, unpublished results, June 2010). The percent of empirical studies in Chinese journals is absent in Hu's study (2005) as the study omitted that analysis. Comparing the present study with the study of Hu and Yang (unpublished results, June 2010), it cannot be denied that Chinese intercultural researchers are now paying more attention to empirical studies as there has been a 4% rise in the proportion of empirical studies in China in the past four years. Nevertheless, the proportion of empirical studies remains low, compared with that of international intercultural research. Thus, both the present study and the study of Hu and Yang (unpublished results, June 2010) support Hu's belief (2005) in the lack of empirical studies in the Chinese intercultural communication field. In general, this study is not only a replica of Hu's study (2005), more importantly, it also seeks to extend his study with more persuasive data analysis, to better reflect the current trends in intercultural communication research in China and abroad. Therefore, the similar research results of the three studies have guaranteed better reliability for each of the three studies. Although the lack of empirical research training and a very low percentage of Ph.D.s among intercultural communication researchers in China may be two of the major reasons for such a low proportion of empirical research, this reliability will surely inspire Chinese intercultural communication researchers to engage in empirical research in the future.

Among the practical implications drawn from this study is the reflection on the question: What should Chinese intercultural communication researchers study? For years, Chinese researchers have been focusing on the comparison and contrast of different cultures, while international researchers have been exploring real intercultural interactions, an approach that is of more practical significance. Through the study of adaptation problems among various cultures, the researchers abroad may help people who, for various reasons, move to a new culture quickly adapt to the new culture without extreme culture shock. The study of new, effective training programs can also offer great help for those who plan to participate in another culture, and is especially necessary in today's multicultural society.

This concern of international researchers also provides meaningful research contents for Chinese intercultural communication researchers. In the Chinese context, it may be argued that the dearth of research into intercultural adaptation lies in the fact that Chinese people have fewer chances to experience intercultural encounters. In fact, China is developing so fast that more and more intercultural communication opportunities are created every day, which may create an ideal research environment for Chinese intercultural communication researchers. For example, many students go abroad to receive higher education and many overseas students come to China to pursue their study; businessmen fly back and forth between China and other countries every day; an increasing number of average people travel from China to foreign countries every year and more and more foreigners come to visit China. While it is evident that many intercultural encounters are taking place every day, the problem is that the need to communicate with people from other cultures is ignored, as is the need to conduct research to assist people in experiencing more successful intercultural communication.

Since the ever-increasing intercultural encounters among different cultures have provided a better research environment for intercultural researchers in China, and China desperately needs effective study of intercultural adaptation to accelerate its cooperation with other countries in every field, it is the duty of Chinese intercultural communication researchers to fulfill this task and aid China in catching up with the pace of globalization elsewhere.

5. Conclusion

Before concluding, limitations of this study should be mentioned. The first limitation centers on data-collection. As the domestic data were collected from foreign language teaching journals in China, and the international data were acquired from one specific journal, it is a limited sampling. The second limitation concerns the two important elements of good research: reliability and validity. Since most Chinese research articles are not empirical in nature, this study neglected to analyze the reliability and validity of each article and furthermore to make a comparison on this point between the East and the West.

Concerning the above-mentioned limitations, this study suggests that future study could enlarge the scope of data. For example, future research could expand the domestic data to include the fields of journalism and communication, management and economics, tourism and so on. The international data may also include more than one intercultural communication journal so that the research trend can be reflected more precisely and from a more holistic perspective. In addition, the analysis of reliability and validity of each sample article should be reflected in future research in order to achieve more sophisticated analysis and insightful critiques.

In conclusion, the present study examined and identified the respective research contents and methods of intercultural communication research in China and abroad, and analyzed the similarities and differences between Chinese and international intercultural studies. As intercultural study abroad has a longer history and has far more developed than the research in China, the results of this study are essential and significant especially to the research of intercultural communication in China. The research findings suggest that Chinese intercultural communication researchers should be encouraged to become involved in the study of intercultural adaptation and training, in addition to their traditional research interests. Moreover, the research findings also make an urgent appeal for empirical research in the field of intercultural communication in China. On the other hand, it is suggested that international intercultural researchers be encouraged to add more weight to the mixed use of qualitative and quantitative research methods in order to reach more robust and convincing results in their empirical studies.

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