

# The Global People Competency Framework

Competencies for Effective Intercultural  
Interaction



GlobalPeople

## **The Global People Competency Framework Competencies for Effective Intercultural Interaction**

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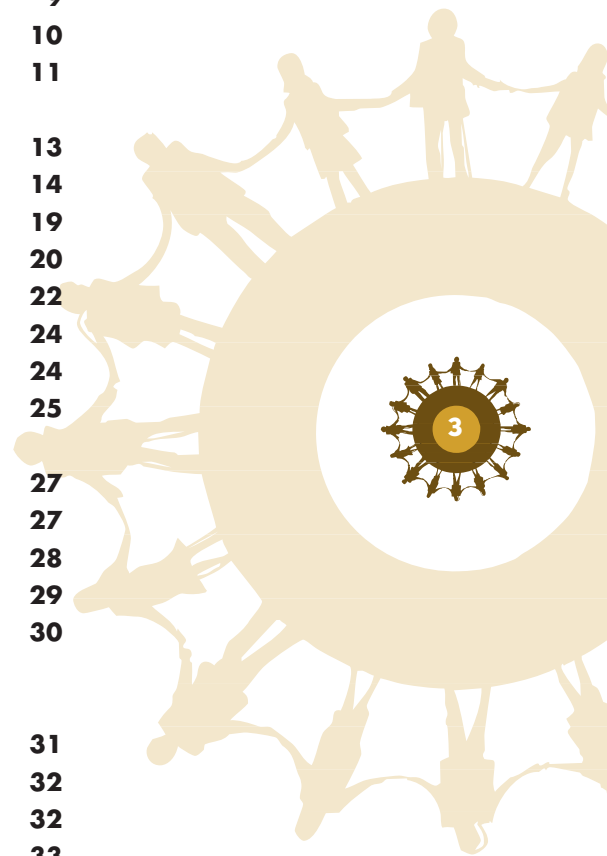
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# 1. Introduction

This Competency Framework explains the competencies that are needed for effective intercultural interaction.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to the Life Cycle Model for Intercultural Partnerships (see the Global People Toolbook) which presents the competencies by stage (i.e. key competencies are identified for each stage of a project life cycle), the Competency Framework presents them by clusters.

Intercultural competencies can be grouped into four interrelated clusters, according to the aspect of competence they affect or relate to:

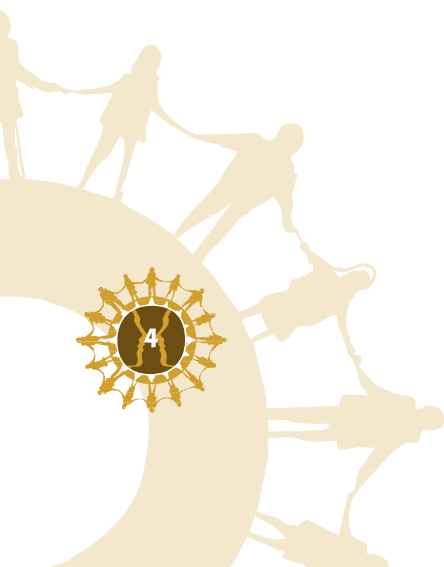
- Knowledge and ideas
- Communication
- Relationships
- Personal qualities and dispositions

We overview these four clusters in Section 2.

In Sections 3 – 6, for each competency cluster, we list the key component competencies, along with descriptive explanations of each of them. We also provide case study examples from the eChina-UK Programme to illustrate one or more of the following:

- How the competency manifests itself;
- Why the competency is important or is needed;
- How the competency can be displayed in behaviour;
- What problems may occur when the competency is not present.

The Competency Framework is thus useful for those who wish to gain a systematic, in-depth understanding of intercultural effectiveness and the competencies need to achieve it.



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<sup>1</sup> The conceptualisation is drawn from two main sources: the international competencies identified by the consultancy company WorldWork [see <http://www.worldwork.biz/legacy/www/docs2/competencies.phtml>] and analyses of research data from the eChina-UK Programme [see <http://www.echinauk.org/>]

## 2. Overview of the Four Clusters of Competencies

### Knowledge and ideas

When working across cultures, there are special challenges to drawing the right conclusions about the behaviours, ideas and perspectives we see around us. We tend to see the world through our own cultural filters, particularly when working from our home culture with little opportunity to immerse ourselves in other realities. When working with international partners, we can quickly misevaluate what we see, allowing negative stereotypes of others' behaviour to replace the need for positive, flexible thinking.

To achieve a greater ability to understand our international partners, we require a range of qualities. We need to be open to new ideas and ready to challenge our assumptions, and we need to avoid jumping to quick opinions about the behaviour we encounter (*new thinking*). In terms of our own behaviour, we need to be interested in how others' goals for the project may be different from our own, and thus seek to explore and take them into account (*goal orientation*). In specific national cultural contexts, we also need to be proactive in researching the national sectoral contexts, values and behaviours of the people we encounter (*information gathering*). In multicultural groups we need to share and surface the different perspectives people have about an issue in order to promote problem-solving and creativity (*synergistic solutions*).

### Communication

One of the key resources we bring to building trust and mutual understanding with our international partners is the quality of our communication skills. We may have come to some useful initial conclusions about what they want and how they operate, but unless we can build on this through effective and appropriate communication strategies and skills, the potential for building shared meaning will be lost. Often international partnerships can be beset by misunderstandings based on problems in overcoming the language barrier as well as a failure to draw on the right mix of listening, speaking and perceptiveness skills in order to construct, explore and negotiate meaning. Often people underestimate the amount of background information that is required to be shared up-front to create a platform for mutual understanding, as well as the different styles needed for communicating effectively with their international partners.

To achieve greater ability to communicate with our international partners, we require a range of qualities. We need to be attentive to the choice of working language and communication protocols (*communication management*) as well as to be willing to learn and use the language of our international partner (*language learning*). In terms of our own



communication skills we need to adapt our language to the proficiency level of our partner (*language adjustment*) as well as be more active and attentive listeners (*active listening*). We also need to become more skilled in observing indirect signals and interpreting them in the context of different cultural contexts (*attuning*). In the context of building and developing partnerships we need to disclose and elicit upfront information that is needed for mutual understanding and meaningful negotiation (*building of shared knowledge*). We also need to influence our partners appropriately and flexibly by drawing from a range of styles to get our message across (*stylistic flexibility*).

## Relationships

When working internationally, trust can often be fragile and differences in cultural assumptions around key issues such as teamwork and hierarchy can often be a source of divisiveness rather than creativity. Research indicates that a lack of cohesion between people is one of the key factors that makes multicultural teams less effective. Thus an explicit focus on glueing people together becomes a need-to-have rather than a nice-to-have element, and a focus on task needs to be embedded in a pro-active approach to relationship-building.

To do this effectively we need to focus not only on the energy we put into relationship-building with specific partners, but also on the knowledge we have of the organisational and cultural context in which they operate and the attitudes we reveal in responding to the different behaviours they exhibit. We need to be pro-active in breaking the ice with new people (*welcoming strangers*) but then need to work hard to build and sustain the relationships we have created (*rapport building*). We also need to nurture relationships by being sensitive to the social as well as professional role that international partners have within groups, and avoid them losing face (*interpersonal attentiveness*). This entails understanding the hierarchical and power relationships they have in their own working context (*sensitivity to context*).

## Personal qualities and dispositions

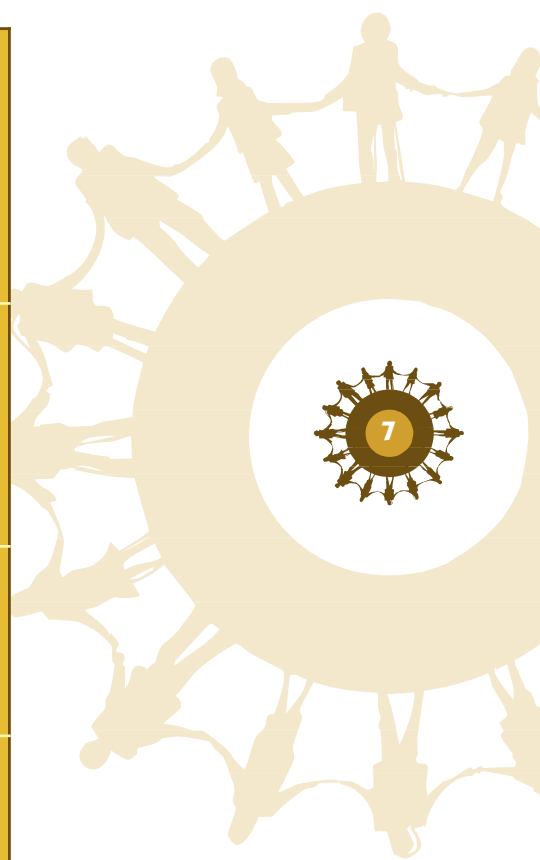
Working internationally also demands a range of personal qualities linked to emotional strength, sense of direction and adaptability. These qualities may be deeper-lying and slower to build, but they remain essential for pushing forward in unfamiliar settings while making others feel comfortable around us.

We need to have the motivation to seek out variety and change (*spirit of adventure*) while having a strong internal sense of where we are going (*inner purpose*). Emotionally we need to possess well-developed methods of dealing with stress (*coping*) as well as the ability to remain positive when things go wrong (*resilience*). We need to accept positively different behaviours that may go against our sense of what is normal and appropriate (*acceptance*). We also need to be conscious that our own behaviour, while normal for us, may be considered strange in another cultural context (*self-awareness*). We thus need to be willing to adapt our behaviour to suit other cultural contexts, and to sustain trust with key partners.



# 3. Intercultural Competency Cluster 1: Knowledge and ideas

<b>Information gathering</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Aware of the need to gather information about unfamiliar cultures and interested to do so.</li> <li>● Uses a range of strategies to gather relevant information, including:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Seeks out and finds helpful books and documents;</li> <li>● Observes behaviour;</li> <li>● Asks explicit questions</li> <li>● Asks 'cultural informants'</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>New thinking</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Open to new ideas</li> <li>● Seeks new insights and ways of understanding issues</li> <li>● Challenges conventional thinking</li> <li>● Extends thinking beyond own field of knowledge</li> <li>● Regularly updates and modifies opinions in the light of new information or evidence</li> </ul>
<b>Goal orientation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Interested in other people's goals and seeks to find out about them</li> <li>● Maintains a focus on own goals and does not compromise too easily</li> <li>● Willing to take other people's goals into account and to balance own and other's goals when needed</li> </ul>
<b>Synergistic solutions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Shares and surfaces the different perspectives that people have about a problem</li> <li>● Facilitates group members in reconciling and integrating different approaches</li> <li>● Stimulates creative and synergistic solutions and procedures</li> </ul>



## Knowledge Competency 1.1: Information gathering

Successful intercultural partnerships start with each partner taking an interest in the other's culture and demonstrating willingness and initiative to learn about and discover unfamiliar cultural values, practices and contextual information.

Gathering such information is important for various reasons. Policy or sector information is usually essential for the task at hand; an understanding of the other's beliefs, values and business practices can create a better basis for relationship-building, and – on a personal level – can broaden people's horizons.

In the eChina-UK Programme, British members needed to gather information on issues such as the following:

- The Chinese educational policies and practices, such as e-learning policies, quality assurance mechanisms, and common classroom practices;
- The target trainees of their proposed teacher training programmes;
- Key cultural values and concepts, such as hierarchy, face, and 'guanxi'<sup>2</sup>.

The project members found that it was often quite challenging to find out such information because it was not necessarily available in English.

### **Case Study Example: Acquiring content-specific information**

Some of the British developers needed some content-specific information on the Chinese educational context, as well as Chinese research data, in order to write some of their units. They found it difficult to obtain this, and it was not always clear whether this was because it was only available in Chinese (and thus not searchable in English) or whether it did not exist. For example, a British developer needing to write a unit on teacher evaluation commented as follows:

*Brit 2: I found it was difficult to find specific information in the literature in English. I'd track down articles via the internet, but the abstracts were in Chinese. But after being over there, and talking to the teachers, I began to think that the material on teacher evaluation doesn't really exist. It depends on the area, the school you're in. Maybe people haven't done that kind of research. Maybe it's also a different kind of research. I was looking for something in-depth, teachers talking about how they are evaluated in schools, which there's a lot of now here. But what I could find, and what I was sent, seemed to be very quantitative. There were a lot of figures and graphs. So it's obviously a different kind of research being done, so maybe that's why I couldn't find what I wanted.*

Information can be gathered from many sources (e.g. books, internet etc.) and all of these should be utilised. However, the eChina-UK teams found that well-chosen cultural informants were particularly effective sources of important information.

**Tip: Find a 'cultural informant' who can act as an effective bridge to the other culture.**



<sup>2</sup> Guanxi roughly equates to 'personal connections' and denotes the value Chinese people attach to the building and maintaining of relationships, which involves receiving and returning favours – both personal and business-related.



## Knowledge Competency 1.2: New thinking

Members of different cultures frequently hold different beliefs and values and engage in different practices. So in international partnerships, people should not assume that practices will be similar; they need to be open-minded towards any different practices and overcome any deep-seated beliefs that their own cultural practices are superior or preferable. They need to embrace the opportunity to learn how practices differ, why they differ and what benefits might lie in the other's approach. This does not necessarily mean that one has to adopt different practices, compromise one's own values or that one cannot disagree with the partner's different approach. However, new thinking does entail being genuinely open towards other practices and to accepting that they might be more beneficial or suitable to the other's cultural context. The ideal is adaptation not adoption; i.e. the ability to recognise and adapt to different ways of thinking and differing cultural practices, but not necessarily to adopt them to replace one's own ideals and practices.

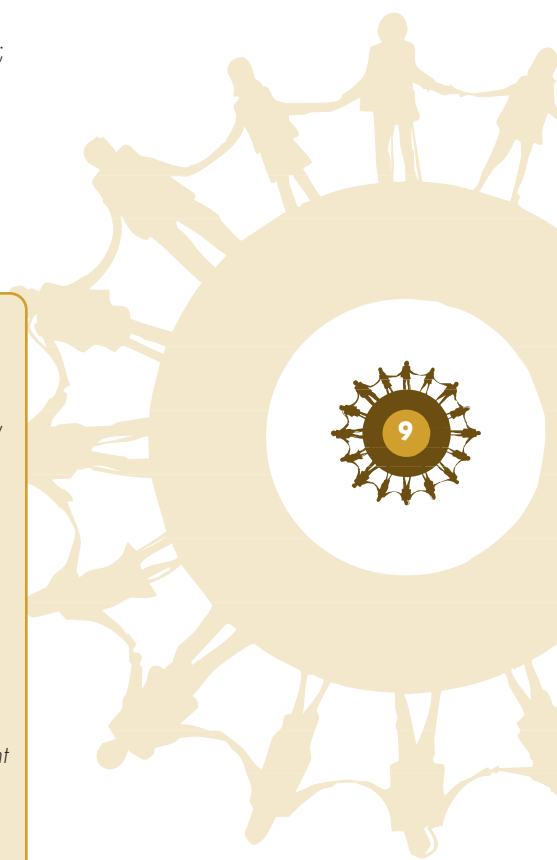
Demonstrating new thinking is not always as easy as it may seem, as the Case Study example illustrates.

### Case Study Example: Memorisation and/or reflection

In one of the projects, the staff reflected in depth on the role of memorisation in the Chinese educational system. They began to realise that memorisation is not necessarily meaningless rote learning, as it is often assumed to be in the West, and yet they had difficulty fully understanding the role of memorisation to Chinese learners.

Brit 15: *Our Chinese trainees thought reflection was common sense, it was an innate feature of everyday life. It was a tacit understanding of the term. But the processes of articulating what you are thinking and why you're thinking it, is not generally practised in China, they felt. There was the issue of face involved in expressing thoughts that are not solidly based in theory and data. And this linked very closely to how they viewed language teaching. We want to learn English, they said, we want to teach bilingually. But what does that mean? Using English to teach. But what does that mean? It seemed to mean using model content in the field that it is in English and being able to share it with their students. But that meant just absorbing and reproducing it, not thinking about how to present it and why I'm choosing this to present.*

Brit 15 *Until we were there and studied the textbooks that they had used, we couldn't understand their way of learning. When they learned the skills at university, it was "here are the sentences and the vocabulary that you need to learn. You need to memorise them, some of them, you need to learn the dictionary." ... They haven't focused on the issues that we regard as important, and this relates back to our views of models. For example, how do I construct paragraphs, how do I write complete sentences that flow one into another? Eventually they admitted that, saying we've never learned that. It's there in theory, such as to begin a lecture you should identify the main focus, but it's not applied in as much detail as in English native speaking countries. ... But it's still very difficult for me to see where it is that their reflection process takes place.*



Interviewer: *It's interesting. There's a Chinese saying that it's through repeating something 100 times that meaning emerges.*

**Tip: Take time to talk to your international partner about some key concepts or procedures in your joint professional worlds. Try to 'dig deep' so that you can begin to understand the meanings and significances they have for them.**

## Knowledge Competency 1.3: Goal orientation

Goal orientation is, arguably, one of the most difficult and sensitive issues to juggle during a collaborative project. On the one hand, stakeholders, research organisations and individuals all have their own (political) agendas. On the other hand, one partner may expect the other partner to accommodate to their own aims and agendas. Goal orientation requires each partner to be interested in the other's goals, to identify which issues can and cannot be negotiated and why, and to recognise where concessions are possible or necessary. In this way, people can maximise mutual satisfaction in goal achievement.

Goal orientation is particularly difficult to manage because new and/or revised goals (one's own and/or the other's) often emerge as a project unfolds and so cannot simply be negotiated at the beginning. They remain an ongoing point of concern and have to be regularly revisited and renegotiated. This demands a great deal of time, patience, sensitivity and persistence.

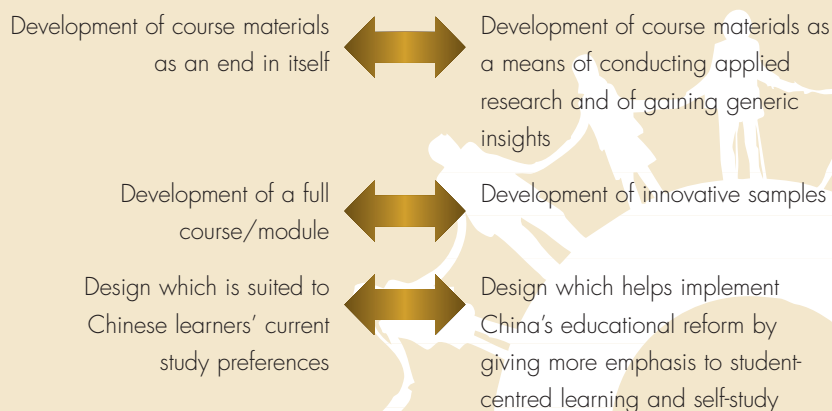
### **Case Study Example: Balancing goals**

A complex matrix of parties was involved in the eChina-UK Programme and its component projects, including:

- strategic stakeholders (HEFCE and the Chinese MoE);
- institutional stakeholders (senior management in the partner universities);
- the project teams.

Each of these parties held varying goal priorities both for the programme as a whole and for the individual projects. Everyone wanted innovative and useful materials to be developed; in addition, however, the British particularly wanted to conduct research and to gain generic insights, whilst the Chinese wanted to develop full courses so that people could be trained and income could be generated. Once the projects were underway, and it became clear that time and money was too limited for everything to be achieved, the teams found they had to balance a number of tensions very carefully. They needed to share their needs and interests with each other in an open and trusting manner, and to find ways of reconciling their different goal priorities.

### Tensions needing to be Balanced



For more detailed examples, please see  
[http://www.echinauk.org/pr\\_learn/pl\\_goals.php?c=1](http://www.echinauk.org/pr_learn/pl_goals.php?c=1)

**Tip: Take time regularly to reconsider each other's goals and to renegotiate them if necessary.**

## Knowledge Competency 1.4: Synergistic solutions

It is important to retain a focus on one's ultimate goals in a collaborative project. However, before one reaches this point, differences in views will invariably surface in any collaborative process. Rather than overriding, neglecting or ignoring such issues, it is important to address them, to identify what the different views are and to try to reach a solution that can accommodate each side and integrate the views of both partners.

### Case Study Example: The Purpose of Master's level Modules

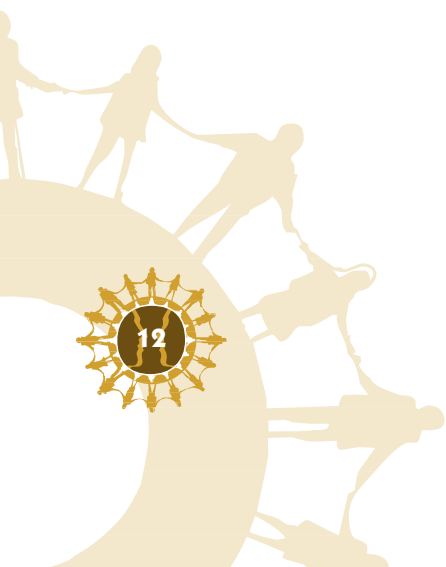
Members of one of the eChina-UK projects report how they found a synergistic solution to the differing opinions they held about the purpose of a master's level module:

*Many of our initial discussions were about the purpose and level of learning appropriate for a Masters module, as we had different views. Sheffield thought that the purpose of the module should be to enable the learners to link theory and practice, through reflection on their practice, and thereby to develop perspectives as research practitioners. Beijing Normal University wanted the focus to be more practical, to support the teachers in effective decision-making about using e-learning technology and to develop associated skills in using it. Both partners argued that their approach promoted deep learning. We managed to reach consensus on this by using the bridge of 'problem-based learning' – a methodology popular in China as a vehicle for collaborative learning that provides an authentic context for reflective practice, and this has been embedded in the way online Tasks and Activities were presented.*

McConnell, Banks and Lally (2007: 184)<sup>3</sup>

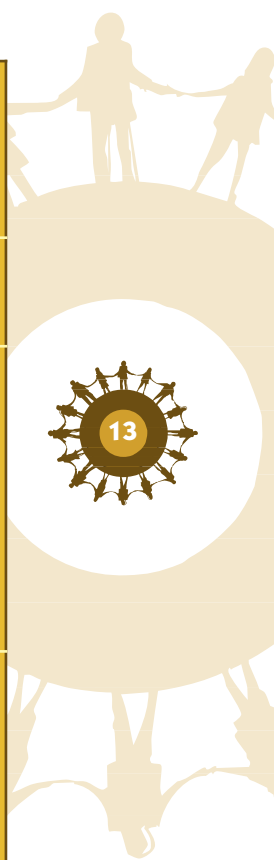
<sup>3</sup> McConnell, D., Banks, S. and Lally, V. (2007) Developing a collaborative approach to e-learning design in an intercultural (Sino-UK) context. In H. Spencer-Oatey (ed.) *e-Learning Initiatives in China: Pedagogy, Policy and Culture*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, pp.175–187.

***Tip: When differences arise in the course of a project, look for different values or beliefs at work. Recognise that creative solutions emerge when apparently opposing values/beliefs are reconciled rather than suppressed or compromised.***



# 4. Intercultural Competency Cluster 2: Communication

<b>Communication management</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Attends to the choice of working language(s)</li> <li>● Chooses modes of communication that suit the particular communicative purpose</li> <li>● Establishes suitable communication networks</li> <li>● Establishes and agrees communication protocols</li> <li>● Takes steps to deal with communication problems</li> </ul>
<b>Language learning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Motivated to learn and use other languages, and willing to invest time and effort in this</li> <li>● Confident in ability to pick up and use foreign languages</li> <li>● Tries out words and expressions in unfamiliar languages</li> </ul>
<b>Language adjustment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Adapts use of language to the proficiency level of the recipient(s) so as to maximise comprehensibility</li> <li>● Pays attention to, and adapts where necessary, aspects such as:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Speed</li> <li>● Frequency and length of pausing</li> <li>● Complexity of sentence structure</li> <li>● Complexity of vocabulary</li> <li>● Use of idioms and colloquialisms</li> <li>● Use of local accents and dialects</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Active listening</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Listens attentively</li> <li>● Signals that listening is taking place</li> <li>● Regularly checks and clarifies the meaning of important words and phrases, to ensure that all participants attach the same meaning to them, even when they are well known</li> <li>● Notices potential misunderstandings and seeks clarification/negotiates meaning until common understanding is reached</li> </ul>
<b>Attuning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Adept at observing indirect signals of meaning, such as intonation, eye contact and body language, and at picking up meaning from them</li> <li>● Pro-actively studies indirect signals of meaning, asking about them in order to deepen knowledge at a conscious level</li> <li>● Learns to interpret indirect signals appropriately in different cultural and communicative contexts</li> </ul>
<b>Building of shared knowledge and mutual trust</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Discloses and elicits background information that is needed for mutual understanding and meaningful negotiation</li> <li>● Structures and highlights information by using discourse markers to 'label' language, by using visual or written aids, and by paying attention to the sequencing of information</li> <li>● Exposes own intentions by explaining not only 'what' s/he wants, but also 'why' s/he wants it</li> </ul>
<b>Stylistic flexibility</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Pays attention to the different styles of communication (e.g. formal/informal; expressive/restrained) that people may use</li> <li>● Builds a repertoire of styles to suit different purposes, contexts and audiences</li> <li>● Uses different language styles flexibly to suit different purposes, contexts and audiences</li> </ul>



## Communication Competency 2.1: Communication management

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Communication is vital to the success of any collaboration, yet effective communication does not happen by chance. In international partnerships, where people are geographically separated, may speak different languages, work in organisations that have different structures and procedures, and so on, the management of communication can be particularly challenging. In the eChina-UK Programme, it was one of the most challenging aspects of communication that the members experienced.

Communication management involves numerous elements, and in view of the importance of this competence for intercultural effectiveness, several of them are described and illustrated below.

### **a. Finding the right person to talk to**

Successful communication starts with identifying the right person/people to talk to. This involves some preliminary research into how the partner organisation is structured and functions, how decisions are made and who makes the decisions (cf. Information gathering). However, when in a meeting with a number of unfamiliar people, it also involves the ability to sense which person holds the decision-making power. This process requires sensitivity and flexibility. People may need to alter their conceptions of who the interactional partners should be and may need to be flexible when faced with an unexpected situation.

#### ***Case Study Example: Mismatches in negotiating partners***

Academic staff from the British projects visited Beijing in March 2003 to meet their Chinese partners for the first time. They needed to get to know each other, and to agree a specific collaborative project that they would all work on for the next two years (the broad area for each project had been identified, but no specifics). The British members were expecting to meet fellow-academics with whom they could discuss and agree the project, but in several cases they found they were discussing and negotiating with institutional managers rather than academic counterparts. They found this very disconcerting – to be negotiating about academic matters with non-subject experts – and the Chinese partners found it equally unsettling.

Why was there this difference? It was due to structural/organisational differences between British and Chinese universities in handling distance/online courses. In Britain, online courses are typically handled by academic departments, and so the eChina-UK projects were organisationally 'located' in Faculties, Departments or Centres whose academic staff had the relevant expertise (e.g. School of Education). In China, on the other hand, the projects were located in special units that were responsible for distance and/or continuing education. These units did not have their own academic staff, but rather had to buy in such expertise from other parts of the university when it was needed.



## b. Establishing the most effective modes of communication

A second important aspect of communication management is establishing which communication modes suit which purposes the best. Such decisions may include establishing when asynchronous communication (email, voicemail) is sufficient and when synchronous communication (telephone, video conference, face-to-face) is necessary. For example, weekly updates on the progress of a jointly assigned task could be conveniently and easily achieved through brief emails. On the other hand, deciding who is to conduct what research and agreeing joint research objectives can be handled more effectively in face-to-face meetings.

### **Case Study Example: Establishing modes of communication for transcontinental contact**

The British and Chinese project members were based at opposite sides of the world, and so they needed to establish effective modes of communication for different purposes. The options included:

- Face-to-face meetings (exchange visits – short stay or extended)
- Email
- Video-conferencing
- Telephone & fax
- MSN, Skype chat
- Online collaborative platform

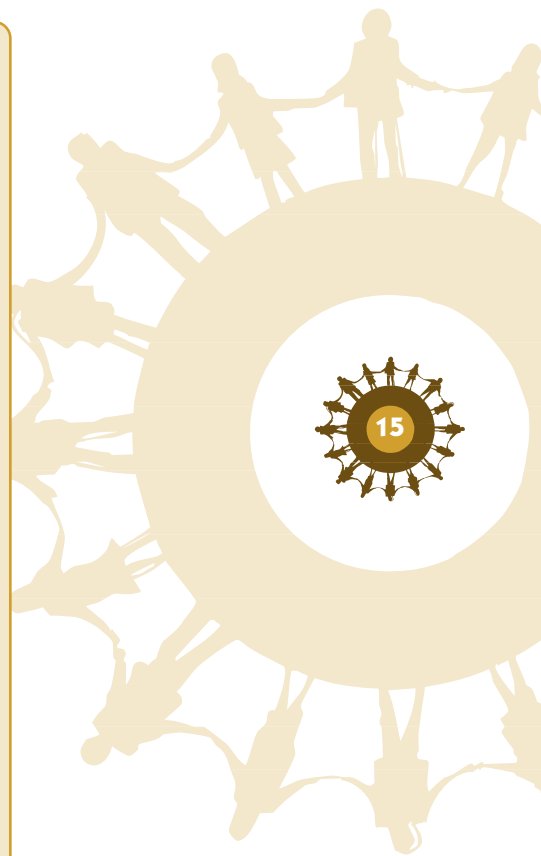
Shortly after the projects had their first joint meetings in March 2003, the SARS epidemic broke out, preventing further face-to-face meetings for several months. Some time later, a major computer virus affected Beijing universities, so that some project partners were unable to have email contact for about 3 months.

Teams, therefore, needed to establish and agree effective modes of communication, taking into account practical constraints. In line with research findings (Maznevski and Chudoba 2000<sup>4</sup>), they found that face-to-face meetings were necessary for complex discussions, and that email was efficient for straightforward, factual matters. People's experiences of video-conferencing were less positive – partly because of poor connection quality, and partly because of the formal way in which they were arranged.

*Comments by the University of Sheffield team*

*We used a 'mosaic' of communication tools to support collaboration between members of the distributed team: email, a virtual learning environment (VLE), video-conferencing, and face-to-face meetings. This variety helps to cater for individual preferences, as well as take advantage of the value of each mode of communication.*

- *We decided to share key documents by email, so that all group members were circulated and had time to reflect upon key ideas without the immediate pressure of instant communication.*
- *We decided to use periodic video-conferences to enhance our sense of being together in a shared project. These often had an air of formality that made the exploration of details difficult to achieve.*



<sup>4</sup> Maznevski, M. & Chudoba, K. (2000). Bridging space over time: global virtual team dynamics and effectiveness. *Organization Science*, 11 (5): 473–492.

- We decided that face-to-face contact was important to develop understandings that could not be achieved electronically.
- We used 'action points' in our face-to-face meetings to provide some continuity of working between meetings.

*Comments by the University of Cambridge team*

*Although most of our academic developers were located in Cambridge, one of them was living in Austria at the time. So we not only had to ensure smooth communication between team members located in Cambridge and Beijing, but also between content developers in Cambridge and Austria.*

*Regular face-to-face meetings were arranged for team members as follows:*

- *Weekly meetings in Cambridge between the academic developers and the online developers*
- *Monthly meetings, usually in Cambridge but sometimes in Beijing, for the academic developers and project managers*

The team member in Austria came to Cambridge every month for the monthly meeting, and the Cambridge project manager telephoned him after each weekly meeting, so that he could keep closely involved with developments.

After each face-to-face meeting, points of agreement, questions and action points were documented and circulated by email for comments to those members of the team not present. This communication took the form of an annotated report for all members of the team. Such a procedure proved effective and valuable in tracking the project's phases, and for documenting all decisions during each phase. More detailed internal reports regarding the finer points of development plus feedback and deadlines were circulated among the content development team to work on before the final drafts of the materials were distributed to the whole team.

### **c. Establishing suitable networks for communication distribution**

Most people will have experienced what it is like to be drowned in a flood of mass-emails that do not concern them or to be disturbed by requests or questions on issues that are not within their area of responsibility or expertise. Likewise, it can be upsetting or infuriating if one is not informed of issues that one should clearly have been consulted on. It is therefore vital in a project, both for the sake of task effectiveness and smooth interpersonal relations, that – at an early stage – assessments are made as to who is responsible for what areas and which people should be informed and updated on which issues.

#### **Case Study Example: Communication networks and the distribution of information**

Several of the projects were large, involving up to 35 people in Britain and 35 in China (including senior managers etc.). So for these large projects, establishing effective communication networks was vital: i.e. deciding who should be kept informed about what issues. It was not appropriate to waste people's time with issues that didn't concern them, yet it was important that they felt involved and updated on developments. This was not at all easy to achieve, and we never really resolved this satisfactorily. One Chinese team member gave the following evaluation:



Chinese Researcher: *In your opinion, was the communication effective?*  
 Chinese 20: *No, it wasn't. Though both Chinese and British sides had their own project managers, they couldn't do all the communications on their own. We should have embedded different communication mechanisms in the project at different levels.*

Although this wasn't necessarily a cultural issue, it was an important communication issue for the teams, and sometimes could entail cultural elements, as the following comment illustrates.

Chinese 02: *Sending mass emails is a good way. But when we send such emails, it will infringe Chinese principles. If I send such an email to a person in a higher position, s/he will feel offended. Nowadays we send various materials by email, but Chinese are special, superiors will feel particularly insulted. ... Sending emails to superiors is not a good way, because it shows no regard for status differences between people. Some superiors dislike equality, so the best way to communicate with them is to submit a report, either in written or oral form.*

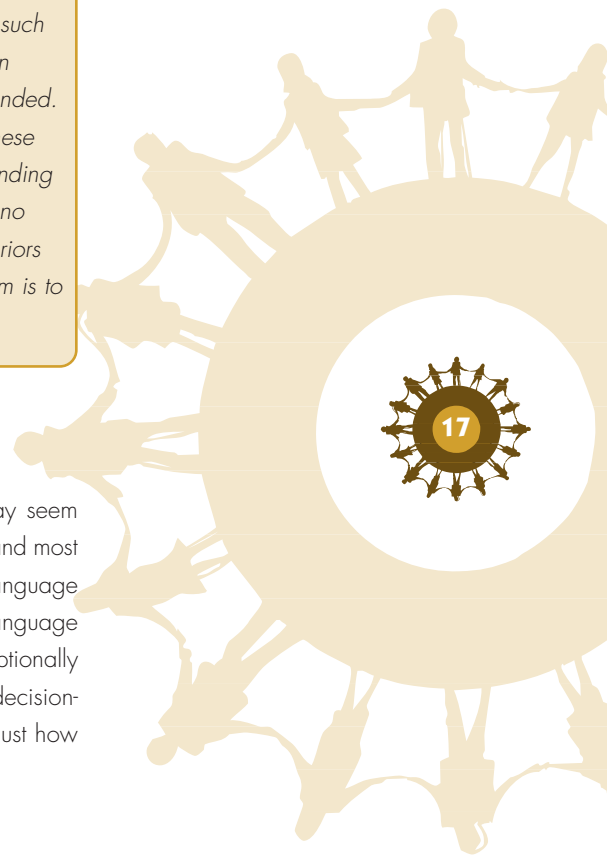
#### d. Agreeing on choice of language

To fluent speakers of English, choosing which language(s) to use in a project may seem uncontroversial, because English is widely assumed to be the easiest, most 'natural' and most convenient option. However, the reality is not so simple. The choice of a working language requires careful consideration, because it is not simply a question of practicality. Language is closely linked to power and often determines the degree to which otherwise exceptionally qualified participants will be able to contribute to the collaborative process and the decision-making process (Janssens and Brett, 1997). The following quotation demonstrates just how sensitive the selection of a working language can be:

*"Choosing the working language can create winners and losers. Language is clearly associated with power, influence and emotional issues. Let us put it bluntly: the ability to master or not master English can create an unequal playing field. Sometimes language differences can be interpreted as personality problems and you can be treated as a deviant or simply ignored just because you do not seize all the linguistic subtleties (Berry, 1990). Beyond discouraging participation, you tend to assimilate language fluency with scientific competencies. If you want to be the leader of the project, it is better if you have English as your mother tongue. Conversely, it is not always the scientific stars that represent a country or an institution but those who are relatively more apt in English."*

Bournois and Chevalier (1998: 207)<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Bournois, F. and Chevalier, F. (1998). Doing research with foreign colleagues: A project-life cycle approach. *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 13(3/4): 206–212.



### **Case Study Example: The impact of choosing English as a working language**

All of the British teams initially relied almost exclusively on the Chinese partners' abilities to speak English. None of them had any Chinese-speaking team members at the start of the project, and so the burden of interpreting and translation fell almost entirely on the Chinese partners. For one of the projects in particular, this was a heavy burden. Language affected not only team interaction but also course development and mutual exchange and evaluation of each other's materials (everything had to be translated from English to Chinese, and from Chinese to English, so that the Chinese and British academic developers could give feedback on each other's work<sup>6</sup>). This was problematic and unfair on the Chinese partners, and some of them felt quite strongly about this:

Chinese 21: *The working language was English. Due to the language problems, when we couldn't express ourselves clearly, it seemed that we were disadvantaged. But as a matter of fact, the British were thinking hard to get what we wanted to say.*

As the projects progressed, most of the British teams realised the importance of having a Chinese speaker to work with them in Britain, and so identified suitable people to bring in on an ad hoc basis. In addition, several of them started to take Chinese language lessons.

### **e. Establishing communication protocols**

It is essential for international partners to understand each other's working practices, such as how group members usually make decisions, their preferred styles of interaction, and so on. Often these are different, and agreement needs to be reached as to how such differences in preferences are handled.

### **Case Study Example: Chinese perceptions of their British partners' communication**

Some Chinese partners found that the way in which the British handled the meetings was very different from what they were used to:

Chinese 06: *The UK colleagues are more likely to raise issues directly. Their logic is that issues should be raised first, then they'll try their best to find solutions. Even if they couldn't solve the problems immediately, at least they would know what the problems are. It's their culture, I think. But one part of the Chinese culture is that we are too shy to open our mouths to talk about some things. It's difficult for us to put some things on the table. ... Sometimes the UK project manager sent some suggestions to us. When we got the suggestion, we usually got nervous and wondered 'must we do it immediately?' or 'are they commanding us to do this?' ... But working together with them for a while I gradually realised that I could voice my opinions and take time to think. It wasn't a big problem.*

<sup>6</sup> This course was aimed at middle school teachers who were non-specialists in English, and so much of the final courseware needed to be in Chinese.

They also experienced differences in ways of handling meetings:

Chinese 14: *When we were in the UK, we found that the British side had a very clear cut meeting arrangement, like how often an update meeting should be held. And the plan was strictly carried out. ... I think this working pattern was quite effective and efficient. In contrast, a regular meeting system was impossible here in China because each member had so many things to do and so little time for regular meetings.*

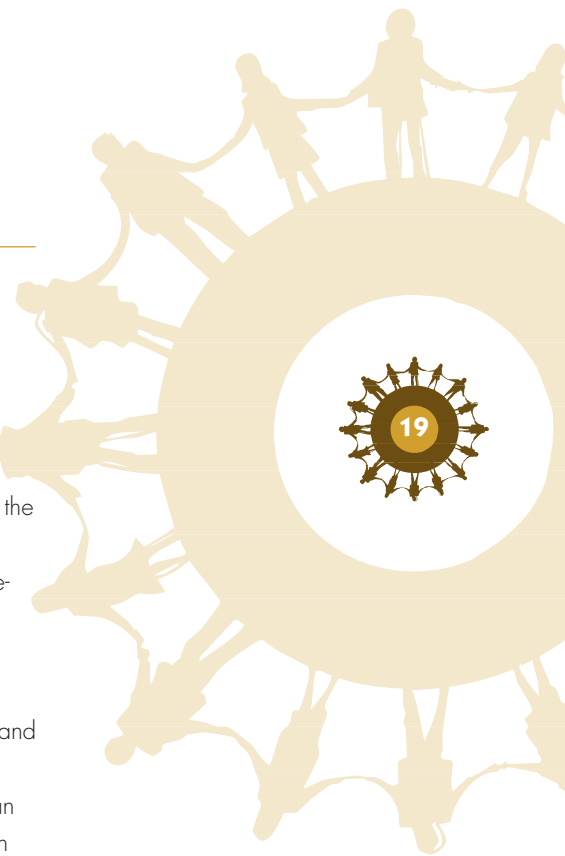
**Tip: Take plenty of time in the early stages of a collaborative partnership to plan how you will manage your communication.**

## Communication Competency 2.2: Language learning

### ***The importance of language learning***

Language learning is rarely prioritised in collaborative endeavours and sadly, this is particularly true where native speakers of English are involved. With English being the number one choice of lingua franca in the world, many native speakers assume that making the effort to acquire even some basic phrases in another language is an unnecessary time-waster which will not really achieve very much. However, even when the interactional partners are highly proficient in the chosen working language, language learning efforts are never in vain. Despite the fact that learning a language can be time-consuming, daunting, and challenging, it can also be highly rewarding.

One benefit of learning another language lies in the fact that language proficiency is a window into the other person's culture and may reveal the collaborative partner's values and beliefs. It can thereby promote understanding of the partner and their practices, and aid more effective interaction. For those who are fluent but who nevertheless choose to use an interpreter, it has further advantages. If you can understand what your partner is saying in his/her native language, you will be able to make use of the duration of the translation to formulate your response, thereby enabling you to prepare better for your reply. Even the most basic skills in another language will be of help in trying to establish good relationships and positive impressions and will most likely be very well-received by interactional partners. Language learning is important for relationship building and maintenance, as it demonstrates an interest in the other's language and culture and a willingness to make an effort. It offers multiple benefits, advantages and rewards, even at the most basic proficiency level, including signalling good-will to the collaborative partners.



### Case Study Example: Choosing to learn Chinese

It was obviously impossible for any of the British members of the eChina-UK projects to become proficient in Chinese within the lifetime of their project, and during the first phase of the eChina-UK Programme, no one paid attention to language learning at all. Only the overall Programme Manager, among all the British members, had learned Chinese, and this made a bad impression on some of the Chinese partners. One of them commented as follows:

Chinese 16: *I think we should show consideration for each other in terms of language. China is now developing very fast; they should know some Chinese to communicate with us. ... We have learned a lot of English, it's their turn to learn some basic Chinese, as it is two-way communication. I find it weird that they don't know even a word of Chinese.*

The British partners learned from their mistake in this respect, and in the second phase many of them started to take Chinese lessons and learned to use some common phrases. One person was particularly interested in Chinese characters, and learned to recognise quite a lot of them during visits to Beijing. This interest in the Chinese language was hugely appreciated by the Chinese partners, and helped considerably in building rapport.

**Tip:** *Reflect on your attitude towards language learning, and explore options for learning your partner's language or improving your proficiency in it.*

## Communication Competency 2.3: Language adjustment

Being able to adjust one's language is a complex yet essential skill, especially for native speakers of the chosen working language. Non-native speakers have to communicate in a language over which they have varying degrees of command, and this may put them at a disadvantage. So, in order to help non-native speakers follow a conversation more easily and to enable them to participate in a meaningful way, it is necessary for native speakers to adapt their language to the level of proficiency of their interlocutor(s).

Adjustment involves multiple aspects. Some of the most crucial ones include:

- adjusting the speed of speech (i.e. speaking slowly enough for non-native speakers to be able to follow, but not so slowly that they are insulted!);
- avoiding complex sentence structure (i.e. keeping it simple and keeping one thought per sentence, rather than packing multiple thoughts into one long and complex sentence);
- avoiding complex structures, such as passive or negative inversion, which can cause considerable confusion (i.e. using active voice, such as 'Are you going to organise the meeting?', instead of passive voice 'Is the meeting going to be organised by you' and avoiding negative inversions, such as 'So you are not coming to the meeting tomorrow then?' in favour of a more simple structure, such as 'Are you coming to the meeting tomorrow?');

- pausing regularly to ensure that non-native speakers can follow the interaction and have the opportunity to ask questions, should they be unsure of their comprehension;
- using simple terminology (i.e. use words such as 'use', which are more likely to be familiar to a non-native speaker rather than more complex words such as 'employ', which are likely to be acquired at a later proficiency stage);
- avoiding idiomatic expressions, which are rarely shared and are among the most difficult aspects to comprehend in a foreign language (i.e. avoid phrases such as 'do we have to reinvent the wheel' and instead describe what you mean);
- avoiding regional dialects and accents, whenever possible (i.e. try to use a standard form of the language, rather than local jargon and heavy accents).

It is important to remember, however, that the level of adjustment needs to be dynamic and to suit the level of proficiency of the other partners. Over-adjustment can be as insulting as under-adjustment.

### Case Study Example: Language adjustment at the start of a meeting

Adjusting one's use of language to the proficiency level of the recipient(s) is vital for effective communication; however, it is sometimes easier said than done. Consider the following interaction that took place at one of our meetings:

Chair: *I'm going to ask everybody to speak very clearly and uh without heavy accents if possible*

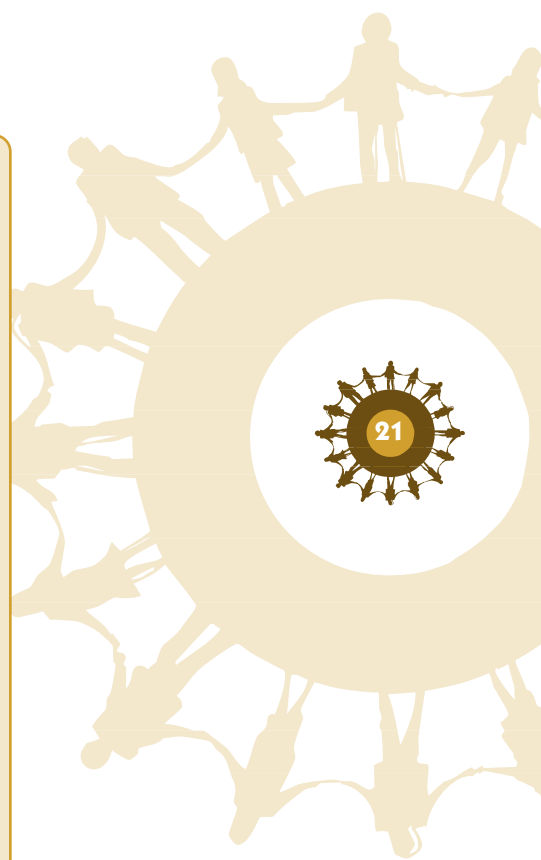
Everyone: *Laughter [as the Chair speaks with a Scottish accent]*

Chair: *and we may take some pauses just to make sure everybody uhm uh is keeping up with the conversation cause we can sometimes each of us speak very quickly when we get excited. Uh this afternoon is a chance for us really to explore the research issues ## tell each other what we're doing ## tell each other what we hope to achieve what we're aspiring to ### and it would be wonderful if we could perhaps focus on the use of technology in learning ## if that was of interest to you ##### so what I'd like to do is I think it would be very helpful for one of our colleagues to volunteer to, <as we say in Scotland: start the ball rolling cause we really love football>. Uh I think I think it would be fair to ask one of our colleagues to start the ball rolling and [name of British colleague] if you would like to kick off for us.*

This excerpt demonstrates a number of adjustment practices. The Chair clearly shows a high level of awareness of this competence, by asking participants to speak clearly, to avoid accents, to avoid fast speech and to pause regularly in order to ensure that all participants have the chance to follow the conversation. The Chair then goes on to put her insights into practice, speaking slowly and clearly, by pausing regularly (signalled by #) and trying to avoid the use of a heavy Scottish accent. However, only seconds later she speeds up (signalled by < >), falls into a more pronounced Scottish accent, uses an idiomatic expression ('to start the ball rolling') which leaves all but one of the Chinese participants with blank faces, and then goes on to repeat the idiom and to use complex vocabulary ('kick off'), which is unlikely to be understood and could easily have been replaced by a more simple word, such as 'start' or 'begin'.

Go to <http://www.globalpeople.org.uk/> for an audio clip of this extract

**Tip: In your next meeting with non-native speaking partners or colleagues, monitor your own use of English or that of your colleagues. How similar or different is it to the type of English used by your non-native speaking partners/colleagues?**



## Communication Competency 2.4: Active listening

In order to minimise the risk of miscommunication and misunderstandings, it is vital for people to engage in 'active listening'. Active listening denotes the willingness and ability to listen actively to what the interactional partner is saying, to check whether a message has been understood correctly, to check whether one understands the other's messages correctly, and to clarify meaning where required.

### a. Building a common understanding of terms

In order to be able to communicate in a meaningful way, it is necessary for both project partners to have a good understanding of each other's contexts and the meaning of terminology in other cultures. In education projects, for example, it can by no means be assumed that terminology such as 'course' or 'module' refer to the same academic structures or denote the same things. It is, therefore, essential to spend time clarifying the meaning of terms, which might be used widely in both countries but to very different effects.

#### **Case Study Example: Exploring definitions**

All of the eChina-UK project members found that it was vital to spend considerable time reaching a common understanding of terms and concepts. This was not necessarily a language proficiency issue; it was equally important among native speakers. At first, teams needed to clarify use of terms like *course*, *module*, *unit*, *chapter*, and even something like this could be emotionally challenging:

British O9: *When I first joined, I spent weeks if not months on a simple practical confusion as to what is a unit, module, what was the other one?*

British O6: *Activity.*

British O9: *There was no standard definition, so I was like blocked at the first hurdle, and so I wasn't quite sure how much material I'd got to write, because we were given this notion of how many hours the student would spend, I wouldn't know in which box those hours fitted. ... I thought I don't understand this, I can't do this.*

The process was never-ending: finding out the nuances of meaning associated with each person's use of a word, and then developing joint working definitions. There was a continual stream of words and concepts to discuss; for example, blended learning, online learning, formative assessment, summative assessment, forum, e-portfolio, student workspace, evaluation, reflection, criticality, and so on. There was no alternative but to spend considerable lengths of time talking with each other, and gradually building up a common understanding and common language.

The Chinese partners often assumed that their British partners were clear about their use of English terms, when in fact very often they were not, as the quotation above illustrates.

## b. Checking understanding/Asking for clarification

The amount of effort constantly required to ensure shared understanding can be hard work, frustrating and/or embarrassing, so it often seems easier to ignore potential misunderstandings. However, such a *laissez-faire* attitude can lead to latent (i.e. delayed) misunderstandings, which can take weeks, months or even years to resolve. Latent and unresolved misunderstandings can leave both parties feeling dissatisfied with the collaboration and, in the long term, they can have a serious impact on relationships and on the success of a partnership. So detecting misunderstandings at an early stage can prevent more severe problems and misunderstandings arising at a later stage of the project.

### Case Study Example: Clarifying meaning

An important element of active listening is asking for clarification and/or checking understanding. The following examples from eChina-UK project meetings illustrate this process:

Example 1:

Chinese 20: [Summing up what he has just said] *So these are the 4 things that the Ministry would like to have.*

British 17: *So these are platform, educational management, IPR and admin.*

Chorus: *Yes.*

Example 2:

Chinese 21: *I direct a group team for making the standards for the courses on the internet.*

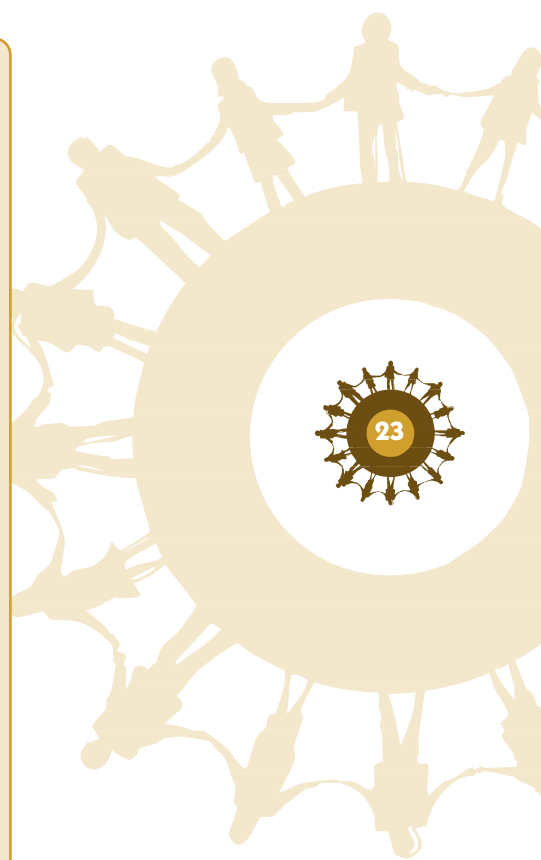
British 18: *Sorry, do you mean standards for interoperability or do you mean standards for quality?*

Chinese 21: *Quality.*

Both these examples show how the speakers British 17 and 18 took steps to clarify the other person's meaning, thereby helping to ensure that they shared the same understanding as their communicative partners.

Go to <http://www.globalpeople.org.uk/> for an audio clip of these extracts

**Tip: In your next meeting with non-native speaking partners or colleagues, monitor how much you understand of what is said. Reflect on ways in which you could try to listen more actively without causing offence.**



## Communication Competency 2.5: Attuning

Very often meaning is conveyed indirectly, so it is extremely important that people pay close attention to subtle verbal and non-verbal signals, such as intonation, eye-contact and body language. If people are attuning, they are able to pick up meaning from such signals. Even a slight hesitation, a slightly prolonged pause, or an absence of signals that are normally present can convey some crucial information. So it is extremely important for participants of international collaborations to learn to 'read' their interactional partners and to infer meaning from both the presence and/or absence of such subtle signals. In this way, they will help reduce miscommunication. Such a competence requires careful observation and sensitivity to others.

### Case Study Example: Sensitive attuning

British 18: *Can I just ask one question? If I understood you, you were talking about [...]. Should I read that into what you say?*  
[turns to others]  
*oh maybe I'm not clear*  
[immediately rewords question]

In this example, British 18 immediately picks up that the other person does not understand his question. It seems he was partly paying attention to the other person's facial expressions, and partly to the sudden lack of 'listening particles' such as Yes and *uhuh* or non-verbal cues such as nods.

Go to <http://www.globalpeople.org.uk/> for an audio clip of this extract

**Tip: Build up your competence in attuning by monitoring people's non-verbal behaviour on a regular basis.**

## Communication Competency 2.6: Establishing shared knowledge

Current models of communication acknowledge that it is not feasible for all information associated with a message to be encoded in language; a large amount has to be inferred by drawing on background knowledge. In intercultural communication, people typically have less background knowledge in common, and so it is particularly important to allow deliberately for this in planning interaction.

### Case Study Example: Establishing each other's research interests

The eChina-UK teams found that the establishment of shared knowledge was a particularly important issue. On some occasions, a project leader was very effective in ensuring that meetings started with an opportunity to establish shared knowledge. For example, in one meeting, the Chair started as follows:



Chair: *"Uh this afternoon is a chance for us really to explore the research issues, tell each other what we're doing, tell each other what we hope to achieve what we're aspiring to, and it would be wonderful if we could perhaps focus on the use of technology in learning, if that was of interest to you."*

This was followed by a valuable time of individual sharing.

On other occasions, however, it was much more problematic, especially when people were not consciously aware that there were any differences in their mutual knowledge. For example, for one of the eChina-UK projects, it emerged after 18 months of collaboration that the procedures for validating online courses were very significantly different in the British and the Chinese universities concerned. The British members had simply assumed that validation would need to take place prior to the delivery of the course, whereas that was not in fact the case for the Chinese partner university. The project members had not spent enough time at the beginning of the project establishing shared knowledge around quality assurance regulations and procedures.

**Tip: At the beginning of a project, don't start working on the shared task too quickly. Spend time sharing and asking about relevant background information.**

## Communication Competency 2.7: Stylistic flexibility

Stylistic flexibility is important at every stage of a project life cycle. It entails noticing prevailing stylistic norms in given cultures and contexts, as well as acquiring a repertoire of styles and using them flexibly and sensitively. Stylistic flexibility is similar in certain respects to the category 'language adjustment'; however, it is not the vocabulary, grammar and tempo that are adjusted to the proficiency level of the interactional partner. Rather, it is the style of language that is adapted (e.g. level of formality) to suit different purposes, contexts and audiences.

### Case Study Example: Meeting conventions

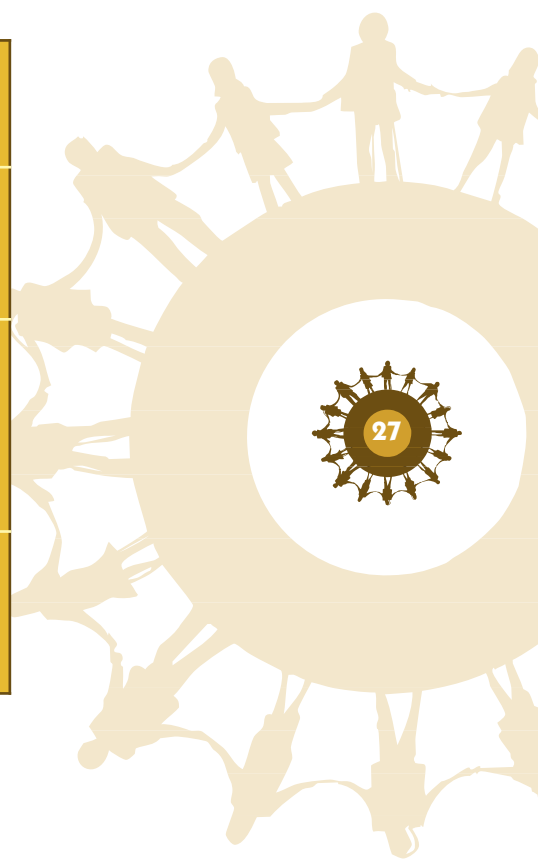
The British manager of the eChina-UK Programme reports that she found the style of many meetings in China, especially with the Chinese Ministry of Education, very different from those she was used to. The most noticeable differences were the 'speaking rights' of the participants, and the length of the speaker turns. For example, it was particularly common for the Chinese chair of a meeting to speak in very long turns, making a whole series of points and with many subordinates carefully writing down everything that was said. The most senior British person was then expected to respond in a similarly long turn. The British manager reports finding this different interactional style quite difficult to adjust to – that it was very hard to negotiate on specific points, as each turn consisted of so many.

The eChina-UK project teams also experienced the need to be stylistically flexible. For example, when they were arranging a joint workshop in China, the British initially wanted there to be one day of speeches and two days of 'working workshops' when the teams discussed and planned their projects in detail. The Chinese partners, on the other hand, were uncomfortable with so much time for discussion and wanted to fill all three days with speeches. They also wanted the event to be formal and grand – the meeting room was decorated with banners and filled with a large u-shape of tables that were too heavy to move. The British team felt more comfortable with informality, while the Chinese team felt more comfortable with formality.

***Tip: In your next meeting with non-native speaking partners or colleagues, pay close attention to some key features, such as seating arrangements, speaker rights and speaker turns, style of language used at the start and the end of the meeting.***

# 5. Intercultural Competency Cluster 3: Relationships

<b>Welcoming of strangers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Interested in people with different experiences and backgrounds</li> <li>● Pro-active in approaching and meeting new people</li> <li>● Builds a wide and diverse network of friends and acquaintances</li> </ul>
<b>Rapport building</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Shows warmth and friendliness in building relationships</li> <li>● Builds connections on a personal as well as professional basis</li> <li>● Shows care and concern for the other person's welfare</li> </ul>
<b>Sensitivity to social/ professional context</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Pays attention to hierarchy and power relations, and how they may influence behaviour in different contexts</li> <li>● Understands how given role relationships operate in different contexts, and the rights and obligations associated with them</li> <li>● Understands how decisions are made in given contexts</li> </ul>
<b>Interpersonal attentiveness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Pays attention to people's personal sensitivities and avoids making them 'lose face'</li> <li>● Encourages and builds people up by complimenting them appropriately and 'giving them face'</li> </ul>



## Relationship Competency 3.1: Welcoming of strangers

Initial impressions are always important and so giving partners a very warm welcome to one's country and organisation is vital for establishing firm relationships or even friendships. This requires not only an interest in other cultures but also an openness to people from different backgrounds and a willingness to make an effort to approach them.

### Case Study Example: Hospitality in China

The British members of the eChina-UK Programme found that their Chinese partners were extremely welcoming when they visited Beijing. Sightseeing trips and shopping expeditions were arranged for them, and they were treated to endless delicious meals and banquets. The hosts went to all lengths to make the British visitors feel at home, and devoted hours of time to try and ensure that they thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

**Tip: Reflect on the hospitality you have received on trips abroad and how you felt. How do you think your international partners like to be welcomed in your country? Ask a 'cultural informant' and compare and discuss your ideas.**

## Relationship Competency 3.2: Rapport building

Relationships are of critical importance in any collaboration; without them, all best efforts will be in vain. Time invested in establishing good working relationships is thus time very well spent.

### Case Study Example: Social activities

All of the eChina-UK project members found that strong interpersonal relationships were crucial for effective collaboration. They spent considerable amounts of time getting to know each other socially, such as having meals together, going on sightseeing trips, meeting each other's families and chatting about a wide range of topics. This relationship building was a vital element of each project, and laid the foundation for the effective management of 'strategic moments' (Canney Davison and Ward 1999<sup>7</sup>). The trust that had been gradually built up over time enabled them to resolve any differences more easily and to achieve fruitful outcomes. However, they all found that senior managers regularly underestimated the importance of rapport building and the time needed for that purpose. One of the project members commented as follows:

*Separated by enormous physical distance, as well as by language, context and cultural difference, we sought from the outset to find common ground on which to build productive relationships. Regular visits between China and the UK enabled various team members to build both working and – equally importantly – social relationships. Whilst it is recognised that building social relationships serves to strengthen developing working relationships, it should likewise be acknowledged that this relies heavily on the willingness of team members to give of their free time, outside the boundaries of any given project. The value of this 'voluntary' input outside formal working time should not be underestimated, nor remain unacknowledged. There is a social dimension to effective team building that should ideally be built into the project.*

**Tip: At the beginning of a project, spend time socialising with your partners and getting to know them personally. Gradually build the relationship as the project progresses.**

<sup>7</sup> Canney Davison, S. & Ward, K. (1999). *Leading International Teams*. London: McGraw Hill.

## Relationship Competency 3.3: Sensitivity to social/professional context

To work successfully in intercultural collaborations and to establish good working relations with the collaborative partner, it is essential to show a high degree of sensitivity to the context in which you are working. This refers to the cultural, social and situational context and requires sensitivity to the partner's cultural values and practices, to role relations and role obligations in the partner's culture, and to what constitutes adequate behaviour in the given situational circumstances.

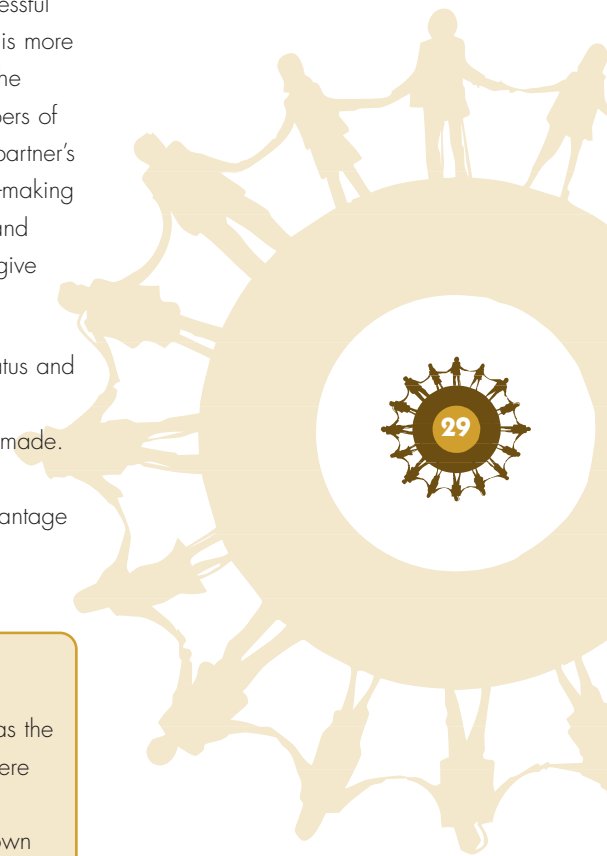
Without such knowledge, *faux pas* are likely to occur, which could hinder the successful building of relationships. For example, it may well be that a junior member of staff is more proficient in English, and that it is tempting to 'pitch' one's ideas predominantly to the person who is easiest to interact with. This could be offensive to more senior members of staff. Likewise, your ideas may very much appeal to a more junior member of the partner's team. However, if you fail to understand who the person is who holds the decision-making power and if you fail to convince the person who holds that power of your ideas and strategies for the project, your efforts will be in vain and – even worse – you may give unintended offence by not recognising the senior person's status and power.

It is therefore of great importance to be perceptive as to what the partner's role, status and decision-making powers are. A good background knowledge of how role-relations function in the other culture can foster a better understanding of how decisions are made. While such perceptiveness, understanding and knowledge will help create better foundations for successful working relationships, it can also provide a strategic advantage for effectiveness in intercultural partnerships.

### Case Study Example: Risking offence

During the first year of the eChina-UK Programme, a significant 'political' issue was the choice of platform for the delivery of the online materials that the project teams were developing. Neither the Chinese Ministry of Education nor the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) wanted any of the universities to use their own platform, yet they could not agree on which platform(s) the projects should use. The decision was delayed and tensions were rising high. So the British sent a small team to explore the issue and to try to reach agreement with the Chinese Ministry of Education. In one of the meetings, which was very formal and involved a senior official from the Chinese Ministry, one of the British technical staff interrupted the senior Chinese official, saying 'Can I ask a question?' The official looked completely shocked and the British senior negotiator, horrified by this breach of Chinese etiquette, which clearly had had such a negative impact, simply replied "No, you cannot."

The incident passed over without any repercussions. However, the lack of sensitivity that this subordinate member showed to the formality of the setting and the importance of respecting hierarchical relations in this type of business meeting, could easily have offended the Chinese official and thereby impacted negatively on subsequent negotiations if it had not been stopped in its tracks. (cf. Communication: Stylistic flexibility)



**Tip: At the beginning of a project, find out as much as you can about the professional context that you are working in. Pay particular attention to things such as organisational structures, hierarchical relations, and people's roles and responsibilities.**

## Relationship Competency 3.4: Interpersonal attentiveness

People everywhere are sensitive to certain things, such as their appearance, their abilities, their wealth, their status and so on. If others challenge them in some way over these sensitive areas, they are likely to feel threatened, and may feel angry, upset or embarrassed. These sensitivities are commonly known as 'face' and in order to build and maintain good working relationships, it is extremely important to avoid causing the other to lose face. In some cultures, particular emphasis is placed on 'giving' face to the other.

### Case Study Example: Giving face

During a visit of members of their Chinese partners' team, the Head of Department (HoD) of the UK institution engages in positive face-giving practices during a project meeting. This practice shows good-will, appreciation for the partners' status and authority and creates a basis for maintaining relationships.

The partners were discussing the need to pilot the material that they were jointly developing. The senior Chinese project member mentioned the difficulties and costs that the Chinese team would face if material was to be piloted at the Chinese partner institution. The following exchange then took place:

HoD: *We have many international students, some of whom will be Chinese who will love to do additional work.*

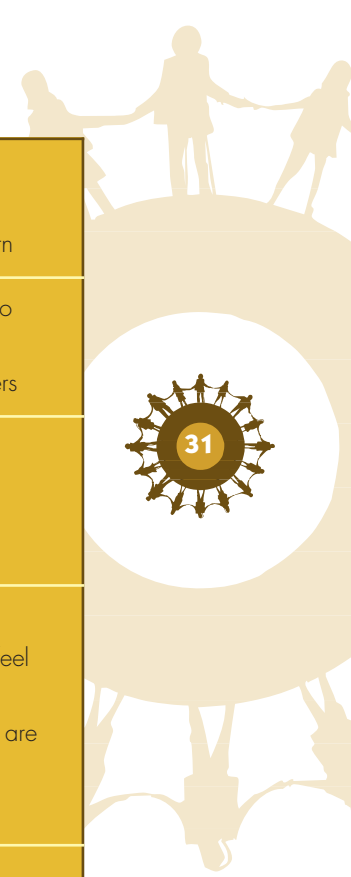
Some: *(Laughter)*

HoD: *No, they will, when they get another course free, which it will be, in a subject area that is relevant to them, so this will be a big plus – especially when they know that [name of the senior Chinese project member] is involved, famous Professor from Beijing, so this will be great [...] this will be a big tick [...] we can really build that up into a big plus. We'll be carefully selecting volunteers because we know we'll have so many.*

**Tip: Reflect on the things that you are personally sensitive to in meetings – what makes you feel embarrassed or flattered. When you next meet your international partners, consider the extent to which they may feel embarrassed or flattered by the same things.**

# 5. Intercultural Competency Cluster 4: Personal qualities and dispositions

<b>Spirit of adventure</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Ready to seek out variety, change and stimulation in his/her life</li> <li>● Avoids safe and predictable environments</li> <li>● Pushes self into uncomfortable and ambiguous situations from which s/he can learn</li> </ul>
<b>Self-awareness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Conscious that his/her own behaviour may be strange and/or difficult for others to understand or accept</li> <li>● Sensitive to how his/her own communication and behaviour is interpreted by others</li> </ul>
<b>Acceptance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Positively accepts behaviour and ideas that are very different from his/her own</li> <li>● Accepting of people as they are and does not try to change them</li> <li>● At ease with those who hold different views or values</li> <li>● Looks for the best in others, and forgives any faux pas quickly and easily</li> </ul>
<b>Flexibility</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Willing to learn a wide range of behaviour and communication patterns</li> <li>● Copies other people's behaviour/communication in order to fit in or make others feel more comfortable</li> <li>● Experiments with different ways of behaving and communicating to find those that are most acceptable and most successful</li> <li>● Adapts behaviour and modifies judgements to suit the circumstances</li> </ul>
<b>Inner purpose</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Guided by a well defined set of values and beliefs</li> <li>● Possesses personal toughness that enables maintenance of a sense of focus in difficult situations</li> <li>● Self-disciplined and self-reliant</li> <li>● Can provide a clear sense of direction for self and others</li> </ul>
<b>Coping</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Possesses well-developed methods for dealing with stress, such as:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Uses humour to relieve tension</li> <li>● Builds local support networks</li> <li>● Manages negative emotions</li> <li>● Looks for something good in what is happening</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Resilience</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Ready to risk making social mistakes</li> <li>● Not easily embarrassed by social gaffes</li> <li>● Has sufficient self-confidence to handle criticism or negative feedback</li> <li>● Has optimistic outlook and bounces back quickly after setbacks</li> </ul>



## Personal Competency 4.1: Spirit of Adventure

There are a number of personal qualities that facilitate intercultural work. One particularly important quality is a spirit of adventure that relishes exploring all things new and different (ranging from trying new foods, engaging in unfamiliar customs and celebrations to immersing oneself into a different cultural environment). Instead of feeling intimidated or threatened by difference, it is helpful for people to feel excited and stimulated by the prospect of working in intercultural partnerships.

Ideally, one should be able to embrace the opportunity to challenge oneself and to learn with enthusiasm about another cultural 'world'. This does not in any way mean that one has to approve of all practices of another culture or agree with all of their customs, but it entails the willingness to approach another culture's practices with an open mind and a positive outlook. Such a disposition/approach to intercultural work will enable the person to grow and learn from collaborative work. When they face setbacks, they are then more likely to recover from them quickly instead of feeling defeated.

### Case Study Example: Excitement about visiting China

Several of the project members had never been to China before and they were excited about the opportunity. As the following quotation indicates, they displayed a spirit of adventure:

Brit 16: *I never imagined in my life that I would be in China. It was simply amazing. At the beginning of the project, when [project director] talked to me about this in April, there was all the negotiations, there was the SARS crisis, there were many many different aspects, and I never thought I'd receive a phone call saying you're going to China in September. Naturally that was something that was an additional motivation for me. [...] Here was a possibility to realise some personal goals, and to show for myself this is what I've learned, and, as a dedicated classroom teacher of 30 years, OK this is what I've learned for myself so how then can I convey this to others? And that was a personal motivation for me.*

**Tip: Before getting involved in an international project, reflect on your feelings: are you excited by the prospect or fearful and/or worried about it?**

## Personal Competency 4.2: Self-awareness

This competence requires, first and foremost, a high level of sensitivity, empathy and perceptiveness. It entails two complementary elements. Firstly, a person needs to be sensitive to how s/he behaves in relation to others and to anticipate how others may react to the behaviour. Secondly, a person needs to be perceptive in 'reading' other people's reactions to his/her behaviour so that if necessary, s/he can make adjustments to what s/he says or does.



**Case Study Example: Minimal self-awareness**

At the beginning of the eChina-UK Programme, British and Chinese project members needed to meet each other and jointly develop a project plan for collaborative working. In one meeting, one of the British senior project members [Brit 18], who had not met any of the Chinese visitors before, started the meeting with a monologue lasting nearly nine minutes. The programme manager [Brit 17] was concerned that the Chinese partners were having difficulty following the flow of the argument, so the following interchange occurred:

Brit 17: *Can we step back a bit because we're getting a bit detailed?*

Brit 18: *Am I losing you?*

Ch 20: *Well to me it's a bit too detailed, can you give me an overall picture?*

The British senior project member [Brit 18] displayed very little self-awareness during those first nine minutes. He had no sense that the Chinese partners were unable to follow the detail of his monologue, and even after this intervention, he quickly reverted to further long-winded monologue. No matter whether he was interacting with Chinese partners or with unfamiliar members of other eChina-UK projects, he was extraordinarily unaware of how he was coming across to others. (cf. Communication – Attuning)

**Tip: Choose a colleague whom you get on well with and trust, and who attends some of the same meetings as you. Ask him/her to pay attention to the ways in which others react to you, and discuss your impressions afterwards.**

## Personal Competency 4.3: Acceptance

Acceptance entails a readiness to listen to a partner's ideas, wishes and needs and to positively accept both the partner and his/her views, even though they may differ considerably from one's own. Conveying any degree of superiority in relation to the partner and his/her views can be highly detrimental; a sense of mutual acceptance is needed for smooth working relations.

This is often very difficult to achieve, yet lower degrees of acceptance can still be valuable. Genuine acceptance (despite different viewpoints) is the ideal to aim for, but surface acceptance is usually better than outright opposition.

**Case Study Example: Surface acceptance**

One of the project teams decided to divide up the work by module, with one module being developed by a Chinese partner and two other modules being developed by British members. The British members soon found that they disagreed strongly with the style of the Chinese partner's materials. They provided feedback and were told that he was 'honoured to receive it'; yet they never saw whether he had done anything with it. In the end, the British members simply decided that the three modules would be written in significantly different styles. For the sake of smooth relations, they accepted their differing viewpoints over materials design.

**Tip: Think of a particular international partner and reflect on the things that you disagree over. To what extent can you accept your differences and why do you think that is the case?**

## Personal Competency 4.4: Flexibility

This quality enables people to act in a flexible way in many different contexts, adapting their behaviour and judgements according to circumstances. It entails a willingness to learn a wide range of behaviour patterns and to experiment with different ways of behaving and reacting.

### **Case Study Example: Flexibility in handling workshops**

Towards the end of the first set of projects, the eChina-UK partners all agreed that we would hold a workshop in Beijing for as many as possible of the project members. We wanted to showcase what we had done so far to the Chinese Ministry of Education and to HEFCE, and we also wanted to have some time to share experiences across projects and to work jointly on a number of issues. The British developed an initial plan for the 3-day workshop, which included two days of small group activities with periodic plenary feedback and discussion sessions. The Chinese partners felt very uncomfortable with this and suggested a programme with three days of speeches, starting with an extended series of initial welcome-like talks.

At first the British were very disappointed, because they genuinely wanted the opportunity to discuss certain issues in small groups and to spend time finding ways to address them. When they arrived in Beijing, they found that the room booked for the conference was extremely formal, with heavy furniture, and that discussion in small groups would be genuinely difficult to arrange. At this point, they displayed flexibility of behaviour and accepted, with little or no resentment, that they needed to adjust to a much more formal style of interaction, and that this could also benefit the project – albeit in a different way.

**Tip: When you are in an unfamiliar situation, observe carefully how people behave. Reflect on how similar or different it is to the ways in which you would normally behave, and experiment with adjusting your own behaviour.**

## Personal Competency 4.5: Inner purpose

Similar to the competence, 'Goal-orientation', which entails the balancing of one's own goals with the goals of others (see Knowledge Competencies), the competence 'inner purpose' points to the importance of possessing internal goals, internal stability and a sense of dedication and direction. Intercultural work can pose difficult challenges and exert a high level of stress. It is, therefore, critically important to be able to maintain a sense of focus and not to let external factors shake one's sense of self, one's identity or values. A strong sense of purpose is vital to intercultural work, especially if it involves being removed from one's family and social networks.



**Case Study Example: Maintaining a sense of purpose**

One of the eChina-UK projects got off to a very difficult start, because the British and Chinese partners had very different expectations as to what the project should focus on and deliver. The director of the British project had a very strong sense of purpose, and this helped her tremendously in starting the project off on the right track when she was faced with pressure to do something different. Her strong sense of inner purpose can be seen from the following comments:

Brit 19: *Well, I think there was a mismatch in the expectations, [...] I felt there was a big gulf between their expectations and where we were coming from. Although I don't know much about Chinese culture, I'm from a Mediterranean culture, and I'm not easily put down by someone stamping their feet and saying I want this and I want that. And although I'm hot tempered, when I encounter something like that, I become extremely cool, and I say well, terribly sorry, but these are the parameters, I'm quite happy to extend those parameters but if you want that, then we're not the right people. And if you take that very firm stand, while being polite and helpful, but a firm stand, then I find that people come half your way. Although it was hard at the beginning, I think by being very clear about what we could do, and could do well, and we were still prepared to negotiate and listen to their needs, I think we came halfway to an understanding.*

**Tip: Reflect on your own values and beliefs: what gives you a sense of purpose in your job?**

**Personal Competency 4.6: Coping**

When faced with new challenges, unfamiliar contexts and with a high degree of uncertainty, many people find it genuinely difficult to cope with and to handle such challenges. So if a project is to succeed, participants need to prepare themselves for the inevitable rocky road ahead. It is particularly important preparation is to develop a range of coping mechanisms and strategies; for example, building meaningful social networks is very useful, and maintaining a good sense of humour, a positive attitude and a good chunk of optimism can also be immensely helpful.

**Case Study Example: Dealing with uncertainty**

One of the most noticeable personal challenges of the eChina-UK Programme was the very high degree of uncertainty. The Programme as a whole, and each of the constituent projects, was breaking new ground in a range of respects; in addition, because it was an inter-governmental programme, there were 'political' factors that influenced decision-making over a range of issues. So there were many unclear or undecided issues. Some members found it very difficult to cope with the stress of this uncertainty, while others took it more in their stride. Strategies that we used to help us all cope better with this included building a very strong sense of eChina-UK community, so that we could get support from each other. Moreover, we tried to make it clear that uncertainty is 'normal' in projects of this kind, and that it is better to try and accept it than to keep seeking (unsuccessfully) to resolve the uncertainty.

**Tip: Reflect on the strategies that you find helpful for reducing stress.**

## Personal Competency 4.7: Resilience

Just as it is important to develop coping-mechanisms in order to deal with stress and uncertainty, fostering the ability to cope with crises and difficulties is equally important. In large international partnerships, it is virtually inevitable that at some point during the collaborative process, things will not go to plan. Setbacks occur, and there are bad days to accompany the good ones. It is of critical importance, therefore, to be able to bounce back and recover from such setbacks and not to be defeated. While setbacks will occur in non-international work as well, problems can be exacerbated by cultural differences or misunderstandings. They may seem hard to handle and overcome, particularly when people are based overseas and temporarily removed from their normal social networks (such as one's immediate family). A healthy amount of self-confidence and 'thick-skinned' nature vis-à-vis criticism and negative feedback can also prove vital for overcoming hard times.

### **Case Study Example: Resilience for a crisis**

There were lots of ups and downs throughout the eChina-UK Programme, and resilience was an essential quality for people to have. The following quotation illustrates its importance:

*Brit 17: Mid-way through Phase 1 of the eChina-UK Programme, one of the projects was not making as much progress as expected, and face-to-face discussions had not resolved the issue. In a meeting with the Ministry of Education about another matter, a senior official asked how the project was progressing. We were fairly vague, but admitted there were some difficulties that were hampering progress. Nothing more was said, but by the time we arrived back at the partner university, the Chinese project director was literally scarlet with rage at us. He shouted at us, rebuked us and criticised us, because the senior official at the Ministry had telephoned him saying that we had reported that the project had not been making satisfactory progress. We went through a very uncomfortable period of 24 hours, and wondered at first whether the collaboration had been irrevocably damaged. However, within a few days both the Chinese project director and ourselves were all able to bounce back and were able to find ways of addressing the problems that had concerned us.*

**Tip: Reflect on your attitudes towards setbacks. What helps or hinders you in bouncing back?**



**Notes:**





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