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**Review of the PhD dissertation by Lulu Hao, titled: “A study on the intercultural competence of English Majors in Chinese Universities”.
Prepared under the direction of dr hab. Associate Professor, Dorota Misiejuk, of University of Białystok, Department of Educational Studies**

The purpose of this review is a critical and explanatory assessment of the dissertation by Lulu Hao, prepared under the supervision of dr hab. assoc. prof. Dorota Misiejuk. The assessment will be concluded with an answer to the question: does the submitted work meet the requirements specified in the article 13 section 1 of the Polish Bill on Academic Degree of March 14, 2003, with later amendments (Journal of Laws of 2018, item 1669). (Ustawa o stopniach i tytule naukowym z dn. 14 marca 2003 roku wraz z uzupełnieniami zawartymi w Prawie o szkolnictwie wyższym i nauce (Dz.U. z 2018 r. poz. 1669)).

In my evaluation, I will focus on the conditions set out in point 1 article 13 and point 6 of the Act. Therefore, the priority for the evaluation of the presented dissertation are the following aspects: 1) The originality of the solution to the scientific problem posed by the researcher, 2) the visibility of the author's theoretical knowledge in the discipline of pedagogy, and finally, 3) the ability to independently conduct their scientific work.

The doctoral thesis by Lulu Hao “A study on the intercultural competence of English Majors in Chinese Universities”, contains a very interesting case study, which is incidental and therefore forms a truly unique contribution to the field. It contributes to our understanding of TEFL (teaching English as foreign language) and language acquisition, in the context of IC (intercultural communication) amongst Chinese students and teachers of EFL. It places great importance on contextual understanding and exposure to the relevant language-based culture, not just language itself. The dissertation is clearly pedagogical. I place it within the subdisciplines of social pedagogy, comparative pedagogy, and of course multicultural/intercultural pedagogy. Its clear pedagogical dimension not only derives from the

researched field and the embedment in educational theory, but also the setting that is the field of the enquiry, the education system in China and the HE institution facilities and colleges.

There is a good balance reached by the Author between theories from the western and far eastern scholars, which widens the perspective for both European and non-European researchers of education. In fact, from a European context, the great value of this work is to go beyond western-centric theories and find those that are better suited for this specific research environment. The thesis may aid preparation of future teachers of English and provide guidelines in how to identify areas for improvement of the educational system in China and the pedagogy of language learning.

The thesis may also be of interest for scholars in other social sciences, particularly for sociolinguists and researchers of educational policy. I am convinced that the thesis is of sufficient standard to be granted a public defence and I will vouch for it in the detailed analysis of the content.

My overall assessment of the thesis is very positive. However, there are certain shortcomings that I will detail over the next few paragraphs. These comments should be considered of such a nature to provide positive feedback and to assist the Author to address any issues during the defence of their thesis. I also trust that they will be instrumental for the thesis to be published as a book, as I am confident that the study is worth publishing.

Formal aspects of the thesis and the situated knowledge of the researcher

I start with the assessment of the formal aspects of the dissertation. The thesis consists of 216 pages, including an abstract, expression of gratitude, table of contents, 6 chapters, extensive bibliography in English containing approximately 130 positions, and 4 appendixes containing research tools. The thesis has a classical structure, opening with theoretical and methodological chapters, followed by empirical data and the conclusions. The titles of the chapters are coherent with their content, indicating clearly and quite precisely what is to be expected from each chapter. The thesis commences with a description of the socio-cultural and historical context to set the scene of the environment in which the study takes place. The Author shows a high degree of reflectivity, posing questions about the situation in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic that occurred during their research work and its subsequent impact on internationalization trends. From the very beginning, the Author comes across as a skilful

narrator with an excellent flow, which is easy to read, follow and understand. This must be highlighted as a great achievement, since the thesis is not written in the Author's native tongue but in English, English learnt as a foreign language and perhaps shifting to a position of a second language (c.f. Odrowaz-Coates 2019¹). The Author is a trained English teacher, with exposure to studying in the UK and international experience. This situates the Author in a perfect place to look at the TEFL processes (TEFL teaching English as foreign language) in China as an insider and an outsider at the same time. The Author writes in the first person, which makes their work authentic with clear situational positioning of the author, which should be viewed as a plus. Infrequently, the tenses are mixed and some small typing errors occur, however this is just a small and insignificant imperfection that can be easily fixed. Examples: On page 126 'had to be deleted' or 'had to delete' not 'had to deleted'. On page 23 there is a probably a typing error since year 1968 appears here in contrast to year 1978 in all other places (p. 16,30,111).

Page 127 – should read that 470 respondents or participants took part in the survey, and not 470 answers. These are just small issues to address. The table on page 99 demonstrating the PhD programme progress is not necessary and more focus on the research timeline and procedure should be given, so that the tools and techniques of data collection can be replicated if needed. Concerning the institutions that the research participants were from, there are different numbers given for this on page 113 (five), p.127 (six), p.21 (ten), p. 132 (five) and p. 129 (five). On page 113 'teachers as research objects' perhaps should be classed as research participants, not objects. The research object in this case, is the phenomenon of possessing the intercultural competency and the teachers are not objects. Moreover, it is the students, who are the primary respondents of the survey, so the sudden appearance of the teachers is confusing. Page 116-117 is a repetition of annexes 3 and 4 and pages 120-125 repeats annexes 1 and 2, but with a small difference, there are fewer questions in the main text. There is no information about the source of the data in the tables given in the empirical section. It is good practice that the tables should have a source given underneath each of them, e.g. Source: self-generated. The tables should also be given more editorial attention (especially table 5.12 on page 153 where the formatting is poor) and the Chinese titles that occur on page 155 should be explained in English. It is also not 100 percent clear if the research took place in English or Chinese. One

¹ Odrowaz-Coates A. (2019). *Socio-educational Factors and the Soft Power of Language: The Deluge of English in Poland and Portugal*. Lanham/New York: Rowman & Littlefield. Lexington Books Series.

assumes English. This raises one positive aspect: immediate assessment of English and one negative aspect, the mitigating aspect of translation and not answering the questions in one's original language.

More importantly, the methodological section lacks an embedment in methodological grounding. There should be a clear indication of the main method used. The method could potentially be a case study of a phenomenon. If additional tools and techniques of data collection were applied as implied in a limitation section, the study could take a form of institutional ethnography (Blommaert 2013, Smith 2005, 2006²), or perhaps a pedagogical monograph (Pilch, 1995³). The information on the main method is missing as far as I can tell. There is also insufficient information about the ethical aspects. Moreover, the perspective, approach and a paradigm used for data collection and analysis should also be spelled out to add value to what is already very solid work.

Content presentation and detailed assessment of the 3 theoretical chapters

The Author investigates TEFL in China and its relevance to the enhancement of the intercultural competencies (IC) of teachers and students, who may become teachers of English in the future. The Author advocates throughout the thesis the importance of intercultural competencies for teaching and learning foreign languages. The Author finds that 80% of papers dedicated to intercultural communication (IC) in China are written either by teachers or researchers of teaching foreign languages, primarily English. The doctoral candidate identifies the barriers for intercultural communication such as a monolingual society (Standard Mandarin) with limited contact with outsiders, restricting practice of the foreign language and being exposure to its cultural environment. The Author points out a very important aspect of IC – empathy in communication and highlights the fact that China has opened only recently (1978) to the idea of globalization with its dominant language of communication – English.

The empirical part of the research took place in Henan Province, the central, populous region of China. The Author collected 470 questionnaires from students (from 5 universities) and 113

² Blommaert, J. (2013). *Ethnography, superdiversity, and linguistic landscapes: Chronicles of complexity*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters; Smith, D. E. (2005). *Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People*. Lanham: Alta-Mira Press; Smith, D. E. (2006). *Institutional ethnography as practice*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

³ Pilch T. (1995). *Zasady badań pedagogicznych, The rules of pedagogical research*. Warsaw: ŻAK.

from teachers (from 10 universities). The numbers are mixed up in the thesis and quoted differently on different pages, so it requires some investigation to establish the actual numbers (p. 21).

In chapter 1.2 (pages 19-20), the significance of the research statement could be strengthened. In its current form it focusses on setting the scene and demonstrating the field where research takes place, not on the overall significance as such. The statement in the fourth line from the bottom on page 20, that the argument by Z. Hongling (2019) is ‘far from achieved’ could be better supported by some evidence, rather than a bold statement alone.

The research questions are very well chosen for the problem they are facing, and well formulated to assess a diversity of aspects, but at this point we do not know if the tools will measure declarative/self-assessed qualities or whether they will be measured in a standardised, ‘more objective’ way.

In the literary review one will find theoretical models from the western and far eastern countries including China, Korea, and Japan. The Author very early on formulates their own definition of IC, as ‘ability to survive and develop successfully in a multicultural and intercultural environment’ (p. 25, verse 2 from the bottom). The word ‘survive’ may be perceived as revealing a certain attitude. Other aspects include an open and focussed outwards attitude (Spitzberg 2000), identity aware and respectful of identity (Chen and Starosta 1996), intercultural communicative adaptability (Jiwan 1996) and appropriateness and effectiveness (Kims 2001). There is an impressive array of definitions quoted in this chapter, leading to some preliminary idea concerning the questions to ask research participants and how to gauge their qualities highlighted as required for IC. Amongst theorists, one can find the heavily explored, but still very relevant Hofstede cultural model. It is admirable how the Author uses poetic language and a metaphor to describe their humble position as a newly established scholar when confronted with the theorists quoted. My attention was drawn to statement: ‘it is like standing on the shoulders of giants’ (p.25) when referring to theorists from the literary review. As a scholar focussed on considerable number of positioning theories, amongst distinguished theoreticians I particularly noted in the thesis Bennett’s developmental intercultural sensitivity model and the idea of locating ourselves through IPS – Intercultural Positioning System. I also noted Bochner’s ABC model, Byran’s 5-dimensional IC model, Kim’s intercultural adaptation theory, Ting-Toomey and Kurogi’s facework competence model and face-negotiation theory, and their interplay between collective we – identity and individual I – identity. Moreover, it

was enriching to learn about Xiao and Chen's Confucianism perspective on IC, Dai and Chen's IC model from the perspective of interculturality, Takai and Ota's Japanese IC model and Yum's theory from Korean cultural perspective. The Author of the thesis is inspired by Deardorff (2004), Fantini (2009) and Wu Weiping's (2015) assessment tools, but reconstructs them to fit in within a wider theoretical framework.

On pages 75-76 the Author includes a very useful and practical table containing all the theoreticians chosen and discussed in the literary review. It is a great way to systemise and highlight the most important aspects of their work. One may observe how the Author grows and deepens their understanding of IC and is able to consistently summarise the theoretical findings, which is an added value of the thesis.

As a researcher of reflectivity in education, I have noticed that the issue of reflectivity and the congruent self-awareness or auto-reflectivity is hinted at in the thesis, but is not treated as a key category. Knowledge of self is articulated by Byran (1997) and for me personally, the Korczakian appeal to get to know yourself and your biases as a necessary step to understand other people and 'other' cultures, is consistent with Byran's contribution and could serve well for arguing the self-assessment required from the survey participants.

The chapter dedicated to theoretical concepts is followed by chapter 3, which is dedicated to the interplay between language, culture and communication. The Author discusses intercultural communication in western countries and in China, as well as the modernization of education and reforms that have taken place since 1949 and the establishment of People's Republic of China, and through the reforms of the 1980s, the apparent influence of Confucianism on education and culture in China and the temporal denial of it. The Author has a critical view on an exam-oriented education system that is identified as an obstacle to competence based/skill-based assessment required for gaining and assessing intercultural competencies.

In conclusion, I highly value this theoretical part of the dissertation.

Content presentation and detailed assessment of the empirical study

The empirical part of the study is of great value to the growth of our knowledge, the understanding of TEFL in the Chinese context and the intercultural competencies within. It is also revealing of other aspects of educational systems and culture, which is the added value for

the enrichment of Polish pedagogical sciences. The number of research participants recruited for the study is quite impressive and the tools used allow this study to be replicated or culturally adjusted and repeated in a different cultural setting. The review of policy that accompanies the survey and the pilot interviews is also of good quality and significant importance.

This said, there are a number of issues that should be addressed if the dissertation is published as a book. They are quite significant, yet do not affect the overall positive assessment of the entire thesis.

The empirical research consisted of a series of pilot interviews, but the Author does not reveal how many exactly. There is a mix up of numbering of appendixes. The interview scenario is in appendix 3 for students and 4 for teachers, not 1 and 2 as indicated on page 91. They should be titled 'Interview Scenario' or 'Interview Questions' and not a questionnaire, as they are said to be an interview. On page 92 the Author claims to lay down the research questions and hypotheses. However, the hypothesis is hard to find. My advice would be to simplify the hypotheses and avoid formulating arguments for its support at this stage, as in its current form, it resembles the presentation of the results of findings and not a hypothesis. For instance: H1 could be 'research participants are not proficient in communication with people from other cultures', H2 'research participants are not confident in communication with people from other cultures' H3 'research participants have an open attitude towards people from other cultures' H4 'research participants are interculturally sensitive' H5 'research participants possess insufficient cultural knowledge'... [I will return to this hypothesis later, in the analytical part of the study, as it is not clearly stated what tests were run to test these hypotheses? Are they simply descriptive statistics?] If so, it should be said so. Questions related to the second main problem are very well formulated.

On page 100 the objective of the study discusses only students, but perhaps teachers should also be mentioned, since they were also part of the study. Perhaps it would also be desirable to add a descriptive adjective such as 'self-assessed' or 'perceived' intercultural competencies, since the research is based on declaration and self-analysis by research participants. The Author realizes this and describes it in the limitations section on page 108, which is very important both for this study and for the academic awareness of the doctoral candidate. This section shows a high level of reflection on the Author's own research project.

It could be clearer who the junior and senior students are, since on page 112 the Author states that all of them had already received 2-3 years of English tuition, so how are they distinguished? It is not clear to me.

There is a very impressive presentation of research findings with creative and clear conclusions derived from the data. The information about software (SPSS) used for analysis should be announced at the very beginning.

The alpha coefficient (Cronbach alpha) is a measure of internal consistency and therefore reliability of the tool. A Likert scale reliability score of between $0.8 > \alpha > 0.7$ suggests it is an acceptable level of reliability, which is the case in this study. The use of this factor is an indication of good statistical awareness of the doctoral candidate, as well as providing Mean, Standard Deviation, the skewness and kurtosis statistic values that should be less than ± 1.0 to be considered normal and indeed are. A description of the testing of the tools would be advantageous, as not all social scientists are conversant with the finer details of statistical analysis. There is a lack of the sample size power analyses for different t-tests, F tests (e.g. using G*Power). Inclusion of this factor would strengthen the research findings as the sample size is quite significant.

The method of verification of hypothesis is not described. It should be. Which tests were used to find correlation? Was there a t-test? ANOVA? I can deduct it from the values in the tables, but for a less advanced reader the testing procedure to find and test correlation should be clearly stated. I heartfully recommend some methodological scripts (Lavrakas, Salkind⁴). Carrying out statistical tests in a non – native tongue is very challenging, to describe it well, even harder, as the correct terminology can be defeating. It is however quite a crucial part of the thesis findings, so more information would be welcomed.

The analysis of the language learning/teaching policies is very well executed and perhaps could open the empirical section. It may also be named as ‘desk analysis’ or ‘document analysis’ in the methodological workshop section.

⁴ Lavrakas, P. (2008). *Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods*. 1st Edition. SAGE.
Salkind, N. (2015). *Encyclopedia of Measurement and Statistics*. 1st Edition. SAGE.

I highly appreciated the answering of the research questions and solving the research problems in a structured way, although the number 1 is missing from the first part of the summary on page 167, which may confuse readers when they come across findings number 2 on page 169. It is very interesting to read the findings of this study, it may be of value to have the author comment on what does it mean or why the correlation results are as they are (p. 173), especially regarding gender. There is a cross section of studies in gender differences in language acquisition, and it would be interesting to employ them for a discussion about these results. Chapter 5.3 and 5.4 are of high importance to this work and they show great deal of knowledge and reflection. It is quite unorthodox to review one's own thesis, but it worked well for the author in chapter 6 taking the reader back to where it all started and recapturing the research objective and outcome.

Although it is a context-specific study, it not only brings new knowledge of eastern theorists and the associated cultural aspects to the field of pedagogy, but most of all several findings appear to be universal and useful in a globalized context. Moreover, the value of the research design is in its replicability and the possibility to culturally adjust the scales and adapt the research tools to other contexts. Overall, the volume of knowledge presented in the dissertation is impressive and within the required standards at the PhD level.

Conclusion

It was with great pleasure and honour to review the doctoral dissertation (thesis) by Lulu Hao, prepared under the supervision of prof. Dorota Misiejuk. It contains a unique approach to a universal problem of high social importance, with a significant intergenerational and international impact, such as: intercultural competencies in foreign language acquisition, tested amongst English Majors students in China. This issue is relevant to many fields, including intercultural studies, communication studies, pedagogy of TEFL, and of course the field of education. The Author demonstrates deep and relevant knowledge of pedagogical theory derived from more than one cultural context. The quality of data presentation and the erudition of the Author demonstrate their thesis' suitability for further proceedings.

Specifically, it is clear that Lulu Hao, MSc presented an original and unique solution to a scientific problem, that enriches the relevant field of scientific enquiry and provides a novel theoretical approach combining both western and non-western theories on intercultural

communication. Lulu Hao demonstrated ability to carry out independent research, to conduct analysis of obtained data and to create their own conclusions, constructions and reconstructions of relevant theories and was able to communicate clearly and to high standard their research findings. I strongly recommend therefore, that the assessed thesis will be subjected to a public defence and that the dissertation is directed to further relevant proceedings.

In summary, despite some shortcomings, in my opinion, the dissertation by Lulu Hao complies with Polish and international standards for PhD dissertations in the field of social sciences, in the field of education and especially abovementioned subdisciplines of pedagogy. It meets the requirements of article 13 section 1 of the Polish Bill on Academic Degree of March 14, 2003, with later amendments (Journal of Laws of 2017, item 1789) in connection with the Article 179 (2) and (3) of the Act of July 3, 2018. Provisions introducing the Act: Journal of Laws of 2018, item 1669. (Ustawa o stopniach i tytule naukowym z dn. 14 marca 2003 roku wraz z uzupełnieniami zawartymi w Prawie o szkolnictwie wyższym i nauce (Dz.U. z 2018 r. poz. 1669).

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