

Chinese learners of Portuguese as a Foreign Language and Cultural Challenges

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Abstract:

Framed in the context of Macao and, in particular, in the specific context of the School of Languages and Translation of Macao Polytechnic Institute, this study aims to determine which representations students bring about Portugal, the culture and native speakers before starting learning Portuguese, but also the opinion they have formed all along the learning process and, in particular, after one year immersion program, in Leiria (Portugal). To achieve these objectives, a survey was carried out, with a year 1 students' group (N=32) and a second with year 4 group (N=29). The results confirm that these students belong to what Hofstede (2010) defined by a collectivist society. However, the fact that there is a strong sense of belonging and identification with the group does not prevent learners to feel excited about learning this foreign language and want to understand new ways of thinking, expressing themselves and taking action.

Keywords: Portuguese as a foreign language; Culture; Representations; Language immersion

Introduction

Rapid globalization and the economic transformations initiated in Western countries have made mobility on a professional level commonplace, we might even say, a rule that has necessarily had a great impact on people's lives. The entry of the People's Republic of China into the World Trade Organization in 2001 was a decisive turning point in economic policy, but not only. China began to view its language policy in a different way, giving more emphasis to the teaching of Mandarin abroad, but also promoting languages with a relevant strategic instrument, in order to generate wealth, as in the case of Portuguese.

The challenge of teaching Portuguese as a foreign language to a Chinese learning audience leads us to consider certain aspects that are related to the teaching-learning process. The distance between the Chinese and the Portuguese language is incommensurable and the same will be said of the respective cultures. The fact that we are teaching at a language and translation school in the context of Macao gives us a particular framework, as our role as teachers is to train interpreters/translators who will be required to play a cultural mediator role.

As Maude (2012) points out, no culture remains static over the years. According to the author, tourism, migration and the global media are a mix of influences that produce new cultural forms and identities. When defining strategies, in order to give our students intercultural competences, it is urgent to define what is meant by "culture", and not least, to understand how sensitive this new public is to this question. In order to ascertain what kind of representations they bring about Portugal, the Portuguese culture and the Portuguese people, before beginning their learning, but also the opinion they formed during the program and, in particular, after a one-year linguistic immersion, in Leiria-Portugal, we decided to carry out a questionnaire survey. After considering some theoretical and methodological assumptions, we will proceed to the characterization of the respondents and then start the analysis of the data of the applied questionnaires.

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Culture

Numerous are the definitions that, over time, anthropologists have been giving to the concept of "culture". The concise form as Lustig and Koester (2010, p.25) identifies the concept emphasizes what we consider to be essential to retain: "Culture is a learned set of shared interpretations about beliefs, values, norms, and social practices, which affect the behaviors of a relatively large group of people".

This set of shared interpretations constitutes an important link between communication and culture. For Lustig and Koester (2010) cultures exist in people's minds, not only in external and tangible objects and behaviors. The meaning of symbols exists in the minds of the individual communicators; when those symbolic ideas are shared with other people, and some symbols will be shared only with a few. A culture can only be shared with a relatively large group of people (2010, p.27).

Cultural patterns are shared beliefs, values and norms that are consistent over time and that lead to similar behaviors in similar situations. These standards make it possible to make predictions about a given culture and, thus, adapt to communication. In short, cultural patterns are, as Hofstede (2010) argues, a common mental program, a software of the mind that governs our behaviors.

However, going a little further, culture is not only in people's minds, if it was, we could only speculate on what it could actually be, since we are unable to know what goes on in each one's mind. In fact, these shared values, beliefs, and norms strongly influence the behavior of large groups of people. In reality, the social practices that characterize a particular culture provide guidelines on the meaning of things, their importance and what should or should not be done. Thus, culture establishes predictability with respect to human interaction. Cultural differences tend to be evident in the way people conduct their daily activities, as they put their culture into practice by their behavioral culture.

Cultures and societies

Hofstede (2010) argues that most people live in societies where group interests prevail over individual interest. We call them collectivist societies which, according to him, should not be interpreted here with any political connotation. "It does not refer to the power of the state over the individual; it refers to the power of the group"(2010, p.91). The concept of family differs from society to society; in collectivist societies, this concept acquires a more comprehensive notion: "This is known in cultural anthropology as the extended family. When children grow up, they learn to think themselves as part of a "we" group, a relationship that is not voluntary but is instead given by nature" (2010, p.91).

Although the concept of high-context and low-context cultures defined by Hall (1976) is not based on empirical research, it is a useful reference framework to explain some of the problems that people encounter when interacting with people from other cultures. As in other high-context cultures, Chinese culture, by definition, is replete with implicit meaning. Little information is contained in the explicit message. The information needed for understanding is already present in the context and in the interlocutor. The author exemplifies the case of Japanese culture, where meaning can be inferred through penetrating glances, occasional glimpses, sporadic grunts or even revealing silences.

In contrast, people belonging to a "low context" culture do not assume that there is common knowledge and understanding. Everything tends to be verbalized and the meaning depends on the communicative ability of the speaker. This distinction between high-context and low-context cultures helps to understand the differences between explicit and implicit speech patterns that occur constantly in intercultural communication.

As Maude (2012, p. 13) indicates: "High-context communication tends to be a relationship-centered, so time must be spent building trust. People from low-context cultures, on the other hand, tend to be task-centered, and may not be willing to spend time on relationship-building".

Culture and education

More than addressing questions related to the teaching of culture itself, what we tried to ascertain through the questionnaires was the learner's position on Portuguese culture and the Portuguese people. As Beacco (2000, p.54) refers, the relations already established between the target culture and the learners' culture are decisive in the constitution of their attitudes and representations in relation to other countries:

“La dynamique et les effets des processus de contacts culturels sont à prendre en considération tout autant que les similitudes partielles de deux sociétés”. Defays's (2003) opinion is in line with what Beacco argues, when he states that: “Le choix de la langue étrangère que l'on veut apprendre (sitant est que l'apprenant puisse lui-même choisir) et le succès de cet apprentissage dépend aussi des représentations positives ou négatives que l'apprenant ou sa communauté se font de cette langue, de la culture qu'elle véhicule, des gens qu'il utilise, et qui peuvent les stimuler ou les décourager” (2003, p.32).

In elaborating the questionnaires, we attempted to understand whether the learner's representations of the target language's culture and speakers came from some prior contact, in order to discern whether these representations could be considered as stereotypes. So as not to corrupt the results, it was considered preferable to inquire two groups of distinct students, one of year 1 and the other of year 4. For some of the items to be evaluated, the same question was asked about the learner's position before and after learning the language and, in particular, before a one-year mobility program in Portugal.

Research Objectives

The objective of this study is to examine the possible representations students may bring of Portuguese people and Portuguese language and culture at the time they initiate their learning of the language but also as they progress through the four-year Bachelor's degree, taking into account that one-year immersion mobility will have forcibly some repercussions on how they see others. The questions that guided this research were: What do students think about Portuguese people and Portuguese language and culture? Are there any changes in their perceptions after one-year immersion and over the four-year degree?

Method

Context of teaching and learning of Portuguese as a foreign language and participants

The School of Language and Translation, founded in 1905, was integrated into the Polytechnic Institute of Macao in 1991. For more than a century, the School's mission has been to contribute to the training of translators and interpreters who generally integrate the most varied services and departments of the Macao Government. However, after the transfer of sovereignty, on December 20, 1999, new challenges were launched and, together with local youths, the school began to integrate students from mainland China into the day classes, which explains the origin and ethnic origin of our target public shown in Table 1.

Table 1

| | Year 1 | | Year 4 | |
|----------------------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|
| | Frequency | Percentage | Frequency | Percentage |
| Gender | | | | |
| Feminine | 8 | 25 | 8 | 28 |
| Masculine | 24 | 75 | 21 | 72 |
| Origin | | | | |
| Macao SAR | 20 | 63 | 11 | 38 |
| China (Mainland) | 12 | 38 | 18 | 62 |
| Mother tongue | | | | |
| Cantonese | 19 | 59 | 11 | 38 |
| Mandarin | 11 | 34 | 18 | 62 |
| English | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Others | 2 | 6 | 0 | 0 |

This framework necessarily obliges the teacher to redefine teaching objectives and strategies. If we consider that a good number of future graduates coming from Mainland China will act as translator or interpreter in Portuguese-speaking countries, it is urgent to understand the sensitivity of learners to intercultural communication. The learning of the Portuguese foreign language does not have a strictly linguistic purpose. As Zarate (2006, p.73) advances: “(d)es savoir-faire orientés vers la mise en relation de deux cultures exigent des compétences plus larges, que la seule habilité linguistique ne peut garantir: maîtriser un environnement culturel étranger, un métallangage (race, nationalité, classes sociale, stéréotype, etc.), l'analyser réflexive des représentations de la culture étrangère et de la culture maternelle.”

Instruments

Taking into account the specific characteristics of this research, we developed a case study, combining a quantitative and qualitative approach. In order to achieve the defined objectives, we selected the instrument of data collection that we considered most appropriate, in this case, a questionnaire survey. Knowing that the first questions of a questionnaire are of great importance since they establish the interviewer-interviewed relationship and determine the positive and negative reaction of the interviewee (Ghiglione and Matalon, 2005), we chose to elaborate two simple questionnaires in which we asked closed or semi-closed questions, so that they would not get annoyed.

These questionnaires were applied between November 8 and 15, 2012, to two distinct groups: one from the first year, composed of 32 students (N=32), and another from the fourth, with 29 (N=29), all integrated in the degree of Translation and Interpretation (Portuguese-Chinese). Some questions are included in both questionnaires, so as to be able to compare learners' perceptions, before and after direct contact with Portuguese and Portuguese culture, since the course includes a one-year mobility program at Instituto Politécnico de Leiria, in Portugal. We will proceed to analyze the data of the 61 questionnaires that we were able to collect.

Analysis and discussion of data

For Beacco (2000), one factor to be equated will be the question of age and, to a certain extent, the social experience of the learner. According to the author, curiosity about a foreign society is strongly shaped by its own habits of information consumption. As it turns out, these habits can be just as they are transferred to another culture. For us, the notion of information may go beyond what is mentioned by Beacco (2000), that is, that which is transmitted in the media. The image that the family and/or social group itself has also contributed to forming the opinion that the learner can have regarding the target language and its speakers. Here both positive and negative aspects can be considered, which usually translate into stereotypes. Hence, we chose to consider which languages were previously contacted, the age of those contacts and the contexts in which they occurred.

Data show that the first foreign language is English with 84%. Portuguese, with 75% of the answers, includes students from the Macao Luso-Chinese schools who began their learning of Portuguese, for the vast majority, in pre-primary and primary education, well before English and, in some cases, of Mandarin accounting for 66% of respondents.

The first foreign language, in any case, is, in the great majority of cases, started between ages 2 and 12 years, with particular incidence, from the first year of primary. 50% of the respondents answered that the teacher was Chinese, 44% of whom reported having Chinese and native teachers. It is interesting to note that the vast majority of the students (47%) only made their first contact with foreigner when they were already teens, between the ages of 13 and 17. Table 2 reveals what feelings they felt:

Table 2
What did you feel in your first contact with a foreigner?

| | Year 1 | | Year 4 | |
|-----------------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|
| | Frequency | Percentage | Frequency | Percentage |
| Curiosity | 15 | 47 | 15 | 52 |
| Enthusiasm | 11 | 34 | 7 | 24 |
| Strangeness | 8 | 25 | 5 | 17 |
| Nervousness | 18 | 56 | 18 | 62 |
| Indifference | 11 | 34 | 7 | 24 |
| Repulsion | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Willing to talk | 11 | 34 | 8 | 28 |
| Others | 2 | 6 | 0 | 0 |

When asked about the ease of making friends with a foreign person, opinions seem divided. Even so, we can see that the mobility experience increases respondents' perception on this issue: 31.2% of respondents in year 3 said to be difficult, and the percentage increases to 41.4% for those in year 4. A language is for 94% of respondents an indispensable tool to communicate, 88% to travel, as well as to know new cultures and to be a more open-minded person with 84%, respectively.

For those students, culture is understood, mostly (97%), as the habits and customs of a people, although they also consider the way people relate as an integral part of it, with 72%. 84% of respondents do not consider Chinese culture superior or inferior to others. When asked how they first heard about Portugal and Portuguese culture, most first year students pointed out that it was at school (see Table 3). When scrutinizing this issue, other data revealed that they first contacted the foreign language through music, books and the Internet, for 69%, followed by television and movies, with 56% and 59%, respectively.

Table 3
Before starting studying in MPI, did you hear about Portugal and Portuguese culture?

| | Frequency | Percentage | Frequency | Percentage |
|------------------------------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|
| | Year 1 | | Year 4 | |
| At school | 20 | 63 | 13 | 45 |
| At home w/ parents/relatives | 5 | 16 | 3 | 10 |
| On television | 11 | 34 | 11 | 38 |
| In the internet | 14 | 44 | 8 | 28 |
| Never heard of this | 2 | 6 | 7 | 24 |
| Others | 2 | 6 | 0 | 0 |

As for the fact that they knew some habits of Portuguese culture before starting to learn the language, many were those who answered that they knew little or nothing. Some mentioned that they associated the Portuguese culture with the western cultures, namely to the English. Others confessed that they thought that Portuguese was only spoken in Brazil, convinced that all Latin America was Spanish-speaking. These aspects are related to the great moments of the History of Portugal, namely the Discoveries or, moreover, elements that characterize some of their habits and customs, such as drinking coffee, forms of greetings, their love for soccer, expressions such as Fado, as well as peculiarities of Portuguese gastronomy.

76% of year 1 learners agree or strongly agree that cultural aspects are important for language learning. To understand people in general and, in particular, what they think prevails and precedes any kind of communication. It seems clear that respondents understood the relevance of acquiring knowledge about cultural aspects, in order to be able to act in certain situational contexts (Table 4). After one year linguistic immersion in Portugal, there is a rise, 83% consider them important.

Table 4
Knowing cultural aspects is important to:

| | Frequency | Percentage | Frequency | Percentage |
|------------------------------------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|
| | Year 1 | | Year 4 | |
| Talk to people | 26 | 81 | 18 | 62 |
| Understand people | 28 | 88 | 26 | 90 |
| Understand what people think | 27 | 84 | 21 | 72 |
| Understand people's reactions | 23 | 72 | 19 | 66 |
| Know how to act in some situations | 26 | 81 | 21 | 72 |
| Do business | 20 | 63 | 15 | 52 |
| Others | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

The vast majority of respondents in the first year (78%) believe that their culture influences the way they learn Portuguese, hence it is not surprising that they characterize this language as "different." However, this difference carries no negative connotation, on the contrary, 53% consider the language to be melodious and 47% beautiful. Throughout learning, the "difference" tends to fade: year 1 registered 75%, and year 4, 48%.

Table 5
The Portuguese language was for you:

| | Frequency | Percentag | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| | Year 1 | | Year 4 | |
| Strange | 4 | 13 | 4 | 14 |
| Ugly | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 |
| Beautiful | 15 | 47 | 15 | 52 |
| Melodious | 17 | 53 | 16 | 55 |
| Different | 24 | 75 | 14 | 48 |
| Others | 5 | 16 | 2 | 7 |

Me and the other

In addition to registering the differences regarding the Portuguese language and culture, before and after a more direct contact, we also considered important to evaluate what opinion students had about the Chinese people. The results reveal a self-critical view on the part of the respondents of both years, but not always totally convergent in terms of intensity in the evaluation of each parameter. However, as far as the positive characteristics are concerned, we can say that they consider themselves to be friendly and hardworking.

When we compare the results of year 1 and year 4 students, regarding their opinion of the Portuguese, before entering the degree program, we observed that 39% of the respondents of the second group knew nothing about this people, which explains the resentful strangeness and the fact that the percentages are so low, when compared to the first group. In general, the positive characteristics are those with the highest percentages, for example, sympathy, solidarity, openness, easy communication and good education, with laziness being the highest percentage defect (64%). If we stick to the data, we could advance that sympathy is the characteristic approaching the two peoples. Even though we want to avoid a stereotyped image, we would briefly say that the Chinese people are hardworking and closed, while Portuguese could be considered open-minded and lazy.

Going deeper into the comparison between the two peoples, we tried to deepen this issue. 83% of the respondents consider the Chinese different from the Portuguese, and the differences lie essentially in the way they think, with 93% or, the way they interact, 79%.

As we have already mentioned, Hall (1976) distinguishes cultures on the basis of how they communicate in a dimension that varies between what they call high-context and low-context. For the author, high-context communication is one in which there is very little to be said because part of the information is in the physical context or is supposedly of the knowledge of the people involved, and very little of the explicit part is referred to in the message. According to this, this type of communication is frequent in cultures called collectivists. In contrast, low-context communication is one in which much of the information is reversed in the explicit code, which is typical of individualistic cultures. Much of what goes on in collectivist cultures must be explicitly mentioned in individualist cultures.

Hofstede refers to another important concept that has its origin in the collectivist family and that is related to the notion of "face". The expression "losing face", which means to be humiliated, comes from the term *mianzǎn* Mandarin (*minjǎn* Cantonese, *mentsuán* Japanese, *chaemyonin* Korean) which implies the concept of "honor". Hofstede adds that "the importance of face is the consequence of living in a society that is very conscious of social contexts" (2010, p.110). Scollon and Scollon also refer to the following:

Within sociological and sociolinguistic studies face is usually given the following general definition: Face is the negotiated public image, mutually granted each other participants in a communicative event. (...) We believe that while there is much negotiation of face in any form of interpersonal communication, participants must also make assumptions about face before they can begin any communication. (2003, p.45) From the foregoing, it will be understood why 86% of respondents are of the opinion that people should not always say everything they think. Following the same logic, it will also be noticed that non-verbal communication (looks, gestures, etc.) is for 62% of the students different between the Chinese and the Portuguese.

Evidence also shows that, in addition to certain habits and customs, the way in which interpersonal relationships are established also diverge from one culture to another. In collectivist societies, to which Hofstede claims to belong the Chinese people, the following is recorded: "The "we" group (or in-group) is the major source of one's identity and the only secure protection one has against the hardship of life. (...) Between the person and the intergroup, a mutual dependence relationship develops that is both practical and psychological" (Hofstede, 2010, p.91).

Even empirically, we know that it is usual for learners to go out in groups. However, in this study, this tendency is not represented so clearly, since 41% expressed they would, while 59% said they preferred to go out alone.

Language Immersion

Hofstede (2010) registered three phases, with respect to feelings (positive and negative), for those residing in a different cultural context: phase 1 which is, according to the author, the period of euphoria (usually short), followed by period of cultural shock (phase 2), when real life in the new context begins and phase 3, acculturation, when the person slowly goes to work under new conditions, adopt local values, gain self-confidence and begins to integrate into the new social network. We tried to find out if our target audience would also go through these moments. If we look at the data in table 6, we can verify that, indeed, the respondents tend to express a certain enthusiasm and curiosity in the perspective of a stay in Portugal.

Table 6
How do/did feel when you think/thought you are/were going to Leiria?

| | Frequency | Percentage | frequency | Percentage |
|--------------------------------------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|
| | Year 1 | | Year 4 | |
| I feel/felt enthusiastic | 23 | 72 | 19 | 68 |
| I feel/felt curiosity | 18 | 56 | 20 | 71 |
| I feel/felt scared | 11 | 34 | 5 | 18 |
| I don't/didn't feel anything special | 4 | 13 | 2 | 7 |
| I don't/didn't want to go | 2 | 6 | 0 | 0 |
| Others | 1 | 3 | 0 | 0 |

When we compare the obtained results, we realize that the fears that the students of the year 1 reveal are related to the language difficulties and the problems in communicating in general. In a first contact, communication failures were due, for 86% of learners, to the use of unfamiliar vocabulary and expressions and to 82% because people spoke very fast. With regard to integration, opinions seem somewhat divided. 55% said they did not feel integrated. However, 31% answered affirmatively, and 10% felt that there was not enough time, which leads us to believe that the integration process tends to be positive.

Culture shock is something that our learners do not seem to have run away from, as 86% answered that they became depressed during the time they were in Portugal. 52% answered that it was sometimes occurring throughout the stay, 21% reported only having happened at the beginning, 14% that it rarely happened to them and only 7% have referred that they never had moments of anxiety.

Although we consider that a large part of the surveyed students did not fully reach the last phase that Hofstede (2010) defines by "acculturation" phase, the results show that, despite the negative aspects recorded, their stay was overall positive. 79% of respondents liked to live in Portugal. 97% felt homesick after leaving the host country and, deepening this question, we tried to find out what they would miss most about Portugal. 86% answered the weather, 76% friends, 69% the city and 45% people and food.

Returning to the country of origin, after some time in a foreign country, can sometimes create a feeling of strangeness. Hofstede maintains that: "Expatriates and migrants who successfully complete their acculturation process and then return home will experience a reverse culture shock in readjusting to their old cultural environment. Migrants who have returned home sometimes find that they do not fit anymore and emigrate again, this time for good" (2010, p.386).

In fact, our students also had these feelings, 62% said they have been surprised with what they found when coming back home, 72% reported that they were surprised with life in general, 55% with the city, 52% with people and 41% with habits. We tried to find out if this sense of strangeness was intimately linked to the appreciation of what these learners had left behind: 59% felt that the difference was for the better. Only 28% reported that what they saw was worse for them and 10% felt that nothing had changed. As Zarate points out, the representations we create from the "other" help us to better understand our own identity: "Si toute représentation relève d'une démarche identitaire, les représentations de l'étranger constituent paradoxalement l'une des voies les plus accessibles pour amorcer une réflexion sur le fonctionnement de son identité. (...) À l'instar de toutes les autres formes de représentations, les représentations de l'étranger renvoient à l'identité du groupe qu'elles produisent" (2006, p.30).

These results corroborate the conviction of the respondents, both before and after their stay in Portugal, that this learning would influence the way they see the world and other people. If for year 1 students the percentage was 97%, it reached 100% for year 4 students. Still on this issue, other aspects are presented in Table 7.

Table 7
How do you think this experience can change the way you see the world and others?

| | Year 1 | | Year 4 | |
|---|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|
| | Frequency | Percentage | frequency | Percentage |
| Knowing myself better | 21 | 66 | 20 | 69 |
| Valuing my culture further | 18 | 56 | 15 | 52 |
| Valuing other cultures further | 22 | 69 | 20 | 69 |
| Being a more open-minded person | 27 | 84 | 24 | 83 |
| Understanding others better | 23 | 72 | 20 | 69 |
| Learning how to better interact with others | 21 | 66 | 21 | 72 |

Culture/intercultural competence

Intercultural awareness involves more an understanding of the nature of culture than a mere accumulation of cultural facts. Traditional methods of culture teaching tend to view culture as a body of knowledge to be learned such as social practices, habits, etc. or a set of culturally correct behaviors to be understood and mastered (White, 2008).

Cohen et al. (2005, p.16) believe that learners achieve linguistic proficiency, but lack strategies for learning culture, not even having a comprehensive and coherent learning plan for learning or developing intercultural communication skills. Many studies have attempted to ascertain the effectiveness of formal education in the teaching of foreign languages, and in particular of culture (Byram, 1989; Kramsh, 1998). For Ellis (2008), the acquisition of a foreign language is faster when formal education is combined with exposure to the target language. In a context of linguistic immersion, such as that to which our students were exposed, it will be easier to achieve the goals White proposes:

(c)ulture, it is argued, is constructed by people in their everyday lives, and language is the chief instrument in this endeavour; it is therefore necessary for learners to be aware of the fact that they will not just acquire cultural knowledge but that they will also construct it. Therefore, it can be argued that it is more appropriate to focus on strategic approaches to culture learning rather than on specific cultural elements. (2008, p.183)

The strategies that we consider important to emphasize are the strategies of interaction, in particular, the planning of communicative interaction in which the learner must negotiate the meaning according to the framework and distance of communication of other interlocutors (Council of Europe, 2001). The results obtained from the questionnaires clearly demonstrate that the learners realized the importance of activating these strategies. The data allow us to verify that year 1 students understood that it is in interpersonal relationships that one learns best to interact in another culture. 97% of respondents intend to make friends in Portugal. When we compare the results, we realize that the students accomplished this goal: 87% said they knew better the Portuguese culture because of the contact they had with Portuguese friends. Lustig (2010, p.19) points out that:

As people get to know each other and develop shared experiences, the nature of their interpersonal relationships is altered. This change in the interpersonal context is accompanied by alterations in the kinds of messages created and in the interpretations made about the meanings of the message exchanged. As we suggested about physical and social contexts, people behave differently from one interpersonal context to another. The meanings assigned to particular behaviors can differ dramatically as different definitions of the context are imposed.

This explains the reasons why oral and intercultural comprehension skills were the most developed during the stay in Portugal, with 77%, 70% and 77%, respectively.

Final considerations

This study revealed that students from the Bachelor of Arts in Portuguese-Chinese Translation and Interpretation of the Macao Polytechnic Institute tend to have a positive representation of the "foreigner", in general, and of the Portuguese culture and people, in particular. While understanding that cultural aspects are important, we must be aware that the attitude we take to difference is fundamental. As Maude (2012, p.244) states: "Even when separated by great cultural distance people can successfully communicate with each other provided that they are motivated to do so. In particular, the presence of goodwill is a factor that determines the success of a cross-cultural communication event." It will be important to activate and develop this interaction capacity, early in the teaching/learning process, in order to motivate learners and endow them with intercultural skills.

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