

Researcher looks at cross-cultural issues in online communications

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As the world has become increasingly interconnected, cross-cultural communication is becoming the new norm in organizations and education systems. As a result, cross-cultural issues in computer-mediated communication (CMC) have taken on importance. Na Li, a doctoral candidate at Penn State's College of Information Sciences and Technology (IST), is investigating how language barriers and other cultural factors cause communication failures within small groups.

"I'm trying to find a way to help both the native and non-native speakers communicate better," Li said.

Li won the Best Paper Award at the 2012 ACM Group Conference for her paper, "At a Different Tempo: What Goes Wrong in Online Cross-[Cultural Group](#) Chat?" which was co-written by Mary Beth Rosson, a professor and associate dean for undergraduate studies in the College of IST. Li was the only student among this year's nominees.

In group communication, Li said, text chat tools have been widely adopted. The use of text chat tools is especially prevalent among non-native speakers, who generally feel less time and social pressures in online chat environments as opposed to face-to-face interaction. However, Li said, studies have shown that non-native speakers still have problems within [chat groups](#). They tend to type slower, adopt follower rather than leader roles, have their ideas ignored by other group members and report lower satisfaction with the overall experience. In addition, non-native speakers find it difficult to follow turns in the

conversation, particularly when there are two or three conversations occurring simultaneously.

As text [chat tools](#) become more widely adopted in cross-cultural communication, Li said, it would be beneficial to understand how their affordances affect both native and non-native speakers more fully. This understanding could provide guidance on designing or redesigning tools for cross-cultural group communication. To conduct such an analysis, Li and Rosson conducted a mixed methods study on groups of Chinese and American students brainstorming and making decisions on a given topic in online group chat. Three types of data—surveys, chat logs and interviews—were analyzed. They assembled five groups for study, each with two native speakers (Americans) and two non-native speakers (Chinese). The researchers asked each participant to assume the role of a Go Green team member and decide how to spend \$5,000 to support environmental sustainability. After the task, participants were asked to fill out a post-experiment survey and participated in follow-up interviews separately. Using the data from the experiment, Li and Rosson depicted the conversation trend of the non-native and native speakers in a time line.

Li and Rosson found three themes from the interview transcripts: language fluency issues, an impaired turn-taking system and a slow-down in group process. The non-native speakers, who are all fluent in English, were slower in comprehending and expressing ideas, which discouraged their willingness to participate in intensive discussion. In addition, native speakers dominated the chat in all five groups, while some Chinese participants expressed negative feelings about being followers in the group. Also, Li said, non-native speakers often produce less complicated words and shorter expressions than native speakers. Since non-native speakers do not generate text as fast as native speakers, they may choose to use efficient expressions to quickly share their points. However, Li and Rosson noted that the shortened expressions were not received well

by other participants.

In the cross-cultural groups, Li and Rosson wrote, people seemed to be more hesitant when taking turns because they were not familiar with the other culture's communication style, thus making it harder for them to take turns at the right time. With parallel conversations taking place, some non-native speakers reported that they had difficulty in determining whether others were following the last topic or the newly initiated topic.

Despite the advantages that native speakers have over non-native speakers in a chat environment, Li said, several native speakers in the study reported that they had made changes in their communication style to accommodate the non-native group members. In general, they slowed their speed to adopt the same tempo as the non-native speakers. However, Li said, the downside is that the native speakers sometimes forget ideas when they hold back in deference to the non-native speakers.

To level the playing field between native and non-native speakers, Li said, she and Rosson suggest a mechanism for thread control that supports turn-taking while minimally affecting the flow of the conversation. They envision a side bar of the chat window in which users can ask questions about missed turns, etc. and enter responses to a turn right beside it. Users' responses can be stacked up in a side pane, similar to a threaded chat.

In their ongoing work, Li said, she and Rosson are designing and evaluating an augmented IM tool aimed at assisting both native and non-[native speakers](#) in group [chat](#).

"The world is getting flat in every aspect," Li said. "I think there's a real need in this area."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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