CULTURAL DIMENSIONS IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION
& IMPLICATIONS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract. This paper presents a critical review of literature on major values directing communication across Western-Anglo cultures and Asian-Confucian cultures, and hence influential to communication between people of different cultures even when the same language (e.g., English) is in operation. Given that these values exist in all cultures and among all individuals at various levels of prevalence, an effort is made to present these values in a bipolar dichotomy. From the insightful understanding of the operation and influence of the difference in cultural values on intercultural communication, the paper suggests implications practical to the teaching and learning English as a foreign language.

1. Introduction

Intercultural communication (ICC) is characterized as communication between people of different cultures (Gudykunst & Mody, 2002). ICC has presented a number of barriers and difficulties caused by differences in values across cultures (Adair, Okuma, & Brett, 2001; Chen, Tjosvold & Su, 2005). The diverse cultural values can make it hard to maintain communication between people of different cultures even when they use the same language. Misunderstandings and communication breakdowns can result from a lack of insights into of cultural values and of the various degrees these values prevail in specific cultures. Accordingly, English language teaching needs to raise language learners’ awareness of the consequences that the cultural differences, especially between Western-Anglo (e.g., American, Australian, British) cultures and Asian-Confucian (e.g., Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean) cultures can cause to ICC. Given that major values exist in all cultures, among various individuals and that they have various degrees of dominance, an effort is made to review major values in a bipolar dichotomy. On the basis of the understanding of the operation of these values across cultures, relevant implications for English language teaching are made.

2. Cultural dimensions in intercultural communication contexts

2.1. Cost / Benefit versus Debt / Favour

Asian-Confucian cultures are sensitive to debt and favour (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Markus & Kitayama, 1991), while cost-benefit continuum is predominant in many Western-Anglo cultures (Watts, 2003). The cost-benefit model highlights a loss
and gain relationship where achievement is promoted as a key value. This orientation towards achievement is analyzed in the Social Exchange Theory (Cheng & Starosta, 2005) where communication is characterized by the idea that society is the product of a voluntary contract between autonomous individuals who bind themselves to a circumscribed compact to further their individual Self-interest (Fiske, 1998). Communication is based on two concepts, namely rewards/benefits and costs. “Rewards are what we gain for the amount of cost we pay [...] when we see the rewards are greater than the costs in the transaction, we purchase the goods. But if the costs are greater than the rewards, we reject the offer” (Cheng & Starosta, 2005, p. 120). Rewards can be affection, love, happiness, face giving, gifts, acceptance, respect, seniority and friendship; and costs can be time, money, energy, dissatisfaction, face loss, psychological energy and the performance of anything one is reluctant to accept. Communicating in this framework, people tend to minimize the negative outcomes so as to reduce costs as much as possible. For example:

[1] (1) Speaker A: Have another cake, please.
Speaker B: I am full. Thank you.

Westerners may view speaker A as being maximizing the benefit and minimizing the cost to speaker B by inviting B to have another cake and minimizing benefit to him (i.e., by giving away one more of his cakes). Speaker B uses her right of being free of imposition by refusing speaker A’s suggestion. The comprehension of this example requires specific reference neither to the context nor to the relationship between 2 speakers. Without information about how close/distant A and B’s relationship is and/or where they are, the conversation is totally comprehensible and truly reflects the speakers’ internal states.

The construct of debt and favour in Asian-Confucian cultures, however, reveals far more about the complexities of the relationship between the people involved and the predictable influences of these complex factors on communication. The equal status assumption is barely acceptable in this continuum. For instance:

[1] (2) Hostess: Ăn thêm chút nữa đi cháu. / Have some more food.
Guest: Cháu no lầm rồi a. / I am very full already.
Hostess: Đừng làm khách đây, ăn thêm cho no đi. / Feel at home. Eat until you are full.
Guest: Cháu ăn no lầm rồi a. / I am very full already.
Hostess: Hay là bác nấu đó quá ?/ Did I cook too badly?
Guest: Không phải bác a mà là…/ It is not so just that…
Hostess: Thế thì ăn thêm ch bác tự nữa./ Then eat more for me.
Guest: Thè thi bác cho cháu ít thôi ạ. Well, just give me a little bit then.

At first glance, from an Anglo point of view, the hostess appeared to be assertive and the guest refused hypocritically. The cost-benefit view can only explain the first part of the conversation. From the Vietnamese Confucian viewpoint, both the hostess and the guest act properly. With the rhetorical question: “Did I cook badly?” the hostess’ message is “I am not a bad cook, do eat some more for me” or “Do me a favour by eating more food” or “I know you are polite but eat more because I ask you to”. Saying “Did I cook badly?” helps the hostess add more weight to her invitation. Weight not only involves the hostess’ insistence on the guest having more food. It also includes her sincerity, hospitality and good will, which makes it harder for the guest to refuse the offer. One can refuse a benefit offered but can hardly reject others’ display of good will. This brings weight closer to the emotional obligations among interlocutors. The debt-favour continuum reflects the interlocutors’ emotional involvement in communication, whereas in the cost-benefit continuum, the emotional aspect is marginalized.

2.2. Individual face loss minimization versus mutual face enhancement

A review of how major communication concepts have been defined for the last 40 years reflects the Western-Anglo belief that communication is a tool to prevent potential problems in social exchange. To illustrate, Lakoff (1975) defines politeness as a means to reduce friction. Leech (1983) sees politeness as a means to avoid conflicts. Kasper (1990) considers communication as an instrument employed to defuse a possible danger and to minimize antagonism in communication. What all of these theories have in common is the assumption that communication is defensive, preventive, and prophylactic in nature. For instance, greetings between acquaintances express their attendance to each other’s face (i.e., the desire to be attended to), and to prevent the possible misunderstanding that one side does not like the other side. The absence of a greeting, therefore, may cause conflicts between acquaintances. Similarly, asking someone to do something in a polite way minimizes the requestee’s possible negative reactions (e.g., anger) that may affect the relationship between the two people.

The literature on communication in Asian-Confucian cultures however, shows that the social practice in these cultures is more than a means to keep people in communication away from possible problems in communication. It indeed brings them closer in enhanced mutual understanding. Asian-Confucian communication is oriented towards an accommodative approach rather than a defensive approach. Social exchange in Asian-Confucian cultures is where people show their wish to be closer to and better understood by others.

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<th></th>
<th>Defensive approach</th>
<th>Accommodative approach</th>
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<td>G1: Congratulations! You made it!</td>
<td>G2: Congratulations! You made it!</td>
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<tr>
<td>H1: Thanks.</td>
<td>H2: We all made it.</td>
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Without reference to the context, it is clear in both instances that G (1+2) is being polite. By simply thanking G1, H1 shows his acknowledgement of G1’s congratulations. By the act of thanking, H1 accepts G1’s congratulations and shows H1’s orientation towards H1’s own face. Additionally, by doing so, H1 does not have to offer any further explanation and as such it helps H1 save time and effort. In contrast, H2’s response provides G2 with more access to the way H2 perceives H2’s own achievement. It reflects H2’s accommodation towards G2 and H2’s proper acknowledgement of H2’s own achievement among the achievements of others. In other words, Confucian communication is more than self-defence (i.e., avoiding conflicts in communication); it is rather directed towards mutual enhancement (i.e., promoting mutual relationships).

The mutual face enhancement approach also leads to a high level of ambiguity in communication in Asian-Confucian cultures. When an act of speech is perceived to be potentially unconstructive to the mutual relationship, it is refined to preserve the face of both parties: on making requests, a much larger percentage of Chinese (60%) choose to use hints instead of explicitly expressed requests than Americans (0%) as a way to make both interlocutors feel good (Shih, 1988). In refusing an offer, Koreans hesitate more and used direct refusal formula much less frequently than do Americans, and sound less transparent, more tentative, pausing and apologizing before refusing (Kwon, 1994). Similarly, being more concerned with maintaining harmony in relationships in ICC, Japanese tend to use more avoidance tactics than their American counterparts, who are more concerned with fairness and assertiveness (Oetzel et al., 2001). Chinese and Japanese are similarly found to use more indirect strategies than their Anglo counterparts (Merkin, 2006).

2.3. Differentiating speech & accepting imposition for interpersonal harmony versus the pursuit of individual free will

The pursuit of interpersonal harmony takes precedence over the pursuit of individual free will in the Asian-Confucian view of communication, whereas from the viewpoint of Western-Anglo individualism, the individual free is stressed.

The Confucian practice of differentiating speech (i.e., one speaks differently to different people in different situations) expresses respect for and the conformity to power and social hierarchy. It reinforces the Confucian belief that people are not socially equal, so they should not talk to each other as if they were equals. The most frequently cited example of the Confucian appreciation of differentiating speech is the way address terms are used in Asian Confucian cultures. A person self-addresses and is addressed by different terms in different situations with different people in different relationships. For instance, Vietnamese are addressed by their role with the addresser, and this way of addressing helps remind people involved in interaction of the
responsibilities, obligations and duties towards each other, and towards the community with which they both identify. In situations where two people meet for the first time, and where the mutual roles have not been established, the addressee is expected to choose an addressing term which shows respect for the addressee’s position, but to employ a humble addressing term for self-addressing. This practice of differentiating speech in addressing is seen in the Vietnamese moral lesson of xưng là phải khiêm, hô là phải tôn ‘humble self-addressing and respectful addressing’. The practice of speaking differently to different people shows the speaker’s acknowledgement of their roles and duties towards the hearer, and hence they show their acceptance of the hierarchical relationship between them, and thereby express their orientation toward interpersonal harmony.

In Western-Anglo cultures, imposition is viewed unfavourably and its avoidance has become the core of the theoretical construction of the concept of politeness. In more group-oriented cultures, however, imposition is not as important a consideration as in Anglo cultures. Accordingly, the avoidance of imposition is not necessarily the most crucial factor in understanding communication in Confucian cultures (Byon, 2006). A strong insistence on the other’s acceptance of an offer is considered polite rather than imposing. In ICC, different perceptions of the degree of imposition regarding requesting, accepting and declining an offer/invitation between South-East Asians and Australians can cause misunderstandings.

While Anglo cultures emphasize the individual’s freedom from constraint and their autonomy in action, with the assertiveness of the centrality of individuals and their wants and needs, the Asian flexible attitude towards imposition reflects their respect for social hierarchy versus the insistence on equality in communication. Interlocutors respond to each other’s status differences involving age, gender and power. For instance, in ICC, while the Chinese respond more to status, Americans emphasize status differences less and value equality and individualism far more (Shih, 1988). Differences in relationships and status with communicative partners do not produce significant changes in the American style of giving criticism, suggesting that Americans seem to be more concerned with the differences in the nature of the provocation that gives rise to the criticism, and less sensitive to the change in the status of their communicative counterparts (Nomura & Barnlund, 1983). In the same study, the Japanese are sensitive to the differences in the status of their communicative counterparts, and this sensitivity is reflected in their manner of giving criticism. Similarly, in ICC, Vietnamese and Japanese develop a strategy of focusing on listening and speaking out their viewpoints only when necessary (Clyne, 1996).

2.4. The preference for immediate good feeling versus the insistence on truth

The Western pursuit of self expression in the search for the truth contrasts with
the precedence of immediate good mutual feeling over the Truth in Asian group-oriented communication. While Western cultures insist on telling the truth, Confucian communication places greater stress on the need to create good feelings, especially during the communication process between the interlocutors: it does not really matter how people genuinely feel, but they are expected to create an appropriate positive feeling through what they say. With the central focus on immediate mutual positive feeling, much less attention is paid to the quest for truth, compared with the West (Jia, 2003). The perception of appearance and impression, therefore, is the key idea. People should appear happy at a wedding, although sometimes it is not necessarily true that they are feeling happy. They should appear cooperative at work even if they find their partners unsympathetic. Similarly, appearing humble when receiving a compliment is appreciated. The significance of this projected appearance is illuminated below where the Chinese subject explained why he refused compliments:

On the surface I say ‘no, no, no’ […] But I accept it. I feel really excited.
In Anglo-cultural culture, they say ‘yes’ means accept the compliment [sic]. But in China, people say ‘no’, but really accept the compliment.
Different [speaking] way, but the feeling is the same.

(Fong, 2003, p. 257)

The linguistic form indicated in “no, no, no” is not intended to convey a rejection of the compliment. It gives “an impression of modesty” (Fong, 2003, p. 203). The mastery of one’s emotion in this sense is indicated by one’s not verbally accepting the compliment, although one may privately agree with it. In ICC, Koreans frequently give reasons for refusing an offer which involves their personal commitments, although these reasons are not necessarily true (e.g., referring to a family member’s birthday when refusing a boss’s invitation, or their poor physical well-being, for example, “I have a headache” or “I am tired”) (Kwon, 1994). This reflects their belief that no matter whether the reason is true or not, by giving a reason that they perceive to be adequate, they do not harm the mutual relationship with other people. On the contrary, in the same research, this type of reason is not used at all by American subjects in their refusal of offers, but rather the American subjects favour more direct refusals such as “I can’t” or “It won’t be possible” (Kwon, 1994). The Confucian concern that one may damage mutual harmony when directly saying “no” to an offer motivates one to give “the most reasonable” reason, regardless of whether these reasons are true or not. A similar practice is seen in Vietnamese behaviour in intercultural business interactions (Chew Chye Lay, 2005), where intermediate references are preferred to direct clarification. In intercultural business contexts where Vietnamese is the means of communication, Vietnamese tend to use the term được ‘can, ok, possible’ to convey ambiguously the meaning of “no”.

In Confucian group-oriented cultures, then, the concern for immediate positive feelings in communication rather than for truth-speech consistency may result in some compromised talk, where the quest for truth is secondary to the need for the perceived interpersonal harmony.

2.5. The insistence on group membership versus individual uniqueness

The insistence on individual uniqueness and the need to be recognized as a group member are well illustrated, though anecdotally, by the American proverb “The squeaky wheel gets the grease” while it is contrasted by the Japanese proverb: “The nail that stands out gets pounded down”. The American proverb highlights independence by emphasizing individual differences through an orientation to standing out from the group, and hence encourages competition. As a result, standing-out is an essential indicator in the Western promotion of individualism of many Anglo cultures, since Anglo cultures, traits such as individual initiatives are emphasized and rewarded. In Asian-Confucian cultures, one enters into social relations with the focus on the social unit of which the one is a part. From this perspective, relatedness to the group or group membership is secondary to individual uniqueness. In contrast, the need to fit in a group reflects the interdependent mode and the sense of social harmony and social security. Therefore, fitting-in is crucial in group-oriented cultures such as Asian-Confucian cultures, where the group is emphasized over the personal Self, and social interdependence over personal dependence.

The Anglo orientation to individual uniqueness and distinctiveness is highlighted with faith in expressing one’s own unique attributes. In this view, one should behave meaningfully primarily “by reference to one’s own internal repertoire of thoughts, feelings and action, rather than by reference to the thoughts, feelings and actions of others” (Markus and Kitayama, 1991, p. 226). In addition, with orientation to individual achievement, the Self is governed by economic rules whose components include people’s occupations, personal financial success and independent contracts, and these rules shape people’s Self-concept (Fiske, 1998). The achievement orientation involves the need to be stimulated to excel when individuals compete with one another. This orientation is shown in the strong Anglo-cultural preference for acknowledging and expressing individual uniqueness as found in research on compliments and compliment responses. For instance, the American English data reveal that Americans compliment primarily on personal appearance, personal acquisition and personal achievement. This indicates that Americans value those attributes more highly than others. Standing-out in Asian Confucian cultures is considered to invite jealousies and the “evil eye”. This belief is widely held by the Japanese, Chinese and Koreans (Fiske, 1998) and Vietnamese (Pham, 2011). One of its manifestations is that people in those cultures are cautious about paying compliments to new-born babies. A Vietnamese baby should be praised as “ugly”, not as “nice” or “cute little” thing. Asian Confucians also pay
compliments and accept compliments less frequently than their Anglo-cultural counterparts (Yu, 2003). This partly shows the Asian-Confucian preference for fitting in and for the interdependent mode in communication. The fitting-in tendency, on the other hand, signals the Asian-Confucian appreciation of being accepted by the group.

3. Pedagogical implications for English language teaching

The recognition that all of the values above operate across cultures at different levels of prevalence and that their various dominance in different cultures is a huge source of misunderstandings in ICC adds another time- and effort-consuming job to the process of teaching and learning English as a foreign language. Both English language teachers and learners need to understand that the language competence itself is insufficient for effective communication in ICC. It does not matter how competent a person is in a language, without insights into the values of the target culture (i.e., the culture of the person with whom he is communicating), he is prone to communication breakdowns.

Learning a language involves increasing sensitivity towards cultural differences. As such, English language teachers need to raise students’ awareness of the fact that cultures share values but these values operate at different degrees of dominance. For example, cost-benefit and debt-favour considerations are in operations in all cultures and among all individuals at different times but the degree at which these considerations prevail may vary across cultures, individuals and contexts. Not all Americans are oriented towards the cost-benefit continuum and not all Vietnamese are guided by debt-favour considerations all the time. However, in general, Americans tend to be more sensitive towards cost-benefit considerations and Vietnamese are more likely concerned with debt-favour practice. Understanding that major values are not exclusive to any cultures but their operation degree may vary will help English learners as foreign language users be aware of the background and expectations/assumptions of the person with whom they are communicating. This will allow them to make better informed decisions for more effective communication in ICC.

English language teachers also need to help language learners realize that cultural differences or the differences in the operation degree of major values across cultures may be consequential to ICC, especially when they use the English language to communicate with native speakers of English from Anglo cultures such as British, American and Australian cultures. Possible misunderstandings resulting from the speakers’ adoption of contrasting values in communication between people of different cultures need to be pointed out to English language learners so that they can be better prepared for ICC. This helps language learners be aware of potential problems in ICC which are caused not by the English language incompetence by any party involved in communication, but by their lack of understanding of how the conflict of cultural values
in operation can impact communication quality.

English language teachers should also provide feedback on learners’ pragmatic mistakes (e.g., what students say or write is culturally inappropriate, and so consequential) rather than primarily focusing on form mistakes (e.g., grammatical, spelling or punctuality mistakes). Pointing out culture-conditioning issues remaining in learners’ use of English as a foreign language that may cause misunderstandings and mis-interpretations on the part of their counterpart can raise English learners’ sensitivity towards how their assumptions of their own home culture and of the expectations of the foreigner they are talking to, can influence their language production, and hence the quality of communication.

English learners’ ICC competence can be improved by teachers’ adoption of self-discovery rather “teach all” approach. This is where the teacher stimulates learners’ curiosity for the target culture by presenting activities which encourage learners to establish a habit of exploring communication practices across cultures and how these differences influence communication of people of these cultures. This can be done by means of various methods, including role-plays, acting out hypothetical scenarios, safari trips (i.e., searching on the internet for information about a specific cultural matter) and so on. These activities must allow language learners to discover cultural differences themselves and how cultural variations can influence intercultural communication.

References


