

## Incorporating Cross-cultural Communication in ELT: A Pedagogical Approach

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**ABSTRACT:** *Cross-cultural communication has become ever more significant through the globalization of markets, affairs of nation-states and technologies. Consequently, the cultural quotient (CQ) is becoming increasingly important, especially in the context of the changing dynamics of work culture around the world. This paper makes a case for the need to pay attention to intercultural communication and discusses some specific approaches and strategies in the teaching of intercultural communication in the classroom. These approaches include addressing issues like learning to honour one's own culture and sharing it with others while developing a capacity to be open to other cultures. Other strategies include progressing from an ethnocentric to an ethno-relative state of understanding and acceptance of cultural differences and increasing one's ability to communicate with non-native speakers. Specifically, classroom practices and strategies suggested include intercultural explorations, use of texts, films, short stories and other multi-media resources, contrastive case studies of cultures, group encounters and role plays.*

### Introduction

Sir Francis Bacon said that if a man was gracious and courteous to strangers, it showed that he was a citizen of the world, and that his heart was no island cut off from other lands, but a continent that joined them. The present work force even in local contexts demands global skills such as excellent communication skills. Regardless of the region, global skills are the primary requisite of any organization as these organizations are operating in a global scenario. Cross-cultural communication is one such global skill that will equip the learner to adapt to any cultural context. Cross-cultural communication has emerged largely through the globalization of markets, affairs of nation-states and technologies. Cultural quotients (CQ) are becoming increasingly important, especially in the context of the changing dynamics of work culture around the world. Cross-cultural issues have become vital due to Informatization. This is a process whereby information and communication technologies such as the World Wide Web, computers, films, and television shape cultural and civic discourse. They have transformed economic and social relations to such an extent that cultural and economic barriers are minimized.

Accordingly, the present curricula should stress the mutual exchange of "know how", strategic utilization of competencies, as well as improvement in the quality of higher education and the role it plays to ensure sustainable development and better quality of life for people. This paper makes a case for the need to pay attention to intercultural communication and discusses some specific approaches and strategies in the teaching of intercultural communication in the classroom. These include tackling issues like learning to honour and sharing one's own culture

while developing a capacity to be open to other cultures; progressing from an ethnocentric to an ethno-relative state of understanding and acceptance of cultural differences; and increasing the ability to communicate with non-native speakers. Specifically, classroom practices and strategies include intercultural explorations through the use of appropriate texts, films and other multimedia resources, short stories, contrastive case studies of cultures, group encounters and role plays.

### **What is culture?**

Culture is an amorphous concept even in the most rigorous of theoretical discussions of intercultural communication. Typically it is defined as a symbolic system, which includes issues of perception, cognition and understanding. It is essential for today's work force to be aware of the differences in communication across cultures at their workplaces. Various scholars have attempted to define culture. A more succinct definition is provided by Down (1971) "... a culture is a system of symbols shared by a group of humans and transmitted by them to upcoming generations" (p. 30). Barnow (1973) suggests that culture is inheritance and is expressed through culture, "a culture is a way of life of a group of people, the configuration of all of the more or less stereotyped patterns of learned behavior which are handed down from one generation to the next through means of language and imitation" (p. 6).

A major component of a culture is its systems of values, beliefs, and material products. First, culture includes belief systems that involve stories, or myths, the interpretation of which can give people insight into how they should feel, think, and/or behave. Second, culture includes value systems. Values are formed based on how we learned to believe things ought to be or how people ought to behave, especially in terms of qualities such as honesty, integrity, and openness. Third, culture is also defined by material products such as food, clothing, and music.

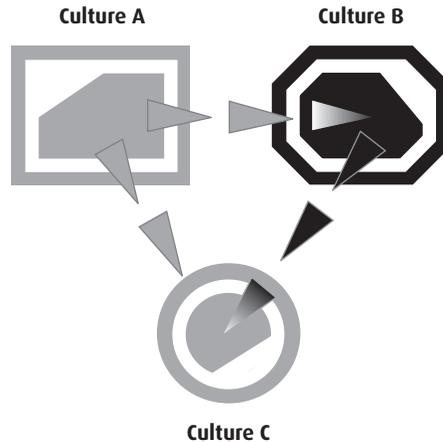
Thus, culture provides people with a general cognitive frame work for an understanding of the world, and for functioning in it. Culture mediates relationships among men and between men and their environment. It is the primary determinant of how a person views reality both consciously and unconsciously. Moreover it provides the context which enables human beings to communicate.

For these reasons, one's professional career can never be separated from his or her cultural habits. Cross-cultural training can put a negotiator in a beneficial position over his or her competitors. Though many companies feel reluctant to train their employees, it is absolutely essential and profitable in view of today's increasing demand for interaction in different global scenarios. Ian Stern, director of Holistic Training Solitarians, emphasizes cross-cultural training as an essential people skill. Thus cultural quotients (CQ), in this ever changing dynamic work culture, are becoming increasingly more important.

### **Cross-cultural communication defined**

Language and cultural misinterpretations can be avoided by increasing our understanding of other people and their cultures. The study of cross-cultural communication addresses this need by examining the communications and interactions between people of different cultures and sub cultures. The fundamental principle of cross-cultural communication is that it is through culture that people communicate. Thus an Indian, a Chinese, an American speaks like any other Indian, Chinese, or American. As Kineberg (1965) points out that "we find that culture differ widely from one another in the amount of emotional expression which is permitted. We speak for example of the imperturbability of the American Indian, the inscrutability of the oriental, the reserve of the English man and at the other extreme of the expressiveness of the African or Sicilian. Although there is always some exaggeration in such clichés it is probable that they do correspond to an accepted cultural pattern, at least to some degree" (p. 174). Thus the ways people communicate and interact, their language patterns, nonverbal modes all are determined by culture (Klopf & Park, 1982).

**Figure 1:** Intercultural communication model



Cross-cultural communication theory begins with the assumptions of cultural variations. These differences act as barriers to communication. Knowing the differences exist and recognizing the potential effects on communication, the communicator will be more sensitive to the fact and accommodate such differences. This means that for communicators to understand each other, they should have something in common in their back grounds that will enable them to perceive the stimuli similarly. Communication is intricately woven into the culture. Culture fosters or promotes communication process. There is strong correlation between culture and language.

Considering the variations in cultures that reflect communication, it is necessary to discuss the barriers to cross-cultural communication.

### **Barriers to cross-cultural communication**

#### *Culture bound verbal and non-verbal communication*

Knowledge of the non-verbal code system of a culture different from one's own is particularly helpful in establishing a communication relationship within intercultural context. Non-verbal codes consist of body movements, facial expressions, gestures, Para language, chronemics and proxemics. Verbal communication displays non-verbal cues through emotion and speaking style as well as intonation, rhythm and other prosodic attributes. The following discussion propagates non verbal actions which are extremely culture-bound.

Among the most basic cultural dimensions is individualism versus collectivism. Collectivistic cultures emphasize community, shared interests, harmony, tradition, the public good, and maintain face. Tocqueville (1945) points out, "Individualism is mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself (or herself) from the mass of his (or her) fellows and to draw apart with his (or her) family and friends, so that he (or she) has thus formed a little circle of his (or her) own, he (or she) willingly leaves society at large to itself." (p. 104).

Evidence exists that personal individualism may transcend cultural differences for certain variables. Schmidt (1983) compared the effects of crowding on people from an individualistic culture (the United States of America) and a collectivistic culture (Singapore). The study examined the relationships among personal control, crowding annoyance, and stress, reporting similar findings for both cultures (p. 221-239).

The other dimension of cross-cultural communication is proxemics, the power distance. It is obvious that power distance would affect the non-verbal behavior of a culture. High power

distance cultures (e.g., India) may severely limit interaction. High PDI countries often prohibit dating, free contacts, which are taken for granted in low PDI countries.

Cultural differences in non verbal behaviors with power implications in one or both cultural groups can lead to misunderstandings eye gaze is a power cue in main stream US culture, in differences in patterns between black and white American communicators may lead to interactional difficulties. LaFrance and Mayo (1976) report that black speakers look at their conversational partner less while listening than speaking. The pattern of for white communicators is the opposite (p. 547-552).

Further, the latest research asserts that, in many cultures exterior signs of emotions are taken as a natural thing. The people of the Middle East and of the Mediterranean area are lively and hearty. For the Japanese, the public display of excessive emotions may be considered as an act of impoliteness, lack of control and even a kind of invasion of the private space of the other person. Silence has different meanings in different cultures. The Chinese have a saying "silence is golden..." In Australia silence can be interpreted as shyness or lack of dynamism. Touch has different interpretations in different zones. In Thailand and Laos it is rude for strangers to touch upon the head of the children where as in western countries it is way of showing affection.

### *Gender communication*

Gender has been neglected as a cultural dimension. This dimension refers to the rigidity and definitions of gender roles. More rigid cultures exert influence on members to behave within a narrow range of gender-related behavior and stress traditional gender role identification. Communication between men and women can be like cross-cultural communication. Language also reflects difference in social status between genders.

Proxemics offers considerable evidence that gender communication is a form of intercultural communication. Space is a primary means by which a culture designates who is important, who has privilege. Responses to invasion of space also differ between men and women. While men may respond aggressively, women tend to yield space rather than challenge the intruder. These differences can create problems in communication. In the work place, employees in the traditional female role, secretary, generally have a smaller space rather than the employee in the traditional male role, executive.

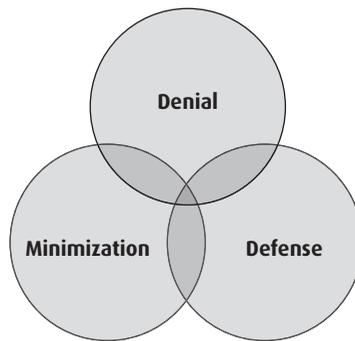
### *Ethnocentrism*

Ethnocentrism refers to the superiority feeling of the members of a certain culture. Generally, ethnocentric persons have the tendency to interpret the other culture, based on their own cultural values. An American manager considers English as the "best" and will not learn another language. The manager may consider another language as inferior or illogical. And if she/he considers his/her nonverbal system as the most civilized, he/she will have the tendency to reject other systems as primitive. In this way the ethnocentrism can become an obstacle for an efficient empathy and lead not only to the total destruction of communication, but to antagonism and even hostility.

Each society has its own culture and values. These are the ways they live and interact with each other. It is not "bad" to have American or Chinese values. What is important is that the way of doing things may not be the same. Ethnocentrism is a belief in the centrality of one's own culture. It often involves judging aspects of another culture by the standards of one's own. Bennet (1993) defines ethnocentrism as "assuming that world view of one's own culture is central to all reality" (p. 30). Bennet has a model of developmental sequence of intercultural sensitivity. In this he discussed the three stages—denial, defence and minimization. (See Figure 1)

- Denial: Avoids new culture; isolated; denies the existence of new culture
- Defence: Negative stereotyping; superiority of one's own culture eg. Nazis
- Minimization: Hide cultural variations; universal truth or values based on one's own assumptions.

**Figure 2:** Stages of ethnocentrism



### *Stereotypes*

Stereotyping is an extension of ethnocentrism. Samovar and Porter (1991) define stereotypes as “the perceptions and beliefs we hold about groups or individuals based on our previously formed opinions and attitudes” (p. 280). As the definition suggests, stereotypes do not develop suddenly but are formed by our culture over period of time. Stereotypes can either be positive or negative. If a group is termed as dishonest we start treating everyone in that group as dishonest irrespective of individual natures. Many examples can be given as the one is the women are not good at math or tough subjects like Aeronautics which may cause women in turn to avoid studying such subjects.

Scollon and Scollon (1995) caution that in order to overcome the problem of oversimplification and stereotyping “comparisons between groups should always consider both likenesses and differences, that is, they should be based upon more than a single dimension of contrast, and it must be remembered that no individual member of a group embodies all of his or her group’s characteristics” (p. 157). Indeed, an issue to keep in mind, as McKay (2002) explains, is that a contrast of especially western versus eastern assumptions of cultures of learning “can perpetuate differences, promote the concept of otherness, and lead to simple dichotomies and stereotyping” (p. 121).

Therefore, it is also important for teacher educators to emphasize individual variation, as well as the dynamic nature of cultures. It needs to be pointed out that the main aim of using the above framework is not to find out how different the students or teaching context will be from what teachers are accustomed to, but to explore what kind of preconditioned ideas teachers themselves have about that particular context, while showing them the dimensions over which cultures are most likely to vary in their discourse systems.

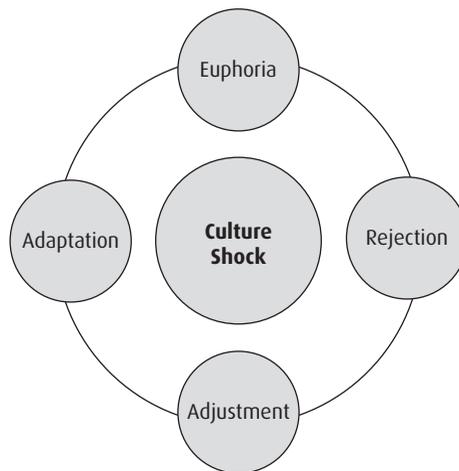
### *Culture shock*

Culture shock is a strange psychological phenomenon which acts a barrier in communicating with others especially in a global environment. The term “culture shock” was first introduced in the 1950s by Kalvero Oberg to describe the phenomena people might experience after moving to a new environment. Culture shock can be described as the feeling of disorientation experienced by a person suddenly subjected to an unfamiliar culture or way of life. Culture shock is the physical and emotional discomfort a person experience when entering a culture different from his or her own. Culture shock is not a sudden phenomenon; rather, it builds up slowly and is often a series of small events.

Culture shock may involve any of these symptoms:

- sadness, loneliness, melancholy
- preoccupation with health

**Figure 3:** Process of culture shock



- insomnia, desire to sleep too much or too little
- depression, feeling vulnerable, feeling powerless, changes in temperament
- anger, irritability, resentment, unwillingness to interact with others
- identifying with the old culture or idealizing the old country
- loss of identity
- unable to solve simple problems
- lack of confidence

For some people, culture shock can be brief and hardly noticeable. For others, it can bring intense physical and emotional discomfort. Though it is inevitable it can be managed or overcome with conscious awareness of one's own reactions.

To overcome culture shock, it is vital to understand other cultures to indulge in healthy interactions and for the well-being of the individual. As one goes through the cycle of adjustment in the new culture, one's understanding and knowledge of the host country increases.

### **Cross-cultural communication in ELT: Pedagogical approaches**

"When in Rome behave like a Roman" is an old proverb, but it takes little pain to understand "Roman" behavior, eventually leading to a cross-cultural communication gap. A cross-cultural communication gaffe can turn a successful deal futile in no time. It can lead to detrimental consequences in public relation, negotiation, mass media communication, business campaigns and meetings.

The present world is changing rapidly and becoming increasingly multicultural. Hence, increasingly complex skills and knowledge are required of people. Yet educational institutions are not fully prepared to accommodate these needs of modern world, nor is the human potential to learn and obtain such "new" competencies fully adequate. Almost seventy years ago John Dewey (1938) expressed:

Learning...means acquisition of what already is incorporated in books and in the heads of the elders. Moreover, that which is taught is thought of as essentially static. It is taught as a finished product, with little regard either to the ways in which it was originally built up or to changes that will surely occur in the future. It is to a large extent the cultural product of societies that assumed the future would be much like the past, and yet it is used as educational food in a society where change is the rule, not the exception (p.19).

Intercultural communication is considered as an essential academic discipline. Gudykunst and Kim (2003) conceptualize the phenomenon of intercultural communication as "... a transactional, symbolic process involving the attribution of meaning between people from different cultures" (p. 17). Moreover, intercultural communication is regarded by some social scientists as an academic discipline—that is to say, a branch of communication studies. People with these interests are more willing to take on the challenge of the global, multicultural world and are probably better equipped to live up to academic internationalization policies than anyone else. Having said that, the role of intercultural communication education in attaining the goals of internationalization and, more specifically, in providing optimal intercultural competence-education cannot be understated.

### **Pedagogical objectives**

The main objective of teaching cross-cultural communication is the development of capability of multidisciplinary handling of communication, through the development of the historical and thematic global vision. The contents and objectives of the courses must extend the simple knowledge and handling of information from the perspective of the design, in order to manage the greater objective which is to create their own identity and the capability to generate contribution and development. A major goal of cross-cultural communication education is the attainment of cross-cultural interaction. Some specific objectives are:

- to create an understanding of a student's own culture
- to create strategies to improve day-to-day cross-cultural communication and maximize cultural sensitivity
- to identify communication breakdowns which stem from the cross-cultural aspects of an interaction
- to explore stages of adaptation and personal strategies for managing the stress of culture shock
- to describe the relationship of culture and communication as mutually reciprocal influences
- to avoid misunderstanding based on cultural differences and methods for managing relationships.
- to understand the country context and its impact on professional and personal objectives
- to develop a communication perspective on intercultural interaction that incorporates:
  - knowledge of a variety of ways of developing messages among different cultures
  - knowledge of how information varies in its processing by acoustic and visual modalities within cultures
  - development of an attitude of an open-mindedness in cross-cultural communication
  - understanding of the basis of acceptance or rejection for communication in different cultures

A good point for teachers to consider the students' socio-cultural backgrounds in designing and implementing programs/lessons would be in the methodology courses in teacher education programs. It is not cultures that communicate but people (and possibly social institutions) with different cultural backgrounds. Cross-cultural communication occurs when the producers and receivers of a message belong to different cultures. On the assumption that knowledge of cultural differences may lead to improved cross-cultural communication, various teaching strategies have been devised to impart such knowledge.

### **Pedagogical approaches**

The language pedagogy is universal and always transcendental as it does not stick to limited horizons. Listed below are some strategies which have been practiced in recent years.

### *Information/knowledge approach*

In this approach a significant quantity of information about historical, cultural, economic, social, political, psychological issues. If the students are exposed to such information then they will develop a cognitive understanding of other peoples' customs, beliefs, and values which are important in cross-cultural interaction. Allowing open discussions rather than mere lectures will enhance the student perspective of communication. The following are the few approaches:

- biographies of great personalities of the world—Abraham Lincoln, Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi
- historic novels, such as *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy; and
- literary texts such as American literature, Commonwealth literature, Indian literature.

### *Area simulation approach*

A focal point of this approach is the creation of a specific environment where the learner gets first hand exposure of a different or contrasting culture. The main purpose of this simulation is that the learner will acquire a better understanding of a different culture by taking part in a situation different from his/her culture. A few examples of this approach are the following:

- interaction with a foreigner;
- creation of a situational or role play with characters of different cultures and regions; and
- on-line chats with people from different countries.

### *Group encounters*

The main purpose of this approach is the development of self understanding that will lead to a more flexible attitude towards another culture. Emphasis is on the process of interaction as opposed to experiences occurring independently of the group as a means of building trust and interdependence. Examples include brain storming, group discussions, debates on various social issues.

### *Communication theory approach*

The main thrust of instruction here is the search for patterned systems of interaction within a given cultural system. Communication models are used to describe the interface of communication variables in various communication situations. Analysis of Encoding, decoding process by taking a topic of different culture will help in understanding the communication process.

### *Programmed approach*

This approach utilizes programmed learning material to transmit cultural information. Programmed learning represents a highly individualized and systematic instructional strategy for class-room instruction as well as self-learning. It is now considered as one of the most important innovations in the field of education. In this approach, emphasis is on cognitive learning of the cultural variables affecting interpersonal interactions. One example of this approach is the Culture Assimilator, wherein specific information about a foreign culture is transmitted to members of another culture. The main objective is to train people to interact in a variety of situations in a specific culture.

### *Games and exercises*

Games are an important tool for imparting understanding and empathy in cross-cultural situation when they are set up to parallel real life situations. A leader provides guidance in the playing of a game and also in the discussion which follows. As the game progresses participants become so engrossed in it that they lose many of their inhibitions. The success of game playing varies greatly in accordance with the expertise of the instructor. The following are some simulation games.

- BAFA BAFA: This is a game to demonstrate experientially, the cultural norms and roles and the intercultural communication problems which develop when such cultures interact. The game may take 1 1/2 hours.
- FIRO B (fundamental interpersonal relations orientation): This exercise is designed to measure an individual's expressed behavior towards others and the behaviour he/she wants from others, from the dimensions of inclusion; control, and affection.
- East-west simulation: This game involves two groups of players, one representing of western culture, the other an eastern culture. The goal is for one to negotiate and obtain a national treasure of the other group. This game, which may take two hours to complete, consists of three phases:
  1. Role definitions within the society and development of strategies
  2. Negotiating period
  3. Presentation of the offer from one group to another. It may take two hours.

### *Other activities*

#### *Activity 1*

Have learners to write answers to the following questions. Their response should consists of 3–5 pages.

1. How do you define your national identity? What are the values, beliefs and customs, that make up your national identity?
2. If you were new to your own country and had only the print medium to learn from, what would you include in a list of the country's values and/or priorities?
3. How do you perceive your geographic region unique in terms of the following:
  - language, including accent, idioms, jargon, slang;
  - social persona—openness to newcomers, friendliness, extroversion;
  - economic status/prestige; cultural values and priorities (festivals, music, food, sport, landscape)
  - concepts of time and personal space.

#### *Activity 2*

Show a video clipping showing two contrasting cultures and then ask the learners whether the following items are visible or hidden.

- facial expressions
- gestures
- literature
- ideas about leadership
- ideas about modesty

It is generally believed that a combination of two or more of the approaches may prove to very effective.

### **Conclusion**

As the global village continues to “shrink” and cultures collide, it is essential for all of us to become more sensitive to the infinite variety of gestures and body language that surround us. There are various cultures in the world with unique customs, values, and languages. Imposing one's own cultural values on others while neglecting variety is not the best way to communicate or establish relationships. As English teachers, we constantly deal with our students' use of language and attempt to help them make it more appropriate to their situation and goals. Just as they need to know how to “moderate” their opinions as they increase English language proficiency, and how to be polite in various situations, students should also learn to appreciate the extent to which many words and expressions are derived from cultural norms.

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