Perspectives on Teaching Cross-Cultural Business Communication*

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Abstract

The growth in cross-cultural encounters increases the opportunities for intercultural understanding and the possibilities of miscommunication. To increase intercultural communication competence, a successful cross-cultural teaching model should find the balance between theory and application.

This article describes a cross-cultural business communication model developed and used in Hong Kong and the United States. The article attempts to provide a general framework that can be adapted universally. The Hong Kong and US examples were used to illustrate the applicability of this model in the West and in Asia.

Introduction

As the world economy becomes more and more globalized and internationalized, there is a parallel need to improve global understanding and increase intercultural communication competence. To be a successful international business executive in this changing marketplace, having a basic understanding of the target nation's economy and providing competitive products are no longer the sole answers. One also must be aware of other cultures and the ways people behave and do the business in these countries. In the late 70's and early 80's, the world economy and consumption patterns changed drastically; the United States was no longer a major "buying" nation and the Pacific Rim Basin nations, particularly the four little dragons (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore), were no longer solely "export-driven" countries any more. The average citizen's disposable income increased a great deal. Except in Hong Kong, the weakened American dollar even accelerated people's purchasing power.

To sell products in the global market, one has to follow the business customs of the target countries. Herein lies a drastic attitude change in American business: Americans cannot simply require their buyers to speak their language (English) and adopt American business practices. Astute American traders and managers strive to avoid the "ugly American" syndrome.

Responding to the changes in the world's economic system, well-established corporations started in-house training programs or hired consultants to orient their employees before sending them to assume overseas assignments (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994; Brislin, 1986, 1989, 1993; Casse, 1981, 1982, 1985; Clarke, 1990; Goodman, 1994; Tung, 1982, 1988). In a concurrent development, universities have realized the importance of preparing their business graduates to work in the international business arena by offering specialized cross-cultural communication courses or adding international components into specialized subjects, such as international finance, international marketing, and so forth.

To date, although there is wide awareness of the need to include cultural dimensions in international business studies, little attention has been paid to the development of appropriate course materials and approaches. Educators, anthropologists, and sociologists have presented different and contrasting opinions based on their beliefs -- known as "utilitarianism" or "non-utilitarianism". These contrasting educational philosophies underlie the development of different designs in intercultural communication courses. Supporters of Utilitarianism adopt an "instant expert approach" which concentrates on providing learners with a list of do's and don'ts to use while interacting with people from a particular culture. Conversely, those who believe that education is "non-utilitarian" argue that knowing all the do's and don'ts, although important, might only secure one's short-term aims through "hit-or-miss" strategy. In contrast, advocates of non-utilitarianism believe that only through providing a solid theoretical base can the long-term aim of understanding the target culture be achieved, thus permitting individuals to work efficiently in the host country environment.

In designing intercultural communication courses, "Going international: How to make friends and deal effectively in the global marketplace" (Copeland & Griggs, 1985) and "Managing cultural difference" (Harris & Moran, 1979) have provided a great deal of insights on dealing with people from different cultural backgrounds. However, as Samovar, Porter, and Jain (1981) claim, most textbooks are inclined to focus on very superficial differences between cultures. Cultures have been simplified and over generalized. As an ancient Chinese philosopher put it, " it is easy to acquire cognitive knowledge, but it takes painstaking effort and an open mind to observe and, as a result, to internalize the acquired knowledge."

Communicating effectively in the international environment is far more complex than just knowing how to greet people from other foreign cultures, or just being empathetic and open to your counterparts. To be competent in dealing with people from different cultural backgrounds, individuals should go beyond understanding observable behaviors and develop an understanding of the deep content that is at the center of real messages. Most importantly, it is essential to understand the hidden cultural forces that shape the deeply rooted cultural behavior. Operating in a cross-cultural environment, individuals may consciously act like natives of that particular target culture at the surface level. But unconsciously, they are still inclined to exhibit their own cultural trait**.** Intercultural communication courses should encourage learners to be aware of not just superficial differences among cultures but also develop the ability to detect the hidden grip of other cultures through interaction.

Theoretical Background

Confucius said, " Human beings draw close to one another by their common nature, but habits and customs keep them apart." Culture is the main factor that separates human beings from one another, and culture also creates the uniqueness of human beings. Culture is what makes Easterners different from Westerners. Culture makes Chinese a Chinese and American an American. Hall (1959, p.169) states that "culture is communication and communication is culture." A knowledge of culture is essential to understand the communication process. Through communication, people can either be brought closer or separated. When communication takes place within the home culture, individuals are instinctively aware of the context, and less likely to misinterpret the transmitted messages. However, when communicating with individuals from different language and cultural backgrounds without a shared context, the danger of miscommunication increases.

In the current era of advanced technology, distance barriers have been shrunk and East meets West. The East has been long categorized as a high-context cultural society which is distinctively different from the low-context Western society. Hall (1976) argues that high-context cultures prefer to use language in which relatively less meaning is provided in the coded, explicitly transmitted part of the message. High context-culture groups value group identity and covert communication codes to maintain a harmonious working environment among members of the groups. For Hall, Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans are characterized as high-context cultural societies. In contrast, in the low-context cultural system, people prefer to use messages in which meanings and interpretations of the transmitted information are vested in the explicit communication codes. Low-context culture societies include North American and Northern European countries.

In environments exhibiting cultural differences and multiple language use, the possibility of miscommunication increases. The merits of the varying approaches to teaching intercultural communication provokes arguments over the relative merits of "utilitarian" and "non-utilitarian" approaches. Educators or anthropologists who support a "utilitarian" philosophy have claimed that intercultural communication course design should focus on practicality. In contrast, non-utilitarian advocators argued that providing a solid theoretical foundation is essential.

Bayo (1993) focused attention on the necessity of developing effective methods for designing and teaching intercultural communication courses. They stressed that the majority of intercultural communication courses were theoretically oriented and devoted little time to skills development through actual intercultural interaction. These concerns have been supported and reinforced by Ady and Yu (1991) who felt that some specific information about certain specific cultures was presented without the benefit of a conceptual framework. Klopf (1991) noted that intercultural communication is "out-of-context" learning. He emphasized that learning cannot be fulfilled by only listening to lectures, reading textbooks, and doing classroom role play which, although valuable, are performed without actually interacting with people from other cultures.

In contrast to the "action-oriented" utilitarian approach, Kim (1980, 1984) argues that intercultural communication course design seems to lean heavily toward conveying "action-

oriented" practical knowledge. He reports that, influenced by the "utilitarian" educational philosophy, the study of the intercultural communication has tended to adopt a "problem-solving" approach. Without devaluing the importance of this approach, Kim further argues that acquiring the "know-how" of intercultural communication without paying attention to the underlying rationale that backs up the problem-solving approach only works for "quick solutions". If the long term aim is to solve problems but also to eventually internalize knowledge, a problem solving approach will not in itself suffice. Learning only the do's and don'ts is likely to overgeneralize culture and devalue the importance of the aspect that one is dealing with individual within a particular culture. Kim believes that more emphasis should be on teaching knowledge whose content is focused on a higher level of abstraction and cognitive training, that is, at a deeper level and with greater thoroughness. He claims that learning "non-utilitarian" knowledge will eventually prove to be more useful. Kim concludes by arguing that providing a solid base for the growth and development of intercultural communication as an academic discipline will lead to better practice in the area of intercultural communication.

The importance of theoretical and conceptual development cannot be denied. Yet without putting theory into practice, an approach centering only on problem solving cannot be considered complete and well-rounded. Theory-based teaching may lack practicality. After completing a theory-based teaching curriculum, individuals come away with a full range of knowledge but still cannot function properly in a particular cultural environment. And yet, knowing "how to act" without a rationale to back up that action, an individual may only know how people will behave in that particular culture without knowing why people in that culture behave that way. It is not until an individual can fully internalize the theory and make it a part of the knowledge base that the learning cycle can be considered complete and that person can then claim to have reached intercultural communication competence. Just having culture knowledge does not necessarily lead to effective communication; thus, learning to interact and cope with individuals from other cultures is essential. Intercultural communication courses should be seen as a "start-up" process of (a) bringing out the participants' conscious awareness toward the different cultures and (b) developing, through conscious effort, intercultural communication skills. In a continuing developmental process, individuals will eventually reach the stage of "unconscious competence" (Howell, 1982) where they are able to use the skills to the extent that they no longer need to think about how to use these skills.

Descriptions of Teaching Module

After examining the two contrasting - "utilitarian' or "non-utilitarian" - approaches to teaching intercultural communication, the paper describes an intercultural communication module developed at City University of Hong Kong which demonstrates the possibility of integrating the utilitarian and non-utilitarian approaches. Though the use of these approaches is difficult and time-consuming to develop, the pay-off is long-lasting learning and better intercultural communication.

Course Descriptions

The teaching module consisted of four interrelated components: self-awareness, cultural knowledge, intercultural communication skills, and selected specialized areas. The underlying assumption of the teaching approach was that participants first need to develop self-awareness (of their own personalities and values) and cultural knowledge (of their native culture and foreign cultures). This self-awareness and cultural knowledge provided the prerequisite background for them to develop intercultural skills. Exhibit 1 on the next page provides an overview of the four interrelated themes which composed the teaching module.

A diagnostic survey (Casse, 1981, 1982) was administered to determine participants' cultural awareness in interacting in a multinational environment. After administering the survey, participants were introduced to the module and specific topics were also developed within the general framework. Themes 1 and 2 focused on providing the theoretical foundations for understanding inter-cultural communication, and themes 3 and 4 stressed application and skills development.

Theme 1 went from cultural-general topics which compared all cultures to more cultural-specific topics; that is, comparison of Chinese culture (also other Oriental cultures) with non-Chinese cultures. The emphasis was on the comparison with the Western cultures, with particular attention paid to American culture. The objectives of Theme 1 were to help participants (a) understand how culture affects peoples' behaviors such as beliefs, values and attitudes, (b) increase awareness of their own cultural identity and their sensitivity to cultural differences, and (c) increase understanding of the impact of culture on communication styles. Cultural

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general topics included in the discussions were: (a) universal cultural dimensions (Kluckhohn, 1965; Kluckhohn & Strodbeck, 1960), (b) country cluster-based on employee attitude (Ronen & Shenkar, 1985), (c) Hofstede's four dimensions (Hofstede, 1991), (d) virtue versus truth (Hofstede, 1991; Hofstede & Bond, 1988), (e) situational versus individual-centered orientations (Hsu, 1981), and (f) high-context and low-context cultures (Hall, 1976).

Theme 2 focused on the individual participants in the training program; it aimed at providing self-awareness for the participants, especially how Asian culture, Chinese culture in particularly, influences their behaviors. Questionnaires such as Management Problem Solving (Keirsey & Bates, 1978; Agor, 1984), Skills for Multinational Managers (Casse, 1981), and Locus of Control (Rotter, 1966, quoted in Robbins, 1993, p. 126) were adapted and discussed among the participants. The discussions were focused on the differences between the Western norms and participants' individual scores and group scores.

Theme 3 stressed skill building. It aimed at preparing participants to learn how to cope in a cross-cultural setting. Theme 3, composed of three major components, ran through the entire program. Intercultural Communication Incidents (Ferraro, 1990; Adler, 1991) were used as a vehicle for pointing out specific cultural differences. Communication Exercises were used to focus on skill development; that is, how to communicate with individuals of other cultures. Personal Intercultural Experiences, the third component, provided experiences to the participants.

Because of the easy access to the expatriates and foreign tourists in Hong Kong, the participants were asked to contact and to interview Westerners throughout the program. After each interview, participants wrote interview descriptions and analyzed the rationales for the success or difficulty of cross-cultural communication. Through the direct intercultural encounters, the participants were able to compare experiences, gain skill and confidence in intercultural communication, and relate their personal experience to the theory base.

Theme 4 (special topics) of this teaching module concentrated on areas of specialized intercultural communication. This part of the program was tailored to the needs and background of the trainees. In the fall 1993 program, the participants were especially interested in international negotiation strategies so an extended unit was developed in this area. Participants completed an 80-question self-assessment exercise (Casse, 1985). Four negotiation style profiles were categorized: intuitive, normative, analytical, and factual styles. Individuals who were in the same negotiation style were grouped and discussed their negotiation styles as compared to the descriptions made by the training experts. The participants were reminded that no style is absolutely good or bad, effective or ineffective since it depends on the situation they are in and on the individual counterparts. A critical factor in cross-cultural negotiation is to know what styles the individuals feel more comfortable with and to learn how to identify the styles of negotiating counterparts. The more the participants are able to use various styles, the more efficient and effective the participants will become in international negotiation.

Based on the theoretical framework, this teaching module involved lectures, readings, group discussions of cross-cultural incidents, and interpersonal skill training. Exhibit 2 on the next two pages illustrates the contents of the modules developed for teaching a US and a Hong Kong audience. Discussion is divided into two parts: background information of the participants and

descriptions of the course materials which consist of theoretical foundation and application of the concepts.

Background Information of the Participants

The cross-cultural communication course offered in the United States was an MBA second year one-semester course. The enrollment was 15 to 25 individuals each semester. The composition of participants represented heterogeneous groups, including Caucasian Americans, Indonesians, Japanese, South Koreans, Singaporians, and Taiwanese Chinese. Compared to the US audience, participants in Hong Kong were homogeneous. All of Hong Kong participants majored in Business, Economics, and Finance and came from the same Chinese cultural background.

Descriptions of the Course Materials

A: Theoretical Foundation

The focus of the theoretical foundation for the US participants was on the history of China in general and geography and economic developments of Peoples' Republic of China (PRC), the four little dragons (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan), and other Southeast Asian countries according to participants nationalities and interests. For culture, the major emphasis was on the Chinese three schools of thought; namely, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, and how these three schools of thought have shaped the Chinese culture and contributed to the economic success of East Asian, especially the four little dragons. A comparison between Chinese and US cultures was also made.

In Hong Kong, assuming that participants had acquired geographical knowledge of their own and neighboring countries, the major focus was on how the three schools of thought shape Chinese culture and make Hong Kong culture different from the US and other Chinese-related countries. The discussion also was extended to the attribution of the economic success.

In addition to the cultural-specific topics, cultural-general topics were also included. The topics were: universal cultural dimensions, country culture clusters, Hofstede's (1991) five dimensions including virtue versus truth, Hsu's (1981) situational centered versus individual centered orientations, and Hall's (1976) high and low-context cultures.

Exhibit 2: Descriptions of Cross-cultural Communication Module for US and Hong Kong Audience

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Exhibit 2: Descriptions of Cross-cultural Communication Module (continued)

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To enrich participants' theoretical background, Hong Kong participants were required to submit five summaries and commentaries of articles or book chapters of their choice. For each selection individuals were asked to (a) summarize the major concepts of the article chapter and (b) explain how these concepts helped them better understand intercultural communication.

B: Applications

The objective of the application activities was to facilitate meaningful and valuable application of concepts and theories outlined in the lectures. The major differences in the section on application between US and Hong Kong modules were that in the United States, the courses included personal intercultural experience, guest speakers, a simulation, and Harvard Business School cases, whereas in Hong Kong, the focus was on personal intercultural experiences.

Personal Intercultural Experience: Hong Kong. The application section of the cross-cultural communication course for the Hong Kong audience was the focus on personal intercultural experiences. Due to the easy access to the foreign expatriates and foreign tourists in Hong Kong, participants were required to interview foreign travelers or business people and write interview descriptions. Based on the interviews, the participants analyzed and explained the difficulty of intercultural encounters and then connected the experience to the theory they had learned from the lectures. Throughout the 15-week program, participants were chosen to present and share their incidents with peers. By carefully debriefing the intercultural experiences, the Chinese individuals were able to gain experience and confidence in dealing with people from different cultural backgrounds. Most importantly, the participants were able to relate their personal experience to the theory base.

Personal Intercultural Experience: The United States. One feature of the application for the module taught in the United States (Culture and International Business; International Comparative Strategic Management) focused on the experiential approach of intercultural communication. The author, an Overseas Executive Project Coordinator, was responsible for executive training programs from Asian Pacific nations. In Spring 1992, there were 28 managers from the PRC who came to California for four weeks of management training. MBA students developed and carried out orientation programs for these 28 Mainland executives. The MBA individuals arranged for seven orientation programs to host sub-groups of these China-based managers. The main task was to orient these Chinese managers about American culture and business customs, and to provide some environmental sensing. These activities were considered valuable for both the Americans and the Chinese. For the Chinese managers, the benefits included receiving direct exposure to the American culture and American way of doing business and its working environment. For the American MBA students, the learning centered on putting theory into practice and allowing them to "try out" their intercultural communication skills. The orientation emphasized company tours and seminars. The visited companies included Franklin Investment Fund, AT&T, a paper company, a hi-tech company, etc. The orientation programs were slightly different between the different groups. In general, the orientation program consisted of activities such as company tours, environmental sensing, dining, and so forth.

Guest Speakers. In contrast to the program offered in Hong Kong, being on the West Coast, the author was able to invite guest speakers from the business community to come and share their hands-on business experiences in dealing with counterparts from Asian countries. The guest speakers usually included: retired CEO of International Banking, consultants of Clarke Consulting Group, CEO of Energio, government officials of the Government Commerce Department from the PRC and Taiwan, Republic of China (ROC), and business practitioners doing businesses in Hong Kong, the PRC, Japan and Singapore. To allow participants to fully benefit from the talks, participants submitted questions beforehand. This practice allowed the guest speakers to direct their remarks directly to audience interests. Participants were also required to turn in summary reports and critiques of the presentations.

Harvard Business School Case Studies. Selected Harvard Business School cases also were chosen according to the participants' cultural backgrounds and their interests. Cases chosen for presentations and discussions included: Singapore Airlines, KFC in Japan, Nike in China series, Daewoo, etc. For each case, one participant was assigned to make an oral presentation and provide detailed analysis. The focus of this assignment was to stress the impacts of culture on operating joint-venture and multinational corporations. The rest of the participants were required to read, analyze the case, and answer the instructor-designed questions.

Cultural Incidents. A dozen cultural miscommunication incidents were chosen to illustrate each aspect of the theoretical framework. After each lecture, participants were grouped to discuss the relevant incident, analyze the reasons for miscommunication, and propose the method to counter the miscommunication. In the US, discussions were lively. Individuals from the different cultural backgrounds were able to perceive the problems from varying perspectives of their own culture and share these perspectives with peers. However, in Hong Kong, the participants came from a very homogeneous society. In the role of instructor, the author would share insights and opinions from a Western perspective based on 15 years in the United States.

Simulation. In the United States context, Bafa Bafa, a classic simulation of cross-cultural experience, was adopted. Participants were divided into two strikingly different cultural groups and simulated cross-cultural encounters. This exercise allowed participants to apply their cognitive knowledge to the behavior skills.

A group of 15 MBA graduates were teamed up with 30 Executive MBAs. The MBA group consisted of different cultural backgrounds such as individuals from the United States, Hong Kong, Singapore, Saudi- Arabia, Japan, and so forth. These individuals had different exposures to intercultural communication. The executive MBA group was composed of 30 American individuals with five-to-ten years of managerial experience. Individuals were divided into two different cultural groups --Alpha or Beta. Both Alphans and Betans received different orientations on the social rules and the "Alphan or Betan language". Only specified Alphan or Betan language was allowed when members of the two cultural groups came together to interact.

At the beginning of the simulation, the “environmental sensing stage”, individuals encounter a completely strange environment -- not knowing their counterpart's culture and language. Each group was challenged to figure out the underlying values of the other culture. At the second stage, the "Adaptation Stage", the individual needed to "try out" their newly learned language,

social and cultural rules and gradually refine and adapt their behaviors to the environment they encountered. Individuals who violated the cultural codes lost the turn and were thrown out of the simulation.

The whole simulation went on for about two hours. The participants' task not only made efforts to "zero in" on the target culture, but also to negotiate with their counterparts for business deals by trading cards. The winning individuals would be the ones who still remained in the game at the end of the simulation and who held the most trading cards. Throughout the simulation, individuals tried not only to communicate effectively but also to negotiate with counterparts by persuading and negotiating for wanted trading cards. The value of this simulation was in demonstrating (a) how easily people get entrenched within their own interpretive and behavioral framework, (b) the possibility of violating a target culture even though the individuals were very carefully observing the culture, and (c) the danger of generalizing the rules and regulations of each particular culture.

Term Project. In Hong Kong in addition to six 2-page personal intercultural experiences, participants were required to turn in a term project. The purpose of this assignment was to allow participants to apply the theories they had learned throughout the 15-week program and systematically analyze the aspects they would like to focus on. For the term project, participants interviewed two foreign expatriates residing in Hong Kong: one just newly arrived, and another who had lived in Hong Kong for more than a year. The interviews were recorded. The major focus of the interviews were: (a) interviewee's perceptions of Asians in general (if applicable) and Hong Kong in particular, and (b) their problems communicating with non-English speakers due to linguistic and cultural differences. The interviewees were from a wide range of walks of life such as educators, film makers, disc jockeys, bankers, and individuals employed by well-established international CPA firms.

For the American course, the participants chose a wide variety of topics for their term projects. The term project topics included: Misunderstood myths: Japan and America; The GAP in Taiwan; Asia a' la Mode: The opportunity in Asian real estate and how to get it; and Doing business with Japanese and Chinese.

Major Learning and Implications

The participants expanded their cultural horizons in a number of areas as they:

1. Gained an understanding of their cultural heritage and its impact on their behavior. This understanding was facilitated by comparing their cultural heritage, their own individual behavior styles, with other world cultures.
2. Learned that their beginning impressions and stereotypes of people from other cultures were incomplete; and that Westerners or Easterners are much more complex and varied than the participants had initially believed. The beginning impressions were based on simplified stereotypes derived from mass media and were modified because of direct exposure to different

individuals from other cultures. The perceptual model of Westerners or Easterners was enlarged through guided interaction and reflection.

3. Developed skills and increased confidence to more effectively communicate with foreigners. Especially important was the learned ability to recognize high-and low-context communication and the skill to choose the appropriate style of communication.

Guidelines for Generalizing the Cross-Cultural (Business) Communication Model

This instructional model can be utilized as a framework for intercultural training. The underlying philosophy should be to:

1. Teach individuals "to learn how to learn is the answer." The main objective of any cross-cultural training module is to help people "to learn how to learn", in other words, to learn how to adjust to different situations, environments and settings.
2. Develop an integrated approach which includes not only cognitive training but also field experiential development. At the theoretical foundation of cross-cultural communication training provides learners with the basis for knowing what to do and field experiential development allows learners to develop the skills to know how to do it. A successful cross-cultural training program should take into consideration the need for interactive involvement.
3. Observe, adapt, but be yourself. When in Rome, do as Romans do. When emerging in the foreign environment, observe how people behave, and “try out” your observation. Be flexible and ready to adapt or adjust your behavior; but do not over do your adjustment. Make efforts to learn the target culture and act accordingly. Be yourself and show sincerity. People tend to be more tolerant in accepting the cultural blunders that expatriates or sojourners make.
4. Recognize differences. Being different should not always be seen as negative. “Synergy is a process, and it is like the California Sushi Roll.” (Clarke, 1990, p. 47). The sushi roll contains pink Japanese crab and green American avocado wrapped together with white rice in the black Japanese nori skin. It is a gorgeous piece of comparative culture . . . you experience an incredibly weird new taste and it is delicious. That is synergy (p. 47). Cultural synergy can be beneficial if both parties can maximize each other’s strengths and learn to integrate and appreciate the best of two distinctive cultures.
5. Respect your counterparts. Ethnocentrism reflects a view that one culture is better or superior to the other. With the advanced technology and long history of management development, Westerners are inclined to think that the Western way is the best for all. When dealing with individuals from societies where face-work is considered a critical factor to strengthen relationships, respecting your counterparts will result in face-saving, and thus in the good regard of others, especially in Asian societies.

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