The need for effective multicultural communication is becoming more prevalent in the world as countries do more business globally and borders disappear. To be effective in multicultural communication we must anticipate audience expectations, which can be known only through the study of the culture. While establishing relationships with people is the most effective way to accomplish this task, people often do not have this opportunity. When communicating with someone from a different culture, we must know some basic concepts.

INTRODUCTION

Most, if not all, of us have heard of problems that occurred when slogans for products were not effectively translated in international advertising promotions. On the website www.grammarlady.com, Mary N. Bruder mentions several translations gone bad. For example, when Chevrolet tried to sell the Nova to Spanish-speaking countries, it never sold well because in Spanish, “No va” translates into “It does not go.” Also, when Pepsi started marketing products in China, the slogan, “Pepsi Brings You Back to Life” was translated pretty literally. The slogan in Chinese really meant, “Pepsi Brings Your Ancestors Back from the Grave” (1).

Americans found that in Africa, since most people cannot read, companies routinely put pictures of what is actually inside the container on food labels. When Gerber first started selling baby food in Africa, it used the same packaging as here in the U.S.A.—with the cute baby on the label (2). Africans were mortified, and the baby food did not sell well.

In his textbook Technical Communication, Mike Markel speaks of the importance of learning about other cultures. He tells of an advertising promotion for deodorant where an octopus is shown applying the deodorant under all of its arms. This campaign didn’t work in Japan because in Japan the octopus has legs, not arms (107).

Naomi Klein, columnist for the Toronto Star, tells that when Warner Brothers began playing Looney Tunes in China, the name Bugs Bunny was translated as “Big Brother Rabbit” (2). In another incident, Ford’s new model, the Fiera, was not well received in South America, where the name Fiera means “ugly old woman” (2).

These mistakes and others have brought to our attention the need to better assess how our audiences are going to interpret our messages. Audience awareness is definitely not a new topic in technical communication; however, it seems that when communicating with other cultures, this most basic standard of excellence in technical communication if often forgotten.

In the business world, people communicate across cultures in meetings, by email, or if relocation takes place. The business world is not the only place where cross-cultural communication occurs, however. As classrooms across America are embracing more and more students from around the globe, children and teachers must be educated in cultural sensitivity.

STUDYING OTHER CULTURES

In observing other cultures, the differences are striking: the way business cards are exchanged, the way people greet each other, dress, negotiate and resolve conflict, and even the way visual information is seen and perceived. Other differences are topics of conversation and business customs that have been deemed appropriate. “When North Americans look at the moon, they traditionally see a face in the dark spots—the man in the moon. When people in India and parts of China look at the moon, they traditionally see a rabbit; Australians see a cat; Fiji Islanders see a rat” (qtd. in Andrews 100). Also, nonverbal communication is different: the distance between us and another person when speaking, hand and facial gestures, and how long eye contact is maintained with another person—or if it is.

In his article in Journal of Business and Technical Communication, Barry Thatcher claims that while more empirical and ethnographic research must be done, we face the danger of “oversimplifying people, organizations, and cultures” (461). Most intercultural communication research is based on “US assumptions of organizational relationships”; therefore, it is not truly valid research (462). He urges that to obtain more valid and ethical cross-cultural comparisons, the focus should first be on similarities between cultures, and then on the differences within those cultures (464). But the question remains: “How can intercultural researchers construct researcher-participant relationships that are sensitive to the values of organizational relationships?” (462).

The academic and business worlds alike must commit to spending the time and working to develop relationships between researchers and participants that will result in careful, effective cross-cultural collaboration and understanding. “The amount of work that is needed
In researching other cultures, it is difficult to avoid our own ethnocentrism and stereotypes. Effective, appropriate relationships between people could resolve some of these mindsets.

**OVERCOMING ETHNOCENTRISM**

According to Jaime S. Wurzel in *Toward a Multiculturalism*, culture creates a person’s reality, the way meaning is given to interactions. “A child’s parents, environment, religion, and social traditions are all given. These affiliations, which the child takes for granted, define identity. . . . Ethnocentrism is inevitable since it is rooted in the impossibility of escaping from one’s experience” (6).

Ethnocentrism can lead to a false sense of superiority. We must learn to combat this false belief and adopt the truth that just because people see things differently, they are not inferior.

Students and business people need to realize that just because a person cannot speak fluent English, he/she is not less intelligent or less worthy of education or a position than they are. In his book *Bridging Differences*, William Gudykunst claims that people must get away from the idea that “we” are right and “they” are wrong. This mindset “exists when groups or individuals look out for their own interests and have little concern for others’ interests” (5). This lack of concern “leads to moral exclusion,” which “. . . occurs when individuals or groups are perceived as outside the boundary in which moral values, rules, and considerations of fairness apply. Those who are morally excluded are perceived as nonentities, expendable, or undeserving; consequently, harming them appears acceptable, appropriate or just” (5). Prejudices and hate crimes could be alleviated if people would attempt to understand others whom they perceive as being different.

Using textbooks to study multiculturalism in an attempt to resist ethnocentric attitudes and multicultural apathy might not be very effective. DeVoss, Jasken, and Hayden suggest that the problem with textbooks is that they assume the readers are primarily from the United States, and the way the textbooks are written insinuates that multicultural differences are “problems to be dealt with,” and they “do not effectively explain the importance of contexts in communication situations” (71).

**COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY**

Many employees and students do not have the opportunity to develop relationships with people from other cultures before they are required to communicate with them. However, simply assuming messages from an American will be understood is insensitive, and it violates the standard of excellence in assessing our audience.

Even if we do not have the opportunity to study other cultures in depth, some of the most important concepts to know are the differences between high- and low-context cultures, collectivism and individualism, reserved and expressive cultures, what topics are appropriate for discussion, and how hand or facial gestures might be interpreted.

**Individualism or Collectivism**

As Gudykunst explains, whether a culture practices individualism or collectivism is “the major dimension of cultural variability used to explain cross-cultural differences in behavior” (45). Where individualism is practiced, individuals are seen as “separate individuals with responsibility for [their] own destinations and [their] own actions” (Chaney and Martin 54). Individuals are supposed to look out for themselves and just their immediate family (Gudykunst 46).

For the collective community, the group is most important. These cultures take on the “we” identity rather than the “I” identity (Gudykunst 46). This culture focuses on “common interests, conformity, cooperation, and interdependence” (Chaney and Martin 54). In an individualistic culture, a father might tell his child, “You must learn to think for yourself,” but in a collectivistic culture, the father would tell the child, “You must do what is best for the family” (Chaney and Martin 54).

Teachers need to be aware of collectivism and individualism in cultures. Students from a collectivistic culture would not think it inappropriate to share answers or collaborate when finding answers. In their culture, this would not be considered cheating; the students might be simply helping their peers. Students from these cultures also tend to have a more difficult time learning how to use documentation in research papers; most of my international students from individualistic cultures have not been taught that it is appropriate to cite an outside source.

**High Context or Low Context**

In many countries, business is discussed in a social atmosphere. People in this high-context culture focus on relationships first and on closing deals after those relationships are established. This might be frustrating to the task-oriented American who does not realize that it might take several meetings before the client is ready to talk about a project. The American might think the client is uninterested, which is not necessarily the case.
In a high-context culture, people are concerned with establishing a context for the communication. They rely more on nonverbal cues than verbal. Bovée and Thill mention South Korea, Taiwan, and China as high-context cultures: “The Chinese speaker is likely to expect the receiver to discover the meaning in a message that uses indirectness and metaphor” (69). This could be impossible for the person who did not grow up in the Chinese culture or who has not studied it. “A series of exchanges appearing to say one thing on the surface might say quite another thing just beneath it” (69).

In a low-context culture, expectations are usually made known with explicit instructions. For example, “Please wait until I’m finished,” or “You’re welcome to browse.” This way the receiver of the message knows what is expected and can respond appropriately. The United States and Germany are low-context cultures.

Reserved or Expressive

Many cultures are quiet and reserved. People from these cultures do not make lots of noise in public, nor do they use many hand gestures when speaking. Others wave their arms. Students who seem apathetic in a classroom may not be apathetic but may have been taught to sit still and not to speak in such a formal setting as the classroom. On the other hand, students in some parts of the United States have even been taught that it is acceptable to challenge the teacher’s opinions during classes, which is a huge contrast.

Author Richard Gesteland tells of holding interviews with Thai men and women in an attempt to set up a business office in Thailand for a U.S. company. He observed that the interviews with the men were going fine, but the women were not responding to him well at all. He asked for help from the human resources consultant, who “began talking around the issue politely.” The advisor let Gesteland know that he was talking too loudly, using too many animated facial expressions and hand gestures. Thai women would interpret a loud voice as anger, and too many facial or hand gestures might be a signal that someone wasn’t quite right in the head (63–64).

Likewise, trying to negotiate in a quiet, calm way with people from Egypt, might lead them to the conclusion that what is being said is really not important. Because they come from a very expressive culture, they will respond better to a louder tone, more inflection, and more expressive gestures (Gesteland 66).

Topics of Discussion

In the United States, small talk most often includes topics about the weather, sports, or physical surroundings. People from the United States have been taught to “avoid discussing . . . religion and politics even in family situations because they are too controversial” (Chaney and Martin 90). These topics of conversation are perfectly fine for people in other cultures. In Germany and Iran, it would be acceptable to discuss or even argue about political issues. People from a Spanish-speaking country would not be offended if asked about their health or the health of those in their families. However, people from Saudi Arabia would consider it rude to ask personal questions about families during an initial meeting (Chaney and Martin 90).

Nonverbal Language

It is very important to study nonverbal language before speaking with people from a different culture. More expressive cultures tend to have more direct, intense eye contact than reserved cultures. Even to walk side by side talking and walking at the same time would be “impersonal and cold” (Gesteland 73). In East and Southwest Asia, however, people feel uncomfortable with too much eye contact (74). Gesteland explains, “Latinos seem to wear their hearts on their sleeves. They trust people who show their feelings openly and distrust those who mask their emotions. In contrast, the taciturn Japanese and Germans may regard such displays as childish and immature” (75). People in North America maintain moderate eye contact; however, most North Americans would not be comfortable with a person who would not look them in the eye. They would see this as a sign of dishonesty.

In addition, raised eyebrows communicate different messages. To North Americans, it signals interest or surprise; the British are showing skepticism with the raised eyebrow; the Germans are acknowledging a clever comment; and it is a greeting with the Filipinos. While these responses would be harmless, it is important to note that this same gesture of raised eyebrows means “No!” to an Arab, and it signals disagreement with the Chinese (Gesteland 75).

CONCLUSION

Because we are becoming a more globalized world and our borders continue to disappear as companies merge with overseas companies, marketing promotion slogans are translated into many languages, and new technology becomes more prevalent. Student exchange programs are becoming increasingly popular, and most students from our primary schools to our universities will eventually sit next to someone in a class who is from another culture. If people travel to another country or even have written correspondence with people from other cultures, audience preferences must be accommodated. Communicating effectively with people from other cultures is not simply a problem to be overcome, and it should not be perceived as such. It will take effort to learn the most appropriate ways to communicate, but it is a standard that must be achieved.
REFERENCES


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Cross-cultural communication refers to interpersonal communication and interaction across different cultures. This has become an important issue in our age of globalization and internationalization. Effective cross-cultural communication is concerned with overcoming cultural differences across nationality, religion, borders, culture and behavior. Understanding, embracing and addressing cross-cultural differences leads to the breaking of cultural barriers, which results in better lines of communication, mutual trust and creative thinking. Following these five cross-cultural communication needs will allow us to improve lines of communication and better cross-cultural awareness and successful cross-cultural relationships.