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Developing Cross-Cultural Awareness in Intercultural Communication Classes Through an Analysis of Cultural Bumps

Introduction

Intercultural communication[1] classes are very popular among new immigrants, especially among those who wish to acquire conversational skills in English as a second language. These classes are generally offered to a wide range of populations, including new immigrants, spouses of immigrant workers, foreign students, businessmen, and so on. Multinational corporations such as Intel, IBM, Cisco, and Oracle are also known to offer short in-house intercultural communication classes for their newly recruited foreign workers. The overall goals of intercultural communication classes, generally speaking, are threefold: one, to enable nonnative speakers to improve their ability to communicate in English; two, to help them gain confidence in their communication skills in English; and three, to teach them to avoid generating unpleasant and uncomfortable speech events when in communication with native speakers. While the objectives of the first two goals are related to the general pedagogy of communication classes, the third goal is related to the teaching and the learners' understanding of how different cultures work since the sources of trouble spots in intercultural communication are generally due to cultural differences, and more important, the interlocutors' lack of knowledge of these differences. While research as early as Lado (1957) recognizes that cultural knowledge plays a significant role in efficient, effective, and anxiety- and trouble-free communication, there has been little research to date to understand what kind of expectations can lead to what kind of problems in intercultural communication.

Nonnative anxiety when communicating with native speakers can be due to a variety of factors. Often, the anxiety is due to the nonnative speakers' concern that they need to be understood, or if not understood, at least not misunderstood since misunderstanding can lead to an unpleasant relationship. One main reason why native speakers may misunderstand nonnative speakers is because nonnative speakers, in their eagerness to exhibit their solidarity, may unwittingly initiate conversations on certain topics that are perfectly

acceptable in similar speech settings in their own cultures. In the target language culture, however, they are not. In addition to being unacceptable, these topics can be interpreted by native speakers as being rude, and sometimes even lead to rejection of the individuals who initiate the topic. The nonnative speakers, on the other hand, in such situations may not even be aware that they have hurt the feelings of native speakers by violating the sanctity of certain culture-based conversational rules and so feel rebuked for no reason. The conversational topics that are acceptable in one culture but are not acceptable in another culture are called cultural bumps. It is truly disheartening to note that there is a lack of research on cultural bumps, though they happen to be one of the major sources of breakdowns in nonnative-native communication. This paper is an attempt to fill in the gap in the literature.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section, while reviewing how culture influences communication, attempts to set out what the curricular priorities of different levels of intercultural communication classes must be, so that it will be easy to identify which level the learner must have achieved to take part in intellectual discussion on cultural bumps in his or her intercultural communication classes. The second section contains a description and findings of a pilot study that attempted to identify cultural bumps in three ethnic groups—mainstream Americans, Vietnamese immigrants, and Hispanic immigrants—by studying how these groups perceive the acceptability of certain topics in conversations in semiformal work-related settings along a 5-point semantic differential scale of *taboo, rude, impolite, inappropriate,* and *acceptable.* The third section of the paper contains two parts: a short list of limitations of this study and a conclusion.

Part I: Culture, Communication, Cultural Bumps, and Intercultural Communication Classes

Human beings can be said to derive a sense of belonging by being a part of a cultural group. Communication among members of a cultural group is generally made without any conscious effort and is usually trouble-free since they all communicate in specific ways using the shared conventions.

Every cultural group, needless to say, has speech conventions based on values and beliefs on which its social systems are built. For example, in a strictly hierarchical society such as those found in Japan or Vietnam, there are conventions governing when children and women should speak, when they should not speak, what subjects they can speak of, how they should address male and female elders, and so on. Even in mainstream American culture, a culture that believes in equality and freedom of speech and that minimizes gender differences in communication, gender-oriented etiquette and politeness still dictate what the male members may say to female members and vice versa. Hence, it is not an exaggeration to claim that human beings are culturally bound in every aspect of their communication and that the way they participate in a conversation is based on conventions generally inherited from previous generations.

When human beings emigrate to a different culture, and when there are significant cultural differences between their native culture and the new culture, communication difficulties arise. These difficulties arise because new immigrants have little or no awareness of the culture-based conventions governing the communication system in the other language. What is particularly troubling is that in such cross-cultural encounters, speakers do not realize that communication difficulties are due to their thinking that communication can be effected only in one way: the way they experienced it in their native culture. Unless informed and educated, they do not realize that cultures can be totally different in many different ways and that conventions governing communication vary from culture to culture.

When communication with other cultural groups does not always go the way it is intended, a new immigrant to a foreign country experiences what is called "culture shock." At times of culture shock, many new immigrants feel that they cannot express themselves in their second language as well as they can in their native language for two reasons: one, lack of adequate language skills; and two, lack of knowledge of conventions governing the communication process in the other language. As a result, new immigrants start experiencing frustration and start losing their self-confidence. While the lack of language skills can be overcome by individual learning, the lack of knowledge of culture-based conventions governing the communication process in the other language cannot be overcome unless new immigrants start the process of understanding how communication in the other culture works. Such an understanding of cultural conventions can come only through what Dodd (1987) calls "relationship development."

The process of relationship development, generally, starts with one's learning about how other cultures work and how the rules governing the conversations in the target language are also culture-bound. Upon learning about the new culture and its traditions, the new immigrant may prefer either to acculturate or assimilate depending on what kind of member he or she prefers to be in the target language culture. Though both acculturation and assimilation require acceptance and integration on the part of the immigrant, there is a great deal of difference between the two. According to Schuman (1978), in the acculturation process, the new immigrants retain their home culture but at the same time choose to become effective members of the target language group. The intention is to become bilingual and bicultural. On the other hand, in the assimilation process, the new immigrants choose to become effective members of the target language group at the expense of their own language and culture. The intention is to become monocultural by adopting and celebrating the new culture. With both acculturation and assimilation come awareness, recognition, acceptance, and internalized knowledge that cultures are different and that conventions governing the communication process can significantly differ from one culture to the other depending on the differences in the new and old cultures' values and beliefs. Once this knowledge has been internalized, the new immigrants are able to function in the new culture appropriately and effectively since they too can correctly

interpret and predict the unstated assumptions and conventions in their conversations with the target language speakers. Predictability leads to a regaining of their confidence. The whole process of relationship development can be captured in four levels of experience:

Table 1
Second Language Learners' Experience of New Culture and the Process of Relationship Development at Different Levels of Cross-Cultural Awareness

Level	Learning process	Learner's experience in communication	Learner's interpretation of the speech event
I	Initial awareness of different cultural traits and conversational rules (e.g., the Asian student's first exposure to the North American classroom culture, such as the university professors being called by their first names even in formal academic settings)	Very little interaction with the target language group because of anxiety, fear, and limited language skills	Stereotyping the target language culture—mostly negative or in disbelief that such culturally bound conventions exist
II	Repetitive experiences leading to awareness of major communication conventions and that one's sociolinguistic competence is much more important than linguistic competence in conversations with the speakers of the target language	Frequent interactions with the members of the target language group and starting to experience culture shock and culture conflict situations	Frustrating, irrational, and unbelievable—the learner wonders whether he or she can survive the new culture and the (linguistic, sociolinguistic, and cultural) demands of the new language
III	Starts intellectually analyzing how the other culture works, including the conventions governing the conversations in the target language	Starts educating himself or herself—starts appreciating the target language culture, and learning and using its conversational rules, especially the significant cultural traits that contrast markedly with his or her own	Cognitively believable, but only as long as the learning of cultural differences and adopting of conversational conventions bring in positive communicative experiences
IV	Becoming aware of how another culture feels and works from the standpoint of an insider	Cultural immersion (integration) leading to internalization of cultural traits	Psychologically acceptable because of subjective familiarity and positive communicative experiences

Note: *Adapted from R. G. Hanvey, 1979*

As can be seen from the above table, complete cross-cultural awareness does not come instantaneously to learners. Even education about another culture takes the learners only to Level III. Only at Level IV is the learner able to experience the other culture as if he or she were an insider, and this level is attainable only when the learner has internalized the new culture, adjusted well to it, and developed a positive relationship with the speakers of the target culture. At this level, they are in a position to appreciate both cultures, their home culture as well as their adopted culture, and are also at ease while communicating with the speakers of either culture.

It is important then that the goal of any intercultural communication class be to take the learners to the next level of their cultural experience and ultimately to Level IV. Experience suggests that monocultural learners with very little knowledge of the target language are at Level I. Learners who prefer to hold onto their own (home) culture but have been subjected to frequent interactions with native speakers, though they still have limited oral proficiency in the target language, are generally at Level II. Learners who seem to have intermediate to low-advanced conversational skills and who are also in the process of becoming culturally competent in their second language are at Level III. Last, those learners who have advanced and fluent conversational proficiency and are also culturally competent enough in their second language to interact with native speakers are at Level IV.

If learners can be divided into four groups depending on their level of cultural awareness, then it is also possible to provide intercultural communication classes at four different levels. A pilot survey of learners enrolled in two community colleges in the San Jose area indicated that learners who enroll in intercultural communication classes generally fall into two categories: one, those who wish to acquire or improve their communication skills, mainly the ability to take part in conversations; and two, those who wish to successfully interact with native speakers without any cultural apprehension.

Class instructors' perceptions coupled with the background information collected through the pilot survey indicated that those learners whose goals are in line with the first category of learners are generally at the beginner level. The goals of the program intended for this population must be twofold: one, improving their language skills; and two, instilling in them the necessary confidence to take part in conversations with native speakers. The learners who fall into this category generally lack literacy skills in English.

Those whose goals are in line with the second category of learners are those learners who wish to successfully interact with native speakers without any cultural apprehension. They are mostly adults ages 25 to 45 and at the intermediate to advanced level in their English language skills. They are all English-literate in their respective countries and are generally confident of their conversational ability in English. Furthermore, according to the survey findings, they are usually well settled in the US, having lived here for more than six years. They don't intend to go back to their respective countries except on vacation. Most of them have steady jobs and work as communication engineers, software developers, financial analysts, realtors, auto

mechanics, plumbers, mortgage brokers, or in similar jobs. Financially, these learners are stable. With financial success, there seems to be a desire for social success and social recognition. As such, many of these learners also reported that apart from needing to talk to native speakers in their work-related situations, they also prefer to be associated with native speakers. Advanced-level intercultural communication classes are appropriate for this kind of population for the main reason that they have advanced oral language skills; as such, they should be able to use their target language to take part in discussions on cultural differences between their own culture and the target language culture.

Advanced-level intercultural communication classes that are geared toward a study of how speech conventions in the learner's culture and the mainstream American culture work will serve four purposes. First, learners learn that conversation conventions exist in every language and in every cultural group, making them understand that cultures are different and so are the conventions governing the conversations among the members of a cultural group. Second, such an understanding can prevent learners from stereotyping the mainstream American culture and can also lead to a greater understanding of why certain topics need to be avoided in nonnative-native communication. Third, it is possible that cross-cultural awareness can speed up the learners' acculturation or assimilation process. Last, with the understanding of how the target language culture works, the anxiety level of the learners in communicating in L2 may come down.

Part II: The Study

The concept of cultural bumps is not anything new to ESL literature. ESL literature, within the framework of social interactionist approaches to communicative competence in second language, claims that the execution of a good conversation depends on what one can say or cannot say, to whom, on what occasion, and with what degree of comfort (Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972). As such, depending on the formal or the informal nature of the speech setting and the nature of the relationship between the interlocutors, conversation topics can be divided into two kinds: conversation-facilitating topics and conversation-inhibiting topics. Conversation-facilitating topics make accommodations that strive toward speaker-listener convergence. Conversation-inhibiting topics, on the other hand, make the speaker and the listener diverge, sometimes without making the speakers realize that the intended topics are not culturally (and in this way, contextually) acceptable to the listeners. Cultural bumps, in short, are conversation-inhibiting topics.

Cultural bumps can be identified through an analysis of what is possible and what is not possible in a culture in terms of the culturally determined social and gender relations of the participants, the formality of the settings of the speech events, and the personal or impersonal nature of the topics. To find out which topics are appropriate and which are not, information on conversation-facilitating and conversation-inhibiting topics was collected from

25 native speakers of American English, 25 Vietnamese immigrants, and 25 Hispanic immigrants. All these informants were students in an MA TESOL program in a northern California state university. The data were collected over three years, from Fall 1997 to Fall 2000. The techniques used to elicit data included brainstorming, check-listing, setting up value differences among different topics, and taking part in role-playing activities.

Brainstorming

In Fall 1997, the students enrolled in a Curriculum and Assessment class were informed well in advance, in the first week of classes, that as part of a class project they would be required to brainstorm on topics that they thought would be appropriate or inappropriate as conversational topics among members of their respective cultural groups. They were asked to come to the class with a list of topics on the activity day, which was in the third week of the semester. They were also informed that they could consult with the elder members of their families in advance if they were not sure whether or not a topic was appropriate in a conversation among members of their cultural group. During the actual activity session in class, the informants were grouped by culture and then each cultural group was required to brainstorm on the lists prepared by the individual members and to prepare a common list for the group. The intention was to arrive at group unanimity in the preparation of the topics.

Checklists

Based on the list of topics prepared in Fall 1997 semester, a checklist containing both the appropriate and inappropriate topics (without identifying whether the topic was appropriate or inappropriate) was developed and the checklist was administered to students from each cultural group enrolled in the Curriculum and Assessment class over a period of six semesters. The informants were instructed that they needed to identify which of the topics in the list would be appropriate or inappropriate as conversational topics with a colleague of their own culture in a work-related speech setting in any of the following workplaces: an automobile workshop, an office cubicle in a high-tech company in Silicon Valley, or a cafeteria. The goal of administering the checklist was twofold: one, to make sure that the original list was indeed a valid list; and two, to identify whether the topics in the checklist could be applied to all the work settings. To achieve the second goal, the student-informants were asked to visualize that they were employed in the described work settings, either as an auto mechanic, a computer software engineer, or as a waiter, before check-marking the item as appropriate or inappropriate. The checklist was administered to 25 students in each of the native speaker, Vietnamese, and Hispanic groups. At the end of Stage 2, there was a list containing conversation-facilitating and conversation-inhibiting topics for each of the three cultural groups.

Role Plays

Once the acceptable topics for each of the cultural groups were identified through brainstorming and checklist-marking, 6 students from each cultural group were asked to initiate conversations on conversation-facilitating topics to see whether they agreed that these topics could indeed generate conversation continuity within their own cultural group. In this third stage of the data collection, each of the cultural groups, by simulating conversations, agreed that the conversation-facilitating topics identified in the checklists were acceptable as topics for conversations within their own cultural groups. Once the possible topics were identified, it was easy to identify the cultural bumps by deleting the topics that were deemed acceptable in all three lists. To assure that the identified cultural bumps could short-circuit a conversation between a native speaker and a nonnative speaker, students were paired to represent both groups. They then analyzed the list of cultural bumps to determine whether those topics negatively affected cross-cultural communication. For example, during this verification exercise, the nonnative speaker would ask the native speaker his or her age and the native speaker would have to come up with an answer based on his or her intuition.

Value Hierarchies

Once the cultural bumps had been identified, a survey format was developed with 27 topics, and the student informants who role-played to identify the cultural bumps were asked to rate the topics along a 5-point semantic differential scale of *taboo, rude, impolite, inappropriate,* and *acceptable.* Later, based on the feedback given by these informants, a value dimension of *acceptable among kith and kin* was added. (It was interesting to learn that it is common practice among the family members of Hispanic and Vietnamese immigrants to work at the same workplace; in fact, when one gets a job in some place, the person uses his or her influence to get a job for immediate family members). The final outcome of the survey is reported in Table 2.

Table 2 contains information on the topics' acceptability on a range of *rude* to *acceptable.* The conversational setting can be considered to be fairly semiformal and the communication can be said to take place between two fairly well-acquainted individuals in a work-related setting unless otherwise stated.

According to the table, for example, enquiring about one's age or salary is not acceptable in the mainstream American culture since such things are considered very personal, while such enquiries are quite common among Hispanic immigrants in their conversations. The difference, as Buckley (2000) points out, is due to the differences in the basic texture of these two cultures. The mainstream American culture is individualistic, private, and competitive, while the Hispanic culture is public, collectivist, and cooperative. For example, while enquiring about a colleague's failure to earn a promotion is not acceptable in the mainstream American culture, such enquiries are perfectly acceptable in the Hispanic culture. The same verbal inquiry will be considered impolite in the Vietnamese culture. The reason is that the mainstream

Table 2
Conversational Topics and Their Acceptability in Communication Among Mainstream Americans, Vietnamese Immigrants, and Hispanic Immigrants Along a Scale of *Taboo-Rude-Impolite-Inappropriate-Acceptable Among Kith and Kin-Acceptable*

	Topics	Mainstream American (English)	Vietnamese immigrants	Hispanic immigrants
1	Age	rude	rude	acceptable
2	Salary—income	rude	acceptable	acceptable
3	Religion	impolite	acceptable	acceptable
4	Marriage	impolite	acceptable	acceptable
5	Education	impolite	acceptable	acceptable
6	Wife and teenage children	impolite unless with a colleague sharing same cubicle or room	acceptable	acceptable
7	Explicit sex talk	acceptable among colleagues (of either sex) of same status	impolite	acceptable among men only
8	the nature of one's terminal illness	impolite but acceptable among very close colleagues	acceptable	acceptable
9	Criticizing somebody face to face	rude/impolite	rude/impolite	acceptable
10	New year—both wishes and discussion of religious gifts	acceptable—in fact, not talking about this is impolite and rude	acceptable	acceptable
11	Christmas shopping	acceptable—in fact, not talking about this is impolite and rude	acceptable	acceptable
12	Criticizing somebody's taste	rude/impolite	acceptable from superiors	acceptable
13	Obesity in people	rude/impolite	somewhat acceptable among very close colleagues	acceptable
14	Hierarchy at work	rude/impolite—unless the status difference is very wide	acceptable	acceptable
15	The taste of coffee or food at a colleague's home (negative comments)	rude/impolite	acceptable	impolite
16	American friend's daughter's relationship with someone you dislike	rude/impolite	acceptable	impolite but acceptable among very close colleagues

Topics	Mainstream American (English)	Vietnamese immigrants	Hispanic immigrants
17 Extramarital relationship of your friend (male)–discussants are all male	rude/impolite	acceptable	acceptable
18 Extramarital relationship of your friend (female)–discussants are all female	rude/impolite	acceptable	acceptable
19 To tell somebody (male) that he over-drinks	rude/impolite	acceptable	acceptable
20 To tell somebody (female) that she over-drinks	rude/impolite	impolite	impolite
21 Death as a topic	inappropriate	acceptable	acceptable
22 Body piercing	rude	impolite	acceptable
23 Male dominance female equality	acceptable	rude	rude
24 Divorce	rude/impolite	taboo	acceptable
25 Failure	taboo	impolite	acceptable
26 One's disability	taboo	acceptable	acceptable
27 Birth control pills	acceptable	rude	taboo

American culture values a high-profile, self-promoting, competitive nature. As such, failure is equated with incompetence and is looked down upon. To initiate a discussion on it, therefore, is unacceptable. The Hispanic culture, on the other hand, encourages a low profile and modest behavior in human beings. It also believes that success or failure is a result of situational factors. Failure is, therefore, viewed as if it is predetermined and not necessarily the result of one's actions alone. For this reason, in Hispanic culture, talking about one's failure is not an embarrassing act. The Vietnamese culture, like Hispanic culture, is also situational and encourages modesty. But at the same time, failure is also viewed as a social embarrassment, and it is preferable not to talk about it in public unless one really intends to embarrass another. A topic's acceptability as a conversational topic, then, is a matter of how these are viewed in different cultures. Cultural outlooks on components of society such as humanity in general, nature, society, money, relations, sex, religion, gender, and professions in particular, vary and so do the acceptability of these as conversational topics in cross-cultural communication.

In an intercultural communication class, therefore, it is important that teachers use various techniques to highlight the cultural perspectives on various topics and help learners understand that what is acceptable in their cul-

ture may not be acceptable as a conversational topic in a similar speech setting in another culture. It is not within the scope of this paper to describe the appropriate teaching techniques, though it suffices to say that any technique that makes learners intellectually analyze and understand why initiation of certain topics is not acceptable and appropriate in communication with speakers of another culture can lead to an understanding and awareness that cultures are different and that so are their rules governing conversations. It is worth mentioning that intercultural communication instructors can effectively use the framework developed by Buckley (2000) as a basis to describe, compare, and contrast the basic natures of different cultures.

In conclusion, the primary focus of intercultural communication classes should be to make nonnative speakers understand that linguistic competence alone will not enable them to be communicatively competent and that they also need to be culturally competent. They should be made to understand that they need to learn what the basic value and belief systems of the target language society are, and how these get translated into conventions governing the conversations among the members of the target language culture, if they are to survive and succeed in the target language society. In summary, an initiation of honest discussion among nonnative speakers in advanced intercultural communication classes about why cultural bumps exist and why they need to be avoided can be a starting point toward making them understand that successful nonnative-native communication depends not only on the learning of the target language but also of how the target language culture works.

Part III: Limitations and Conclusion

Limitations

This pilot study has some limitations in its design. What follows are some of these limitations:

Nature of Sample Population. Any qualitative data collected from a limited number of well-defined groups are bound to be biased and skewed. In other words, a serious limitation of this study was that the data set had been collected from only one kind of population. All of them were highly educated and all were students in an MA TESOL program in a California state university in Northern California. As such, it is possible that some of the findings may not be valid for other social groups in the respective cultures.

Sample population size. A second limitation of this study has to do with the sample size. Future studies must try to include not only larger sample populations (at least 100 informants from each culture) but should also make sure that they are randomly chosen to represent various social groups within a cultural group.

Speech setting. A third limitation of this study was that the identified cultural bumps are valid only for semiformal speech settings in a work-related atmosphere. In future, research studies must find out what other kinds of cultural bumps exist in what kinds of cross-cultural speech settings. Some of the settings that need to be studied are those that one normally encounters in one's day-to-day life, such as birthday parties, weddings, Christmas celebra-

tions and other religious holidays, office get-togethers, and cultural festivities. For example, in Indian culture, it is not appropriate to have conversations about tragic events such as death or fatal accidents on occasions such as weddings and birthday parties.

Conclusion

It is evident from this study that cross-cultural communication is not as simple a matter as it is perceived to be. The success of cross-cultural communication generally depends on an understanding of the other culture through an intellectual analysis of why certain conventions exist in that culture. For learners to achieve this understanding in intercultural communication classes, it is important that instructors themselves have the necessary tools to identify and analyze the cultural conventions in various cultures. In fact, one way to educate instructors and provide them with tools for an intellectual analysis of other cultures is by making "culture and communication" a core course in the graduate and undergraduate TESOL programs offered in the US. As Buckley (2000) states, "ESL teachers and curriculum designers need to know as much about culture as they know about language, and this knowledge will include a high degree of cultural competence that is grounded in the understanding of the variation of values" (p. 71). An analysis of why cultural bumps occur in nonnative-native communication can be a valuable starting point for introducing prospective ESL teachers to a course in culture and communication.

Also, at present, writers for intercultural communication class materials have been focusing only on improving the conversational skills of nonnative speakers. Materials writers could be made aware that it is important that materials for advanced intercultural communication classes be written in such a way that learners are educated not only on how conversations between two native speakers of English are structured but also on what are the appropriate and inappropriate topics for conversations with native speakers in a variety of settings.

In concluding this section, it is important to remind readers that cultural bumps are only one of the impediments in nonnative-native communication. Many other reasons can cause short-circuits in intercultural communication; however, a study of these is an area for future research.

Author

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Endnote

[1] Cross-cultural communication, as a term, is generally used in the literature referring to communication between speakers belonging to two different cultures, whereas intercultural communication refers to a setting in which speakers belong to multiple cultures. In a country such as the US, intercultural communication classes are the norm since learners will come from different cultures unless the class is intended for learners belonging to a specific culture. Some researchers prefer that the term "cross-cultural" be done away with completely. They prefer the term "intercultural" to be used instead since intercultural as a term "calls attention to process and boundaries rather than to a collection of separate cultures" as implied in the term "cross-cultural" (Lustig, 1997, p. 588).

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