

# Perspective on Intercultural Communication in a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Classroom

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**Abstract** Together with the dynamic integration of different cultures all over the world, intercultural communication has become an important part for human relationship, cooperation and understanding in a variety fields of science, politics, economics, journalism, psychology and education. In particular, the way intercultural communication takes place in a scope of educational institutions should, therefore, be a primary concern for educators, teachers who care about effective communication during teaching and learning process. Accordingly, this paper is elaborated with dimensional descriptions of intercultural communication in a culturally and linguistically diverse classroom. Qualitative data, retrieved from a teacher's holistic viewpoint of intercultural communication, give a vivid example of cultural reactors in terms of language, identity and local norms. Additionally, reflection approach is used as a mirror for the teacher to "look" again all pedagogical issues of curriculum and strategies. The paper, furthermore, contributes to make teachers' voice heard when they encounter both advantages and disadvantages of communication in multicultural settings.

**Keywords** Intercultural, Communication, Education, English, Teaching, Learning

## 1. Introduction

*Culture is a framework in which we communicate (Stephen Roberts)*

During an era of globalization, people from different countries or geographically different areas now have opportunities to meet face-to-face, study, work and live together in newly formed communities. In fact, people exist and interact with one another through multiple means of information, which is conveyed verbally or non-verbally. The ways we communicate involve our own cultural conceptions and values. In this sense, we reveal our identities, social norms, inherited characteristics, and national customs through the ways we do and talk every day.

Normally, how does this type of communication really take place? As Ozturk (1991) states, there may be two trends for developing cultural pattern detectors. One is about trying to listen to the conversations and get the real meanings from the speech; another is about misinterpreting exchanged information, and misunderstanding will come up.

Educational journeys can offer primary chances for many people to become knowledgeable and at the same time communicate with others in a culturally and linguistically

diverse learning environment. Thus, there may be arising questions such as "What happens to such communication in a classroom setting? How can teachers narrow cultural gaps through effective communication and recognize all students' cultural values?"

The first demand, perhaps, is to get to know about students by initiating intercultural communication effectively in the classroom. Imagine an example of an Asian student coming to an American class. He is likely to get embarrassed in the moment of standing up alone in front of the class to greet his teacher. In fact, in most countries in Asia, teaching is considered to be a precious job, and teachers are regarded as the ones who educate people and give the knowledge to students. Students, then, have to express their full respect to their teachers. Every class, they have to stand up to greet their teacher right after the teacher enters the class. Besides, during the learning process, "influenced by Confucianism, students tend to value quietness, and be less opinioned" (Lim, 2003, p. 1). The student may have a lot of difficulties while studying in a Western environment where learning involves active engagement and opinion oriented discussions. However, many international students have been determined to pursue their goals of going abroad as they perceive a higher quality of education in foreign countries. They even take their family members to the country where they are going to study.

According to Duffey (2004), "by the year 2030, 40% of all school-aged children in the United States will be speakers of a first language other than English" (as cited in Pratt-Johnson, 2006). Araujo (2011) also claimed about the increasing

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numbers of student sojourners in America in the last five years. These students have some troubles of adjustment issues due to cultural differences. Thus, educators should help students to accommodate with the host customs and social norms while representing their own unique cultural identities and attain learning achievement.

Hence, the purpose of this study is to explore a teacher's perspective on intercultural communication in a mixed-nationality classroom. The study offers the teacher an opportunity to reflect on his own intercultural competence and teaching strategies. Using interpretive paradigm, the researcher is going to "share the goal of understanding human ideas, actions, and interactions in specific contexts or in terms of the wider culture" (Glesne, 2011, p. 8). The study also aims to contribute to the archive of educational research which has not been filled with teachers' voices and their own empirical perceptions.

The main research question that guides the study is:

How does a teacher perceive intercultural communication in a culturally and linguistically diverse classroom?

There are some sub-questions that may help to answer the main questions:

- In what way does the teacher communicate with the students who come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds?
- In what way, from the teacher's view, do students engage in intercultural communication in the classroom?
- How does the teacher consider the role of intercultural communication in his pedagogical approach?

## 2. Literature Review

Culture is an amorphous concept that reveals multifaceted issues of humans. It has been defined in multiple meanings of language, identities, social norms, and national customs. Many scholars view culture as a first mirror reflecting anthropological characteristics, beliefs and behaviors (Brislin, 1993, McLaren, 1998; Helman, 2001, Jandt, 2004; Suneetha & Sundaravalli, 2011; Gao, 2013). Thus, communication, in terms of cultural topics or expressions, is multidimensional. In the past, Gudykunst and Kim (2003) considered intercultural communication to be "a transactional, symbolic process involving the attribution of meaning between people from different cultures" (p. 17). This ideology of constructivism elucidates a process of social interaction through which people get better understandings of social and political impacts (Aneas & Sandin, 2009). Arasaratnam and Doerfel's (2005) study suggested that five particular qualities are associated with intercultural communication competence: empathy, intercultural experience/training, motivation global attitude and ability to listen well in conversation (as cited in Perry & Southwell, 2011, p. 456).

Based on educational theories, Adams and Cargill (2003) elicited the importance of facilitating conversations so that

students will have opportunities to talk freely about what they need (as cited in Bash, 2009, p. 482). Besides, Gao (2013) was concerned with the language used in communication. Since English as second language (ESL) learners have to struggle with linguistic issues, they are more likely to encounter cultural barriers. Misunderstanding and misinterpretation may discourage their morale and hinder them from being open to others' perspectives.

Additionally, non-verbal code system plays a vital role in a particular context of dialogues and denotes power relationships (Suneetha & Sundaravalli, 2011). Eye contact, facial or emotional expressions, and body language can become a means of communication. Some people may even be more interested in such non-verbal feedbacks when they talk to others. For example, in mainstream American culture, people pay more attention to eye gaze and often appreciate the speaker by looking attentively to the speaker during conversations. In contrast, many research studies confirm that immigrant citizens find it hard to talk while being stared. The interpretation of silence is also varied among different cultures; Chinese people will keep calm or get thoughtful ideas by being silent for a moment, but Australian people may regard silence as passivity and disengagement in communication.

Another factor that affects the way how information is conveyed and perceived is gender roles. Women's ideas may not be regarded as a high level thinking in Asian culture as men are considered to be stronger and wiser in decision making and logical assumptions. Conversations among different gender can be put into the categories of cross-cultural communication. Besides, generation gap is another hurdle for understanding and empathy. Merriweather and Morgan (2013) conducted a qualitative study to investigate how young mentors and older mentees bridge this gap while working together. The auto-ethnographic approach of the study helped the researcher and participants to be connected within a self-discovery process in the same social, political, historical circumstances. Personal stories were analyzed in three themes of "communication, respect, and ambiguous roles" (Merriweather & Morgan, 2013, p. 7). The findings revealed that truthfulness and support creates effective ways for communication between different generations of mentorship. Positive attitudes for learning from one another also make it easier for a young faculty member and an old student to communicate and understand each other.

Ethnocentrism is inherently one of disadvantages for valuing different cultures. Ethnocentric person tends to interpret other cultural meanings from their own cultural norms. Such type of subjective presumptions is also called "culture-boundness" (Ozturk, 1991, p. 81).

A common negative form of this narrow-mindedness is the stereotypes on an ethnic group or a nation. Dominant or socially and economically advantaged groups usually initiate stereotyping to prove themselves as supreme individuals. In terms of racial issues, stereotypes hurt under privileged or marginal groups who always find it hard to make their voices

heard. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to help them break the bond with their cultural beliefs and look at other people from diverse backgrounds in dynamic contexts of social interaction.

In practice, Zilliacus (2013) explored a teacher perspective on minority religion and their support of religious plurality in the classrooms. Participants of his research study involved thirty-one teachers who belong to all forms of minority religion in the Helsinki metropolitan area, Finland. Qualitative data included semi-structured interviews. The result showed that teachers tried to support students' religions in education, yet they hardly overcame the challenge of cultural diversity in the classroom. However, most of the teachers agreed upon the idea of communicative teaching strategies to stimulate student in learning and create positive dialogues among diverse religious followers. The study contributes to educational reforms with the presentation of pedagogical strategies in multicultural education, which implicates that "Both scholars and classroom teachers must look for opportunities, new ways to think and learn about human diversity and social justice" (Ladson-Billings, 2004, p. 63).

One example of cross cultural research studies was a qualitative study conducted by Ozcelik and Paprika (2010). The researchers focused on a teaching module that emphasized emotions and emotional awareness in cross cultural business communication. A total of sixteen undergraduate students from the business schools of an American university in northern California and an Hungarian university in Budapest participated voluntarily in the study. Data set was collected from the researchers' observation and students' reports during the videoconferencing process. Emergent themes included "alertness and curiosity", "mixed emotions", "anger and frustration", "pride and cohesiveness", "pleasantness", "empathy" (Ozcelik & Paprika, 201, pp. 686-687). Consequently, students found it useful to engage in this module and they became more receptive to cultural studies.

In brief, there have been several theoretical work and research studies on cultural diversity and communication; however, it appears that the application of intercultural communication in a practical context of educational institutional has not been noticed much, especially there were few studies on teachers' perspectives. This research study is going to fill in this gap of the literature of intercultural communication.

### 3. Research Method

The purpose of this study is to explore a teacher's perspective on intercultural communication in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. It also offers the teacher a better understanding of intercultural communication as well as an opportunity to reflect on his own teaching strategies in order to embrace students' cultural values and stimulate them during learning process. Thus, the researcher adopts a case study approach so as "to retain the holistic and

meaningful characteristics of real-life events" (Yin, 2003, p. 2). In terms of classification, the study is an 'intrinsic case study'.

Using interpretive paradigm, the researcher was going to "share the goal of understanding human ideas, actions, and interactions in specific contexts or in terms of the wider culture" (Glesne, 2011, p. 8). Qualitative methodology serves best to attain this goal as it helps to search for the meaning constructed from personal experiences (Merriam, 1998). The teacher's perceptions of intercultural communication in the classroom would shed light on cultural understanding and reflective pedagogical strategies. A qualitative study also supports an in-depth examination of fundamental factors emerging from communicative activities, such as attitude and emotion. This qualitative inquiry was derived from the researcher's desire to make teachers' voice heard in the field of educational research both theoretically and authentically.

The participant of this study is a White male teacher who has three years of teaching experience. He has an intuitive sense of cultural gaps after spending three years teaching abroad in China and Brazil. Suffice it to say, he really encountered the situations of communication in a diverse cultural and linguistic setting, which has made him be more concerned with students' similar experiences in his classroom. Therefore, the study may offer the participant an opportunity to recall his experiences and share his perspectives on the way he interacted with students verbally as well as the way students interact with one another to gain mutual respect and understanding.

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview that makes it easier for the participant to express his ideas without feeling reluctant to respond to the questions one by one. Probing was utilized as an effective technique "for getting to the bottom of things" (Glesne, 2011, p. 123). There was a set of fifteen questions for the interview, but the researcher was flexible in choosing the questions to ask or elaborating on some questions for further information. Additionally, the nature of the interview was intercultural itself, so both the researcher and the participant would have a constructive dialogue in terms of cultural exchanges.

The interview was going to be recorded digitally with the approval of the participant, and then the audio file would be transcribed. Thematic analysis was applied to look for common threads emerging from the data (Glesne, 2011). After that, all the themes were coded and re-examined carefully. Finally, as Gibbs (2007) claims, the researcher would be able to "look for patterns, make comparisons, produce explanations and build models" (as cited in Glesne, 2011, p. 196). This analytical process would help the researcher retrieve necessary information from the data without missing any specific pieces and continue with the next stage of a holistic discussion.

In order to ensure the ethics of the study, the researcher had provided the participant with essential information of the study, for example, the purpose of the study and the work relating to the participant. After agreeing to participate in the

study voluntarily, the participant got the consent form and then he signed two copies, kept one copy and returned another copy to the researcher. A pseudonym (Mike) would be used instead of the participants' name, and any other information involving the participant's identity and privacy must be secured. The researcher indicated that the participant could withdraw from the study, or refuse to be recorded without any penalty and his contribution would be appreciated all the time.

In this study, the researcher was going to play two roles. The first one was the role of a researcher. The researcher kept notes, conducted the interview with the participant, collected and analyzed all the data. The second one was the role of a learner. During every stage of the study, the research has gained more knowledge of research and literature work on the topic of intercultural communication. Besides, in terms of friendship, the researcher always cares about maintaining rapport and trust with the participant by being open to his perspective, and learn from his way of seeing and thinking. Furthermore, the researcher is going to reflect on her personal experiences and find the way to improve her own teaching approach.

#### 4. Findings and Interpretation

According to Wolcott's (1994), after collecting meaningful data, a researcher continues to make a "data transformation" (as cited in Glesne, 2011, p. 209). In other words, it is time for the researcher to examine data with multiple lenses and find out sufficient details to know what message is conveyed in the data. Patton (2002) suggests that this stage in a study should be a "thick description" (p. 437) as it demonstrates the significances of what have been collected. Based on the data from the interview, the findings are represented in five different themes: Language, cultural diversity, teacher's cultural background and knowledge, teaching strategies, and curriculum. Firstly, language is an important tool of communication. Secondly, cultural diversity also affects intercultural communication. Besides, teacher's cultural background influences his way of understanding students through communication. Lastly, there are other concerns about teaching strategies and curriculum in the teacher's reflection.

##### Language

The school that Mike, the respondent, taught was a small school in China. There were one hundred and twenty students with twenty-four nationalities. The first thing the researcher wondered about is the language for intercultural communication among the students who came from such diverse backgrounds. Mike replied that, "we had an English only rule...and students would and could eventually be asked to leave the school if they broke the rule so many times". He believed that students were English language learners so it was better for them to practice English all the time. Students tried hard and they understood one another

well through communication, "they could understand each other for the most part very well", he added.

It appears that using different native languages was not allowed at the school building as it could hinder second language acquisition. Although the rule was rather strict, it supports the fact that intercultural communication can only take place when people use a common language.

Regarding non-verbal communication, the teacher perceived that students used to apply body language when they could not understand one another. Yet, due to cultural differences, it also made it harder for students to understand the meanings of body language. Mike explained:

*Because nationalities have different understanding of body language and so sometimes maybe one person from one country was very reserved in their body language, they didn't use a lot, while other countries were very animated in their body language and so it was hard sometimes for one student to understand another through body language.*

This finding is consistent with the idea initiated by Suneetha and Sundaravalli (2011) when they discuss that interpretations of body language vary among different cultures. Mike was interested in looking at students' interactions and he also had a feeling for how cultural diversity featured his classroom.

##### Cultural Diversity

In our modern age, the term 'cultural diversity' has been prevalent in many fields. In education, it is embedded within the contexts of teaching and learning, and perhaps for the teacher, the participant of this study, it relates to both advantages and disadvantages. Mike changed his own emotions and attitudes when recounting his experiences. On the one hand, he was interested in cultural diversity that made his classroom a community for sharing and listening to stories. He stated, *"It was advantages because everybody has such unique stories to tell in the classroom and so it was fun to get to hear students' talk about, you know, in my country this is what we would do"*.

Such differences helped students understand knowledge contents when they revealed their vicarious experiences of how a particular issue was presented in their cultural norms. Mike stated, "we had students from different parts of the world, they can talk about how science related to their lives in different parts of the world". Apparently, the teacher could apply this diversity to help students open their minds to multiple perspectives. Communication in the classroom, in his view, was fun and engaging for all students.

On the other hand, Mike confirmed the negative effects of cultural diversity when he said:

*...but later in the semester, as the students got to know each other more, and they got to learn about each other more, they saw the differences between their countries and other countries, and they found things that they didn't like about other countries, and sometimes that would cause some negative relationships.*

Mike mentioned the difficulty that he and other teachers faced. In the classroom, the students appeared to have good

relationship as they respected the rule and the teacher. However, outside the classroom, when students wanted to show their actual feelings and attitudes, they became judgmental. This finding and analysis supports Ozturk's (1991) idea of "cultural-boundness" (p. 81) when students base on their own cultural perspectives to interpret other cultures. Mike noticed this unexpected consequence of intercultural exchange, yet he could not move beyond his role of a classroom teacher to make any intervention. Besides, another problem was concerned with students' cultural backgrounds that limited the frequency of communication. As a teacher, he knew about his students' characteristics, so he claimed that "even students who were very extroverted outside the classroom because of their cultural background in the classroom they were very quiet and they were very respectful, and they would usually not speak very much in class".

Mike gave an example of Asian students who used to keep silent as they wanted to "save face". Being an Asian teacher, the researcher has experienced a similar situation. Her students used to sit still by chairs and tables, listen attentively to every single word she said and take notes. Although it was an English language class, the students had little time for speaking skill as they could not talk to one another during the lessons. For an American teacher, this was really a challenge to make a conversation with students in order to break the silence in the classroom.

### Teacher's Cultural Background

When being asked about how his own cultural background that affected his way of teaching and communicating with the students, Mike confessed that he was influenced by the way he learned at the schools since his early ages. Thus, he expected the students to listen to the class and raise their hands for questioning. To some extent, he became a supervisor who would get students to conform to the rule that he set up. Consequently, the students' reactions, as he explained, might be unexpected when "it was hard for them to understand how to solve the problem. They were frustrated with me as a teacher and they were frustrated with the school, the culture of our school because all of the teachers were from North America". After that, the teacher found it harder to talk to unhappy students as "they were not themselves and so they were upset because it was natural for them to be asking a lot of questions and to be talking problems out with their classmates, and we wouldn't let them do that".

In addition, he revealed that he had never learned about Asian cultures before going to China. Therefore, the lack of cultural knowledge led to difficulties in appropriate assessments of students' performances and even limited verbal interactions between the teacher and students.

*I didn't really know that was a part of their cultures, and so I thought everything was just fine with them if they performed well on assignments and tests. I thought that they understood everything, but in reality, there was something that they just didn't understand. They were good at taking*

*tests but the thing was that those were not only tests that they did not understand they would never ask for help for.*

It took rather a long time for the teacher to refer to the lack of his knowledge as he found that there was a problem. The teacher expected students to obey the rules, yet the teacher noticed that following the rule did not mean performing well and growing intellectually.

### Teaching Strategies

In a response to the question about teacher strategies, Mike pointed out some challenges. First, the teacher had to deal with the conflicts in the classroom because "it was two extremes... those who would not say when they are in trouble and those who... very talkative in class". In a classroom, he found it hard to balance student talking and encourage them to have mutual understanding. Some students who preferred their home languages would argue that English was not the best language for communication. Consequently, the classroom community was not constructed continuously, as "we would have fights sometimes between *one country* and *another*".

Second, Mike indicated that it was not easy to teach students to respect one another's culture. He gave an example of asking students to talk about their countries. It was good for students to hear about some new, interesting information they had not known before. However, students were inclined to show that their culture is superior to others' cultures. Mike explained that,

*Because of their background, what they've learnt through history, through their cultures to not like or to have a certain opinion of another country... some countries just like any others may not have a respect for another, and sometimes the students would show that in the class and that's hard.*

Finally, Mike was aware of the challenge of becoming a caring teacher. At the same time, the teacher had to try to teach well and be conscious of all cultural differences. Mike was excited about the questions as he could recall all the memories of spending several years teaching in a foreign school. Both the advantages and disadvantages that he encountered inspired him some ideas of feasible teaching strategies.

He responded that the students could help teachers to know about their cultural backgrounds when "some students will be happy to tell you, oh, this is what we do day to day in our country". Talking to the students increased teacher and student interaction and made students feel being recognized with their unique cultural characteristics. This finding is congruent with the recommendation from Adam's and Cargill's (2003) paper when they insist that the teachers should facilitate intercultural conversations.

Overall, Mike referred to an authentic teaching approach that he would apply in a similar context of a multicultural classroom. He added,

*I think that general practices I would try to make sure that in the beginning I as the teacher can make it easier for the students to communicate, to make sure I investigate culturally how they are used to communicate in the*

*classroom and try to accommodate them in that and so slowly begin to try to bring everyone together to where they know how to communicate, to learn how communicate with each other... to see the differences and how the students like to communicate and make them all comfortable...*

In this way, Mike advocated a student-centered pedagogy that really makes students' voices heard and gives them the best opportunities to grow. As a matter of fact, good teaching requires both professional knowledge and devotion amid difficulties.

### **Curriculum**

In terms of curriculum, Mike claimed about the problem of using the same curriculum at an American school to teach in a Chinese school.

*We used the same American textbook that we would use in Stillwater middle school in China. So for the curriculum purposes, it was not the best strategies to teach all those other nationalities about History, Science, Math...from American perspective, it just did not work very well.*

He stated that it was hard for the student to understand the knowledge contents because what they learned did not connect with their own personal experiences or "they could not see the subject matter from their perspectives from their realities, from their countries that they were from". Mike was a little disappointed with the curriculum at the beginning of the school year. It was essential to make modifications, so he stated that, "by the end of the year...it almost seems like we rarely used the textbook, we did use the books for information, but we had modified and changed to represent different cultures that were in the classroom". As a result, Mike perceived some positive changes in his classroom. Particularly, the students became happier and they were ready to engage in the lessons as well as classroom activities.

## **5. Conclusions**

The findings help the researcher to answer the main question about a teacher's perspective on intercultural communication in a culturally and linguistically diverse classroom. During a semi-structured interview, the participant was interested in sharing his experiences of teaching with the researcher. Coming to a foreign country and joining a different culture, the teacher had difficulties communicating with students due to his lack of cultural knowledge. He had never learned about Chinese culture before. The rule that he set up for student's behaviors and interactions affected students emotionally as the students could not be themselves in the classroom. For example, students with some cultures of excessive verbal expression would not be allowed to talk much whereas Asian students were more silent as in their culture, they should respect the teacher by listening to the lessons attentively and do not raise any questions.

In addition, English was the only language that students could use for communication at the school building. Students

became proficient in English when they practiced their language skills regularly. Thus, they could also understand one another through communication. However, in some cases, students endured the pressure when they could not use their home languages. The teachers confirmed both positive and negative impacts of cultural diversity on students. The lessons were more exciting when students talked about their typical cultural characteristics. However, there were some conflicts when students did not like certain issues in one another's cultures. The teacher found it hard to teach students to show respectful attitudes towards one another.

Hence, the teacher faced challenges to implement an appropriate pedagogy for the issues of multicultural and diversity in his classroom. Especially, the curriculum at the Chinese school was adopted from American curriculum. In order to enhance intercultural communication, the teacher thought of some possible teaching strategies, for instance, learning about students' cultural backgrounds and offering students more opportunities to communicate. Together with other teachers at the school, he made some modifications to the curriculum to authenticate knowledge contents and arouse students' interests in sharing ideas and understanding one another during classroom activities. As Schlein & Garii (2011) proposed that, "it is crucial for teachers to undertake professional development endeavors aimed at the acquisition of knowledge about multiple cultures and culturally related models for teaching and learning" (p. 81).

Although there are some limitations such as the number of participants and lack of students' voices, this study has made a contribution to the field of intercultural education in the era of globalization. Particularly, the study emphasizes the importance of intercultural communication in the classroom. There are implications for cultural understanding through communication and reflective pedagogical strategies. To some extent, the study helps to make teachers' voice heard in the field of educational research both theoretically and authentically.

The researcher also got valuable experience of intercultural communication during the process of the research. She finds it necessary to change her own teaching strategy in order to communicate with students effectively and embrace all students' unique cultural values. Finally, there should be further research on how to develop intercultural competence for both teachers and students so that teachers and students can understand and cooperate with one another while together joining an educational journey and striving to obtain achievement.

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