

Communicating beyond Culture

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Few of us have not read about how to communicate with people from different cultures and even fewer of us have actually studied how to do this. We simply stumble through cross-cultural encounters, sometimes successful in our endeavors without really knowing how or why. Communicating beyond culture is therefore a new experience. The emphasis should be on how we normally act and think when we are with people from other cultures, so we can better understand the communication process and can develop new skills and ways of thinking. Cross - cultural knowledge is very valuable for overseas students, employees from a variety of cultures working together and even foreign tourists. Most of the time, these individuals relate well and adapt to the new culture. However, there are always situations that present a problem. Cross-cultural knowledge enables us to gain the greatest possible benefit from our interaction with people from other cultures and learn to choose the best pattern for attaining our objective in a particular situation.

There are many things that we do in our own culture that we never ask questions about. This is because we have always done them in the same way. When we are with people from a different culture, we always question ourselves as to why they do that or why they do not do as what we do. Some examples of cultural differences follow to demonstrate this.

Addressing

The language of addressing people gives cultural information about customs, relationship and communication styles. For example, students in many parts of the world must show politeness and respect to teachers; one way of doing this in Thailand is to use “Ajarn” and the teacher’s first name. However, in America respect is shown by using the teacher’s surname. Also, it is not appropriate for adults to call their teachers “Teacher”, only young children can do this. In Japan, co-workers or classmates do not usually call each other by their first names.

They use the last name followed by a title “San.” In Vietnam, a person calls his older brother or sister “older brother” or “older sister” without using a name (Archer, 1991: 72). There are times when special forms of address are used before a person’s name such as Mrs., Miss, Ms. and Professor etc. In our culture, these forms of address are formally used in front of a person’s first name while “khun” is commonly used in speaking.

Complimenting

Every language usually has particular rules of speaking and every culture has rules about how people interact with each other. In our own culture, we can automatically interact because the rules are a part of us. Complimenting is an example of the area where ways of interacting can differ across cultures.

The kind of things people compliment and the words they use differ from culture to culture. In American English, a limited number of adjectives are often used. Some common ones are great, wonderful, fantastic, beautiful, nice, pretty, attractive etc. The first three adjectives sound like strong compliments to us, but to many Americans, they are used to describe everyday events and objects. To people in some countries, these compliments seem exaggerated, and in many cultures, complimenting frequently merely sounds insincere. For example, many Thai, Chinese and Japanese find that Americans give too many compliments. One reason, why Americans compliment so frequently is because it is a polite way to start a conversation (Samovar and Porter, 1973 : 59-60).

Upon receiving a compliment, Americans often say “Thank you” and add some sentences which lead into a conversation. In contrast, Thai or Chinese people seem to find it difficult to say “Thank you” when someone gives them a compliment. They still want to say “No, no, it’s not true.” This is because modesty is so highly valued in our culture. To deny a compliment shows modesty.

The following dialogue shows the way Supachai responds to compliment in his own culture.

George : Supachai, your English is improving. I am pleased with your work.

Supachai : Oh, no. My English is very poor.

Geoge : Why do you say that? You’re doing well in class.

Supachai : No, I am not a good student.

George : Supachai, you're making progress in your class. You should be proud of your English.

Supachai : No, it's not true.

George : (He is surprised. He doesn't know what to say and wonders if he should stop giving him compliments.)

The following dialogue shows Supachai responding in a way that is culturally familiar to George.

George : Supachai, your English is improving. I am pleased with your work.

Supachai : (making eye contact) Thank you. I try my best in this course.

George : You're doing well, and I can really see your progress.

Supachai : I enjoy my English classes. I do homework every night.

George : I see. Keep up the good work.

Supachai : I'll try. You are a good teacher. You have helped me a lot.

Expressing emotions

Although everyone experiences the same emotions, the way emotions are expressed can differ culturally. Children see their parents expressing emotions such as sadness and anger whilst they are growing up, and they express them in more or less the same way when they are adults. People in some cultures believe that it is healthy to let emotions out rather than to keep them in. In other cultures, people try to keep feelings of sadness or anger inside, as they do not want to bother others with their problems. People's cultural backgrounds often influence when and how they express their emotions. American businessmen might think that Japanese businessmen look too serious because they rarely smile, whilst Russians and Thais smile at inappropriate times. Of course, there is no right or wrong time to smile; there are only cultural norms.

The following dialogue shows that Wimon tries to hide her feelings.

Ann : You seem upset about something. Is everything okay?

Wimon : Everything's fine.

Ann : Are you sure? You look upset.

Wimon : No, there's no problem.

Ann : Well, I hope everything's okay. Remember, you can always talk to me.

Wimon : Okay.

In the following dialogue, Wimon still does not tell Ann her feelings, but she explains why she does not. As a result, both of them are more comfortable.

Ann : You seem upset about something. Is everything okay?
Wimon : Everything's fine.
Ann : Are you sure? You look upset.
Wimon : Well, something is bothering me, but I'm not used to talking about my feelings.
Ann : You might feel better if you talk to me.
Wimon : Thanks, but in my culture we don't usually talk about our feelings with others.
Ann : That's hard for me to understand, but I'm glad you explained it to me. I hope you feel better soon.
Wimon : Thanks.

Showing that you understand

How do you show that you are listening, you understand or do not understand when you talk to someone? There are many personal and cultural differences in this area of communication. In Thai culture, we usually say "Kha" or "Krap" to show that we are being attentive and that we understand. Also, we sometimes interrupt the speaker to ask questions so that we can be sure that we understand. Attitudes toward interrupting and asking questions vary across cultures. In Thai culture, constant interruptions are not appreciated. This is why our foreign instructors (especially American or English) feel uncomfortable in their classes. Most Thai students always keep silent even when they are asked for feedback using expressions such as:

You got that?	Do you know what I mean?
Are you clear?	Do you understand?
Okay. Any questions?	etc.

Students are expected to show, with words, that they are listening and to ask questions. When they do not, the instructors begin to lose self-confidence and become upset. They would like their students to interact in a way that they expect or are used to.

A good way to become aware of interaction in another culture is to think about how we interact with people in our own language and culture. This will help us to recognize differences and similarities between cultures. Where there are similarities, we will probably be able to interact in the ways which are familiar to us. In these instances, the two cultures fit together. Where there are differences, we may need to learn new ways of interacting. The points at which the two cultures differ from or “bump” into each other, usually make us uncomfortable. (Archer,1991:44).

A culture bump will occur when an individual expects certain behavior in a particular situation but receives different behavior when interacting with people from another culture. Culture bumps can be positive, negative, or neutral. For example, we might have felt uncomfortable the first couple of times that we saw some foreigners step on books. This is because we value books. However, we are now accustomed to this sight. This culture bump was negative at first, but it is now neutral to us.

In conclusion, in order to be effective in communicating cross culturally, we must be able to recognize our own cultural being. It is also necessary to know how a culture differs from our own. By learning about culture, we learn how to cope with cultural differences and to communicate comfortably because cultural learning goes hand in hand with language learning.



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