

Psychological Factors in Intercultural Communication and its Influence on Foreign Language Teaching

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Abstract: All people are affected by psychological factors in their intercultural communication, either consciously or unconsciously, so considerable time needs to be spent on the research of the main psychological factors that determine the cultural differences in our communication between cultures. Only in this way, can we really conduct effective and successful intercultural communication. The thesis points out that psychological factor such as stereotypes, values, ethnocentrism, prejudice, and so on all contribute to the production of successful intercultural communication. If we do not understand those psychological factors, we will never be able to conduct intercultural communication successfully in our lives. Therefore, in the foreign language teaching, we should pay attention to the psychological factors in intercultural Communication.

1. Introduction

Culture is acquired, transmitted, preserved and reflected through communication. Intercultural communication study, as a field of systematic study of what really happens in intercultural interactions, is difficult to identify. In most cases, intercultural communication happens when a member of one culture sends a message for receiving by a member of another culture. Precisely, intercultural communication occurs between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are different to change the communication event. Samovar and Porter said that intercultural communication took place when the message sender is a member of one culture and the message receiver is of another [1-2].

2. Interaction between Culture and Communication

Culture and communication is an inseparable, ever-interacting couple. Each is produced through a dynamic relationship with the other. For humans, they appear simultaneously: neither of them can exist without the other.

Culture is a shared conventional way of life, shaping by the negotiated production, common use, and mutual understanding of languages and their meanings, the communication rules and their patterns. We need communication to “negotiate”, to “share” and to be “mutual”. Therefore, culture is directly or indirectly produced through communication[3]. Without the creation and usage of the symbolic language, common understanding of meanings and culture would be impossible. By communication, the information across place and time could be kept or spread, which allows for the cultural transmission from one generation to another and from one place to another. Communication bridges the gaps more rapidly and urgently between different cultures. And through information processing and generation, humans can recognize and adapt to distinctive customs and conventional behaviors that characterize cultures, as shown in Figure 1.

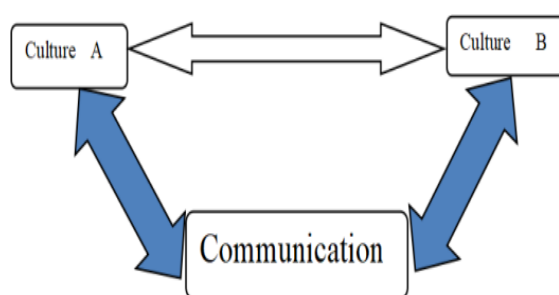


Figure 1. Interaction between culture and communication

While it is a logical implication of the foregoing discussion to conclude that cultures are defined, shaped, and transmitted through communication, the reverse is also apparent. So it is evident that culture is resulted from the human communication.

3. Topic Differences between Chinese and English (Figure 2)

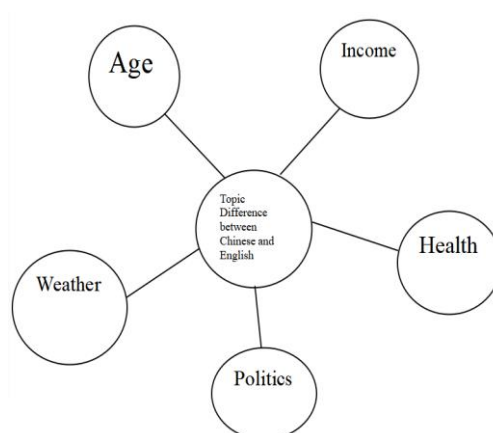


Figure 2. Topic differences between Chinese and English

3.1. Differences on Talking about Age

Generally speaking, it is regarded as inappropriate or even impolite in western culture to ask about age when talking with strangers. Nowadays, the new Chinese generations have already realized the sensitivity of some problems when communicating with westerners. However, most Chinese people still hold traditional views on some questions and mention the questions constantly

when communicating with westerners[4]. There is a survey about this situation, only 38 percent of Chinese think that it is not appropriate to ask about age when chatting with strangers while all the westerners take age as a taboo topic. Why westerners don't like to talk about age, most westerners wrote that they feel not comfortable to answer the question. They also pointed that in the western countries, being young is very important and they don't like anyone to know how old they are or else they will lose some respects[5]. Although some of Chinese who are involved in the investigation also chose age as an inappropriate topic, most of them just consider age as a little sensitive topic to ask a lady and it is still ok to ask a man.

3.2. Differences on Talking about Income

Another frequently asked question in China is how much money a person makes. Most Chinese think it is acceptable to ask about others' income while all westerners just hold the opposite opinions on this topic. It is funny that although westerners take money as a very important matter but they think income is privacy which should be avoided to ask or talk about. Income is regarded as an extremely personal and private affair in the western countries, and even among family members, people often do not know the exact salary of others. This does not mean that western family is not a close one. It is just because that western family mode is based on respecting each member's privacy. On the contrary, the closeness in Chinese families means "to share everything with the people around you" and sometimes this tendency towards closeness really bothers the members' family life and social affairs[6].

3.3. Differences on Talking about Weather

Weather is a standard form of normal greetings in western countries.

Westerners love to talk about weather very much which seems a little strange to Chinese people. Most Chinese can not understand why westerners like to accept weather as a topic to start a conversation with strangers. For in most Chinese eyes, talking about weather appears to be a little simple[7]. On asking the reasons why weather is not a suitable topic to start a conversation with strangers, most Chinese wrote that "there is nothing interesting to talk about weather" and some of them even seem to be confused why westerners like to talk about such kind of "shallow topics." Instead, most Chinese would rather talk about politics for such topics can show their deep thoughts. As a matter of fact, weather as a standard conversational topic is very important in western countries. For most westerners, weather can be a useful and inoffensive topic to start a conversation with strangers. They pointed that there are many advantages on talking about weather as follows:

1. *It can warm up atmosphere and break the ice.*

2. *It is challenging to warm up atmosphere through talking about weather.*

For example, to speak out one's own tendency on loving hot or cold weather can draw out more different ideas of the interlocutors in conversation. The most important function on talking about weather is that it can switch the conversation to a new topic. Let us take the following conversation as an example:

A: Isn't it a lovely day today?

B: Yeah, it would be a pity if you stay at home in such a nice day.

A: Where do you usually do in such a good weather?

B: Well...I prefer to hang out with friends and go pubs.

Then the conversation will go on naturally and smoothly. Generally speaking, westerners take weather as a suitable topic to start a conversation with strangers for instrumental purposes.

3.4. Differences on Talking about Politics

Westerners won't discuss about politics unless they are very familiar with the people they are talking with or it is really necessary for doing so. On asking why westerners dislike the topic 57 percent of them think that it will cause unpleasant and uncomfortable feelings; 8 percent of them think it might cause disputes or feuds; another 3 percent of westerners think that it is inappropriate and even stupid to talk about politics with strangers. However, Chinese people especially males seem to be very vivid on talking about politics. An interesting phenomenon is that Chinese seldom talk about politics in public because of power distance while westerners sometimes talk about it freely in public. Generally speaking, westerners consider "politics" and "religion" as dangerous and contentious topics which might cause unhappiness[8-9].

3.5. Differences on Talking about Health

In China, when someone is sick, people around him/her usually show concerns by saying "drink more water" or "put on more clothes." This way of showing concerns in China sometimes make westerners feel uncomfortable and offended. Words such as "drink more water" seem to have protective and parental overtones. Such words appear to be inappropriate to an independent adult in westerners' eyes. Generally speaking, westerners usually express concerns through the following ways:

1. *Hope you will be better soon;*
2. *Look after yourself;*
3. *Have you been to the doctor?*
4. *Why not get some rest?*

4. Psychological Factors in Intercultural Communication

Beneath the cultural differences, there are some psychological factors which are very important to understand those cultural differences and use them rightly in practice. Such as stereotypes, values, ethnocentrism, prejudices and so on. The intercultural communication research center in Yale University in America made a research in 55 American universities in 1997, and the research was based on the roles that psychological factors play in intercultural communication. They chose 2000 college students from 55 universities throughout America, and let them fill questionnaires, collected and analyzed the data, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. 2000 college students from 55 universities throughout America data

Psychological factors	Stereotype	Value	Ethnocentrism	Prejudice	Culture shock
2000 university students in U.S.	80%	90%	95%	80%	95%

From this diagram, we can see that most of the people feel they are affected by the psychological factors in intercultural communication. In fact, according to the intercultural communication research center in Yale University, all kinds of intercultural factors are at different degrees. The main psychological factors that determine the cultural differences in our communication between cultures are discussed in the followings.

4.1. Stereotyped Ideas in Intercultural Communication

- (1) Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism is the stereotyped idea that one's own culture is superior and advanced than other cultures. William G. Sumner introduced the concept of ethnocentrism firstly, and he defined it as "the view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it." This shows ethnocentrism happens when people think their nation is the center of the world. First, one's own group, whose value is universal and suitable for anyone, is superior to any other groups[10]. Second, people from other cultures who do things differently are wrong and their value is denied. In-group persons keep a certain distance with out-group members. Thus ethnocentric speech is produced in intercultural communication, that is, people use special speech speed, tune pattern and diction to show social distance with out-groups, which is called communication distance by Peng (1974). According to the degree of ethnocentrism, communication distance can be divided into—distance of indifference (low level); distance of avoidance (moderate level); distance of disparagement (high level), as shown in Figure 3.

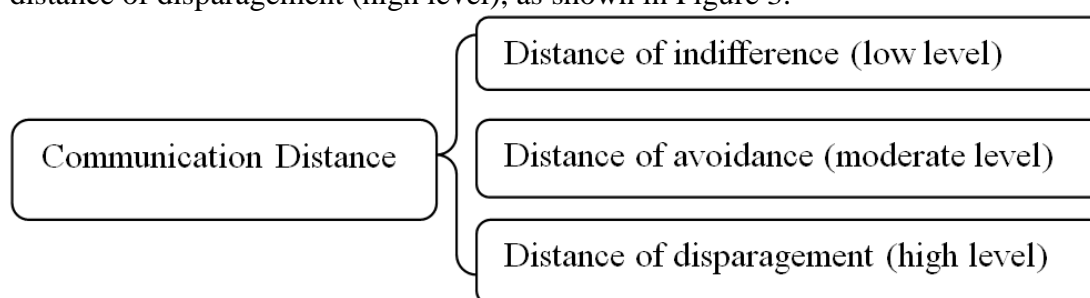


Figure 3. Division of communication distance

Distance of indifference and distance of avoidance are primary aspects to influence intercultural communication.

(2) Prejudice

Ethnocentrism is the cause for most prejudicial beliefs. Prejudice, like stereotypes, varies in direction and intensity. Prejudice means a biased and intolerant attitude toward others. In the intercultural background, prejudice often leads to hostility, which includes "negative feelings, beliefs, and action-tendencies, or discriminatory acts that arise against human beings by virtue of the status they occupy or are perceived to occupy as members of a minority group."

Prejudices are also learned and formed gradually. For some people, prejudices are acquired from feelings of superiority to feelings of power. They appear in various ways—sometimes subtle and other times overt[11]. Learning the manifestation way of prejudice will change the manner we perceive the world and interact with people. People show prejudice when they interact with the disliked group. The problems caused by prejudice are obvious. On the international occasions, there are a lot of examples of one nation or ethnic group refusing to take part in or withdraw from an international peace conference. Prejudice is also expressed through the individual behavior. When this happens, there can be little communication. In an age when each cultural group has some discrimination over another, prejudice can harm everyone. When discrimination happens, the prejudiced person is excluded from some kinds of employment, residential area, political rights, educational opportunities, and recreational time, etc. In the context of discrimination, we can find ethnocentrism and prejudice coming together so that the intercultural communications are completely obstructed[12].

We know that this process of cultural description is easy to cause ethnocentrism, prejudice even discrimination in intercultural communication. Nevertheless, intercultural communication is on the increase, especially in an era of globalization where both labor and capital flow across trans-national borders and mass communication brings people into everyday contact with others across the world, we should on the one hand recognize and control biases and try to avoid

ethnocentrism, on the other hand we should be open-minded and advocate co-existence of cultural pluralism and perceive the world and other cultures with the eyesight of cultural relativism. Cultural relativism means values and institutions of any culture must be taken to be self-validated, which stipulates that behavior in a particular culture should not be judged by the standards of another. Owing to the social progress, people should be able to show a tolerance for the coexistence of various cultures. The mutual exchange and mixing of different cultures will promote the prosperity of world culture as well as the development of all national cultures.

4.2. Values in Intercultural Communication

Values are parts of culture. They guide both perception and communication and tell people what is right and what is wrong in the specific culture. Values can be divided into primary values, secondary values, and tertiary values. Primary values are the most important values: they indicate what is worthy of sacrificing in human life. For example, in the United States, individualism and privacy are primary values. Secondary values include relieving the pain and suffer of other person. Possessions security is also a secondary value[13].

Values influence all aspects of people's perception and consequently affect people's belief and world view system. In the field of culture studies, people categorize culture into two parts-surface culture and deep culture. Scholars consider values to be the main part of deep culture, which is very difficult to acquire. Michael Prosser has pointed out that all people have their value systems and we think values are the deepest level of culture. We need to pay attention to some important characteristics of values. First, the values in a certain culture are not always the values of all individuals in that culture. They are always the values which are the mainstream value of the society[14]. Second, value guides people how to communicate with others. Both language contact and non-language contact is controlled by values. Chinese values and western values are so different that sometimes we hold entirely different ideas on the same thing. Third, once values are formed, they will not be changed easily. If a person lives in a foreign culture for a long time, he may know their language and customs, but it is difficult for them to know some parts of their values. Third, once values are formed, they will not be changed easily. If a person lives in a foreign culture for a long time, he may know their language and customs, but it is difficult for them to know some parts of their values.

4.3. Culture Shock

“Culture Shock” is first used in one of the academic papers written by Oberg in the year of 1960. He gives a detailed explanation of this phenomenon: “Culture Shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse.” Now it is very common and popular. It refers to the psychological reactions to unfamiliar environments.

Recent psychology tells us people tend to appreciate things that are more familiar to their culture. When we have a contact with another culture, and have a feeling of psychological and physical unease from this contact, we suffer from Culture Shock. Cultural shock can mean sadness, anger, invasion toward the new culture, or even completely withdraw from it, which may cause the obstacle of intercultural communication[15].

With the development of globalization, the international companies play a more and more important role in the world economic field. These companies send a lot of staff to other countries in order to expand their business. Many of these staff does not have experience of intercultural communication. They meet a lot of difficulties both in their work and lives. Failure comes one by one in their process of intercultural communication. Some of them have to go back to their

countries ahead of the schedule. From that we can see culture shock is a very common phenomenon.

The culture shock include four stages: honeymoon stage, hostility stage, adjustment stage and adaptation stage, as shown in Figure 4.

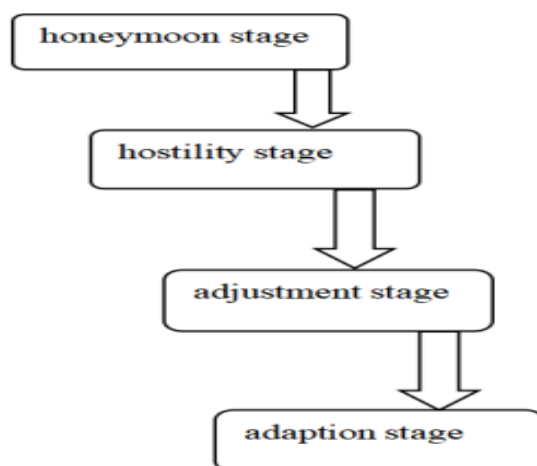


Figure 4. Four stages of cultural shock

Generally speaking, honeymoon stage contains three or four weeks. When tourists or businessmen visit a foreign country, they usually feel excited about everything in a new environment. In the second stage, people feel alone and disappointed in the new environment. They will have many difficulties in the intercultural communication with the local people. The third stage is adjustment stage. In this stage, people try to find ways to deal with the new language and culture environment. They begin to understand the customs and weak points in the foreign culture. They also establish relationship with some local people. Gradually, they adapt to the new culture and environment. Then the last stage---adaption stage comes. People in this stage can live in harmony with everything of the foreign culture. From the theoretical point of view, culture shock is inevitable. In fact, when you visit a foreign country, it is very useful for you to get some knowledge about the target culture. Then you will meet less culture shock and adapt yourself to the new life of the new country as soon as possible.

5. Conclusion

The thesis explains the main psychological factors in the process of intercultural communication such as stereotyping, ethnocentrism, prejudice, values, and culture shock. All of these contribute to the production of successful intercultural communication. According to research by the intercultural communication research center in Yale University, all kinds of intercultural communication behaviors are affected by psychological factors at different degrees, either consciously or unconsciously. In this thesis, we try to analyze in what way these psychological factors affect our process of communication and how they show themselves in the cultural differences. The research of the psychological factors in intercultural communication is becoming more important than ever in this increasingly global world. However, because of their sheer scope and complexity of the problems, it is never easy to bring the research of psychological factors to a completion. The research not only needs creative and logical thinking but also requires analytical and interpretive skill. In order to carry out efficient research in this field, we need to be sensitive and sensible

observers, careful and critical readers, individual and independent thinkers, so that we can conduct efficient methods in our foreign language teaching.

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Data Availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Conflict of Interest

The author states that this article has no conflict of interest.

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