Cross-Cultural Conversational Strategies Used by Chinese Students in Pakistan

Umaima Kamran
Associate Professor, Department of English, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan.
Email: umaima@qau.edu.pk

Saadia Abid
Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan.
Email: sabid@qau.edu.pk

Abstract
Cross-cultural communication is the study of ways people from multi-cultural backgrounds interact, in similar and different manners among themselves, and how they strive to converse cross culturally. This becomes particularly significant given potential frequency of interaction and/or the nature of relationship. The claim of Pakistan-China friendship with new economic agreements in the form of CPEC is opening up new avenues requiring effective cross-cultural communication. One of which is in the academic domain with an increased students exchange. The aim of the present research is to explore the cross-cultural conversational strategies used by female Chinese students at International Islamic University Islamabad, Pakistan while conversing in English. The current study focuses to identify their cultural context i.e. high context culture or low context culture by exploring their method of developing the topic, ways of responding difficult questions, participation in term of interaction, and their promptness of disagreement through verbal and nonverbal indications. The cultural framework of Hall (1976, 2000) is found particularly useful and is employed as a theoretical framework. For the elicitation of linguistics data, questionnaires (adapted from Xu Lin (2007) and interviews are used for data collection. The study concludes that the female Chinese students are low context people who rely on words, avoid silence and actively participate in the conversation for better understanding of the topic. It is evident from the responses of interviews as well as questionnaires that they actively engage in conversation; immediately disagree through verbal and nonverbal indications; do not give short answers instead try to develop the topic raised in the questions and even try to respond difficult questions.

Keywords: Cross-cultural conversational strategies; high/low context cultural; verbal and nonverbal indications.
1. Introduction

Cross cultural communication, also known as inter-cultural communication, studies communication patterns between people from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. This diversity is observed and experienced at both inter as well as intra cultural level. Given the scale of globalization where distances have reduced to an extent that the world is now being termed as a global village, cross cultural communication strategies have become ever more important. With increased trade and commerce transactions, academic exchange and tourism, inter-cultural dialogue has become a necessity. Of the countries that Pakistan shares borders with, the relationship with China always held a special place in political discourse. Additionally, the economic ties between the two countries have a long history. Both political as well as economic ties have taken a new course with CPEC in the process. People to people interaction has increased in terms of pervasiveness as well as frequency. Education is one such domain; the academic exchange, especially in terms of students has increased over the recent past. Additionally, the study of cross-cultural communication between Pakistanis and Chinese is particularly interesting given that the languages spoken in the two countries are nothing like each other; the phoenix, the rules, the script, the grammar, all is but different. The aim of present research is to explore the cross-cultural conversational strategies used by female Chinese students at International Islamic University, Islamabad while conversating in English.

Set with definite objectives, the research first discusses questions regarding engagement and interaction leading on to explore the barriers and coping strategies involved therein. Close attention is paid to participants’ response to research questions in order to identify their cultural context. Their willingness to interact in terms of active engagement or conversely resorting to silence helped elicit low or high cultural context. Their promptness of disagreement through verbal and nonverbal indications were also noted in detail.

Because of the limited scope of our research, five female Chinese students (undergraduate studying in Pakistan, International Islamic University Islamabad) were selected for participation. Data is collected in the form of questionnaire, interview and focus group interview.

1.1 Significance:
Cross-cultural communication is inevitable in contemporary times and for this reason is being increasingly recognized as an important area of research in linguistic and cultural studies.
Individuals are constantly pushed towards understanding each other’s culture through cross-cultural interaction. It is argued that transcending the linguistic barriers of different cultures will not only garner tolerance and appreciation for diversity but will also augment the process of knowledge production in the universities and institutes. This research is significant as it highlights the value of conversational strategies while communicating in non-native language. It also helps to understand how cultural groups may differ in their perceptions about preferred communication behavior. It is suggested that research in cross-cultural conversational strategies underscores the value of using these strategies to avoid ambiguity, evade biases that may hurt the hearer’s feeling, and negative evaluation by the hearer; thus, to improve effectiveness of communication.

2. Literature Review:

Martin and Nakayama (2010) defined cross-cultural communication as, “a communication pattern between people having different cultural identities. It is also comprehended as a face-to-face, or verbal, or nonverbal conversation/communication between people from distinctive cultures (Jakucionyte, 2020; Kosareva et al., 2019). Different terms like intercultural communication or multicultural communication are used interchangeably for referring to any research that defines the relationship between culture and communication (Croucher, 2021). However, the unprecedented increase in cross-cultural communication at a practical level led many scholars to trace out differences between multiple terms and determine an operational definition of the field with acutely clarifying individual and cultural constructs/variables (Levine et al., 2007). It has been notified that the research in the cross-cultural communication revolves around the techniques of comparing and contrasting the communication patterns of individuals belonging to different cultures with a special focus on the strategies implied by them to effectively communicate (Levine et al., 2007). This stands in contrast with intercultural communication where only the interaction process between individuals of different cultures is observed to examine how cultural characteristics of these distinctive cultures impact the interaction process. However, cross-cultural communication seems to align with other disciplines in the context that it is an amalgamation of various fields which include, communication, anthropology, business studies, cultural studies, and psychology. The field has also contributed to both, toward the conduct of inter-ethnic relations and
the learning of different strategies of communication employed by cross-cultural or multi-cultural inhabitants, to handle the mainstream populations (Fabian, 2019).

Commonly believed to have originated as a sub-field of business studies, the origin of the study of culture and communication can be traced to the post-World War II era (Liu, 2017: 159). In the context of ever-expanding businesses and advancements in economic relations from individual-country capitalism to global capitalism (Menaka, 2018), the United States framed the foundational ground of this study introducing the trend of training their employees. The founding of the United Nations and the growing realization of the need for effective political and economic ties between countries led to the ever-growing interest in the field. To provide effective and practical cross-cultural training to overseas personnel (ibid) and scale down ideological complexities, in the initial phases of this study, culture was conceptualized as ‘nationality’ with a strong emphasis on cross-cultural comparisons of verbal and nonverbal communication patterns. The investigation in this lieu highlights high vs low context culture, non-verbal differences, language differences, ethnocentrism, dispositions and attitudes, stereotyping as few of the generic challenges and barriers in cross-culture communication (Gayathri et al., 2018). It became imperative that these challenges are dealt with accordingly in the context of globalization, and businesses expanding to new geographic locations and cultures (Levine et al., 2007). Various strategies can be adopted to counter such challenges if one is aware of the cultural context. Bovée and Thill (2018) argue that communication is always happens within a cultural context including “pattern of physical cues, environmental stimuli, and implicit understanding that convey meaning between two members of the same culture”. High context culture relies more on the context i.e. situation and nonverbal indicators with lesser use of, whereas low context culture people count more on words and less on the context (Bovée & Thill: 2018). Given the pretext that in cross-cultural communication, the culture-level or the individual level is a meaningful and important unit of analysis (Levine et al., 2007), theorists and scholars suggest the use of gestures, eye contacts, facial expressions, and other nonverbal cues as a suitable way to avoid misunderstanding, facilitate communication, and bridge the gap between people of different cultures (Gayathari et al., 2018). It is especially true in the context of the education sector, where students of distinctive cultures come together, to apply the cross-culture communication techniques. It is noted that Higher education amongst the other education sectors has made conspicuous progress in contemporary times to cross the boundaries of nation-states. Bash (2009) confirms the phenomenon that universities have entered the global
periphery of corporatist activity since long, with university degrees’ “constituting items of currency which can be traded cross-nationally”. Literacy and acceptance of multicultural differences are crucial to functioning efficiently in a globalized academic world and to establish close and multi-faceted relationships. Students in such changing times are advised to tactfully deal with the challenges inherent in cross-cultural communication through implying various strategies like the use of verbal or nonverbal communication patterns (Linde, 1997), acute analysis of the unique features of stranger’s culture along with a non-judgmental and tolerant approach (Gudykunst & Kim: 2002), or the usage of a translator in extreme cases of confusion. Scholarly approach also recommends the comprehension of possible glitches of cross-cultural communique to rule out any complications and frustration in the process of cross-cultural communication. Notwithstanding the importance of cultural identities, Linde (1997) proposes that educational managers should focus on cultural universalia and thorough knowledge of inter-cultural communication.

3. Research Methodology:

Our research participants include five female Chinese students of IIUI. To control the variable of English language proficiency, those participants were selected who have completed their language skills development courses. All participants were students in the seventh semester of their Bachelors programme.

It is obvious that no approach rests on any one procedure, except only a few that rely completely on one kind of data collecting technique (Bell, 1999). The first priority was given to make every possible effort to efficiently collect data and cross check the findings adequately. For this reason, more than one method was employed for data collection. Triangulation is taken in to account as multiple methods are suitable where a controversial/complex aspect is to be evaluated in detail (Jaison, 2018: 65; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007).

For the elicitation of linguistics data, structured questionnaires and interviews were used. Questionnaires helped to provide the quantitative data needed for the study (Gillham, 2000). The questionnaire is adapted from Xu Lin (2007) who used it for the study of cultural dimensions and conversational strategies. All the questions were closed-ended with given Likert Scale. The questionnaire consists of two parts: The five questions in part one were designed to identify the participants’ preferences in conversation while part two is based on their practice of developing
The analysis provided descriptive and insightful data as to what decision had been taken by participants as well as recommendations regarding conversational strategies. On the other hand, qualitative interviews with open ended questionnaire were used keeping in view the multiple issues involved in the study. The following three primary questions were asked from each participant in the individual interview:

1. How is your experience of visiting Pakistan?
2. What is your opinion about education in Pakistan?
3. Do you suggest any change in education system of IIUI?

These questions were asked to understand their ways of developing a topic and response of difficult question. In the focus-group interview, the topic to generate debate and discussion (food, co-education, profession) was given and participants were asked to discuss their point of view on any one of these topics. The FGD ended with the researcher’s two-minute speech on the topic of ‘Education’ and participants were encouraged to ask questions or share queries in order to ensure active engagement. The purpose of this focus-group discussion was to confirm their preferred method of disagreement i.e. verbal or non-verbal as well as promptness of disagreement; immediate, later or never. The frequency of questions and interaction helped to understand their ways of participation in terms of interaction. Notes were taken on the already prepared checklist. The checklist is attached in the appendix.

4. **Data Analysis:**

Data is analyzed by managing the contents of questionnaires and interviews into categories and the responses are shown in the form of tables.

In Table 1, first column shows all the contents of the questionnaire condensed into five categories and each category is written in a row. Next three columns show the response of thirty participants whereas the column five reflects the average response.
Table 1: Questionnaire data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Avoidance of silence</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Average Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10 participants</td>
<td>12 participants</td>
<td>8 participants</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Active participation is desirable</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10 participants</td>
<td>20 participants</td>
<td></td>
<td>agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic should be Developed</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Should not Respond difficult question</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Somewhat agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>07 participants</td>
<td>05 participants</td>
<td>18 participants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Showing Disagreement</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Somewhat disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>04 participants</td>
<td>19 participants</td>
<td>07 participants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Table 2, first column shows the contents of interview which are manner of disagreement, promptness of disagreement and frequency of interactions during two-minutes speech of the researcher respectively. Next five columns of the table present the responses of five participants and column six shows the average response. Table 2 is generated through the results of individual interviews and focus-group interview, noted through check list.
Table 2: Interview data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>Participant # 1</th>
<th>Participant # 2</th>
<th>Participant # 3</th>
<th>Participant # 4</th>
<th>Participant # 5</th>
<th>Average Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manner of disagreement</td>
<td>Verb 2 times</td>
<td>Non-verbal 3 times</td>
<td>Verb 5 times</td>
<td>Non-verbal 4 times</td>
<td>Non-verbal 2 times</td>
<td>Verb Non-verbal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promptness of disagreement</td>
<td>later</td>
<td>immediate</td>
<td>Immediate</td>
<td>immediate</td>
<td>immediate</td>
<td>immediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of interactions</td>
<td>2 times</td>
<td>5 times</td>
<td>3 times</td>
<td>3 times</td>
<td>2 times</td>
<td>3 times</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The average of the five responses shows that all participants agreed on the avoidance of silence and showing disagreement, whereas all participants strongly agreed on the active participation of the interlocutors and good development of a topic generating discussion. The responses of the second part of the questionnaire also reveals their interest in development of a topic. From the interview data their actual practice of using cross-cultural conversational strategies is obvious; that all participants communicate their disagreement by using both verbal and nonverbal forms, that they do not hesitate at all in showing disagreement and they prefer to interact and actively participate during a conversation.

5. Conclusion:

After interacting with the Chinese students in Pakistan, it can be concluded that Chinese female students are low context people, who rely on words, as they avoid silence and actively participate in a discussion to clarify the topic and for better understanding. It is evident from their responses of interviews as well as questionnaires that they keenly engage in conversation and immediately disagree, if need be, through verbal and nonverbal indications. They do not only give short answers but try to develop the topic raised in the questions and even try to respond to difficult question through extended interaction.
About the Authors:

Currently, Dr. Umaina Kamran is chairing the Department of English, Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad, Pakistan. She is a team-builder and able to develop good rapport with students and colleagues and create an atmosphere of mutual sharing, understanding and transfer of knowledge. Her duties include looking after the official matters of the department, teaching courses, supervising graduate and post-graduate researchers, developing/ modifying curriculum as per modern learning needs of academia and organizing different meetings, tutorials, hand-on trainings, web/seminars, and conferences in the department.

Dr. Kamran has got twenty-two research articles published in the field of English linguistics and literature. She is highly interested in research for keeping pace with the evolving trends. Skilled in communication, research designing, implementation, analysis and report writing. She has expertise in development of projects, and carrying out research; dealing with respondents; collecting and analyzing data; using various tools such as PRATT and optimality theory, etc.

Dr. Saadia Abid is working as an Assistant Professor at the Department of Anthropology, Quaid-i-Azam University. Her research primarily centers on issues related to gender, class, identity construction and alterity aspects. Abid has a keen interest in contextualizing and deconstructing various forms of disparities and marginalization resulting from patriarchy, capitalism, colonization and globalization. Apart from this, she has a keen interest in exploring the relationship between language, culture and communication. She has obtained her PhD from University of Vienna, Austria, and is a trained anthropologist having an expertise in ethnographic research methods.

Abid has worked as research fellow for several international projects including, “Peaceful Change Violent Conflict: the transformation of the Middle East and Western-Muslim relations” and “South Asian Network to Address Masculinities” sponsored by DAAD (Germany) and Save the Children (Sweden) respectively.

References


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Appendices

Cross-cultural Conversational Strategies of Chinese Students

A. Questionnaire

We are conducting a survey on conversational strategies of female Chinese student of IIUI while conversation in English. Your answers will be treated confidentially, so we would appreciate your answering each question. Thank you very much for your participation in this survey.

Class and Semester: __________

Part I: Please choose the degree to which you agree or disagree with each statement. Then, briefly explain your reason.

1 = strongly agree 2 = somewhat agree 3 = neutral 4= somewhat disagree 5 = strongly disagree

1. In conversation you should develop the topic, not just answer the question.

1 2 3 4 5

2. In conversation active participation such as asking questions is desirable.

1 2 3 4 5
3. It would be better to express disagreement immediately if you don’t agree with another person’s opinion.

1 2 3 4 5

Part II: Please circle the response that most closely corresponds to the response you would give for each situation. If you find another response that you think would be better than the one you would normally give, please double circle the answer.

1. Suppose that you had experience staying in Japan. How would you respond to the following question: "Have you ever been to Japan?"

(1) "Yes."
(2) "Yes, I’ve been to Japan."
(3) "Yes, when I was in high school, I went to Japan."
(4) "Yes, when I was in high school, I went to Japan as an exchange student. I had lots of new experiences such as trying sushi, visiting Japanese shrines, and going to a festival. It was great!"

Different answer:

2. Suppose that you wanted to visit England. How would you respond to the following question: "Which country would you like to visit?"

(1) "England."
(2) "England because it’s interesting."
(3) "England because I’m interested in the culture."
(4) "England because I saw some historical buildings on TV, and I would like to see them with my own eyes. How about you?"

Different answer:

3. When asked how your weekend was when you hadn’t done anything special, how would you respond?
(1) "So-so."

(2) "It was so-so because I couldn’t do what I wanted to do."

(3) "It was a pity that it wasn’t fine."

(4) "I wish it had been fine so that I could have gone on a picnic. I was really looking forward to getting outside."

Different answer:

4. When asked what you know about Australia, how would you answer?

(1) "Nothing much."

(2) "Australia has koalas."

(3) "Australia has a vast land and many unusual animals."

(4) "Australia is a peaceful country with a vast land and rich natural resources. I’d really like to go there someday."

Different answer:

5. When asked about deforestation, how would you answer?

(1) "I think it’s bad."

(2) "I feel that air pollution is getting worse."

(3) "It has caused serious problems in various parts of the world."

(4) "People in developing countries have no other choice but to cut trees for a living, so people in developed countries should think out ways to avoid deforestation, for example, by recycling paper."

Different answer:

6. When told, "Teenagers have bad manners, for example, they use cellular phones in the train and talk loudly with their friends," if you disagreed, how would you answer?

(1) "That may be true."
(2) "That may be true of some people."

(3) "Aren’t there some teenagers who have polite manners?"

(4) "Not all teenagers have bad manners. It’s just that people with bad manners are so conspicuous."

Different answer:

7. Regarding the comment, "I think it’s good that the Internet has come into wide use. We can do lots of things with it, such as shopping, watching TV or movies, sending e-mails to our friends who live all over the world," if you wanted to state disagreement, how would you answer?

(1) "That may be true."

(2) "Most things have positive and negative aspects."

(3) "Hasn’t the Internet also influenced people negatively?"

(4) "The Internet has also influenced people negatively. Those people who are hooked on it have little communication with their family. Moreover, children with little knowledge of the Internet are involved in crimes."

Different answer:

**B. Check List for Note Taking**

1. How they disagree?
   
   Verbal  Non-Verbal

2. Promptness of disagreement.
   
   Immediately  Later  Never

3. How many times they interact and ask questions during two minutes’ speech of a researcher?