



1 An Introduction to Intercultural Communication

1.1 The Scope of Intercultural Communication

Sometimes intercultural conversations go very smoothly and are extremely intriguing; think of a walk at sunset on a beautiful beach, for example. At other times, participants unexpectedly run into some turbulence and things don't go as well as planned. The walk on the beach is interrupted by a violent storm. In intercultural communication, a conversation might be interrupted by a "storm" or a clash. Culture clashes will be discussed in Chapter 2. People who live near the ocean can affirm that the scene there never looks exactly the same from day to day. Although there is always water, shore, and sky, the exact color and combinations available each day can change quite noticeably (sometimes bolder and more striking in appearance and at other times softer and nuanced). Intercultural interactions can have the same type of beauty and variation.

Read this intercultural exchange between a seller and a customer.

*Arab seller (after first noticing
a potential customer walking by):*

*Uh, English? You're from English, are
you?*

Chinese customer:

It's none of your business.

Arab seller:

Who learn English?

Uh, come inside. Come in.

Excerpt from Arent, R. *The Pragmatics of Cross-Cultural Bargaining*, 1998.

- What is your initial reaction to the participants in this exchange?
- What do you think the seller was trying to communicate?
- What was the customer's message?
- Do you think each was successful? Why or why not?
- How does culture impact the way we perceive and understand each other?

Today, communicating is affected by many different aspects of human language and behavior; for example, nonverbal communication can be just as relevant as the exact language forms chosen. Most of the time, however, we are not fully conscious of the assumptions and beliefs involved in a communication exchange with someone from another culture.

Intercultural communication is the sending and receiving of messages across languages and cultures. It is also a negotiated understanding of meaning in human experiences across social systems and societies. When we talk of other cultures, we mean not only those who speak a language that is different from ours or who live in a different country or region; we also mean those who live in the same city or region but who do not share the same social groups. For example, a 14-year-old teenager does not typically communicate the same way as an 82-year-old senior citizen. Even if they were born and raised in the same neighborhood (in the city or in a rural area), their conversation could be just as "intercultural" as two people who come from opposite corners of the globe because they are from two subcultures. A subculture is a smaller group within a larger culture that shares language or behavioral patterns that are different from the larger group.

Activity Set 1



Task 1

How would you define culture? Make notes here to use as part of the class discussion. See Appendix A for specific guidelines on large group discussions.



Task 2

Review the definition of intercultural communication on page 2. Is this definition complete? Is it clear enough? Can you suggest any changes that would make it better? Make notes here to use as part of the class discussion.



Task 3

Have you ever been in a situation where you were surrounded by members of another culture or subculture and you did not understand what was happening? List the key details of one such experience, and then describe it to a partner.



Task 4

As Bob Harris arrives in Tokyo and first interacts with Japanese citizens, describe the physical environment, the participants, and the types of interaction. What differences between Japanese and U.S. culture did you notice? Be specific, and then talk about it in a group. See Appendix A for specific guidelines on small group discussions.



Lost in Translation (2003, Universal)

Countries/Cultures: Japan and United States

Timing: 01:14–04:06



Task 5

What does it mean to *haggle properly*? What is the seller trying to teach the buyer? In the marketplace, what behavior is expected in this culture? Can you share any similar stories? What can we learn about other cultures from watching movies like this? Can movie scenes ever mislead us? Explain here, and then talk about it in a group.



Life of Brian (1979, Paramount)
Countries/Cultures: Ancient Israel and Rome (with some Great Britain)
Timing: 46:14–48:25

1.2 How Can We Understand Each Other?

How then do we understand each other if we do not always share the same perspectives? This is a question you will attempt to answer as you read this book. Communication of any type usually happens very quickly. Communicating “across” cultures is even more complicated because we tend to interpret messages in split seconds based on the past experiences and the cultural grids that were passed down to us in our home cultures. A cultural grid is a framework of understanding for processing verbal and nonverbal cues specific to a particular culture. We are usually not aware of the many ways that culture can influence the way we listen to, speak to, and understand other human beings.

We, of course, base much of our understanding on the verbal and nonverbal cues available to us. Verbal cues are the words and sounds people emit when communicating. Nonverbal cues are facial expressions, gestures, and other things that don't require sound, but still offer a message. For example, when someone wants to agree, he or she can verbally say "yes," or nonverbally nod their head, or both. Communication must be placed into a framework of understanding or it is meaningless. That framework is based on assumptions from our home culture and any other cultures that we have come into contact with. Everyone has had some experience with verbal and nonverbal cues, but there is no one who fully understands all of the languages and cultures in the world and how they are similar and different from one another. To bridge the intercultural communication gaps, several personal characteristics are helpful: patience, a sense of humor, and an open mind toward different points of view.

Some aspects of intercultural communication are simple and well understood. Others are somewhat embarrassing, complicated, and mysterious. Therefore, some intercultural communications might go smoothly and participants will find them easy. Others, especially those that contain a participant from a culture the other knows little about, may prove more challenging. There is still a lot to be learned.

Activity Set 2



Task 6

What strategies have you used when you could see problems while communicating with someone else? What did you do to make your message clear? What did you do to better understand what the other person was telling you? Make notes, and then be prepared to share your answers with a partner.



Task 7

Charlotte has hurt her toe, and it is now bruised so badly that Bob insists that she must visit a local hospital to have it checked.

What type of communication difficulties do they experience in the hospital (at the front desk and in the waiting room)? What do you think the Japanese woman was asking Bob? What specific strategies were used to bridge their language and culture gaps? Make notes here, and then describe them to a group.



Lost in Translation (2003, Universal)

Countries/Cultures: Japan and United States

Timing: 59:54–1:02:48

1.3 Characteristics of Effective Listeners

Listening happens in several different ways.

1. discrete (bottom-up)
2. global (top-down)
3. interactive (combining discrete and global at the same time)

Discrete listening often involves listening for specific information (like a number or name), while **global listening** primarily means listening for the main idea and the corresponding subtopics. An **interactive listening** approach combines both.

Can listening be directly observed? Most people would say no. We can notice in a conversation (from watching body language or other cues) whether someone *appears* to be listening, but do people really *know* what is going on inside of someone else's head?

What does it mean to be an effective listener? Although there are perhaps a number of factors involved, many experts feel that **active listening** is the most important one.

An active listener:

- **stays focused on the speaker's main points** (more global than discrete)
- **tunes out all potential distractions** (or asks for time to remove them)
- **offers the fullest possible attention** (manages any emotional reactions, especially if a particular word or phrase hits a nerve or touches on a sensitive area)
- **gives signals that he or she is listening as objectively as possible** (uses eye contact or other nonverbal cues, or fillers, such as *yeah, uh huh, ok, I know what you mean*, or equivalent expressions in another language)
- **is flexible and open-minded when new topics or ideas are raised** (these concepts are culture specific in practice, but the general point remains that these traits have a positive impact on overall listening effectiveness)
- **asks for clarification if anything is unclear** (how that is done will depend on the language and culture involved; all languages have a way to ask questions and make clarification requests)
- **validates the speaker's main points** (conveying that they are received, considered, and under review; such validation may be verbal, nonverbal, or both)

Validation can only occur if the previous steps are followed. Some listeners do not perform all these steps all the time, but good habits and skills take time to develop. As the saying goes: "Practice makes perfect."

When people communicate with active listeners, they are often not conscious of exactly what happened between them. They likely enjoyed the conversation. They may have laughed, felt encouraged, or sensed that their perspective was well understood. Active listening techniques are among the best tools available for bridging language and culture gaps.

Activity Set 3



Task 8

Which of the seven characteristics of active listening do you use regularly? Which are the most difficult for you? What can you do to become more effective in these areas?



Task 9

With a partner, go to a busy area of your campus or neighborhood (with a lot of noise and distractions). Begin talking (on a topic of your choice), and practice the seven active listening techniques for at least 15 minutes. After 15 minutes, list the techniques that were difficult to follow and what adjustments you made in reaction to the busy environment. Discuss this with a partner.

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Task 10

Watch a movie or TV show that contains a conversation involving active listening techniques. Examples are movies *Down in the Delta*, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, *K-Pax*, or *What about Bob?* and TV shows like “Seinfeld” or “Friends.” List the name of the program, who was talking, the situation, and the active listening techniques observed. If it is possible to bring the video clip to class, share it with your classmates.



Task 11

Describe one of your accomplishments to your partner. List three or four facts about the accomplishment. Your partner will practice active listening techniques. When you are finished, ask your partner to tell you what the main points of your talk were. Decide whether your main points were understood by your partner or not. Then, change roles and listen to your partner.



Task 12

Describe a frustrating moment in your life. List three or four facts about it. Your partner will practice active listening techniques. When you are finished, ask your partner to tell you what the main points of your talk were. Decide whether your main points were understood by your partner or not. Then, change roles and listen to your partner.

1.4 Characteristics of Effective Speakers

What does it mean to speak a language well? People generally considered to be effective speakers use speech that is **accurate** (that is, it follows grammar rules correctly) and **fluent** (that is, it is delivered in a smooth manner with appropriate pauses). They also match their speech to their specific audience and the purpose for communication. When you are giving an answer for a test, for example, your primary focus is usually on accuracy. When you are telling a story to friends in a conversation, your main focus is usually on fluency. Although accuracy and fluency are clearly *both* important, an increase in one area often leads to a decrease in the other.

Even eloquent and famous speakers sometimes make a mistake or a **slip of the tongue** when communicating with others. To err is human. One of the greatest lessons in language learning is to allow yourself freedom to experiment with new words and expressions and understand that mistakes are part of that learning process.

Activity Set 4



Task 13

In general, do you think your speech is more accurate or more fluent? In which speaking situations is your speech least accurate? In which speaking situations is your speech least fluent? Be specific.



Task 14

Some people think that speaking in front of a large group is one of the scariest experiences a person could ever face, even more frightening than death. If you had to give a speech on live TV in front of millions of people, how accurate and how fluent would you need to be to deliver the speech successfully? How would you feel if the speech were required to be in English (or another second language)? How would you feel if the speech were required to be in your native language?



Task 15

Give a ten-minute oral presentation to your classmates on an important lesson you learned from someone from another culture (other than your home culture). See Appendix A for specific guidelines on speeches. Use the feedback form on page 130 as you listen to your classmates give their speeches for this chapter and throughout the text.

1.5 Taking Effective Notes to Record Important Information

At times you will have to capture important information from the spoken language heard in films, lectures, conversations, or debates. There are many ways to take effective notes (typed on a computer or handwritten on paper) that will help you remember the most important information. Here are some specific suggestions:

- **Your notes should be organized by each main idea.** Many note-takers number these main ideas so that they are easier to notice when the notes are read quickly.
- **You should focus on key words.** Many smaller words can be skipped if they are not essential to the basic meaning.
- **You should use abbreviations** to save time. As long as you understand the meaning of each abbreviation you use, you can use any abbreviation that you want. If your notes are only written for yourself, it doesn't really matter if anyone else can understand them.

Here are some abbreviation examples:

- (leads to)
- ↔ (two-way relationship, two factors influence each other)
- = (equals)
- & (and)
- w/ (with)
- w/o (without)

betw	(between)
bc	(because)
alth	(although)
dep	(depends on)
rel	(relationship)
e.g.	(for example)
i.e.	(that is)
+	(plus, increase)
-	(minus, decrease)
~	(approximately, about)
@	(at)

- **You should not be writing every minute that someone else is talking**, or you won't be able to hear new points. You also need to listen carefully and evaluate the information you are hearing so you can best capture the full meaning of the content in your notes.
- **Use as few words as possible.** Your goal is to write all the main points and all the key subpoints you heard. There will be a number of words and details that are not essential to the basic outline of the talk. These unimportant words and details do not need to be recorded in your notes.
- **Make sure you have comprehended the important points** (or main ideas) and the relationship between them.
- **If you miss a piece of information, leave a space in your notes where it belongs and ask someone** afterward to clarify what that missing piece is. Until the talk is over, however, keep listening to the rest of the presentation or additional content might be lost.
- **Meet in a study group shortly after the talk is over.** Participating in a study group is a great way to compare your understanding of the key information with someone else's understanding. By discussing what you heard in the film, lecture, conversation, or debate, you can determine as a group what the main ideas and important details actually are. As they say, two or three heads are better than one!

Activity Set 5



Task 16

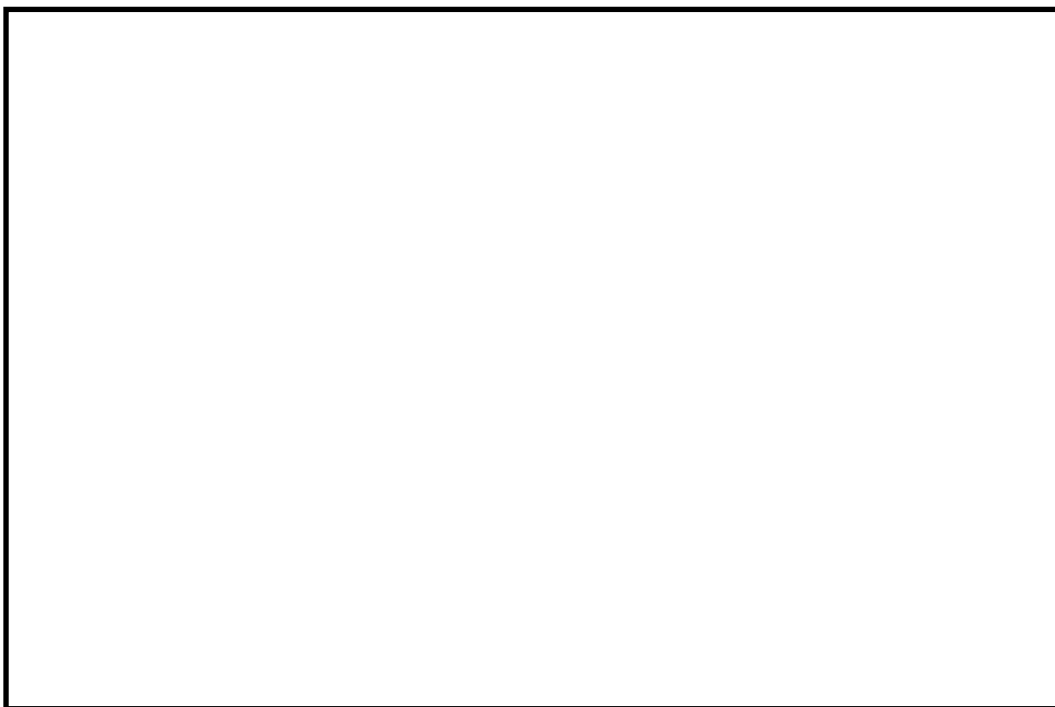
Which of the note-taking abbreviations on pages 13–14 have you seen and used before? Are there abbreviations that you use that don't appear on the list? This is okay. What abbreviations do you regularly use?



Task 17

Listen carefully to the lecture on intercultural communication. Answer the questions on pages 16–17 using only the information in the lecture. Use abbreviations as necessary and follow the other note-taking guidelines mentioned on pages 13–14. Use the space on page 16 for your notes.

Notes



1. In no more than two sentences, what is the main idea of the lecture?

2. What specific subtopics can you identify?

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3. What does the word *exhaust* mean in this lecture?

4. Based on the lecture, what percentage of your message in a conversation is carried by nonverbal communication?

5. Research in intercultural communication usually involves strictly-controlled scientific experiments. True or False

6. Intercultural communication is a soft science. True or False

7. In India, _____ bilingual positions will go unfilled.

8. What was the main point about the example of high-definition TV set? Be specific.
