

## Cross-cultural Miscommunication: Effects on ESOL learners and Sequences for ESOL Teachers

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سوء التواصل بين الثقافات : الآثار المترتبة على طلبة اللغة الانجليزية كلغة

ثانية ، وما يترتب عليه لمعلمي طلبة اللغة الانجليزية كلغة ثانية

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جامعة بغداد / كلية الاعلام / قسم الصحافة

DOI 10.58564/MABDAA.62.1.2023.257

### Abstract

This is a review of the paper by which is done by Jinyan Huang, Erin Dotterweich and Ashleigh Bowers on Cross-Cultural Miscommunication that exists in North America learning institutions. The review touches on all the areas that the education experts have addressed in their paper; causes of intercultural miscommunication, including what leads to cross-cultural misunderstandings, how they affect English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students, and what it means for ESOL instructors.

المستخلص :

هذه مراجعة للورقة التي أعدها جينيان هوانغ وإيرين دوترفيتش وأشلي باورز حول سوء التواصل الثقافي الموجود في مؤسسات التعلم في أمريكا الشمالية. تتناول المراجعة جميع المجالات التي تناولها خبراء التعليم في ورقتهم البحثية؛ أسباب سوء التواصل بين الثقافات، بما في ذلك ما يؤدي إلى سوء الفهم الثقافي، وكيف يؤثر ذلك على طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية، وماذا يعني ذلك بالنسبة لمدرسي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية

### Introduction

The paper appreciates the fact that the number of ESOL students attending North American learning institutions has been on the rise since 1980s, which is a good start as knowing the approximate number of ESOL students goes along way in determining the impact of ESOL on students and its implication for teachers. The experts point out that insufficient proficiency in English language on the part of ESOL students hinders them from effectively communicating with students whose native language is English. The situation is even made worse by the fact that ESOL students do not know local culture. This makes it impossible for ESOL students to effectively gain from cross-cultural learning activities.

### Culture and Language

To better understand the impact of intercultural miscommunication and its implications on ESOL teachers, the three experts set out to establish a link between culture and language, which is very commendable. It is commendable because understanding the link makes it easy for one to identify causes of cross-cultural misunderstanding and their effect on ESOL teachers.

The three experts show clearly how culture relates to language by citing relevant past scholarly works. They cite work by Liddicoat (2008), who states that culture and language are inseparable because a language's structure and how it is used is informed by the culture in which the language is spoken. This is indeed supported

by both Kuo and Lai (2006) who state that “culture not only changes people’s values and habits but also affects people’s language and behavior.

The paper also points out that language is not static but adapts to existing culture through introduction of new vocabulary and development of slang words as time elapses. The paper goes further to emphasize that culture is not merely a part of any language but an integral part of a language as has been pointed out by Chang (2002), (Crago, Eriks-Brophy, Pesco, & McAlpine (1997), Liddicoat (2008). From the paper, communication is how a language is culturally used in that cultural context to relay a cultural meaning.

From above, culture need not be treated as a factor in the process of communication but rather as the main communication channel. Culture indeed informs a language, determining how the language is spoken, in effect enabling successful communication. The paper points out a very important fact when it comes to ascertaining how culture relates to a language. For instance, the paper points out that it is hard to notice culture in a language especially when communication process is multicultural. The paper gives clear reasons why noticing culture in such a setting is hard, pointing out that values, beliefs and topics are shared in different cultures. The paper also points put the complexities involved in a language’s grammatical and lexical items.

### **Intercultural Communication**

When addressing issues relating to intercultural communication, the paper delves into how second language is acquired, pointing out that past studies on the issue largely dwelt on accuracy with strong focus on phonological, lexical and grammatical elements. To their credit, the three experts also illustrate how acquisition of second language has changed with time.

The change, according to Chang (2009), focused on acquisition of vital skills relating to acquisition of second language; when to speak, how to speak and who to speak to. As pointed out in the paper, these are skills that can be very difficult to transfer from one language to another while maintaining the same linguistic rules.

The experts define intercultural communication as sociality that exists between two different cultures, a definition that is fairly accurate. The exports defend their definition by stating that intercultural communication is not merely the transfer of information from one language to another but also transferring information while preserving social relationships. Transfer of information can be verbally or through physical expression such as by nodding and smiling.

The paper appreciates the role importance of intercultural communication not only in preserving social relationships but also in the development of global economy and technology. It is indeed through understandable intercultural communication that people from different cultures can interact and understand each other.

The paper also appreciates that two people from different cultures naturally harbor assumptions on how communication between them should proceed with each relying on his/her assumptions. This is a situation where communication breakdown can occur, which is what the paper refers to as intercultural miscommunication. According to Chang (2009), the study of intercultural miscommunication is therefore very important for the benefit of ESOL students in North American learning institutions.

### **Cross-cultural Miscommunication**

As has already been indicated, intercultural miscommunication is the breakdown of communication between two people who come from different cultural backgrounds. Breakdown in communication is in most cases attributed to the fact that each one interacts with the other on the basis of his/her cultural assumption on how communication should proceed. This is the same challenge that ESOL students face as they transfer their cultural language skills to communicating in English language. In this regard, they employ their native language communication rules when communication in English language, which leads to communication breakdown.

This challenge is further made clear by Chick (1996) as cited in the paper. According to Chick, communication breakdown between two people from two different cultural backgrounds occurs because of direct social-linguistic transfer, which involves one sticking to his/her cultural way of speaking when communicating with another person from a different cultural background.

Chic presents a very appropriate example of how intercultural miscommunication can occur by giving example of how giving and accepting compliments differs in different cultures. While in one culture one can appreciate a compliment but reject it politely, the same compliment may readily be accepted without any reservations.

The first instance presents a scenario where one giving compliment that is appreciated but rejected may take it to mean rudeness, which is certainly a case of miscommunication because of direct social-cultural transfer. The experts go step further to indicate that intercultural miscommunication is not limited to verbal miscommunication. They cite Esposito (2007) who points out that intercultural miscommunication can also occur through various other communication means such as gestures, eye contact, eye movement, response time, physical contact, voice intonations and personal space. Bratanic gives the example of closed door, which means different things in different cultures.

#### **Effect of Cross-cultural Miscommunication on ESOL Learners**

The impact that intercultural miscommunication on ESOL students learning in North American institutions has clearly been illustrated by the three experts. They point out that the first challenge that these students face is culture shock, which according to Anderson (1992) causes anxiety, depression and feeling of helplessness on the part of the students. Worse still, North American teachers teach ESOL students North American culture with assumption that doing so makes it easy for the students to fit in the local culture and therefore use English language proficiently. This teaching approach ignores the students' own culture and the teachers do not make any effort to understand the students' culture.

The experts rightly acknowledge that because the students have their own culture, they hold on to their own values, beliefs and traditions that according to Anderson (2009) inform their identity. Ignoring these is certainly damaging to the students as they suffer psychological damage, which impacts negatively on their learning.

The paper looks at a number of studies done in the past, studies showing that intercultural miscommunication is not only evident among ESOL students; intercultural miscommunication can also emanate from English-speakers due to cultural barriers. According to Chang (2002), the blame leveled on non-English speakers as being the cause of intercultural miscommunication therefore does not stand. Because ESOL students do feel embarrassed when blamed, they find it a serious challenge to speak freely, which again impacts negatively on their academic performance.

#### **Consequences for ESOL Teachers**

The paper encourages ESOL teachers to understand that their non-English speaking students come from different cultural backgrounds, which affect how they learn a second language. The linguistic differences they come across while learning a second language can easily lead to intercultural miscommunication.

The paper therefore encourages ESOL teachers to help their students in understanding North American culture. This can be by use of films and media clips for the purpose of introducing the students to the process of interaction in the new culture. Students get an opportunity to learn the use of vocabulary and acceptable interaction values of North American culture. Pegrum (2008) declared that, it is only through such practice that ESOL students can be able to compare North American culture with their own and know how to prevent miscommunication.

In addition to use of films, the paper also encourages ESOL teachers to organize classroom discussions bringing together North American and ESOL students for the purpose of giving ESOL students the opportunity to acquire basic conversation skills. Teaching ESOL students on how and when to use such words as "sorry" and "pardon" when they do not understand anything during a conversation goes along way in helping them acquire the necessary English-language communication skills.

The paper brings up a very important issue when it comes to helping ESOL students avoid cultural miscommunication. The experts encourage ESOL teachers to involve native English-speaking students to in teaching ESOL students. In this regard, native English-speaking students need to be given the responsibility of ensuring that their ESOL counterparts speak correctly by correcting them whenever they make mistakes in the course of conversation.

Perhaps the major implication for ESOL teachers is the need for them to understand their ESOL students' cultures. Because intercultural miscommunication is caused by cultural differences, knowing their students' cultures can be very beneficial in helping the teachers employ appropriate teaching methodologies for the benefit of their ESOL students. The paper indicates that ESOL teachers can easily learn other cultures through professional development. ESOL teachers who take up these measures are better positioned to help their ESOL students excel academically.

#### **Comparison**

Other studies example Kerekes (2004), who investigated the different challenges of teaching and learning English as a second language outside of the classroom. The author distinguished the lacking of require

linguistic skills to support learners in their way through verbal interactions based on the interlocutors speakers applied in learner's everyday activities. This study differ from the one conducted by Huang, Dotterweich and Bowers (2012) in which it was mainly relaying on the intercultural activities, while Kerekes,s study was mainly relaying on whether the learners were familiar or not with rules of pragmatic appropriateness in particular English-speaking settings. With not considering such aspects, ESL learners' verbal performance can have serious drawbacks affecting their future learning. Huang and others gathered their study's data based on interview transcriptions, triangulated with other data sources from an employment agency. Doing so, the authors were capable to address the main features of gate-keeping encounters which demonstrate the interlocutors' pragmatic competence, and which can be better by developing awareness's level of ESL teachers and students in terms of their key characteristics in order to increase the chances of successful outcomes.

Another relevant study was conducted by Johnson (1995) in order to reports on asimulation adapted among ESL/EFL teacher in a course in intercultural communication. The process was based on having a design with an atmosphere reflecting unfamiliar and uncomfortable aspects that culturally similar to what student would experience in a foreign environment.

Unlike Huang, Dotterweich and Bowers (2012) study, Johnson's one used a deeper approach by applying three weeks activities in order to enable students greet each other through the whole semester during the opening and closing of class. The types of greetings were used in the Yoruba (West Africa) culture. However, Huang and colleagues did not consider conducting an intercultural miscommunication to help students recognize themselves as cultural beings whose cultural beliefs would influence the learning process of their own students. This led us to conclude that culture shock process reserve a place among several students which included different characteristics such as feelings, anger, and then acceptance.

### Conclusion

Huang, Dotterweich and Bowers (2012) conclude by showing how important intercultural communication is very important in North American learning institutions. It stresses the need for ESOL teachers to take up the indicated measures for the purpose of helping their ESOL students communicate freely with their native-English speaking counterparts without making any mistakes that can lead to intercultural miscommunication. By helping their ESOL students learn North American culture while at the same time understanding their students culture, ESOL teachers will not only helped their ESOL students avoid intercultural miscommunication but also help them perform well in their academic work.

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