

# Different Communication Styles—Cultural Matters

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In the paper the author tries to analyze the cultural differences behind the different communication styles between the Chinese students and the Saudi ones who study in the United States. The author thinks that the different religions make the big difference.

*Keywords:* communication styles, cultures, religion, Confucianism, Islam

## Introduction

When I was studying in a university in the United States, I went to the English Corner which was organized by some kind native American people on the campus to help the foreign people to practice speaking English. There we were given some certain topics to talk about each time. The foreign people were mostly students from Saudi Arabia, with some others from China, South Korea, Japan, etc. Very soon I noticed that the students from Saudi Arabia liked to talk and could express themselves fairly well, no matter how long they had stayed in the United States, while students from China were fairly shy and liked to keep silent during the course of the free talk, which I was used to since that is what most of the Chinese students do in such kind of situations. The striking differences in communication styles between the Chinese students and the Saudi ones in the United States are striking, which arouses the author's interest in studying what factors lead to those differences.

## The Observed Differences Between the Chinese Students and the Saudi Students

According to the statistics about the overseas students in the university where I was studying, the students from China rank the first and those from Saudi Arabia rank the second. At the English Corner, the students from Saudi Arabia make up the major part. According to the number of the students, there should have been more Chinese students coming to the English Corner. The Saudi students like to participate in such kind of activities more than their Chinese counterparts. They show more interest in talking to other people and stronger desires to practice speaking. There are some fairly new Saudi students at the English corner and there are always new ones coming.

At the English corner, the students from Saudi Arabia like to talk much more than the Chinese counterparts. The Saudi students, whether they have stayed in America for a long time, like six months or more, or have just arrived in America yesterday, like to participate in the talk much, even though they have some difficulty expressing themselves well. The Chinese students talk when they are asked questions. Some of them can speak very well, yet still they do not show much willingness to participate in the free talk. They would rather keep silent during the free talk, listening to others silently, smiling or nodding sometimes to indicate that they are listening.

In some classes mixed with the Chinese students and the Saudi ones I observed in the university, I found that students responding to the teachers' questions were mostly Saudi ones, although sometimes their responses might be short, simple, or inaccurate. The Chinese students chose to keep silent throughout the class, reading the book or doing something else. They did not respond to the questions orally. According to an American professor, in his math class, almost all his Chinese students always kept silent throughout the class.

Generally speaking, the Saudi students are more interesting, more humorous, and more talkative, while the Chinese students are more serious-looking, more boring, and less talkative.

### **Communication Styles and Religions**

As a college teacher of English in China for more than 10 years, when the students keep silent in class, I tend to think that is due to the inefficiency of my teaching approaches. But when I noticed the striking differences between the Saudi students and the Chinese ones, I began to think differently. Maybe something else attributed to the Chinese students' silence in class. What is that? Cultural matters may be the answer. What is culture? According to Bates (1988), culture is "a relatively organized set of beliefs and expectations about how people should talk, think, and organize their lives", so everything in our life is affected by the culture we have been raised in. Communication styles are no exception. In each culture, there are five basic elements, that is, history, religion, values, social organization, and language. In this essay, I will focus on religion since the religious influences on the way the students communicate are so salient.

(1) Communication styles can be defined as the way one verbally, nonverbally, and paraverbally interacts to signal how literal meaning should be taken, interpreted, filtered, or understood. The ability to communicate is critical to reflecting one's culture or ethnicity. Five communication traits are communication apprehension, willingness to communicate, self-perceived communication competence, argumentativeness, and self-disclosure. In order to fulfill successful communication, one needs to show the willingness to communicate with others, otherwise there will be no effective communication. Communication apprehension refers to the fear or anxiety one has during the course of the interaction with other people. Self-perceived communication competence means a person's own evaluation of his or her communication ability. Argumentativeness means a person's ability to debate during the conversation and express his or her own opinions well. Self-disclosure means a person's willingness to be open to others when communicating with others. Based on these five traits, communication styles can be divided into two categories—high context communication and low context communication. A high-context culture communicates information either in the physical context or internalized in the person to the point where little information is coded, explicit, or transmitted within the message. Within a high context culture, many things are left unsaid, permitting the culture to explain. While in a low context culture, information is shared explicitly. Low context cultures do not cater toward in-group, but tend to be more inclusive in practices. Much more is shared in words and verbalizations, instead of the context of the situation, environment, or person. In high-context communication, meaning is typically derived through shared experiences, histories, and implicit messages whereas in low-context communication, meanings are usually derived from direct, precise, and logical verbal interchanges.

(2) The religion in Saudi Arabia: The dominant religion in Saudi Arabia is Islam. The sacred book is the *Qur'an* (often called *Koran*). According to Belt (2002), "For Muslims, the Koran is also a poetic touchstone, a source of the pure Arabic language memorized by Muslim school children and recited by Muslim adults on very important occasions—weddings, funerals, holidays".

All the Muslims are expected to learn and perform the religious duties and rituals as part of their practice. The Five Pillars of Practice are Statement of Belief, Prayer, Fasting, Alms, and Pilgrimage. The first one—Statement of Belief means the repetition of the creed, uttering the creed “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the Prophet of Allah”. The Muslims need to speak these words when they practice their faith.

The second one is Prayer. This is a central ritual, which the Muslims perform five times a day: after getting up, at noon, in the midafternoon, after sunset, and before going to bed. When they pray, they need to recite a prescribed prayer. Muslims must wake up at dawn to perform the early morning prayer, and throughout the day, Muslims are expected to perform their prayers at the appointed times. During Muhammad’s prophecy, the Friday afternoon, prayer was designated as the weekly congregational prayer, and Muslims continue to observe this practice to this day. It is considered obligatory for every free male Muslim adult to perform the Friday afternoon prayer in congregation at a mosque. And the act of praying in congregation is not limited to Friday afternoons.

It is quite obvious that these practices mentioned above are concerned with speaking and reciting, which makes Saudi culture basically an oral one. They are good at speaking, reciting and memorizing. They are not afraid of speaking in front of other people. They feel comfortable expressing their thoughts orally, since this is what they hear and do from the very beginning of their life. They feel comfortable telling others what they think since that is what they do when they pray to their Allah. They will not feel shy or embarrassed when they express themselves in public. In their prayers, they are encouraged to speak out their thoughts to Allah bravely. Hence, it is very easy for them to express their opinions to others orally in public without much effort. Hence their religion makes their communication style more close to a low context one. They are more likely to express themselves verbally and directly to others.

(3) The dominant religion in China: Although now China is considered an atheist country basically, it is deeply influenced by Confucianism. Confucianism has been for most of the last two thousand years the state ideology of China. It has provided a form of training for government and administration, and has also been seen as providing normative models for ethics, etiquette, and culture. According to Barry, Chen, and Watson (1960), “If we were to describe in one word the Chinese way of life for the last two thousand years, the word would be ‘Confucian’”. Confucianism is more than a religion. It is “the system of social, ethical, and religious thoughts based on the teachings of Confucius and his successors”, as Crim (1989) points out. Confucius puts emphasis on a commitment and the belief in social harmony. He considers the proper and harmonious human relationship as the basis of society. These proper relationships mean things like the protection of “face”, dignity, self-respect, reputation, honor, and prestige. Specifically, in communication, the Chinese people who are influenced by Confucianism tend to listen to others instead of expressing their ideas openly. They are aware of the social status of the people involved. Chinese like to use indirect language instead of direct language to express their request and decline in order to save their own face and other people’s face, to show their respect to other people’s dignity, in order to maintain a harmonious relationship. In Confucianism, you cannot find deep conviction in a God, no religious rituals, no temples. In a study about the communication styles of Asian Americans, as cited in Tomes (2013), Gudydunst (2001) found that European Americans report that they are more dramatic, open, and precise than Asian Americans, who tend to report that they are more indirect. European Americans communication styles can be described as low context, while Asian Americans communications styles as high context. Gudydunst (2001) describes high context communication styles as being indirect, inferring meaning, interpersonal sensitivity, using feelings to guide behavior, and using silence,

while low context communication styles are described as dominant, animated, relaxed, attentive, open and friendly. According to Kim and Park (2008), Asian Americans' high communication styles may be heavily linked to their Confucianism beliefs. They tend to be more introverted compared other peoples in America. Maintaining harmony and peace in relationships is what counts in Confucianism when dealing with people.

Therefore, it is very natural that in class the Chinese students are very sensitive to others' reaction; they do not like to express their opinions and ideas directly. They choose to listen to others instead of speaking out their mind in order to show their respect to others, to save their own face (they are afraid of making mistakes), to save others' face, especially the teachers. I think this is one of the important factors that lead to the students' unwillingness to speak in public, their preference to keep silence in class.

### Conclusion

Based on the above analysis, I think religious influences are one of the most important factors that lead to the different communication patterns between the Saudi students and the Chinese students. Yet this is only a tentative analysis, much more remains to be explored in this field.

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