

Cultivating Cultural Self-Awareness to Teach Intercultural Communication

LIU Sha

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

Intercultural communication is undisputably important in today's world. Schools on every level in China attach great importance to educating young people with intercultural communication competence. Chinese anthropologist Fei Xiaotong developed the concept of cultural self-awareness to meet this urgent need. The paper explores the rich meanings of cultural self-awareness concept and how the idea is relevant to teaching intercultural communication.

Keywords: cultural self-awareness, intercultural communication, Intercultural communication competence teaching

Introduction

Globalization increases interconnection between people on this globe. People communicate or interact with each other cross-culturally like never before. The present-day technology accelerates the interconnectedness by making instant, virtual intercultural communication a commonly experienced reality. This multicultural world unfolds itself like a superb panorama in front of attentive people's eyes. The diversity, complexity, and discrepancy challenge people's conventional idea about the world. Young people, especially, need to have a full understanding about how this increasingly closer multicultural world impacts their life and how they can be prepared for it. Back to the turn of the new century, celebrated Chinese anthropologist Fei Xiaotong expressed his concern, "Another aspect of particular concern to me is how to educate and train people to be able to coexist peacefully in the multicultural world of the 21st century" (Fei, 2015, p. 9). With this mission in mind, he developed the theory of cultural self-awareness to help educate people to build a truly multicultural world. Basically, cultural self-awareness means that "Those who live within a specific culture have a true understanding of it, know where it comes from, how it developed, which its unique features are, and how it is evolving" (Fei, 2015, p. 50). This concept actually encompasses multi-layered meanings and it can be used as a guideline of intercultural communication teaching.

The concept of cultural self-awareness involves understanding one's own culture and other cultures one encounters; having the right attitude toward one's own culture and other cultures; and building a harmonious global community with diversity.

Knowing One's Own Culture

People's culture shapes the way they think, the way they behave, the way they live, and the way they interpret the world. They need to know that they are who they are largely due to the culture they are immersed

This paper is a program of the project: Construction of Common Core Courses for Graduate Students of the University of Shanghai for Science and Technology (Project Fund No. GG202301).

LIU Sha, M.A., lecturer, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

in. Consequently, they need to know what their culture is. Members of a particular culture need to have the self-knowledge of their own traditions: the origins, the development, the influence on their lives. They also need to know the most important values, the finest qualities, and the most distinctive features of their culture, so as to appreciate it and identify with it. And this knowledge of their own culture can also boost their cultural confidence in intercultural communication.

Chinese culture, for example, values interpersonal relationship and we define ourselves almost solely on the roles we play in the family or society. The fundamental virtues are Ren (benevolence) and Yi (righteousness), which respectively means love and concern for others and duties or responsibilities for others. It can be said without exaggeration that traditional Chinese culture is others-centered. Another important Chinese cultural quality lies in its view about man-nature relationship. Chinese culture advocates harmony between man and nature. Heaven, earth, and man are the three fundamental elements and they are holistically interconnected with each other. Philosophically, we believe human beings and heaven and earth can be connected. Traditional Wushu practitioners usually exercise in the open air, surrounded with trees or on the grass, so that the energy of nature can be channeled into the body.

A lack of one's own cultural knowledge poses a big problem to intercultural communication. For example, a Chinese person may find himself/herself unable to explain Chinese culture to people from other cultures or answer their questions about Chinese culture. In intercultural communication, you are treated as someone with your own cultural identity by your interlocutor, but you are not aware who you are, culturally. That would be a sad thing. The second problem with a lack of one's own cultural knowledge is that you are not aware that you are interpreting people and the world through your cultural lens. And another problem about lack of self-knowledge lies in the inability to express one's culture in other languages. For example, research showed that in China, many doctoral candidates did not know how to explain traditional Chinese culture in English. The problem is termed as Cultural Aphasia. Therefore, cultivating students' cultural self-awareness also involves teaching them how to express their culture in the foreign languages they are learning: English, French, Russian, German, Japanese, Spanish, etc.

To learn one's own culture is very important. However, "most often, people live within their culture but do not knowingly experience, understand, or interpret it" (Fei, 2015, p. 208). Culture is to its people what water is to fish. The fish lives in the water, but it does not know what water is. So, one way to really acquire knowledge of one's own culture is to learn it formally in a classroom. But another way to deeper understand one's own culture is through comparing it with a different culture in intercultural communication. This leads to second component of the concept of cultural self-awareness: to understand other cultures.

Knowing Other Cultures

Cultural self-awareness means "first understanding one's own culture, then understanding all the other cultures one encounters, and then being able to establish one's own place in the multicultural world" (Fei, 2015, p. 74). Effective cross-culture communication requires the knowledge of other cultures: other Asian cultures (influenced or not influenced by Confucianism), European cultures (Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant), African Islamic culture, Latin-American culture, English speaking culture, etc. You need to know the history, values, beliefs, religions, and traditions of your target culture to ensure a successful intercultural communication. When you are communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds, you need to remember they are individuals with specific cultural identities.

Besides, knowing other cultures offers a chance to rethink your own culture: your practices and daily life. You become aware of your culture when it is challenged by different social norms, practices, values, and beliefs. You realize that your way of doing things and saying things are not universal. Then, why do I do things the way I do them? The reflection will help you understand the values underlying these behaviors. It's like a fish suddenly realizes the existence of water it's been living in. Or you jump out of your life of habitual patterns, and observe it like an onlooker. And then, you will have a deeper and clearer understanding of what it is really like.

For example, cultures are different in their communication styles. Some cultures prefer to express ideas clearly in verbal language while some other cultures imply their messages in the context of the conversation. Based on this difference, the American anthropologist Edward T. Hall categorized cultures into high-context communication and low-context communication styles.

A high-context communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low-context communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code. (1976, p. 91)

The differences between communication style are actually the manifestation of the differences in the core values of difference cultures. High- and low-context communication styles correspond to collectivistic culture and individualistic culture respectively. The former values groups and personal relationships and enjoys higher degree of homogeneity. So, people have shared ideas about social practice and norms and they do not need to express it clearly. Besides, their value of personal relationships requires them not to say unpleasant thing directly to help save the other person's face or avoid hurting the other person's feeling. In individualistic cultures, people are more heterogeneous and there is not a high level of consensus about how to behave appropriately; therefore, the members of this culture need to say things explicitly in verbal message. Besides, this culture puts tasks at hand above harmony between people. People express their ideas as clearly as possible, so that they can get the job done as soon as possible. They do not mind confronting people head-on in the event of conflict. Examples of high-context culture include Native Americans, Latin Americans, Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans. Typical low-context cultures are German, Swiss, and American.

The purpose of knowing your own culture and your target culture is to help you navigate your intercultural communication and reflect on your own culture. It's not for you to compare your culture with other cultures to decide which one is superior or inferior. This leads to the third component of cultural self-awareness: the right attitude toward cultural diversity.

All Cultures Are Equal

We do not know our own culture and other cultures to compare them and judge them. The diversity of cultures in this world is like the shades of colors. Every culture contributes to the world's richness in its own way. "All have played positive roles in mankind's development, and all have failings too" (Fei, 2015, p. 113). All cultures are equal. And no culture is superior or inferior to another. We should respect and love our own culture and look at it in a factual and rational way. It has its unique contribution to this world and it may also have failings that are the legacy of the past times and yet to be adapted. We should appreciate the fine part of our culture. When encountering a new culture, it is not right to dismiss one's own culture as inferior and accept other cultures indiscriminately. And, it is equally wrong to assume cultural superiority and arrogance.

The biggest barrier to effective intercultural communication is to, consciously or unconsciously, judge other cultures using our own culture as a standard: A culture is good or right if it's the same as ours and bad or wrong if it's different. This mindset is called ethnocentrism. "Ethnocentrism refers to negatively judging aspects of another culture by the standards of one's own culture. To be ethnocentric is to believe in the superiority of one's own culture" (Yan, 2015, p. 113). It is a common mistake that people tend to make in intercultural communication. In American culture, people say that British people "drive on the wrong side of the road". This is a typical example of ethnocentrism. To Americans, the right side of the road is supposed to be the right. The left side, which British people stick to, is wrong. Another example of ethnocentrism can help illustrate what ethnocentrism is. In Chinese culture, filial piety, respect, and love for the elders are a universally accepted and observed tradition. It is children's obligation to care for their old parents. So, if we happen to know that people in the western society do not take care of their old parents, we will judge them as being cold-hearted or unfilial. But the fact is that in the western individualistic society, people value independence. So, "What's different from mine is wrong or bad" is a harmful mindset.

Every culture is what it is for a reason. Given that culture is a way of living, it is formed in or by a specific historical, geographic, climatic environment. It must be the best for its people at a certain time. Otherwise, it will not be created and preserved. In this sense, it's unfair to judge other cultures based on our own accustomed way of thinking.

To communicate across cultures, we need to shift our frame of reference by moving from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. Ethnorelativism maintains that "cultures can only be understood relative to one another; there is no absolute standard of rightness or goodness that can be applied to cultural behaviors; cultural difference is neither good nor bad; it is just different. Each culture has its unique way of judging and comparing cultural dissonance" (Xu, 2019, p. 275). The mindset of ethnorelativism asks us to view all cultures as equals and appreciate each and every one with sincere appreciation and respect.

Cultivating Cultural Self-Awareness to Build a World in Harmony With Diversity

Fei Xiaotong (2015) summed up his idea about the approach to living in a multicultural world in very concise language: "each appreciates its own best, each appreciates the best of others, all appreciate the best together, to build greater harmony for all" (p. 51).

"Each appreciates its own best" means identifying with one's own culture, and knowing and respecting one's own traditions. And it also means the awareness that "What I think is beautiful may not be beautiful to others". "Each appreciates the best of others" is about the right attitude toward other cultures. When working or living together with people from other cultures, we should sincerely admire the merits or the beauty of their cultures and do not judge them as inferior or bad by using our own culture as a criterion. It also contains the idea of tolerance. "All appreciate the best together" means seeking "a consensus on human values" or "commonly acceptable cultural values". It also means being open-minded and learning from each other. Intercultural communication is a two-way process in which the cultures involved influence each other. So, people have to make the right choice as to what to select, absorb, and assimilate from the fine product of human civilization so as to enrich their own cultures. "To build greater harmony for all" is the ultimate goal people from diverse cultures strive for: to build a multicultural world in which people live according to a set of commonly accepted rule and at the same time have their own traditions preserved. In other words, all cultures co-exist peacefully and live in "harmony with diversity".

Conclusions

Cultural self-awareness prepares students for intercultural communication in knowledge, attitude, motivation. It emphasizes the importance of having self-knowledge and knowledge about other cultures. The knowledge enables them to navigate through contact with people from other cultures and at the same time it helps them find the place of their own culture in the complex map of world culture. Cultural self-awareness embraces the idea of cultural equality, so that they do not feel inferior or superior when encountering other cultures. They will appreciate their own culture and other cultures. They will not make hasty or negative judgements about the behaviors that are viewed as unacceptable in their own culture. Instead, they try to understand and tolerate the differences. Cultural self-awareness gives the students a sense of mission in intercultural communication: They don't just communicate to close a deal, get a job, or solve a problem. By every successful intercultural communication, they prove that people can live in harmony with diversity.

It can be concluded that before teaching students intercultural communication strategies, teachers should first of all cultivate students' cultural self-awareness. That will make the teaching and learning easier and more effective.

References

- Fei, X. T. (2015). *Globalization and cultural self-awareness*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Gao, Y. C. (2003). Cultural awareness in intercultural communication context. *Journal of Soochow University (Philosophy & Social Science Edition)*, 98(4), 68-71.
- Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond culture*. New York: Doubleday.
- Tajeddin, Z., & Alemi, M. (2021). Moving from cultural ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism through the affordance of English language learning experience. In *Interculturality and the English language classroom* (pp. 233-262). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Xu, L. S. (2019). *Intercultural communication in English* (Rev. ed.). Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Yan, M. (2015). *Intercultural communication textbook for college students*. Beijing: Tsinghua University Press.