

## INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION WITHIN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY. A LOOK AT ASIA

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**Abstract:** *In the larger context of globalisation and internationalization, navigating business operations in a multicultural environment is no easy task. The Far East has always fascinated the West through the uniqueness of its traditions, while at the same time remaining mysterious and rather difficult to assimilate for those who have not experienced culture shock before. Therefore, this paper strives to emphasise the importance of familiarising business students with the key issues related to cultural awareness and communication, focusing on Asian cultures in contrast to the Western world since, in the light of the latest political and economic developments leading to an ever-increasing Chinese dominance, they will undoubtedly be putting that information to good use.*

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### **Introduction**

Doing business internationally is not a new concept, since people have been travelling long distances to trade with foreign partners for hundreds of years. And while intercultural communication skills may not have been something traders actively sought to improve back in the day, things have definitely changed on that front, as the modern businessperson has realised that the success of their business often depends on interacting with people from different cultures that are, more often than not, quite dissimilar to their own. Asia has always been a bit of a mystery to the rest of the world, while at the same time exerting a fascination unparalleled by other territories. For the European, and even for the American (despite the USA having been deemed as a melting pot of various cultures), visiting countries like China, Japan, South Korea or Singapore is still likely to result in culture shock, which is especially challenging when travelling on business.

Nevertheless, China in particular has always been a force to be reckoned with, both in numbers and also in economic terms, so while the Covid-19 pandemic has placed some temporary hurdles on its way to global supremacy, China and Asia as a whole are definitely attractive for foreign businesspeople. English may be the language of business nowadays, but intercultural communication is much more than just being able to speak the same language as your Asian partners. This paper aims to emphasize the specificity of Asian

cultures as opposed to the Western world, so as to identify the necessary steps to be taken by a businessperson who is interested in expanding their business abroad or simply interacting with global partners and customers alike. From the perspective of a business student, being culturally aware is a must nowadays, as it opens the door to global access to resources and business opportunities, while emphasizing the need for strong communication skills in a foreign language. Therefore, after being introduced to the key concepts of culture, cultural awareness and cultural differences, alongside the main theories describing various dimensions of culture, they benefit most from practical examples on how various cultures approach the business context, their negotiating practices and what to expect overall from a meeting with foreign participants.

### **Theoretical background and literature review**

At this point, the distinction between cross-cultural and intercultural communication must be emphasised, as Jane Jackson points out that “cross-cultural communication research typically compares and contrasts native discourse and communication behaviours (or styles) in different cultures,” while “intercultural communication research involves an investigation of interpersonal interaction between individuals (or groups) from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds” (Jackson, 2014, p. 3). Moreover, “in conceptions of intercultural communication it is important to recognize the dynamic, interpersonal dimension inherent in relationship building between people from diverse backgrounds” (Jackson, 2014, p. 3). This paper will thus focus on the latter, since business students need to be made aware of the fact that “linguistic proficiency is not enough to ensure the success of the (business) interaction” (Ursu and Ciortescu, 2021, p. 157). Having explored cultural patterns in business communication by comparing Europe and Asia, the two authors conclude that “meaning is far from being encoded in language alone, but also in context, in the ways in which people position themselves in society or how they related to notions of time and space” (Ursu and Ciortescu, 2021, pp. 157-158). Therefore, teaching English at university level must include a significant intercultural communication component if it is to be effective in preparing students for the realities of doing business internationally. Grosu-Rădulescu points out that after our country became part of the EU and adopted the Bologna education system, “foreign language teachers’ roles in Romania appear to have exceeded the traditional framework of imparting knowledge strictly related to the development of linguistic abilities” (Grosu-Rădulescu, 2018, p. 12). Now, one of the teaching purposes at this level, as exemplified by David (2018) when referring to the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, is enhancing students’ intercultural awareness, with a view to “stimulating an interest in intercultural exchange” (Grosu-Rădulescu, 2018, p. 12). While teaching languages such as Chinese or Japanese to Romanian students is still an extremely rare (and often workshop-limited) occurrence, English language proficiency paired with intercultural training remains their best bet in tackling written discourse, face-to-face or online interactions with people from different cultures.

In a very broad sense, culture can be seen as “a distinctly human means of adapting to circumstances and transmitting this coping skill and knowledge to subsequent generations” (Harris, Moran and Moran, 2004, p. 4) and it can range from something as small as dress and appearance, food and feeding habits, to an entire system of values and

norms or ways of thinking, all of which leading to an altogether different approach on life. Hofstede (2001) is, of course, the one who spoke at length about the cultural dimensions lying at the basis of cultural differences, but even though his theory has received its fair share of criticism over the years, it still lies at the basis of teaching English with a view to preparing students for further studying and working across cultures in today's globalised world. This is a must, since "in only 10% of 191 nations are the people ethnically or racially homogeneous" (Harris, Moran and Moran, 2004, p. 23). And while certain individuals possess several qualities which allow them to adapt quickly and easily to new cultures, cultural intelligence, as defined by Earley and Ang (2003) is not something that comes naturally to all of us.

More recently, Erin Meyer used her experience as a cultural trainer and INSEAD professor to devise an eight-scale model, based on key areas that managers must be aware of when dealing with different cultures. The model illustrates how cultures stand on a scale, in terms of communicating, evaluating, persuading, leading, deciding, trusting, disagreeing and scheduling (Meyer, 2014, p. 32) and, based on it, the author also conducted an in-depth study of corporate culture, together with the CEO of Netflix, Reed Hastings (Hastings and Meyer, 2020). Both books provide extensive practical examples of how the corporate world needs training when dealing cultural differences, so as to be able to effectively communicate, manage teams, negotiate, hire, provide feedback etc.

### **Aspects of Intercultural Communication**

Based on Meyer's model, below are some practical examples of cultural differences which may be pointed out to students, with reference to Asian cultures. It is essential to acknowledge, beforehand, that while several cultures from the same geographical region may share common characteristics, they must never be treated as a whole, since avoiding stereotyping and understanding the specificity of each culture in itself should lie at the basis of successful intercultural interactions. So, the following examples will point out both the similarities and the differences among various Asian cultures as well as how they stand in relation to Western cultures, and will hopefully illustrate the fact that business students need to be particularly mindful of the unconscious bias we experience in relation to so many aspects of our lives, including culture. Furthermore, Meyer points out that "when examining how people from different cultures relate to one another, what matters is not the absolute position of either culture on the scale but rather the relative position of the two cultures. It is this relative positioning that determines how people view one another" (Meyer, 2014, p. 37).

Similarly, Storti and Franklin (2016) analyse the case of an US-based global business services company outsourcing to India and emphasize three main areas (deadlines, asking questions and giving feedback) where cultural differences create significant issues in terms of effective communication. They explain that "when people communicate and cooperate in any setting, they do not simply transfer meaning, but they co-construct understanding and indeed sometimes more explicitly actually negotiate understanding" (Storti and Franklin, 2016, p. 189). Furthermore, "when people communicate across cultures, this co-construction of understanding can become particularly difficult, because people communicating draw on 1) different sets of cultural knowledge; 2) this is often unconscious to themselves but 3) sets the norm for behaviour in their own cultural setting

(and often not for behaviour in the other culture)” (Storti and Franklin, 2016, p. 189). Consequently, it is recommended that students are first of all aware of such patterns and then double-check understanding before drawing conclusions about a particular culture. Let us now take each key area in Meyer’s model and discuss the main points to be considered when teaching students about intercultural communication and cultural differences.

### *Communicating*

Many of us assume that as long as two people speak the same language, they are able to communicate satisfactorily, and since English is the universal language of business, they rely on their general knowledge of the language to get the message across. However, conducting business in a foreign language is much more complicated than that, since it is essential that the information and meaning conveyed are in accordance with how the interlocutor receives the message, so that no misunderstandings appear, which might distort the exchange. The communicating scale from Meyer’s model stems from the distinction between low-context vs. high-context cultures (Hall, 1973). In high-context cultures, people pay more attention to body language, changes in tone and facial expressions since meanings are usually conveyed indirectly, through connotation. On the other hand, low-context cultures rely on denotation, explicitly stating what they want to communicate. Asian countries like China, India, Korea or Japan are recognised as high context, alongside countries from the Middle-East and Africa, while the USA, Germany and many European nations are low context. However, it’s the whole picture of the differences between two countries that provide one with a better understanding of the difficulties encountered when doing business with someone from a different culture. Meyer explains that while communicating and disagreeing may be done in the same way in Israel and Russia, leading and making decisions places the two cultures at opposite ends of the spectrum, which means one must acknowledge and adapt his/her approach to certain particularities in order to successfully move forward (Meyer, 2014). This being said, it is essential to note that countries and cultures within the same geographical region are not to be taken as a whole in terms of business approach. While it is common for a company to delegate one person to manage sales, for instance, in the entire region of Asia-Pacific, they may soon discover that “each of the local markets had a different ‘go-to-market’ strategy. In China, Hong Kong, Malaysia and South Korea, for example, a direct sales team sold direct to the end customer. In Indonesia, Thailand and Taiwan it was through a third party. In Australia, Singapore and New Zealand it was a combination of both” (Plaister-Ten, 2016, p. 98). Consequently, the way you communicate your own strategy to the culturally-diverse members of your sales team should take into account the different ways in which they work within their respective cultures.

### *Evaluating*

When it comes to providing negative feedback in business, things become even more complicated, as the potential for straining relationships is greater than in general communication. Meyer (2014) points out that some cultures which are low-context and explicit on the communicating scale may be less direct when it comes to negative criticism and vice versa, which reinforces the previously-mentioned need to look at the whole picture before making assumptions about a certain culture. Also, one mustn’t forget to factor in

cultural relativity when looking at the evaluating scale. “For example, the Chinese are to the right of the world scale, but they are much more direct than the Japanese, who may take offence at their forthright feedback” (Meyer, 2014, p. 99). In countries like India, Thailand, Japan and China, it is recommended that negative feedback is not provided in front of others and that the message is blurred (even by using food or drink as a distraction). Also, Meyer explains that the message should be delivered slowly, over a period of time, to let it sink in, while the actual negative part can be left out so that the receiver infers it from the good (Meyer, 2014, pp. 116-120). In the case of how Americans versus Indians provide feedback in the above-mentioned study by Storti and Franklin (2016), the former complained that the latter did not give honest feedback, while Indians responded that the Americans didn’t listen, so they preferred to not say anything at all. These conclusions were reached by both parties based solely on their direct work interaction and self-constructed cultural stereotypes, since the parent company did not invest in cultural training before outsourcing operation to India. Thus, complaints were bound to appear and work was inevitably affected by such misunderstandings.

### *Persuading*

A lot has been said about the art of persuasion, and while we usually associate it with making a sale, being persuasive is a quality that is very useful in other areas of business as well. Negotiations often rely on it, but so do presentations and meetings. To Meyer, persuading is about knowing when to use a principles-first or applications-first approach. The German culture is often the best example to illustrate the preference for a principles-first approach, while the American one is all about starting with the conclusions and recommendations. When it comes to Asia, however, the author recommends that we use a different lens, that of holistic versus specific thought patterns (Meyer, 2014, pp. 143-153). Essentially, this means that Asians pay more attention to backgrounds and how these affect the central figures than the Westerners, who tend to focus on individual figures separate from the environment. For the outsider, this involves taking the time to listen to a conversation about seemingly unrelated things before actually reaching the main point of discussion. This goes to show that cross-cultural communication usually takes more time than its monocultural counterpart, but in today’s world the latter is often not an option.

### *Leading*

The issue of leadership is perhaps more complex than others discussed here, since it relies greatly on subjective elements, connected to one’s personality. This is not to say that being more egalitarian or hierarchical is not determined by one’s cultural background or skills as well, but it requires a lot more adaptation on the manager’s part in order to be a successful leader, especially in a culturally-diverse environment. Getting it wrong might lead to the complete failure of the business. Also, as Romani (2016) points out, when organisations expand internationally, leaders face not only the challenge of managing people from various countries working together, but also implementing the headquarters’ ideas of organisational culture (Romani, 2016, pp. 300-301). Many times, challenging a culture’s idea of authority, even done with the best of intentions, is not the way to go. The Chinese culture is particularly keen on maintaining the hierarchy, even though this may seem profoundly unjust to a Westerner. In fact, insisting on a Chinese subordinate to move to a first name basis may prove to be a permanent source of uneasiness for him/her, since

their culture values hierarchical relationships. Instead, perceiving this kind of deference as something completely natural rather than a sign of superiority on the foreign leader's part is more likely to lead to a less strained relationship with the Chinese subordinate.

### *Deciding*

When it comes to decision making, it is interesting to note that the notion of hierarchy means different things in different cultures. Nancy Meyer explains that even though German organisations are very hierarchical, it is not uncommon to challenge your boss' decision and push for consensus, while in the US, which is perceived as a very egalitarian, the individual does have a lot of decision power, but he/she can easily be vetoed by the boss, making it more top-down than consensus-based (Meyer, 2014, p. 196). The Japanese culture offers another notable exception. Although it is a strongly hierarchical culture, where a lot of deference is required towards the most senior company members, who are allowed access to these positions after spending a significant amount of time in the organisation and earning their place in the hierarchy, decision making is paradoxically consensual. Basically, decisions are made from the bottom up, with people agreeing on the next move and sending their proposal to their supervisor who then makes amendments where necessary and proceeds to pass it upwards for approval and/or modification. Neither of the approaches is inherently more effective, however conflicts, misunderstandings and frustration may easily arise if one is not familiar with the culture-specific procedure.

### *Trusting*

In business, trust is essential across all cultures. Even the most reserved businessperson, who is eager to get down to business as soon as possible and shies away from small talk and seemingly personal questions will agree that, before anything, they would like to establish whether their counterpart is trustworthy and someone they would actually want to do business with. Sometimes, people are difficult to read, especially if they come from a culture where conventions dictate that emotions do not have a place in business meetings, remaining hidden behind a perfectly-woven screen of politeness. The Japanese are particularly versed in the art of courtesy, with strict rules regarding bowing and politely smiling at encounters at any level. Shop-assistants are known to lose their jobs, for example, if they do not smile while greeting customers on the shop floor, which might be seen as excessive by foreigners, but it also gives us an idea about the level of formality they employ in business. However, both the Japanese and the Chinese value trust and creating personal connections with their business partners through out-of-the-office meals or drinks before actually getting down to business. The Chinese word describing this kind of (personal) connection is *guanxi*, and it seems to be the Far East equivalent of networking, which is nowadays considered the way to develop your business.

Meyer distinguishes two different forms of trust (cognitive and affective), which further illustrate the cultural differences between the American and Chinese cultures (Meyer, 2014, p. 223). While Americans make a clear distinction between the two (i.e., they might like a person but not trust doing business with him/her at the same time), the Chinese do not have a problem with mixing them. "One consequence is that, for a Chinese manager working with Americans, the culturally based preference to separate cognitive trust and personal trust can indicate a lack of sincerity or loyalty" (Meyer, 2014, p. 225). Conversely, the Americans might find it difficult at first to determine what their Chinese

counterparts are really thinking, behind the curtain of politeness. That is why taking the time to socialise beforehand will allow both parties to better understand each other's *modus operandi*.

### *Disagreeing*

Disagreeing with someone in a meeting is often difficult even among colleagues that have been working together for years, let alone when there are multiple cultures involved. Losing face is going to have a negative effect on people from all cultures, but with varying levels of importance. In Asian countries such as China, Japan, Korea, Indonesia and Thailand, saving face is of utmost importance. As Meyer explains, this is a common characteristic of Confucian societies and it supersedes stating what you think is correct (Meyer, 2014, p. 263). While in confrontational cultures it is common to challenge a speaker's ideas, without any intention of attacking the person at the same time, someone from a culture where confrontation is avoided will take this personally and feel the relationship has been negatively impacted by such comments. Always reminding students to do their homework about cultural differences and to choose their words wisely whenever they find themselves in a formal/business is a way to draw their attention to the myriad of issues that may arise when it comes to cross-cultural communication.

### *Scheduling*

The way different cultures perceive time is maybe one of the last things one worries about when preparing for a business meeting, but it may turn out that, in certain situations, arriving too early, too late and even on time for a meeting can lead to misunderstandings or even tension. Edward T. Hall's distinction between polychronic and monochronic time (Hall, 1983, pp. 44-58) is usually the starting point of explaining different people's attitudes towards scheduling versus the more flexible approach to time. In countries like Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, the US, the UK and Denmark, there is an emphasis on promptness and good organisation, with people focussing on one thing at a time and doing it well. At the other end of the spectrum, in Spain, Italy, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, India and China, time is more fluid, many things are done at once and interruptions are acceptable. It is interesting to note that Japan and China are at the opposite ends of the spectrum on this scale. According to Meyer, punctuality is the only similarity between the two cultures. While the Japanese are highly organised planners, the Chinese are very flexible and very good at getting things done because of it (Meyer, 2014, pp. 311-313). Going back to the Storti and Franklin's (2016) case study, Americans complain about Indians falling behind and not being able to meet deadlines, while the latter insist that Americans don't listen when they are told more time is needed. Clearly, the Indians being less direct obstructs communication in this case, which leads to frustration on both ends.

## **Conclusions**

As this paper has hopefully emphasised, the topic of intercultural communication is a very complex one, both in the number of dimensions involved but also when it comes to the perspective we have on each culture. For business students studying this topic as part of their English classes, practical examples of situations involving different cultures interacting in a business context is a good starting point, while also being an excellent

opportunity to analyse the situations from multiple perspectives, including the language used, levels of formality, specialised vocabulary etc. While generalisations are inevitable, this article strives to point out that neither Asia nor the Western world should not be taken as a whole when it comes to illustrating cultural differences, as each particular culture has its own specificities and might score differently on the various scales presented above. Thus, the challenge of interacting with others is striking that balance between identifying one's personal quirks and addressing those characteristics that are culturally-conditioned in such a way that successful communication is achieved. Practice makes perfect, and educating ourselves in always trying to understand the root of one's words or behaviour (which is often embedded in their culture) before labelling them as inappropriate is key to celebrating the diversity of today's business world.

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