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# Communication and Cultural Competence: The Acquisition of Cultural Knowledge and Behavior

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# Communication and Cultural Competence: The Acquisition of Cultural Knowledge and Behavior

## Abstract

This essay expounds on individuals' acquisition and development of cultural competence via the process of communication. It highlights both the importance of culture and communication in our lives and the close associations between culture, communication, cultural literacy, and cultural competence. The author explicates the commonly experienced difficulty in "knowing the true face" of one's culture, and illuminates the communication process by which individuals acquire their cultural knowledge and behavior.

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## Introduction

While visiting the magnificent and mysterious mountain of Lu Shan, China, the famous Chinese Song dynasty poet Su Shi realized that he could not see the “true face” of the mountain simply because he himself was in it. He then recorded his experience in one of his well-known poems, claiming that “Knowing not the true face of Lu Shan/As I am in its midst.” Indeed, it is rather difficult for one to realize the scope and magnitude of a mountain when one is deep in it. The same can be said of one’s culturally acquired knowledge and behavior since living in a culture is fairly similar to being deep in a mountain. Often, it is a rather significant challenge for individuals to be fully aware of their culturally acquired knowledge and behavior because, in part, such knowledge and behavior are generally perceived by people around us as “common,” “natural,” or “habitual.” Functioning as competent members in a given culture, contrary to what we would normally expect, does not necessarily help us to identify our cultural knowledge and behavior. Much of the “true face” of a culture, or an individual’s cultural competence lies deep underneath his/her level of consciousness and, as such, defies quick recognition by the person.

It is thus meaningful for us to understand what cultural competence is and how one obtains cultural knowledge and behavior that are indeed indispensable for the individual to communicate effectively with others in his/her cultural environment. We shall start by ascertaining what culture is and how culture and communication are closely related. Then, we move on to examine the nature of one’s cultural knowledge that constitutes the person’s cultural literacy. Further, we will illustrate the communication process in which one translates his/her cultural knowledge into cultural behavior and acquires his/her cultural competence. Finally, we draw a conclusion for this writing.

## Culture and Communication

Culture is indeed an evasive and complex concept. It is evasive because we are surrounded by culture and we live deep in it; in a practical sense, culture is the air and water we breathe and drink day in and day out. Since humans are fundamentally social beings, individuals cannot live without cultures of their own. Glen Fisher, for instance, employed an analogy of computer to state that culture is comparable to the “programming” of an individual’s mind (Fisher, 1997). With this cultural programming, a person is then generally able to function appropriately and effectively in his/her own culture. Success and failure in interacting with others in a culture is contingent upon the types of cultural programs a person has obtained. This analogy further suggests that human cultures have both tangible and intangible contents as comparable to the hardware and software of computers. Tangible ones are the hardware of a culture like those pointed out by Triandis and Albert (1987) as the “objective culture.” Examples of the objective culture include such things like buildings, gardens, roads, tools, and so on. Intangibles, on the other hand, are the software of a culture or, the “subjective culture” according to Triandis and Albert

(1987). It is subjective because it includes such things like norms, roles, beliefs, values, and so forth that embedded in our culture. Usually, it is less difficult for us to notice the obvious differences and similarities of the tangibles in various cultures, whereas the differences and similarities of cultural intangibles are not as easy to discern.

Scholars interested in culture and communication often define culture as a system. While some (e.g. Rosengren, 1986) believe culture is a system of “abstract, man-made patterns,” others hold it as a “historically shared system of symbolic resources through which we make our world meaningful” (Hall, 2005, p.4). Still others argue that culture is “a negotiated set of shared symbolic systems that guide individuals’ behaviors and incline them to function as a group” (Chen & Starosta, 1998, p. 26). Whether human culture is a shared system or a negotiated set of shared systems, in essence, it serves as a context within which we communicate. Culture tells us who we are, what positions we hold in our society, with whom and in what language we communicate. In this particular sense, individuals in a society are in fact cultural persons; each was born into a culture and grows up to become a cultural being.

Although all of us were born into a culture, by no means were we born with a culture. In other words, culture is not innate; rather, it is learned. Each of us acquires our culture while growing up, and the primary means by which we are enculturated is through communication. By communicating with those around us, we learn our languages, develop our worldviews, establish our values, and subscribe to our beliefs. We also pass on to others our languages, worldviews, values, and beliefs by way of communicating with them. In fact, communication is the sole process by which humans acquire and transmit their individual cultures. George Borden (1991), for instance, proposed that we understand human communication as a system for “the sharing of information through meaningful symbols” (p.7). These meaningful symbols, of course, include both verbal and non-verbal codes utilized by a large group of people. Thayer (1987), on the other hand, called this meaning generating process our “communicational realities” that involve “those ideas, beliefs, preferences, qualities, evils, and ideals which exist for us essentially because they can be and are talked about” (p. 172). For a human society, communication behaviors stand for social consciousness reflected in the verbal and non-verbal interactions among its members. Thayer (1987) further believes that the essential function of communication is to organize us socially in many different ways. In other words, “communicational realities” help form a social totality within which members of a society associate with each other in an effort to create meanings for themselves in their living environment.

Thus, it is quite clear that this meaning-creating process enables us, as members of a large group in a social environment, to understand, revitalize, and regenerate our cultures. The process of communicating with others, in this sense, requires the employment of culturally appropriate and effective knowledge and behavior so as to accomplish our purposes in life. In order to be effective in achieving our objectives, we also understand our utilization of cultural knowledge and behavior is regulated by rules agreed upon by members in the same cultural community. More often than not, following such tacit rules means success whereas doing the opposite may entail failure. We, as communicators in a particular cultural community, obtain our goals and realize our intents

in life while simultaneously engaging in the process of perpetuating our cultural norms and sustaining the cultural environment. The very process of communicating within a social cultural environment is the process by which we not only sustain and pass on our cultures but also apply and acquire cultural knowledge and behavior that constitute our cultural competence. Before we can gain a better understanding of our acquisition of cultural competencies via communication, we must first understand what our cultural knowledge is composed of, that is, the contents of our cultural literacy.

## Cultural Literacy

These days we frequently encounter terms related to literacy. “Media literacy,” “computer literacy,” and “information literacy” are just a few examples. Cultural literacy, however, refers to the basic knowledge that is required for individuals to interact meaningfully with one another in a large social group. Hirsch (1988) once stated, “To be culturally literate is to possess the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world” (p. xiii). He also considered the breadth of such basic information very extensive, covering all domains of human activity “from sports to science.” Using reading as a case in point, Hirsch believed this kind of background information to be absolutely necessary in order for readers to obtain “an adequate level of comprehension, getting the point, grasping the implications, relating what they read to the unstated “context” which alone gives meaning to what they read” (p. 2). Similarly, Borden (1991) considered this context the “tacit knowledge” that one needs in order to function in a social/cultural environment. He cites the instance when a person understands all the words of a joke, but fails to get the point, as a good example to illustrate the necessity of background information in understanding a communication episode, that is, to get the joke. Without the context, or the tacit knowledge needed, one won’t be able to comprehend the meaning of a simple joke. George Borden (1991) went one step further and argued, “If the joke is particular to a certain culture, then understanding it is a measure of literacy in that culture” (p. 179).

Thus, in Borden’s (1991) view, a person is considered culturally literate when he/she possesses both the language codes and contextual knowledge of a social environment. While language codes include both verbal and non-verbal ones, contextual knowledge of a social environment refers to background information, cultural symbols and cultural processes. Unlike most linguists such as Chomsky (2002), communication researchers (Duck & McMahan, 2012) generally consider both verbal and non-verbal codes important parts of a language. They argue that, like the verbal codes of a language, non-verbal codes also have structure, and are similarly organized according to a system of grammatical rules, syntax, and vocabulary (Knapp, 1980; Hall, 2005). Typically, non-verbal codes function to repeat, regulate, complement, substitute, emphasize, and, sometimes, to contradict a communicator’s verbal messages (Duck & McMahan, 2012).

In addition to speaking the language of the group, a culturally literate person must also have contextual knowledge of the social environment in which he/she lives. In fact, it is more important to have contextual knowledge if we desire to communicate with others effectively. Without contextual knowledge of a culture, the use of language can often be

rendered senseless. This scenario most frequently occurs when one uses a second language in a culture other than his/her own. For instance, native Chinese who speak English as a second language may utter the comment, "I think so," as a rather positive response. Thus, when a native English speaker says: "That was a great party!" the Chinese English-speaker, particularly a new user of the English language, will most likely respond with: "I think so." To the Chinese, his/her response is a positive affirmation; yet, to the native speaker, the response is barely lukewarm. Both the use and comprehension of this particular comment in this situation require some contextual/cultural knowledge. With cultural knowledge, the Chinese English-speaker can understand that "I think so" is just not a very firm response in English and, therefore, would refrain from using it if a positive feedback is intended. On the other hand, having contextual knowledge will also enable the native English-speaker to comprehend the positive meaning of the comment "I think so" since contextual understanding of the comment enables him/her to put the Chinese speaker's comment in its proper perspective. In this communication episode, when both speakers have the required background information regarding the comment, they can understand each other relatively much better.

Besides background information, understanding of cultural symbols is equally important to our contextual knowledge. Cultural symbols are objects selected by members of a culture to represent significant meanings in their communication, including metaphors and myths (Borden, 1991). In America, for example, red, yellow, pink and blue roses all have their symbolic meanings. It's not necessary to articulate, "I love you," in words when silently presenting a red rose conveys the same meaning. Another example is when a good committee comes along we often claim it "a committee from heaven." Otherwise, we could name it "a committee from hell." These metaphors are so common in every culture that Martin Gannon (2010) wrote a book devoting to the discussion of the cultural metaphors that he believes represent 29 cultures in the world.

Further, all cultures subscribe to myths. Take the myth of technology in North America as an example. Foglesang (1982) pointed out that North Americans take "the myth of technology" very seriously. Technology is considered a necessity and benefit to everyone regardless of what it actually brings to the person. Almost all in American culture would like to be the first to utilize new technology as soon as it comes into being. The most recent phenomenon of chasing the latest model of I-phone is a case in point. Many believe, for instance, that a new and faster computer will certainly improve the quality of their life no matter what it actually does to the individuals' living. Therefore, within the last ten years or so, I have updated my office computer more than five times. Each time, the new one runs much faster than the old. The computer I use now is thought to be many times faster than the one I used a decade ago. Nevertheless, I never go home earlier. The point is: in order to understand a technologically advanced society and to communicate effectively with its members, we need the contextual knowledge about how much technology is valued by most North Americans.

Just knowing the language and cultural symbols is not yet enough to make a person culturally literate. One must also have an understanding of the cultural processes. This means having the proper understanding of when to say what to whom, and the appropriate

manners of speaking. Having dinner in a restaurant is a good example to illustrate the concept of “cultural process”. Not only does the person need to understand the language so as to read the menu and talk to the server, he/she must also understand the process of ordering food and enjoying the meal. While some researchers call this a schema (Markus, 1977), a prototype of culturally expected behavior, others regard it as a plan or a communication script (Datan, Rodeheaver, & Hughes 1987; Trenholm & Jensen, 1995) for an occasion. Careful observations of daily communication with others will certainly inform us that we have plans and scripts for almost every social circumstance. Yet, knowing is not behaving; having knowledge of the language and context of a culture may make us culturally literate, but not culturally competent, for competence is the translation of knowledge into behavior. In what follows, we take on the topic of cultural competence and how it is acquired by individuals in a given culture.

### **Cultural Competence and the Communication Process**

To be competent is to be appropriate and effective; to be culturally competent is, therefore, to be appropriate and effective in a particular cultural context. For instance, in the United States, when a party is over, the guests are expected to leave. However, if one or two linger around at a time when the host/hostess has other more important things to do, what should be done? Yelling at them, “Get out! The party is over!” will be effective for sure, yet it is not appropriate. Another choice for the host/hostess under this circumstance is, of course, to be extremely patient and wait for the guest(s) to leave by themselves. This alternative may be more appropriate, but it is the least effective in regard to the host/hostess’s plan. The key lies in being both appropriate and effective in communicating one’s purpose, and doing so requires cultural competence.

To be culturally competent means one translates cultural knowledge into culturally appropriate and effective behaviors. From a communication perspective, behaviors are either verbal or nonverbal. While verbal competence refers to an individual’s proficiency in using a language, nonverbal competence concerns the application of nonverbal codes to cultural contexts. As for the acquisition of a particular language, there are normally two ways for individuals to obtain it: naturally and deliberately. Most of us learn our first language naturally, that is, hearing and speaking it while growing up in our homes and hometowns. Ever wondered why we call a person’s first language “native or mother tongue”? It refers to the verbal behavior one has obtained from his/her native place and/or from one’s mother.

The acquisition of a second language, on the other hand, is usually through a person’s deliberate effort. One starts with learning vocabulary and grammatical rules of the language before moving on to learn more complicated expressions and situational applications. In second language acquisition, the greatest challenge for many learners is not the vocabulary, proper pronunciation, and correct application of grammatical rules; rather, it is the acquisition of cultural knowledge of the language, or “cultural language” (Wang, 1999-2000). For instance, when invited to an American family for dinner and asked if hungry, American guests’ cultural language often is: “Yes, we’re starving!” so as to

indicate the desirability of the host/hostess's food. However, a common answer from a culturally uninformed Japanese who uses English as a second language will perhaps not be "We're starving." Instead, the answer may be: "Not really". The Japanese guest's use of the English language can be flawless in vocabulary, pronunciation, and application of grammatical rules; yet, his/her "cultural language" is not effective. The Japanese guest's verbal behavior is considered culturally incompetent under this circumstance due to his/her ineffective use of the "cultural language" called for on such an occasion. In short, a person may be linguistically competent as gauged by his/her choice of words, articulation, and application of grammatical rules of a particular language, yet, he/she will not be considered culturally competent if his/her comment is inappropriately offered in a given cultural context.

Likewise, the acquisition of culturally appropriate non-verbal behavior is also accomplished in ways natural or deliberate. Most of us acquire our non-verbal behaviors in our own culture naturally while growing up, but we obtain our second culture non-verbal behaviors deliberately. For example, most American males acquire their business handshake via the natural process of communicating with others. To the best of my knowledge, there are no classes in the United States teaching people how to perform the business handshake with people like bankers/loan officers. Yet, we all know how to shake that hand firmly and gently squeeze it for a second in the middle of the shaking, particularly when we desire that loan from a banker. Second culture non-verbal behaviors, however, are deliberately learned. For example, there are workshops to teach Japanese business bows to Americans who go to Japan on business ventures. Granted, Japanese bows are more complex than the American handshake due to the various ways to bow on different occasions to people of different status and seniority.

More importantly, culturally appropriate and effective verbal and non-verbal behaviors are both acquired through the process of communication. By communicating with others, we learn languages and, therefore, acquire linguistic competences; similarly, through communication, we obtain non-verbal codes that are essential for our non-verbal competence. In the discipline of communication, scholars consider a person's culturally appropriate and effective behavior his/her communication competence (Rubin, 1990). Appropriate and effective behaviors in cultures other than our own are then considered intercultural communication competence (Lustig & Koester, 2010). In more ways than one, communication plays a pivotal role in our acquisition of cultural competence. Via communication, not only do we acquire our cultural knowledge and behavior, we also transmit our cultural knowledge and behavior to generations that follow. A culturally competent person is therefore a culturally competent communicator, and a cross-culturally competent person is a cross-culturally competent communicator.

## Conclusion

In this essay, the elements that contribute to culturally competent communication within one's own culture were identified. Usually, cultural competence is taken for granted until people travel to places where the culture is different. Then and there, they discover how



clumsy and ineffective they are in the new environment. Generally, most of our culturally acquired knowledge and behavior are unconscious to us. People are seldom aware of the cultural knowledge and behavior they have acquired while growing up since application of one's own cultural knowledge and behavior is reflexive, spontaneous, and effortless.

The cultural knowledge and behavior thus acquired constitute our cultural literacy. Without cultural literacy, individuals find themselves lacking the knowledge to comprehend the meanings of interactions within a given cultural context. A person must have acquired both language codes and the contextual knowledge of a social environment before he/she can effectively and appropriately communicate with the people in that culture. While language codes include both verbal and non-verbal messages, contextual knowledge encompasses background information, cultural symbols and awareness of cultural processes. All are equally important to an individual's effective and appropriate communication.

Clearly, communication and acquisition of cultural competence are closely related to each other. By communicating with others, one not only learns knowledge of a particular culture, but also obtains culturally appropriate and effective behaviors, including both verbal and non-verbal conduct. Indeed, communication is indispensable and plays a critical role in our acquisition and development of cultural competence.

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### Related Websites and Video Clips

- At [www.Shpm.com/articles/cultural/culture.html](http://www.Shpm.com/articles/cultural/culture.html) readers can find a cultural competence checklist provided by Dr. Jean Chin.
- [www.culturalcompetence.ca/](http://www.culturalcompetence.ca/) This is the website of the Center for Organizational Cultural Competence, Canada, which provides training classes, books and other resources relating to issues of diversity and cultural competence.
- [www.google.ca/search?q=cultural+competence&hl=en&biw=1536&bih=764&site=webhp&prmd=imvnsb&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=LuWoTtfANcMiQKv8rDRBg&sqi=2&ved=0CHAQsAQ](http://www.google.ca/search?q=cultural+competence&hl=en&biw=1536&bih=764&site=webhp&prmd=imvnsb&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=LuWoTtfANcMiQKv8rDRBg&sqi=2&ved=0CHAQsAQ); this website offers a variety of visual and graphic resources pertaining to cultural competence, and cross-cultural communication.
- The official website of the National Communication Association in the United States can be found at [www.natcom.org/](http://www.natcom.org/) which provides up-to-date information regarding the field of communication and intercultural communication.
- The official website of International Communication Association is at [www.icahdq.org/](http://www.icahdq.org/) which renders resources relating to all aspects of human communication worldwide.

- [www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/ach/article/view/3054](http://www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/ach/article/view/3054); this link connects readers to an article published in a 2009 issue of *Asian Culture and History* (Vol. 1 No.2, 63-71). The article, “Impact of culture and knowledge acquisition to organizational success: Study on Chinese and Malay small firms”, presents a careful study demonstrating how acquisition of shared knowledge significantly contributes to business success and failure in a given cultural setting.
- In this short video, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=oAJ8ZqanZr4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oAJ8ZqanZr4) a group of elementary students is shown acquiring a second language and the cultural knowledge of the language simultaneously.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fclz2zP0n48&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fclz2zP0n48&feature=related); this is a mini-lecture explaining relevant elements of a person’s linguistic communicative competence.

### Discussion Questions

1. Try to work out your own definition of culture. What do you think of the importance of culture and its impact on us?
2. Are you aware of your culturally acquired knowledge and behaviors? If you are, describe the process by which you have come to know the “true face” of your culture. If you are not, try to describe some of the ways by which you can get to know the “true face” of your culture.
3. Why does the author of this essay claim that culture and communication are closely related? Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
4. The author also argues that “tacit knowledge” is of fundamental importance in individuals’ comprehension of a communication episode. Try to give examples from your own experiences to illustrate the importance of “tacit knowledge” in your communicative activities.
5. What do you think of the role of communication in your acquisition and development of cultural competence? Use examples to demonstrate.
6. In your opinion, what constitutes a person’s cultural literacy? Is it possible for us to measure an individual’s level of cultural literacy? If so, how?
7. The author contends that a culturally competent person is a culturally competent communicator and a cross-culturally competent person is a cross-culturally competent communicator. Do you agree with him, and what does this mean to you?

## **About the Author**

Jianglong Wang (Ph. D., Northwestern University, 1989) is a professor in the Department of Communication at Western Washington University, where he teaches courses in intercultural and interpersonal communication. His research interests include intercultural/international communication, Chinese culture and communication, and teaching and learning as non-native speakers of English in North America. Wang is a recipient of the Distinguished Scholarship Award from the Intercultural and International Communication Division of the National Communication Association in the United States.