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PATTERNS OF INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION:
THE INFLUENCE OF LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Introduction

This paper expands an original model of expatriate-local personnel communication, published in April 1996 issue of the Journal of Business Communication (JBC), to a broadened model of intercultural business communication. The paper consists of the following: (a) three zones of expatriate-local personnel that present the original model and (b) elaboration of the expanded model and preliminary reporting of empirical data collected within its framework.

Original Model: Expatriate-Local Personnel Communication in Taiwan

The JBC article is organized around models of the verbal communication systems, processes, and interactions of the expatriates and local personnel. The focus is on the expatriates who initiate the communication process and the response of local personnel to these initiations. Distinct communication patterns arose in three communication zones. These zones are determined on the basis of second language competencies (Mandarin in this case) of the expatriates in the interactive communication process. In Zone one communication, expatriates might be able to use greetings, ordinary social expressions, and ask simple questions in their daily encounters; however, almost all expatriate-Chinese personnel communication is transacted in English as the expatriates can not speak or understand enough Mandarin to fulfill the complete communication process. In Zone two, expatriate-Chinese communication was still primarily conducted in English but some communication exchanges could be in Chinese. Chinese-language communication transactions are possible because Zone two expatriates are partially bilingual. These Zone two expatriates had sufficient control of the structure and adequate vocabulary to handle representation requirements and professional discussions in one or more specialized fields. Expatriates in Zone three were fully bilingual; these individuals can choose to communicate in either English or Chinese. In each of these zones the expatriate communicated with Chinese personnel who possessed
varying second-language proficiency—from fully bilingual mid- to upper-level managers to the limited English-speaking workers.

**Zone One Communication.** Figure 1 describes the model of Zone one communication patterns. To secure an efficient communication flow in the organization, Zone one expatriates modified their approach to communication because they could not replicate their previous home country communication experiences. The overall process of communication can be divided into two sub-systems: direct and indirect strategies (See Figure 1). The direct communication strategy refers to person-to-person interaction between expatriate and Chinese personnel (two patterns) and indirect communication describes communication encounters in which messages were relayed through intermediaries or language linkpins to the Chinese receivers. Indirect communication consisted of two phases: expatriate to intermediary or language linkpin in phase one and intermediary to enterprise personnel in phase two. Three types of language linkpins were used in indirect communication. These were primary language linkpins, secondary language linkpins, and secretary linkpins.

![Figure 1: Overall Process](image)

In direct communication, English was the communication medium; whereas, in indirect communication, English was used in the Phase one and Mandarin and/or Taiwanese in Phase two. In indirect communication, as the Zone one expatriates passed messages through language linkpins, these individuals translated the English-language messages into Chinese.
before relaying the messages. In direct communication the Zone one expatriates communicated directly in English to the Chinese personnel.

Through developing a communication system which included both direct and indirect communication, the Zone one expatriates were able to create a two-way communication system that included the feedback and the reception of information from multiple sources. The language use (English or Chinese) introduced different types of communication loss or distortion (noise). There was a trade-off in the use of these two communication codes: translation error (with indirect communication) versus original content omission (with direct communication). As the message was translated from English to Chinese, indirect communication presented the risk of changing the message content. Conversely, when the message was directly transmitted in direct communication, there was the danger of over simplification in attempting to adjust the message to the English proficiency level of the Chinese interlocutors.

The indirect communication sub-system became the dominant mode of organizational communication with direct communication playing a supporting and reinforcing role. In Phase one of indirect communication, Zone one expatriates communicated English-language messages to the language linkpins whose levels of second-language competencies (English in this case) were such as to not require language simplification or the use of extra energy to send (encode) or receive (decode) messages. Zone one expatriates reported that, except for significantly less use of slang or Western humor, they could communicate without feeling any inhibitions and use sophisticated technical genre.

Through continuous interaction in English, the Zone one expatriates and intermediaries developed close working relationships with the language linkpins (phase one). By means of interaction with enterprise staff in Chinese, the language linkpins guided the processes of both downward and upward organizational communication (phase two). A feedback loop (see Figure 2) was an integral part of both phase one and phase two of the indirect communication sub-systems. The language linkpins, being included in both sub-systems, connected the two sub-systems to create an integrated whole.
In addition to communicating through language linkpins in the indirect communication subsystem, the expatriates also communicated directly with Chinese personnel. These communication transactions can be categorized into two patterns: selective communication and generalized communication.

The selective communication pattern was used by expatriates to disseminate ideas and information to selected groups in organized meetings. As the Chinese attending the meetings possessed varying second-language capabilities, the expatriates had to simplify their spoken English and attempted to adapt the language level to that of a particular group. By communicating directly rather than using intermediaries, the expatriates were able to add authenticity to important messages, and were able to reinforce as well as complement the messages sent through the language linkpins. From the standpoint of the receivers, this communication pattern allowed the Chinese to get a first-hand impression of the expatriates and to assess the communication through non-verbal signals sent by the expatriates. This pattern was chosen to accomplish a specific purpose - such as announcing a new program, soliciting support for organizational improvement, or supporting as well as confirming messages sent through the intermediaries.
Expatriates were also able to extend their influence throughout the organizations and to solicit cooperation and support for particular programs. These goals were accomplished by a two-step communication process. During the first step, expatriates communicated directly to all invited personnel who attended the meetings. In this step, there was direct face-to-face contact between the expatriates and selected organizational personnel. In the second step, these personnel were able to take the ideas expressed in the meetings, especially the enthusiasm conveyed by the expatriates, and spread these messages to other colleagues in their respective divisions and departments throughout the organization.

The generalized communication pattern represented symbolic communication. The expatriates used this pattern to establish their images throughout the organizations. By making themselves visible, the expatriates were communicating (sending) with a wide range of personnel at all organizational levels. Through direct observation (receiving), the expatriates also secured unfiltered information about the organization. In general this pattern could be described as a version of management by walking around”.

In the communication process, the zone one expatriates would randomly engage in conversations with enterprise personnel as they wondered through various departments, especially in production departments. The medium of communication can be described as actualized English” and spoken Chinese.” Because of the constraint of second-language competency, the expatriates could communicate only a few understandable words in English and say only a few token words in Chinese. Non-verbal communication also played an important role in the communication process.

**Zone Two Communication.** Zone two expatriates used the same communication patterns and communication strategies as the Zone 1 expatriates, but were able to engage in a higher proportion of direct communication and conversely make less use of intermediaries because of their better second-language (Chinese) speaking abilities.

Given these additional second-language speaking abilities, Zone two expatriates had to decide whether to use a passive or an interactive strategy. Passive and interactive communication are represented by opposite poles of three sub-dimensions: frequency (less to more), situation of second-language use (social or business), and activities (passive listening or interactive listening and speaking). The cumulative impact of the sub-dimensions indicates movement
toward either the passive communication mode or the interactive communication mode. Placement on the insider-outsider continuum represents an expatriate relative position as a cultural insider or outsider and is a function of the expatriates relative position on the passive communication and interactive communication dimension.

With a passive strategy, the expatriate and Chinese interlocutors confined their Chinese language exchange to social situations. In moving to an interactive strategy, the exchange was gradually broadened to include business conversations—especially those conducted away from the office and in a social situation. In the passive stage, the expatriate was solely or primarily a receiver. Upon moving to the interactive stage, the expatriate initially responded and increasingly initiated conversations. This movement from passive to interactive communication carried with it social implications; that is, the expatriate was gradually moving from being an outsider to becoming an insider.

Successful Zone two interlocutors (expatriate and Chinese) developed a balance of English and Chinese communication. As the Chinese proficiency of the expatriates increased, the possibility of using Chinese in various occasions also broadened. In a parallel development, as expatriates initiated more social conversations in Chinese, the Chinese responded by talking more with the expatriates with a greater number of business related conversations in English and social exchange in Mandarin. The dual use of language was mutually reinforcing and in effect increased the total amount of verbal communication between the expatriates and the local Chinese.

The Zone two expatriates although they could communicate in Chinese, still spoke less fluently in Chinese than their Chinese counterparts did in speaking English. The challenge for the Zone two expatriates was to match English or Chinese with appropriate situations. With Chinese individuals having limited-English speaking abilities, Zone two expatriates used Mandarin to their obvious advantage. Without speaking in Chinese, these zone two expatriates would not have been possible to effectively communicate with their limited English-speaking Chinese subordinates.

Moving from the passive communication stage to the interactive communication stage, the expatriates had the potential for improved communication but this also carried with it the dangers of misunderstanding and conflicts. Communicating in a second language brought the
Zone two expatriates in close connection with Chinese individuals and, at the same time, created pressures for the expatriates to abide by Chinese cultural norms. In effect, the increased second-language used by expatriates meant that the expatriates were more connected to the Chinese social system and were moving from being outsiders to becoming insiders.

*Zone Three Communication.* Language deficiencies did not constrain the communication transactions of the Zone three expatriates; these managers could choose to communicate in English or in Chinese. The Zone three expatriate, however, faced the same insider-outsider dilemma as the Zone two individual but had much greater control in the use of language.

Having other personnel serve in the role of linking the expatriates and the Taiwanese personnel was essential in Zones one and two but less of a necessity for the Zone three expatriates. This function could now be performed, at least partially, by the expatriate manager. The danger in a Zone three environment is that, if the expatriate spends too much time working with the Taiwanese operations, the expatriate may lose contact with the corporate headquarters. The possible result is that the expatriate will become less effective in communicating the corporate philosophy and culture and that the Taiwanese operations will become less successfully integrated within the corporate family. Because the Zone three expatriates were not constrained by language, these expatriates had to strike a balance between (a) maintaining contact with the corporate headquarters and thereby not losing touch with the corporate culture and (b) implementing the corporate philosophy throughout the Taiwanese operation by being deeply involved in day-to-day operations.

**Expanded Model of Intercultural Business Communication**

While the original model was based on expatriate initiated communication in the context of expatriate-local personnel communication, the expanded model recognizes that interlocutors besides expatriates and local employees can engage in intercultural communication transactions. Within the three communication zones as defined by the second language proficiency levels of the interlocutors, both interlocutors can have differing cultural and subject knowledge and skill competencies (divided into low, medium, and high categories). The model provides a structure that to describes and analyzes how communication channels
and effectiveness are affected by language proficiency, intercultural competency and subject knowledge.

**Figure 3: Language Maps of Hong Kong and Mainland China Expatriate and Local Personnel Interlocutors**

Note: MNCs = Multinational Corporations
Hong Kong and Mainland China Communication Patterns

Figure 3 presents language maps that portray the percentage of Zone 1, Zone 2, and Zone 3 interlocutors in the Hong Kong and Mainland China samples and the resulting proportion of indirect and direct communication in the exchanges between these interlocutors. With a high percentage of local personnel in the Zones two and three categories (85%) and a high percentage of Zone one expatriates (80%) the predominate communication channel in Hong Kong was direct communication (90%). It should be noted that the entire Hong Kong sample represented professional organizational environments.

In the Mainland China sample was drawn from manufacturing and professional organizations. In manufacturing sector, the communication patterns were distinct from that observed in Hong Kong while reflecting Taiwan expatriate-local personnel communication. With a high percentage of the interlocutors in Zone one (80% of the expatriates and 85% of the local personnel) the dominant pattern in Mainland China multinational manufacturing firms was indirect communication. Language linkpins facilitated the intercultural communication process in these multinational firms by relaying messages between expatriates and low English proficiency local personnel.

In contrast, in the professional organization contexts with 100 percent of the Chinese interlocutors falling under the Zones two and three categories, a direct English communication environment was enacted and an intra-organizational and language linkpin pattern did not emerge. The Chinese Personnel with higher English proficiency level did then become language linkpins in inter-organizational communication. As the professional firms interfaced with Chinese manufacturing sub-contractors, the language linkpins transferred English messages into Mandarin and also provided feedback to non-Chinese speaking personnel in the multinational firms.

NOTE

1. References available upon request.
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