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**Cross-Cultural Communication: Misunderstanding**

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EAP: A Discourse Analysis Perspective— 2017 SVC Project

Learning Outcome Demonstration

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## Cross-Cultural Communication: Misunderstanding

### Abstract

Miscommunication occurs in everyday life regardless of how intimate one is with their dialogue participant either semantically or physically. This paper specifically observes from the point of view of a participant the two day English camp hosted by Guo-Tai elementary school the interactions between American students from Saint Vincent College, Taiwanese students from Fu Jen University, and Guo-Tai elementary students of grade 6. Three major aspects of miscommunication are proposed as an attempt to explain situations where communication had failed: lexical comprehension problems, mishearing, and language learning anxiety.

### Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine instances of cultural miscommunication from my own personal perspective, during the events of interacting with the various students from Saint Vincent College. In this one case study I will note behaviors and interactions among primarily three groups of people involved during the SVC summer camp: FJU students, SVC students and the Guo-Tai elementary school students. Having noticed multiple occurrences of cross-cultural misunderstanding, I will attempt to pin-point the reason as to why the intended message became misinterpreted by the recipient party or parties.

The term misunderstanding here is in general for the breakdown of communication between members of two distinct cultures or ethnic backgrounds, whether it is verbal or non-verbal. It may also apply to two members of differing language proficiency levels as well. Mauranen (2006) defines the terms as “a potential breakdown point in conversation, or at least a kind of communicative turbulence” (Mauranen, 2006, p. 128). A break in understanding may also occur if the recipient is unable to comprehend the exchange and as time goes on each speaker will then reach their own conclusion regarding the conversation, creating a conflict of understanding.

What is more is that the two cultures here hold oppositional traits, fitting into the narrative of the individualist western and collectivist eastern culture. Novinger (2001) suggests that “Individualists tend to be self-motivated and can be stimulated to achieve by individual competition” (Novinger, 2001, p. 30) while on the other end of the spectrum “Collectivists...are better encouraged by appealing to their group spirit and by requesting cooperation” (Novinger, 2001, p. 30).

### Literature Review

**Fred Dervin: Cultural identity, representation and othering** - Cultural identity and its relations to representation and Othering is discussed, Dervin stresses that concepts such as culture, identity and cultural

identity are very slippery, and research tools available are advantageous towards taking a critical stance. Dervin presents arguments and studies from multiple fields from the humanities and social sciences regarding the concept of representations, stereotypes and Othering.

**Peter Broeder et al.: Achieving Understanding: Discourse in Intercultural Encounters** – A detailed study regarding understanding in a second language related to minority workers. Everyday interactions between works and bureaucrats of the society within which they now live are studied. Theories are proposed to explicate why miscommunication occurs between native and foreign speakers.

**Geneva Gay: Culture and Communication in the Classroom** – Gay explains some of the critical features and pedagogical potentials of the culture0communication semiotics for different ethnic groups of color. Gay outlines key assertions regarding culture and communication in teaching and learning in general followed by major characteristics of communication modes of African, Native, Latino, Asian, and European Americans.

**Adrian Holliday et al.: Intercultural Communication: An Advanced Resource Book for Students** – The authors analyzes social, political and psychological factors which affect successful intercultural communication in a social setting. Holliday et al. discourages against traditional conservative theories of essentialism, Othering and stereotypes, and lastly, the reader is reminded that in the age of globalization cultural differences are unavoidable and increasingly complex.

**Anna Mauranen: Signaling and preventing misunderstanding in English as lingua franca communication** – Mauranen investigates misunderstanding and its prevention among participants in university degree programs where English was the lingua franca. The author asserts that speakers engage in various clarification and repair strategies in an apparent attempt to ensure the achievement of mutual intelligibility and thereby the achievement of important communicative goals.

**Bonny Norton: Non-participation, imagined communities and the language classroom** – Norton examines the relationship between non-participation and what she calls ‘imagined communities’ of two ESL learners in Canada, linking the discussion to the learners’ changing expectations of ESL courses, their shifting identities and their unique investments in the target language.

**Brian H. Spitzberg: A Model of Intercultural Communication Competence** – Spitzberg examines the concept of interactional competence in intercultural contexts, which is followed by an attempt to broadly outline a theory of intercultural competence. Spitzberg develops an integrative model of intercultural competence elaborated upon by a series of propositions. The propositions are divided into the individual system, the episodic system, and the relational system.

**McLaren Peter: Collisions with otherness: "traveling" theory, post-colonial criticism, and the politics of ethnographic practice - the mission of the wounded ethnographer** – McLaren discusses qualitative research in general and critical ethnography, citing new perspectives in a postmodernist environment. McLaren argues that ethnographic research must take into consideration its form of analysis as a narrative practice that is institutionally bound, discursively situated, and geo-politically located.

### **Background**

The course overall was geared towards advancing knowledge and strategies related to teaching English for academic purposes. Students were expected to focus on various purposes of academic discourse through utilization of discourse analysis with attention to cross-cultural communication and TESOL. Two major set of activities were conducted throughout the semester course:

- In-class discussions regarding teaching English: reading, writing listening, speaking, and vocabulary. Academic materials were consulted towards teaching English as a second language as well as practicing the application of such theories in real time. Finally, there was observation of pedagogic practices in a local elementary school.
  - FJU students also created their own lesson plan based on the theories and techniques discussed in class and practiced teaching to a class of elementary children
- A collaborative project was conducted with a group of American college students for one English Summer Camp lasting two days. The American students collaborated with the FJU students to learn and observe the differences and similarities individuals from differing cultural backgrounds.
- Prior to the camp itself, during the course of the semester three guest speakers were invited to discuss teaching English.
  - The first guest speaker being a professor who lectured on utilizing picture books to teach not just the English language but also additional skills pertinent to elementary students.
  - The second guest speaker was an entrepreneur who created educational videos on Youtube, the speaker primarily created content geared towards Taiwanese people of all ages desiring to learn English.
  - The last guest speaker was another professor which discussed the techniques and importance of utilizing drama and free expression to enhance the English learning experience for elementary school children.

In addition, leading up to the camp the FJU students also conducted a brief interview with one of the American students, asking questions pertaining to characteristics of the American university.

## Methodology

Prior to the summer camp I briefly had a conversation with a member of the American group to come and collaboratively teach with us FJU students. During the start of the camp itself I met with the American members we performed icebreaker activities via demonstrating the activities that are to be conducted with the Guo-Tai elementary school students. During the down times in between I became acquainted with and conversed at length with the individual assigned to my group while running through the work station activities and explaining the overall framework for the camp.

During the two day camp including time spent to allow for the American students to sightsee parts of Taipei I observed others and also evaluating myself afterwards interactions between the American students, the FJU students, and also the Guo-Tai elementary students. Elements such as student behavior, the contents of conversations both in a casual atmosphere as well as pedagogical were noted, interactions between the American and FJU students were also noted and evaluated.

This study was conducted as a singular case study with which I myself was also a participant within the activity. The data was collected and analyzed from my own point of view. It is important to note that I as the observer was also involved in these activities, as Peter McLaren states: “We are, in effect, both the subject and the object of our research... This is why it is vitally important that we connect empirical data to the discourses that produce them and, at the same time, produce our subjects under study.” (McLaren, 1992, p. 80). My own conversations and physical presence also have an effect on those around me, furthermore, personal inherit biases are always going to be present due to my own unique background.

The Theoretical concepts I will discuss are:

Bremer (1996): *Lexical comprehension problem*: Terms or phrases which were highly specialized or not often used. Often this problem is cleared up quickly by asking an interrogative question.

Norton (2001): *Language learning anxiety*: Fear of not being understood or being laughed at because of accent or making language mistakes is often reported by learners. The dilemma is that the very anxiety also occurs or is exacerbated when learners are talking to people in whom they have a particular symbolic or material investment.

Bremer (1996): *Mishearing*: Misunderstanding caused by ‘mishearing’ a lexical element...that the hearer perceives one or more phonetic elements differently.”

These concepts will be elaborated with examples from the summer camp from my observational point of view in an attempt to explain the interactions that occurred, it is important to note that there are multiple views with which the same incidents can be explained.

### Analysis and Discussion

Both the American and Taiwanese students (FJU and Guo-Tai) exhibited cultural traits in their own respective end of the spectrum. In terms of hierarchical distance, Novinger suggests that it “can also be conceived of as interpersonal power distance, affects the degree of formality that is used in communication style” (Novinger, 2001, p. 32). While Taiwanese students will address their adhere to an authoritative distance and incorporation formal but personal courtesy, the American students often would communicate informally with everyone regardless of social rank. Novinger continues to suggest that “North Americans are conditioned by their culture to communicate in a manner that will decrease the hierarchical distance between themselves and people situated both at higher and lower levels in the social ranking system” (Novinger, 2001, p. 34), namely when speaking to the leaders of their mission a frank attitude is exhibited.

One of the ‘lectures’ decided upon was the concept of gift giving etiquette, whereby the local Taiwanese cultural behavior is contrasted with the American version. Students are taught which items are considered taboo and plays upon superstitions which prevail in society, for example in Taiwanese culture the giving of clocks is considered rude as it is a pun on implying death. Similarly from the American perspective a pair of scissors is seen as a severance of friendship ties. Students are explicitly told the differences through both visual and verbal instruction as well as a short skit to convey how one’s body language and attitude should be in this specific situation. The lecture here is geared towards raising the students’ cultural awareness as part of language teaching. Risager (2007) categorizes this as a culture capsule: “a short talk about a minimal cultural difference between the target-language culture and the students’ own culture” (Risager, 2007, p. 41).

Bremer (1996) identifies various problems of understanding which is concerned with an individual’s linguistic proficiency. More often than not two types of problems were exhibited:

*Lexical comprehension problem:* Terms or phrases which were highly specialized or not often used. Often this problem is cleared up quickly by asking an interrogative question.

For example when the student were becoming acquainted with the McDonalds vocabulary, one of them being “clerk” the Guo-Tai students were unable to conceptualize what a clerk was. In an attempt to provide context, Brother Dominic then showed them the picture that accompanied the word which allowed for the students to comprehend and associate the utterance ‘clerk’ with the picture.

The second problem is that of “Misunderstanding caused by ‘mishearing’ a lexical element...that the hearer perceives one or more phonetic elements differently” (Bremer, 1996, p. 45), this can similarly be clarified by asking interrogative questions or displaying body language conveying a lack of understanding. For example during activity 4 of teaching American fast food where students played “Support the Frontline” in order to not only enhance the learning experience, but also ingraining the vocabulary taught by associating it with a pictorial representation. There were a number of incidents where the student brought back the wrong item as requested by a SVC student, when told that it was the wrong item the Guo-Tai student often replied that they *thought* they heard a different item expressed verbally. It is possible that the student misheard the request as it was of a different accent or a combination of the SVC speaking too fast with a foreign accent. After numerous incidents of this had occurred, the plan was revised slightly where repetition was used to clarify the request.

During the course of the English camp there were on multiple occasions to which I experienced misunderstandings due to possessing inadequate linguistic proficiency: some lexicons which I’ve never heard were used, and thus had to utilize inferences from the context (usually the dialogue at hand) in order to formulate a response. Furthermore, given that many of the foreign participants were members of a religious organization and thus possessed not only their own technical vocabulary but an entirely different set of meanings for common words in the English language. As a result on multiple occasions the flow of a conversation often turned into a query session, one of explanation rather than an exchange of viewpoints. One example was that as Brother Dominic was immersed in the church organization, with which the only knowledge I could draw on was what I have previously come into contact with through the filter of media and books which were outdated. A possible solution given this context is that knowing the individuals’ backgrounds and professions one could beforehand become acquainted with their specific field, in this case it would be that of the Catholic Church and its workings.

Gay (2016) argues that cultural values and ways of knowing percolate through languages and communication styles, should there be an absence of shared frames of references for which either the student and teacher, then it becomes difficult for the students to understand the task given as well as completing them. On the other end of the relationship, teachers will not be able to effectively instruct students nor will they be able to grasp the capabilities and learning progress of the students. Sometimes there are situations whereby a certain level of familiarity may falsely lead the instructors to believe that their instructions will be processed. It is observed that in both western and eastern conventional classes students are expected to be passive-receptive: they are told to listen quietly and receive information in a pre-organized manner and will be given opportunities to respond in the form of answers, questions, or physical actions. Individual students are acknowledged and



given permission by the teacher to respond and both physical and verbal etiquette befitting that of a student-teacher relationship occurs (Gay, 2016, p. 305).

On more than one account, seeing this framework in play by the American students it was assumed that the students would then respond to a given instruction. However presence of a language barrier impeded the instruction from getting through completely. For example, during the first day when the students were getting acclimated to the new vocabulary provided, in an attempted to teach them the rules of a work station Dominic was under the impression that they would be able to infer simple sentences and thus directly stated the rules. Given that there was no common ground between the students and the instructor other than the structure of passive-receptiveness the students naturally did not understand the instructions.

Norton (2001) contends that there are a variety of factors that explains the observed lack of participation among learners; some of these are seen during the English camp:

*Language learning anxiety* Fear of not being understood or being laughed at because of accent or making language mistakes is often reported by learners. The dilemma is that the very anxiety also occurs or is exacerbated when learners are talking to people in whom they have a particular symbolic or material investment (Norton, 2001).

During the camp on multiple occasions the American teachers would engage with a student individually and directly instruct them to either learn vocabulary or ask a simply question related to the workshop. Not limited to just one student, it was observed that multiple students displayed a delayed response and in some cases no response at all. When prompted some were more nervous as a negative feedback loop had been constructed, the anxiety of uttering an imperfect phrase is exacerbated as they are told it isn't clear or proper. For example during Activity 6 or the Order Simulation Game for American fast food, one student in my group when attempting the activity had difficulty vocalizing his order, when I spoke to him in Chinese he responded timely and with confidence. However, when asked to verbalize his request in English he was hesitant and required repeated prompting and encouragement before saying his order and completing the activity. Other scenarios also occurred throughout the camp whereby the children wanted to interact with the American students but were not able to; this often led to a prolonged period of silence and direct eye contact without other additional interactions. As a result some SVC students were slightly put off being isolated in a foreign culture, while some Guo-Tai students ended up distancing themselves from the SVC students.

Prior to meeting the American members of the camp, the information that was available was that in general they were from a Catholic college, and among them were members of the clergy. Without additional information, the presuppositions which I made drew inferences from what I knew about catholic people in the US. For example, having understood a small facet of existentialism, I assumed that they then endorse the

metanarrative of the Roman Catholic Church unquestionably. Furthermore, I assumed that the students themselves were also fervently religious in that the often propagated stereotypes from the American south would be prevalent. In this case I had subscribed to the concept of stereotyping and Othering given that the culture both in the capital of Thailand and Taiwan in general tend towards skepticism of religion and emphasis on scientific empiricism. According to Fred Dervin (2012) “Usually, two types of stereotypes are put forward: autostereotypes, which are linked to people’s in-group; and heterostereotypes, which are related to an out-group (‘the Other’). (Dervin, 2012, p. 186), on one occasion the heterostereotypes which I presupposed came to be confirmed in a few cases. During one of the meals which we had with the students I was asked about my religion and what I knew about Catholicism, I was asked for my input during a discussion about the Bible as well as being invited to their campus and church to learn more about the religion. Other discussions also assumed that divine providence was in motion, as Brother Dominic would often answer various queries with the implication that it was God’s plan.

Holliday et. al. (2010) categorizes this as the “‘foreign Other’...any group of people which is *perceived* as different – perhaps in terms of so-called ethnicity, religion, political alignment, class or caste, or gender” (Holliday et. al., 2010, p. 25). Even the monk which I was assigned to also possessed this concept, especially when he told us that he used to work in I.T. and suggested that I was surprised he gave that up in favor of religion. Thus in an attempt to remove the cultural barrier as he assumed I believed that he was a westerner through and through, Brother Dominic also attempted to defy this preconception by opening with the fact that he was of Indian decent and still had contact with his family in India, thus attempted to utilize geographic distance to minimize the initial phase of intercultural exchange.

## **Conclusion**

In terms of further research or additional directions this study could have been taken, increasing the data size would allow for qualitative and potentially statistical analysis also. One method is to interview the participants from all three sides possibly during the activity or after the English camp has been completed. The data could be recorded in terms of an interview or through a questionnaire. The qualitative analysis could then reveal certain priorities or values that are seen as esteemed in their respective backgrounds, furthermore, it may also allow for a more precise characterization rather than just FJU students, SVC students, and the Guo-Tai students.

Additional methods which bear the issue of subjectivity in mind could also involve having an independent observer performing surveillance duties with a recording device, this would then allow for the data to be more removed from the issue of subjectivity and allow for objective analysis based on recordings. An

observer could also be asked to record their observations either through writing or voice recording which could then be analyzed as data free of my own subjectivity and inherent biases.

Due to the fact that this paper was based on my own personal data, there will naturally be issues of interference and subjectivity. It is important to remember that in a postmodern globalized society both physically and digitally, no one is truly isolated in terms of contact with information. Naturally as a result one's own opinions will be influenced both consciously and unconsciously by either official institutions like that of education, or through biopower or peer pressure where the opinions of those in close proximity both physical and digital have an effect on one's own world view.

Just by interacting with others from a different background one's own disposition and values will shift automatically, in effect we are all hybrids culturally even without a comprehensive knowledge or experience of other cultures. Furthermore, personal levels of social openness, conversational proficiency, and even the amount of sleep one had the night before along with a myriad other factors all contribute towards how one behaves towards others. This paper was one attempt at explaining how and why miscommunication occurs.

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