

## INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

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**Abstract:** *Intercultural communication is now a cornerstone of international relations and business relationships in our globalized world. Although it has its pitfalls, cross-cultural communication skills can be trained and improved to foster smooth relationships between people from different cultural backgrounds.*

**Key words:** *cultural differences, cultural sensitivity, intercultural understanding and communication, social groups, cultural background.*

### Introduction

In international business, a lack of knowledge about cultural differences can have serious consequences. In fact, entire campaigns have had to be withdrawn due to a lack of research into cultural sensitivity. A last-minute redesign and reprint can be very expensive, so ensuring that any text and imagery is culturally appropriate is crucial. It is not surprising that intercultural understanding and communication are top priorities for international companies today. Employees with intercultural communication skills are in great demand. But what is intercultural communication?

Intercultural communication studies the communication between different cultures and social groups and describes the many communication processes and related problems between groups of individuals with different cultural backgrounds.

### Main part

Knowing a foreign language is only part of the package – the other party's cultural background, values and beliefs must also be understood. This is where intercultural communication skills come into play. They are required to successfully communicate with people from other cultures and social groups. And intercultural communication skills also involve a willingness to adapt and accept that other cultures may communicate and act differently.

If you're wondering where you and your employees can acquire those coveted cross-cultural communication skills, look no further! EHLION is an established language service provider with many years of experience in intercultural training. We can help your staff communicate effectively with other employees internationally, or we can prepare executives for international assignments or for high-level business negotiations rather than relying on interpreting services.

How can we define intercultural communication? Essentially, intercultural communication means across different cultural borders. When two or more people from different cultural backgrounds interact and communicate with each other, we can

say that intercultural communication takes place. Therefore, intercultural communication can be defined as the exchange of information at different levels of consciousness between people from different cultural backgrounds, or simply put: individuals influenced by different cultural groups negotiate common meanings in interactions.

### **Discussion**

There are many different types and theories of intercultural communication. The most important are:

social science approach. This model focuses on observing the behavior of a person from another culture in order to describe and compare it to other cultures. It also examines the way individuals adjust their communication in different situations depending on who they are talking to. For example, we would tell the same story differently to our best friend than to our grandmother.

interpretative approach. This theory focuses on gathering knowledge about a culture through communication in the form of shared stories based on subjective, individual experiences. The focus is on intercultural communication as used in specific language communities, so ethnography plays an important role here. Because individual context is so important to this model, it does not seek to make generalized predictions based on its results.

dialectical approach. This method examines aspects of cross-cultural communication in the form of six dichotomies, namely cultural versus individual, personal versus contextual, differences versus similarities, static versus dynamic, history versus past-present versus future, and privilege versus disadvantage. A dialectical approach helps us think about culture and cross-cultural communication in complex ways so that we can avoid categorizing everything in either/or dichotomies by taking a broader approach and acknowledging the tensions that need to be negotiated.

critical approach. This approach examines cultures for their differences compared to the researcher's own culture and specifically how those cultures are represented in the media. The critical approach is complex and multifaceted and therefore leads to a comprehensive understanding of intercultural communication.

Perhaps you have also come across the term's multicultural communication and cross-cultural communication. How do these differ from intercultural communication? Let's take a look!

multicultural communication. Multicultural refers to how a group or team is put together, especially a group made up of people of different nationalities. Indeed, communication in multicultural settings has become commonplace today.

cross-cultural communication. Cross-cultural means comparing two or more different cultures; cross-cultural communication examines the different communication styles of different cultural groups.

communication. Finally, intercultural refers to the exchanges that take place between different cultures.

In summary, intercultural communication refers to interactions between people from different cultures, while cross-cultural communication involves comparing interactions between people of the same culture with those of another culture.

There are many reasons why intercultural communication is important. First, effective intercultural communication is an essential skill for anyone working in different countries or regions to build harmonious relationships and avoid conflict. It is imperative to accurately and appropriately transmit information across countries and cultures. Executives in multinational companies, either working in their home country or as expats abroad, particularly benefit from excellent intercultural communication skills to interact with international customers and employees. Similarly, intercultural communication is also important for anyone working with people from other cultures to avoid misunderstandings and even insults. It is fair to say that intercultural communication is the basis for successful international business in today's globalized world.

Intercultural competence covers a wide field, ranging from linguistic aspects to social and cultural conventions. Linguistic differences can make it difficult for global companies to find appropriate product names for their target markets that do not cause offensiveness. For example, Coca-Cola once tried to find a phonetic equivalent of their brand for the Chinese market and came up with Ke Kou-Ke La. But they didn't consider that this pleasant-sounding name translates to "bite the growth seedling" in Chinese. Needless to say, the brand name had to be changed.

It is important to note that each culture may have different social conventions. For example, American business partners prefer small talk to build a relationship first, while Britons may try humor and Germans tend to get straight to the point without beating around the bush.

Western cultures like Australia and the US are more forward looking and like to focus on potential future benefits of products and campaigns. In contrast, representatives from countries like China or India prefer to review past performance to build credibility. This knowledge can have a profound impact on relationships and business deals.

Nonverbal communication can be just as difficult to navigate as verbal communication. In many countries, giving a thumbs up is a positive sign that shows approval. But in some cultures, like Japan, Indonesia and Latin America, it is considered offensive.

Likewise, eating with your hands is a perfectly acceptable way to eat in Indian culture, but is considered rude in many other cultures. One of the main challenges of intercultural communication is ethnocentrism, the common but misguided assumption

by one culture group that they are superior to other culture groups. This can be addressed by actively striving for openness and acceptance towards other cultures.

Another barrier is the assumption that other cultures are similar and not different from one's own. As a result, you may behave as you would in your own culture, but unintentionally cause offense or even worse, simply because you are unaware that different rules and norms apply in the other culture.

Finally, the most common barrier to cross-cultural communication is, perhaps surprisingly, fear. When you are unsure of what is expected of you or what to do, it is natural to feel anxious. Your attention will then likely focus on your sense of anxiety and away from the cross-cultural transaction that is taking place. This allows you to make more mistakes than usual and appear awkward to others.

International business means more than investing in website translation, app translation, software translation or professional translation services for your documents and materials. Setting up liaison interpreting services is also commendable, but it's only half the job. The other half is training your employees in cross-cultural communication and providing them with cross-cultural skills to ensure they can communicate effectively - both with other employees around the world and with customers and other people from different cultural backgrounds.

Given the importance of intercultural communication in business, it is definitely worth investing in this area. Communication can be greatly improved by implementing proper intercultural training. This is especially important when managing teams from all over the world. In particular, be aware of different communication styles, as some may be more direct than others.

To improve your intercultural communication skills, prepare yourself. Do your research and find out who you will be dealing with. Find out about cultural norms and social customs of each place. For example, if you are traveling to China, South Korea or Japan, check out our country guides before you go!

Learn the language. It will certainly be very helpful and much appreciated if you show that you have made an effort to learn the other person's language. You will surely get respect for it and it could strengthen your relationship.

If you are interacting with a representative of the foreign culture for the first time, listen carefully and observe their behavior closely. In particular, notice how they respond to different communication styles and also look for similarities to your own culture.

Forget any hasty assumptions you may have about the other culture. After all, people are still individuals with their own preferences, so be aware of any preconceived notions you may have and challenge them.

If you're unsure or think you may have misunderstood what is being asked of you, it's perfectly fine to ask and clarify rather than guess and possibly commit an embarrassing faux pas.

Get help to introduce you to the culture of your destination country. You can ask them any question you want and benefit from their hands-on experience.

### Conclusion

By signing up for our popular intercultural training, you will become familiar with the working and leadership styles in your target country. This will enable you to successfully communicate with employees and motivate them. In addition, the coaches from EHLION give you valuable tips on conflict management and negotiation in the respective region and explain the differences in attitudes towards physical contact and the importance of gestures and facial expressions in every culture.

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