

THE ROLE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF ORAL SPEECH IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: *In the context of increasing globalization and multicultural interaction, oral speech plays a central role in facilitating effective intercultural communication. Beyond the mere transmission of verbal messages, oral speech comprises prosodic, non-verbal, and culturally embedded features that affect how messages are constructed and interpreted. This article explores the theoretical and practical dimensions of oral speech in intercultural settings, examining challenges such as language barriers, non-verbal miscommunication, and cultural differences in communicative styles. Strategies for improving oral communication competence are also presented, with implications for education, professional environments, and international diplomacy.*

Keywords: *oral speech, intercultural communication, non-verbal cues, cultural awareness, communicative competence*

The 21st century has witnessed unprecedented levels of global interaction, facilitated by technological advancement, international mobility, and transnational cooperation. In such a dynamic context, the ability to communicate across cultures is no longer optional but necessary. Oral speech, as the most immediate and human form of communication, is a vital tool in these exchanges. Unlike written communication, which allows time for revision and reflection, oral communication is immediate, context-sensitive, and often shaped by social and cultural conventions. Therefore, understanding the intricacies of oral speech in intercultural settings is key to fostering mutual understanding and avoiding conflict or misunderstanding. This article investigates the complex role of oral speech in intercultural communication, with attention to its linguistic and non-verbal components, typical challenges, and strategies for improving communicative effectiveness in diverse contexts.

Scholars in linguistics, communication studies, and cultural anthropology have long emphasized the significance of oral speech in conveying not just linguistic content but also social identity and cultural norms.

Edward Hall's High- and Low-Context Cultures

Hall (1976) introduced the concept of high-context and low-context communication. In high-context cultures (e.g., Japan, Arab countries), much of the communication is

implicit, relying on context, shared knowledge, and non-verbal cues. In contrast, low-context cultures (e.g., the United States, Germany) prioritize explicit verbal expression.

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

Hofstede's (1980) dimensions of culture, such as power distance and individualism vs. collectivism, influence oral communicative norms. For instance, in high power distance societies, subordinates are expected to use formal and deferential language when addressing superiors.

Byram's Intercultural Communicative Competence

Byram (1997) introduced the concept of intercultural communicative competence, emphasizing not only linguistic proficiency but also the ability to interpret and negotiate cultural meanings. Oral communication is central to this competence.

Other notable contributions include Ting-Toomey's work on face negotiation theory (1999), Gudykunst's theories on anxiety/uncertainty management (2004), and Knapp & Hall's studies on non-verbal communication (2010).

Methodology

This article adopts a theoretical and qualitative approach, drawing on existing literature and comparative cultural examples to explore the role of oral speech in intercultural communication. Case studies from academic, corporate, and diplomatic settings illustrate typical communicative challenges and adaptive strategies. The focus is conceptual, aiming to synthesize key insights rather than report on primary empirical research.

Verbal and Paralinguistic Features

Oral communication is shaped not only by words but by how those words are delivered. Intonation, pitch, volume, pauses, and even silence carry meaning. For example, in many East Asian cultures, silence may signal thoughtfulness or respect, while in Western cultures it may be interpreted as awkwardness or disapproval.

Fillers such as "uh," "like," or "you know" also serve cultural functions. In some cultures, such fillers indicate politeness or hesitation; in others, they may be perceived as signs of uncertainty or incompetence.

Non-verbal Communication

Gestures, facial expressions, body posture, and eye contact are integral to oral communication. Yet their meanings vary widely. A thumbs-up gesture may be positive in many Western contexts but offensive elsewhere. Direct eye contact may signal honesty in Western cultures but disrespect in some Asian or African societies.

Physical distance between speakers (proxemics) also differs. Latin American and Middle Eastern cultures may prefer closer distances, while Northern Europeans may favor more personal space.

Common Barriers in Oral Intercultural Communication

Despite sharing a common language, intercultural interlocutors often encounter barriers. These include: Linguistic misunderstandings: Idioms, slang, and culturally specific references can hinder understanding. Pragmatic differences: What is considered polite, humorous, or assertive varies across cultures. Anxiety and ethnocentrism: Fear of making mistakes or assuming one's own communicative style is "universal" can limit openness and effectiveness. A Japanese manager avoids saying "no" directly to an American client to maintain harmony, but the client perceives this as indecision. In a multicultural classroom, students from collectivist cultures may avoid speaking up out of respect for the group, while others interpret silence as a lack of engagement. In international healthcare settings, failing to interpret a patient's non-verbal cues may lead to misdiagnosis or non-compliance.

Strategies for Enhancing Oral Communication Across Cultures

Cultural Awareness Training

Training programs can help individuals recognize their own cultural biases and learn about other communicative styles. Activities such as role-play, cultural simulations, and critical incident analysis can build empathy and adaptability.

Language Education Beyond Grammar

Language instruction should include pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and cultural discourse analysis. Learners should be exposed to real-life scenarios, idiomatic expressions, and cultural norms governing speech.

Active Listening and Clarification

Encouraging active listening, paraphrasing, and seeking clarification can reduce misunderstandings. Phrases like "Could you explain what you mean by that?" or "Is it okay if I ask for clarification?" are useful tools.

Technology and Multimedia

Digital tools—podcasts, video conferencing, language learning apps—offer immersive experiences that can help individuals develop both linguistic and cultural competence.

Conclusion: Oral speech is a powerful yet complex medium in intercultural communication. It is not only about what is said but how, when, and in what cultural context it is said. Verbal content, tone, silence, gestures, and cultural expectations intertwine to shape meaning. Misunderstandings arise not only from language barriers but from differing communicative norms and values.

To navigate this complexity, individuals must cultivate both communicative and cultural competence. Educational institutions, organizations, and governments should prioritize training in intercultural oral communication to foster understanding in an increasingly interconnected world. Future research may benefit from exploring how digital communication platforms—where visual cues may be limited—affect the role of oral and non-verbal communication across cultures.

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