

Cultural Difference: Immediacy in the Classroom

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Objective

To provide students with an opportunity to compare and contrast immediacy in American, Chinese, and other classroom environments.

Approximate time required

One class period (50 to 75 minutes)

Materials needed

Copies of handouts

Rationale

Immediacy can be described as behavior that communicates approachability and closeness between interactants (Mehrabian, 1971). "Immediacy" behaviors both suggest and promote positive feelings. Interactants who communicate at relatively close distances, smile, maintain eye contact, use direct body orientation, lean forward, and touch are likely to be viewed as having positive feelings about the situation and this perceived liking tends to be reciprocated (Mehrabian 1971, p. 7). Early immediacy research exclusively focused on homogeneous Caucasian students from middle-class families in U.S. classrooms (McCroskey, Fayer, Richmond, Sallinen, & Barraclough, 1996; McCroskey, Sallinen, Fayer, Richmond, & Barraclough, 1996).

Today's classrooms are filled with a diverse group of students and instructors who all grew up in different cultures. Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988) state that "culture is the normative frame in which expectations concerning appropriate or competent nonverbal behaviors are defined consensually" (p. 117). Our own cultural experiences frame how we perceive others' actions. Differences in comfort level with uncertainty reduction between high and low context cultures, as well as power and distance preferences, the favoring of masculine versus feminine communication styles or differences in individualistic versus collectivist cultures leads us to perceive others as more or less approachable, friendly, and open; more immediate (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1983; Gudykunst, Chua & Gray, 1987; Gudykunst & Nishida, 1986). The impact of immediacy has not been found to differ significantly among African-American, Asian-American, Hispanic (primarily Mexican-American), and non-Hispanic Caucasian groups (Sanders and Wiseman, 1990). Although research exists studying the use of immediacy in other cultures, the majority of this research focuses on the Chinese culture. The interpretation of verbal immediacy behaviors should be treated with caution when generalized to different cultures (Zang, 2005).

It has been found that Asian students feel that too much openness is an ineffective communication behavior (Collier, 1988). The Chinese culture takes a very holistic teaching approach, requiring teachers to take on both instructional and pastoral roles which involve educating the whole person (Biggs & Watkins, 2001; Ho, 2001; Lu, 1997). This holistic approach and the differences in perceived roles of students and teachers cause student-teacher relationships to extend beyond the classroom. A Chinese teacher is usually deemed as a

transmitter of knowledge, role model, authority, and parent (Cortazzi and Jin, 1997; Pratt, 1991). The primary roles of teachers in China are to teach books and educate people.

A second difference that affects immediacy in different cultures relates to power distance orientation. Power distance (PD) is the extent to which people accept the unequal distribution of power in society (Hofstede, 1980, 1991; Hofstede & Bond, 1984). Cultural PD suggests that members of high PD cultures accept power as part of society and members of low PD cultures favor the relatively equal distribution of power in society. China is typically a high PD culture whose inequality of power is embodied in the hierarchical instructor-student level component.

Teachers in the U.S. usually address students by their first names and encourage students to address them by first names as well in order to enhance closeness, but this immediate practice is inappropriate in the large, power distance Confucianism-focused Chinese culture. Here, teachers are treated as the authority, and obedience and conformity are expected from students. Chinese teachers usually address students by their full names, including surnames and first names, and students address teachers by their surnames with their professional titles (Zhang and Oetzel, 2006).

To sum up, the Chinese perception of teacher immediacy reflects a multi-dimensional-holistic approach where teachers assume both instructional and pastoral roles (Biggs & Watkins, 2001; Ho, 2001; Hu & Grove, 1999; Lu, 1997). The American perception of immediacy in the classroom reflects a more task-oriented role (Biggs & Watkins, 2001; Cortazzi & Jin, 1997; Ho, 2001; Pratt, 1991). When interacting with others in interpersonal settings who grew up in a different culture, whether they be our peers or our instructors in both American and classrooms abroad, we need to keep in mind that each culture defines immediacy differently. What we perceive as appropriate may be different than what our International counterparts perceive as appropriate given the context and the hierarchical differences between the communicators. Our own cultures as well as the ones we find ourselves in create important frameworks in which we must determine the amount and type of immediacy behaviors to use so that we do not offend others in interpersonal settings.

What to do before the activity

Photocopy handouts and introduce the concepts of American and Chinese teacher immediacy behaviors. Put students in three equal groups and have each group complete just one part/box of assignment part one. Each group should have between three and six group members.

What to do when introducing this activity. Paraphrase the rationale so that your students will have a better context/background for the activities.

What to do during the activity

Walk around the room and observe the groups as they complete the first activity. Check in with the groups to see how they are doing.

What to do after the activity

The activity can be debriefed using a written critical thinking or reflexive essay homework assignment or an in class discussion. Ask each group to share their findings. Send students away with part two of the assignment activity sheets. Ask the students to find a conversation partner who is from a culture other than the United States.

Appraisal

Students can be asked to write a paper or present a speech that discusses their immediacy difference findings. They could also be asked to participate in a full class discussion in which the students' share their conversation experiences in an effort to both compare and contrast their findings of immediacy in American, Chinese, and other classroom environments. The paper, presentation, or discussion will allow the students to more critically think about their experiences and implications for future interactions with those from different cultures both in the classroom and outside. It will also allow the students to practice their oral and written communication skills in an informal manner.

Alternative uses or extensions

Students could be asked to sit in on a class taught by an instructor for whom English is not their first language and look for examples of immediacy. Students could be asked to critique a non-native English speaking peer, a speaker on campus, or a video recorded famous speech. Students could attend a weekly/monthly meeting of an international student organization on campus and observe immediate behaviors. Students could watch a speech presented in a language that is not native to them and watch the immediacy cues.

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Additional Readings

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Cultural Difference: Immediacy in the Classroom

Task: To provide students with an opportunity to determine the effects of culture on communication in the classroom.

Goal: Identify and evaluate the immediacy effects of American and Chinese teacher communication.

Assignment Part 1: Group discussions

Directions: In your group, read your assigned part/box and answer the accompanying questions.

Immediacy in American and other Cultures: In American scholarly publications, immediacy is the perception of being physically and psychologically close. A teacher will be perceived as immediate if their actions and environmental factors cause students to feel engaged in the material presented, to find the teacher/speaker likable, to feel comfortable in approaching the teacher after the presentation with questions or comments, and one to whom they assign a high level of speaker credibility.

1. How do you define a good teacher?

2. If you have ever had a teacher whose first language was not English and they were from a different culture, describe what that was like for you.

3. Have you ever been in a study abroad program in which your teachers and classmates spoke a different language? Describe how you perceive those teachers and friends where immediate behaviors go (approachable, friendly, and open)?

4. Think of a time that you interacted with a friend or teacher from a different culture, describe that experience.

5. Have you ever realized after talking to someone from another culture that what you thought was a sign of being friendly did not match their idea of being approachable and open? Explain that situation here.

China's Holistic Approach: The pastoral role of Chinese teachers requires an on-going, extra-curricular involvement with students. Many Chinese college students as well as instructors live on campus allowing for a huge amount of after-class collective activities, including academic and athletic contests, academic discussions and recreational activities. Out-of-class communication (OCC) can be defined as "the formal and/or informal interaction between faculty and students which takes place outside of formal classrooms and during times other than when class is scheduled".

1. In what ways have you observed your American teachers supporting college students participating in athletic events, the arts, or other extra-curricular activities and interests?

2. Can you think of any instructors that live on your campus? If the instructors who live off campus lived on campus in what ways do you think your relationships would be different?

3. Describe any professional relationships you have with any of your current instructors that extends beyond the classroom?

4. A Chinese teacher is usually deemed as a transmitter of knowledge, role model, authority, and parent. How would you describe an American teacher?

5. Chinese teachers are supposed to conduct themselves academically and non-academically with exemplary virtue. They are expected to care about students' behaviors and problems inside and outside of the school environment. How do you assign value and virtue to your teachers?

6. In what ways are American teachers role models?

Power Distance: Power distance (PD) is the extent to which people accept the unequal distribution of power in society. Cultural PD suggests that members of high PD cultures accept power as part of society and members of low PD cultures favor the relatively equal distribution of power in society. China is typically a high PD culture whose inequality of power is embodied in the hierarchical instructor-student level component.

1. Do you feel that there is an inequality of power between yourself and your instructors in the American classroom?

2. How would you feel if your teacher called you by your first and last name?

3. How would you feel if you had to call your instructor by his/her first name and professional title?

Assignment Part 2: Components of Immediacy in the Chinese Culture

Directions: Find a willing conversation partner who you can talk to about immediacy. They need to be from a country other than America. For each of the immediacy components, paraphrase the definition and example and then ask your conversation partner the bold faced questions. After completing the interview, answer the self-reflection questions.

Instructional immediacy can be defined as “the use of communication behaviors associated with classroom instruction and teaching to enhance the closeness between instructors and students.” It focuses on instruction-oriented communication behaviors that reduce physical and/or psychological distance between instructors and students. Examples of instructional immediacy include being passionate, responsible, patient, conscientious, lively in teaching, and committed to teaching. Components of instructional non-immediacy include being inadequately prepared for teaching, having an irresponsible teaching attitude, and being mechanical and boring in teaching method use.

Describe instructors who do and others who do not use instructional immediate cues, such as the ones described above, in your culture of origin.

Relational immediacy can be defined as “the use of communication behaviors associated with the instructor-student relationship to enhance the closeness between instructors and students”. It focuses on relationship orientation, mainly the instructors’ treatment of, concern for, and caring about students with a goal of reducing the distance between the two. It can involve instructors’ in-class and out-of-class communication with students, which can be both academic and non-instructional in nature, and it can even be focused on students’ extracurricular lives and problems. Examples of relational immediacy include caring about students, understanding students, respecting students, and engaging in out-of-class communication with students. Examples of relational non-immediacy include favoring certain students over others, not respecting students, hurting students’ self-respect, and showing bias against certain students.

What types of out-of-class communication activities did you participate in with the teachers in your culture of origin?

Personal immediacy can be defined as “the use of communication behaviors associated with instructors’ personal attributes and characteristics, like unique personality, morality, and scholarship, which help to enhance the closeness with students.” The importance of personal immediacy cannot be underestimated since teachers’ personal attributes and characteristics are of great importance in Chinese culture, where teachers are deemed as a role model, an authority figure, and a parent for students.

Describe your experiences with personal immediacy in your culture of origin.

Self- Reflection Questions

Which of these three dimensions can you most identify with in your interactions with both your American and international instructors?

What are other dimensions/types of immediacy that are present in your culture of origin?

In what ways do you find these dimensions played out in your American cultural experiences?

Which component do you feel is the most important? Why?