

# The Meta-Cultural Perspective: Communication, Understanding, Engagement, Appreciation, & Competence

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Abstract: A Meta-Cultural way of thinking about communication, understanding, and competence means not just understanding and appreciating a few other cultures, but rather being able to function competently in any cultural setting in which you find yourself. In the Meta-Cultural mindset, therefore, all cultures have value, we are sensitive to cultural traits and cues, we avoid giving or taking offense, and diversity is seen as a strength. This paper is based on a presentation, given to a Multi-Cultural Communication class at Asia University, Taiwan. It explores the reality of the world today in which when speakers of different native languages meet, they are likely to have English in common as a second or foreign language, at least in business, education, tourism, and similar fields. Effective communicators today must be able to quickly identify commonalities across cultures and avoid points of cultural conflict, in order to achieve the most beneficial interaction, regardless of which culture they encounter. The paper concludes with the author's seven rules for functioning in a different culture.

Hello and thank you for inviting me to talk with you today. My topic is about how we think about our interaction with people of other cultures, and about how we prepare ourselves for this role.

Educators have long talked about "Cross-Cultural Communication." This term puts the emphasis on the act of communication, with a less important emphasis on understanding and competence. More recently, we have used terms such as Inter-Cultural or Multi-Cultural to describe our communication, understanding, and competence.

Inter-cultural means "between cultures" and the emphasis of the term indicates *one* other culture. For example, I think that for a long time it was the goal of Asian

people learning English to be able to communicate with one other culture. Historically, this was the British colonial citizens in Asia. More recently I think it has been Americans, because of business and manufacturing motivations.

“Multi-Cultural” indicates that there is *more than one* other culture with which we want to interact. This term emphasizes the value of being able to interact with people of more than one other culture, but I think that this still implies a purposeful choice about which other cultures we want to interact with. In international business, for example, a Chinese speaker might specifically want to interact with people who speak Japanese, English, and maybe German.

The new idea that we are beginning to hear is a “Meta-Cultural” way of thinking about communication, understanding, and competence. “Meta” means overarching, implying that it encompassing all cultures. It means not just understanding a few other cultures, but rather being able to function effectively in any cultural setting in which you find yourself. This is challenging because while there are usually similarities among cultures, there are often big differences, and the differences are sometimes not immediately obvious.

### **What is Another Culture?**

Before we can explore this topic, we need to determine what we really mean by “other cultures.” We tend to think of other cultures as other countries or speakers of other languages, but cultures may live alongside each other. Here in Taiwan, you have the Chinese, the Haka, and the indigenous peoples, along with a heavy Japanese influence, as well as a strong Western influence. In the United States, we have our indigenous Native American tribes, the heritage of many European countries (each with their own cultural traditions), as well as large African-American and Hispanic populations that are actually majorities in some parts of the US, plus Asian minorities including those from Taiwan, China, Japan, Vietnam, and the Hmong.

I have even heard it said that businesses, organizations, and even families can have their own individual cultures. When you begin a new job, for example, you need to become acquainted with how the other employees interact, do their jobs, and what the expectations are. Although this kind of culture is interesting to study, today we are

talking primarily about other cultures which do not speak the same language as our own.

## Cultural Understanding

In thinking about interacting with people from other cultures, Harvey's framework is valuable. Here is a version that a colleague and I adapted:

Level	Information	Mode	Interpretation
1	Awareness of superficial or very visible cultural differences; stereotypes	Textbooks, National Geographic, Internet	Unbelievable, bizarre, exotic
2	Awareness of significant and subtle cultural traits that contrast markedly with one's own	Cultural conflict situations	Frustrating, irrational, immoral
3	Understanding of significant and subtle cultural traits that contrast markedly with one's own	Intellectual Analysis, explanations from intercultural friends	Accepted logically
4	Understanding of how another culture feels from the standpoint of the insider	Cultural immersion; living in the culture	Accepted because of subject familiarity

Wu, P-H. N., & Marek, M. W. (2018). Developing intercultural competence via Social Media engagement in a language learning framework. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 46.

Adapted from: Harvey, R. G. (1975). *An attainable global perspective*. Denver: Center for War and Peace Studies. Available from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED116993>

Figure 1. Levels of Competence

I probably went through these levels myself the first time I came here to Taiwan. I have certainly seen other people go through this process. The framework shows how we are first aware of obvious and then subtle differences in cultures, and come to understand them, along with the mode via which we tend to gain this awareness and understanding, plus it shows how we react and interpret these differences.

When it comes to learning another language, we know that as we advance in our learning, we need to gain more and more understanding of the culture in which the language resides, so that we can understand the nuances and subtext of the idioms and cultural references used by native speakers. Advanced interaction means that we need to be at least at Level 3, if not at Level 4.

## **What is Different about a Different Culture?**

Of course, there are many kinds of cultural differences, communicated by language, but not language themselves. Some of them are:

- Differences in national heritage (traditions from “the Old Country” or where ancestors came from)
- Differences in religion
- Differences in food
- Differences in experiences
- Differences in traditions
- Differences in taboo or superstition
- Collectivist vs. Individualist differences
- Differences in folk/traditional music

Any distinct group of people tends to retain elements of a separate culture. Even within broad groups, such as Europeans or Chinese, there tend to be different traditions in subgroups which we can think of as cultural differences. Sometimes they are minor, but sometimes they are very obvious and important.

In the past, immigrants and minorities were often told that they had to change to adapt to the dominant culture. Some cultures use the metaphor of the “Melting Pot” to represent how new immigrants merge with the society they encounter. For many years in America, this meant leaving behind their “old country” traditions, beliefs, and even languages. For a long time, second-generation Americans knew little about where their parents and grandparents had come from. In recent years, however, genealogy has become popular in the United States and more people are discovering their heritage and are eager to learn what their families have forgotten about their own past.

In Canada, I am told, there is a different cultural metaphor, the “Mosaic.” In a mosaic, multiple individual parts make up a whole piece of art, a metaphor meaning that people of many backgrounds are valued and contribute to the collective Canadian culture, as opposed to a pre-determined culture that people must change themselves to join.

## **Diversity**

Closely-related to this idea of multiple cultures is “diversity.” Diversity is an attitude of embracing the differences among people of varied backgrounds. None is seen as better than the others, only different, and the reasons for the differences are understandable and make sense. Diversity is the idea that we should seek out people of different backgrounds, befriend them, and welcome the differences. Businesses and organizations often seek out diversity among their employees in order to be stronger.

Today, many people aspire to treat all heritages and traditions as valuable and as valid as those with which we as individuals grew up. The world is often not successful in fulfilling this goal, but enlightened people aspire to achieve it.

## **Learning Culture with Learning a Language**

These ideas about interacting with other cultures are fundamental to the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). As I mentioned earlier, the goal of learning English in the past was more limited -- speaking with English native speakers and being able to function using the language of science, academia, and business. Many people learned English without ever meeting a native speaker. My first interaction with Chinese speakers was a project with Dr. Vivian Wu in which I talked via Skype with her English students at a technical university in Taiwan. They had rarely, if ever, actually met a native speaker. I learned a lot about interacting with Chinese speakers from that experience.

But times have changed. The goal today of teaching English as a Foreign Language, English for Specific Purposes, Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, as well as English-based Computer Assisted Language Learning, and Mobile Assisted Language Learning is readiness to interact among speakers of many languages. It is the reality of the world today that when speakers of different native languages meet, they are likely to have English in common as a second or foreign language, at least in business, education, tourism, and similar fields. Advanced interaction in English requires openness to other traditions, beliefs, and customs, and this openness must exist among all parties to the interaction.

I should note that we often have a utilitarian view of why we learn a second or foreign language, because we tend to do things that benefit ourselves, but I think that we should not think ONLY in terms of making our business successful, or of making money from teaching. We should value learning for the sake of learning, and for the benefits of making friends from other cultures, because doing so changes our own view of the world. Learning another language, and particularly learning English, opens the door for us to join what the scholar Dörnyei called the cosmopolitan international society.

### **Accommodation**

So, we have seen that when people of different languages, cultures, religions, traditions, and customs meet, each must be prepared to seek understanding about the others, not just in language, but in all aspects of life. They must be ready to accommodate each other and you might say to “meet in the middle” of the cultures. When I speak to someone from another culture, I must be open to that culture, and that person must be open to my culture in order for us to have the best possible relationship. We must take care to NOT create cultural conflict, such as being easily-offended when the person does not know that something is offensive.

I am probably not the best person to tell you how to interact with my culture in America, because I do not see it as an outsider. My colleague Vivian, from Taiwan, has observed that Americans usually begin a conversation with pleasantries, to build a relationship, whereas Taiwanese tend to jump right to business. I would not have noticed this difference. At meals, people in Taiwan often accommodate me by offering me Western utensils, but I work hard to use chopsticks, to show my respect for the culture I am visiting. Even if I am not an expert in using chopsticks, I hope that my friends appreciate my intention.

### **Meta-Cultural Competence**

But let us return now to the idea of being able to interact effectively in ANY culture in which we find ourselves. We can do this because we have a mindset that favors diversity, we avoid cultural conflict, and we are sensitive to cultural traits and cues.

This is particularly valuable for people who need to be able to interact with others who may speak a wide range of other languages. It can be hard because there are so many different accents. I remember a woman I met when I was visiting Scotland a few years ago. She was certainly speaking English, but her accent was so different from mine that I literally could not understand her.

Here are my seven personal rules for interacting with people from another culture, particularly when I am the visitor:

1. Be as friendly as possible and smile a lot
2. Have a goal of giving people a positive experience - in my case, giving people a positive experience with myself as a representative of the American people and culture
3. Engage in local customs as much as possible in order to understand them from the inside
4. Try to sense the level of English proficiency of the people you meet and adjust your vocabulary and speed accordingly
5. Ignore minor incorrect words and grammar - assume that people are not intentionally giving offense, and be as encouraging as possible
6. Work hard to understand the local accent - it is your job to understand them as much as it is their job to be understandable by you
7. Learn how to say "thank you" in the local language and say it often

## **Final Thoughts**

Being able to interact effectively with people from many different cultural backgrounds is essential in today's globalized society. Effective communicators today must be able to quickly identify commonalities across cultures and avoid points of cultural conflict, in order to achieve the most beneficial and satisfying interaction.

I am sorry to say that there is no perfect roadmap for how to do this. The first step, however, is the Meta-Cultural mindset in which all cultures have value, we are sensitive to cultural traits and cues, we avoid giving or taking offense, and diversity is seen as a strength.

Thank you.