

Do We Talk Differently: Cross Culture Study on Conference Call

Xingrong Xiao, Chen Zhao, and Shaoke Zhang

IBM China Research Lab, Bldg 19, Zhongguancun Software Park,
Beijing, P.R. China, 100094
{xiaoxr,zhaochen}@cn.ibm.com, shaoke.zhang@gmail.com

Abstract. Cross cultural collaboration is popular in the world with increasing globalization, where cultural issues are important to be explored. In this paper, we reported an investigation of culture differences and cultural effects on communication problems in cross culture conference call using an ethnographic technique which refers to long interviews. In these interviews, communication differences among Chinese, Japanese, Indian and Americans were investigated. Our results showed that (1) culture differences in conference call existed in the dimensions of indirectness, power distance, assertiveness, language and speaker-centered vs. listener-centered; (2) and these culture differences caused communication problems in conference call such as misunderstanding, bad impression, unequal participation.

Keywords: Culture, Communication Style, Conference Call.

1 Introduction

In the world with increasing globalization, more and more corporations undertake global projects. Cross cultural collaborations become indispensable and ubiquitous in business and workplace. These changes bring new challenges and require considerable attention because of culture crashes, and there is increasing concern about how cultural differences may affect work-team performance.

Researchers investigated the effects of culture and diversity on performance of distributed group collaborations. Results of these studies showed that the relationship between performance and a team's cultural composition had been mix. While some studies found that multicultural teams often suffered from greater group process losses such as higher conflict, less participation, than culturally homogeneous team [1], others revealed that multicultural teams could perform as well as homogenous teams [2].

From above researches, it can be seen that study results are not the same and further studies are needed. In this study, we investigated culture differences in communication styles in cross cultural meetings supported by teleconference which is always called conference call. Meanwhile, it was examined if these culture differences would cause problems or not as well as what kinds of problems would be produced by a certain difference. We selected conference call, which was a telephone call that interconnected three or more phones simultaneously, as the typical scenario

for two reasons. First, it was a common and ubiquitous channel for cross cultural collaboration. Second, it excluded the factors like body language—while we admitted that body language was also important in cross cultural communication, we tried to focus on the communication styles reflected in the meeting contents.

2 Culture Study on Communication Style

Norton regarded communication style as “the way one verbally, nonverbally, and Para verbally interacts to signal how literal meaning should be taken, interpreted, filtered, or understood” [3]. As communication is important in daily life, communication style has been a hot topic which attracts researchers’ attention [4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11]. They investigated the way people from different cultures expresses and talked. Indirectness, Assertiveness, context, and speaker/listener-centered are four aspects of communication styles which researchers have paid most attention to.

Indirectness

Indirectness has been shown to vary between cultures. Indirect expressions were more common in collectivist culture because the emphasis on face-work [5] and people from collectivist cultures (such as Koreans) were more indirect than people from individualistic cultures [6, 7].

In other similar aspect, Hall reported that there was more indirectness in high-context cultures than in low-context cultures [8]. In high-context cultures communications are more subjective and multilayered, colored by relationships, history and status; in contrast, in low-context cultures, events have single and universally understood objective meanings [4].

Assertiveness vs. Responsiveness

Richmond and McCroskey developed the Assertiveness-Responsiveness Measure. Assertiveness reflects a person’s willingness to speak up for her- or himself in interaction or let others take advantage of her / him; responsiveness involves being other-oriented, considering others’ feelings, and listening to what others say [9].

Klopf, Ishii, & Cambra conducted a survey finding that the Japanese was in a moderate level of assertiveness while the Americans showed a high degree of assertiveness, which meant it was relatively easy for an American to make a request and actively disagree with another’s opinion and express his or her personal rights and feelings, whereas the Japanese found it was not so easy to do the same [10].

High-context communication vs. low-context communication

High-context and Low-context Communication refers to the degree to which speakers rely on factors other than explicit speech to convey their messages [12]. In high-context communication, communicators share much information and context in which they are talking about, while in low-context communications, communicators understand each other relying on words they say.

Gao and Toomy pointed out that Chinese communication was a high-context communication, as Chinese always emphasized and identified with some expressions such as “yan bu jin yi” (not saying all that is felt) and “yan wai zhi yi” (more is meant than meets the ear) [11].

Teruyuki Kume etc. [10] compared the communication styles among Japanese, Americans and Chinese by 5 TV dramas aired in the 1990s in Japan, the U.S. and

China. Results revealed that American communication was low-context while Japanese and Chinese communication was high-context.

Speaker-centered and listener-centered

Teruyuki Kume etc. revealed that Americans were speaker-centered while Chinese and Japanese were more listener-centered. For example, Americans often proceeded with the discussion by requesting information, making confirmation, which were rarely found in Chinese and Japanese drama. Americans were eager to talk, expressing their opinions freely while Chinese and Japanese listeners rarely asked questions but just followed with short expression of support [10].

3 Method

3.1 Participants

Six participants were investigated in the study. They were Chinese who do research and management work in a large multinational corporation. Two of them have lived in American for more than 20 years. The rest were native Chinese, who had rich experiences in cross cultural communication with foreigners like the American, Japanese, and Indian, averagely 12 years with the standard deviation of 8. They participated in conference calls at least once a week, at most 4 or 5 times a day, and each conference call lasted about 1 hour. Their meeting activities included discussing technique problems, reporting and tracking status, negotiating and decision making. In all of the meetings, they used English as the main language.

3.2 Procedure

The study was based on semi-structured interviews. Each participant was interviewed separately face-to-face for about one hour. In the interview, we investigated culture differences in communication styles and their influences on outcome and efficiency in conference calls. All data were recorded by tape for following transcription.

3.3 Data Coding

As previous research revealed that culture differences in communication styles existing in the aspects of indirectness, assertiveness, high-context vs. low-context communication and speaker-centered vs. listener-centered communication. The transcriptions were coding according to these four aspects.

All transcriptions were coded by 2 researchers, and the coherence is 92%. The disagreement was discussed to be determined.

4 Results

4.1 Culture Differences in Conference Call

Participants pointed out that culture differences in conference call existed in the dimensions of indirectness (6/6¹), power distance (6/6), assertiveness (5/6), language

¹ 6/6 means 6 of the experts considered there were culture differences in the dimension of Indirectness; the rest may be deduced by analogy.

(4/6), speaker-centered vs. listener-centered communication (4/6) and high-context communication vs. low-context communication (2/6).

In addition, all of the participants (6/6) reported that power distance had great effects on the way people talk.

In the study, participants mainly reported culture differences in communication styles among Americans, Chinese, Indian and Japanese. In the following, culture differences in concrete communication styles were described.

Indirectness. Result revealed that Americans were direct, Chinese and Japanese were indirect and Indians were in the middle. Table 1 showed the concrete characteristic of how Americans, Indians, Chinese and Japanese talked indirectly in conference call as well as ratio of participants mentioned the characteristic. It can be seen all of the participants pointed out American was direct and Chinese was indirect.

Table 1. Characteristic of communication styles in Indirectness

Nation	Communication Characteristic	Ratio of participants mentioned the Characteristic
American	Express their opinions directly	6/6
	Be straightforward	1/6
	Say “NO” directly	1/6
	Criticize and praise directly	1/6
Indian	Be direct in work but their real feelings is difficult to be understood	1/6
Chinese	Express their opinions implicitly	6/6
	Express disagreement indirectly	4/6
	Threw out many reasons but hoped the other side to give an expected conclusion	1/6
	Seldom say NO directly	1/6
	Talk in a roundabout way	1/6
Japanese	Never say bad though dislike	1/6
	Always say good	1/6

Assertiveness. Table 2 showed the characteristics of communication style on assertiveness mentioned by participants. From the table, we could see that American was most assertive.

Speaker-centered vs. Listener-centered. Results revealed that American and Indians were speaker-centered while Chinese and Japanese were listener-centered in cross cultural meeting. Table 3 showed the detailed description.

Table 2. Characteristic of communication style on Assertiveness

Nation	Communication Characteristic	Ratio of participants mentioned the Characteristic
American	Speak up their ideas and questions immediately	4/6
	Insist on their own opinions	2/6
	Tend to lead a discussion	1/6
Indian	Be aggressive	1/6
	Be tough in argument	1/6
Chinese	Dislike to express their requirements	3/6
	Dislike to ask questions in meeting	2/6
	Don't know how to say "NO"	2/6
Japanese	Avoid conflicts	1/6
	Be quiet and speak up in key points	1/6

Table 3. Characteristic of communication style in Speaker-centered vs. Listener-centered

Nation	Communication Characteristic	Ratio of participants mentioned the Characteristic
American	Talk much	3/6
	Use a lot of "I" in speech	2/6
	Spend a lot of time to speak	1/6
Indian	Talk ceaselessly	1/6
	Take a lot of time to speak	1/6
Chinese	Use more "we" in their speech	3/6
	Dislike talking and tend to listening	3/6
	Be quiet in meeting	1/6
Japanese	Be quiet in meeting	1/6
	Talk less	1/6
	Tend to listening	1/6

High-context vs. low context communication. Only 2 of the 6 participants pointed the culture differences in High-context and Low-context communication. Table 4 showed the details.

Effects of Power distance on communication. Power distance didn't belong to communication style, but results showed that it had an important effect on communication. Table 5 showed the detailed communication characteristics caused by power distance.

Table 4. Characteristic of communication style in High-context vs. Low context communication

Nation	Communication Characteristic	Ratio of participants mentioned the Characteristic
American	Use a lot of explanatory words	1/6
	What they speak up is what they want to say	1/6
Chinese	Use simple words such as "Yes" or "No" to answer questions	1/6
	Have implication in words	1/6

Table 5. Characteristic of communication caused by power distance

Nation	Communication Characteristic	Ration of participants mentioned the Characteristic
American	Participate in discussion equally	3/6
	Common to express different opinions from managers	1/6
Chinese	Regard managers' voice as more important	2/6
	Pay more attention to authority	2/6
	Managers saying and employees listening	1/6
	Assume that managers are always right	1/6
Japanese	Let decision made by management team	1/6
	Pay more attention to authority	2/6
	Managers' voice can only be heard in meetings	1/6
	Try to fulfill managers' will	1/6

4.2 When Oriental Meets Occidental: Problems in Interaction

The data demonstrated that culture difference in such communication styles as indirectness, power distance, assertiveness and speaker-centered vs. listener-centered communication caused several communication problems which affected meeting satisfaction and efficiency.

Problems Caused by Indirectness. Indirectness was an important culture difference in conference call which was described above. American and Indian were less indirect

than Chinese and Japanese. Study data suggested that when these two kinds of people had meetings together, the communication problems were as follows:

(1) Misunderstanding

4/6 participants reported that culture differences in indirectness caused more misunderstandings in cross culture conference call than that in intra-national meetings. For example, Americans always gave a direct challenge only referred to business affairs. But Chinese maybe regarded it as negative evaluation and felt uncomfortable. In addition, Chinese didn't like saying "no" because of the importance of face, and it also made Americans misunderstood their real intention.

(2) External meeting

1/6 participants suggested that external meeting was more common in cross cultural meeting than in intra-national meeting because Chinese's indirectness often created some unrelated threads. For example, when in discussion, Chinese would like to give reasons first and hoped the other side to give a decision he expected. However, if the other side was direct, they always could not aware Chinese purpose, and should ask some questions about the reasons, so meeting subject would be shifted to the reasons, which in fact is not to be solved in the meeting. (This example was given by a participant.)

Problems Caused by Power Distance. Culture differences in Power Distance caused problems more often such as "some opinions can not be fully put forward" (5/6) and "unequal participation" (4/6). For example, if Japanese participated in a meeting, you could only hear managers voice; we didn't know what other Japanese thought about. However, managers didn't always know detail information, so opinions could not be fully put forward. (This example was given by 2 participants.)

Problems Caused by Language Use. All participants (6/6) pointed out that language was a big problem in conference call. First, in most conference calls, English is a working language, but for some of the attendees, English is not their native language which will influence on their expressions. Second, misunderstanding was sometimes caused because some attendees didn't know well about the slang, idioms, convention and so on.

Other Problems. Culture differences in dimensions of Assertiveness and Speaker / Listener Centered also caused communication problems such as 'bad impression' (3/6), 'pending questions' (4/6) and "unequal participation" (3/6). Bad impression meant if a participant in a cross cultural conference call who was listener-centered or less assertive would be regarded as uninvolved, inactive or less contributions. In addition, people who were not such assertiveness disliked asking questions; if they had any questions, they would like to think by themselves after meeting. Because of that they often lost the opportunity to clarify questions which may cause pending questions and finally affected meeting efficiency.

4.3 Measures to Avoid Culture Shock: Culture Awareness

In the end of the interview, each participant was asked how to avoid problems caused by culture differences in conference call. All of them said culture awareness was very important to reduce culture shock. They pointed out that in one hand if participants in conference call didn't aware the culture difference, they could not do anything to intervene it. And in the other hand, communication problems caused by culture differences would be decreased with the increase of cross cultural communication as people knew more about other culture.

5 Conclusions and Future Research

In this study, culture differences in communication style among American, Chinese, Indian and Japanese were investigated as well as communication problems caused by these differences in cross cultural conference call. Results showed that in cross cultural conference calls, people talked differently, especially in the aspects of indirectness, assertiveness, power distance, high-context vs. low-context communication and speaker-centered vs. listener-centered communication, which were consistent with previous study [7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12,13]. In addition, participants pointed out that there were several culture differences in language use such as different use of slang, idioms, acronyms, and conventions. In this study, we also found that different communication problems were caused by specific communication styles, for example, indirectness always caused "misunderstanding" and assertiveness tended to cause "bad impression". According to these results it was found that to find the relationships between culture differences and communication problems was important to facilitate cross cultural communication.

Though culture differences and communication problems were found through the present study, however, in this study, we only used a single interview technique, which probably could not distinguish participants' perceptions on what they saw and listened from those on what they really experienced in very well. So in the future study, we would like to conduct a field study to observe culture differences and communication problems in real cross cultural conference calls to validate if culture differences existed in aspects of indirectness, power distance, assertiveness and speaker-centered vs. listener-centered communication. And meanwhile, another purpose of future study was to investigate problems caused by such culture differences as well as intervention to avoid culture shock.

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