



# Understanding Intercultural Conflict in Communication: A Case Study

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## Abstract

With the rapid advance of globalization, the instances of individuals from different cultures interacting are increasing exponentially. What was a comparatively rare event one hundred years ago has become commonplace. People from different cultures and different language backgrounds are interacting more than they ever have in human history, and this trend is only going to continue. What is becoming increasingly apparent is that cultural differences can often be a greater source of miscommunication and conflict than differences in languages. Even when speaking the same language, people from different cultures often do not understand one another because of culturally based differences in values, beliefs, and behaviors.

One useful means of gaining a deeper understanding of intercultural communication conflict is analyzing a case study. Such an analysis can help us understand how people

from different cultures communicate with one another, what issues make effective communication problematic, and to what degree we are products of our own cultures. In the process, we can become more knowledgeable of ourselves and others, and become more effective intercultural communicators. The following intercultural communication conflict, based on my personal experience, is offered as such a case study.

## An Intercultural Conflict

This intercultural communication conflict takes place between an Anglo-American and two Japanese in 1996. Doug is an ALT (Assistant Language Teacher) at a small Japanese junior high school in rural Japan, although he is actually employed by a private dispatch company. He has been in Japan three months and speaks little Japanese. He has unexpectedly been called to the principal's office to attend a meeting with the school principal, Mr. Yamamoto, and Doug's

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supervisor from the dispatch company, Ms. Tanaka.

**Ms. Tanaka:** Doug! Hello! Please sit down. *(She speaks with a friendly smile and a seemingly unnatural high pitched voice. Doug sits down next to Ms. Tanaka. Both face Mr. Yamamoto, who sits rigidly at an imposing desk, like a military officer.)*

**Doug:** Thank you. Good morning. *(Doug smiles nervously. Mr. Yamamoto does not look at Doug, but in a low voice, talks to Ms. Tanaka. She looks apologetic, answers back while nodding her head and upper body, and then curtly talks to Doug.)*

**Ms. Tanaka:** I told you at your interview! Before you leave school you must say to Mr. Yamamoto and the other teachers, “Osakini-shitsureishimasu.” *(“By leaving before you I am being rude. I apologize.” The foreign ALT usually leaves work before the Japanese faculty.)*

**Doug:** *(Doug is slightly bewildered and defensive)* But, when I leave, there are usually no teachers in the teacher’s room. I feel stupid apologizing to an empty room. And I can’t actually get “Ooskanai-shatsarai-shamashu” out of my mouth! I only started studying Japanese three months ago. *(Mr. Yamamoto is silent, but looks unhappy. Ms. Tanaka looks towards Mr. Yamamoto, nods her head politely, continues to apologize in Japanese, and then turns to Doug. Although she is smiling, she is not happy.)*

**Ms. Tanaka:** When you come to school in the morning, you must say to the teachers and Mr. Yamamoto, “Ohayo-gozaïmasu” and when you leave, you must say “Osakini-shitsureishimasu.” This is nice for us Japanese. Ok? *(Although she ends it as a*

*question, it is obviously not a question.)*

**Doug:** Ok. No problem. I’m sorry. I’ll practice saying it at home. *(Although confused, Doug’s desire to do better is sincere, and the Japanese sense this. The two smile, relax, and pleasantly exchange a few more words.)*

**Ms. Tanaka:** Mr. Yamamoto wants to know, are you OK? Are you happy?

**Doug:** Yes, I am. *(He is lying)* But I have one question. Why do I need to attend the weekly two hour faculty meeting, which is in Japanese, and I don’t understand Japanese? *(Mr. Yamamoto understands little English, but he looks irritated, although he keeps smiling. Ms. Tanaka nods and smiles at Mr. Yamamoto, and then speaks to Doug.)*

**Ms. Tanaka:** Maybe they will say something important for you. Ms. Shimodaira *(one of the school’s two English teachers)* can explain it to you in English.

**Doug:** But I can’t actually understand Ms. Shimodaira’s English. And my desk is next to a big propane heater. By the end of the meeting, I am so hot and sweaty that I feel like I am going to get sick. *(Doug is trying to smile and control his irritation.)*

**Ms. Tanaka:** All teachers go to meetings. You are a teacher so you go to meetings too! OK?

**Doug:** Sure. No problem. *(After a few pleasantries about topics such as how much Doug “loves” the students and the school lunch, the meeting ends with everyone smiling, even though Doug feels like he is on another planet. However, at the next faculty meeting, Doug was relieved when the large propane heater was moved away from his desk.)*

### **Intercultural Conflict Analysis**

The following conflict analysis will be

based on Ting-Toomey's (1999) cultural variability factors. It will include an examination of ethnocentrism according to Bennett's (1998) DMIS, as well as the effects of prejudice and culture shock.

Chapter One of Condon's (1984) insightful book, *With respect to the Japanese*, is titled *The Odd Couple: America and Japan*. During my sixteen years in Japan, I have had numerous experiences that underscore Condon's point. In so many ways, no two countries could be more different, but due to the wiles of history, they have been put into a close and often awkward relationship. One obvious result has been frequent intercultural conflicts. Ting-Toomey (1999) describes intercultural conflict "as the perceived or actual incompatibility of values, norms, processes, or goals between a minimum of two cultural parties, over content, identity, relational, and procedural issues" (p. 194). Numerous issues can exacerbate intercultural conflict, such as ethnocentrism and prejudice, but even when people from different cultures have the best intentions, intercultural conflicts can impede their efforts to develop positive relations.

A cultural variability perspective is posited by Ting-Toomey (1999) as a means of organizing factors involved in intercultural conflicts. "In order to explain these factors, we need a perspective to organize and relate ideas in a coherent fashion" (p. 201). This conflict will be analyzed according to three dimensions of the cultural variability perspective; low-context and high-context communication, individualism and collectivism, and power distance values.

### **Low-context and high-context communication**

One cause of this intercultural conflict is low-context and high-context communication. According to Hall (1991/1998), "A high-context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is already in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low-context (LC) communication is just the opposite, that is, the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code" (p. 61). Japanese tend to prefer high-context communication and Anglo-Americans low-context. Although Doug has had considerable experience abroad, this is his first immersion in a country that emphasizes high-context communication. At his interview he was told "it would be nice" if he would greet the other teachers upon arriving and leaving the school. He did not realize that the implicit "would be nice" had an explicit meaning.

"A high-context message relies more on nonverbal communication than verbal, so "Japanese 'read' faces and postures and clothing to a much greater extent, and with more accuracy, than do most Americans" (Condon, 1984, p. 45). Even though Mr. Yamamoto speaks little English, he understands Doug's displeasure by his non-verbal communication. Furthermore, Mr. Yamamoto believes that his instructions were accurately translated to Doug by Ms. Tanaka, and that Doug understood them. Exacerbating this problem is the language barrier. Doug does not speak Japanese, and he still has some difficulty understanding the few English speaking Japanese around him.

**Individualism and collectivism**

Another cause of this intercultural conflict is individualism and collectivism. Mr. Yamamoto and Ms. Tanaka are products of a collectivistic society, where one is enculturated to place the needs of the group before one's own. According to Huang (2003), "The core concepts of Asian cultures are collectivism, shame, and loss of face" (p. 44). The concept of face is connected to an individual's "vulnerable emotions such as pride and shame, or honor and dishonor" (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 38). To "lose face" means to be humiliated. "While human beings in all cultures desire identity respect in the communication process, what constitutes the proper way to show respect and consideration for face varies from one culture to the next" (p. 38). How we "give face" to others, which means to show respect, and what constitutes "loosing face," which basically means being humiliated, also varies between cultures.

Issues of face and shame are involved in this intercultural conflict. Doug is a product of an individualistic society where individual needs and self-identity are more important than the group's. His self-identity is primarily individualistic, so issues of shame and loss of face are less important for him than for the Japanese, whose self-identity is primarily group-based. When Mr. Yamamoto tells Doug that upon arrival and departure, Doug must say correct Japanese salutations, it is from a collectivistic standpoint. As the principal, Mr. Yamamoto is responsible for the cohesion and harmony of his in-group, which includes everyone at his school.

As for Ms. Tanaka, she is the representative of her dispatch company and

has spent years developing relationships with various schools in the community. "It takes time to cultivate reliable, reciprocal social and business ties in Japan" (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 207). Ms. Tanaka must keep Mr. Yamamoto satisfied, which includes ensuring Doug's proper behavior. She is the "go-between," an essential role in Japanese society for everything from business negotiations to marriage unions. The responsibility of the go-between is "to deflect direct contact between people which might otherwise be awkward, confusing or disruptive" (Condon, 1984, p. 14). The go-between has a prominent role in maintaining group harmony, and Ms. Tanaka fulfills this role by ensuring that her mostly Western ALTs behave properly.

Although Doug desires to please his new employers, his individualism (including core values) clashes with their collectivism. For example, he believes that if truth and harmony are in conflict, truth wins, for truth is the basis of freedom. As a product of Western Christianity, Doug believes he has God on his side concerning this issue. "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" - John 8:32 (NIV). He will spend years reconciling this core belief in the fundamental existence of truth, with the Japanese willingness to sacrifice truth for harmony. Having to attend a weekly faculty meeting, where he understands nothing, also creates conflict between Doug's individualism and Japanese collectivism. "The act of being present and sharing in the process, even by physical presence only, can be the more important message" (Ramsey, 1998, p. 121). In time, Doug will realize that his mere

attendance is his contribution.

### **Power distance values**

Finally, another cause of this intercultural conflict is power distance values. According to Ting-Toomey (1999), Japan has a large power distance culture, whose members are naturally aware of interdependent and hierarchical relations. Mr. Yamamoto is the authoritarian patriarchic principal of his school, a high-status position in Japanese society, and he expects to be respected. Doug is from a country with a low power distance culture, where “subordinates expect to be respected and valued based more on personal attributes than on their positions or titles. Supervisors tend to play consultative roles more than authoritarian roles” (p. 205). Doug considers Mr. Yamamoto to be irrationally authoritarian. According to Roland (2003), “Rather than being rooted in a hierarchical social collective and cosmic order, as is the case in many other societies, Western individuals are on their own” (p. 5). Doug is accustomed to being on his own. He has had little experience in this sort of interdependent cohesive group, and therefore cannot yet realize that the primary purpose of such meetings is not to solve problems, but to do face work, which includes safeguarding the vulnerable emotions of the other party. By defending his actions and questioning the need to attend meetings, Doug is questioning school policy, which threatens Mr. Yamamoto (and Ms. Tanaka) with loss of face. Other pertinent issues involved in this intercultural conflict are ethnocentrism, prejudice, and culture shock.

### **Ethnocentrism, prejudice, and culture shock**

Doug has witnessed how Japanese school principals (and other Japanese educators) and foreign ALTs often interact from an ethnocentric perspective, which M. Bennett (1966/1998) describes as a “tendency to see our own culture as the center of the universe – that is, as the true reality” (p. 195). This is not only a clash of cultures but a clash of realities. In order to interact and communicate effectively, both groups need to move from an ethnocentric mindset to an ethnorelative one; the recognition of cultural differences and the validity of other cultural realities. This issue can be more clearly understood by considering it in the context of M. Bennett’s (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS).

### ***Ethnocentrism***

In the DMIS, M. Bennett (1993) describes the human experience of encountering cultural differences in terms of three progressive ethnocentric and three progressive ethnorelative stages. “Ethnocentric is defined as using one’s own set of standards and customs to judge all people, often unconsciously. Ethnorelative means the opposite” (p. 26). The first ethnocentric stage is denial, where human groups have had little or no contact with differing others. “If a group simply has not confronted cultural difference in any way, then it is unlikely to entertain the existence of alien realities” (p. 30). In this context, ethnocentrism is a natural state where the individual’s self-esteem is centered in one reality. As differing groups increasingly come into contact, feeling threatened is natural. As one’s group security is threatened,

so is self-identity. One result of an ethnocentric mindset is the formation of prejudices.

### ***Prejudice***

Prejudice is a belief, judgment, or opinion that is usually based on deficient or incorrect information. Since both parties, the Japanese school principal and the foreign ALT, are interacting from an ethnocentric perspective, it is normal to have developed prejudices that hinder effective communication and aggravate intercultural conflict. Prejudicial attitudes can be very difficult to change because they are rooted in core values and beliefs. Wurzel (2004) describes prejudice “as a phenomenon present in all cultures and affecting all human relations” (p. 81). He explains the universality of prejudice and its role in the human condition. Arguably, prejudice has historically been essential to human survival, but now is a major stumbling block in creating positive and harmonious intercultural relations.

Prejudice is a natural result of the intensification of ethnocentrism, often caused by an increase in contact between differing groups. As contact increases, so does prejudice. “In South Africa, the English, it is said, are against the Afrikaner; both are against the Jews; all three are opposed to the Indians; while all four conspire against the native black” (Allport, 1954/1979). Comparable examples can be found anywhere humans exist, from nation states to grade school playgrounds. One result of ethnocentrism and prejudice is an increase in intercultural conflicts. Our Japanese principal and Western ALT have their own (mostly unconscious) collections of prejudices. Before these

prejudices can be changed, they must be recognized and understood.

The school principal in our case study, Mr. Yamamoto, seems to be in the ethnocentric stage of defense (M. Bennett, 1993). Individuals in this stage recognize other cultures, but either denigrate them (Americans are selfish and noisy), or stress the superiority of their own culture (Japanese are kind and hard working). Moving this group from ethnocentric to ethnorelative would probably be difficult. A more realistic goal would be moving them into the least problematic ethnocentric stage of minimization, which is the “last attempt to preserve the centrality of one’s own worldview ... While differences are seen to exist, they are defined as relatively unimportant compared to the far more powerful dictates of cultural similarity” (p. 41).

According to Ting-Toomey (1999), “To manage intercultural conflict constructively, we must take other people’s cultural perspectives and personality factors into consideration” (p. 220). Helping these two groups follow this advice would not be easy, especially for someone like Mr. Yamamoto, who believes that it is the ALT’s responsibility to adapt. Foreign ALTs, as a whole, would be more adaptable. They tend to be in the ethnocentric stage of minimization, where cultural differences are less important than human commonalities (M. Bennett, 1993). However, they usually believe that their way is best, despite the fact that they have undertaken employment in a foreign culture which is very different to their own. This situation is further exacerbated by culture shock.

### ***Culture shock***

Culture shock is the disorientation, confusion, and stress that is experienced when one is immersed in a different culture. J. Bennett (1977) notes that, “culture shock bears a remarkable resemblance to the tensions and anxieties we face whenever change threatens the stability of our lives” (p. 215). All foreign ALTs (most of whom are Western) deal with different levels of culture shock while working and living in Japan. In this intercultural conflict, Doug’s sense of bewilderment, and feeling like he is ‘on another planet,’ are obvious signs that he is experiencing a high-level of culture shock. Taking into consideration the fact that he has been in Japan only three months, this is to be expected.

The mutual understanding of ethnocentrism, prejudice, and culture shock by all parties involved, Japanese and non-Japanese, will help alleviate some of the major impediments to effective communication. With competent intercultural training, it is also quite possible that these groups could move into the first ethnorelative stage of acceptance, where cultural differences are “acknowledged and respected” (M. Bennett, 1993), if not necessarily liked.

### **Recommendations for Intercultural Conflict Management**

In order to positively manage this conflict, all relevant parties need to develop an ethnorelative mindset, empathy, and mindfulness. Learning Ting-Toomey’s (1999) four operational skills; trust-building skills, face-management skills, mindful reframing, and mindful listening, would also be of great

benefit. Ideally, the end result would be the development of intercultural sensitivity. These attitudes, behaviors, and skills will be addressed in turn.

### **Empathy and mindfulness**

Through intercultural training, one element of managing this conflict would be moving both groups from an ethnocentric to ethnorelative mindset. A coinciding objective would be moving their mindset and behavior from sympathetic and mindless, to empathetic and mindful (M. Bennett, 1966/1998; Ting-Toomey, 1999). M. Bennett (1966/1998) says that “empathy concerns how we might imagine the thoughts and feelings of other people from their own perspective” (p. 197). Being empathetic requires a leap of intellectual imagination from one’s own reality into another, and in the process recognizing the validity of multiple realities. “The communication strategy most appropriate to multiple-reality and the assumption of difference is empathy” (p. 207). It is posited that the understanding of ethnocentrism, ethnorelativism, and the DMIS, would set the foundation for realizing the logic and benefit of communication based in multiple realities, which is what empathy provides. However, it is possible to be empathetic, but not act empathetically, and that is where mindfulness is needed.

Mindfulness is the act of being aware, moment by moment, as events are occurring. In order to consistently communicate empathetically, it is important to practice mindfulness. According to Ting-Toomey (1999), “The feelings of being understood, respected, and intrinsically valued form the outcome

dimensions of mindful intercultural communication” (p. 54). This creates security and trust for the parties involved, which is essential for building effective communication and relations among differing groups and individuals. Being empathetic and mindful will also aid in ameliorating the negative effects of prejudice.

#### **Four operational skills for conflict management**

The process of moving from an ethnocentric mindset, based on sympathy and mindlessness, to an ethnorelative mindset, based on empathy and mindfulness, should coincide with learning four of Ting-Toomey’s (1999) operational skills for constructive conflict management. These skills are mindful listening, mindful reframing, face-management skills, and trust-building skills.

##### ***Mindful listening***

“Acquiring new information in conflict negotiation means both parties have to learn to listen mindfully to each other even when they are disagreeing” (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 220). Because of Japanese high power distance values, many Japanese principals would believe that they should be talking and the young foreign ALT should be listening. They need to understand that the individualistic ALT’s tendency to ask questions is often a sign of eagerness, not disrespect. The foreign ALTs need to realize that the onus is on them to adapt. Mindful listening is going to mean learning to appreciate, value, and use silence. Ting-Toomey notes “people in high power distance cultures tend to be verbally cautious in their conflict negotiations. They tend not to

trust people who are too ‘wordy’” (p. 223). Many individuals from individualistic – low context cultures talk too much for Japanese sensibilities. They need to talk less and listen more.

##### ***Mindful reframing***

“Mindful reframing means that both individualists and collectivists need to learn how to ‘translate’ the other’s verbal and nonverbal messages from the context of the other’s viewpoint” (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 221). Both groups need to try and imagine how the other sees, feels, and interprets the situation according to the other’s culture. This requires a high degree of empathy, which might be quite difficult for traditional Japanese principals like Mr. Yamamoto to develop, but at least they should understand that the ALTs seemingly disrespectful behavior has a deep cultural basis, and is not usually meant as disrespect. The ALT needs to understand and be mindful of issues of hierarchy in Japanese society and education.

##### ***Face-management skills***

“Face-management skills basically address the fundamental core issue of social self-esteem” (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 222). They are important in all societies, but how they are achieved differs greatly between cultures. The ALT needs to learn to “give face” to Japanese, and especially to the Japanese principal. They also need to embrace silence. This is easier said than done. The young educated Western ALT has been enculturated to believe that having an opinion and stating it shows intelligence, and simply being silent means one has no opinions or curiosity, and is not



very bright (N. Sakamoto & S. Sakamoto, 2004). Often times the best way an ALT can give face to Japanese is simply by their quiet and supportive presence.

### ***Trust-building skills***

“Trust is often viewed as the single most important element of a good working relationship” (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 22). It is also important in overcoming intercultural conflicts. Doug and Mr. Yamamoto worked together for four years and developed a relationship of mutual trust and respect, but they were not equals. Doug learned to accept that Mr. Yamamoto was his superior, and needed to be treated as such. In turn, Mr. Yamamoto took care of Doug’s needs as a member of his in-group, the school. Doug developed a similar relationship with Ms. Tanaka. For the Japanese principal to build trust with the foreign ALT, they can “give face” to the ALT by respecting their experiences, education, and culture, and by being patient with their (by Japanese standards) sometimes overly verbal communication style. The ALT should realize that building trust is essential to success in Japan, and it takes time. One mistake many ALTs make is addressing potentially conflictive issues during meetings. Such issues should only be discussed in informal situations, where there is less chance of loss of face.

### ***Intercultural sensitivity***

A final goal for our prospective Japanese school principal and Western ALT is to develop some degree of intercultural sensitivity (a principle goal of intercultural studies), where the individual has developed a “construction of

reality ... increasingly capable of accommodating cultural differences” (M. Bennett, 1993, p. 24). At this point, they have developed the ability to recognize and negotiate cultural differences when communicating with culturally differing others. M. Bennett succinctly states why this is easier said than done. “Intercultural sensitivity is not natural. It is not part of our primate past, nor has it characterized most of human history. Cross-cultural contact usually has been accompanied by bloodshed, oppression, or genocide” (p. 21). Historically, the human tendency to oppress and subjugate has been much stronger than the will to cooperate and live harmoniously.

### **Conclusion**

This case study of an intercultural conflict between an American and two Japanese has demonstrated many of the issues that make communication highly problematic between members of differing cultures. It has also given recommendations for overcoming those issues. Clearly, learning a foreign language without understanding the culturally based attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of the people who speak it, is not an effective means of developing the skills necessary for communication in a rapidly globalizing world. Such a case study can be an interesting and enlightening educational tool. It also has the potential to be a significant and meaningful source of increased self-awareness, which is essential for developing intercultural sensitivity and more effective intercultural communication skills.

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