

Cross-cultural Student and Teacher Communication

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Introduction

Education and Culture

The fast-moving train of technology has made it possible for people all around the globe to be connected to one another and has given meaning to the "global village". This fact has made people more interested in perusing their academic and professional lives internationally, which results in communities with members from different nations, backgrounds, and cultures. Due to the fact that the number of students who move to other countries for educational purposes is increasing, different cultures are encountered in the current educational settings more than ever. Although the presence of different cultures, gives more color and beauty to the community, the difference among these different cultures may result in some misunderstandings and problems. This issue comes to even more importance, when we are dealing with an educational setting and the relationship between teachers and students. One of these challenges which is a result of cultural differences, is lack of necessary student-teacher communication. Since student-teacher communication is of great importance in the field of education, this cross-cultural issue needs more attention.

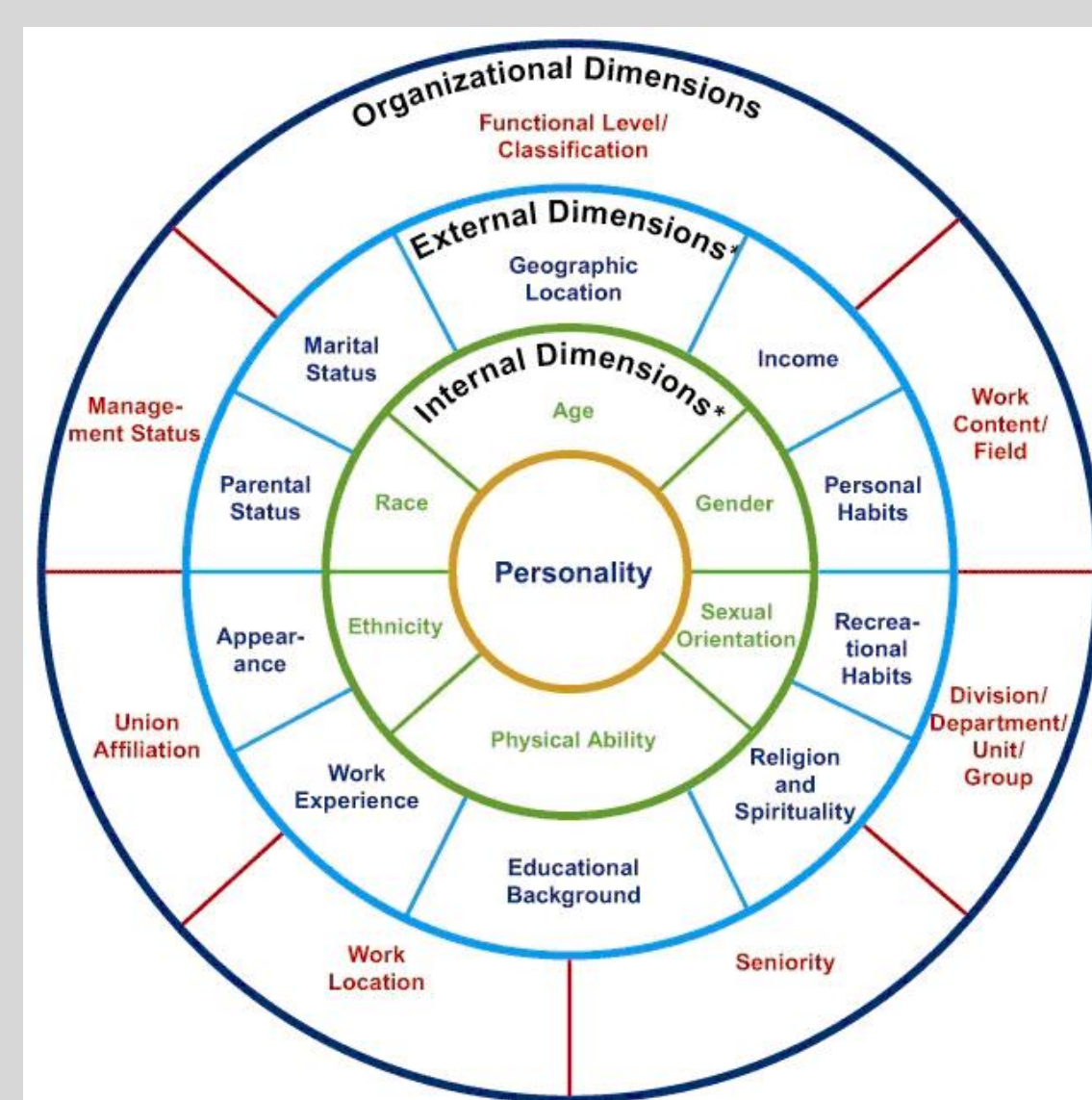
Communication and Culture

Culture can be simply defined as what people do and don't do which has been formed and rooted in them because of living in a certain context for a period of time. Time factor plays an important role in shaping one's personality and character based on the culture. Therefore, adult students who have lived a relatively long time in contact with a certain culture, have already formed their identity based on that culture. As a result what they do and don't do reflects their culture. When these students move to other countries they take their long formed identities with them. They enter a new world with a different culture and they need to survive. One of the challenging areas for these students is communicating with their teachers. An important element in student-teacher relationship is the role of the student in relational development in the classroom and a positive relational development is a function of communication between the teacher and students (Goodboy et al, 2009). However, some cultural courtesy and ethics negatively affect student-teacher communication. In some cultures it is not considered polite to ask questions during the class. In some other, the teacher is seen as an authority and students are not supposed to question what their teacher says or does. An example of the role of a teacher as an authority is when students need to call their teacher by his/her family name and stand up whenever s/he enters the class. As a consequence of these behaviors, students learn to be silent and this results in lack of communication between students and teachers. When these students come to countries like the United States, they will face a different way of teacher-student relationship and it would not be easy for them to change their behavior at once. Therefore they need help, information, and support to be able to manage their new academic life. The goal of my project is to implement some ways by which adult students coming from different cultures would feel comfortable in communicating with their teacher.

Communication and Personality

It is of considerable importance to mention that there are a lot of different factors which effect the way students communicate with their teachers. Cultural background and the definition of courtesy in the native culture is just one angle of looking at the student-teacher communication. I believe it's necessary to take some other factors into consideration since they would help in developing a successful student-teacher communication. Another element which affects the way people communicate is their personality. Personality might be shaped, to a great extent, by the culture and context in which people grow up, however it can still be considered separate from one's culture. Some personality factors which affect communication are as follow:

- Intrapersonal Communication Skills
- Confidence Level: the more confident one student is, the easier it would be for him/her to communicate.
- Motivation: Motivation has different levels and types and it might result in more attempts to communicate.
- Students' Motives: There are five reasons or motives why students communicate with their teachers. These motives are relational, functional, participatory, excuse making, and sycophantic (Myers et al, 2002). Students may have one or more of these motives based on their personality.



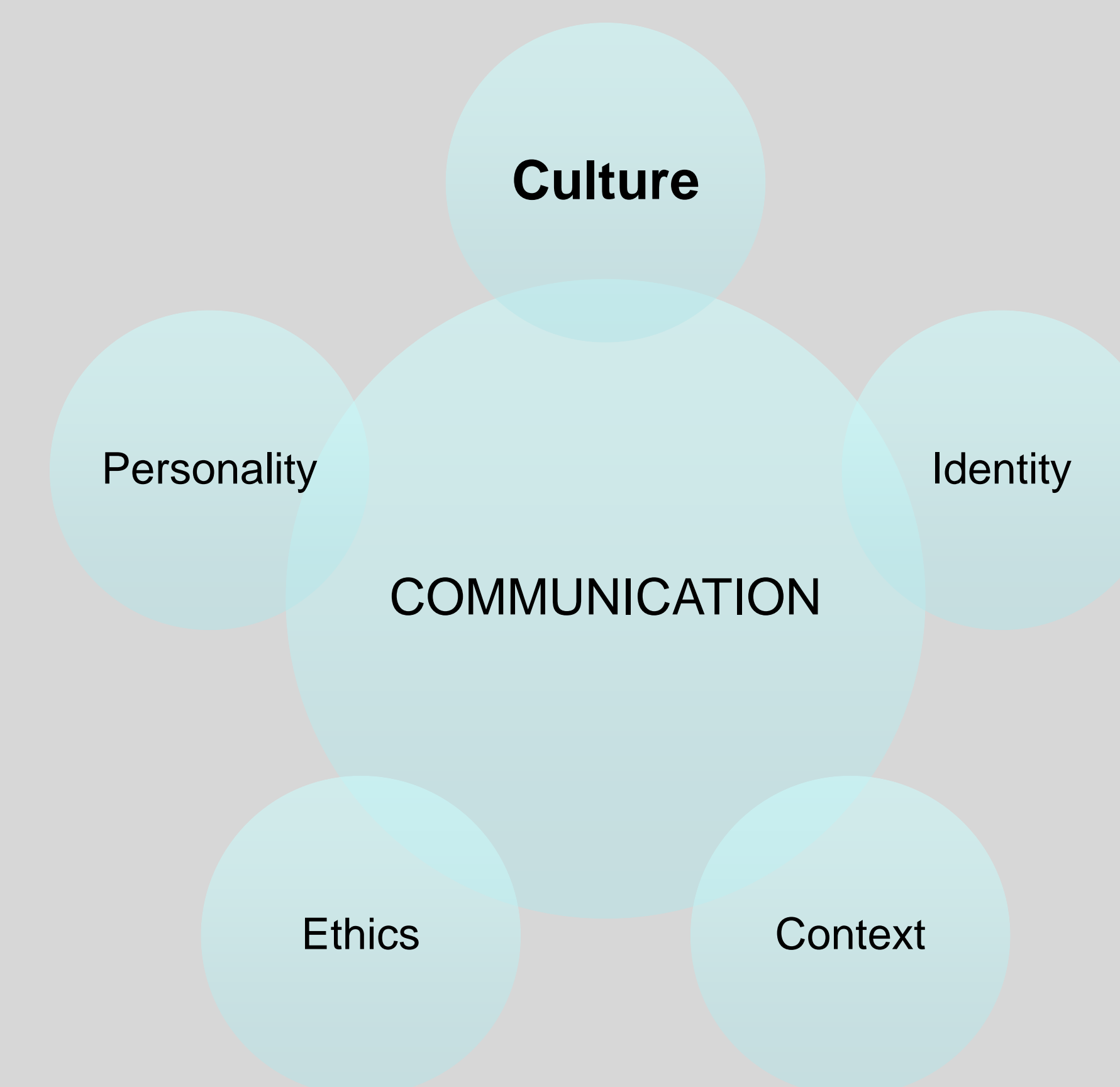
What Needs to be Done

Teachers always play the core role in any educational system. Therefore it's of vital importance to educate teachers on different factors which affect students' communication. Teachers need to be able to differentiate cultural reasons from other reasons which might hinder student communication with their teacher. There are a lot of times when teachers believe that their international students do not participate in class and they loose marks because of this. But if teachers be aware of some cultural differences they might realize that the reason why their students do not participate is their courtesy and ethics and this can be seen more if the student has moved to the United States recently. On the other hand, it's not only the teachers who need to be educated but the students need to know about their new context too. They need to learn that there are different expectations in their new academic setting and they need to meet these expectations and accept the new standards and behaviors.

Communication and Context

Another important element in building communication is the context. The context of classroom and in a bigger scale the society, directly affects how a student feels in communicating with his/her teacher. Some of these factors are:

- Discrimination Factors: Unfortunately there are still some races and nations which are not entirely accepted in all societies. Even if students of color do not see any direct behavior of discrimination towards them, there would still be some circumstances in which they feel discriminated. I believe this would directly affect the students' self-confidence and communication.
- Teacher's Attitude and Behavior: The way a teacher approaches his/her students plays an important role in student-teacher communication. Students might feel more at ease to communicate with teachers who are more friendly. Instructors' socio-communicative style (ex. assertiveness and pensiveness) affects students' motivation for communication (Mottet et al, 2004).
- Teacher's Nonverbal and Verbal approach: The way a teacher chooses to talk and communicate with his/her students defines how students would be able to communicate with him/her. In other words, it's so much related to the teacher to open the doors for communication.
- Students' Engagement: Student engagement leads to learning (Mottet et al, 2004). The level of attraction the class has for the students determines the amount of students engagement in class. If a student is so much engaged with the teaching and learning happening in the classroom, s/he will automatically start to communicate.
- Peer Relationship: The relationship that a student establishes with his/her classmates directly affects the level of interest in that classroom. In addition, successful communication with peers can open the doors for successful communication with the teacher.



My Plan for Adult Language Institutes

Teacher Training Course: I strongly believe that teachers need to be educated about the differences that exists between different cultures and how it affects their classroom. In the Institute I work, students mostly come from Asia (ex. China and Japan) and Arab countries (ex. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait). So the teachers in this institute mostly need to know about the ethics and courtesy in Arab and Asian cultures. This knowledge would help them to be able to identify the reasons why a student does not communicate with the teacher in class and if the reason is the cultural difference, then the teacher would be able to handle the situation. To make it possible for the teachers to know how to confront cultural differences, we need to have Teacher Training Courses on the subject of "Culture and Communication". This would be a 5-day course for 10 hours (two hours per day) for all the teachers. The objective of this course is to make the teachers aware of the differences that exist between cultures and how it affects their classes and especially the student-teacher communication. And also to teach them some techniques and strategies that they can use to help their students communicate with them. This course summarized in the table below.

| Sessions | First Hour | Second Hour |
|----------|---|---|
| 1 | Culture and Education | Arabic and Asian Cultures of Education |
| 2 | The Importance of Student-Teacher Communication | Cultural Difference in Student-Teacher Communication |
| 3 | The Role of Teacher in Student-Teacher Communication | The Role of Student in Student-Teacher communication |
| 4 | Techniques and Strategies to Encourage Students to Communicate with Their Teachers (part 1) | Teacher Practice Session for Applying the Techniques and Strategies |
| 5 | Techniques and Strategies to Encourage Students to Communicate with Their Teachers (part 2) | Teacher Practice Session for Applying the Techniques and Strategies |

Some of the techniques the teachers will learn to use are:

- Establishing a friendly environment in their class to help their students feel comfortable talking.
- Introducing the ways students can contact with the teacher on the first session (ex. e-mail, office hours, etc.) and encouraging the students to contact the teacher for any questions or problems throughout the term.
- Staring to informally communicate with each single student individually from the beginning of the term. This can be done through e-mail, informal chatting before and after the class, having a cup of coffee together, etc. These communications don't need to be specifically about the course, but on how they are doing in the U.S. and their new lives here.
- Formally communicating with the students about how they are doing in the course and what suggestions you have for improvement. This can be done through e-mail or asking them to come to your office.

Student Information Session: Students need to attend a one hour information session before each term to learn about the importance of communicating with their teachers and how it might be different in American culture compared to their countries. This formal session would show the importance of student-teacher communication to the students.

References

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