

Verbal and Nonverbal Communication in American Culture and Its' Implications for BIPA Teacher's Intercultural Competence

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ABSTRACT

Intercultural misunderstandings can lead to communication failures. Communication failure between BIPA teachers and students can also result in BIPA learning failures. Therefore, BIPA teachers must understand the culture of their students, including American culture because there are quite a lot of BIPA students in America. In America BIPA is studied as an elective subject at the University of California, Harvard University, Yale University, Arizona University, and Wisconsin University. Cross-cultural communication in the context of American culture discussed in this article includes verbal culture and nonverbal culture. The verbal and nonverbal culture in question is the habit of American communication strategies, both in using verbal and nonverbal language. Qualitative descriptive method was used because this study describes the habits of the American verbal strategy including (1) verbal communication which includes direct communication, language style, intonation and voice volume, politeness, silence, and (2) nonverbal communication which includes eye contact, physical contact, space personality, gestures, smiles, and basic etiquette. The data collection uses literature studies and interviews, and the analysis uses the theory of Samovar. The results show that verbal and nonverbal communication in American culture tends to be concise and to the point, and highly respects individual freedoms and boundaries. The implications for BIPA learning are related to increase intercultural competence of BIPA teachers.

Keywords: *Cross-cultural communication, intercultural competence, nonverbal culture, verbal culture.*

1. INTRODUCTION

With increasingly sophisticated technology, it is easier to communicate with people of different cultures, races, ethnicities, languages, religions, education levels, economic levels, etc. This progress is accompanied by the need for cross-cultural understanding, which is very important to learn. As one way out to minimize misunderstandings due to cultural differences is to understand or at least know the language and cultural behavior of others, know the principles of cross-cultural communication and practice them in communicating with others. Mulyana (2015), stated that by studying other people's cultures, we actually learn our own culture, including its influence on the way we communicate with other people. An 18th century English writer, Samuel Johnson stated, "I understand my country much better when I stand in the culture of others".

An understanding of cross-cultural communication is the key to the success of a communication. As stated by Griffin (2010) and Allan (1984), that human communication aims to serve five things, namely sending information (to inform), expressing feelings (to express feelings), entertaining (to entertainment), educating (to educated), to influence (to influence) and meet social expectations (to meet social expectations) (Liliweri, 2015).

There are many examples of cases of how conflicts occur due to misunderstandings that arise due to a lack of understanding of cross-cultural communication. For example, a representative for an American soft drink company was confused as to why Mexican customers laughed when he offered a free sample of Fresca soda. In a Mexican accent, the word Fresca means lesbian (Liliweri, 2017). In Indonesia, when a Sundanese asked a Javanese for papaya. In Sundanese, papaya is called *gedang*, while for Javanese, *gedang* is the name for

bananas. This is the importance of understanding cross-cultural communication so that there is no conflict or cultural chaos when communicating with people of different cultures that we know. The key to cross-cultural communication is to form cultural awareness.

Verbal communication is communication that uses words, both spoken and written. Some important elements in verbal communication, namely language and words. Meanwhile, nonverbal communication is communication in which the message is packaged in nonverbal form, without words, more of an expression (Kusumawati, 2016). Mulyana (2006) also stated that every country and nation will have different communication patterns, both verbal and non-verbal. This happens because of cultural differences between each other.

In BIPA learning, BIPA teachers or prospective BIPA teachers need to have an adequate understanding of the characteristics of BIPA students who come from different cultural backgrounds. These cultural background differences affect the language learning strategies used by language learners (Suyitno, 2017). The competencies of BIPA teachers stated by Permendikbud No. 16 of 2007: Teacher Competency Standards which covers 4 competencies namely pedagogic, personality, social, and professional. For foreign language teachers, especially BIPA, intercultural competence of the target language is required. Bennet (2015) defines intercultural communication as what transpires when people communicate with others whose experiences, assumptions, sense making, and behaviors are different. Thus, mastering the competence will have a significant impact on learning success.

Understanding of cultural aspects will direct BIPA teachers in determining BIPA learning strategies, according to the characteristics of the learners. In relation to BIPA learning, there are several characteristics of BIPA students that must be considered. First, BIPA students already have enough knowledge and insight, so that their needs are also the needs of adult learner. Second, foreigners (westerner) like to express themselves, present things, express opinions, so assignments outside the classroom will be very interesting. Finally, to accommodate interests and needs that may differ from one another, various materials need to be prepared (Sugino, 1995). This is the author's hope as a provision in understanding BIPA students from the United States.

2. METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative literature review to explore the literature in understanding and interpreting the meaning of an event in a particular situation on the object under study. The main data sources in this study come from written literature that

discusses the issues being studied, such as articles or research related to cross-cultural or intercultural communication in the context of US verbal and nonverbal culture, and cross-cultural studies related to BIPA. And supported by secondary data, in the form of news, videos, and other sources available online.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Overview of United States Culture

According to Onuf (2010), the United States is a federal republic consisting of 50 states, a federal district (Washington, DC, capital United States), the five major territories, and various small islands. The 48 states on the mainland and Washington, DC, are in the middle of North America between Canada and Mexico; the other two states, Alaska and Hawaii, are located in the northwestern part of North America and an archipelago in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, respectively, while the territories are scattered along the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea.

The United States is ethnically and racially diverse as a result of massive immigration throughout its history, hundreds of indigenous tribes and cultures, and through African American slavery followed by emancipation. American culture itself promotes homogeneity in its diversity, often referred to as the "American Melting Pot" (Thompson & Hickey, 2005). The term Melting Pot itself is a metaphor for an increasingly homogeneous heterogeneous society. The different elements are "melted into one" as a harmonious cultural similarity. This term is used to describe the assimilation of immigrants in the United States; the metaphor of melting into one was used in the 1780s (Samovar, Porter & McDaniel, 2011). Immigrants who come and then choose to stay and become American citizens, by the government are asked not to leave their culture and continue to practice it while living in America. This makes the culture of the United States to be multicultural. Country and cowboy culture are generally one of America's most well-known symbols and characteristics.

3.2. Communication Patterns and Cultural Characteristics of United States

Linguistic expert Richard D. Lewis (2015) mapped the communication patterns and cultural identity of the United States. The chart on the side gives an overview of when they spoke as well as the cultural traits and characteristics in the chart related to the range of conversation, which is indicated by a widening arrow. Communication barriers are marked in grey. Americans either listen carefully or nonchalantly, depending on the nature of the conversation or its purpose, when required to listen (see Figure 1).

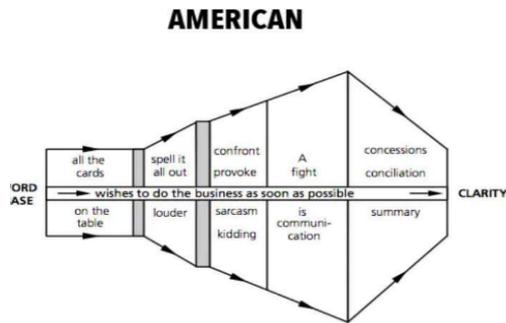


Figure 1. Lewis, R. (2006). *When Cultures Collide*.

Mulyana (2016) describes the characteristics of cultural differences, which include Communication and Language, Clothing and Appearance, Food and Eating Habits, Time and Time Awareness and Values and Norms. Communication and Language includes following points.

3.1.1. Verbal

3.1.1.1. Direct Communication

According to Bennett (2015), Americans are very direct communicators. They tend to convey their entire message verbally, paying little attention to body language. People are expected to ‘get to the point’. This doesn’t mean that politeness is ignored in communication, but sometimes Americans become deprived of some nuances of communication (such as disparaging) in conversation or certain types of humour (for example, subtle sarcasm or ironic remarks).

3.1.1.2. Style

Americans are generally quite enthusiastic, assertive and persuasive in their speech.

3.1.1.3. Modesty

Americans are not very humble (by Indonesian standards) because ‘showing off success’ is not affected by the “tall poppy tree syndrome” in their culture. People are expected to speak for themselves rather than waiting for someone to share their achievements or successes.

3.1.1.4. Intonation and volume

Americans may speak at a higher volume in public spaces, but they generally don’t appreciate emotional outbursts or loud outbursts.

3.1.1.5. Silent

American culture is a low-context culture. Silence is underappreciated in most American contexts. Americans sometimes feel uncomfortable when social

chatter is interspersed with long pauses or silences and often try to fill gaps in conversation (Lewis, 2016). They don’t like listeners not giving feedback and staying silent. They perceive silence in conversation as disrespectful behaviour (Cai, 2019).

3.1.2. Non-Verbal

Besides Communication and Language, aspects of cultural differences that enter into nonverbal communication according to Mulyana (2016) include Clothing and Appearance, Food and Eating Habits, Time and Time Awareness and Values and Norms. According to Lewis (2016), there are several nonverbal patterns that stick to American culture.

3.1.2.1. Eye

Eye contact must be maintained directly. It shows warmth, openness, honesty and approachability. If you make casual eye contact with a stranger (on the street, in the store, in the hallway, etc.) give them a small smile or nod to acknowledge their presence. Continuing on your journey without doing so means you are either just staring or unfriendly, and come across as a little rude.

3.1.2.2. Physical Contact

Generally, Americans don’t really like physical touch outside of their family and close relationships. However, cities that are more internationally exposed may adopt more physical contact in their behavior. Touching someone of the other gender – especially at work – can be misconstrued as sexual harassment.

3.1.2.3. Private Space

Americans like to be given enough personal space, so try not to intrude during a conversation. If Americans feel you’re too ‘to face’ with them, they probably won’t mention it and just back off.

3.1.2.4. Gestures

It is best to nod or show some kind of sign that you are listening during the conversation.

3.1.2.5. Smile

Many Americans smile when passing strangers on the street as a simple gesture of goodwill.

3.1.2.6. Basic Etiquette Meet and Greet:

- a) Casual greetings.
- b) Smiles and “hello”.
- c) Prefer a handshake as the first greeting. Hugs are suitable for family and friends.

- d) Kisses and sun cheeks in a warmer handshake are usually done only in the context of relatives, lovers, and friends.
- e) Prefer to be called by their first name and title (Mr. Madam and Miss).

American's value "small talk" or chit-chat before talking about important things. However, asking direct questions about someone's salary, wealth, weight, or age is often considered rude. Also, people usually don't wait to be introduced and will start talking to strangers when they are standing in a queue or sitting next to each other at an event. Non-Americans may interpret this informality as overly direct or even rude, but it is the level of friendliness they feel comfortable with.

3.1.2.7. Visits

Arrange a visit before going to an American home. Don't come unannounced or bring friends and family unless you've requested it beforehand. People are usually expected to arrive at a large party 30 minutes to an hour late, especially if they don't know the host well. Call ahead if you will be arriving more than 10 minutes late for a small group of people. Being late is a sign that you are disrespectful to the meeting and the host. However, late attendance is more acceptable for parties and large social gatherings. Avoid prolonging your visit by staying at an American's house longer than expected, unless they urge you to stay.

3.1.2.8. Dining Etiquette

Americans meet in their homes and yards, or in restaurants and public places. Pray or ask for blessings before eating. The guests will not start eating until the host has started. Table manners are generally used, but for the context of eating at a fast-food restaurant, it becomes loose and relaxed. If someone coughs while you are smoking, it is an indication that you should put out the cigarette. It's rude to clean your teeth without using a toothpick in public. Being a 'picky eater' in America and refusing some foods without explanation is acceptable.

3.1.2.9. Gifts

Gifts are usually only given on special occasions and are almost always accompanied by a card. Gifts are usually given even if the recipient does not expect it. People tend to open gifts in front of the giver, either after receiving them or later along with other gifts. For occasions that require a gift (e.g. birthdays, weddings, the birth of a baby), inexpensive and simple gifts are acceptable. Unless the guest is very familiar with the recipient, a more expensive gift can be accepted. Gifts given as a personal gesture outside of special occasions are often grander or more heartfelt. For example, to reflect deep gratitude for the help someone has done for

you, you could give them a sports ticket or take them to an expensive restaurant. Gifts can be given when visiting the house (e.g. wine grapes, chocolate, pudding potted plants or flowers for the hostess).

3.1.2.10. Business Etiquette

Wear formal clothes. In many companies, casual wear is acceptable on Fridays. A handshake is a common greeting, and eye contact and expression are important. Americans have direct, logical and linear thinking, and are influenced by data and evidence. Talking directly to the topic (shorthanded) is a common and typical style, while praise and appreciation is done sparingly. Even though the meeting looked relaxed, it is taken seriously.

3.1.3. Tips for Communicating with Americans

Bennet (2015) also gives some tips on "Do's and Don'ts" in communicating with Americans as follows.

3.1.3.1. Do

It's okay to be open and proud about your success in America because Americans like to focus on accomplishments and other positives. This can sometimes be embarrassing or uncomfortable for Indonesians, but it is just a way to encourage one another and is also part of sharing life with others. If giving suggestions or criticism, be sure to emphasize the points both before and after doing so. If you want to help someone, try to do it in a way that gives them the opportunity to help themselves. Charity done indirectly or in circles can imply that the person is a burden to others.

There is a strong cultural and religious narrative in America about being a 'Good Samaritan'. As many as 1 in 4 Americans volunteer for nonprofit organizations and events. It is also common for people to reach out and help complete strangers spontaneously.

3.1.3.2. Don't!

Avoid mentioning divisive topics like gun control, the death penalty, abortion, civil rights, etc. These talks rarely reach a settlement in the public realm of debate and can quickly become heated discussions. Talking about religion can also be sensitive if you don't know everyone's stand on faith.

According to the 2020 polling company Gallup, 9 out of 10 Americans are proud of their country. Therefore, do not make fun of the United States. Many Americans would consider themselves patriots, so mocking their country would most likely offend them. Never make insults about race. Race relations in America are taken very seriously. Discussions about

terrorism, Islam, slavery and race relations can be sensitive topics.

Although the culture of the United States at first glance looks so different, basically the cultures of the United States and Indonesia have many similarities. Thompson & Hickey (2005) have noted that the United States is ethnically and racially diverse, which is where this diversity is fused in the “American Melting Pot.” Former president Obama mentioned the similar cultural diversity between Indonesia and the United States during a speech at the University of Indonesia campus in 2010, that “Let’s look at our national written motto. *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (different but one). In the United States, our motto is *E pluribus unum* (many, but one).” (White House, 2010).

In reflecting on what Indonesians can learn from American culture, Mulyana (2016) quotes the wise words of the writer WS Rendra, that we should take cultural elements from anywhere as long as we increase our dignity as human beings. The following are things that Mulyana suggests for Indonesians to emulate.

- a) Appreciation of the souls of others
- b) Appreciate time
- c) Fulfill a promise
- d) Love and sincerity in learning science
- e) cleanliness
- f) Easy and sincere community service
- g) Environmental care
- h) Health care

4. CONCLUSION

Cultural differences often make it difficult for humans to communicate with each other. This is because differences in cultural expectations can pose a fatal risk, at least it will cause communication that is not smooth, feelings of discomfort or misunderstanding arise. As a result of some of these misunderstandings, they are often found in various incidents that contain ethnocentrism today in the form of conflicts that lead to riots or inter-ethnic conflicts. To avoid this, understanding cross-cultural communication is very important and must be done. Studying cross-cultural communication, then everyone will be aware of the differences in culture as well as the factors that cause differences in cross-cultural communication, which can build into intercultural competence. Understanding of cultural aspects will direct BIPA teachers in determining BIPA learning strategies, according to the characteristics of the learners.

The implication of the findings of the researchers in this study is as a provision for BIPA teachers in understanding the verbal and nonverbal communication of BIPA students from the United States, considering that BIPA teachers or prospective BIPA teachers need to have an adequate understanding of the characteristics

of BIPA students who come from different cultural backgrounds. Understanding of cultural aspects will direct BIPA teachers in determining BIPA learning strategies, according to the characteristics of the learners. These cultural background differences affect the language learning strategies used by language learners.

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