

# HIGH-LOW CONTEXT COMMUNICATION IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION OF INDONESIAN

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**Abstract**— Cross-cultural communication is an integral part of Indonesia. Using the characteristics of high context and low context from Edward T Hall, this study intends to describe the style of communication in Indonesia, whether included in the communication of high context or low context. This research uses interview and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) to 25 exchange students from Vienna University and 25 Users consisting of lecturers, politicians and employees in Bandung. Results show that Indonesia is in a high- context communication, it can be seen from the communication that involves and emphasizing physical contact, interpersonal relations, meaning internalized, non-verbal messages, the physical settings and social settings, as well as cultural values. Indonesia is expected to adjust to the high context cultures of other countries both in the context of business and politics.

**Keywords**— *Cross-Cultural Communication, high context, Low Context, Indonesian Culture*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Today, communication is influenced by many different aspects of human behavior and language, such as non-verbal communication and verbal communication. Most of the time, we are not fully aware of the assumptions and beliefs involved in communication exchange with someone from another culture. All forms of communication can be categorized as cultural. Communication can be divided into verbal and nonverbal communication. Human being communicate in a different way, that are usually influenced by personality factors, the environment, the context, the mood and other factors and then internalized to influence what they think. The effective communication is influenced by many things, such as whether the communication we do is received and understood properly and vice versa if we accept and understand the communications of others properly, whether the communication objectives achieved well, whether the communication is interactive or not, and sometimes misunderstanding or even conflict happened.

If we use what is said above about “culture” and “communication” as a base, we would now be able to define intercultural communication as the sharing of information on different levels of awareness and control between people with different cultural backgrounds, where different cultural backgrounds include both national cultural differences and differences which are connected with participation in the different activities that exist within a national unit.

Things above could happen even though we have the understanding or the same culture. Now the question is what if the communication involves a different culture? Culture means all not just ethnicity, religion or ethnicity but involve different countries, different languages, customs, rules, and

stuff another further complicates the communication to be performed.

Communication that occurs between two people or more which involve a different culture is also known as intercultural communication [16]. Edward T. Hall, an anthropologist and also the inventor of intercultural communication or also known as cross-cultural communication. Edward T Hall claims that Cross-cultural communication divided into 2 of the communication context of high and low context. The discussion in this paper begins by showing how the communications business practices reflect high context or low-context and then moves to a deeper level to explore how communication style is integrally linked to the characteristics of other cultures [6].

There are many researches on cross- cultural communication in Asia focuses more on Japan and China [12]. Still very little is discussed about Indonesia, which actually has a culture that is not less interesting to other Asian countries. So that you will better understand your culture and how it contrasts with other cultures, we will describe five key dimensions of culture: context, individualism, formality, communication style, and time orientation. Therefore, this paper will discuss cross- cultural communication that exist in Indonesia is included in the high context or low context.

### A. Dimension of Culture

Discussion related to cross-cultural communication can't be separated from an understanding of the culture itself. Even the communication and culture are things that can't be separated, culture has its own definition. Culture is set of core values, beliefs, standards, knowledge, moral, legal, and behavioral submitted by individuals and communities, which determine how people act, feel, and see himself and others. Culture is (1) an important idea as it deals with the way people live and approach problem solving in a social and organizational context, (2) the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another, and (3) the result of a complex interaction of values, attitudes, and behaviors of the members of a group; "values" influence attitudes, "attitudes" affect behaviors, and "behaviors" in turn have an impact on "cultures"—thus forming a reinforcing or self-adjusting, circular phenomenon [13]. Culture has a variety of elements such as ethnicity, race, religion, language, customs, education, food, gender, music, art, and even age which has influence on human character.

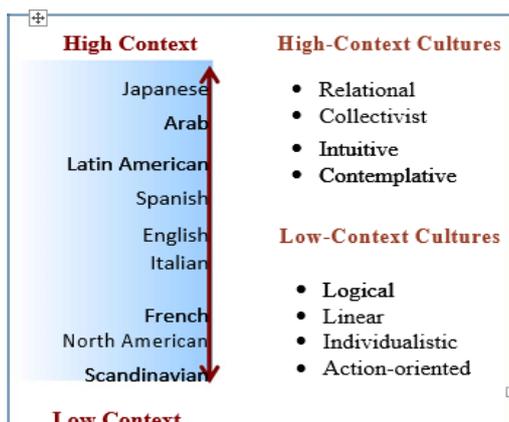
Culture is shaped by attitudes learned in childhood and later internalized in adulthood. As we enter this current period of globalization and intercultural, we should expect to make adjustments and adopt new attitudes. Adjustment and

accommodation will be easier if we understand some basic characteristics of culture such as [4]:

- **Culture Is Learned.** Rules, values, and attitudes of a culture are not inherent. They are learned and passed down from generation to generation. For example, in some Asian cultures such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Japan, same-sex people may walk hand-in-hand in the street, but opposite-sex people may not do so. Cultural rules of behavior learned from your family and society are conditioned from early childhood.
- **Cultures Are Inherently Logical.** The rules in any culture originated to reinforce that culture's values and beliefs. They act as normative forces. For example, in Japan the original Barbie doll was a failure for many reasons, one of which was her toothy smile. Acknowledging the inherent logic of a culture is extremely important when learning to accept behavior that differs from one's own cultural behavior.
- **Culture Is the Basis of Self-Identity and Community.** Culture is the basis for how we tell the world who we are and what we believe. People build their identities through cultural overlays to their primary culture.
- **Culture Combines the Visible and Invisible.** To outsiders, the way we act, those things that we do in daily life and work are the most visible parts of our culture. In India for example, people avoid stepping on ants or insects because they believe in reincarnation and are careful about all forms of life. These practices are outward symbols of deeper values that are invisible but that pervade everything we think and do.
- **Culture Is Dynamic.** Year by year, cultures will change. Changes are caused by advancements in technology and communication and also change in social environment.
- **The more we know about culture in general and our own culture in particular, the better able we will be to adapt to an intercultural perspective.** A typical North American has habits and beliefs similar to those of other members of Western, technologically advanced societies. We can outline some key dimensions of culture and look at them from different views. To be able to explain more deeply related to cross-cultural communication we can see the cultural dimension. Edward Hall divides cultures in 5 dimensions of context, individualism, formality, time-orientation and communication style.

*B. Importance of Context*

Edward T Hall highlight the important of context. Context is probably the most important cultural dimension and also the most difficult to define. In his model, context refers to the stimuli, environment, or ambience surrounding an event [4].



To make his point, Hall illustrate how understanding context makes difference in the meaning of particular problems.

Low-context communicators such as those in North America, Scandinavia, and Germany depend little on the context of a situation to convey their meaning. They assume that listeners must be told practically everything because they know very little. In opposite, communicators in high-context cultures such as those in Japan, China, and Arab countries, they think the listener is already "contested" and does not need to be given much background information.

*C. Definition of High Context dari Low Context*

High context communication is communication that involves physical contact, emphasizing interpersonal relationships, meaning internalized, more emphasis on non-verbal messages, the physical setting and social setting, and great attention to cultural values that exist. HCC is defined as a mode of communication in which both verbal and non-verbal behaviors are displayed with meanings implicitly embedded at different levels of the sociocultural context. High context communication more intuitive and contemplative. As a result, high-context message carries less information. People do not explicitly say what they want to convey. Instead, they are long-winded until they can solve the meaning of the message correctly. The main purpose of the use of this communication is to preserve and strengthen relationships by ensuring interlocutors still respect and maintain harmony [2]. However, Edward Hall in [6] suggested that high-context communication style features faster and more efficient because they rely on intuitive understanding. However, they are slow to change and need time in order to create a common understanding between the sender and receiver. China and Japan are examples of high-context culture model.

Low context culture, on the other hand tend to be logical, analytical, and action-oriented, more decisive and to the point, tend communications made directly to the objectives and efficient [4]. Direct verbal communication style is favored over indirect style. Intention and meaning are clearly and has a direct correspondence with the pattern of verbal and non-verbal. Concentration is placed on the "encoding" messages. In problem solving situations, low context cultures adopt the style of face to face confrontation. Users low context cultures place more emphasis on ideas and thoughts. Low-context communicators emphasize the exchange of ideas and thoughts. They tend to focus more on the words or symbols used to convey their ideas, information and feelings. They thought it was important to deliver the message directly. They use their language in instrumental form. They are also trying to retain thoughts and their ideas in a way that is rational and analytical. [2] said that Low-context cultures (particularly American culture) are more geared towards "freedom of speech" and "personal rights," with self-expression and verbosity highly prized. In making a clear comparison between the United States and Japan on how communication breakdown can easily take place in a workplace when people are not aware of the potential misunderstandings.

They usually have a definite purpose when they communicate, and the final product of the message is the most important part of the communication process. Low context communicator usually not very skilled in the use of non-verbal messages [2]. This type of communication is widely used for countries that are rooted in Western Europe such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States, as well as most of Europe [6].

Figure 1 Comparing High Context and Low Context

Figure 1 shows some of the countries belonging to the low context and high context. So far no one has clearly categorized whether Indonesia include low or high context. To be able to classify what types of communications made by Indonesia will be discussed in advance of communication and culture in Indonesia.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted in Bandung and Yogyakarta since August 2014 until February 2015 to conduct deep interviews and focus group discussion (FGD) to 25 exchange students from Vienna University (Austria) at UGM and 25 Users consisting of lecturers, politicians and employees in Bandung. This research was conducted by comparing the perception that exists between the two types of respondents. Then the researchers also obtain additional information through the study of literature. The data analysis is done by comparing how the perception of users and exchange student perspective of high-context and low context.

### A. High Context and Low Context Communication

Either high context or low context can be divided into five dimensions of context, formality, communication style, individualism and time orientation. The fifth of these characteristics will provide a fundamental difference between high- context and low context.

The first characteristic is the context. [6] explains that the context/context is stimulus, the environment and the atmosphere in the situation. Low context tends to be logical, analytical thinking and action-oriented. While high context is more intuitive, more emphasis on personal relationships and social settings. According to Hall (1998), high context more use emotions and relationships. While the low context preferring logical approach and minimize the personal approach. As an example of Indonesian society which is dominated by a culture to promote a culture of hospitality so that everyone who visit the home would be well served. Indonesian Society will entertain with his good so that they feel comfortable. Culture is also carried over into their business atmosphere that is visible from the provision of drinks and snacks at meetings so that guests feel more comfortable. Even very common for Indonesian people

familiar with the business partner in order to facilitate business relationships occur. Not infrequently they will smile to others then had a conversation "preamble" to break the atmosphere becomes more relaxed and familiar that sometimes takes a long time before finally down to business. Unlike the case with Western societies tend directly to the subject in this business. They will immediately start a business in accordance with their purpose. Style of negotiation of Indonesian and Westerners were different. Westerners tend to use rationality than emotional. They will tend to use a standard negotiating ways to achieve the desired goal although it may be in the process does not go smoothly (Rothwell, 2004).

The second characteristic of high context is a formality / formality. The lack of formality (informality) is characterized by frankness or directness. Instead formalities both often lead to indirectness [4]. Indirectness in layman's language is more often referred to as "rambling".

According to Hall (1976) high context will be happy to talk all topics because they think other person will understand what is meant. They will only give a message partially in hopes partly be charged and response by the receiver, for

example in an organization there is employee named Bob who could not attend the meeting because there will be another agenda. He asked his friend Budi to replace him in that meeting. Bob will tell that this day should attend meeting just that there are other agendas that must be attended too instead of asking Budi directly to replace him. This sentence will be left hanging so Budi will understand that indirectly Bob asking him to attend the meeting. Instead Westerners will immediately give a statement when we will express something [18]

Another study suggests indirectness of high communication context by Nishimura et al (2008) describes how communication style in country that is high context is more indirect in the delivery of the message, more frequent "use of silence". Communication styles more silent for things that are not agreed upon or unknown. Same thing with [10] that the high context's country will use ambiguous language. Asian countries do tend to use language that is not directly comparable with the direct language that is often used by low country context.

The third characteristic is the communication style. According to [6] style of communication is divided into two types, namely verbally (using words) and nonverbal (using symbols, pictures, gestures, etc.). Edward T Hall declare that high context will be more use of non-verbal language as compared with low context [6]. Indonesian culture is very strong with non-verbal language, as an example of when you meet people who are known they will tend waving or shaking hands. Then shook his head when the answer does not know or when in a situation where the employee makes a mistake, then usually the boss will be shaking his head as a sign that they were disappointed. Communication is also done by Malaysia, China and Japan are also the high country context [12] [18]

The fourth character is individualism. An attitude of independence and freedom from control characterizes individualism. High context communication chooses to minimize individualism and more on the nature of collectivism. Culture of collectivism give an approach to the membership of organizations and groups, pushing on promoting the values of the group above personal values, even they will refuse to do their own self-reliance in the sense because it will bring competition and confrontation rather than consensus. Instead America, Germany, Scandinavia is a country with a culture individualism or can be categorized into low context. They believe that the initiative and self-affirmation will lead to personal achievement. They also believe in individual action and personal responsibility, as well as the freedom to get things done. Many cultures, of course, are quite complex and cannot be characterized as totally individualistic or group oriented. For example, European Americans are generally quite individualistic, whereas African Americans are less so, and Latin Americans are closer to the group-centered dimension [4]. On the other hand, Indonesia has a culture of mutual cooperation is very strong in social life. Just as in their business activities will put forward the concept of working with the team than his own [14].

Last characteristic is time orientation. we now turn our attention to monochronic versus polychronic cultures. Monochronic cultures like to do just one thing at a time. They value a certain orderliness and sense of there being an appropriate time and place for everything. They do not value interruptions. They like to concentrate on the job at hand and take time commitments very seriously [19]. In addition,

monochromic people tend to show a great deal of respect for private property and are reluctant to be either a lender or a borrower. This is part of a general tendency to follow rules of privacy and consideration as well as adhere religiously to plans [5].

Polychromic cultures like to do multiple things at the same time. A manager's office in a polychromic culture typically has an open door, a ringing phone and a meeting all going on at the same time [19]. Though they can be easily distracted they also tend to manage interruptions well with a willingness to change plans often and easily. People are their main concern (particularly those closely related to them or their function) and they have a tendency to build lifetime relationships. Issues such as promptness are firmly based on the relationship rather than the task and objectives are more like desirable outcomes than must do [19].

In some culture time orientation related to money, productivity and efficiency. Culture in Indonesia tend to form habits "rubber time" where time is very flexible so often meeting scheduled for example at 9 am will begin at 10 and it has become a joint impunity. In addition, Indonesian people will enjoy the time with what is being done in spite of the desired objectives have not been achieved. Examples include an employee delaying work that should be completed today because the deadline is still two or three days, to work overtime in Indonesia become popular even if it means sacrificing personal time because no extra pay earned.

Summarizing the existing culture in Indonesia it can be seen that Indonesia included in the high context. This culture will last a long time because it is rooted on the ancestors to see how the influence of culture in everyday life for the people of Indonesia. Communication is done indirectly (known as "berbelit-belit"), using non-verbal language, promote cooperation and team work, time orientation as an unlimited resource and promote personal relationships and social arrangements put Indonesia in the category of high-context communication

TABLE I. LOW AND HIGH CONTEXT CHARACTERISTICS

Low contact	High Contact
1. Tend to prefer direct verbal interaction	1. Tend to understand meaning embedded at many sociocultural level
2. Tend to understand meaning at one level only	2. Are generally more proficient in reading non verbal cues
3. Are generally less proficient in reading nonverbal cues	3. Value Grup membership individualism
4. Value individualism	4. Rely more on context and feeling
5. Rely more on logic	5. Employ spiral logic

6. Employ linear logic	6. Talk around point, avoiding saying "no"
7. Say no directly	7. Communicate in simple, sometimes ambiguous, understand visual message readily
8. Communicate in highly structured message, provide details, stress literal meaning, give authority to written Communication	

*B. Communication Context in Indonesia*

Indonesia is in Southeast Asia. Indonesia including the Malay Archipelago which means it has 18,108 islands. Several large islands that exist such as Java, Bali, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, and Sumatra. Jakarta is the capital of Indonesia, which is also located on the island of Java. Indonesia is also rich with a variety of ethnic languages and dialects respective national culture of Indonesia categorized properties analogous to India-multicultural, rooted in an older community and inter-ethnic relations. (www.everyculture.com). High-context cultures include Eastern cultures such as Indonesia, where people have widespread networks with family, friends, and organizations.

Communications of Indonesian in generally is indirect. Directness will be regarded as acts that are not polite or rude. Indonesian people will talk, "play" or pep talk beforehand with the hope the other person will understand the purpose intended. Indirectness can be also be found in a social setting, like in a marriage. In Indonesia culture, when a man has the intention to marry, the man's parents would make the proposal to the woman's parents. Sometimes the woman does not even know about the proposal until the man's parents come to their house.

In terms of negotiations, the Indonesian people will be using an emotional approach than rationality. Emotional approach is considered as a powerful way to make the other person "engage" with us and establish good relationship for the next activity, even in many cases will simplify and streamline other things. Testimony of 25 exchange students from Austria University who studied at the University of Gadjah Mada can be concluded that the Indonesian is the host very well, many people are very satisfied with the banquet given ranging from dinner together, providing transportation for traveling, even providing information required by them even when they have not been asked. Not only was the Austrian students were also pleasantly surprised by the kindness of Indonesian students who also provides souvenir to be brought to Austria. They feel they have a personal connection with a student from Indonesia.

The use of non-verbal language become common place in the culture of Indonesian people. An example is when lecturer explain something in front of the class, the students would nod to show that they understand the lessons delivered, despite the fact they may not understand the explanation. Or when students put a face with eyebrows crimped to show that these explanations are poorly understood, so as to see the faces of the lecturer students will understand that he needs to

repeat the explanation.

Characters that is formed in Indonesia is a culture of cooperation or mutual help that would greatly promote the cultural of collectivism. Collectivism happen in many level for example in company, many people tend to prefer doing the work with colleagues or peers than working alone. This also applies to other tribes or ethnic groups because of a sense of togetherness and family were very high, they will fight for defend someone who hurt by other people. In doing an activity Indonesian will be happy to work with colleagues or peers than working alone. Gotong royong culture ingrained form of this behavior. Same thing with Indonesian students who study abroad will tend to colonize or find a friend who came from Indonesia as well in order to feel more secure and comfortable. Different thing with the Americans with a culture that is more individualism.

Time orientation in Indonesian is polychromic time. It considers the time is not limited so better enjoyed and not rushed. Even the jargon in Indonesia itself that the Indonesian people have been more pleased with the rubber time or start and end everything was delayed from the scheduled. The same thing happens in the work, the Indonesian will feel alright / willing to overtime or spend time outside of working hours. Some companies even provide a fee to employees who do

overtime, whereas on the other hand they sacrifice personal time and family time to do the work that should be done during working hours. Based on interviews with sources such as employees, lecturer, students showed that the cultural context of Indonesia is still included in the high context and culture of collectivism although there was little effect of low context and individualism which is an effect of globalism. However, the effect of high communication and cultural context collectivism still very dominant. This is influenced generations of ancestral culture and the influence of an ethnic Javanese culture and the largest island in Indonesia.

### III. CONCLUSION

Each individual is very different and provide different responses also in terms of communication. Both high and low context is equally a way of communicating to others. In terms of culture there is no right and wrong only appropriate or inappropriate when applied to a particular environment or situation. In general Indonesia is still included in the high context and collectivism although there is some influence of low context is an implication of globalism. Things need to be done is a country that is a low country context must be able to adjust his style of communication and culture to the high country to maintain harmony in the context of communication in general and business in particular.

HCC that is owned by the Indonesian people will not turn out to be low context in a long time due to the strong influence of the culture of the ancestors who passed down from generation to generation, especially since Indonesia is upholding cultural values. This research is expected to provide a clear illustration that Indonesia included in the high context and could be as famous as Japan or China which is also a high context. Even so needs to be done in- depth research about the Indonesian culture specifically eg Culture in the area of Java, Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi and others. This is to provide an in-depth information and detail that Indonesia consists of many islands and tribes so it is possible in which there is a low context.

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