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# **Culture Shock in the Basic Communication Course: A Case Study of Malaysian Students**

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*Eunhyong Lee Yook*

## **INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE**

Despite the increasingly large number of international students in the United States (Scully, 1986), few studies have been carried out on the topic of international students (Altbach, 1985). Existing literature on international students concentrates on areas such as the adaptation process typically undergone by the international student in a new cultural environment and on the relation between academic success and such various factors as age, sex, marital status and language proficiency (Altbach, Kelly & Lulat, 1985).

The research literature examining international students generally deals with language proficiency. Lack of proficiency in the English language is considered to be one of the reasons why some foreign students show unsatisfactory academic performance (Heikinheimo & Schute, 1986; Altbach, Kelly & Lulat, 1985; Putman, 1961).

Besides these difficulties in general academic work due mainly to linguistic differences there is the specific requirement in many classes to speak in front of native speakers, which, according to the literature, poses a problem for international students. International students manifest a fear of appearing foolish in front of peers and teachers, and feel stripped of their real selves and their real language capacities (Ludwig, 1982) Hull (1978) states that clearly the area most

students perceived difficulties was related to speaking in the classroom. A young woman from the former Federal Republic of Germany states that it is hard for international students who cannot speak and act spontaneously and who cannot express their thoughts accurately to speak in front of native speakers of the language (Hull, 1978).

In addition to speaking in classes, there are courses which specifically require students to present speeches. Speech courses are mandated by most universities as a general education requirement for all students. Regardless of their national origin or major specialization, students have to take the basic communication course. These courses are feared even by native speaking students and can pose more of a problem for the international student.

## **PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF STUDY**

The purpose of this article is to examine international students from one cultural background, Malaysia, in the American basic communication course in order to identify the areas which they are apt to find most difficult. International students constitute a significant factor in U.S. institutions of higher education. Malaysian students are chosen as the focus of study because according to statistics, Asian students comprise more than half of the total international student population at 56%, and Malaysian are one of the largest groups among the Asian student groups (Snyder, 1992). Many of these students are enrolled in departments that require speech classes in their programs of study. Therefore, a study of the concerns of Malaysian students in the basic speech course merits our attention.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There is a spattering of literature on international students in the speech performance class (Yook, 1993; Yook & Seiler, 1990) and some research on the role of accents on perception of nonnative speakers (Giles, 1971; Giles, Henwood, Coupland, Harriman & Coupland, 1992; Gill, 1994; Yook 1996). However literature on the academic performance of international students in public speaking classes is generally still lacking, except for a few articles on Native American students' speeches, which should not be included in the category of literature on international students in the strict sense. Yook and Seiler (1990) conducted a study of the concerns of Asian students in speech performance classes. However, the focus was on Asian students in general, and not on Malaysian students specifically. As Malaysian students are one of the largest Asian student groups, Malaysian students merit particular attention. To the author's knowledge, there is to date no studies focused specifically on Malaysian students' concerns in the basic communication course. Therefore, the present study is an exploratory study that can potentially yield important insights into culture-specific differences that will be useful for communication scholars and educators.

### *Culture Shock in the Classroom*

It seems logical that not only linguistic factors, but also cultural factors play a large role in international students' speech performance (Yook & Seiler, 1990). Language and culture are intrinsically related (Hall, 1983; Hofstede, 1980). The main theme of this article is that culture shock, due to unfulfilled expectations, in turn caused by a ignorance of teach others' cultures, can be prevented in students and teachers in public speaking courses. The key word to avoid-

ance of culture shock is awareness, or knowledge on the part of the teacher and student, of each other's cultural rules and expectations.

Culture shock can be seen as having two components. The first pertains to the inability of the student to fully understand and relate to the intricacies of the host culture, so that the students lack adequate control of what happens to them in their new environment. The second component is the gap between international students' expectations of the host culture and the realities they observe (Royeen, 1981).

It is possible that teachers with international students in their classes who have cultural backgrounds unknown to them can also experience the same culture shock through interaction with these students. If expectations of international students are not fulfilled, and teachers are unable to fully understand and relate to their students, then it is possible that teachers will feel a lack of ability to control interaction with foreign students, thus resulting in a form of culture shock.

Classic studies on the effect of such nonverbal behavior as maintenance or avoidance of eye contact, interpersonal distance, and participation patterns on teacher/student interaction show that negative evaluations can result from ignorance of the rules of the other culture. There is a certain grammar of nonverbal communication that enables members to achieve or avoid a certain "personal relatedness." Incompetence, due to lack of knowledge, in this type of communication can bring serious consequences. One example is presented in an article on Indochinese students. When Indochinese students keep their eyes down while talking to parents or teachers as a sign of respect, teachers who are not knowledgeable in their cultural grammar may become frustrated, thinking that the students are not paying attention.

In addition to the language barrier and differences in nonverbal norms, there may be an additional factor to consider when considering the difficulties that foreign students

face when giving a speech. The act of speaking may itself differ from the US view of this concept.

Different cultures may attribute different values to the communicative act of speaking (Yook, 1993). This needs to be understood by the teacher in order to be able to help the international student learn the skills of public speaking, as it may be the underlying cultural values ingrained in the international student that is the main obstacle to performance in the public speaking class (Byers & Byers, 1972).

To give an example of the cultural differences in views of the act of speaking, the Paliyans of South India communicate very little throughout their lives and even become almost completely silent by the age forty. "Verbal, communicative persons are regarded as abnormal and often offensive" (Gardner, 1966, p. 368). For Native Americans, speech constitutes an unnecessary intrusion in the learning process and the culture stresses the importance of observation and participation. African American culture also seems to make greater use of direct observation, rather than expanded verbal explanations in their classrooms (Edwards, 1983). Understanding culture-specific rules for how, why and when the act of speaking is valued becomes important in identifying international students' concerns and needs in the basic communication course.

Hofstede (1991) states that in certain cultures with high "power distance", the teacher is considered a "guru" who shares knowledge with the students.<sup>1</sup> In high power distance

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<sup>1</sup> Hofstede (1980), found four such dimensions of cultural programming. In his study of over 100,000 subjects, he identifies these dimensions as power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/femininity, and collectivism/individualism. Briefly stated, power distance is the extent to which those of lesser status in a society accept that power is distributed unequally, and uncertainty avoidance is the extent to which members of a society avoid ambiguous situations. Masculinity refers to the competitiveness and rigidity of gender roles reflected in a society, as compared to its nurturing characteristic and tendency to have overlapping gender roles. Collectivism is the extent

cultures, the teacher is expected to initiate communication in the classroom, with students indicating deference to authority through silence. Malaysia is categorized as a culture that is very high on the power distance scale (Hofstede, 1980). Malaysian students may encounter culture shock by the mere fact that they are to take on the novel role of a speaker in the classroom context. Such knowledge about cultural differences may help the instructor and student avoid some aspects of culture shock in the basic communication course.

### ***Malaysian Culture***

Background information about Malaysian culture is important in studying students from that culture. The following information about Malaysia was gathered through written sources and students who were Malaysian nationals. There are three ethnic cultures in Malaysia (Gullick, 1981). The Malays for the most part tend to the agriculture of Malaysia and receive governmental assistance to help them improve their standards of living. Chinese Malaysians make up roughly one third of the Malaysian population. Many Chinese Malaysians work in the business sector and tend to be economically well off (Jain, 1990). Most of them believe in Buddhism, rather than the Moslem religion, which is the dominant faith of the Malays. Indian Malaysians for the most part make their living through labor (Jain, 1990). Only a few among them are well off economically. While the three ethnic groups may be different in a number of ways, they have some commonalties that cannot be ignored when juxtaposed with other cultures. For example, they all share the same

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to which needs and goals of the collective are valued higher than individual needs and goals.

governmental and educational systems, and all of these groups learn English as a second language (Gullick, 1981).

English is taught as early as second grade of primary school, but the emphasis is on reading and writing, not on spoken English. Religion plays a significant role in Moslem believers' lives, affecting them in many ways. The influence of religion seems less for Buddhist believers because the interviewees state "If I have to pick a religion, it would be Buddhism." In both of these religions, norms advocate that women be subjugated to men. As one student says, "Women should not work and should obey to their husbands." The Moslem religion, however, seems to have stricter norms concerning sexual propriety, especially for women. For example, one student said "You need a distance of about three feet [between opposites sexes] because of sexual attraction."

In general, Malaysian students state that there are individual differences in how one viewed the act of speaking in their culture. However, most of them agree that there is a certain difference in the older and younger generations' views of speaking. They state that the older generation tend to dislike verbose people, more than the younger generation. Many also believe that their culture endorses speaking "indirectly", while the Western culture views outspokenness as a virtue (McCroskey, 1980).

### ***Evaluation of International Students***

These are only a few selected examples of cultural differences that affect classroom communication. Knowledge of these differences are important in the evaluation of international students and can help all parties avoid culture shock in the basic course. Without knowledge of the culture-specific differences in attitudes toward speaking in general and public speaking in particular, the instructors are missing funda-



mental information that they need to possess to be able to make a fair evaluation.

The ultimate problem lies in holding one standard for all students of diverse cultures and evaluating them according to this uniform yardstick. Siler and Labadie-Wondergem (1982) state "if minority students fail to measure up to acceptable standards of the overculture, they are penalized" ( p 93).

On the other hand, however, a different argument can be voiced on this issue. One may say that by overcompensating for the handicaps of the international student, the purpose of the course may become meaningless. In other words if students enroll in public speaking classes, there is a certain level of performance that is expected of them. This is the dilemma that instructors face in evaluating international students in speech performance classes (Yook, 1995).

To effectively deal with this dilemma, instructors may need follow Scafe and Kontas' (1982) suggestion:

In a bicultural or multicultural class, effective instruction and constructive feedback is dependent upon 1) the teacher's awareness of his or her own expectations as being culturally based and 2) the expansion of these expectations to adapt to students from differing cultures, with the explicit affirmation that several alternative ways of speaking are valid, depending on the situation (p. 252).

In other words, international students should be taught the same skills as the U. S, mainstream students with an understanding of different expectations. Some factors such as accent and grammatical perfection are largely uncontrollable given their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. International students should, however, be shown the appropriate communication skills for the various contexts and be expected to understand and be able to apply those skills for the purposes of the class.

While U. S. students will find the skills acquired in the basic communication course important for almost all aspects

of their future lives, the skills may be important in a different sense for international students. As the skills learned in the basic communication course are largely ones acceptable in the U S mainstream culture, they may not necessarily be appropriate nor useful in other parts of the world. The skills will become part of temporary communicative strategies to be employed by international students for interactions with the U S culture.

One solution to speech instructors' dilemma suggested in Yook (1995) is to help students become aware the cultural differences in rhetorical style or delivery and to allow them to make the choice to adapt the acceptable style of the mainstream U. S. culture for the purposes of the class. Dauplinois (1980) states that if students are provided specific instruction about styles appropriate in both cultures and then given the opportunity to practice these styles, they can make decisions regarding the appropriateness of communication behavior and can discern the consequences of the lack of appropriate behavior. A useful starting point for fair evaluations of Malaysian students in the basic communication course is to understand some of their concerns.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

The focus of this study is the analysis of Malaysian students' experiences in the basic speech course to discern potential areas of difficulty. The research question for this study is:

**RQ:** What are Malaysian students' concerns in the basic communication class?

## METHOD

Quantitative methods are useful in establishing credibility in terms of numbers, and can thus be considered more generalizeable than qualitative methods. However, for the purposes of this study, the qualitative method seems to be more appropriate. The qualitative approach was chosen, rather than the quantitative because the difference between the Malaysian and American cultures precluded the use of surveys for this research. This is because concepts and operational definitions may differ because of linguistic or cultural differences. A Malaysian may have a different view of the concept of a speech to begin with, thus leading to an answer that may be irrelevant to the question. This study used focus group and individual interviews to seek to answer the research question..

### *Participants*

Malaysian students were contacted through the instructors who had these students enrolled in their basic speech classes, through word of mouth, and also by contacting the Malaysian Student Association. Instructors were given minimal information and asked not to disclose the specific purpose of the study other than that it was an interview to find areas of concern for international students in speech classes.

A total of seventeen interviews were carried out. While the number of interviewees is not large, the sample is considered adequate for the exploratory nature of this study. Most of them were Malays and Chinese Malaysians. Only one student was an Indian Malaysian. Indian Malaysians tend to be less numerous as international students, according to Malaysian student sources. There were only a mere handful

on the two large Midwestern college campuses where the interviewees were recruited at the time the present study was conducted.

The students interviewed were mostly business majors, with twelve majoring in finance, business administration, international business and accounting. Five of the seventeen students were civil engineering or electrical engineering majors.

Nine female students were interviewed, all of them being Malays except for three Chinese Malaysians. Eight male students were interviewed. Three were Malays who were of the Moslem faith, while four were Chinese Malaysians who were Buddhists. One male student was Indian Malaysian of the Moslem faith.

As mentioned earlier, the ethnic groups are distinct groups within the Malaysian culture. However, they share enough similarities in terms of educational systems and cultural beliefs about speaking. Consequently the distinctions were not considered relevant for this study. The ethnic and gender composition of the interviewees was considered appropriate for the purposes of the present study.

### ***Individual Interviews***

The interviews were all conducted in the author's office, with prior permission to use the tape recorder, and an outline of the topics to be covered during the interview. Five female (three Malay and two Chinese Malaysian) students and five male (two Malay and three Chinese Malaysian) students participated in the individual interviews. The interviews ranged from thirty minutes to over one hour. These interviews all took place within the same semester. An average of two or three interviews were conducted each week during the six weeks of interviewing.

While carrying out the interviews, the interviewer felt she had made a good choice in choosing the interview format

instead of asking them to fill out survey instruments. Their fluency in English was overall very good when compared to other foreign students, but misunderstandings frequently occurred, making it necessary to probe for inconsistencies, in order to collect valid data. The interviewees were in general quite willing to be interviewed, and answered questions freely and fully.

### ***Focus Group Interview***

Two focus group interviews were held. One focus group interview took place in the interviewer's office and the other in an empty classroom. An effort was made to get at least one member of each ethnic group, religion and sex. During the first focus group meeting three female students, two Malay and one Chinese Malaysian, and one Chinese Malaysian male student attended the meeting. The Malay male student who had missed his appointment before had agreed to attend, and failed to a second time, resulting in an absence of a male Malay representative. The second focus group interview was attended by one female and two male students. The female student was Chinese Malaysian, the male students were Malay and Indian Malaysian. The interviews were audiotaped with prior consent of the interviewees.

## **RESULTS**

All of the Malaysian students interviewed took Speech class because they were required to do so. According to the interviewees, students are not typically given any opportunities to present their ideas before others under the Malaysian educational system. This seems to greatly influence the Malaysian students' performance in speech classes since the role reversal, from that of a passive recipient of knowledge to that of an active proponent of ideas, leads to

awkwardness. American students, on the other hand, are already acquainted with having an active speaking role in classroom situations at a very early age (Yook & Seiler, 1990).

The problem that the majority of students interviewed stated as their “biggest problem” in giving speeches was the lack of fluency in English. As one student put it, “I’m happy if I can get through to them usually, I have to try twice. restructuring sentences.” Many of them professed they thought in their own language and tried to translate their thoughts into English when giving speeches. This inevitably led to awkward pauses when students were searching for words. It also took several trials to get the sentence structure just right. Students also had trouble with pronunciation and intonation, and found themselves searching for synonyms to avoid repeating the same words. In short, for a majority of Malaysian students, their greatest fear is linguistic inadequacy. As one student put it, “I am afraid they won’t understand”.

Some students declared proudly that they had found a way out of the dilemma by memorizing the entire speech text. In reality as most speech teachers warn, memorization only serves to exacerbate the problem because once students forget their place they tend to panic and to do poorly on the rest of the speech.

Students seemed to feel that the organization of ideas was not problematic at all for them. All of them asserted that they already had much practice in the organization of ideas in their Malay and English language classes, where composition or “essay-writing” was required regularly. They also felt that the volume of their voice did not pose problems.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Three instructors were asked to comment on this information. Among them two felt that the Malaysian students “wandered” from point to point in their speeches and that Malaysian students tended to speak too softly. One student said, “I thought I spoke loud, but the instructor said he could not hear me.” This could be an area that Malaysian students could be guided to work on in the future.

On the subject of using natural gestures to accompany and stress what is being said, students said that using gestures was viewed by their culture as being disrespectful, as was talking loudly. This could have been the cause for Malaysian students' unnatural gestures and inaudible tone. One student stated, "I put hand in pocket and the other was going round and round." After talking to the students individually, it was still hard to find a pattern to explain why some students perceived the use of gestures while giving speeches as problematic, while others did not seem to do so. After much thought, a pattern was discerned. Problems in using gestures decreased as a function of the time spent in the United States. One student asserted that she used "more gestures now than before."

Interpretation of students' perceptions of eye contact as a potential problem area was more complex. In general, for female students of both ethnic backgrounds, eye contact proved to be a problem. One female Moslem student said "When I see American face, I start nervous. I just talk, talk, talk, without looking any point. When I stopped, I tried to look but I don't know what I am looking [at]." Difficulties with eye contact for female students seemed to stem from two sources.

First, according to the Moslem religion eye contact is associated with sexual promiscuity, while in Buddhism, direct eye contact is seen as a challenge to superiors. Therefore, in order to avoid being promiscuous or challenging to males, who are deemed "superior", eye contact is avoided. The second, is that eye contact is seen as a means of feedback from the audience, and since Malaysian students are understandably more apprehensive about their speech performance, they fear looking at their audience. One student stated:

"If you say something, you expect the audience will give some.. let's say feedback. Seeing from their face we can see whether they understand what we say, so it's kind of the

audience may reflect what you feel ... When I'm giving a speech and I look at their face, if they look miserable, I know that they don't understand what I say so I feel depressed and kind of affect what I'm going to say."

Among male Malaysian students, Chinese Malaysians stated that they had no problems with eye contact during speech presentations, while Malay students had mixed perceptions. One asserted that avoiding eye contact was "part of our culture," while others denied having any problems at all with eye contact. This may be another area that needs further investigation in the future.

## DISCUSSION

Interviews with Malaysian students lead to the conclusion that Malaysian students perceive that they have three main handicaps they have to deal with when presenting speeches in American basic speech classes. The first is the language barrier. Many students cited language as the biggest problem they had in giving speeches. Another handicap is that they come from a different culture where gesturing and talking loudly are seen as "disrespectful", especially for women. When these are some core aspects that instructors focus on when evaluating speeches, it becomes problematic to use the same yardstick to evaluate these students, because the evaluations could penalize the students for having attributes of their own culture ingrained in them. The third is that students have not had opportunities to present ideas orally in their own country. This lack of training could lead to an inferior level of performance, and consequently a lower grade, when compared to those who have received prior training.

Several suggestions can be made in consideration of these perceived handicaps. For example, remedial classes for English proficiency can be suggested as necessary to correct



specific patterns of errors (Yook, 1995). The instructor can also coach these students individually, on how to concentrate on getting the general message across. Suggestions may include giving up a long search for a particular word and settling for a substitute word or set of words that convey a similar meaning. Additionally meeting with international students and getting to know them by name early in the term may be ways in which instructors can make international students more comfortable in speech classes (Yook, 1995). McCroskey (1980) states that one can help students from minority cultures to learn, by first becoming acquainted with the cultural norms for communication of that person, and following up with steps that include avoiding evaluation on factors such as accent or dialect, which cannot be easily nor rapidly changed (p. 241).

More importantly, sharing expectations that instructors have of Malaysian students may serve to both ease the discomfort of culture shock for Malaysian students and serve as a fair basis for evaluation for speech instructors. That is, instructors' expectations of having the skills be integrated into the everyday lives of U.S. mainstream students cannot be rigidly held for Malaysian students. Malaysian students may not see the need to acquire these skills beyond the limits of the speech course or the U S. classroom. They may feel uneasy with the rhetorical styles and the expectations of the class regarding delivery and organization of material. Acknowledging that linguistic fluency and accented speech will not disappear in a short time and that Malaysian cultural rules may not dictate using these skills in their own culture will lay a useful groundwork for the Malaysian student's understanding of what is expected of the class. However, Malaysian students should be brought to understand that the skills learned in the basic communication course are ones that they may find useful in enlarging their repertoire of communicative behavior for use in various U S. cultural contexts.

This article reviewed some of the perceptions of Malaysian students on their public speaking experience in the basic course. Some suggestions for instructors regarding practices in the classroom and for evaluation of Malaysian students are offered. There are several shortcomings of the paper, including the relatively small number of students interviewed. However, this paper is an important exploratory first step in the process of understanding cultural differences in the basic communication course. If instructors are made aware of these potential problem areas for Malaysian students, this will help prevent culture shock in the speech communication classroom from occurring for both instructors and students alike. In macro-perspective, the present study is a step closer to ensuring that students, whatever their cultural background may be, are helped to learn to their fullest potential.

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