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Intercultural Communication between Colombian and American Teachers in Colombian Institutions

Comunicación intercultural entre docentes colombianos y norteamericanos en instituciones colombianas

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This article, which is based on observations from working in multicultural environments for twenty-five years and a review of sources on intercultural communication, addresses the intrinsic difficulties that arise from communication among people of different cultures. The connection between language and culture is so close that communication among internationals creates challenges of intercultural communication even when communicating in the same language. In Colombia, especially in institutions that teach English, there are bicultural or multicultural groups of teachers that work together. Some misunderstandings arise because of an inadequate understanding of colleagues' values systems. This article includes three common work situations, the possible problems arising from inappropriate communication and some suggestions for overcoming intercultural communication difficulties.

Key words: Intercultural communication, globalization, challenging intercultural relationships, foreign language teachers

Este artículo, basado en mis observaciones de 25 años de trabajo en ambientes multiculturales y en una revisión de fuentes sobre la comunicación intercultural, trata sobre las dificultades intrínsecas que surgen de la comunicación entre gente de distintas culturas. El lenguaje está tan relacionado con la cultura que la comunicación entre internacionales crea desafíos de comunicación intercultural, aún cuando se comunican en el mismo idioma. En Colombia, especialmente en instituciones donde se enseña inglés, se encuentran grupos de docentes de distintos países que trabajan juntos y cuyos valores son diferentes. Surgen malos entendidos a raíz de una falta de comprensión del sistema de valores del otro. Este artículo incluye tres situaciones comunes en el lugar de trabajo, algunos problemas que pueden aparecer en él debido a una comunicación inapropiada y algunas sugerencias para superar dificultades en la comunicación intercultural.

Palabras clave: Comunicación intercultural, globalización, relaciones interculturales desafiantes, docentes de lenguas extranjeras

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Introduction

Sensitive awareness of the feelings and perceptions of others and devotion to detail are needed to communicate among cultures. North Americans are not generally known for that type of attention in their interpersonal relationships though such dedication is often given to their technical or work related tasks. Conversely, Colombians will sacrifice other values in order to devote the time and energy needed for maintaining harmony in their relationships. At institutions in Colombia and all over the world, people of different cultures work together in education, research, business and for other purposes. Working together with international colleagues is often a rocky process due to the challenges of cross-cultural communication. A congenial work environment is a challenging goal when colleagues come from different cultures.

Intercultural communication is the communication of both verbal and non verbal messages among people of different cultures. Communication is perceived through one's cultural lens and every communicator tends to be egocentric (Elmer, 1993) or ethnocentric, which Tyler (1979) defines as "the concept that one's own culture is of central importance and is a proper basis for judging other peoples and cultures" (p. 28). When people of different cultures interact, they judge the customs and actions of the other culture based on how they see the situation as they look through their own cultural lens (Elmer, 1993). When communicating, people automatically apply their own assumptions to a situation, unless they are knowledgeable about the assumptions of the other culture (Gordon, 1974). At international schools and national universities in Colombia, different cultures, commonly Colombian and North American, interact on a daily basis. To create a harmonious and effective

work environment requires understanding intercultural communication, specifically how perspective and interpretation depend on the cultural lens through which communication is received (Elmer, 1993).

For twenty-five years I worked at two private bilingual schools and a university in Bogotá and Cali, Colombia. As a teacher, counselor, principal, and program director, I had the privilege to work with faculties, staffs, school committees and interschool associations, whose members were mainly Colombian and American, and included a few people from other countries. In those working environments, richness arose from the diversity of perspectives, and the institutions, as well as the individuals, were benefitted. At the same time, conflicts due to intercultural misunderstandings often hampered communication, limited productivity and strained relationships. The following questions are explored in this article:

- What are some culturally-based communication differences that can lead to conflict?
- How do the Colombian and American values which impact intercultural communication compare?
- What are some common misunderstandings that arise when Colombians and Americans are together in typical work situations?
- What are some suggestions for how Americans and Colombians can work towards better intercultural communication?

Anthropologist Hall writes that the context of all communication is the culture or cultures of those involved, "Communication is culture and culture is communication", (1959, p. 191). A communicator's culture provides the "framework" in which communication takes place. Communication is not only the culturally influenced "words,

actions, postures, gestures, tones of voice, [and] facial expressions” but communication is framed by the speaker’s culturally bound values, such as the way the communicator “handles time, space and materials, and the way he works, plays, makes love and defends himself” (Hall, 1976, p. 42). A thorough understanding of the communicated message requires an understanding of “behavior in its historical, social and cultural context” (Ibid.).

For the sake of convenience, in this article the conventions North American, in the preceding paragraphs, and American, from here on, refer to those with a mainstream US culture. Neither term is satisfactory as North American includes Canadians and Mexicans and American includes those from North and Latin America. Also, please note that some of Edward T. Hall’s research about the high context Latino culture is referred to in this article even though his contact was with Latin Americans from many countries and not just from Colombia.

High and Low Context Cultures

Hall’s Culture Context Model (1976) identifies and compares high context and low context cultures. A high context culture is characterized by long lasting relationships, clearly identified insiders and outsiders of the culture, spoken agreements, and ingrained and slow-to-change cultural patterns. Though what is said is important, the context, that is, how and where it is said, is significant and gives meaning to what is said. Colombia is an example of a high context culture. Low context cultures, of which mainstream US is an example, are characterized by comparatively shorter relationships, preference for written agreements, less clearly identified insiders and outsiders, and quicker change in cultural patterns. What is said is less dependent on the context; that

is, the content is more important than how or when it is said (Hall, 1976; Hall & Hall, 1990; Hall as cited in Cagle, 2004).

In a work environment, a low context culture expects work before friendship, the earning of credibility through performance, formal agreements and efficient management of time. On the other hand, the high context culture seeks to create a cordial and congenial atmosphere where credibility is earned due to the relationship, agreements are spoken and rituals surround aspects of business (Hutchison, Poznanski & Todt-Stockman, 1987; Cagle, 2004). What may seem like small differences in how work and other relationships are addressed can negatively affect work teams and the office ambience.

Conflict Due to Communication Styles

The Handbook for Foreign Students and Scholars (2004) of the University of Iowa identifies generalizations about the communicative style of Americans to which most Americans can easily assent. When the American style of communication is compared with that of the Colombian’s, it is easy to find sources of possible conflict.

1) In their informal chats, Americans converse about the weather, sports, jobs, mutual acquaintances, and past experiences, especially those shared by the person with whom they are speaking (U Iowa, 2004). They avoid talking about topics they consider personal such as their income, age and how much they paid for something. Colombians often enter into topics of conversation, even with those they know only casually, which seem personal and delicate to Americans, such as, people’s age, weight, salary and other personal information; Colombians readily enter into discussions of politics and even topics that are particularly controversial

such as drug trafficking, guerillas, corruption (Hutchison et al., 1987).

2) Americans prefer exchanges that are comprised of short statements, alternating between speakers. Rituals, such as greetings, are kept to a minimum (U Iowa, 2004). Colombian Spanish is full of rituals. Saying hello is a lengthy exchange and might be repeated several times a day between the same people (Hutchison et al., 1987). “¿Qué tal?” “¿Qué más?” “¿Cómo estás?” “¿Qué hay de nuevo?” are all ways of saying “What’s up?” and Colombians use them all, perhaps in the same exchange and do not really need or expect a detailed answer.

3) Americans tend to try to support their opinions with facts and evidence (U Iowa, 2004). For Colombians, exact evidence and facts are much less important in informal exchange than maintaining a harmonious relationship and congenial conversation (Hutchison et al., 1987).

Conflict Arising from Different Cultural Values

Comparing American values to Colombian values reveals themes for possible conflict in the normal work situations found in bicultural settings. Kohls’ work, “Values Americans Live By” (1984), provides a summary of the assumptions and values by which Americans judge situations. *Living in Colombia* by Hutchinson et al. (1987), as well as my firsthand experience of twenty-five years working in bicultural and multicultural settings in Colombia, provide many of the Colombian values summarized here.

1. *Colombians have a higher tolerance for ambiguity than Americans.* They are ready to believe that there could be other possible explanations than the immediately obvious. They can be very flexible when they see problems

arise. They are tolerant of difficulties with and interruptions to a schedule. Hall says that in high context cultures such as those of Latin America, the importance of the relationship between people is so great that in order to preserve that value, the culture permits flexibility in how things are done and ambiguity in how things are perceived (Hall, 1976). Americans prefer exactness and want to exert control over their environment (Kohls, 1984). Elmer writes that for the American, the ambiguity of an “unanswered question is scandalous”, forcing him to supply a logical explanation from his own perspective (Elmer, 1993, p. 18).

2. *Colombians and Americans interpret differently how to help others.* The American value of self-reliance (Kohls, 1984) leads to the belief that helping someone means empowering them to help themselves. Colombians approach offering help on a more direct, personal level. Helping someone is not necessarily seen as an opportunity to teach her or him, but to solve her/his immediate need.

3. *Americans have a compulsive time orientation compared to the one of Colombian extended time.* Americans structure their lives around time and schedules (Kohls, 1984). Colombians have a flexible orientation towards time (Hutchison et al., 1987) and structure their lives around people much more than around time and schedules. One description of the differences of the use of time is that Americans have a monochronic time scheme and Colombians, like other Latinos, a poly-chronic time (Hall, 1976). Monochronic time is perceived as a line of time with events being scheduled in a row, happening one at a time, beginning and ending at precise moments. Poly-chronic time permits several events to transpire at the same time. There is

much less compartmentalization of activities and they occur simultaneously (Hall, 1959).

4. *Colombians hedge their conversations for the sake of relationships whereas Americans prefer directness in conversation and honesty at all costs.* In their relationships and discussions, Americans speak directly (Kohls, 1984) and also allow for disagreement. They can “agree to disagree”. Colombians avoid giving a direct negative response when it would cause discomfort for the speaker or listener (Hutchison et al., 1987). In order to avoid giving an answer that may disappoint, Colombians may answer with a “relational yes” to a request that they know cannot be fulfilled (Elmer, 1993). They prefer “avoidance at all costs of face-to-face confrontations or unpleasantness with anyone with whom [they] are working or with whom [they] have a relationship” (Hall, 1976, p. 158). While directness is a strong American value, most people in the world do not value such a straightforward manner; “Such directness is considered crude, harsh, uncultured and certainly disrespectful if not cruel” (Elmer, 1993, p. 50).

5. *Americans have a stronger sense of ownership, including control of their possessions, their ideas, their time and their personal space compared to Colombians.* Whereas Colombians are more flexible in their sense of control, Americans are more possessive with their material property and ideas of their creation (Althen, 1988). For Colombians, personal space is less important and ownership of possessions and ideas is less guarded. For example, an American will find it more difficult to have his work criticized or edited by others than will a Colombian and a Colombian will be less possessive about her/his workspace than her/his American counterpart.

6. *Americans prefer change and newness; Colombians celebrate the past and prefer continuity to change.* Americans tend to plan for and live for the future, orienting their present activities to future results; tradition and the past tend to be ignored or pushed aside (Kohls, 1984). Americans look for ways of overcoming resistance to change (Hall, 1959). Colombians are more tied to the present and past. It is harder for high context cultures, like that of Colombia, to embrace and accommodate change (Hall, 1976).

7. *Americans highly value practicality and efficiency whereas Colombians value harmony and congeniality.* Americans prefer to finish tasks in as timely a fashion as possible (Kohls, 1984), regardless of the development of the relationships of those with whom they work. Americans do not regard unity as highly as they do other values (Elmer, 1993). Colombians are very concerned that their relationships remain intact and congenial while they get tasks done (Hutchison et al., 1987). That tasks are finished quickly is less important than the congeniality of those who are working together.

Conflicts in Common Work Situations

Looking at communication styles and values, there are many areas for possible conflicts in normal working situations. Below are three examples of common interactions that can lead to misunderstandings.

Initiating a Project

In university settings, especially in the English language departments, Colombians and Americans work together to complete tasks. Generally, the behavior of the Americans in the group is such that they arrive at the announced time and begin to work immediately. Their

mode of communication is direct, with an eye on efficiency and based on provable facts. They want to receive credit for ideas and work and get the job done as well and as soon as possible. For Colombians, the beginning of a major project requires some ceremony. Their good breeding leads them to find out how their colleagues are doing. Family or other personal information will be shared, as well as elaborate plans made about how to begin the task. That the job is done quickly is not of great importance. However, that everyone feels a part of the process and feels good about the work is of utmost importance. That individuals receive credit for their specific contributions is less important for the Colombians.

Possible Negative Interpretations

When Americans work with their eye on the clock of efficiency, they can be seen as rushing the process and being insensitive to important family happenings they are not interested in hearing about. The Colombians can be seen as taking work lightly and preferring to talk about personal issues. Americans may feel that it is a waste of precious time to use a communication style that beats around the bush (or *irse por las ramas*, as the idiom is in Spanish) or to have an inordinate interest in how everyone is feeling.

Idea Proposal and Critique

In the course of proposing ideas and suggestions for the development of the project, the American will directly ask if anyone disagrees with a proposal. An American who disagrees would probably directly express an opposing point of view. However, a Colombian will probably not directly contradict the idea. A Colombian may gently question if the idea is a good one. Those questions will be the hint that there is an opposing opinion and in a Colombian setting, the original

idea may eventually be discarded, although no direct criticism or overt evaluation took place.

Possible Negative Interpretations

The American who directly criticizes an idea could be seen as insensitive to people's feelings and as needlessly interrupting the harmony of the work team. Likewise, she or he would be seen as pushing forward ideas when she/he directly asked if people agreed and then blundered on even though others tried to indicate that there were differing opinions. For the American, it may be a surprise that a developing idea was discarded when no obvious opposition was presented. In addition, when the Colombians do not seem to offer a contrary perspective, the American may view the Colombians as not having an opinion or not caring about the development of the project.

Greeting

Two people are talking in the hallway. They have assumed a conversational pose and seem to be speaking intimately. A third person walks by. Should this third person greet the other two? The Colombian custom is for the third person to greet the other two. American custom would probably direct the third person to half look at the couple speaking. If they initiate a greeting, the third person would greet them. If the engaged couple do not acknowledge the third, then he/she would walk by without greeting.

Possible Negative Interpretations

In Colombia, saying hello and good-by are important social rituals. The failure to greet properly causes strained relationships that affect work environments. Those who do not greet well are seen as having bad manners and those who are not greeted may feel slighted or rejected (Hutchison et al., 1987). People expect to greet

and be greeted even when they are engaged in conversation or working; Colombians greet each other every time they meet, not just the first time they see each other in the day (Condon, 1975). Therefore, it would be rude for the third person to walk by the other two without greeting them. From the American point of view, the third person could be seen as interrupting the other two, especially if the greeting turned into a two or three minute chat. Colombians often say that Americans “don’t greet”, As a people who are generally stereotyped as “friendly”, this might be seen as an odd criticism, but the Colombian custom of greeting every time people meet makes the American practice of one “hello” per day seem cold, aloof or indifferent.

Overcoming the Conflicts of Intercultural Communication

As the world continues to shrink and communication among people of different cultures increases, it is necessary that all parties become sensitive to the challenges and follow through with those actions that can help ease the conflicts inherent in communicating cross culturally. Knowing the cycle of culture shock (for example, see Oberg’s work, 1954), understanding one’s own culture and having some knowledge about the culture of colleagues can be helpful to intercultural communication. Here are some suggestions that can encourage good cross cultural communication.

The informal conversation patterns of Americans make it very difficult for non-native speakers of English, or even for non-American native English speakers, to understand American speech. Likewise, the indirect speech of Colombians, including much use of passive voice and many pronouns, make Spanish communication difficult for non-native speakers. Keeping conver-

sations simple and direct will help increase communication. Here are a few practical solutions to the difficulties of informal intercultural conversation pointed out on the “Listening and Culture” website:

1. Keep language as unadorned and standard as possible. Figures of speech have hidden meanings and confuse second language speakers.
2. Keep sentences short with subject, verb and object in close proximity.
3. Alternate speakers to offer opportunities to check on understanding.
4. Keep in mind that the lack of understanding of certain rituals may lead to confusion about why a particular subject is being discussed.
5. Expect and be ready to correct misunderstandings.

If a speaker finds him/herself in a difficult intercultural conversation, especially one in which the “foreigner” is being asked to defend her/his native country, it is important to try to turn the conversation around and get the focus away from stereotypes and the history of a country’s wrongs and wrongdoings. In intercultural settings, she/he should try to avoid arguments and remain courteous even if the tone of the conversations seems to become conflictive (Tyler, 1979). In cross cultural communication it is easy to misinterpret what is going on, as tone and attitude are culturally bound (Hall, 1976). A listener who is being criticized can disarm a verbal aggressor by turning the focus of the conversation, perhaps by stating something positive about the critic’s country or agreeing with him. The criticized person might speak about the discomfort she/he is feeling (Tyler, 1979).

In his book, *The Handbook of Foreign Student Counseling*, Gary Althen studied successful foreign student advisors and found that those who enjoy their work had the characteristics that make people

better communicators. Those characteristics are intelligence, patience, tolerance for differences (what he calls “nonjudgementalness”), interest in cultural difference, respect for others, tolerance for ambiguity, sociability, self awareness, and kindness (Althen, 1995, pp. 31-40). Of course, not all people or even all cultures have all these characteristics, but those people who possess or develop them will find it easier to communicate with people of different cultures.

Conclusion

There are cultural differences between Colombians and Americans that can stress communication among them. Colombia has a high context culture where meaning is greatly influenced by the context in which the communication is made and by the relationship among those who are communicating. The American culture is lower context, where meaning is less influenced by the situation and those involved in the communication. In addition, there is a contrast between conversation styles, including topics of casual conversation, intervals between speakers, and the use of external evidence versus affect. Differences in how time, assistance, and the importance of harmony are valued can cause conflicts. The values that govern priorities of Colombians and Americans can impact negatively on understanding and, consequently, there are misunderstandings in work groups. However, the benefits of their different perspectives as regards the project or work group make it worth the hard work of overcoming the difficulties of intercultural communication.

Bicultural or multicultural work teams benefit the communities they serve and provide wonderful learning opportunities for the people involved. The difficulties intercultural communication causes

are small compared to the advantages of teaching or working with colleagues from diverse cultures. Attention to cross cultural challenges can help all members of the community communicate better and provide an enriching experience for all. Elmer (1993) sums up the disadvantages of refusing to look through the cultural lens of others:

When I resist [cultural adaptation], I wallow in my myopic ignorance, forfeiting the joy of learning from others and the exhilaration of discovering that God’s world far exceeds my experience. When I resist [cultural adaptation], I remain firmly anchored in egocentrism, mistakenly believing that my cultural patterns are the best and only way (p. 53).

The culturally diverse work team has the unique advantage of looking at challenges and problems inherent in the work situation from different cultural perspectives. The best characteristics from those cultures can be exploited for the development of a successful work team for the benefit of the community and those who make up the team.

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