Indirect vs. Direct Communication: Steps in Becoming Culturally Intelligent

Claudia E. Stoian*

Abstract:
The paper brings into discussion the importance culture plays in communication, and highlights the necessity of training students in cross-cultural communication. Focusing on an important dichotomy in communication styles, i.e. indirectness vs. directness, it proposes possible activities to do in language and/or translation and interpreting classes. Their purpose is to culturally intelligent, particularly by drawing their attention to cultural differences in communication, and helping them to acquire knowledge to anticipate differences, practice mindfulness and develop cross-cultural skills.
Keywords: cross-cultural communication, indirect communication, direct communication, cultural intelligence, training

The world we live in nowadays has become a *global village*, where information travels by speed light and distances are reduced to minimum. It seems that "[w]henever we read a newspaper or watch television or buy a product from the grocery store we find ourselves in this global village" (Thomas & Inkson, 2017: 5). Therefore, even if we do not travel around the world, the world comes to us, since we interact with people from other cultures and participate in international transactions (Thomas & Inkson, 2017).

Communication has adapted and/or updated to the present-day society requirements, and, at the same time, has become more complicated. Considered "the fundamental building block of social experience" (Thomas & Inkson, 2017: 77), it is used in every aspect of our lives, from personal affairs to work and leisure. No matter the simplicity of the process itself, i.e. that of transmitting and receiving pieces of information, the meaning conferred by it and its interpretation may lead to misunderstandings or failures of communication. As pointed out by Thomas & Inkson (2017: 77), "communication failure is by far the most common explanation" "when it comes to figuring out what goes wrong in life". For example, the same researchers argue that the

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* Assistant Lecturer PhD, Communication and Foreign Languages Department, Politehnica University of Timișoara, claudia.stoian@upt.ro

typical problems in companies are not related to technical or administrative issues but to people interacting inadequately, indicated by bad teamwork, poor leadership or personal conflicts.

1. Communication and culture

Communicating across cultures poses more problems than communicating within the realms of one's own culture, since the codes and conventions shared are no longer or not totally valid. Since communication is influenced by culture and vice versa (Stoian & Șimon, 2017, Șerbănescu, 2007), the differences existing in terms of culture between the interlocutors "threaten communication by reducing the available codes and conventions shared" (Thomas & Inkson, 2017: 79). These differences are considerable and operate "at all levels of behaviour, verbal and non-verbal" (Archer et al. 2012: 225), affecting thus people's ability to communicate.

One of the many existing definitions of culture and the one adopted in this paper follows Hofstede's theories (1984), considers culture as a series of shared mental programs which guide and influence people's behaviour. It seems that "culture is inherent in everyday behaviour […], but such behaviour is controlled by deeply embedded mental programs" (Thomas & Inkson, 2017: 21). In other words, culture guides humans through life. As individuals, people make their own choices, which are, however, expressed within the parameters set by their particular cultures (Culturewise, 2015).

On the present-day international stage, one culture appears to be more and more dominant and influence all the others. The English language has become "the lingua franca of global business and education" (Thomas & Inkson, 2017: 12), while the American culture, by means of Mcdonalidization, consumption and mass communication (Ritzer, 2019; Thomas & Inkson, 2017) has reached almost every corner of the world. Convergence of the world's cultures is envisaged by many. However, the slow pace of change plays an important role against convergence and globalization. Regardless of the rapid modernisation and change the world is living, "culture is slow to change" (Thomas & Inkson, 2017: 29) and "convergence probably tak[es] place only in superficial matters such as business procedures and some consumer preferences" (Thomas & Inkson, 2017: 12). Moreover, change may be "often recontextualized to fit preexisting cultural patterns" (Thomas & Inkson, 2017: 27).

As mentioned earlier, culture influences the way communication takes place within our own society and outside it. One well-known and thoroughly studied distinction (Hall, 1997, 2000; Hall & Hall 1990,

Peace corps, 2011, Samovar et al., 2010; Stoian, 2015, forthcoming) is that between indirect and direct styles of communication.

1.1. Indirectness vs. directness in communication

Certain cultures, particularly many Middle Eastern and Asian cultures, adopt a more indirect style of communication. In these cases, "the *context* is more important – for example physical setting, the previous relationships between participants, and nonverbal behaviour" (Thomas & Inkson, 2017: 84) than the content, as people are preoccupied with avoiding embarrassment and saving face. Context has to do with "the amount of innate and largely unconscious understanding a person can be expected to bring to a particular communication setting" (Peace Corps, 2011: 78). As such, interlocutors do not say what they mean, since they know and understand each other quite well and the way interactions unfold; they imply meaning, with the aim of not hurting people's feelings and maintaining harmony (Hall 1997; Peace Corps, 2011; Stoian, 2015).

At the other end of the continuum, there are the cultures, usually Western ones, that put emphasis "on the *content* of the communication – the words" (Thomas & Inkson, 2017: 84) instead of the context, preferring to say the truth and to "use explicit, direct, unambiguous verbal messages" (Thomas & Inkson, 2017: 84). Interlocutors do not have to look for implied meaning or read between the lines as they say exactly what they mean and the other way around, the focus being on honesty, truth and the exchange of literal information (Hall 1997; Peace Corps, 2011; Stoian, 2015).

The dichotomy in the styles of communication is usually linked to the importance of saving face and to the context of communication. The associations go even further, as the indirect style of communication is usually encountered in high-context, homogeneous, collectivistic, high power distance cultures, whereas the direct style is typical of low-context, heterogenous, individualistic and low power distance cultures (Neuliep, 2006; Peace Corps, 2011; Şerbănescu, 2007).

This classification is clear cut, but real-life situations and cultures are not so easily classified. The two ends of the continuum are extremes; communication takes place in between them. People use both types of communication styles in their own culture, depending on the context of situation. Nevertheless, "the tendency to prefer one style of behaviour over another is widely reported to vary across cultures" (Culturewise, 2015: 10), as indicated by the research consulted in the intercultural field (Hall, 1997, 2000; Hall & Hall, 1990; Peace Corps, 2011; Samovar et al., 2010; Stoian, 2015, forthcoming). This means that misunderstandings and misinterpretation may arise when people from different styles communicate, as the codes and conventions known

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change and become unpredictable and/or confusing. Moreover, in face-to-face communication, understanding may be guided by gestures and clarified by questions or repetitions, but, when it comes to writing, things get more complicated. One such example is the e-mail, which relies on turn-taking, leaving almost no room to implicit meanings (Thomas & Inkson, 2017).

Understanding the different styles in communication and being able to communicate in another style than the one known "may sometimes involve learning another code" (Thomas & Inkson, 2017: 84). This indicates that training in the field is needed. Acquiring another code may be done by oneself, based on experiences and reading, or by trainers in formal settings.

Within the framework depicted so far, the present paper aims to highlight the necessity students of foreign languages and of translation and interpreting have to become aware, learn and master techniques that may turn them into better communicators and lead to a successful communication across cultures. For this, it, first, proposes a model for acquiring cultural intelligence (Thomas & Inkson, 2017) to be adopted by trainers and then, presents several exercises to do in language classes in accordance with the model.

2. Training cross-cultural communicators

Despite the rapid changes and modernisations of our times, culture, as mentioned earlier, has a slow pace in adopting and adapting modifications. As such, learning cultural features is not in vain. As stated by Thomas & Inkson (2017: 159) "[f]or the foreseeable future, cultural differences will remain a key factor in interpersonal interactions". That is why, language students need to learn not only the foreign language but also the "silent language of [its] culture" (Peace Corps, 2011: 2). Cross-cultural training, either as a separate discipline or within the language/specialised class, should increase students' awareness and understanding, while providing them with a set of skills to use in real-life situations. In order to avoid future failures in communication, language teaching needs to focus more on cultural aspects. Usually, the "focus on words and grammar often crowds out pragmatic and social considerations" (Archer et al., 2012: 225).

2.1. Cultural intelligence – a model

Thomas and Inkson (2017) propose a model to follow with the aim of becoming cross-culturally competent or culturally intelligent, as they call it. Cultural intelligence or CQ (Earley, 2002; Earley & Ang, 2003) is compared with the intelligence quotient (IQ) and the emotional intelligence quotient (EQ) by the researchers, as it "describes and

assesses the capability to interact effectively across cultures" (Thomas & Inkson, 2017: 15).

Cultural intelligence is defined as **"being skilled and flexible about understanding a culture, interacting with it to learn more about it, reshaping your thinking to have more empathy for it, and becoming more skilled when interacting with others from it"** (Thomas & Inkson, 2017: 14). It includes three interrelated aspects, as presented in Figure 1, namely knowledge – regarding cultures, cultural variations and how they can influence behaviour, mindfulness – reflective and creative attention paid both to cues in communication and to one's own feelings and knowledge, and cross-cultural skills – competency across different situations by choosing the appropriate behaviour from a repertoire of intercultural possibilities.
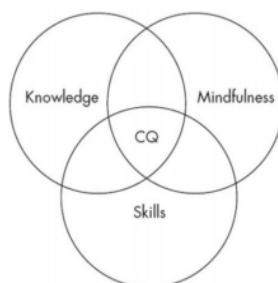

Figure 1. Cultural intelligence (CQ)
(Thomas & Inkson, 2017: 15)

In other words, a culturally intelligent person has "the *knowledge* to understand cross-cultural phenomena, the *mindfulness* to observe and interpret particular situations [and] the *skills* required to adapt *behavior* to act appropriately in a range of situation" (Thomas & Inkson, 2017: 20). As stated by Thomas and Inkson (2017: 15), "[t]he process of becoming culturally intelligent involves a cycle or repetition in which each new challenge builds upon previous ones" so that both general and specific cultural intelligence is acquired simultaneously, each future challenge becoming easier to deal with.

2.2. Teaching activities

As indicated by Thomas & Inkson (2017: 16),

[c]ultural intelligence is not difficult to understand but is hard to learn and to put into practice on an ongoing basis. It takes time and effort to develop a high CQ. Years of studying, observing, reflecting, and experimenting may lie ahead before one develops truly skilled performance.

The authors reflect on the types of formal training available and link them to their model. The following different types of trainings and methods that develop a particular aspect of the CQ are mentioned:

- books, lectures, films and area briefing, which provide factual knowledge about cultures,

- case studies, discussions and culture-training manuals, which offer analytical insights into culture-general and culture-specific knowledge, as well as the chance to practice mindfulness, and

- simulations, role-plays, field trips and actual intercultural experience, which give the opportunity to practice both mindfulness and behaviour skills, while experiencing emotions of cross-cultural interaction (Thomas & Inkson, 2017).

The present paper combines area briefing, case studies, discussions and simulations in order to introduce students to and train them in the two different styles of communication presented above, namely indirect and direct communication. The activities are designed following the three aspects of the cultural intelligence model, i.e. knowledge, mindfulness and skills.

2.2.1. Activity 1: Exemplifying cultural misunderstanding

Firstly, students are presented with an instance of real-life communication between persons using different styles.

> Committee Meeting (adapted from Peace Corps, 2011: 88)
> John: How did it go with the committee members?
> George: A lot easier than I was expecting.
> John: Really? Did you ask about buying the new equipment?
> George: Yes. I explained we had to have it and told them how much it would cost.
> John: And?
> George: There was no discussion. They said fine and asked me to move on to the next item.

Then, students are asked to think whether this instance is an example of successful communication. They are guided towards realising that George, being American, expects people to tell others the truth, even in front of other people during a meeting. This is not customary in less direct cultures, as the one where the meeting was taking place, which usually try to avoid public confrontation. In brief, one of John's mistakes is that "of assuming that no comment means approval […], and that a person who says 'fine' is pleased." (Peace Corps, 2011: 240).

2.2.2. Activity 2: Understanding indirect and direct communication

Following Thomas and Inkson (2017: 13), the first step towards gaining cultural intelligence is "[u]nderstanding cultural differences between cultures and how those differences affect behaviour". The characteristics of the indirect and direct styles of communication are summarised in the next exercise. The activity focuses on the differences between the styles, making students aware of their own style and of that of others.

Students receive the following set of statements, and have to decide whether they apply to indirect or direct styles of communication.

Characteristics & Behaviours (Peace Corps, 2011: 79)
1. Communication is like that between twins.
2. People are reluctant to say no.
3. You have to read between the lines.
4. Use of intermediaries or third parties is frequent.
5. Use of understatement is frequent.
6. It's best to tell it like it is.
7. It's okay to disagree with your boss at a meeting.
8. "Yes" means yes.
9. "Yes" means I hear you.
10. Communication is like that between two casual acquaintances.
11. It's not necessary to read between the lines.
12. People engage in small talk and catching up before getting down to business.
13. Business first, then small talk.
14. Lukewarm tea means all is not well.
15. Lukewarm tea means the tea got cold.
16. People need to be brought up to date at a meeting.
17. People are already up to date.
18. The rank/status of the messenger is as important as the message.
19. The message is what counts, not who the messenger is.
20. People tell you what they think you want to hear.

After verifying the answers to the exercise with the class, the students have to group the characteristics for the two types of communication. The statements numbered 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 9, 12, 14, 17, 18 and 20 are typical of indirect communication, whereas the others, i.e. 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 13, 15, 16 and 19 are typical of a more direct style of communication. Then, they are asked to think which type they use. The students are expected to choose the indirect one, as Romanian culture is considered to favour indirect communication (Şerbănescu, 2007).

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2.2.3. Activity 3: Mindfulness in cross-cultural interactions

Mindfulness in cross-cultural communication is, according to Thomas and Inkson (2017: 50), "simultaneously paying attention to the external situation, monitoring our own thoughts and feelings, and regulating the knowledge and skills we use". Students are asked to consider the next example:

> We are in a meeting and I have just proposed a project. Jane keeps repeating that she doesn't like it. She is American and she doesn't understand how things are done here. We don't say things so directly, going around hurting people's feelings. I just can't stand it anymore. I am about to leave the room, providing an excuse that I have some urgent task.

They are asked to think if the reaction is due to cultural differences in style of communication. Students are indicated that the person telling the story acted mindlessly, i.e. based on routines, being inflexible to changing situations. Next, they are advised to become mindful and see how the situation can be improved, paying attention to a different style of communication than their own, namely direct.

After a few minutes of brainstorming, the students' various perspectives are discussed in class. In the end, the teacher may propose the following situation:

> We are in a meeting and I have just proposed a project. Jane keeps repeating that she doesn't like it. Probably this is due to her cultural background. She must believe her behaviour is ok and that is why she keeps insisting on saying what is on her mind. I am sure her aim is not to offend but to express herself. I will try and discuss openly her points and see whether she has also some solutions. Maybe, something good will come out of this situation.

2.2.4. Activity 4: Performing directness

Knowledge and mindfulness are not enough for mastering cultural intelligence as they exist in the mind of the person. They are put into practice by skilled behaviour, which seems to be related to general skills, such as "relational skills, tolerance for uncertainty, empathy, perceptual acuity, adaptability" (Thomas & Inkson, 2017: 55). The exercise proposed here (adapted from Peace Corps, 2011: 97) aims to make students think about how they could become more direct in their communication styles.

The students receive several indirect statements and have to explain them in a more direct language:

1. This proposal deserves further consideration.
2. I know very little about this, but ....
3. We understand your proposal very well.

4. We will try our best.
5. I heard another story about that project.
6. Can we move on to the next topic?

A first example is provided to them:

That is a very interesting viewpoint.

This can mean 'I disagree with you', and be rephrased as 'I don't agree', 'We need to talk more about this' or 'You're wrong'.

Students' answers are discussed one by one, paying attention to context and politeness details.

3. Conclusion

The present paper has emphasised, if emphasis were needed, the importance culture plays in communication. It has focused on a main dichotomy of communication styles, namely indirectness – directness. The paper pointed out that learning a foreign language has to go hand in hand with learning a culture, especially in the case of students of a degree in languages, linguistics and translation and interpreting. With this purpose, the cultural intelligence model has been briefly described and proposed as a guideline to follow in class. Possible exercises to acquire knowledge to anticipate differences, practice mindfulness and develop cross-cultural skills regarding the indirect and direct styles of communication have been proposed.

To conclude, communicators and other professionals dealing with different cultures must pay attention to other codes and conventions than the ones they are used to. As summarised by Thomas and Inkson (2017: 14), people "must become flexible and adapt to each new cultural situation with knowledge and sensitivity".

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