

The Influence of Cultural Differences Between High and Low Contexts on Oral English Communication

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Abstract: This paper aims to explore how cultural differences between high and low contexts affect oral English communication. The theory of high and low context culture, originally proposed by anthropologist Edward Hall, describes the differences in the degree to which different cultures rely on context when communicating. In high-context cultures, the transmission of information depends on non-verbal factors such as body language and environmental context, while in low-context cultures, the direct expression of information is more important. This difference is particularly important in cross-cultural communication, especially in the use of English, which is widely used in international communication. Understanding these cultural differences is crucial to improving the efficiency and accuracy of cross-cultural communication, especially in today's increasingly globalized world. Therefore, through theoretical analysis and practical cases, this paper will discuss in detail the specific impact of cultural differences between high and low contexts on oral English communication and how to communicate effectively under different cultural backgrounds. Through this research, the aim is to provide insights and strategies for the practice of cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: High and low context; Cultural difference; Oral English communication; Cross-cultural communication

In the context of globalization, people from different cultural backgrounds communicate and interact more and more frequently, especially in the occasions where English is used as the common language. Due to cultural differences, there may be significant differences in the ways of communication and interpretation between the two parties. Among these differences, the concept of high-low context culture is particularly key. The theory of high-low context culture reveals the degree of people's dependence on context in communication and its manifestations in different cultures, thus becoming an important research direction in the field of cross-cultural communication. In high-context cultures, communication often relies on non-verbal elements such as environmental context, body language, and implied social norms, while in low-context cultures, it relies more on direct verbal expression. This difference is particularly prominent in cross-cultural communication using English, because English, as an international language, is widely used in people with different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, in-depth research on how cultural differences between high and low contexts affect oral English communication is of great significance for improving the effect of cross-cultural communication. Understanding and adapting to these differences can not only avoid communication misunderstandings, but also promote effective communication between people with different cultural backgrounds. With the deepening of international exchanges and the integration of global economy and culture, research in this field is of great value to promote global cooperation and understanding.

1. Theoretical basis of high-low context culture

1.1 Origin and development of high-low context culture theory

The theory of high-context culture was proposed by American anthropologist Edward Hall in the 1960s to explore how cultural differences affect communication patterns. Hall's theory focuses on how cultural context determines the degree of dependence on context in the transmission of information. High-context culture emphasizes the importance of non-verbal information, tends to use obscure and implicit communication methods, and emphasizes the role of social relations and environmental background in communication. Low-context culture, on the other hand, focuses on direct, explicit verbal expression, in which information is transmitted primarily through the language itself, rather than relying on context or non-verbal cues. Hall's theory provides an important

analytical framework for understanding the differences in communication between different cultures, and plays an important role in cross-cultural communication in the context of globalization.

1.2 Characteristics of high-context culture

In high-context cultures, the meaning of communication often depends on internal social relations, historical background and environmental context. Individuals in such cultures tend to communicate in indirect ways, and the understanding of information depends on shared experience and implicit knowledge among interlocutors. In this cultural environment, subliminal meaning and non-verbal behaviors (such as facial expressions and body language) play a crucial role in communication. Representative examples of high-context culture include Japan, China and Arab countries, where people are more inclined to express their intentions and feelings through indirect means, emphasizing group harmony and the maintenance of social relations.

1.3 Characteristics of low-context culture

The opposite of high-context culture is low-context culture, where communication is more direct and clearer. In low-context cultures, the words themselves carry most of the information, and the communicating parties tend to express their intentions and needs clearly and rely less on nonverbal cues. People in this culture value logic, facts, and efficiency, and tend to solve problems directly rather than relying on situational understanding. The typical representatives of low-context culture include Western countries such as the United States, Germany and Switzerland, where people attach more importance to clarity, directness and individual expression in communication.

1.4 Application of high-low context culture theory in cross-cultural communication

The theory of high-low context culture has far-reaching application value in the field of cross-cultural communication. Understanding and recognizing different cultural communication patterns is essential for international exchanges, business negotiations, and effective communication in a multicultural environment. For example, when communicating in a high-context culture, valuing non-verbal cues and contextual information can lead to a better understanding of the other person's intentions and feelings. On the contrary, in low-context cultural communication, it is more appropriate to express ideas and needs clearly and directly. The application of this theory not only helps to reduce misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication, but also improves communication efficiency and promotes mutual understanding and cooperation between people in different cultural backgrounds.

2. The influence of cultural differences between high and low contexts on oral English communication

2.1 Differences in nonverbal communication

In high-context cultures, nonverbal communication (such as body language, facial expressions, and silence) plays an important role. In oral English communication, this may make it difficult for communicators from low-context cultures to accurately interpret implied non-verbal messages. For example, silence may indicate agreement or respect in some Asian cultures, while it may be interpreted as uncertainty or dissatisfaction in many Western cultures. This difference can lead to misunderstandings and communication barriers, especially among people in low-context cultures that rely on direct verbal expression. Therefore, it is particularly important to understand and adapt to the differences in non-verbal communication in different cultures when using English for cross-cultural communication.

2.2 Conflict between direct and indirect expressions

Low-context cultures prefer direct and explicit communication, while high-context cultures prefer indirect and implicit expressions. In oral English communication, this can lead to obvious conflicts. For example, someone from a low-context culture may be straightforward in expressing an opinion or offering criticism that might be seen as rude or insensitive in a high-context culture. This difference in expression can lead to misunderstanding and tension, especially when one party expects more background information or indirect cues. In international communication and multicultural teams, effectively managing this difference between direct and indirect communication styles is essential to ensure smooth communication.

2.3 Importance of context understanding

In a high-context culture, context is crucial to understanding information. However, in intercultural communication using English as the medium of communication, individuals from low-context cultures may ignore or misunderstand these contextual cues. For example, in a business meeting or international negotiation, participants from a high-context culture may rely on environmental cues and established relationships to convey information, while these subtle cues may be ignored by people from a low-context culture, leading to the omission or misinterpretation of information. Therefore, in cross-cultural communication, especially in the use of a widely used language such as English, understanding the extent to which different cultures depend on context becomes particularly critical.

3. Oral English communication strategies based on cultural differences between high and low contexts

3.1 Enhance cross-cultural awareness

In the face of cultural differences between high and low contexts, it is necessary to enhance the knowledge and understanding of different cultural characteristics. In oral English communication, this means learning to recognize the communication habits of the other person's cultural background. For example, when communicating with individuals from high-context cultures, it should be noted that they may be more inclined to use oblique and indirect forms of expression. In contrast, when talking to communicators from low-context cultures, it is important to realize that they prefer direct and explicit communication styles. This enhancement of cross-cultural awareness helps to anticipate and understand the differences that may arise in the communication process, so as to adopt appropriate communication strategies and reduce misunderstandings and communication barriers.

3.2 Adjust speech expression

Based on the cultural background of the other party, adjusting one's own speech expression is one of the effective communication strategies. For communication objects from high-context cultures, more implicit and indirect language can be used, focusing on the transmission of non-verbal information, such as body language and facial expressions. Such strategies help ensure that the message is delivered effectively while remaining culturally sensitive. In contrast, when communicating with people from low-context cultural backgrounds, more direct and explicit language should be used to ensure clear and accurate information transmission. This strategy can help both parties in intercultural communication better understand each other's intentions and messages.

3.3 Pay attention to listening comprehension and feedback

In cross-cultural oral English communication, it is very important to attach importance to listening comprehension and positive feedback. This includes not only the understanding of verbal content, but also sensitivity to non-verbal signals and cultural context. When communicating with individuals in high-context cultures, emphasis should be placed on understanding non-verbal cues and meanings implied in context. At the same time, through feedback to confirm the intention of the other party, you can effectively avoid misunderstandings. When communicating with communicators from low-context cultures, more attention needs to be paid to direct understanding of the verbal content, and to provide clear and direct feedback to ensure that both parties clearly understand the communication content.

3.4 Develop adaptive communication skills

In oral English communication, adapting to different cultural backgrounds requires the development of flexible communication skills. This includes learning to adapt communication strategies flexibly to different cultural contexts. For example, in a multicultural environment, it may be necessary to switch between communication styles of high and low context cultures. In addition, understanding and respecting the values and beliefs behind cultural differences can help build deeper mutual understanding and trust. Through these adaptive communication skills, not only can improve the effect of cross-cultural communication, but also promote the harmonious relationship between individuals in different cultural backgrounds.

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To sum up, cultural differences between high and low contexts have a profound impact on oral English communication. This cultural difference is not only reflected in the direct and indirect ways of communication, but also involves the degree of dependence on non-verbal signals and sensitivity to context. In today's increasingly globalized world, understanding and adapting to these differences is essential for effective cross-cultural communication. By improving cross-cultural awareness, adjusting speech expression, paying attention to listening comprehension and feedback, and developing adaptive communication skills, oral English communication in different cultural backgrounds can be significantly improved. This not only helps to promote international exchanges and cooperation, but also promotes mutual understanding and respect among people of different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, the in-depth study and practical application of cultural differences between high and low contexts should be regarded as an important part of the improvement of intercultural communication competence.

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