

**EFFECTIVE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION FOR THAI
PA'S AND THEIR FOREIGN BOSSES**



**A THEMATIC PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF MANAGEMENT
COLLEGE OF MANAGEMENT
MAHIDOL UNIVERSITY
2020**

COPYRIGHT OF MAHIDOL UNIVERSITY

EFFECTIVE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION FOR THAI PA'S AND THEIR FOREIGN BOSSES

SARUNYA LIKITSAWAROJ 6149055

M.M. (GENERAL MANAGEMENT)

THEMATIC PAPER ADVISORY COMMITTEE: ASSOC. PROF. ASTRID KAINZBAUER, Ph.D., ASSOC. PROF. VICHITA RACTHAM, Ph.D., RONALD SURACHAI THESENVITZ, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

This research studies the intercultural communication between Thai and foreigners specifically secretaries and their bosses in the Company S. The objective of the studies is to analyze the differences and conflicts in communication from dissimilar cultural aspects. The miscommunication occurs from many possible factors such as language barriers, cultural practices, personality and human characteristics.

The research conducted the interview session based on direct experiences from the secretaries who work for the foreigners Regarding the responsibility, which is directly reported to one executive, the interaction is necessary to be coped to develop the intercultural communication efficiency.

KEY WORDS: Intercultural Communication/ A mindful Intercultural communication Model/ Ting-Toomey/ High vs. Low Context/ Strategies for overcoming miscommunication

27 pages

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
3.1 LIST OF INTERVIEWEES	11



LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
2.1 A Mindful of Intercultural Communication Model	8



CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Humans use communication skills on a regular basis. People are more cooperative in business operations. Nowadays, the world is changing toward digital technology and people become more interconnected for businesses. They use languages to negotiate and share experiences. The diversification of cultural ideas is widely escalated in terms of cultural awareness. The cultural perspective should not be limited in a certain society. There are many languages in the world which indicate the differences in terms of context and meaning. However, languages are not only the communication tool, but physical or non-verbal context can also be used to deliver the messages.

This study is focusing on personal assistants who work with the foreigners. One personal assistant is working for and assisting one executive officer. The communication is considered as the most important task in their roles. Some information is confidential which is needed to be untold such as salaries and personal information. On the daily basis, handling the phone correspondence is a routine task both internally and externally. The assistants must be able to correctly deliver the information. This might cause the gaps of miscommunication during the delivery process.

Personal assistants are the contact persons who are responsible for gathering and receiving the information for their bosses. Unlike Thai executive officers, foreigners need certain consultation on cultural aspects in the Thai firm. In the organization where they are unfamiliar with, to adapt themselves, that person should be their assistant. Not only are the practices different but languages could also be other influential factors for adaptation. Some ceremonies and religious practices required specific ceremonious behaviors depending on the occasion.

Communication between native speakers and non-native speakers can possibly cause a conflict due to misinterpretation. The complication in languages is an influential impact on the work motivation and productivity somehow. Adaptation

always takes time to build the relationship between each other. The conflict in a workplace might be caused by the barriers of the differences in language communication.

To maintain good relationship in working closely, it would require the level of understanding in an intercultural context. Mutual understanding of the different cultural contexts can reflect one's cultural background as well as understanding of other people. These experiences would also benefit a person's life experience and soft skill development.



CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following theoretical definitions will elaborate and specify how it would be relevant to the case study:

Culture

“Culture” is defined as “[a] collective phenomenon because it is at least partly shared with people who live or lived within the same social environment, which is where it was learned. It is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another” (Hofstede, 1997).

According to Hofstede (1997), there are three levels of the uniqueness of human mental programming: Personality, Culture, and Human Nature.

Personality refers to the unique characteristics of humans. It is inherited and learned. Even though our personality comes from the genetic trait, it can partly change based on individual life’s experiences and the influential factors from cultures.

Culture involves races and norms which are parts of the programming process to shape us as who we are. The culture will be passed on from generation to generation. It also involves learning. Cultural practice exists in specific places and groups. Even though some practices are justified as politeness, it does not mean that it would be the correct practices in other places.

Culture emerges as a part of human civilization. Each society contains different cultural elements and values. Humans adopt certain characteristics and behavior from their origin including home countries, the community in which they were born, and family. Each community has the different belief and practices depending on social values and norms determined by languages, law, regulations, and rituals, or ceremonies as well as gestures. Therefore, we gradually program these elements throughout our lives—started from our childhood.

Lastly, **human nature** identifies who we are as human beings. It is determined by generic and psychological factors resulting in our feelings, behavior, and how we react to the issues. It might also involve the morality in the society.

Conceptualizing Communication

“Culture is communication” (Hall, 1959) and is somehow correlated. Based on Hall’s study, communication can be categorized into three parts: words, material things, and behavior. Words are used for communication in businesses, politics, and diplomacy. It can appear in terms of both written and unwritten contexts. Lastly, behavior determines how we act and behave as the member of community to avoid the conflicts. More understanding should be gained and focused on the differences because we are humans. People use languages to communicate and interact with one another to share ideas and information.

High Context vs. Low Context

Low and high contexts are ones of the cultural communication concepts related to the individualistic and collectivistic characters. According to (Hall, 1990), a high context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is already in the person while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low context (LC) communication is just the opposite, that is, the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code.

An individualistic culture tends to fit in LC types in the way they use the direct communication and clearly state the messages, for example, European people such as German, French or British normally communicate straightforwardly unlike Asian people such as Thai, Indonesian, Korean and Japanese who are believed to be in harmony and generous. They will try to avoid any conflicts or argument in groups.

In contrast to the LC, HC people will communicate in an indirect way which might be less precise or ambiguous for opened interpretation. It can cause misconceived translation among speakers and listeners. Moreover, HC people use “understatement” (Grice, 1975) communication style. The degree of the messages being sent out to the counterparts can determine the cultural values due to the ways people are trying to convey the messages to someone. A group of people are anticipating their assignments and responsibilities in the workplace or organization. It

is necessary to receive a clear direction and requirement in order to deliver the job efficiently.

Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication is a transactional symbolic process involving the attribution of meaning between people from different cultures. The communication is widely interconnected in the globalization and business cooperation era. The intercultural communication will integrate the global community. Therefore, the necessity to acknowledge how we can make the approach to people from different cultures might be challenging for intercultural communication.

The process of intercultural communication understanding consists of 3 phases:

1. Awareness
2. Knowledge
3. Skills

Our mental adaptation will start from “**Awareness**” of ourselves. We are raised in different backgrounds and in different environment. We are taught to input the mental software as a part of our life to fit in the society. However, people may need to step out from their familiarity to explore the new opportunity in life. The awareness will be a mental functional system to adjust to the differences.

Secondly, learning the cultural context of a certain society becomes the “**Knowledge**”. The capability of human learning can be identified as the intellectual development. We might acknowledge the differences or similarities between others’ cultures and ours. This might include the motivation of an individual person. Knowledge also refers to language learning development. Knowledge and language are connected because people learn a second language other than their native language. The mother tongue is learned and developed through one’s environment. In contrast, the second language must be taught by teachers or native speakers. It should possibly require practices of skills to learn unlike learning our native language. It takes time to learn and improve in order to acquire certain languages. Moreover, it will become another skill set that one can apply to his/her profession on a daily basis.

Third, the combination of “awareness” and “knowledge” phases with practice is called “**Skills**”. It is considered as a survival task for a person to be able to adopt and face social situations in his/her routines. When we look at cultural differences, we might find that our surrounding people are manageable to avoid cultural conflicts while some are not. It is the complication of how each individual can deal with the issues. According to Spritzberg (2000), “*skills must be repeatable and goal oriented.*” In other words, it implies that the intension to develop the skills must be repeatedly done in order to accomplish the cultural competency.

Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC)

As indicated earlier, intercultural communication is specified as how people will interact due to the differences in the cultural background including languages and behavior. Interestingly, we can apply the Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) to develop the skills using the three criteria (Appropriateness, Effectiveness and Adaptability) as a part of the cultural awareness.

The ICC is defined as “*an impression that behavior is appropriate and effective in a given context*” (Spritzberg , 2000). This context refers to the linguistic and language proficiency to interpret the messages especially when we speak different languages.

The word “competence” refers to the “*fitness or ability to perform*” (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989). In other words, the communication competency and skills rely on the adaption of each person to deal with each situation. However, there is a factor determining some extent of communication competence which is caused by the roles of either producers or receivers (Habermas, 1979). It emphasizes the interpretation of the messages that they are likely to be misunderstood due to the actors’ or “speakers’” competence.

The ICC criteria have been borrowed from the interpersonal competency (Spritzber & Cupach, 1984, 1989, 2002, 2011) which consists of appropriateness and effectiveness factors. The intercultural communication is partly linked to the socio-cultural determinant while personal identity is partly connected to interpersonal competency. The two concepts can be analyzed on how the communication is successful among different cultures.

People normally behave differently due to the differences in the cultural context. Their values and norms are distinguished depending on where they have grown up. Some behaviors might be acceptable in the certain society. In contrast, it might be considered “rude” or “inappropriate” to some extent. Therefore, appropriateness refers to the interchangeable communication by values, norms, and beliefs. Nowadays, people perceive the cultural aspect in various ways such as in a person’s interaction or even the media channel. Behaviors should not be judged by the prejudice of not realizing the differences.

The purpose of communication would be determined by how effective people can mutually understand the content of the messages which refers to “effectiveness”. The communication can be strategically successful by the non-verbal or verbal behavior accuracy.

To adapt to the social situation, people require the “adaptability” skill to be able to handle the changes or unfamiliar environment. People need an open-minded attitude to accept the change or adaptation. As already mentioned, certain behaviors or practices might be acceptable; however, it might not be applicable to other contexts. Therefore, willingness of open-minded attitude would lead to better consequences on adaptability in intercultural communication.

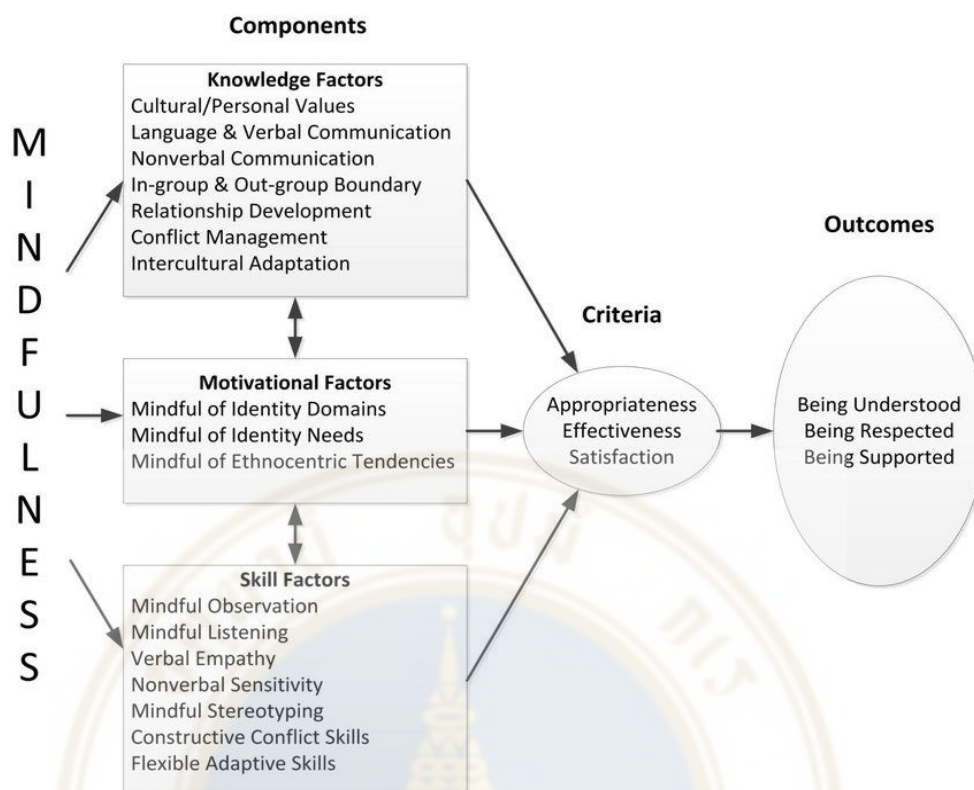


Figure 2.1. A Mindful Intercultural Communication Model: Components, criteria, and outcomes (Ting-Toomey, 1999)

“Mindfulness means the willingness to attend one’s internal culture, linguistics, personal communication assumptions, cognitions, and emotions. At the same time, one is becoming exquisitely attuned to the others’ communication assumptions, cognitions, languages, and emotions (LeBaron, 2003; Ting-Toomey 1999).

The model refers to three influential aspects which are knowledge, motivation, and skills which can determine the efficiency of intercultural communication.

For knowledge factors, in order to frame the successful mindfulness of intercultural competence, it requires specific communication skills, both verbal and non-verbal, which include both the mother tongue and second languages. Languages represent verbal communication skills. People use certain languages to deliver the

messages to one another. Languages are a part of the knowledge for human development.

The communicative ability is determined by the level of understanding of listeners. Some words or vocabulary are carefully used because they can lead to misinterpretation. Such words can mislead into totally different content from what the speakers want to convey.

Motivation factors are related to the mindfulness of the identity. In other words, a personal identity and others' identity should be recognized. The awareness will include the respect toward the difference in other people because they come from different backgrounds. The intergroup identity refers to intercultural groups of people, who represent their own cultural perceptive, gathering in the same environment. The adaption will take parts for gaining more knowledge ability in their workplace.

Lastly, mindful listening is another skill factor which is an important task in the profession. People perceive the messages through listening to others, for example, while they are corresponding their opinion or thought verbally to others (Ting- Toomey, 1999). The purpose of mindful listening should reduce the chances of misunderstanding communication in the way that they will increasingly build up mutual understanding from what we perceive via voice. It can appear in the "paraphrased" content to emphasize whether the messages are delivered accurately.

This skill is importantly adapted to the direct experiences of each individual. It is adaptively required some flexibility in order to accomplish in communication successfully.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research is conducted in qualitative by interviewing the sample group. Our interviewees were selected specifically. They are the executive secretaries who work for foreigners. The definition of qualitative research can be defined as “*the primarily concerned understanding human beings’ experiences in a humanistic, interpretative approach*” (Jackson II & Drummond, 2007) Therefore, interviewees will be asked the set of questions to determine the cultural differences based on direct personal experiences.

The data collection method includes semi-structured interviews. The characteristic of this type of data collection allows both interviewer and interviewees to engage in the conversation in formal ways either online or face-to-face. The interviews are made by appointments in the informal way. Interviewees are aware and prepared to respond to the questions. Some of the questions require elaboration or examples of the necessary situations which will be used for analysis.

The interview in this research is determined to be the “[g]eneral interview guide approach” (Kabir, 2016) which implies that this type of interview collects general information from each interviewee. The questions for an interview had been designed specifically on communication conflicts among executive officers and secretaries using “What” and “How” to ask rather than focusing on “Yes” or “No” answers. This set of questions are open-ended type so that interviewees could freely describe their thoughts through their true expression.

The responses were analyzed to what extent we could reduce the gaps in the communication. The responses will be used to comprehensively analyze certain characteristics or behaviors in the communication. Tesch (1990) explained “*sociological tradition*” aspect which emphasizes the difference in cultural dimension.

According to Stake (1995), there are several distinctions between quantitative and qualitative interviews. One aspect given as an example is “*the distinction between knowledge discovered and knowledge constructed.*” The

qualitative interview is the way we construct the knowledge based on the responses from the interviewee, and we use those to construct the interpretation and analysis. This implies that we can gain more understanding on human experiences. The responses from the qualitative interview can construct the interpretation of individual experiences rather than generalized responses.

The interview sample group work at Company S which has long been operated in Thailand over 100 years. The number of employees is approximately 8,000 and the majority of them are Thai. Every interview session is conducted through the Microsoft Team calls and phone calls. There are foreign executive officers who work for Company S. The total of 8 sample groups for the interviews are as follows:

Table 3.1 List of Interviewees

No.	Respondents	Working with foreign boss/ nationality	Gender	Age	Years of experiences
1.	Khun A	Singaporean-Indian	Women	29	2016 - 2020
2.	Khun M	Indian Executive (Thai Citizen)	Women	35	2018-2019
3.	Khun L	Singaporean Indian	Women	31	2015 – 2018
4.	Khun T	German	Women	37	2016 - present
5.	Khun B	British	Women	28	2019-2019
6	Khun O	American	Women	35	2020-present
7	Khun P	Indian	Women	33	2019-present
8	Khun N	Singaporean	Women	29	2018-present

These are lists of question which will be use for the interview session

1. Which nationality of your boss you are working for?
2. How long have you been working with your current boss?
3. Have you noticed the different in the cultural difference among you and your boss? Can you give an example of a situation?
4. Have you ever felt any difficulty in communicating in the different languages? How did you deal with it?
5. Do you think the languages difference impact to the way you communicate with your boss?
6. Have you ever have any communication issues with your current boss? If yes, could you elaborate specific situation.
7. In which channel do you normally communicate with your boss; Texting / talking? How often do you talk to him/her per days?
8. Have you ever experiences when the messages you send to your bosses are mislead / misinterpret to different content from your intension?
9. Which are the most challenges in communication between the pronunciation and the messages (context)?
10. Have you ever felt insecure when you're boss when the misunderstanding occurs?
11. Do you think you can easily observe your boss's emotion through their facial
12. How do you adapt yourselves and develop the positive relationship with your boss?
13. Do you think working with a foreign boss would benefit your professional in the future?

CHAPTER IV

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The researcher conducted the interview session with the total amount of 8 executive secretaries who have been working with foreign bosses. In the beginning of the interview session, they were asked briefly about their bosses' nationality to distinguish the intercultural influence in communication between Thai secretaries and foreigners. This is the pre-observation to determine the comparison of Asian with European. Five out of 8 executive secretaries are working with Asian bosses. Their bosses are originally Indian born; however, one executive has just received Thai nationality and another executive's nationality is Singaporean. The other sample group are secretaries who work with European and American bosses. Their bosses' nationalities are German, American, and British. According to the interview, the intercultural communication conflicts are influenced by the following issues:

4.1 Intercultural Communication Conflicts

4.1.1 Language Barriers

The first aspect which can be used for the discussion is related to language factors. Language barriers have an impact on work on a daily basis, especially between non-native English speakers and English speakers. Thai secretaries use English language to communicate with their bosses.

Speaking and listening skills are important for professional communication, especially for non-native speakers. Verbal communication is necessarily used for connecting with other people efficiently. One of the secretaries who works for Singaporean-Indian boss stated that

“In the first three months of working with my Singaporean-Indian boss, I sometimes found it difficult to understand him because he spoke slightly fast, and the

pronunciation is unlikely compared to American that I normally listen to through movies, for example, some vocabulary like 'allow' took me seconds to realize what he did say due to his pronunciation”

She explained that the pronunciation of the word “allow” (/ə'laʊ/) should be similar to that of “around” (/ə'raʊnd/) from her understanding while the Singaporean-Indian boss pronounced it as “a-l-low” (/a'l'lo/)

This implies that pronunciation and accent might affect the level of understanding of both parties (listeners and speakers) in terms of interpretation. For the secretary, it took her seconds to realize what her boss was trying to say. This implies that each nationality pronounces each English word differently. The pronunciation is unique depending on the educational background, nationality, and perhaps experiences. However, the secretary stated that her improvement and familiarity of the conversation is getting better over time when they have been working together for some time.

One of the executive secretaries who works for a German boss admits that sometimes speaking on the phone is more difficult for her to understand when it is compared to having a conversation in person. She said,

“My boss always speaks in a low tone because he is German. Sometimes, I find it hard to understand his English accent especially when he pronounces Thai name like Pan or Pun. Well, I could guess who he wanted to meet.”

She added, *“I can pick up the name he mentions if I arrange the meeting for him earlier”*. The vowels of both Thai and English are different. Moreover, the boss’s speaking tone is quite low, so sometimes the secretary could barely hear what he said. Each person speaks in different voice and tone.

The vowels of the words affect understanding of the content such as names, for example, Thai names to the ears of foreigners. The secretaries said that talking in person is more effective than talking on the phone. The possible solution to avoid the misunderstanding issue is to repeat the names a few times. It is necessary to reconfirm the messages whether they have been delivered clearly and correctly. Ms. A mentioned the same problems with understanding when her boss assigned her some work while he was walking to the meeting. He walked pass her desk and asked her to do something. Moreover, it is inevitable that she needs to talk to her boss on the

phone and the message is often unclear and fast; therefore, she needs to reconfirm the message many times.

4.1.2 Technical Vocabulary

Specific terms or keywords in the workplace are varied depending on the businesses and roles. Secretaries who will be working with the boss need to learn some specific terms relevant to tasks and functions in order to arrange the meeting and invite the right people for each meeting subject.

Ms. P, who has been working with her boss for 1 year, describes that in the first three months, she was unable to capture some vocabulary. *“I didn’t know what ‘New Normal’ meant? I later looked it up and found that it is business consulting vocabulary. Technical vocabulary requires familiarity to know the definition. After her boss had mentioned this term regularly, she searched for the definition of the phrase on Google. This shows her characteristics of an individual who is interested in learning.*

Ms. A added that her boss verbally asked her to schedule the meeting with his team by saying *“Could you please arrange the meeting with the team on P&L?”* At that time, she did not know what P&L was. Therefore, she added the subject of the meeting as “P and L” She did not realize that P&L itself refers to ‘profit and loss’. She thought it was a technical term. This is considered one of her new words learned. Later, she will not misspell it again. The situation gave her the experience for improving herself to have more proficiency.

4.1.3 Miscommunication in Writing

Ms. O, the secretary who works for an American boss stated that miscommunication occurred between herself and the boss. Her boss had sent her an email with the instruction: *“Please remove the purple square of headcount”*. The attached file had been sent to her via email. She opened the file and then she was not quite sure. Ms. O stated that she ended up deleting the “headcount” or head box in the sheet and her boss called back and requested her to delete “the purple bar chart” in the sheet. This shows that miscommunication can happen even it is in the form of a text. There are various factors due to false interpretation such as background knowledge or

personal experience of each individual. Vocabulary normally defines many different meanings and content.

4.1.4 High vs. Low Context Communication

Ms. B who has been working for a British boss shared the story about her boss and his Thai subordinate. While the boss was explaining the detail for the presentation preparation and his expectation on how the presentation should be ordered, his subordinate kept saying “*YES, YES*”. The boss immediately replied,

“This is unprofessional because our presentation will be used in the management meeting, so it will require special attention and details to make a decision later on. Please stop saying “yes” in the end of your acknowledgement and respond to me with the comments or opinion in the suitable time during our meeting”.

In this case, it can be analyzed that the British boss can immediately give feedback to his subordinate in front of other participants during the meeting. The direct way of communication is unlikely to occur in Thai culture. Thai people normally value any kind of relationship as well as between a subordinate and a boss. People avoid direct communication in order not to embarrass people in front of others. They can easily feel insecure from harsh feedback. The direct way of communication is determined as the “low context”.

Even though the boss might unintentionally embarrass his subordinate during the meeting, it cannot be denied that some criticism has an impact on others’ feelings. The main purpose of the criticism refers to high expectation in the working quality rather than personal feelings.

Thai people use the particles, “Ka and Krub” to respond to others in order to express their acknowledgement in the polite way rather than saying nothing. However, repeatedly saying “Ka and Krub” can imply vagueness for Westerners. The cultural aspect of responses might portray the picture of a listener losing the focus while listening instead of listening carefully to the details.

Referring to the interview with Ms. T, Executive Secretary to a German boss, she said, “*My boss sent me an email and specified the meeting agenda including participants for the meeting clearly, so I could forward that details to the invitees.*”

The secretary expressed her personal feelings toward working with the German boss that his direct communication and clear instruction helped her work easily. He knows the estimated flight schedule including departure and arrival time. Therefore, he can guide his secretary to book the flight available at almost the exact time as he mentioned to her earlier. The secretary added if there is further clarification required such as the flight time that might not be available, she will reconfirm it with him. The arrangement can be managed within 1-2 times through face-to-face discussion, and the task will be completed after the second time of the discussion to finalize every detail.

The way that the boss and secretary precisely discuss in detail can reduce the chance of misinterpretation. The secretary will clearly know what she has to do, and which option will be the best for her boss. This will decrease the repetitive and confusing communication while her boss is already busy with his meeting schedule. For instance, this task should be managed by the secretary because it is now her responsibility. One of the possible ways of the directions of working may depend on the personality of each person which is unlike the Asian style of working.

In contrast, in the cases of Singaporean-Indian and Indian bosses, the details should be specified and discussed prior to finalization. The options are varied and opened for consideration. The boss was always unsure to pick a choice because he is most likely to change.

Ms. L said that *“I always look for the alternatives available for my boss. I know that for the alternative solution, explanation and clarification are required, so most of the time, the first solution might not be his (my boss’s) final selection.”* The secretary needs to complete the assignments and be able to solve any problems for her boss. The secretary will be the contact person who should be able to receive the order and transfer it to the boss correctly. Each task is considered a challenge and required a lot of communication and engagement with others.

Therefore, in this case, the quality of work and the alternative choices that the secretary offers to her boss can determine the aspect of “low” communication style, for instance, the data and choices should be reasonable to choose for one’s boss to finally make the decision. The choice should be the direct communication to approach the final goal or complete each task. Working as a secretary, he/she should

be able to guide and recommend the best options for his/her boss. Certainly, each option can be practical based on what we have been checking or finding the backup information for a boss as a part of his decision making.

4.1.5 Cultural Aspect of “Appropriateness”

Ms. P. shared a story about her boss, *“As a secretary, I always knocked on the door and called my boss to the next meeting. He always feels more comfortable when he does not have to hang around in the meeting room for other participants to join. When I told him, ‘Mr. X, they are all in the meeting room ka. You must go now,’ he suddenly replied, ‘I should go now, or I must go now?’”*

According to this situation, the interviewee doubted what the appropriate way to call her boss for a meeting should be. In her opinion, the word “must” perhaps should be avoided because it more or least refers to “demanding” someone to do something. She was unintentionally commanding her boss, who is senior to her, to go to the next meeting, but it was her responsibility to gently remind him. After a year of working with her boss, Ms. P. becomes more familiar with the questions and now she is more insistent and confident to use the word “must”, if necessary, to inform him of urgency or necessity.

This can imply that Thai or Asian people are more respectful to those who are senior to them. The hierarchy is important in Asian society. The younger relatively respect the older especially when he/she is their boss. Perhaps the guilt of reminding him/her to another meeting is considered the disruption just like stopping someone from saying something.

Currently, the word is varied in definitions and the level of urgency and appropriateness is still doubted whether it matters to listeners especially to Westerners. Based on the researcher’s personal experience in English class in primary school, students were taught to use the word “could” instead of “can” for asking questions or for some help. “Could” in the sense is more polite to ask someone; therefore, Thai or Asian people are highly concerned about the appropriateness and avoid some reactions which prone to disrespectful behavior.

Ms. T, Secretary to German Executive, said,

“My boss is one of the friendliest guys I know. He speaks in soft and polite tone. One day, one of his colleagues kept staring at his shirt, specifically at his belly, while talking to him. My boss immediately asked that person whether he is fat or else by asking, “Am I fat? Do I gain weight? Are you staring at my belly?” The researcher notices that he is a friendly man and is rarely moody to others, and he has never been rude to anyone in the office; however, the sense of self-sufficiency and respect is also counted.

This implies that in the western practices, it might not be polite to highlight physical appearance even though a person has no intention to make others feel insecure. Teasing others and cracking jokes are dissimilar in different cultures, for instance, certain behavior can be considered a disrespectful action.

4.1.6 Cultural / Superstitious Beliefs

The relationship between bosses and secretaries is developed through learning and understanding each other’s personality, characteristics, and religion or belief. The religion and superstition are ones of the personal aspects depending on the family background and practice. Ms. A stated that her boss is Singaporean-Indian, and his religion is Hinduism, one of the oldest religions in the world. Hindus worship many gods. Nowadays, people still carry some traditional beliefs and activities with them.

There are certain practices which people need to strictly follow. Ms. A stated that *“My boss doesn’t like me to call him once he has already turned back. He doesn’t want anyone to stop him.”* Ms. A said that, at first, she always forgot the rules and accidentally asked her boss about something while he was turning back and walking elsewhere. Her boss told her his superstitious belief and the reason he does not like anyone to call him on his back is that he believes it is the bad luck.

Mostly, Ms. A’s boss always talks while he is rushing to the meeting. He always talks while he is walking pass Ms. A’s desk in front of his office. Most of the time, he would quickly assign some tasks to Ms. A. He might not realize that this style of communication can easily be misinterpreted due to many reasons. The messages are sent out without clear sound. Moreover, the listener will have no chance to ask in case she needs clarification on the assignment.

They both understand each other better. Over time, her boss would stop before he left and asked, “*Do you need anything?*” or “*Any question?*”. The way of communication has changed. The boss is not upset with his secretary as he was before. Instead, mutual understanding respectively develops positive relationship.

4.2 Strategies for Overcoming Miscommunication

4.2.1 Listening Skills

Most of the secretaries who work for foreigners should have the intermediate to advanced level of English communication proficiency. Listening and speaking tasks are important for the secretaries’ responsibility.

Ms. T, Secretary to German Executive, shared her previous working experience for the foreign boss for 10 years. Since she had started to work with her current boss, she needed to adapt herself slightly to the German style of talking. She is eager to learn new things. During the interview session, she seemed to be comfortable to share the stories. However, she added that adaptation is important even though she has experienced working as a secretary for a long time. “*The first three months were a bit challenging.*” Ms. T is not the only person who expressed the difficulty in adapting herself to her new boss. Ms. N and Ms. P agreed in terms of adaptation period especially when using a second language for communication.

Ms. L stated that her listening and communication skills with the boss (a Singaporean-Indian boss) barely affect her working ability. However, she admitted that adaption period is required. She stated that it took more than 3 months for communication skills to develop and for her to understand what her boss wanted. The conflict surely was not caused by English listening skills; however, it mostly came from his ways of conveying the messages when he assigned the job. The message was sometimes too short but with clear requirement specifically in the meeting participants. Apparently, it is clear that English listening task is not due to the secretary’s inability to understand the English sentences.

4.2.2 Positive Perception

In the workplace, people face difficulties caused by verbal conflicts and miscommunication. The messages can convey many different meanings. Verbal communication can emotionally impact on other people. Words can either increase or lower motivation of the employees. Motivation can be driven by the individual perception.

Apart from listening ability in communication between the executive and secretary, Ms. L shared her direct experiences to keep herself pass through the working challenges. *“Don’t take things personal from what you hear. Sometimes, harsh criticism will make you grow and be more proactive,”* said Ms. L. Regarding Ms. L’s correspondence, she added that she used to feel lack of motivation in working with her boss because of his unpredictable and fussy behavior. *“He said something harsh to me. Over time, I have gained positive perception on my bad days”*. She said that she could deal with any difficult circumstances. She has become more patient and active in learning new things. This is the benefit of her having been hard working for the past 3 years.

Ms. A, who has been working with the Singaporean-Indian boss, added that her boss used to say, *“Hey, Wake up!”* She was always upset and frustrated with what he had said. She felt really bad to hear such a harsh criticism especially during the first few years of working for him. The sarcastic comment should be abandoned because it is considered having the bitter meaning to others whether it is delivered intentionally or unintentionally.

Ms. A believes that she has been driven to become more detail oriented. She does not take the conversation personal. In contrast, she believes it is the lesson learned. After 4 years of working with her boss, she is able to tolerate the pressure. However, she will be more focused on the job and outcomes to gain more strength.

4.2.2 Adaptive Skills

It takes times to build up relationship between mutual understanding and adaptation. It requires behavioral adaptation for positive interconnection between bosses and secretaries. Ms. L specified the time range for mutual adaptation.

“In my first year of working for my boss, I had communication problems because he was too busy to read or respond to the messages. The communication was delayed, plus we didn’t get along well. My strategic way to work with him is using a “Guessing game.” Then, in the second year, I normally glanced at his body language and we have developed better adaption compared to the first year. I knew how to deal with certain issues and specifically with 70% of what he thought. In the third year, I could say that I barely have any miscommunication.”

The adaptive skill is necessary for working cooperatively. Time is the key determined factor for adapting especially the first three months. It is the period to start to get to know each other. Some people might take more time than others to adapt due to their uniqueness in personality, emotions, and behavior including working styles. Secretaries themselves can apply the strategic solutions differently due to their background experiences. Communication is the most influential factor as well as the ability to understand the difference in cultural aspect.

The interview responses show that Thai secretaries are using the compromise strategy and patience to deal with their bosses. The compromise strategy refers to how we can manage all the tasks and schedule changes unexpectedly. The alternative options will be offered reasonably for the discussion about any necessary issues with their boss openly.

Some secretaries can easily notice the boss’s facial expression and glance through their boss’s emotions from the conversation. Over time, they will have the ability to predict the situation whether it is the right time for a conversation.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the interview results, the intercultural communication gaps could easily occur due to many factors. Those issues can be linked to the model of Mindful Intercultural Communication (Ting-Toomey, 2015) which indicates how to reduce miscommunication and increase work productivity of secretaries who work for foreigners.

Most of the secretaries seem to adopt the Mindful Intercultural Communication Model such as knowledge, motivation, and skills. The knowledge component can be varied for the determination. The **knowledge** means the know-how of specific tasks. Knowledge can be gradually gained during the work process. The assignment might be the challenges as well as the confusion or mistakes.

The Mindful Intercultural Communication Model refers to verbal and non-verbal **skills**. The level of verbal messages is considered one of the challenges in the beginning of the adaptation period. The “Guessing game” is ambiguous to fully understand what the bosses are actually needed. The information provided for the specific assignment is unclear leading to misinterpretation.

The respondents expressed their **motivation** on their jobs in a sense that they are aware of the differences and willing to adapt themselves while the bosses show the empathy and understanding to speak slowly and can repeat an instruction. A secretary’s role is to assist the executive; therefore, motivation on the role will be the key factor for them to achieve the goal. The assignment is expected to be completed.

First of all, the factors of knowledge and skills of individual secretaries will evaluate one’s understanding of a non-native English-speaking language. The interview session will be used as the pre-selected criteria to analyze the ability of the secretaries, both speaking and listening, as well as the aptitude and the working environment matched. At the same time, secretaries can pre-observe the interviewer and ask the questions if the future matches their characteristic.

Knowledge refers to ability to use English skills for listening, speaking, and communication. Effective communication uses the source of knowledge. People use their knowledge to adjust to the situations which occur on a day-to-day basis. For example, they will choose the right words to convey the messages. The successful messages will be determined by the content delivered by the speaker.

Secretaries can avoid the miscommunication in many ways such as using a sample structure to deliver the messages. Importantly, non-native English speakers will automatically learn to improve their English speaking and listening skills while working with foreign bosses. Secretaries will be knowledgeable in a second language used during work and professional experience.

Secondly, mindfulness of intercultural communication of motivation comes from the eagerness to develop oneself and willingness to get through any challenges in one's assignment. The challenges of communication can be misinterpretation, either by listening or speaking by both parties. People have self-ambition to become successful in their career path. Some people are optimistic about any struggles in life.

Individual performance depends on the level of motivation and the adaptability to work with one's boss. Working styles are determined not solely motivation, but positive relationship is gradually built up between the secretaries and bosses. Therefore, mindfulness of intercultural communication is attentive with details. Self-improvement needs to be motivated even though, after a certain period of time, some people might find themselves in a routine job.

Lastly, the skill component of the mindfulness of intercultural communication consists of listening and observation which perhaps are related to knowledge as mentioned above. Secretaries require assistive skills. They need to act fast and be active in order to manage all the changes on a day-to-day basis.

Working with foreign bosses who have different personality, cultures, and characteristics cannot be compared which nationality is better than one another. However, secretaries need to be open-minded. Even though sometimes some situations might be beyond the expectation, tasks should be handled professionally. The empathic mind should be adaptive and understand the differences among people rather than using only personal judgment.

REFERENCE

- Bjerregaard, T., Luring, J., & Klitmøller, A. (2009). *A critical analysis of Intercultural communication research in cross-cultural management. Critical perspectives on international business.*
- Chaney, L. H. & Martin, J. S. (2011). *Intercultural Business Communication*
- Esenciuc, A. (2012). *Interpersonal Communication Competence: Cultural Underpinning Journal of Defense Resources Management*
- Gardner, H. (1983). *Frame of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*
- Gudykunst, W. B. & Kim, Y. Y. (1984). *Communicating with strangers: An Approach to international Communication*
- Hall, E. T., & Hall, M. R. (1990). *Understanding & Culture Differences*
- Hofstede, G. (1997). *Culture and Organizations Software of the Mind Intercultural cooperation and its importance for Survival.*
- Jandt, F. (2017). *An introduction to intercultural communication: Identities in a global community.*
- Jackson, J. (2012). *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Intercultural communication*
- Jackson II, R.L., & Drummond, D. (2007). *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*
- Kabir, S. M. S. (2016). *Method of Data Collection*
- Kawar, T. I. (2012). *Cross Cultural Differences in management*
- Klagge, J. (2016). *Communicating In High-Context & Low-Context Culture*
- Patel, F., Li, M. & Sooknanan, P. (2011). *Intercultural Communication Building a Global Community*
- Samovar, L. A., Porter, R. E. & McDaniel, E. R. (2010). *Intercultural Communication: A Reader*
- Spitzberg, B. H. (2000). *A Model of Intercultural Communication Competence*
- Stake, R. (1995). *The art of case study research*

Ting-Toomey, S. & Dorjee, T. (2015). *Intercultural and intergroup communication competence: Toward an integrative perspective*

Zegarac, V., Spencer-Oatey, H. & Ushioda, E. (2014). *Conceptualizing mindfulness–mindlessness in intercultural interaction. International Journal of Language and Culture*

