Communication Patterns in Multicultural Organizational Meetings: The Influence of Language and Culture

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Abstract

This article presents empirically based models of four communication patterns that arose in intercultural organizational meetings. The dynamics of the intercultural communication process, as influenced by both language proficiency and cultural factors, are explored for each of the patterns.

Introduction

Meetings are an integral part or feature of organizational life in all societies. By talking together in face-to-face situations (sometimes aided by electronics media in modern times), individuals satisfy their personal needs of connectedness and the organizational purposes of coordinating work. The communication dynamics are altered in meetings attended by individuals with limited second-language competency or eminating from cultures of differing context levels. By systematically analyzing and categorizing these communication dynamics, it becomes possible to identify differing patterns of intercultural communication.
This article presents empirically based models of four communication patterns that arose in expatriate-local personnel intercultural meetings occurring in 14 local and multinational corporations (MNCs) operating in Taiwan. In the Taiwanese MNCs environments encompassed in this study, expatriate managers and Chinese local managers did adjust their communication approaches and were able to make effective use of meetings. Through changing and adapting their natural communication styles and methods, the expatriates and the Chinese personnel were able to compensate for their second-language deficiencies and to overcome cultural differences. The information exchange in meetings was an integral part of the total communication system; these exchanges formed a framework for other communication in the MNCs and also had the positive impact of increasing contact among expatriates and local personnel. Owing to the structured and mandatory nature of the intercultural meetings, Chinese individuals with lower second-language (L2) proficiency were not excluded from the intercultural communication process.

The present study disclosed four communication patterns in the intercultural meetings that reflected efficient information exchange: namely, 
(a) communication initiated by expatriates without feedback requests, (b)
communication initiated by expatriates with requested feedback, (c) local personnel initiated communication, and (d) interactive communication between expatriates and local personnel. Language and cultural factors prompted the development of these communication patterns. The Chinese managers in these organizations possessed higher English language skills as compared to the expatriates' spoken Chinese; thus, the communication medium in the intercultural meetings was entirely in English (except for side conversations among the Chinese personnel). In addition, the communication transactions took place between individuals eminating from low context cultures (expatriates) and a high context culture (Chinese locals). For each pattern the analysis focuses on: (a) a diagram and a corresponding explanation of the communication flow and (b) the cultural and language proficiency factors impacting the communication flow.

Collectively, these patterns of formalized communication provided reinforcing system of intercultural communication between expatriates and local personnel.

Theoretical framework of the study

Teboul, Chen, and Fritz (1994) reported in a comprehensive review of the research studies on the communication process in multinational firms that there was a surprising absence of empirical studies in
investigating organizational communication in multinational corporations. Even though there is an absence of previous studies on which to build a research strategy, there fortunately is a growing body of theory in two areas (second-language communication and cultural studies) that can be utilized as the theoretical framework for the present study. Reflecting these developments, the following theoretical framework section is divided into two sections. First, there is a review of L2 proficiency and its impact on communication. The second section discusses the concept of culture and its impact on communication. This section also includes an analysis of face behaviors in high-context cultural societies.

**Language Competency and Communication**

Where there exists a deficiency of second-language competency among those attending meetings, adjustments are required in order to insure that efficient information exchange is accomplished. Hamzah-Sendut (1989) provides evidence that the effectiveness of communication relies on interlocutors' proficiency in the language used. Speakers with low second-language proficiency communicate fewer ideas and provide less detailed descriptions in meetings than do native speakers or individuals with high second-language proficiency. The dynamics of the communication process in such situations is different from those meetings in which all meeting
participants can use their native language to communicate. The mix of first-and second-language speakers and their various levels of second-language proficiency complicate the communication process in intercultural meetings.

**Culture and Communication**

Hofstede's classic study (1980, 1991) differentiated between individualistic and collective cultures; Table 1 summarizes the dimensions of Hofstede's individualistic and collective cultures. Hall (1976) developed a comparative model that is directly related to interpersonal communication. According to Hall, individuals from different societies and cultures communicate differently; and, as did Hofstede's paradigm, his model has contrasting polar dimensions: low-context versus high-context style of communication. In low-context communication, the verbal part of the message contains more of the information and the majority of the transmitted information is vested in explicit codes. Verbal messages are extremely important to the low-context style of communication and these messages are usually explicitly coded unless they pertain to highly sensitive issues. In contrast, in high-context communication, more of the information lies either within the context or within the shared culture of the
counterparts who are parts of the interaction. Less of the meaning is
provided in the coded, explicitly transmitted part of the message.

Table 1: Key Differences in the Collectivistic-Individualistic
Dimension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collectivist</th>
<th>Individualist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity is based on the social network.</td>
<td>Identity is based on the individual.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harmony should always be maintained and direct confrontations avoided.</td>
<td>Speaking one's mind is a characteristic of an honest person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship prevails over task.</td>
<td>Task prevails over relationship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective interests prevail over individual interests.</td>
<td>Individual interests prevail over collective interests.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consensus in society is ultimate goal.</td>
<td>Self-actualization by every individual is ultimate goal.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Hofstede, G. (1991), pp. 67 and 73

The basic Communication Model (See for example, Bovee & Thill, 1993; Guffey, 1994; Richmond & McCroskey, 1992) describes the
communication process in all cultures and includes the components of
sender, receiver, and feedback. Although this model describes the
communication process in all cultures, the importance of the components
within the communication process differs among cultures. People from
collective cultures tend to use high-context language. High-context
communicators are sensitive to their surroundings or environments; and as
such, speech interactants integrate verbal messages and contextual variables to form their complete information source. In communicating, the sender first assesses the communication environment or context and then encodes the verbal message. As the message is sent, the receiver also assesses the communication environment before interpreting the meaning of words in the verbal message. The syntax, taken by itself, may be vague and indirect, especially when dealing with sensitive interpersonal issues. Interlocutors instinctively receive contextual or environmental variables as part of the message, so a verbal message that might be considered incomplete or vague in itself becomes complete by adding the context dimension to the communication process. In high-context communication, the verbal message constitutes only one part of the total communication.

To connect the approaches of Hofstede and Hall, it can be inferred that individuals from collective cultures (Hofstede) use high-context language (Hall) and individuals from individualistic cultures (Hofstede) prefer low-context language (Hall). In the context of the current study, it can be noted that Taiwan is a collectivistic culture and Mandarin (Pu-pong-hua) is a high-context language, whereas countries from which the expatriates emanate are classified as individualistic and theoretically utilize low-context language.
**Face and Communication.** Face considerations also impact the communication process. “Face” behavior is the dominant social dynamics in the high-context Chinese culture. While all cultures give importance to “saving-and giving-face”, Hsu (1971) points out that the possibility of losing face has a potentially significantly higher detrimental effect on Chinese than on Western individuals. He states that losing face is the ultimate social sanction and is a real dread affecting the social system even more than physical fear. To guard against a loss of face, Chinese individuals unconsciously factor in face considerations in composing and sending messages. Consequently, in composing and sending messages, Chinese do make sure that the content of the message is correct or cannot be questioned. The Chinese individuals are likely to wait to respond in meetings and to delay reporting until projects are completed or results are certain (Du-Babcock & Babcock, 1987). This face-saving behavior of Chinese people is distinct from face-saving or enhancing behavior of Westerners.

As contrasted to an individualistic low-context culture, in a collectivistic high-context culture society, there is a dominant concern for maintaining the approval of one's group and an emphasis on helping others to save face. Chinese attempt to avoid embarrassing their important
counterparts because such behavior would result in a face loss for those individuals. To circumvent direct confrontation and to preserve interpersonal harmony, people from different groups are inclined to either smooth over conflicts by relaying their messages through non-verbal cues, delaying responses, or simply ignoring conflicts by not replying. If disagreements absolutely need to be expressed, people are socialized to phrase the negative comments so as not to humiliate their counterparts by finding excuses or blaming uncontrollable natural causes for the undesired consequences that underline the disagreements. Building an escape [xìa tài jìe] for the accused person allows that individual's public face to be saved. One of the facework strategies in collective cultures is to assist others to maintain the appropriate public image of "social self" and, in the process, ensure that one's own public self does not suffer (Du-Babcock, et al., 1995).

Face Behavior and its Impact on High- and Low- context Cultural Societies.

Face behaviors differ in high-and low-context cultures. Individuals from high-context cultural societies are concerned with both self-face and others' face maintenance while individuals from low-context cultures are concerned with only self-face maintenance. In high-context cultural societies, people strive to develop interdependence and reciprocal obligations, whereas individuals in low-context cultural environments value independence,
autonomy, and choice. In low-context cultural societies, face-negotiation is an overt communication process between individuals; the face-saving and face-giving moves and counter-moves are overtly spelled out in language, and the persuasion and solution in the communication process tend to be linear and logical.

In contrast, in high-context societies, face negotiation is wrapped in the web of social relationships and social roles as well as in the norms of behavior of the culture. Each member is expected to act out the expected behaviors that are appropriate for his or her role and to pay proper respect to the established roles of all others. Every face support or face violation act on another person has secondary implications for the actor's in-group and for intergroup relations. Ritualized behavior and adherence to social conventions are encouraged. Disagreements are ambiguously expressed and face-saving and face-giving appeals are frequent.

In the collective Chinese society (Hofstede, 1991), the virtues of harmony and the maintenance of "face" reign supreme. Confrontation and open conflicts are avoided. Maintaining harmony among individuals leads to the suppression of open conflict and confrontation in Chinese culture, whereas Western culture emphasizes the "open airing" of conflict and an active discussion to resolve conflict. In the on-the-record formal
interactions among individuals that transpires in meetings, these cultural differences alter the communication flow.

Research methodology

Sample

The data for this study were collected from 14 companies. Of 14 companies, four were locally-owned Chinese enterprises having import-export international business relationships and ten were multinational corporations (MNCs) headquartered in both the United States and Europe. These enterprises ranged from a domestic consulting firm to a producer of high-tech products with thousands of employees worldwide. The study included MNCs with recognizable names in variety of industries, such as banking, petro-chemical, construction, electrical, electronics, and health-care industries and Chinese-owned and management consulting firms. In total 79 personnel were interviewed, and 16 of them were expatriates. These firms were not selected randomly, but instead consisted of those which consented to participate in the study within available time parameters. Table 2 lists sample firms identified by industry, home country, and total number of interviewed expatriates, and Chinese managers.
Data Collection

The data for this paper were collected over a three-year period as part of larger study. At the pilot study stage, the sample was composed of four MNCs, and at the later stage, 14 companies were involved. The expatriates were interviewed in English and the local Chinese personnel in either Mandarin, Taiwanese, or English. In the case of the first-level Chinese managers, the interviews were conducted either in Mandarin or Taiwanese as the co-researcher was a native speaker of both languages.

Table 2: List of interviewees by Industry and Home Country

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Home Country</th>
<th>No. Expatriates Interviewed</th>
<th>No. of Chinese Subordinates Interviewed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Banking</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cosmetics</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer Products</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Consulting Agency</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electrical</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronics and computers</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House furnishing</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health-care</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home appliances</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Packing and Seals</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petro-chemical Pharmaceutical</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Analysis

Four intercultural communication patterns were identified, namely:
(a) communication initiated by expatriates without feedback requests, (b) communication initiated by expatriates with requested feedback, (c) local personnel initiated communication, and (d) interactive communication between expatriates and local personnel.

Communication Initiated by Expatriates without Feedback Requests

Figure 1 traces the communication process from its initiation with the expatriates to its dispersal throughout the organization. This pattern started with the expatriate composing and sending English messages to the meeting attendees. As individuals, the local Chinese meeting attendees received the transmitted English messages and then translated the messages into their native language. After the conclusion of the meeting, the local Chinese conferred among themselves in informal small groups and developed a consensus of the meeting’s major thrusts and the essence of the expatriate’s message. Together they reinterpreted the expatriate’s original English message into Chinese.
Rather than approach the expatriate for clarification either during or after the meeting, Chinese conferred among themselves. This behavior stemmed from both language and cultural influences. Individuals with more fluent second-language competency explained missed ideas and concepts to their less fluent English-speaking Chinese colleagues. This communication behavior avoided face threatening activities that would have consisted of publicly admitting a lack of understanding of the expatriate's English message and that was consistent with the Chinese cultural characteristics of showing deference to and respect for elders and superiors (Hsu, 1971). In this situation the expatriate represented an elder and a superior authority as a result of the expatriate's occupied rank in the organizational hierarchy. In addition, this clarification process among Chinese message receivers resulted in developing relatively uniform interpretation of the expatriate message. In the final step of the process, the meeting attendees conveyed the agreed upon messages to their colleagues and subordinates in their respective organizational divisions and departments.
Figure 1: Model of Communication Initiated by Expatriates Without Feedback Requests

Before and During Meeting

Expatriate(s) > Compose English Messages > Send English messages to Chinese meeting attendees > Attendees receive English messages

Individually translate to Chinese

Confer among themselves

Develop consensus

Convey (filtered and consensus) message(s)

Expatriate Personnel

Expatriate Personnel

Expatriate Personnel
The major focus of expatriate initial communication without feedback requests was information sharing and transfer. Information from the corporate and international level was conveyed to the local enterprise environment in Taiwan's subsidiary. Expatriates used these meetings as platforms to convey the background information on a variety of non-local topics including the importance of corporate philosophy and mission, the announcement of new products, and briefings on corporate strategy and industry trends. Especially important was the use of meetings to build and maintain corporate culture. Since all of the topics represented information available from expatriates and not from their local colleagues, the Chinese personnel felt that it was extremely important to have direct contact with the expatriates — especially the top-level residing expatriates or visiting overseas corporate staff. Chinese personnel representing multiple organization levels and departments were invited to these meetings. By having wide representation from different departments and various organization levels, expatriates were able to develop more direct contact throughout the organization and a better basis for indirect contact through meeting attendees with other enterprise personnel who did not attend the meetings.
Effective expatriate communicators adapted and modified their communication styles. Successful adaptation moved the language complexity to a level appropriate for second-language listeners and took into account that the Chinese local personnel had a wide range of listening and comprehension abilities. One British Chief Executive Officer (CEO), for example, made extensive use of the chalkboard. He wrote key phrases on the board to emphasize the important points and issues at meetings. Using simple and direct English, he concentrated on establishing broad guidelines for the Taiwanese division. Successful expatriates adapted a variety of communication practice including providing handouts, annouciating the pronunciation, slowing down the English communication speed, simplifying the content, and using presentation aids.

By explaining the reasons for and not the details of company programs, Expatriates were in effect providing an effective communication environment consistent with the high-context nature of Chinese culture. As high-context receivers of information, Chinese interpret the received messages and do not ask directly for feedback or for clarification. The meetings provided an environment in which the Chinese at multiple organizational levels had direct exposure to the message sent by expatriates and to the influence of the corporate culture. After receiving
the messages, the Chinese continued and completed the communication process in their native language and in ways reflecting their culture.

The Chinese managers, after receiving the messages directly from expatriate manager, could disperse the messages horizontally to their work groups. By having managers from multiple levels attend the informational meetings, the expatriate managers were in effect providing these Chinese managers with cues to interpret the messages. Consistent with a high-context communication style, the expatriates were providing more understandable messages than could have been provided in either written communication or through downward communication passed through the hierarchy. By adding non-verbal signals (content) to the verbal messages sent to the high-context Chinese receivers, expatriates were reducing but not eliminating the possibility of committing communication error. As one expatriate manager explained, "No matter what you communicate, the Taiwanese will change it. Having all subordinates hear the same message at least gives you a greater chance of having an effect on the changes."

Communication Initiated by Expatriates With Requested Feedback

Figure 2 diagrams the communication flow of those communication transactions in which expatriates requested immediate feedback during the
meetings. In this process, an expatriate initiated the communication and then expected a response from the Chinese meeting attendees. Even if the expatriate directed a question to a particular individual, the general pattern was the same. The Chinese considered the inquiry to be the “property” of the total group; this predisposition reflected the collectivistic orientation of cultural society, or to be more specific, the Chinese culture. There was a pause in the meeting while the Chinese attendees conferred among themselves in Mandarin. At the conclusion of these in-meeting conferences, the summarized message was transmitted back to the expatriate. It was not uncommon there to be a five or six minutes delay in providing feedback to an expatriate inquiry. Even though closely connected in time, the expatriate-Chinese and the Chinese-Chinese dialogs represented contrasting patterns. The expatriate-Chinese dialog was non-interactive and spaced over time while the Chinese dialog was interactive and immediate.
Figure 2: Model of communication initiated by expatriates with requested feedback

Expatriates

Compose issues and questions in English

Ask meeting attendees for comments and feedback

Attendees
Receive English message
Individually translate to Chinese
Confer among themselves in Chinese
Develop consensus

Elected spokesperson speaks for group and provides feedback
In the meetings, only senior Chinese managers spoke in detail; This being explained by the Chinese custom of deferring to those senior to themselves. A senior Chinese manager with higher second-language competency served as a spokesperson to express the concerns of the lower level personnel. The feedback presented by this spokesperson consolidated the opinions of the Chinese group of managers. Following the in-meeting Chinese language discussions, the Chinese spokesperson summarized the colleagues’ viewpoints and responded in English.

**Local Personnel Initiated communication (Usually Upward Communication)**

Figure 3 is a diagram representing the communication flow in local personnel initiated communication. In these communication exchanges, expatriates did interrupt and ask clarification questions. This communication exchange was dysfunctional for both parties; consequently, the frequency of such interruptions decreased as expatriates gradually learned to postpone their questions and comments or to phrase their remarks in such a way as to turn the communication pattern into interactive communication (see Figure 4).
The first step in the process was pre-communication. Chinese
prepared extensively and either memorized or wrote scripts for their
comments. By doing so, the Chinese thought they could best avoid face
threatening situations and reduce the uncertainty confronting them in the
formal meeting. Then, when called upon to offer verbal comments in the
meetings, the Chinese delivered their prepared comments.

Two patterns of local personnel initiated communication were
employed. In the first pattern, the local personnel participated in a
scheduled and distinct event. Both the local personnel and the expatriates
held common expectations regarding the nature, beginning, and duration of
the Chinese presentation. This shared expectation resulted in a smooth
communication flow. The Chinese individuals delivered their presentations
according to a pre-determined and announced agenda. For example,
Chinese individuals spoke and reported on marketing campaigns,
production programs, or engineering designs. Both expatriates and local
Chinese understood the cues and boundaries relating to this pattern of
communication.
Figure 3: Model of Local Personnel Initiated Message

Local Chinese Personnel → Prepare(s) message(s) through consensus → Appointed individual sends or reads memorized message(s) → Expatriate(s) receive(s) message(s)

Limited verbal feedback and questioning during meeting
In the second pattern the local Chinese delivered their presentation in the flow of a meeting. On the surface, this pattern looked like interactive communication (see Figure 4) but the local Chinese initiated a prepared statement when presented with a given cue. This presentation was not distinct event and occurred (a) most frequently when a specified person was called upon and (b) very infrequently upon the initiation of a Chinese individual.

As the local Chinese, especially those with low levels of English proficiency, had memorized statements in anticipation of being called upon, their delivered comments did not precisely fit a “give-and-take” communication flow. Extra material was usually included. Expatriates, especially those new to their overseas assignments complained that the local Chinese were “wordy” and did not respond adequately to questions. Veteran expatriates learned to hold follow-up questions so as not to interrupt the communication flow of the meeting.

The local personnel initiated communication model represented less fluent English-speaking Chinese personnel whose communication behavior emerged from an interplay of language and cultural factors. Avoiding potential face loss situations was a powerful motivating force. As Chinese
acquired experience and a corresponding confidence by communicating in official organizational meetings, the cultural influence continued to impact Chinese communication behavior but in less extreme form.

Communication behavior was determined by both language proficiency and cultural factors.

**Interactive Communication between Expatriates and Local Personnel**

Figure 4 represents the interactive communication pattern. Both expatriates and local Chinese initiated and responded in the communication exchanges and L2 proficiency was sufficient so as not to restrict an interactive flow in the dialogs.

There were three types of the interactive patterns as defined by communication situations. They are (a) primary working environments; (b) inter-organizational communication; and (c) and structured and repetitive situations. A prerequisite for this pattern to occur was that the local Chinese personnel possessed sufficient English proficiency that thereby allowed them to send and receive messages in a specialized communication area.

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Figure 4: Model of Interactive Communication

Expatriates → Interactive dialogs among meeting participants → Local Chinese
**Primary working environments.** This type of communication flow represented continuing communication between an expatriate and fluent English-speaking Chinese who were designated as language link-pins (Du-Babcock & Babcock, 1996). These language linkpins acted as the "ears" and "eyes" of the expatriates and were composed of the expatriate's immediate working group. Weekly meetings supplemented by daily informal discussions was the general practice for this pattern in the studied firms. These primary language linkpins provided a bridge between the expatriates and the local Chinese personnel in the organization. This pattern was a dynamic process representing sending, receiving, and feedback in a continual process.

**Inter-organizational Communication.** In most cases inter-organizational communication did not occur in a formal meeting format. These inter-organizational communication meetings between the host company personnel and the visiting individuals took place in the normal course of business activities and as the visiting personnel visited the respective companies. These continuing interactions were supplemented by more formalized meetings when special circumstances occurred. The medium of
Information exchange was in English because the Chinese personnel spoke English well enough so that translation was not necessary.

The researcher was fortunate to observe both the more informal meetings occurring in the course of normal business dealings and the more formal meetings. During the informal exchange, the enterprise visitors, usually vendors, interacted with Chinese managers who had a sufficient command of English to carry out the required transactions. To facilitate communication, a standard routine and a simplified vocabulary was usually adopted. According to the researchers' observation, the content of discussions between the Japanese and Western vendors were similar; however, the practice of social customs was different. Japanese salesmen always brought small gifts, whereas Western vendors only brought small gifts at Christmas.

Owing to Chinese cultural traditions (Hsu, 1971), one type of inter-organizational meeting took the form of a social occasion. To a Westerner unfamiliar with Chinese culture, this meeting was only a demonstration of Chinese hospitality and occurred prior to meeting for business purposes. For the Chinese, the social meeting served dual purposes. Besides showing hospitality, the Chinese informally gathered information about the business partner. As a high-context receiver of communication messages, the
Chinese was establishing and learning the content for the forthcoming reception of business messages. The Chinese was in effect establishing a relationship in which more confidence could be placed in the communication process.

The following is an example. The researcher attended a dinner with a visiting engineer from the United States of America which was hosted by the CEO of a Chinese firm. The researcher substituted in this case for company personnel with high level English skills who normally would have engaged the visitor in conversation. The engineer was in Taiwan to adjust the production process. After the dinner, which lasted until 10 p.m., and after what seemed like a short night’s rest, the CEO picked up the visiting engineer for 18 holes of golf the next morning at 6 a.m. Only after lunch did the CEO take the visiting engineer to the plant to adjust a relatively minor problem in the production process. The Chinese CEO had achieved his purpose; he had been able to observe the American who was suffering from the jet lag and lack of sleep and gain confidence in working with the American engineer in the case of subsequent production and machinery breakdowns.

**Structured and Repetitive Situations.** In situations needing interactive communication, all individuals ideally should contribute and share their
ideas and information. The objective of holding these meetings is to facilitate an interchange of ideas and information so that intelligent decisions can be made which are of higher quality than individuals could make alone or in smaller and informal groups (Wehrich & Koontz, 1990). Through a process of mutual influence, the group members share information, modify original positions, mutually influence each other, and arrive at broader-based and integrative decisions. As Adler (1991) points out, the potential for making higher quality decisions is greater for culturally divergent groups than for groups composed of individuals of the same culture. In the current study, this sub-pattern was the least frequently used of all identified patterns. The most prominent use was the case of loan approval meetings in an international bank. In these meetings, a group of up to ten expatriates and Chinese loan officers met to discuss and approve customer loans. All attending local personnel had sufficiently high English-language proficiency to take part in the require interactive communication process.

Conclusions and implications

This article models four communication patterns occurring in intercultural enterprise meetings in 14 Taiwanese enterprise environments. These communication patterns reflected interactions between managers
who possessed limited second-language proficiencies; either expatriates who could not communicate in Chinese or Chinese managers who exhibited various levels of English proficiency. These expatriates and local Chinese managers adjusted their communication styles to compensate for language deficiencies and cultural differences.

Four communication patterns occurring within intercultural organizational meetings were identified. They are: communication initiated by expatriates without feedback requests; communication initiated by expatriates with requested feedback; local personnel initiated communication; and interactive communication between expatriates and local personnel. By structuring communication forums for direct interaction among expatriates and local personnel, these meetings, taken together, created the basis for intercultural communication and included the communication functions of sending, receiving, and feedback.

Of the four patterns, only interactive communication represented a completed and self-contained cycle of sending, receiving, and feedback. The other three patterns provided for the sharing of information (sending and receiving) but lacked self-contained feedback. The interactive communication process took place among communicators who were able to utilize the second language at appropriate levels to execute the required
tasks. The other three models represented only the sending and receiving phases and omitted the feedback cycle. Consequently, there was time lapse in the communication process and these breaks allowed processing (encoding and decoding) time for those less fluent second-language speaking Chinese personnel to digest and mutually explore the meanings of messages (receiving) and to prepare more thought-out and complete messages (sending).

By combining the four patterns and integrating them with other components of the enterprises communication system, there emerges a completed or total intercultural organizational communication system. With inputs from all of sub-system patterns, successful expatriate-local personnel communication contained all the basic elements of the communication model: sending, receiving and feedback. Relieved of the pressure for using interactive communication in all communication situations, the less fluent second-language Chinese respondents reported that they could concentrate their attention and energy toward sending (see Figures 2 and 3) or receiving (see Figure 1). Forcing active interactive communication in situations better suited for other intercultural communication patterns resulted in communication errors. Expatriates and local Chinese personnel who mutually learned to identify and utilize the
appropriate intercultural communication patterns were rewarded with more complete and accurate information and with an efficient structure for intercultural organizational communication.

Future research is needed to identify the communication dynamics in inter-cultural organizational meetings. By modeling the differing patterns occurring in these intercultural meetings, this article hopefully sets the stage for such needed empirical investigations. These investigations can add texture to the patterns identified in this article.

References


