

## *Cross Cultural Communication*

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### **Abstract**

With the imperatives of globalization, it has become inevitable that people of diverse cultures, backgrounds & linguistic orientations will meet and interact with each other at some juncture whether it is an educational institution, trading or companies having diverse work force participating in global economy. Where different perspectives cross ways, it becomes essential for thoughts to get across to all stakeholders with explicit clarity to avoid misunderstandings. There may be a possibility of communication casualties like missing the main idea of the conversation, misunderstanding or misinterpretation of one's words and being offended by use of certain non-verbal gestures. Each individual belonging to a particular culture has social habits or values that influence the verbal expression of emotions and even aspects of non-verbal communication, like gestures, facial expressions and body language. Symbols and images necessarily do not all translate well across cultures and need deeper than skin understanding to interpret and conclude justifiably. This paper, while suggesting cultural sensitivity and related aspects as the vectors to cross cultural communication, also highlights the major barriers to effective communication elucidated through a Primary research survey, conducted among Engineering students of one of India's premier institutes. The student profile are natives of the same country - India, they belong to different regions, culture, societal grade segregations and hence use different paralinguistic and prosodic features while communicating. The survey analysis examines the obstacles in effective communication, cross culturally, using evaluative parameters like difference in cultural norms, status and various other factors.

Keywords: cross cultural communication, culture, values, perception, paralinguistic, prosodic, non-verbal

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## **Introduction**

Most of us mistakenly assume that for successfully communicating we need to have command over use of language. We fail to recognize that effective communication between people cannot result unless we are fully aware of the corresponding culture of language. People use their own beliefs, customs and values to guide their words, their thoughts and even their actions. And they consider all of these as parameters to evaluate the words and actions of others. We define cross-cultural communication as a subject which focuses on the communicative activities of people from different cultural backgrounds and the essence and rules of the communicative activities (Jia, 1997, 563). When people are communicating cross cultures, there are breakdowns in communication primarily owing to different cultural perspectives each right in their own respect. As we are living in a shrinking world, cross cultural communication is critically important to be understood in all dimensions of human co-existence.

As my research substantiates and as I elucidate with few examples from that research, the underlying idea of “cross- cultural” I have also attempted to include speakers from the same country of different states, class, region, age and gender.

## **Overview**

During cross- cultural interaction, the behaviour of the person whom you are interacting with is often categorized as incorrect and inappropriate due to unfamiliar signals. The person is expected to adjust himself in order to adapt to the environment, which results in decrease in problem solving ability, adaptability and sometimes, increase in stress. This stress which accompanies the cultural adaptation can be termed as culture shock in today’s world. One must have the ability to communicate inter culturally in order to realize the purpose of communication. Both parties need to explicitly express their intentions while communicating. They need to scrutinize or monitor the minute details of the use of paralinguistic and prosodic features like tone of voice, pacing and pauses to show their attitude towards what they are saying with the aim of considering the other side’s preferences, establishing cordial acknowledgement and understanding and finally reaching a juncture of concurrence on opinions or discussions. It is very difficult to become actually competent in all areas, but to attain cultural awareness is not a herculean task. Many a time cultural errors are responded with anger and antipathy which leads to major breakdown in communication. To communicate effectively within a new cultural framework is a challenging task and one may face many painful experiences. Under such circumstances, one is expected to be focused on the inappropriate behaviour of the person rather than the person himself.

## **Examples Of Cross Cultural Differences**

In one of the sections of the instrument which I had designed for this research, I had asked my subjects to relate to an incident when they were put into complex situations while communicating cross culturally. The major barrier in cross cultural communication arises due to non-sharing of expectations about how paralinguistic signals are used to indicate what is meant by what is said. Upon clarification of cause of misunderstanding, it is amazing to notice that certain speech choices or pitch tonalities were intended to mean something but were interpreted to mean something

completely different. For example my research analysis shows that when North Indians especially students from Haryana use increased voice volumes to perform conversational business- as-usual, it seems to students from south that they are angry. Another interesting episode of cross cultural difference from my research analysis is - Intended friendly act of keeping a conversation going by a student of one culture was misunderstood or misinterpreted by another student from a different background as an unfriendly act of not allowing him a chance to talk and misjudged the situation as conversational dominance. However after sometime, it was realized that the cause was differences in their turn taking habits and ways of showing friendliness. Students of U.P. especially Hyderabad & Lucknow, as per their culture, wait until the other has finished talking before taking their turn to express themselves. But, the durations of this pause differs from culture to culture. In U.P, the pauses are longer in duration and students from Delhi consider a turn-taking pause as an uncomfortable silence indicating that the other person doesn't have anything to say. So they go on to fill the silence with the intention of smooth interaction between them. But the student from U.P. in this episode felt humiliated as he was interrupted and was not given a chance to speak. Yet another episode of cross cultural difference was conveyed by the students of Jammu and Kashmir pitted against their friends from Rajasthan. As per the culture of Rajasthan, people show their friendliness by asking direct and personal/darting questions which is quite untoward in Kashmiri style of communicating. In this incident too one of the students expressed his dislike to a series of questions that were personal in focus, and abrupt which were intended to show interest in him but had quite the opposite effect as he felt that he was caught off guard. After talking to both the groups, I realized that these darting questions were a sign of showing friendliness and they never expected answers from their friends. But the Kashmiri students felt offended and were very resistant to continue their conversation with their Rajasthani friends and resented the imposition.

Different values and ethics too attribute a lot to cross cultural differences. For example, North Indian students feel that South Indians are very cold and dull as they do not believe in many habits of North Indians like standing close, holding hands while talking and talking at the same time. On the other hand, South Indian students feel that North Indians are ridiculously talkative, insincere and superficial, trying to act like close friends when they are not. My research also reveals that in many cultures, overt expression of emotions are taken as a natural thing, while some believe that public display of excessive emotions is as an act of impoliteness, lack of control over one's feelings and even a kind of intrusion into someone's personal space. Similarly, 'Silence' is golden and a sign of respect towards the other person in some cultures, whereas the other cultures interpret 'Silence' as shyness or lack of dynamism. 'Touch' too has different interpretations in different zones.

The few examples stated above clearly show that inter-cultural communication competence has become a pre-requisite for cross-cultural communication. Inter-cultural competence is the multi-faceted ability, which requires not only linguistic command, but the preparedness of a person to be able to perceive and interpret various socio-cultural events and to manage confidently with cross-cultural encounters. Language and culture have to be dealt from a cross- cultural perspective to define various approaches to foster inter-cultural communicative competence. These include learning to respect and share one's own culture while developing a positive outlook towards other cultures; progressing from subjective and individual

state of understandings to mutual and wider interpretation of language of audiences not necessarily from the same background.

### **What Is Meant By Culture?**

According to Barnow (1973) “culture is a way of life of a group of people, the configuration of all of the more or less stereotyped patterns of learned behaviours which are handed down from one generation to the next through means of language and imitation” (P.6) Culture means the ways of thinking, acting and behaving that people have internalized in them and which are transformed into reality through their actions in the society. Values, beliefs and material products are the three most important components of a culture. Beliefs are basic personal orientation towards what is true or false, good or bad; beliefs can be descriptive or prescriptive which give people insight into how they should feel, think or behave. On the other hand, values are deep-seated orientations and ideals generally based on how we’ve learned to believe things ought to be or how people are expected to behave in terms of qualities like integrity, honesty etc. Also culture is reflected through material products like the food we eat, clothing that we wear and to some extent music.

Modern researchers are of the opinion that culture is a dynamic, organic entity that is developing gradually and continuously changing irrespective of geographic boundaries. Schwartz (2009), considers culture as a “dormant, hypothetical variable, existing outside the individual that influences the distribution of individual beliefs, actions, goals and styles of thinking through the press and expectations to which people are exposed”(p.128). Hong (2009) defines culture as “network of knowledge, consisting of learned routine thinking, feeling and interacting that exist as a body of knowledge and perceptions about a given people’s cultural reality” (p.4). If we look at different viewpoints given by different researchers, there are few elements of culture which are common in almost all the theories, which is; All of them view culture as a pool of cognizant but not consciously recognized thoughts, behavioural displays, belief and value sets that reach people across similar or dissimilar backgrounds and are deployed in inter personal behaviours of people in their every-day lives.

Thus we can say culture plays an important role in providing people with ratiocinative frame work for an understanding of the world and for functioning in it. It is culture which acts as a conciliator to bring about relationship among men and between men and their environment.

Culture is the barometer to assess a person’s interpretation of reality and the sub conscious communication that he encounters and the meaning he derives of the situation set, he finds himself in, individually or collectively.

### **Theoretical Dimensions of Cross Cultural Communication.**

Geert Hofstede in his study links dimensions of cultural variability directly with the cultural norms and rules that influence the communication behaviour. The major dimensions of cultural variations are:

- (a) Power distance
- (b) Individualism v/s collectivism

- (c) Self-construal
- (d) Low and high context.

Power distance is the degree to which cultures include status and power hierarchies against relative equality. It is the extent to which less powerful members of society tolerate unequal distribution of power. The extent to which people feel threatened by ambiguous situations, decide how they create beliefs and institutions to try and avoid unforeseen consequences. The culture that believes in high power distance interaction, its people often restrict dating, free contacts, which are taken for granted among people from low power distance interaction.

Another basic dimension of cultural variation is individualism versus collectivism or in other words the extent to which cultures value individual personal identity versus community identity. Tocqueville (1945) points out, "Individualism is mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to serve himself (or herself) from the mass of his (or her) fellow and to draw apart with his (or her) family and friends, so that he (or she) willingly leaves society at large to itself" (p.104). The psychological makeup of an individual is the result of this cultural dimension. Tomkins (1994) had reported that people in western countries are inclined towards positive or negative self-celebration, whereas Asians consider harmony between human and nature as another alternative. Individualism hypothesizes the focus on the person himself and establishes his own existence as being of prime importance. On the other hand, collectivism "pertains to societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong cohesive in-groups, which through people's life time continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty" (Hofstede, 1991, p.51).

Collectivism hypothesizes collaborative cultural considerations and regards mutual or co-operative social reckoning as over archingly important. Collectivist culture is more traditional in the sense that they value interdependence whereas individualistic culture which is less traditional seeks independence and emphasizes on pursuit of personal goals, interests and self-expression.

Self-construal is the way one looks at one self that is the self-concept: who I am and what is my ultimate aim in life? This dimension can be related to 'The masculinity-femininity dimension', where in masculinity symbolizes the cultures that assesses strength, aggressiveness, material success whereas femininity exhibits cultural preference for affection, compassion, nurturance and emotionality.

Low and high context is the degree to which a culture relies on unspoken reasonable gestures versus direct verbal communication. Hall (1976) identifies two types of cultures on the basis of communicating behaviour of an individual, namely 'high' and 'low' context cultures. He labelled communication style of collectivistic cultures high- context cultures and the style of individualistic cultures low- context. This division was based on how people interpret messages. People from low context culture, value verbal expressions and are more communicative as compared to people from high context culture, who are less verbal and thus give more emphasis on non-verbal communication. People from low context cultures are more direct, have low level of trust and take decisions on facts, whereas individuals from high context cultures are more interested in knowing the person with whom they are interacting so

as to enable them to take a decision. They are more oriented towards group success rather than individual achievements and believe 'I' wins only when 'we' does.

### **Importance of Cultural Transfer in Cross Cultural Communication**

The most prominent element in cross cultural communication is the cultural transfer of first language. Culture transfer is the cultural intrusion caused by cultural dissimilarities. There are two types of culture transfer: surface-structure transfer and deep structure-transfer. Surface-structure transfer is due to the difference in the culture of language forms and use of linguistic words. It is not possible for an individual to avoid transfer of the first language vocabulary. Here, the only way to avoid miscommunication is to know the implication of the word in accordance with an understanding of the corresponding culture.

The deep-structure transfer is psychological in nature in the sense the influence of life values and thought patterns are not clear through words resulting in miscommunication. People from one culture express themselves through indirect course and leave the rest for others to understand. In my data analysis of the conducted research, one of the students expressed his anger by saying that during the project work which involved three students, they agreeably decided to work on Sunday. The conversation among these three students went as follows:

Student I – Lets all of us work on Sunday to complete our project.

Student II – Oh! Great! We will be able to submit on time.

Student III – Yes, I think so. Sunday is a special day for me, do you know?

Student II – Why? What is so special about this Sunday?

Student III – It is my Dad's birthday!

Student I & II – Oh! How nice, hope you all have a good time.

In the above dialogue, student III, though didn't want to work on Sunday, didn't refuse directly, which he should have. His thought pattern according to his culture expected his friends to get the hint of his desire to spend that time with his father instead of working on the project. The other students didn't understand him because of the difference in the way of communication and thought pattern. This is an illustration of deep-structure transfer which exists in communication. According to the British linguist, Jenny Thomas, there are two types of failure in cross-cultural communication; Paralinguistic and Socio-pragmatic failure. (Thomas, 1983, 3): paralinguistic failure is the surface-structure transfer and socio-pragmatic failure is the deep-structure transfer. Thus culture transfer; both surface-structure and deep-structure are the major causes of cross cultural misunderstanding in communication. The most important method to overcome failure in cross cultural communication is to find out the methodology to improve the communicative competence.

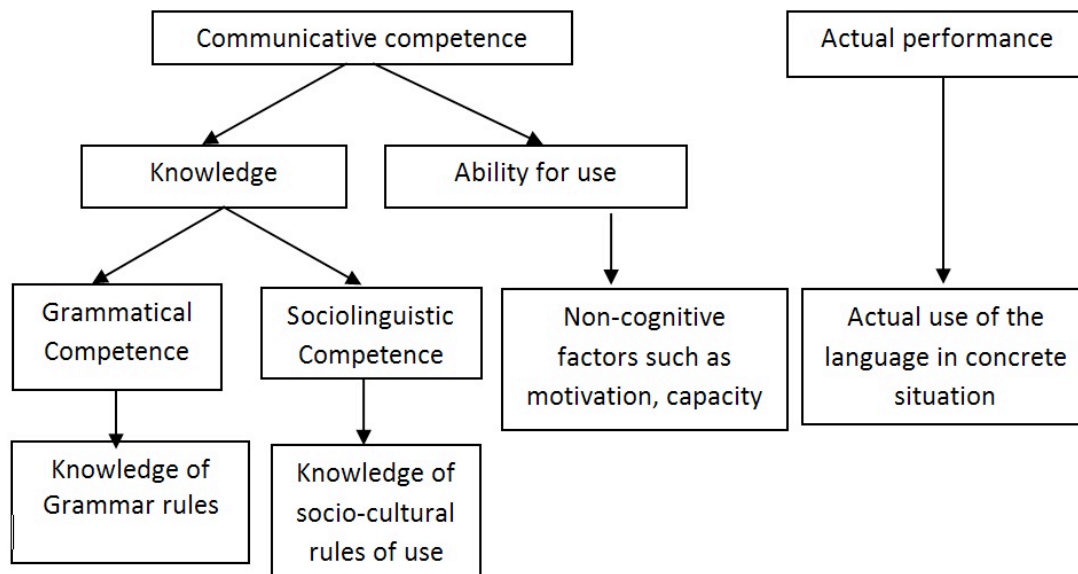
### **Cross Cultural Communicative Competence**

#### **What is Communicative Competence?**

Communicative competence as pointed out by Hymes (1971, 1972) laid more emphasis on the importance of language users to comprehend the social rules of a language for everyday interactions. According to Hymes, there are two areas of

competence: grammatical, socio-linguistic competence and ‘ability for use’. Communicative competence may be displayed differently depending on the situation.

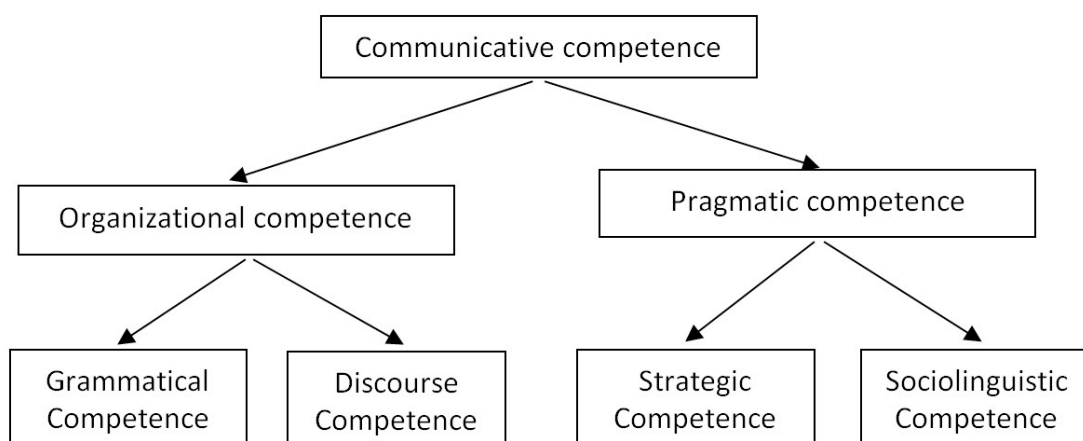
Hymes’ communicative competence model can be explained as follows:



**Figure 1 Hymes’ Communicative Competence Model**

According to the above model, communicative competence doesn’t only mean applying grammatical rules of a language to construct correct sentences but one should also have the knowledge of when and where to use these sentences. In other words it is the development of the learner’s cognitive capability and his ability to deal with communication casualties resulting from cross cultural differences.

Canale & Swain (1980, p.20) defined communicative competence as “a synthesis of knowledge of basic grammatical principles, knowledge of how language is used in social contexts to perform communicative functions and knowledge of how utterances and communicative functions can be combined according to the principle of discourse”.

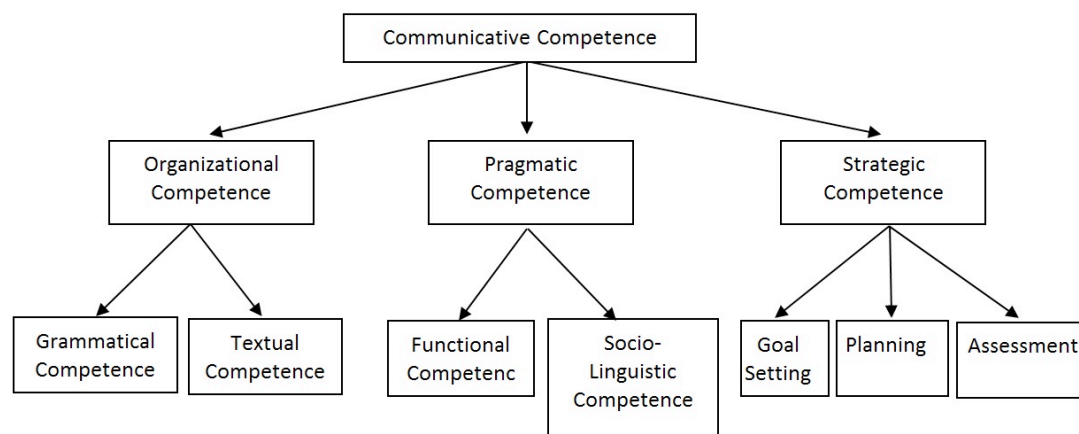


**Figure 2 Canale’s Model of Language Competence**

According to the above model, linguistic competence refers to correct use of language & skills while sociolinguistic competence is ability to select correct/opt way of expressing as per the demand of situation. Discourse competence means the ability to

plan and organize the discourse. Strategic competence is the ability of the learner to take corrective recourses during possible communication breakdown.

But, the 1996 model of Communicative competence by Bachman & Palmer (1982, 1996), consists of three components: “Organizational knowledge”, “Pragmatic knowledge” and “Strategic competence”. Organizational knowledge includes both grammatical and textual knowledge. Sociolinguistic rules and functional knowledge together form Pragmatic knowledge. Strategic competence is conceived of “ a set of meta-cognitive components, or strategies, which can be thought of as higher order executive processes that provide a cognitive management function for language use as well as in other cognitive activities”.(Bachman & Palmer, 1996,P.70)

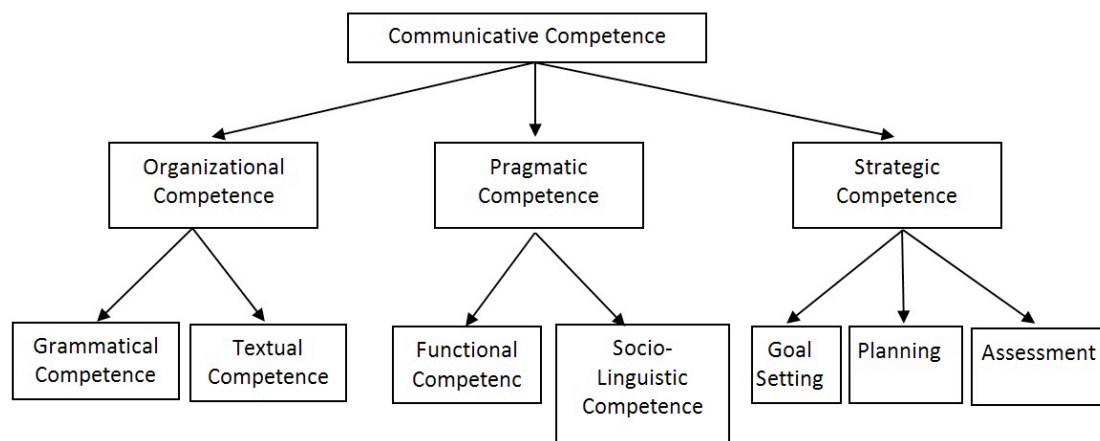


**Figure 3 Bachman’s Communicative Competence Model**

This is a more complicated model, dealing at the micro level in the sense; knowledge of grammar includes skills in textual level along with knowledge and skills in syntax, morphology and phonetics. Pragmatic Competence includes functional and situational use of language and strategic Competence includes accurate assessment of self and the others’ script, style and context of communicating to finally arrive at the aim of communication.

Although there have been reformulation of the different components of communicative competence as proposed by different researchers, they have failed to pin-point explicitly the competence of how to deal with cultural differences in their models. Based on the analysis and comparison of different models of communicative Competence, Wen (1999) proposed her own model of Cross-Cultural Communicative Competence, which consists of three components: Sensitivity to cultural difference, tolerance towards cultural difference & flexibility in dealing with problems of cultural differences.





**Figure 4 Wen's Model of Cross Cultural Communicative Competence**

Sensitivity to cultural differences includes both surface and deep cultural difference. One doesn't need special training to identify the surface cultural difference. But, the cultural difference in deep structure is difficult to comprehend as it is concealed in people's behaviour & thoughts. As such it is even more important to develop the sensitivity to the cultural differences consciously. Knowledge & Sensitivity to cultural differences are two different entities and knowledge of foreign culture is not an end but a means.

Tolerance towards cultural difference is the degree to which a person is ready to understand, respect or accept the cultural differences. Some people regard their own culture far superior as compared to other cultures as they feel that their culture is the integral part of their body language. To cultivate acceptance towards cultural differences, one has to accept that culture is not inborn and tolerance should be predicted on a broader relative horizon.

Flexibility in dealing with problems of cultural differences is the ability to resolve the communicative conflict resulting from cultural differences by adjusting to the listener's behaviour, in the light of mutual cultural background understanding. A communication process can be attempted to be made complete and successful through a continuous process of explicit communicative consultation and adjustment.

As discussed earlier also, the two main barriers during cross- cultural communication are linguistic and cultural communication barriers. If both parties don't possess the capability to sense cultural differences, it is not possible to come to 'tolerance' and 'flexibility'. Thus, Cross Cultural Communicative Competence can be acquired step by step by first sensitizing both parties to differences, then have them adopt a correct attitude towards it, so that they can respect each other's culture and lastly train them with special skills to deal with such differences.

### **Different Approaches for cultivation of cross-cultural communication competence in ELT.**

With phenomenal growth in globalization, the world continues to shrink and cultures collide. To overcome the cross- cultural communication gap, specific skills and knowledge are required. To preserve mutual respect and to minimize antagonism, the following approaches are suggested.

### **A. Knowledge Approach**

Since the broad concept of culture penetrates the field of religion, traditions, law, politics & economy, the students should be exposed to a significant quantity of information about historical, cultural, political & psychological issues. This knowledge will help the students develop cognitive/ psychological understanding of other people's customs, beliefs and values which are important in cross-cultural communication. The best way is to make the students read different literary texts, political & historical novels and biographies of great personalities of the world.

### **B. Situational Approach**

This approach involves creation of situations where students will be asked to interact with people from different cultures or they should be made to do video chatting with people from different countries, which will help students intensify their skills on listening and speaking.

### **C. Social Pragmatic Communicative Approach**

Grice's cooperative principle (1975) suggests that successful communication should observe the following four criteria: the maxim of quantity, the maxim of quality, the maxim of relation & the maxim of manner. The approach here will be the search for patterned systems of interactions within a given cultural system. Students should be made to use different communication models describing the interface of communication variables in different communication situations. Students should be taught to encode and decode topics of different cultures in order to help them understand the process of communication.

### **D. Meta-Cognitive Approach**

In meta-cognitive approach, the learners in learning activities are required to plan consciously, create learning environment and overcome the unfavourable factors. Here learners experience variables in learning situation, as well as the relationship changes these variables. They choose their own learning method according to the relationship. They adjust and control their learning method based on characteristics of the learning tasks. Checking the outcomes of their performance, learners adjust to appropriate measures and make learning smooth. For this approach, students need to have positive learning attitude, self-confidence and self-consciousness. This approach increases learner's autonomous learning ability.

### **E. Role Playing Approach**

Here the students will be subjected to play with characters and the things that happen in a certain situation in foreign language and certain actions. This will help the students improve their communicative competence like listening to the application, observation, imagination, flexibility, use of language and improvisation. They can be made to view others performance, which will help them to understand and learn, means of non-verbal communication.

### **F. Games and Exercises**

Games and exercises also play important role in the development of understanding and empathy in cross cultural situation when they are set up to parallel real life situation. Students overcome many of their initial inhibitions while playing games.

## **Conclusion**

To stay in today's global community; cultivation of cross-cultural communicative competence is obvious. It is imperative for all of us to be more sensitive to various cultures with unique customs, values and languages. The best way to avoid cross-cultural casualties is having knowledge of 'cultural awareness', 'cultural sensitivity' along with respect for other's cultures. Impressing one's own belief in solidarity without a sensitization of the diversity of cultures is not the most ideal way of establishing connections leading to acquaintances and further, relationships. Through the analysis of cross-cultural communication, various models of communicative competence and effect of cultural transfer on cross-cultural communication, it is suggested to design a course ware to develop cross-cultural competence, in the curriculum, aiming at acclimatizing the students to global cultural diversity and teaching them the art of acceptance , understanding and respect for differences in communication. By observing different strategies of communicative accommodation, other skills like integrity, positive attitude and leadership qualities can also be cultivated among students. If the students are able to understand the impact of cross-cultural communication, it will not be a difficult task to put the methodology into practice.

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