

Applying Case Study Method in Intercultural Communication Course: A Teacher's Experience and Reflection

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Abstract:

This paper explores the use of case study method in intercultural communication courses to develop students' intercultural competence. Two cases highlighting cultural differences in time orientations and verbal communication styles were analyzed to demonstrate how case studies apply intercultural communication theories into practices. Moreover, the "what-why-how" framework was applied in the analysis. The paper reflect on the teaching process and students' feedback, discussing the opportunities and challenges of adopting case study teaching method, including increasing student interests, overcoming complex conceptual challenges, and continuous teacher development. By linking cultural knowledge to real-world issues, case studies create an interactive learning experience that equips students with practical skills to navigate cultural barriers. Overall, case studies show promise in enhancing intercultural education through active explorations of cultural differences and merit wider use in this field.

Keywords:

Case Study Method, Intercultural Communication Education, "What-Why-How" Framework, Intercultural Competence, Cross Cultural Differences

1. Introduction

The methodology of using case studies in educational programs originated in the pioneering achievements of the Harvard University professional schools: the Harvard Law School (1870), the Harvard Business School (1920) and the Harvard Medical School (1985) [1]. According to David Garvin, a faculty member of the Harvard Business School, "these cases help students practice dealing with unknown and unforeseen circumstances, with varying conditions, and with surprises" [1]. Later the case method has been applied in curricula entirely or partially in economics, education, engineering, sociology and other disciplines.

Intercultural communication involves complex real-world situations. Achievement of positive results in the course of intercultural communication is an extremely complex process that requires the availability of special knowledge, skills, abilities,

and personal qualities of participants in the dialogue of cultures [2]. However, intercultural communication features conflicts of participants from different cultural background. Case study could be an effective means of preparing students with intercultural competence to face potential conflicts. Cases can present the language behaviors of interactants from different cultural backgrounds in authentic communication scenarios, allowing students to understand the complexity of intercultural communication. The case-based teaching approach can help link theories to practical scenarios, increase students' interests and improve learning outcomes.

Today, case study method has firmly entered the system of higher education [2]. Case studies in intercultural communication courses are an innovative yet challenging teaching approach. By reporting my experience of designing and applying case studies in the course, this paper aims to provide firsthand opinion and enlightenment for educators and researchers interested in adopting this interactive teaching method. The discussions and reflections in this paper also shed light on how to better integrate theories with intercultural issues, meet learning objectives, evaluate learning outcomes, and improve students' intercultural competence through case studies.

2. Application of Case Studies in the Course

The textbook of this course the teacher adopted is *Intercultural Communication in English* edited by Xu Lisheng and published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press. This textbook integrates authentic language examples and cases, explains Chinese-Western cultural differences and theoretical foundations of intercultural communication in both verbal and non-verbal forms. It features altogether 40 intercultural cases, which help students to combine theory and practice, grasp basic intercultural communication theories and apply skills in related contexts.

The author will take two cases to demonstrate the application of case study teaching method in the classroom (Case 1 & Case 2). The following table shows the theoretical basis and learning objectives (Table 1).

Table 1. Theoretical Basis & Learning Objectives.

Case 1	
Theoretical Basis	1. high-context culture & low-context culture 2. directness & indirectness verbal interaction style
Learning Objectives	1. Examine how communication styles are influenced by cultural values and norms. 2. Identify the main obstacles to effective intercultural communication resulted from differences in communication styles. 3. Explore appropriate skills and techniques to reconcile communication style differences and facilitate mutual understanding.
Case 2	
Theoretical Basis	1. monochronic time & polychronic time
Learning Objectives	1. Apply the concepts of time orientations and cultural orientations to understand the misunderstandings in the case. 2. Analyze how time differences lead to conflicts and cultural barriers between the interacting parties. 3. Discuss strategies to mitigate negative effects due to differences in time orientations in a culturally sensitive manner.

2.1. Case Study One

2.1.1. Case Description

The following is what Litz, a Finnish, tell about her Chinese mother-in-law.

Ten years ago, I met a Chinese doctor in the United States, and fell in love with him. In less than 6 months we got married. After my graduation we returned to Finland. My husband had long wished to bring his mother to live with us for a while. Last summer, after we re-decorated our house, we invited her over. You can well imagine how happy my husband was! And I was just as happy. I know being filial to parents is a great value Chinese people cherish. As wife of a Chinese, I try to be as filial as my husband.

Two days after my mother-in-law's arrival, I talked to my husband, Dick, while his mother was sitting in the garden enjoying the sunshine.

Litz: Dick, how long is your mum going to stay?

Dick: I don't know. I haven't asked her.

Litz: Why not ask her?

Dick: What do you mean by asking her?

Litz: I mean what I said. Just ask her how long she's going to stay.

Can you guess what was going to happen the next day? My mother-in-law overheard our conversation, and decided to leave for China the very afternoon. I had never expected that her visit should be so short. I tried very hard to persuade her to change her mind, but in vain.

2.1.2. Teaching Process

This case is verbal featured, so the teacher invited three students to separately play the roles of Litz, Dick and Dick's mother and another student to speak out the voice-over. This activity will bring the students into the real scenario and intercultural conflicts. Then the teacher asked the what-why-how questions and gave them 10 minutes to discuss in a group (what is the conflict, why there are these conflicts and how to solve the conflict?). When time was up, two or three students volunteered to share their opinions based on the what-why-how model.

What: The mother-in-law misunderstand Litz's question of asking how long she is going to stay.

Why: From the perspective of high-context vs. low-context culture, the Chinese mother-in-law comes from a high-context culture which values implicit and indirect communication, while Litz comes from a low-context Finnish culture where explicit and direct communication is the norm. Questioning the length of her mother-in-law's stay is a direct approach by Litz to plan ahead, but it is interpreted as an rude gesture in the high-context Chinese culture where such subjects should not be addressed so bluntly. This results in the misunderstanding and conflict between the two.

In terms of communication styles, Litz's question demonstrates a typically direct and confrontational interaction style in Finnish culture. However, her mother-in-law expects an indirect and implicit way of addressing this issue as favored in Chinese culture. A direct question about how long one's visit will be is seen as impolite and aggressive, while an indirect approach like implying the hope for a longer stay through hospitality and quality time would be more appropriate. The culture gap in communication styles leads to confusion and hurt feelings.

How: The differences in cultural context and communication styles caused Litz's question to be misinterpreted and mishandled in this intercultural encounter. Recognizing and bridging such differences are crucial for building understanding and maintaining relationships across cultures. For the students, this case reinforces the

concepts of high-low context cultures and direct-indirect communication styles through a real-life example. Comparing the Finnish and Chinese cultural patterns helps develop an awareness of how the same behavior can be viewed completely differently in different cultural contexts.

2.1.3. Teacher's Comments

Finally the teacher will comment on students' opinion and answers as feedback. Discussing this case helps enhance students' ability to analyze intercultural issues from different theoretical perspectives. They learn to adopt divergent thinking and relay both sides of the story emphatically. By role playing the conversation again with cultural considerations in mind, they gain hands-on skills to navigate subtle cultural barriers and achieve mutual understanding in intercultural communication. The challenges also highlight the fact that intercultural competence requires continuous learning and an open and flexible attitude.

2.2. Case Study Two

2.2.1. Case Description

Katherine came to Beijing in 1998 and found a job as an English teacher in a foreign language institute. Soon after her classes began, she found that her students showed no interest in her teaching and quite a few of them avoided attending her class. She was feeling quite upset and depressed so she decided to ask the Director, Prof. Wang, for help. One day, she came to the Director and told him that she would like to talk to him about her problem. The Director looked at his timetable and asked if they could meet at ten o'clock on Thursday morning and she agreed.

On Thursday she arrived at the Director's office at the exact time of their appointment when she found that Prof. Wang was talking with another teacher in Chinese. Seeing that she had come, Prof. Wang smiled to gesture a seat and asked her to sit down. She got herself seated, and the professor excused himself and carried on the talk with the teacher. About five minutes later, he concluded his talk and made a profound apology before he began to talk with Katherine. The Director showed great concern and asked her what the problem was. Just as she was specifying her problem, another Chinese teacher came in, with a form that apparently needed signature of the Director. The Director smiled an apology to Katherine again and turned to talk with that teacher, also in Chinese. Katherine became impatient, wondering why their talk should be interrupted since they had already made an appointment. She was so upset and got choked by their talking in Chinese in front of her that she became quite angry. Although their talk continued, she was apparently unhappy about what had happened.

2.2.2. Teaching Process

The teacher gave students 10 minutes to read and discuss the case based on the what-why-how model in groups. Then two or three volunteers shared their ideas.

What: The cultural conflicts come from different orientations towards time in America and China.

Why: Case 2 illustrates a cultural clash in time orientations between Katherine, the English teacher, and Prof. Wang, the Chinese director. Katherine demonstrates a monochronic time view that values promptness, scheduling and efficient use of time, while Prof. Wang shows a polychronic time orientation where overlapping activities, interruptions and flexible scheduling are common.

Katherine expects her meeting with Prof. Wang to start right on time at 10 am as scheduled, with no interruptions or overlapping activities as preferred in monochronic

cultures. However, Prof. Wang engages in another conversation upon Katherine's arrival and allows repeated interruptions during their talk. This reflects a polychronic time view where simultaneous interactions and shifting between tasks are normal. Having an appointment does not mean the parties' undivided attention and adherence to a strict timetable.

The cultural differences in temporal orientations lead to Katherine's frustration, impatience and eventual anger at the interruptions and inefficiencies. But from Prof. Wang's perspective, attending to emergent issues and maintaining relationships through unscheduled interactions are more important than promptness. He sees no conflict in shifting focus between the two meetings and believes the flexibility makes good use of time.

How: This case reinforces the concepts of monochronic and polychronic time introduced in the course. Comparing the norms and values around time in different cultures helps students develop cultural sensitivity. Recognizing own time orientation biases is a first step to navigating cultural time dimension barriers. Role playing the scenario with an understanding of the two time orientations builds skills in scheduling and interacting with cultural others.

2.2.3. Teacher's Comments

Case Two provides an authentic context to apply theoretical knowledge of cultural time orientations. Discussing this case helps students examine their assumptions, expand cultural frames of reference, and develop competence in reconciling cultural time differences in intercultural interactions. The challenges also highlight the fact that intercultural communicative competence is a continuous learning process.

3. Students' Reflections

After applying the case study teaching method and the "what-why-how" analysis framework in the course of intercultural communication. The author interviewed some students about their reflections. The following are part of their reflections.

The case study approach adopted in this intercultural communication course has provided me with valuable opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge in authentic social contexts and develop critical analysis and problem-solving skills. By examining complex intercultural scenarios, I gained a deeper understanding of cultural concepts and frameworks that shape people's communicative behaviors and expectations.

Overall, learning with case studies provides a multi-perspective approach to understand intercultural communication theories and contexts. The cases brought the conceptual materials to life by linking them to authentic human experiences I could relate to. The meaningful discussions with peers during and after the analyses also encouraged active participation and collaborative learning, and offered spaces for 'trial and error' to apply my intercultural skills. I believe through continuous practices, I can become more competent in navigating complex intercultural interactions in a global community. This approach has been highly facilitative to my learning experience, and I look forward to coming across more cases with intercultural challenges to explore.

The "what-why-how" model provides a structured framework for systematically analyzing intercultural cases. By following this model, I was able to develop a comprehensive and coherent understanding of the complex issues presented in the cases.

By separating case analysis into three stages of "what-why-how", this model scaffolds my

critical thinking process and ability to solve complex intercultural problems. It promotes a deep dive into cultural dynamics behind each case and practices of applying knowledge to real-world challenges. I can also receive targeted feedback from the instructor and peers at each stage to enhance my analysis and solutions. Overall, this model brings systematization, coherence and practicality to learning through case studies in this course. I feel increasingly equipped with critical analysis tools and a progressive problem-solving mindset vital for effective intercultural communication.

Analyzing practical cases was an illuminating process that rendered my learning visible and promoted internalization of knowledge. The case study teaching method deserves prominence in intercultural communication education to prepare students for participation in today's diverse social environments.

From the above reflections from the students, it could be concluded that the case study teaching method enable them link abstract theories with exact contexts, and the “what-why-how” model provide a framework from them to conduct the case analysis. They benefited from this teaching approach.

4. Teacher’s Experience and Insights

As the instructor, applying case studies in intercultural communication course poses opportunities as well as challenges. Case study teaching method fosters interaction and encourages students to participate, which increases their interests and motivation in learning intercultural communication theories and skills. However, guiding the students through complex and open-ended case analyses requires expertise, patience and effort.

In the two cases presented, students actively engaged in discussions to explore different perspectives. Their enthusiasm reflected the benefits of using real-world examples to stimulate learning. Some students showed frustration when cultural differences were unclear or challenging to reconcile. Continuous encouragement and clarification were needed to guide them through difficult conversations. Students’ performance and feedback helped evaluate the effectiveness of case studies and make improvements for future classes.

The two cases also highlight the importance of selecting culturally rich and thought-provoking cases, preparing students with related theoretical knowledge and providing ongoing support. The challenges reflect the fact that both teachers and students need to maintain an open and reflective attitude in such exploratory teaching and learning. With practice and continuous self-development, case study teaching method can achieve fruitful outcomes in intercultural education.

5. Conclusions

In summary, applying case studies in intercultural communication course creates authentic learning experiences that enhance students’ intercultural competence through exploring real-world cultural issues. However, it also requires commitment to ongoing learning and development on the teacher's part to overcome the difficulties. By comparing the time orientations difference in Case 2 and the communication styles difference in Case 1, students gain a deeper understanding of intercultural theories and build up skills to reconcile cultural barriers.

Case studies brings opportunities for both teachers and students to adopt new perspectives in a collaborative learning environment. Though challenging, the

interactive nature of case-based teaching motivates students to participate and engages them in profound discussions. This approach links cultural theories to practical scenarios, equips students with knowledge and tools to handle complex intercultural interactions, and prepares them for encounters beyond the classroom.

Case study teaching method shows promise in developing learners' intercultural sensitivity and competence through active explorations of cultural differences. With good case selections, adequate scaffolding from instructors and a reflective attitude, students can gain insights from challenging yet authentic learning experiences. This approach also encourages educators to keep innovating and refining our practices to enhance intercultural education. Overall, applying case studies in intercultural communication courses leads to rewarding outcomes and merits wider use in this field.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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