

An Intercultural Perspective on Conflicts Between Language Teachers

BY DOUGLAS J. GOODWIN, UNIVERSITY OF GUANAJUATO, MEXICO¹

In order to begin this paper properly the definitions of two primary concepts related to the topic are required—culture and intercultural communication. E.B. Taylor in O’Sullivan offers this definition of culture:

Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs and other capabilities or habits acquired by members of a society. (1994:2)

It is these characteristics which are shared by people that form specific groups or communities.

Intercultural communication involves communication between several cultures. The cultures are not necessarily national entities but rather various groups of people who share beliefs, traditions, art, language, behavior, etc. There are three components involved in successful intercultural communication: knowledge of the target culture, awareness of the target culture, and skill in performing in the target culture.

There are three main areas in language education and culture. They are culture as content, culture as communication, and culture as a methodological factor. The focus of this paper is not specifically on cultural studies or communicative language learning but rather it is focused on learning more about and trying to better understand the interculturality where I work. While arguably every workplace in the world has internal conflicts, I believe that there must be a logical explanation for them. I believe the interculturality of the staff is the starting point for trying to understand some of the conflicts that exist between some of the teachers at the Language School of the University of Guanajuato.

I would like to believe that the people who work in the Language School are mostly intelligent, hardworking individuals who try to carry out their labor in the most professional way possible. Therefore, it is my intention with this paper to demonstrate that the conflicts among the teachers on

¹ This is a refereed paper. The author can be reached at goodwin@quijote.ugto.mx.

staff are in fact due to intercultural aspects and not just personal issues or bad attitudes.

There are nine languages taught at the Language School. Of those, English is the department with the majority of the student demand, which also means that it is the department with the most teachers—half of the teaching staff are English teachers. The current director and academic chair are also both English teachers by profession. In addition, since English is the most desired language to study in Mexico, the university appears quite willing to support the department in terms of growth and advancement, as was seen via the enormous amount of support for the completion of a project for a Bachelor's degree in ELT, which began in August 2000.

The above-mentioned information establishes certain cause for some tension between the English department and other language areas, which are made up mainly of Mexican teachers. Resentment might be a better word than tension in this case. That is to say, some colleagues have voiced their objections to having a foreigner as their director, as well as having more importance be given to a department that is made up primarily of foreign teachers.

On the other hand, there are a number of foreign teachers who seem to project certain arrogance to their Mexican co-workers. I will use the terms “foreign” and “U.S.” as synonyms to describe the non-Mexican teachers since most of the foreigners are indeed from the United States. And they come to Mexico with different attitudes about the target culture. There are those who arrive with the well-known attitude, “everything in my country is better,” and they seem to consider everything and everyone here as inferior to them and what is theirs (education, opinions, etc.) There are also those who would question every decision made by a Mexican teacher or Mexican superior because apparently they expect everything at our workplace to be the same as it would be in a workplace in the United States.

There is also the issue of the “defensive Mexican”. Mexicans can be very proud people, but they can be especially nationalistic. If someone from another country appears to be “stepping on a Mexican's toes”, the Mexican can often quickly become aggressive in the defense of his / her national pride, in whatever situation.

Because of these mentioned reasons there are often confrontations between colleagues. Interestingly, during these confrontations, the real feel-

ings of the individuals rarely, if ever, come out. Normally each side of the discussion maintains a superficial “professional” stance while taking turns jabbing each other into arguments about school policy. It is only afterward, while each is in their respective “corner” do the real attitudes surface. When individuals are “safe” within their group they feel secure about voicing what they really feel about the other individuals and the situation.

Here is an example to illustrate a conflictive situation at the Language School. Some members of the English department, who were more or less trained in teaching ELT, offered a methodology workshop to the teachers from another language department made up of entirely Mexican teachers. The immediate response from those teachers was, upon hearing about the workshop, “Why would we attend such a workshop? These people know nothing about teaching our language” (the one they teach). Nevertheless, they were informed that attendance would be mandatory, so their attitude did not improve.

The English teachers, on the other hand, already had (have) their own opinion about the teachers in question. The fact that no one in that department has any training in second / foreign language teaching has led some to believe that they are not competent teachers. While no one from the English department has actually been in the classroom to observe them in action, there have been reports and complaints that have reached the administration, as well as the university Rector, which have fueled the English department’s perception, or misperception, of them and their ability as teachers.

The workshop was given and the Mexican teachers reluctantly attended. While I was not involved in this workshop, I had the opportunity to speak to the people who were involved. The reaction I heard from the attending teachers generally was, “What we saw in there is of no use in our classrooms.” or “Your colleagues think they are superior.” By my “colleagues” they referred to those who gave the workshop, although I sensed they might have been trying to vent their frustration at the entire English department in general. In all honesty, I thought their remarks were very narrow-minded and unfair to say. Especially since the workshop was supposed to be helpful for them. The people who gave the workshop had remarks such as, “Those people just refuse to accept that someone else might be able to teach them something new.” or “They don’t have any idea what they’re doing.” These statements also struck me as unfair. As this story concludes, the English department continues to criticize that department, while those

teachers continue to resent the insinuations that they are not good teachers. The resentment is so much that in social gatherings organized by the Language School, they are always the only people who do not attend, or if they do attend, they usually group together and isolate themselves from the rest.

An Intercultural Perspective

This seemingly constant friction in the Language School, as illustrated above, can be explained from an intercultural standpoint in different ways. There are the cultural differences that exist between Mexicans and people from other parts of the world, mainly the United States. Holliday's (1999) article on "small cultures" provides another valid rationale. The concepts of culture shock and perception / misperception also shed light on explaining why there is so much tension at the Language School.

A comparison of the two main cultures in question here, Mexico and the United States, is carried out using Hofstede's (1986) "four dimensions of national culture." The word "culture" is used loosely in this section primarily to distinguish the different groups or individual teachers at the Language School who come from different countries. This comparison will demonstrate some of the obvious differences. I will then relate them to the Language School and its issues.

First of all, the power distance in each country differs. According to Hofstede (1986), O'Sullivan (1994) and my personal experience, Mexico is a place with large power distance. That is, Mexicans generally accept their inferior position in the chain of command. The United States, on the other hand, has a smaller power distance. An example for Mexico would be the society and its government. The same political party has ruled Mexico for 71 years. Everyone has an idea about the extremes of corruption and violence that the government has carried out in order to stay in power, but they have accepted it as normal and the only way. Only last year, during the presidential campaigns, were there signs of that acceptance declining. However, most of the people I spoke to indicated that although they were going to vote for the opposition party, none of them believed that their candidate would win; or they believed he would win, but he would not survive long enough to be sworn in as president. It was not the skepticism that got my attention, but rather the ease and resignation in their voices when they said it.

Mexico is considered a country with low individualism, while the United States is just the opposite. Hofstede defines a collectivist society as

“...tightly integrated...” (1986) which in my experience describes Mexicans both in country and abroad (e.g., Mexican communities in the United States). I have discovered this to be true thanks, in part, to my wife (who is Mexican) and her family. It would seem that two or three times a year a new “cousin” appears at our door to visit. I was convinced that all of the relatives had attended our wedding, but I was obviously mistaken. Nevertheless, these new “cousins” almost never fail to appear with some sort of special circumstance that requires some kind of assistance. My “individualist-loosely integrated background” (Hofstede 1986) has conditioned me to react quite defensively—and often aggressively—in these cases. I usually behave based on reflex and say something that embarrasses my wife. My wife’s reflex, on the other hand, is to look for a solution to the problem, no matter the sacrifice or cost. She does this knowing beforehand that these people most likely would never have visited us had they not needed something, nor will they likely ever return unless they need something again—to the date I have not seen most of these cousins a second time. My wife and her family do not do these things because they are gullible or because they can not say “no,” but rather simply because they are members of the same family and would expect the same help from their relatives if they were ever in need. For my part, I have learned to accept that my wife is like that, and I now recognize it as a noble quality. Could I be still be learning to adapt to Mexican culture after ten years? —Evidently.

In regard to uncertainty avoidance, O’Sullivan (1994) and Hofstede (1986) list Mexico as strong and the United States as weak. Mexicans, for the most part, are not risk-takers. In fact, they are a strongly Catholic and nationalistic society. Religion and national pride are the main “crutches” of Mexican society. Whenever there is an economic crisis—usually every six years—the people’s attention is seemingly diverted to news and events that would appear to focus on matters distant from their current situation. It is not unusual at these times to note a large amount of publicity for soccer games or other events for entertainment. Likewise, the church suddenly appears in the news more frequently to remind everyone of his or her faith in God; and, without a doubt, more and more people find their way to a church to pray for better times. The praying does not usually work to improve people’s financial situations, but it does tranquilize them and help them learn to live with less in every crisis.

The United States, however, is a more risk-taking society. Religion plays a much less important role, and the people are seemingly more toler-

ant to the advent of something new. In fact, it is not uncommon to hear a Mexican criticize the United States as cultureless without its own traditions and without faith in God. Mainly immigrants who arrived to the continent with their own cultures, traditions, beliefs, etc. form the United States. So, it is understandable why someone from a predominantly Catholic society would criticize a country where more than 250,000,000 people are divided into the numerous religions from around the world. While they do have faith in their own “God” it is not necessarily the same God for everyone.

The one dimension that the two cultures share in common is that of masculinity. Both stress material success, certain competitiveness and assertiveness more than they do “quality of life, interpersonal relationships and concern for the weak” (Hofstede 1986). The already high divorce rate in the United States and the rapidly growing one in Mexico could be one indicator of the lack of interest in interpersonal relationships in both “cultures”.

The Four Dimensions and the Language School

As mentioned earlier, Mexico is primarily a collectivist society, whereas the United States is more individualist. It is not any different in the Language School. The Mexican teachers tend to depend on each other more. They mostly spend their preparation time and / or free time with each other both in their respective language areas and together. The foreign teachers, on the other hand, usually spend their time alone or in small groups. During staff meetings, where a lot of the tensions surface, it is common to see the teachers segregated into groups, either by language area and / or nationality. It has also been common to see a group of Mexican teachers that team together in a debate against one or two of the foreign teachers. The foreigners involved in the debate are usually left to fend for themselves, while the Mexican teachers defend each other to the end. This illustrates one difference between the Mexican and foreign teachers. Perhaps another reason, and more important, for some of the tension is that the collectivist Mexican teachers resent the individualistic attitudes of the U.S. teachers. The Mexican teachers are accustomed to working in unity, developing ideas together, and supporting each other throughout a process. They do not always agree with or appreciate the “lone wolf” approach of individuals who present their ideas without help from the rest. Possibly they perceive that attitude as overbearing and arrogant.

The differences in uncertainty avoidance play a large role in the conflicts at the Language School. Most of the teachers in all of the language ar-

teachers have acquired their knowledge about teaching from their own learning experiences as well as from their hands-on teaching experience. Very few (English teachers included) have had any formal training in teaching second languages. Needless to say, some of those teachers are quite set in their methodology and absolutely refuse to change or experiment with something different. Hence, when someone comes along suggesting that there might be a better way to do their job, or that they are not teaching the way they should be, of course they are going to be resistant, defensive and often times angry. This I believe was the primary reason behind the reactions from the methodology workshop mentioned at the beginning of this paper. This is not just a problem between Mexican and foreign teachers but also between U.S. teachers. There are people who are very comfortable in their methodology, or lack thereof. And they reject any insinuation that they need to improve their teaching.

An interesting thing happens with the power distance at the Language School. Mexico has been labeled as a high-power distance society, but it has been my experience that in the Language School that is not always true. I have worked under three different directors—a Mexican woman, a Mexican man and currently a woman from the United States. In each case the power distance as well as the emotions of the staff have varied. d'Iribarne (1989) in Hofstede (1994) reports that in France “there is an extreme diversity of feelings towards superiors: they may be either adored or despised with equal intensity.” Such has been the case at the Language School, depending on who the director has been at a given time. When a Mexican woman was director the staff mostly respected her authority, but no one respected her ability to manage a language school. This was due in part to the fact that she was an attorney with no language teaching experience. Many teachers, foreign and national, tried to deal with her assistant, the academic chair, instead of with her, with the idea that he knew more about the job. Everybody seemed to like her, especially since she made a lot of effort to be friendly. Even still, few people considered her capable of administering a language school. Later on, when the Mexican man took over as director, there was absolutely no respect for him as an authority or as a person. In fact, to the contrary of what would be typical for a high-power distance society, the Mexican teachers complained bitterly about his performance to university authorities. He lasted only four months at the Language School. Interestingly the foreign teachers complained about him also, but not together with the Mexicans.

Now the director is a foreign woman. There is respect for her authority and for her ability, for the most part, since she is a trained language teaching professional with more than 20 years of experience. However, there is still animosity and there are conflicts between her and some of the Mexican teachers. Some of the Mexican teachers openly question her performance as director among themselves and with other teachers. In staff meetings they seem to seek confrontation with her by challenging anything from policies to registration schedules. When this occurs, usually a foreign teacher gets involved and the debate is transferred from the director onto another individual. While this may appear collectivistic, it is worth mentioning that the individual who gets involved normally battles alone and becomes public enemy number one for a while.

Power distance alone is not the cause for tension; but combined with the dimension of masculinity, I believe it could be a strong factor. Mexico is still a very masculine-oriented society, where women occupy very few positions of power. As Hofstede explains, the role for women in a masculine society is “to serve and to care for the non-material quality of life, for children and for the weak” (1986). For some of the Mexican teachers at the Language School, it would appear that having a woman as their superior goes against this idea, and it is extremely difficult—if not impossible—for them to accept.

It is possible that the current director sets off the Mexican teacher’s uncertainty alarm bells as well. It is worth noting that the director may be perceived as a power-wielding foreigner by some. Being perhaps the most experienced and most qualified language teacher at the Language School, she can use, and has used her authority to require teachers to take training courses and participate in other activities that they would have otherwise ignored. This creates resentment towards the director and hence the criticism. There are teachers who believe that those (from all departments) without formal training should seek it and we support the director’s decisions in that respect. This support has been cause for animosity from certain groups in the Language School. I would prefer to believe that it is due to those less or non-trained teachers’ ideas about improving or not improving, but I have to recognize that it could be the way that our ideas are expressed to them. I will address this later on in the discussion of Holliday’s small cultures (1999).

A Small Culture Perspective

Another possible explanation for the conflictive situation at the Language School could be found in Holliday's concept of small cultures. Beales et al defines small cultures in Holliday (1999) as "...any social grouping from a neighborhood to a work group" (1967:8). In other words, while the Mexican teachers and the foreign teachers come from their respective "national" cultures, they also come from their own individual "small" culture(s). An example of this would be where one of the Mexican teachers on staff comes from a state in the extreme north of Mexico where most everyone in the small town is involved in the mining industry. Others come from larger more cosmopolitan cities of Mexico. There are others from small farming communities throughout the state of Guanajuato, as well as from City of Guanajuato. Most have completed undergraduate studies in very different fields ranging from History to Business Administration. The same can be said for the foreign teachers, who come from places like New York, Texas, and California, among others. There are even some people from Canada, Japan and the U.K.

What this translates to is that the tensions at the Language School may not necessarily be a result of a Mexican vs. foreigner conflict. Instead it could be a result of a conflict or conflicts between several existing small cultures as well as between the newly formed small cultures there. By "newly formed" I refer to the grouping of individuals from different cultures to form a new small culture such as a work group. An example is the formation of the English department. It consists of more than twenty teachers, each coming from their own set of beliefs, behaviors and language; they come from all of the previously mentioned places. Placing these people into one department provokes a process that involves, as defined in Holliday (1999:248) by Crane, "...each member using her or his culture-making ability to form rules and meanings in collaboration with others" (1994:11). Thus, new small cultures are formed in different language departments, as well as among groups of teachers who do not necessarily work in the same department but for some reason work together.

The conflicts arise when there are differences in the beliefs or behaviors from one small culture to another. A common example of this in Mexico is in the use of the formal "*Usted*" in Spanish. Depending on the region, community or small culture that an individual comes from, the formal structure is used differently. It has been my experience both in and away from work that people from smaller communities tend to use "*Usted*" more often with their superiors, elders and professional people. However, those from

larger, cosmopolitan zones tend to use the informal “*Tu*” form more often. This difference in usage can cause conflict because there are colleagues at the Language School who, because of their age, position or educational level, expect to be addressed in the formal form but they are not. So, they are offended by the “disrespect” towards them and often respond with a negative, sometimes aggressive attitude.

Singer states, “...it almost never occurs to us that anyone could possibly have different core beliefs.” He also includes the statement, “they just don’t think the way we do” (1998). These two quotes sum up the root of many of the conflictive situations at the Language School. Most of them happen because we as individuals do not recognize that people come from different cultures where they hold values that are different from ours. Not only do we not recognize them, we tend not to respect “...that their values are as important to them as ours are to us” (Singer 1998:37).

Along those lines, O’Sullivan (1994) and Hofstede (1991) offer some other perspectives that could serve as possible explanations for some of the conflicts. O’Sullivan mentions the idea that people usually perceive their own cultures in a more positive way than they do other cultures. It is not uncommon to hear people claim that the people in their culture are friendlier, more intelligent, and more hardworking than other cultures (1994:15). There is also the idea of “cultural superiority,” which basically means that people hold their own culture in a much better position than they do other cultures when comparing.

Culture shock is also an important factor. According to Hofstede, foreigners commonly experience some kind of culture shock. While a foreigner may try to learn some of the language or traditions of the new culture, it is probable that he or she will not be able to understand the underlying values. The foreigner basically “returns to the mental state of an infant, in which he or she has to learn the simplest things over again”. This “regression” tends to cause the foreigner to feel “distress, helplessness, and hostility towards the new environment” (1991:209).

Having lived in Guanajuato, Mexico for more than 10 years I have experienced both of the situations described by O’Sullivan and Hofstede. I have also witnessed them with the teachers at the Language School. It is common for the new people (teachers) to go through this. They often arrive with a superior idea about themselves and their culture, and the Mexican (as well as others) teachers usually interpret that as arrogance. This leads to

high tensions because some of the Mexican teachers have the same “superior” ideas about their own culture. Now it is not an issue of arrogance but rather one of “who is right and who is wrong”. The answer, of course, is “Everybody”. I’d like to compare this issue to that of abortion. There will most likely never be an agreement between the two sides on whether it is correct or not, but anti-abortion activists and pro-choice activists will continue arguing, fighting, and even killing over it. I foresee more intercultural understanding in the future, but I believe the conflicts caused by intercultural differences will never end—neither in the Language School or the world. It is possible, however, to reduce the number of conflicts through more intercultural understanding.

New foreign teachers often go through culture shock. When the frustration of not really knowing what is going on around them in the new culture sets in, hostility towards the new culture seems to be a common defense mechanism. It is, however, a poorly received mechanism by the host culture (Mexico) and leads to confrontations between teachers at the Language School. It also occurs between students and teachers, but that is an area too broad to include in this paper. It is not unusual for foreign teachers to return to their native countries after only one or two semesters, probably due to their inability to adjust to the new environment. I have heard several former co-workers say, as they were leaving the Language School and Mexico, “This place is backwards” , or variations of that sentiment with diverse language forms. I translate those words into “I can’t adjust or they won’t adjust to me” . It reminds me of the previously mentioned Singer quote, “...they just don’t think the way we do” (1998:41).

One last area which plays an important role in explaining possible reasons for conflict in the Language School is that of perception—or perhaps more importantly—misperception. Singer explores this area defining perception as a “process by which an individual selects, evaluates, and organizes stimuli from the external environment” (1998:10). He also mentions:

It is not the stimulus itself that produces specific human reactions and / or actions but rather how the stimulus is perceived by the individual that matters most for human behavior. It is perhaps the most basic law of human behavior that people act or react on the basis of the way in which they perceive the external world. (1998:10)

In the Language School the way we, the teachers, perceive each other's actions, language, attitudes, etc. dictates our response or behavior towards each other.

The point I am trying to arrive at is that while we all perceive, we do not all perceive in the same manner. Singer supports this notion in mentioning, "No two humans can communicate 100 percent accurately because no two humans have learned to perceive identically" (1998:24).

Knowing this, I suggest that another of the principal problems resulting in miscommunication and conflicts where I work are "misperceptions." Misperception is defined as when people are "wrong in the way they perceive situations, motives, or intentions" (Singer1998:49).

An example of misperception at the Language School involves me personally. Since beginning an M.Ed. program at the University of Manchester, I was really excited with some of the subjects and offered small workshops to my English department colleagues to share the new ideas with them. The response was overwhelmingly positive, so I decided to offer a one-hour presentation on using video in the classroom to all of the other language departments. The response from those who attended was positive. However, when I saw a member of another language department who had not attended, I commented to him, "Too bad you couldn't make it. Let me know if you'd like me to schedule another workshop". His response was, in a surprisingly aggressive tone, "Don't bother. I don't need you to tell me how to teach!" What I had intended to be friendly idea sharing was somehow perceived as prepotency. Of course, I was offended and immediately reacted defensively. We misperceive usually because we assume that our perceptions are always the correct ones. But if we all perceive differently, how can we all be right? Singer states:

We know that we perceive; we don't know what we don't perceive. Since there is no way that we can know what we don't perceive, we assume that we perceive "correctly"—even if we don't. (1998:26)

Hence, the source of disagreement and conflict. We are always right, and they are always wrong.

What Path to Take?

I have taught at the Language School since the latter part of 1992, and it is safe to say that there have been tensions and conflicts consistently since then. There have been periods when the problems are less frequent

and periods when they are exaggerated. Often the conflicts involve only a few people, but they sometimes extend to entire groups.

A goal now would be to share some of this information with my colleagues. The trick is going to be presenting the information without encountering the same defensive attitude as in the past with other situations. The information needs to be presented in a way so that it does not appear pretentious.

I would begin with a series of example scenarios such as those mentioned by Goodman in Brislin and Yoshida (1994:129-147). However, it might be appropriate to include scenarios that come from or could be easily compared to the classroom situations at our work place. Obviously, this approach begins with teacher-student interaction, which is not addressed in this paper; however, I see it as a way to introduce the subject and lead my colleagues into a discussion on intercultural awareness, knowledge, and skills. Then a discussion on some of the possible causes for breakdowns in intercultural communication would follow.

The objective of the discussion is not to resolve the conflicts but rather to provide people with information on which to reflect. My hope would be that upon reflecting and discussing a little, people will have another perspective when they experience something that is considered different from what would be “normal” in their own culture. I would like to present the information so that they apply it to conflicts they perceive instead of giving them my possibly biased version of the conflicts. Ideally, the discussion would lead to a brainstorming session of conflicts and tensions they have detected at work. Then, we could address some of the possible reasons for them. However, if the response to this discussion is similar to previous responses to other activities, then I may have to settle for whatever participation I can obtain. If nothing else, I plan to continue talking to colleagues over coffee, and I’ll hope that they will experiment with the ideas and that word-of-mouth will spread the word to other colleagues.

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