Learning about Cross-cultural Communication by Movies

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Abstract. In cross-cultural courses, the teacher would inevitably face the challenge of providing cross-cultural experiences in teaching, and students are eager to have real exposure to other cultures. One way of simulating the feel of entering another culture is through movies. There are many interesting movies telling about cultural conflict, cultural shock and miscommunication in transnational experiences. By analyzing some cross-cultural examples in movies, the teacher could provide authentic examples close to real life for students to learn and understand communicative skills between two or even more cultures. This article provides a way of understanding cross-cultural communication by three movies: \textit{Lost in Translation}, \textit{My Big Fat Greek Wedding} and \textit{The Joy Luck Club}. The research shows how films can be used in direct reference to concepts related to cross-cultural communication. It also illustrates the review of the movie can enrich the class discussion and reserve the voice of the culture of interest.

Introduction

Cross-cultural communication is a field of study that looks at how people from differing cultural backgrounds communicate, in similar and different ways among themselves, and how they endeavor to communicate across cultures. Context is the most important cultural dimension and also immensely difficult to define. The idea of context in culture was an idea put forth by an anthropologist Edward T Hall. Hall breaks up culture into two main groups: high and low context cultures. He refers to context as the stimuli, environment or ambiance surrounding the environment. Depending on how a culture relies on the three points to communicate their meaning, will place them in either high or low context cultures. He explains that low-context cultures assume that the individuals know very little about what they are being told, and therefore must be given a lot of background information. High-context cultures assume the individual is knowledgeable about the subject and has to be given very little background information.

The main goal behind improving cross-cultural audiences is to pay special attention to specific areas of communication to enhance the effectiveness of the cross-cultural messages. These specific areas are divided into three sub categories; non-verbal, oral and written messages. Non-verbal contact involves everything from something as obvious as eye contact and facial expressions to more discrete forms of expression such as the use of space. Eye contact is the key factor in setting the tone between two individuals and greatly differs in meaning between cultures. In the Americas and Western Europe eye contact is interpreted the same way, conveying interest and honesty. People who avoid eye contact when speaking are viewed in a negative light, withholding information and lacking in general confidence. However, in the Middle
East, Africa, and especially Asia eye contact is seen as disrespectful and even challenging of one’s authority. People who make eye contact, but only briefly, are seen as respectful and courteous. Facial expressions are their own language by comparison, and universal throughout all cultures.

It is important to note that no culture is completely high-context or low-context, since all societies contain at least some parts that are both high and low. For example, while the United States is a low-context culture, family gatherings (which are common in American culture) tend to be high-context. Members of high-context cultures usually have close relationships that last for an extended period of time. As a result of these years of interacting with one another, the members know what the rules are, how to think, and how to behave, so the rules do not have to be explicitly stated. This makes high-context cultures difficult to navigate for those who do not understand the culture's unwritten rules.

Cross-cultural Examples in *Lost in Translation*

Bob Harris, an aging American movie star, arrives in Tokyo to film an advertisement for Suntory whisky. Charlotte, a young college graduate, is left in her hotel room by her husband, John, a celebrity photographer on assignment in Tokyo. Charlotte is unsure of her future with John, feeling detached from his lifestyle and dispassionate about their relationship. Bob is also going through a midlife crisis. Each day Bob and Charlotte encounter each other in the hotel, and finally meet at the hotel bar one night when neither can sleep. Bob and Charlotte's platonic relationship develops as they spend more time together. The two finally depart. There are many scenes describing cultural differences between American and Japanese way of communication. A good example is the scene where the Murray character needs to take direction in a Suntory Whisky commercial for which he has been paid a lot of money. He's faced with a Japanese director who doesn't speak English at all, and an interpreter who, for whatever reason, barely translates.

Mr. Murry: For relaxing times, make it Suntory time.

Unidentified Man : (Japanese spoken)

Unidentified Woman : With intensity.

Mr. Murry: Is that everything? It seemed like he said more than that.

In fact, the Japanese director and his photographer know a lot about American culture. They knew to use references like gestures to invoke the cool and in-crowd attitude they wanted for the shot. It's just their pronunciation isn't very good. The director explains in detail how he wants Bill Murray to salute the audience with the whisky the way Bogey would in *Casablanca*, but this never gets translated. In another scene, the Bill Murray character conducts an animated faux conversation with an elderly Japanese man. The man knows that this American doesn't understand a word he's saying, but he's polite. He humors him. That's because foreigners are treated like honored guests in Japan, but honored guests who know nothing about the complexities and hierarchy of Japanese culture. Cross-cultural communication makes no sense here. Japan is a country in low-context culture.

Cross-cultural Examples in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*

The film is centered on Toula, a middle class Greek American woman who falls in love with a non-Greek upper middle class White Anglo-Saxon Protestant Ian. It shows how
traditions in two cultures come into clash and finally merge into one. The heroine is a daughter of Greek working-class immigrants. In her thirties, single, and socially awkward early on in the film, she is doubly oppressed as an ethnic woman and worker. Entrapped within the patriarchal confines of her immediate immigrant family, she is openly devalued by her father. Caught in the relentless routine of long hours at work in the family restaurant, she witnesses her life’s prospects fading away. The hero, on the other hand, inhabits a contrasting world. Charming and with a meaningful profession, he leads an apparently secure life, his family’s country club membership a sign of upper-middle-class privilege. He is socially graceful and self-assured, open to difference yet comfortably entrenched within the dominant culture. The film tells the divergent worlds of the hero and heroine, showcasing their vast social, cultural, and class distance only to dissolve it via the power of love.

Young Toula is marked as culturally and racially threatening, a condition made visible by spatial isolation in the school’s cafeteria. Correspondingly, the heroine’s incorporation into whiteness is performed in the college cafeteria. Transformed into a confident American ethnic, Toula seeks to join a group of white women, her initiative warmly accepted. This symbolic moment rewrites the immigrant’s exclusion in the past into the ethnic subject’s inclusion in the present. It realizes the ethnic subject’s desire for whiteness, a desire that could be readily fulfilled in the US, the film assures us, through the will to acculturate and integrate. If the college cafeteria constitutes a charged space of racial divisions in American campuses, there is no doubt about the ethnic female’s object of identification in the racial divide, and, in turn, the receptive openness of whiteness toward it. This is why Toula’s bite of the Wonder Bread sandwich, a sign of white Americanness, is performed with such relish; this is a bite of inclusion into whiteness.

The significance of alcohol in Greek settings is paramount in this contest. Regulated consumption of alcohol is valued in rural Greece as a means of producing fellowship; it mediates the experience of togetherness, precisely the component that Ian misses in his life. While excessive drinking is tolerated in specific contexts, particularly ritual settings, there are sanctions against public intoxication, which threatens family honor. The ability to hold one’s drink is central in Greek drinking practices. Ritually forcing the Millers to partake in heavy drinking results in their failure to measure up to a Greek standard. The film mobilizes the process of “looking into,” a process of cultural translation where the self expresses interest in knowing the other while the other invests in explaining itself to the self. Ian is willing to cross ethnic boundaries and ultimately accept the other’s cultural logic, no matter how illogical it seems, from the perspective of the dominant. Literally and figuratively, he joins the ethnic dance, embodying ethnicity. But on the other end of the cultural divide, Aunt Voula challenges the representation of the immigrants as insular subjects, adopting instead an active position invested in cross-cultural understanding. Subjected to symbolic violence by the ethnics, Ian is forced to experience being a minority. The power reversals operating in the film converge to this point: the newcomer acquires an embodied knowledge of linguistic and cultural powerlessness. Significantly, Ian insists on finding meaning in ethnicity, eventually crossing the cultural divide to adopt the logic of the other.

There are four strong points in showcasing cross-cultural communication. First, the film builds on liberal multiculturalism as a historical opportunity for ethnics to exercise greater cultural autonomy; second, it highlights the power of the collective as the means to enhance autonomy by exerting power over the dominant, making a case for the relevance of community for ethnic reproduction; third, it posits the importance of
agency practiced as cross-cultural translation and a strategy for advancing the interests of ethnicity; and fourth, the tempering of its claim to autonomy via its adherence to the dominant ideologies underlines the importance of strategy in promoting the ethnic message.

Cross-cultural Examples in The Joy Luck Club

The Joy Luck Club is chiefly a film describing the mutual friction and attempts toward better communication between Chinese mothers and their Americanized daughters. The reasons for the barriers between them include the “generation gap” and the chasm formed by different spiritual traditions and lifestyles. Their American-born, grown-up daughters want to affirm their own personal values and achieve their own goals. They have to listen to the words of their mothers and are at the same time unwilling to give up their own wishes. This puts them into conflict with both their mothers and their husbands—an awkward predicament in the gulf between generations and cultures. The Chinese culture and lifestyle continuously drag on their entry into mainstream orthodox American culture. One of the daughter Waverley had a failed marriage and lived with her own daughter. Then she made a new boyfriend Rich, an American guy. She had been hesitant to take him to see her mother Lindo because Lindo seemed always unsatisfied with her and her life.

Then an opportunity came as Waverley took Rich to her mother’s birthday dinner, hoping this could be a good opportunity for her mother to accept Rich. But as an American totally unfamiliar with Chinese traditions, Rich failed to follow Chinese table manners and behave improperly to mother’s disappointment. He should have drunk half inch of wine like everyone else when making a toast. He should have taken only a small spoon of dishes leaving most part for others. He should not brag about his skills of using chopsticks. He should never criticize the cooking in which the hostess takes great pride. There are so many rules that Rich has no idea of and he indulges in drinking until he gets drunk and makes a mess of this dinner. Maybe if Waverley have told Rich about all these rules ahead of time, there would have no such embarrassment.

Conclusion

High-context culture have some common characteristics like non-verbal methods to relay meaningful information in conversations, such as facial expressions, eye movement, and tone of voice. The situation, people, and non-verbal elements are more important than the actual words that are communicated. They may become language barriers or useful helper in cross-cultural communication. People are comfortable standing close to each other. The preferred way of solving communication problems and learning is in cross-cultural groups. Members of the culture put emphasis on interpersonal relationships. Movies offer a good cultural context for students to learn about cultural differences and high or low context culture.

References


