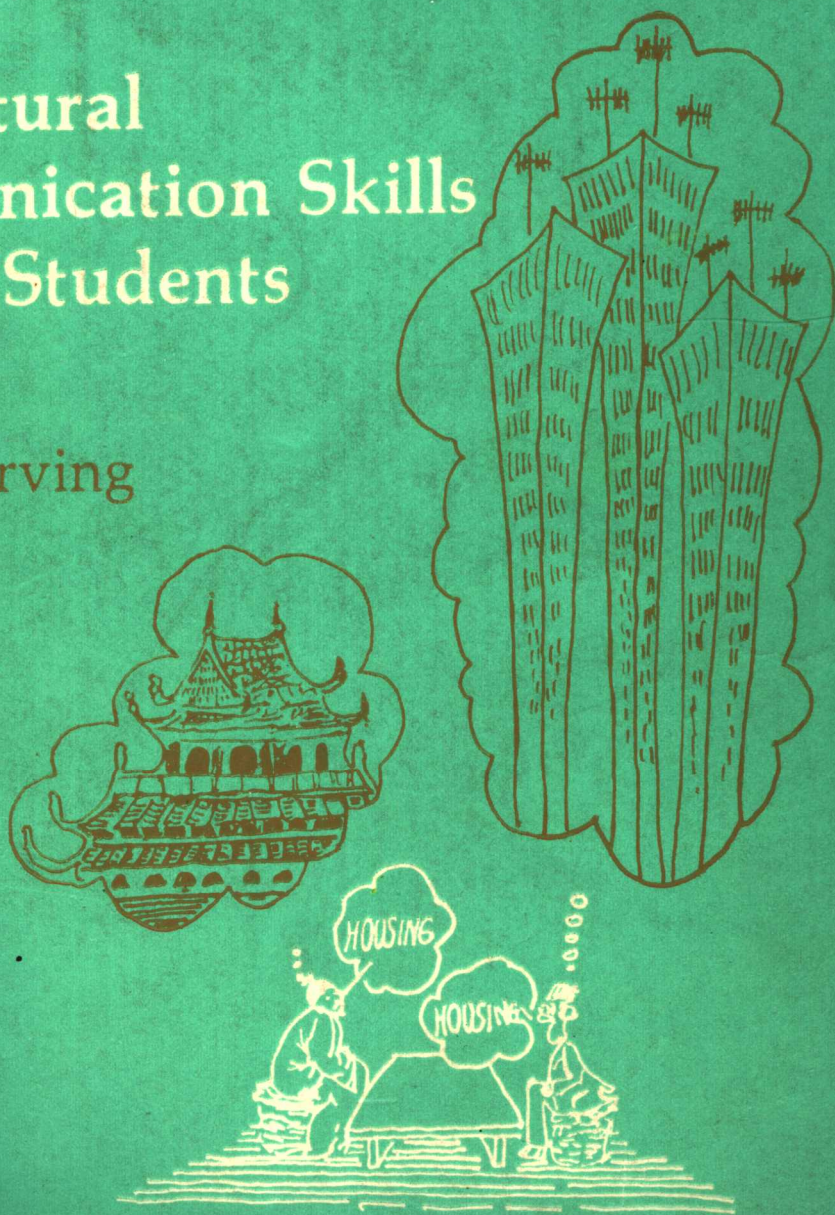


# COMMUNICATING IN CONTEXT

## Intercultural Communication Skills for ESL Students

Kathy J. Irving



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**Kathy J. Irving**

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# Preface

*Communicating in Context* is intended for intermediate-advanced ESL students. It is based on the premise that good communication skills depend on becoming familiar with the cultural context to which a language naturally belongs. The cultural context in this case is that of the United States, because American English is the target language for the students who will be using this book. However, American cultural values are intended to be used only as a starting point for discussion and activities that will lead to better understanding of all cultures, not just American culture.

Many communication failures have more to do with a lack of cross-cultural understanding than with a lack of linguistic competence. This book will help bridge the gap between linguistic and culture competence that often exists for students who have already spent some time (in some cases, years) studying the English language by focusing on its linguistic features instead of its cultural features. In other words, this book is for experienced ESL students who need new ways to work on old problems—the problems of developing fluency and appropriateness by integrating the language and the culture.

The text in each chapter offers a wide variety of American voices and ideas, some from the past and some from the present, some well known and some little known. But each voice and opinion comes from some segment of the mosaic pattern that comprises American culture. Each chapter begins with a cartoon that introduces the theme of the chapter and gets students thinking and talking about communicating in context.

The exercises that follow the text are divided into two broad categories: "Focus on Communication" and "Focus on Culture." Of course, the division is only for the purpose of emphasis; in reality, communication and culture cannot be separated and

both sets of exercises deal with communication and culture in an attempt to highlight one or the other. Each exercise and activity involves the student in a cultural context, sometimes through a cartoon or advertisement that offers visual clues to the context, and sometimes through a description of a particular cultural situation. The key word is **CONTEXT**—the particular cultural context that makes some choices of expression appropriate, and others inappropriate, for both linguistic and cultural reasons.

The traditional language classroom is an artificial and sterile environment ill suited to an activity that is by its very nature dynamic and calls for interaction and a setting that suits that interaction. It is hoped that this book, by bringing the cultural context into the language classroom, will provide some of that dynamism and the possibility for interaction that can pave the way for better intercultural communication skills. Those skills, based on an appreciation of and respect for cross-cultural similarities and differences, offer a hope for successfully sharing our pluralistic global community.

## Acknowledgments

I am very grateful to many individuals whose help and support sustained me throughout the writing of this book. Sarah Brady, Tom Nicoletti, and Barbara Schulman—Foreign Languages and Literatures support staff at MIT—were of tremendous help in the technical preparation of the manuscript. I am also grateful for the institutional support that MIT offered throughout.

I owe thanks to the Stanford Institute on Intercultural Communication for my first in-depth exposure to a group of professionals who not only shared my commitment to the development of cross-cultural awareness, but who also had the methods and expertise to apply their skills in various settings. Through my participation in the Society for Intercultural Education, Training, and Research (SIETAR), I have been able to further develop my cross-cultural training skills. Many SIETAR members have contributed both directly and indirectly to the ideas in this book.

I want to give special thanks to Steve Molinski, Boston University, who willingly went through early stages of the manuscript page by page and gave me very practical suggestions that I have tried to incorporate. Ahad Shabaz, Interlink, Guilford College, tested some of these materials in his cultural orientation classes and generously lent me his own valuable cross-cultural perspectives. John C. Condon, University of New Mexico, reviewed the manuscript, but, more importantly, through his humanistic values and insights, not to mention his sense of humor, he remains a model of the successful multicultural person who is willing and able to be comfortable and compassionate and to make others feel comfortable, if not compassionate, in the midst of cross-cultural differences. In one way or another, I feel that Jack is represented on each page of this book.

Oruc Cakmakli's creativity and his ability to express his view of the world through cartoons provided me with many joyful encounters; his method of non-

verbal communication shouts messages that in a different medium might fall on deaf ears.

Finally, I want to thank Bill Iacono, for his unwavering support. He saw me through the ups and downs in the struggle to produce my first book, and he understood the need for me to spend summers in Shanghai and Tunis pursuing my own cross-cultural encounters. His quiet but devoted presence was, and is, the buoy that keeps me afloat.

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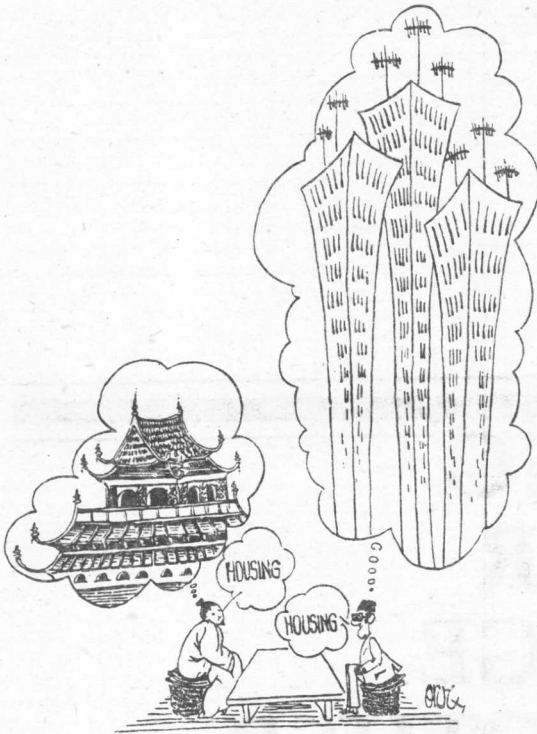


# 1

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## LEARNING ANOTHER LANGUAGE AND ANOTHER CULTURE

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### Discussion Questions

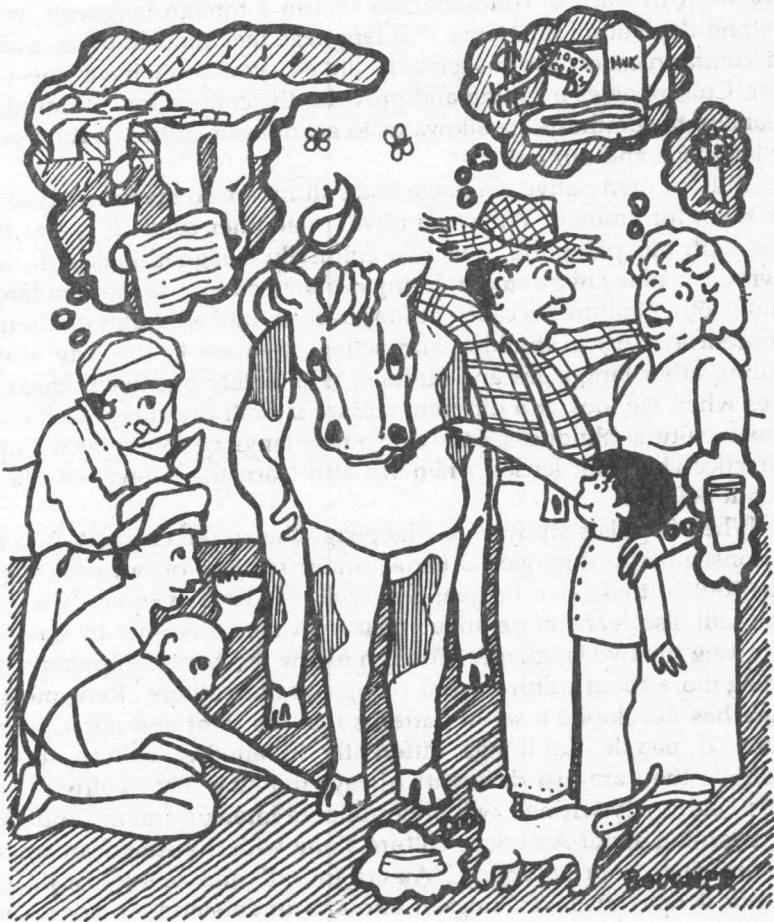
1. Where are these characters from?
2. What visual clues did you depend on to identify their origin?
3. What country are they in? How do you know?
4. Describe how these two men differ in their perceptions of what the word "housing" means.
5. Why don't they agree on the meaning of the word?
6. Describe what the word "housing" usually brings to mind in your culture.
7. This cartoon points out some potential problems in communicating with someone in a second language and a second culture. What are those potential problems?
8. Discuss your own experiences and problems in trying to communicate in a new language and a new culture.

## The Link Between Communication and Culture

It has been said that without a culture we cannot see, but with a culture we are forever blind. In other words, each of us is born into a culture that teaches us a number of shared meanings and expectations. We usually learn our own cul-

ture's ways of doing, speaking, and thinking so well that it becomes difficult to think, feel, speak, and act as people in other cultures do.

For example, a baby born in India into an orthodox Hindu tradition will learn that cows are sacred. The child becomes a vegetarian like the rest of his family and the thought of cows as a source of food never occurs to him even though his Muslim neighbor eats beef. If he were to come to the United States as an adult and observe the gusto with which some Americans enjoy a good beefsteak, he might have difficulty understanding and accepting this behavior. He might think that Americans had no respect for religion or that they showed poor taste. However, the practice of eating beef in the United States, a predominantly Judeo-Christian culture, has little or nothing to do with religion, nor from the American point of view does it mean Americans don't know what



tastes good. It is just that Indians and Americans have been raised in different cultures with varying ideas about what to eat and what not to eat, what is sacred and what is not sacred. In the same way, the carnivorous American who visits India, craving a good steak and noticing a lot of Indians who appear to be skinny, might find it absurd that these people, who, from the American's perspective, look like they need more nourishment and protein, don't break down and enjoy a good, juicy hamburger or steak. Both the Indian and the American have a word for "cow," in their respective vocabularies; but just as the word "housing" means different things to different people, so does the word "cow" mean different things to people of different cultures.

As the basic building blocks of communication, words communicate meaning, but as we have seen, the meanings of words are very much influenced by culture. Meaning is in the person, not in the word, and each person is the product of a particular culture that passes on shared and appropriate meanings. Thus, if we want to learn to communicate well in a foreign language, we must understand the culture that gives that language meaning. In other words, culture and communication are inseparably linked: you can't have one without the other. Culture gives meaning and provides the context for communication, and the ability to communicate allows us to act out our cultural values and to share our language and our culture.

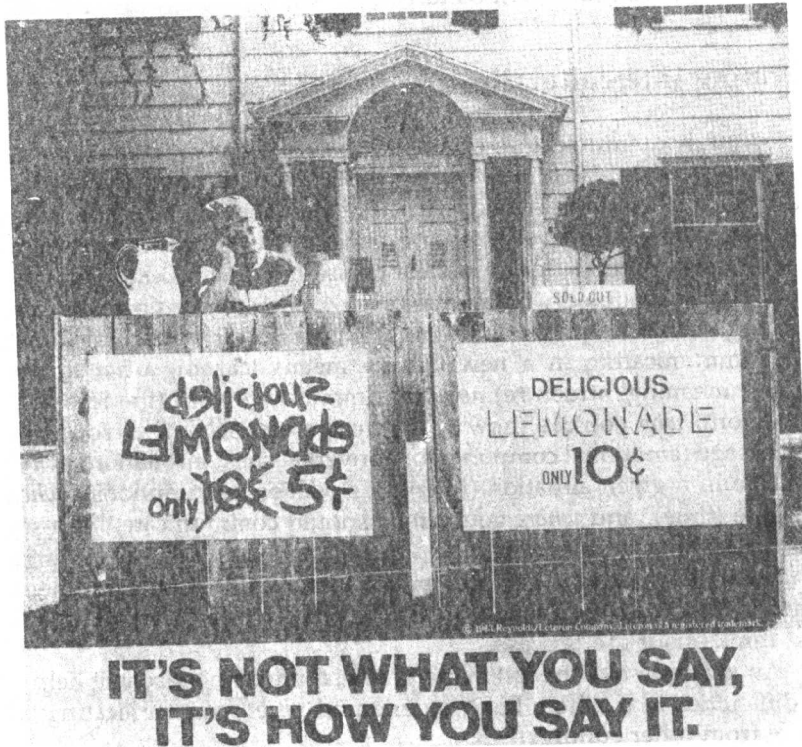
But our own native language and culture are so much a part of us that we take them for granted. When we travel to another country, it's as if we carry, along with our passports, our own culturally designed lenses through which we view the new environment. Using our own culture as the standard by which to judge other cultures is called ethnocentrism, and although unintentional, our ethnocentric ways of thinking and acting often get in the way of our understanding other languages and cultures. The ability and willingness to change lenses when we look at a different culture is both the cure and the prevention for such cultural blindness. Studying a new language provides the opportunity to practice changing lenses when we also learn the context of the culture to which it belongs.

When linguists study a new language they often compare it to their own, and consequently they gain a better understanding of not only the new language, but of their own language as well. Students who study a foreign language will also learn more about their own native tongue by comparing and contrasting the two languages. You can follow the same comparative method in learning more about culture—your own, as well as others'. Remember that each culture has developed a set of patterns that are right and appropriate for that culture. If people do things differently in another culture, they are not "wrong"—they are just different! Always thinking that "culturally different" means "culturally wrong" will only promote intercultural misunderstanding.

Learning about American culture along with the American language does not necessitate your becoming "Americanized" and acting just like an American, but it does mean making an effort to understand American people and

culture. In other words, it helps you to *see* like an American without your having to *be* like an American.

## You Can Talk, but What Do You Communicate?



Reynolds/Leteron Company, creative by R. Kwong.

How often have you heard someone say, in an attempt to clarify, "Yes, that is what I *said*, but that's *not* what I meant"? Just because we talk does not mean that we actually communicate what we intend. Communication can be defined as any behavior that is given meaning, whether the behavior is verbal or non-verbal, intended or unintended, consciously or unconsciously performed. So, it is impossible *not* to communicate, even though one does not always communicate in words.

The clothes we wear, the way we decorate our homes, the car we drive, the way we address people, the jobs we choose, the mates we choose—all these

things communicate different things to different people, and they may communicate more—or less—than we intend. It depends on how the receiver of the message sees, thinks, and feels as much as on what the sender says, thinks, and feels. Communication is a very complex process, even among people from the same culture who speak the same language. The potential problems and the likelihood of miscommunication multiply when communication takes place between people from different cultures.

## Communicating Interculturally

Intercultural communication occurs whenever a person from one culture does something that is given meaning by a person from another culture. Communicating across cultures is made difficult by each person's ethnocentric tendencies to perceive objects, events, and behavior through lenses designed in the person's own culture. But an honest desire to communicate with people from other cultures, coupled with an attempt to understand cultural differences, will go a long way in helping you become a successful intercultural communicator.

Communicating in a new culture means learning *what* to say (words, phrases, meaning, structure), *who* to communicate with (the role and status of the person), *who* you are (how you perceive yourself), *how* you communicate the message (emotional components, nonverbal cues, intonation), *why* you communicate in a given situation (intentions, values, assumptions), *when* to communicate (time), and *where* you can or should communicate. This sounds like an impossible task—but remember, you learned to do all these things in your own native language and culture, mostly without thinking about them. The difference is that now as an adult learning a second language and culture, you must think about the process.

An awareness of the following potential problem areas will help you avoid the difficulties that others have experienced when communicating with other people from other cultures:

1. Linguistic differences in grammatical structure and semantic differences in word meaning and usage.
2. The nonverbal aspects of communication, such as gestures and other silent cultural clues.
3. Preconceived ideas that cloud your ability to see and understand a person as he or she wants to be seen and understood.
4. Value judgments about the behavior of people based on what you think is "right."
5. Anxiety or discomfort that defeat your intentions and create discomfort for the person with whom you are trying to communicate.

Notice that only one of these problem areas is directly related to the linguistic aspects of communicating in a second language and culture. To be an effective

intercultural communicator you must pay attention to the social, psychological, and cultural aspects of communication, not just the grammar. Much evidence shows that communicating interculturally is not easy, but that does not mean it is not worthwhile or is to be avoided. As we approach the twenty-first century, we have no choice, given the world we live in. If we are going to survive on this necessarily international globe, we *must* learn to communicate interculturally. But we need not dwell on the dark side. Learning to be a successful intercultural communicator can be an exciting, enjoyable, and rewarding experience that will open up new doors to both personal and professional growth and satisfaction.

## Learning to Survive in a New Culture

Entering a different culture with new values, new expectations, and new—or at least different—communication styles can certainly create conflict and confusion. Perhaps you are familiar with the term “culture shock.” It refers to the anxiety one sometimes feels when going to a new culture and having to adjust to different ways of perceiving and acting. Many analogies have been used to describe this difficult experience: it is “like being a fish out of water” or “like being up a creek without a paddle.”

According to L. Robert Kohls, author of *Survival Kit for Overseas Living\**, culture shock comes from:

1. Being cut off from the cultural cues and known patterns with which you are familiar—especially the subtle, indirect ways you normally have of expressing feelings. All the nuances and shades of meaning that you understand instinctively and use to make your life comprehensible are suddenly taken from you.
2. Living and/or working over an extended period of time in a situation that is ambiguous.
3. Having your own values (which you had heretofore considered as absolutes) brought into question.
4. Being continually put into positions in which you are expected to function with maximum skills and speed but where the rules have not been adequately explained.

Kohls goes on to say that:

Some time ago people began to recognize that there were distinct states of personal adjustment which virtually everyone who lived abroad

\*Reprinted from *Survival Kit for Overseas Living*, pp. 64 and 66–67, L. Robert Kohls © 1979, with permission from Intercultural Press.

went through (no matter where they came from or what country they were living in). These stages are: (1) Initial Euphoria, (2) Irritability and Hostility, (3) Gradual Adjustment, and (4) Adaptation.

**Initial Euphoria** Most people begin their new assignment with great expectation and a positive mind-set. If anything, they come with expectations which are too high and attitudes that are too positive toward the host country and toward their own prospective experience in it. At this point, anything new is intriguing and exciting. But, for the most part, it is the *similarities* which stand out. The recent arrivee is usually impressed with how people everywhere are really very much alike. . . .

**Irritation and Hostility** Gradually, your focus turns from the similarities to the *differences*. And these differences, which suddenly seem to be everywhere, are troubling. You blow up little, seemingly insignificant difficulties into major catastrophes. This is the stage generally identified as "culture shock." . . .

**Gradual Adjustment** The crisis is over and you are on your way to recovery. This step may be so gradual that, at first, you will be unaware it's even happening. Once you begin to orient yourself and to be able to interpret some of the subtle cultural clues and cues which passed by unnoticed earlier, the culture seems now familiar. You become more comfortable in it and feel less isolated in it. . . . Gradually, too, your sense of humor returns and you realize the situation is not hopeless after all.

**Adaptation** Full recovery will result in an ability to function in two cultures with confidence. You will even find there are a great many customs, ways of doing and saying things and personal attitudes which you enjoy—indeed, to which you have in some degree acculturated, and you'll miss them when you pack up and return home. . . . You can also expect to experience "reverse culture shock" upon your return [to your home country]. In some cases, particularly where a person has adjusted exceptionally well to the host country, reverse culture shock may cause greater distress than the original culture shock.

The term "culture shock" carries a heavy negative connotation. The *Random House Dictionary* defines the word "shock" as "a sudden and violent blow or impact" or "a sudden and violent disturbance of the mind and emotions." But in fact, the culture shock experience need not be a bad one; people who live and travel in other cultures also report feeling reawakened, refreshed, renewed, revived, and even rejuvenated as a result of their cross-cultural en-



counters. Culture shock has a positive side that must not be overlooked, and it is this brighter side that anyone living in a different culture should dwell on. Psychologist Peter Adler, who has written about culture shock and its effects, says:

Culture shock is a profound learning experience which leads to a high degree of self-awareness and personal growth. The greatest shock in culture shock may not be in the encounter with another culture, but with the confrontation of one's own culture and ways in which the individual is culture-bound.\*

Thus, culture shock can be a blessing in disguise. Although there may be difficult adjustments and many frustrations, living in a new culture can help you better understand yourself, which leads to a better understanding of others. In this way, we can learn to enjoy and to appreciate the diversity of peoples.

## FOCUS ON COMMUNICATION

### Summary of Key Ideas

After each summary, *paraphrase* the idea—that is, restate it in your own words.

*Example:* We are all, to some extent, culture-bound.

*Paraphrase:* Everyone is, to one degree or another, influenced by the culture he or she was raised in.

1. Meaning is in the person, not in the word.

*Paraphrase:*

2. We tend to take our own language and culture for granted.

*Paraphrase:*

\*Peter Adler, "Culture Shock and the Cross-Cultural Learning Experience," in *Readings in Intercultural Communication*, ed. David S. Hoopes (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, Regional Council for International Education, 1979), II: 13.