"What's the matter, Kathy?" I asked as one of our English Language Institute student teachers came into my office visibly shaken.

"Paulo ran out of my classroom very upset, and I don't know why. I had just asked him how he had done on his biology test, and when he answered, 'I got a "B," ' I said, 'Great,' and gave the A-OK signal. That's when he ran out."

After I explained that in Paulo's home country of Brazil that was the rudest sexual gesture one could make, she understood why he was upset, especially since a Christian teacher had made it. Both student and teacher learned something about cross-cultural miscommunication that day. But such misunderstandings are not limited only to individuals speaking different native languages.

One day in my Scottish sixth-grade classroom a student suffered a nosebleed. "Fiona," I said, "please go to the washroom and clean your bloody nose." As soon as I said it, I knew I had goofed. The entire class gasped and stared wide-eyed. I was in a country that used British English, and for them, *bloody* was not a simple adjective, it was a swear word. "Now, children, you know I'm American," I began, asking them to excuse my cross-cultural linguistic blunder.

These incidents point out a not-too-infrequent happening: cross-cultural misunderstanding. Even people who have never lived outside of a particular culture may be misunderstood because they come from a different part of the country, or use certain speech patterns acquired from immigrant parents or grandparents.[1]

Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

In the earlier part of this century two linguists, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, while studying American Indian languages, formulated the hypothesis that the language one speaks greatly affects the way one views the world. Later scholars divide this theory into two parts: linguistic determinism, which asserts that one's native language determines the way one thinks and views the world; and linguistic relativity, the view that languages differ in what they denote.[2] More

recently, Fishman[3] has added a third emphasis, ethnolinguistic diversity value, the view that the world is better for a diversity of languages because of the increased creativity such a diversity allows.

Most scholars today reject an extreme interpretation of linguistic determinism. They do not believe that a language binds a speaker to a single world view from which he or she cannot escape. For example, in Hopi there is no past tense form of the verb. Does this mean then that Hopis cannot speak about the past? No, because they can add adverbs of time to their sentences to show they are talking about a past event. It would be more accurate to say that our culture and language bind us not because we cannot

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Our culture and language bind us not because we cannot think in other ways, but because we see our way of thinking as so normal and natural.

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think in other ways, but because we see our way of thinking as so normal and natural; our way of saying things as *the* way to speak. These conventions bind us because, as anthropologist Edward Hall[4] says, so many of the things we do (and say) we do lie outside of our awareness.

Language is a bearer of culture in many ways. For example, Eskimos have many different words denoting different kinds of snow, which demonstrates how important snow is to Eskimo culture. In English we have only one word for snow, though we can approximate the Eskimo word meanings through phrases such as "wet snow," or "dry, powdery snow." Nevertheless, a list of words commonly used in a language highlights the importance of certain entities in the culture.

On the level of discourse (i.e., language above the sentence level), cultural differences also show up. In the United States if you are late to work (or class) and meet an acquaintance on your way, it is perfectly acceptable to greet him or her briefly and say you have to hurry because you're late for work (or school). In Manninka culture (African),[5] it is not acceptable to greet someone so briefly; one must inquire after the health of relatives and send greetings to them, and only then can one indirectly bring up the idea that he or she must hurry on. It is easy to imagine the misunderstanding that would occur between an American and a Manninkan if each followed his cultural rules in an encounter when the American was in a hurry. Of course, Americans and Manninkans can learn to extend their greeting repertoires. However, they would ordinarily not think to do so because their cultures do not expect it.

Forms of Communication

Hall views each aspect of culture as being a part of one of 10 primary message systems. In other words, everything in a culture communicates, not just language. For example, food communicates: a birthday cake signals a different social occasion and behavior than a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. If everything in culture communicates, then obviously miscommunication can occur in any aspect of culture, from how close you stand to someone when talking, to the meaning of an expression such as "to hit the ceiling."

In today's world there are very few monolingual/monocultural societies or countries. Therefore, almost everywhere, multicultural (if not also multilingual) situations often occur.

It is important, therefore, that teachers and administrators understand and respect the language and behavior that students bring into the classroom. These customs are learned early in life and form the very core of self-identity of each student. They are also the child's bond with a particular speech community.

At the same time, the school must help students learn the language and ways of

Communicating
in Today's Classroom

By Stella Ramirez Greig

speaking and behaving appropriate to the classroom. For although the classroom reflects the culture in which it exists, it also has a culture of its own—one with its own rules, jargon, and order.

Each teacher holds certain expectations regarding clarity, respect and politeness in the classroom. We shall examine these three areas to see how language and culture affect them. As illustrated by the examples at the beginning of this article, teachers and students may use conflicting strategies to fulfill each other's expectations.

Since the main functions of the classroom are transfer of knowledge, development and testing of knowledge and skills, clarity of expression and intent is an integral part of classroom culture. But different people use varying strategies to achieve clarity.

When speaking or writing, individuals employ varying degrees of directness. For example, if someone in the school cafeteria says, "Please pass the salt," the request has been made in a direct way. But if the person says, "Could I ask you to pass the salt?" the request has been made indirectly. Problems arise when an individual is judged negatively because of the strategy he or she uses. Some individuals consider indirectness as being more polite, while others consider it vague or evasive. Some people consider directness as clear and logical, while others regard it to be overbearing or rude.

Use of logic is also a factor in communication. People structure discussion or argumentation in different ways. While we may think ours is the correct (logical) way to structure the presentation of knowledge, other groups may structure arguments quite differently. Several researchers[6] (Olson, Ong, Scollon and Scollon, and Tannen, to name a few) have shown how ethnic and cultural groups use strategies based on oral or literate traditions.

Briefly (and somewhat simplistically) stated, the styles connected with an oral tradition (1) use formulaic expressions (wisdom comes in the form of proverbs), (2) see meaning in the context rather than in the text, and (3) achieve knowledge through identification with the speaker. This tradition focuses on interpersonal involvement and shared knowledge.

Conversely, in the literate tradition, (1) wisdom comes through (Greek) logic, (2) meaning is in the text rather than in the context, and (3) knowledge is achieved through analysis. This tradition focuses on depersonalization and analysis. Although, as Tannen has pointed out,[7] both kinds of strategies are used by the same individual or group, the situations in which each is applied may vary. A college professor once told me about a stu-

dent who, after hearing a logical, analytical explanation of a problem, said, "Next time I go home, I'll ask my grandfather. If he thinks it's right, I'll believe you." This student was following a standard oral tradition method of evaluating new knowledge. Although space does not permit us to discuss oral and literate strategies further, I highly recommend the books and articles (under Kochman, Scollon and Scollon, and Tannen) in the suggested reading list.

Another area in the classroom where misunderstanding takes place is assessing

Everything in a culture communicates, not just language.

the speech patterns a child brings to the classroom. Some teachers mistakenly think that nonstandard dialects are unclear or illogical.[8] For example, standard English forbids two negatives in a single verb clause, but at least two nonstandard American English dialects use double negatives. This does not seem logical to some standard speakers. However, when studying standard Spanish, one finds that it uses double negatives for the same reason that nonstandard English dialects do, to intensify the negative.

Nonstandard dialects follow grammatical rules just as standard dialects do. However, in some cases the rules are quite different. While teaching standard English the teacher must recognize that the language patterns of nonstandard dialects are just as logical and clear to members of their speech community as standard dialects are to the teacher's speech community. The role of the school is to help these children become bidialectal, not to eradicate their ethnic or cultural way of speaking. Education should be additive, not subtractive.

Respect

Respect for parents and others in authority is one of the first things children learn. However, ways of displaying respect differ among cultures (and ethnic groups). These differences can cause misunderstanding.

African-American and Hispanic children are taught that looking someone, especially an adult, in the eye while talking to him is a sign of disrespect; in Anglo-American culture, avoiding someone's eyes when speaking to him is often interpreted as a sign of deviousness or poor self-image.

Some of the rules of an American classroom are outcomes of a cultural tendency towards monochronism, that is, doing one thing at a time. One example is the one-person-speaking-at-a-time rule.

However, many cultures are polychronic (two or more things at a time), so it is not unusual in several cultures (such as Puerto Rican), to have more than one pupil at the teacher's desk, all talking to the teacher at the same time. The latter is not a sign of disrespect, but a natural occurrence in that culture.

Coupled with these cultural mores are some rules relating to silence and talk. Teachers have certain expectations regarding when students can talk (for example, "Please raise your hand and wait to be called on") and when they should be silent ("No talking during the quiz, please"). To speak when one is expected to be silent is interpreted as being disrespectful. In the Andrews University English Language Institute classes, it is not unusual for students from some cultures (when coming in late) to greet the teacher in the middle of the lecture, before sitting down. This is their cultural way of showing respect. Since we want to prepare them for success in an American college classroom, we tactfully urge them to break this habit.

Politeness

Respect and politeness are closely allied. How one manages space shows both respect and politeness. How close one should stand to another person when talking varies: in some cultures it is quite close, in others farther apart. It is polite to give individuals "their space." However, what constitutes the correct amount of space varies. Another area of politeness is touching behavior. The touching of students (for example, patting them on the head, back, or arm) to show concern or care is neither polite nor appreciated behavior in several Oriental cultures, as well as among native Americans.

Likewise, normal speech volume varies from culture to culture. Although Americans may consider some ethnic groups as being "too loud," native Americans find the normal speaking volume of Anglo-American teachers as loud and rude.

Another aspect of politeness has to do with meeting the needs of others. Two basic needs of all humans are these: (1) the need not to be imposed upon, to have one's individuality respected, and (2) the need for communion, to have one's social needs fulfilled. Brown and Levinson[9] call the fulfilling of these needs negative and positive politeness, respectively.

In negative politeness one tries to not impose on others, allowing them options relating to talk and interaction. In positive politeness, one tries to be friendly by initiating conversation and interaction. Because some individuals and ethnic groups seem to emphasize one kind of politeness over the other, this can cause misunderstanding.

Conclusion

Recognizing the possibility for misunderstandings across cultures, one begins to wonder how *any* communication occurs. Yet it does occur. Teachers need to assume that students come to the classroom wanting to be cooperative: to make clear responses, to be respectful, and polite. Teachers must be sensitive to their students' styles, reading between the lines, to help them become multiculturally communicative. At the same time, teachers need to develop their own sensitivity to the needs and communicative styles of others.

Teachers and school administrators play a pivotal role in the future of their students. In their book, *The Counselor as Gatekeeper,* Erickson and Shultz show the importance of cross-cultural understanding between student and counselor. The counselor's misinterpretation of the student's words or actions, affects the future of the student. The counselor's as well as the teachers' and administrators' opinions and assessment of the student may influence whether that person gets a job, or is accepted into college or graduate school. This gatekeeping task, then, requires that professionals who deal with students be as knowledgeable about cross-cultural differences as possible. They need to guide students in learning to conform to the expectations of the wider society. This requires observation, reading, and discussion on the part of both school personnel and students.

Sensitivity is vital. Teachers need to look for nonverbal reactions of students that indicate that the young people have misinterpreted certain words or actions. Teachers also need to be sensitive to the possibility that they have misinterpreted their students' actions or words.

One way to keep the lines of communication open is to visit students' homes. This will convey insight into the strategies that students bring with them to school and to help them adapt to school strategies and expectations. While teachers must be explicit about their expectations, they must not denigrate the strategies that students use. While helping students learn the expectations of the majority culture, teachers should not deprive them of their home family culture. Instead, students can become bi-(or multi-)cultural, functioning comfortably at home, school, and in the marketplace.

This will not be easy, but it is a worthwhile endeavor. If Seventh-day Adventist classrooms are to truly educate young men and women for life, then Adventist teachers must be aware of the backgrounds of their students and of the culture(s) in which they will need to operate. As the countries of the world become more and more interdependent, international communication will continue to increase. As Christians, we need to speak to one another in love, understanding, and sensitivity. This will help us fulfill the gospel commission and move forward as an international church. □

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

[1] Deborah Tannen ("Indirectness in Discourse: Ethnicity as Conversational Style," *Discourse Processes,* 1981, vol. 4, pp. 121-128) has shown that some communication strategies are passed down by immigrants to the second and third generations, even though those generations do not speak the original mother tongue.

[2] David Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 15.

[3] J. A. Fishman, "Whorfianism of the Third Kind: Ethnolinguistic Diversity as a Worldwide Societal Asset," *Language in Society,* 11:1 (April 1982), p. 1.

[4] Hall, Edward, *The Silent Language* (New York: Anchor Books, 1972), pp. 29, 30.

[5] Charles Bird and Timothy Shopen, "Manninka," in *Languages and their Speakers,* ed. by Timothy Shopen (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop, 1979), p. 93.

[6] For a summary, see Deborah Tannen, "The Oral/Literate Continuum in Discourse," in *Spoken and Written Language: Exploring Orality and Literacy,* ed. by Tannen.

[7] Ibid., p. 3.

[8] For a discussion of Black English see Labov, Kochman, and Wolfram and Fasold listed in the Suggested Reading List.

[9] Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, "Universals in Language Usage: Politeness Phenomena," in *Questions and Politeness,* ed. by Esther Goody (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).