Applying theories of cultural dimensions, teacher credibility, and nonverbal immediacy, this chapter explores classroom management techniques used by Asian female teachers to establish credibility.

Establishing Credibility in the Multicultural Classroom: When the Instructor Speaks with an Accent

Chikako Akamatsu McLean

As cultural diversity in higher education increases nationwide, community colleges are working with a kaleidoscope of student demographics. Teaching communication courses in such settings presents a great challenge; this challenge is compounded when the instructor is an Asian-born female with an accent. When Asian-born instructors teach communication-related courses to a predominantly native English-speaking student body, our credibility is subject to challenge. My frequent conversations with other female Asian instructors have confirmed that we initially sense skepticism among the students due to our nonnative background. However, we believe that because of our background we can provide a unique “outside-in” viewpoint on the American culture.

Geert Hofstede’s work (1980) in intercultural communication forms a guidebook for developing the outside-in viewpoint that Asian female instructors need. The cultural dimensions he suggested clarify the characteristics of U.S. classrooms. His analyses of the world’s cultures focus on how rather than what we think, feel, and act in organizations. Awareness of such analyses may be useful for Asian female academics entering U.S. higher education. Knowing how to establish teacher credibility in the United States is also a key element in increasing effectiveness in predominantly Caucasian classrooms. The classroom management techniques of female Asian teachers will likely
follow their own cultural frame of reference; therefore, understanding non-verbal immediacy theory (Teven and Hanson, 2004; Johnson and Miller, 2002) may be useful as a third resource in assessing our effectiveness in the classroom.

Using Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, teacher credibility theory, and nonverbal immediacy theory, I conducted an exploratory study investigating how female Asian-born college faculty establish their credibility with native-speaker students.

Cultural Dimensions and Their Application to the Classroom

From 1967 to 1973, Hofstede (1980) conducted a groundbreaking study of correlations and connections between cultural backgrounds and work-related value patterns among employees of IBM from around the world. He scored the results from fifty-three cultures and placed them on a continuum, identifying four cultural dimensions: individualism-collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity. These dimensions can be applied not only to the corporation’s organizational strategies but also to the field of education. For example, in a teacher training class, Hofstede observed a Dutch teacher applying more structure in his classroom management for a group of Asian students than the teacher was accustomed to using. By adopting methods considered inappropriate in the standards of his native culture, the Dutch teacher successfully bridged the cross-cultural teaching gap (Hofstede, 1986).

Individualism-Collectivism. According to Hofstede (1991), individualism pertains to societies with loose ties between individuals while collectivism reflects strong, cohesive in-groups. In U.S. classrooms, the individualism-collectivism dimension can be directly related to such student activities as group projects. Due to the strong in-group and out-group distinction, students from collectivist countries hesitate to speak up in larger groups, especially with strangers they perceive as members of the out-group; but the hesitation decreases in smaller groups (Hofstede, 1991).

Uncertainty Avoidance. Uncertainty avoidance is defined as the level of tolerance toward uncertainty and ambiguity within a society. Hofstede (1991) observed that students in cultures with strong uncertainty avoidance preferred highly structured classroom practices while students from cultures with weak uncertainty avoidance were more susceptible to flexible and accommodating approaches. According to Hofstede, students from strong uncertainty avoidance countries, such as Japan, expect their teacher to be the expert. Intellectual disagreement from a student is disrespectful and viewed as disloyalty toward the teacher. Conversely, in classrooms with students from weak uncertainty avoidance countries, such as the United States, an intellectual disagreement may be regarded as a stimulating exercise. Teacher credibility tends to increase when teachers encourage honest response and
disagreement in class; at the same time, students are likely to feel comfortable arguing points with the teacher without feeling disrespectful.

**Power Distance.** Hofstede (1991) defined *power distance* as the level of tolerance toward inequalities of power and wealth within a society. In high power-distance cultures, the classroom becomes “teacher-centered with strict orders” (p. 34). However, in low power-distance cultures, the educational process is student centered, encouraging mutual communication between teachers and students. For example, American teachers in a classroom of Japanese students often experience little feedback from the students until they call out a student’s name and ask for feedback. Eventually, the teachers may have to give up their customary reliance on student feedback to assess classroom effectiveness, leaving them without an important pedagogical tool.

**Masculinity.** Hofstede (1991) listed key differences between feminine and masculine societies in their general norms for family, school, and workplace. In masculine societies, such as Japan, the best student is the norm, and failing in school is unacceptable. Excellence in student achievements is rewarded, and teachers’ excellence is appreciated. In feminine societies, the average student is the norm, and failing in school is a minor incident. Friendliness of teachers is valued, and social skills and students’ social adaptation are emphasized.

### Application of Cultural Dimensions

As just described, Hofstede’s cultural dimensions form a strong framework for education (1986). The individualism-collectivism spectrum can be applied to leadership styles and effectiveness in small group communication. While uncertainty avoidance explains the communication patterns between teacher and students, power distance illustrates students’ expectations of the teacher’s classroom management techniques. Finally, the masculinity dimension depicts the contrast between academic achievements and social skills in education.

For Asian-born female teachers of U.S. students, this information regarding cultural dimensions may be particularly useful when designing assignments, class activities, and evaluation, and in setting the classroom atmosphere. While cautiously avoiding stereotyping, these teachers are more likely to connect with U.S. students, and consequently to gain respect, when they are in tune with the cultural backgrounds of the students. Each dimension influences teacher credibility. Without credibility a teacher fails.

### Application in Academia: Teacher Credibility

In contemporary research in social science disciplines, McCroskey, Holdridge, and Toomb (1974) defined teacher credibility as a composite of character, sociability, composure, extroversion, and competence. McCroskey (1992) further suggested that the teacher’s credibility was determined in
three primary dimensions: caring, competence, and trustworthiness. Positive teacher credibility can also be measured by such behavioral parameters as verbal and nonverbal immediacy (Johnson and Miller, 2002), nonverbal immediacy and perceived caring (Teven and Hanson, 2004), and affinity seeking (Frymier and Thompson, 1992).

Nonverbal Immediacy

Teacher immediacy refers to teachers’ verbal and nonverbal communication attempting to reduce the physical and psychological distance between teachers and students (Andersen, 1979; Gorham, 1988). The importance of understanding the use of nonverbal message systems has long been recognized; their functions are referred to as a silent language (Hall, 1959). Hall and Hall (1987) asserted that because nonverbal message systems differ in each culture, cultural communications are deeper and more complex than mere verbal messages. Considering this cross-cultural element in teacher-student communication, Neuliep (1997) suggested that although students from a low-context culture (such as the United States) recognized certain teacher behaviors as immediate, students from a high-context culture (such as Japan) might not. The possible discrepancies in perceptions of nonverbal communicative behaviors between the United States and other cultures may hamper the female Asian instructor new to the United States because she cannot count on her American students interpreting her behavior in the same way as Asian students would.

When Asian-born female teachers are deprived of highly contextual, low-immediate communication practices, they are more likely to face confusion, frustration, and apprehension over their effectiveness in the classroom. Likewise, when American students are denied verbal and high-immediate interactions with teachers during class sessions, their perception of the Asian-born teacher's credibility may drastically deteriorate, causing disharmony between the teacher and the students. By investigating how Asian-born female faculty find ways to overcome such cross-cultural issues, we may find insights into how Asian-born female teachers of communication can make a smooth transition between the cultures.

Exploratory Qualitative Study: Cultural Differences in Student-Teacher Interaction

A small minority of Asian-born females has recently appeared on the faculties of college English communication departments (Forrest Cataldi, Fahimi, and Bradburn, 2005). Do they perceive themselves as lacking credibility when teaching English-speaking American students? How do they establish teacher credibility? Do current cross-cultural theories apply to Asian-born female faculty?
Method and Participants. I designed a set of interview questions to investigate how Asian-born female faculty establish teacher credibility. The questions were written to elicit narrative answers and allow opportunity for explanation.

Seven Asian-born females whose primary language is other than English were recruited. Six participants had experience teaching English communication-related courses or providing counseling to native English-speaking students in the American Midwest, and one taught in the Southwest. They ranged from adjunct visiting professors to tenure-track and emeritus faculty. Before the interviews I explained the purpose of the study and distributed the interview questions. To protect the participants’ identity and promote easy identification during data analysis, pseudonyms were given to each of the seven participants. Four were interviewed in person: Ming Liang, a Taiwanese professor of mass communication; Xiali, a Chinese professor of psychology; Tomoko, a Japanese professor of English; and Fusako, a Japanese counselor. The remaining three participants were interviewed via a series of e-mail exchanges: Ayako, a Japanese professor of communication studies; Hye Young, a Korean counselor; and Hiromi, a Japanese doctoral candidate in communication studies.

Participants were asked a series of questions about (1) the length of their stay and their teaching experience in the United States, (2) their initial concerns about teaching native speakers of English, (3) their perception of credibility acknowledgment by their students, (4) their use of self-disclosure, (5) grade protests by their students of the grades they received, (6) their personal teaching experiences, and (7) strategies they used for effective classroom teaching.

Results and Discussion. I analyzed the interviews according to two thematic categories: teachers’ self-perceptions of credibility, and the strategies they developed to connect to their students.

Perceptions of Competency and Teacher Credibility. Participants’ responses to the question about initial concerns suggested low self-confidence regarding their own English competency and their knowledge of cross-cultural differences early in their careers. Hye Young, Xiali, Ming Liang, and Ayako stated that they sensed the students had difficulty understanding them even though there were no explicit comments from the students. Hiromi and Xiali received student evaluations stating that they could not understand their instructors because of their accents. Hiromi and Xiali also reported that during class students occasionally asked them to repeat words and sometimes commented that they did not understand the teacher. Ming Liang, who holds a Ph.D. and has two years of teaching experience in the United States, observed the following: “When I saw my students’ faces showing confusion during the first few weeks, I was concerned that they had a hard time with my accent. I started using visual aids as much as I could. I then scripted all my lectures, memorized the entire lectures, and rehearsed them before each class.”
Ming Liang stated that the students appreciated the visual aids for note-taking purposes, and she felt they helped the students prepare for exams more effectively and efficiently. She also noticed that once the students visually grasped the basic theories and learned the terminology, the auditory explanations and illustrations were more comprehensible to them. Interestingly, the students’ confused facial expressions may have been directed to the content of the lecture and not toward their teachers’ accents; however, Ming Liang perceived that the language barrier must have caused some level of confusion.

Hye Young, who had three years of counseling experience, confessed that she had a high level of anxiety about communicating in English. She was concerned that because of a lack of proficiency in English she could not make herself understood and thus would be unable to form a rapport with the students. Hiromi, who had three years of teaching experience, and Ayako, who had a doctorate and three years of experience teaching in New Mexico, commented that they were concerned that rather than their students not understanding their English due to their accents, they could not understand their students’ speech well enough to evaluate them fairly. Ayako noted that her initial concern probably stemmed from her own lack of teaching experience, and from general anxiety and uncertainty about her effectiveness.

Ming Liang, Fusako, Hiromi, and Ayako felt that their students acknowledged their credibility, but Tomoko, with eleven years of teaching experience, and Xiali, with two years of teaching experience, stated that their credibility as teachers was openly challenged. A nonnative English-speaking student in his fifties in Tomoko’s class expressed his disappointment with the teacher by saying, “You are too young.” Tomoko responded with humor because she did not feel comfortable arguing with him. Likewise, a female student asked if Xiali had a Ph.D. and openly voiced her objection to the teacher’s lack of a doctoral degree. Xiali recounted her experience that earlier in her career some students must have sensed her lack of confidence as a teacher and preyed on it. She stated that at first she used the material she was most comfortable with so she could build her confidence and subsequently establish her teacher credibility in class.

Although the participants were confident about their subjects, their perception of language barriers lowered their self-confidence when teaching the material. My experiences during my first few years of teaching parallel many of the stories I heard during the interviews. Once I was openly challenged during the first class session that public speaking should be taught by a native English speaker. I quickly realized that content knowledge was hardly enough to build my credibility as a teacher. In addition to having this content knowledge, I needed to swiftly break the language barrier that my students felt between us.

**Strategies for Connecting with Students.** During the interviews, three strategies emerged for connecting with students: use of self-disclosure, rapport setting, and elimination of uncertainty. Five participants used some
form of self-disclosure to build their credibility. Four stated that they shared their personal experiences in cross-cultural, interpersonal, and professional contexts. They intentionally used this strategy, hoping to encourage their students to reciprocate; once the students responded, these participants felt that their disclosures had strengthened their credibility considerably. One participant rated the level of her self-disclosure as moderate and often unintentional, and two stated that they never used or used very few self-disclosures with their students.

All participants shared their approaches to connecting with their students and their efforts to develop rapport early in the course. Hiromi stated that she routinely emphasized the benefits of learning from differences at the beginning. Tomoko described her first writing assignment, personal narrative, as a tool for becoming better acquainted with her students early on. She also employed self-disclosure to stress the importance of cross-cultural sensitivities and individual cultural values.

The most interesting data came from the participants’ anecdotes that depicted their cross-cultural experiences. Ayako, Tomoko, and Ming Liang stated that they were at first caught by surprise when their students came to see them in their offices and protested their grades, because they were “not used to it.” A female student of mine once claimed that her grade was too low because the assignment had not been graded according to the scale I had promised. When I regraded, her grade was lowered. The student cried for fifteen minutes, accusing me of discrimination.

After experiencing such grade protests, Ayako adapted a strategy to eliminate any uncertainty about grading, and increased students’ ability to predict their grades. Similarly, Fusako, who had fifteen years of counseling experience, stated that her most effective approach to connecting with students was to eliminate uncertainty and increase predictability with guidelines for activities and grading.

Ayako also observed the American students’ insistence on high grades, while Xiali described her experience and summarized her students as “undisciplined,” quoting their unrealistic expectations about receiving leniency on deadlines for personal problems. It is ironic to see these teachers from a high uncertainty avoidance country adapt their cultural practices, such as precise objectives and strict timetables, to satisfy the students of a lower uncertainty avoidance culture.

My experience as a novice teacher overlaps this approach. At first I perceived that American students would prefer more flexible and accommodating classroom management; therefore, deadlines and due dates were not strictly enforced. The students constantly asked what their grades were, how the grades were calculated, and on some occasions, what they could do to raise their grade to A from C during the final week of the semester. After I adopted a point system for grading, along with stricter policies, very few students inquired or protested regarding grades.
These anecdotes may not be unique to the United States; however, for teachers from Asian countries where the classroom reflects teacher-centered dynamics, such experiences are rather problematic. Just as children are expected to obey their parents at home, students are expected to regard their teachers with respect. In school, the hierarchy between teachers and students is clear. Violation of such social order is unacceptable. Asian teachers who expect a large power distance from students may not be able to tolerate these violations easily. Likewise, students from small-power-distance cultures become equally confused and frustrated when their teachers insist on a power hierarchy in the classroom. This is a recipe for disaster for students and teachers alike.

Hall and Hall's account of high- versus low-context cultures in its paradoxical form (1987) is vividly illustrated in Ming Liang’s experience with grade protests. She stated,

Before receiving his final grade, a male student assumed that he had passed the course with flying colors, and had a party to celebrate. When he received the grade the next day, he realized he had barely passed. He confronted me, saying that he thought he'd receive a high grade because I was “always smiling” and “nice” to him.

Lacking multicultural skills in nonverbal communication, this American student, from a low-context background, relied on his instinct for nonverbal cues. As a result he misinterpreted his teacher's smile as a sign of favoritism toward him when in fact Ming Liang's smile had no specific agenda but represented a natural behavior according to her culture.

It is noteworthy that although all participants in the study shared a high-context cultural background, four participants used an explicit verbal approach (self-disclosure), which is characteristic of a low-context culture, to connect with students from a low-context culture. I too find that explicit communication seems to eliminate students’ anxiety toward teachers and classroom practice. I also find that a rapport can be built through listening to the culture stories given by students. Blending my teacher-centered classroom management into the student-centered environment in the United States seems to be the key to providing a successful learning experience for the students.

Although exploratory, these findings provide a foundation for research to fully identify the challenges that Asian-born female faculty face in the English communication classroom. Much information is yet to be gathered in order to examine closely how teacher credibility can be effectively established through the use of the cross-cultural information that is currently available. Future research should question which culture emerges as dominant in a classroom of predominantly English-speaking students when the instructor is an Asian-born female. How do Asian-born female college faculty negotiate the clash of cultures? Can a hybrid culture be created to bridge the communication gap in cross-cultural academic settings?
Conclusion

In my public speaking class several years ago, an English-speaking American male student commented on his student evaluation sheet that I lectured too much. The evaluation also pointed out that I should design and present the class materials in a manner more enjoyable for the students. The comments also suggested that I give tests and quizzes less often. To date, many of the student evaluation comments from the class with predominantly English-speaking Americans often include their expectation to be entertained and their desire to be less restricted in their study timetable.

Conversely, in my public speaking classes for ESL students, which often consist of students from cultures ranging from Arab, Eastern European, and Asian to Central and South American, the students frequently comment on my preparedness, the manner in which disagreements are handled, and the practice of fairness, along with a polite suggestion that the tests and quizzes should be easier. It seems that my classroom dynamics do reflect in part Hofstede's observations regarding uncertainty avoidance, power distance, and individualism. Interestingly, however, the students in my public speaking classes, regardless of their cultural backgrounds, consistently view a well-organized and highly predictable classroom practice as a positive quality. This positive perception of the class is often simultaneously coupled with the students' perception of the teacher's credibility and competency (“She knows her stuff”).

Although instructors’ expectations of students are explicitly stated in the course syllabus, students’ expectations are rarely communicated to their instructors (Niehoff, Turnley, Sheu, and Yen, 2001). This lack increases students’ dissatisfaction with their instructors as well as with the course content. Hendrix (1998) stated that the findings of her study examining the influence of race on teacher credibility indicated that the likelihood of students questioning the credibility of African American teachers depended on the subject matter. This inference seems to parallel the testimonies of Asian-born female instructors obtained in this study. Just as foreign language students expect their teachers to be multicultural and to speak the subject language with a native tongue, English-speaking American students may expect their teachers to be experts in English as well as in American culture. Because student perceptions of instructor effectiveness may be influenced by such factors as the instructor's cultural background and classroom practice, it is important for instructors to tune in to cross-cultural sensitivities and nurture inclusiveness and openness among students.

Note

1. Three participants were my colleagues. Through the Japan-U.S. Communication Association, I e-mailed a request for participation to its members. Two people replied. Finally, my graduate professor at Northeastern Illinois University referred two participants to me.
References


CHIKAKO AKAMATSU MCLEAN is speech program ESL coordinator and adjunct professor in the Speech and Modern Language Departments at Oakton Community College, Des Plaines, Illinois.