

MASTER'S THESIS

Cultural hybridization in a multicultural university workplace: how rapport management works in intercultural communication

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Abstract

Communication skills and interpersonal relationships have been receiving an increasing amount of attention in literature on workplace culture. Being polite serves a significant role in building up a harmonious working environment, and in enhancing communication efficiency. Current approaches to politeness have called for a more comprehensive framework than the polite-impolite continuum. There is a growing tendency to view politeness as a matter of appropriateness, which involves the negotiation of relationships. This new trend is represented by Spencer-Oatey's rapport management theory. While rapport management has been framed within the study of workplace culture or communities of practice (CofP), little empirical research has investigated its application in intercultural settings. The present study has continued the focus of building up and maintaining rapport at work, which draws attention to intercultural communicative behaviour as it arises in a multicultural context. In essence, the purpose of this study is to examine how people from different cultural backgrounds manage rapport at work, and consequently explore how the workplace culture is shaped. It also aims to document and examine the change and development of workplace culture with the participation of different members.

A multi-method approach underpins the study, which enables the research concern to be looked at from different perspectives. This approach, involving the adoption of workplace observation, audio recording of conversations, and semi-structured interviews, overcomes the weakness of using one single instrument to analyse communicative behaviour. Situated in a multi-cultural university workplace in Mainland China, the research makes use of naturally-occurring interactions between Chinese and foreign (American and European) teaching-related staff. The study is composed of two phases with some overlap of participants. Conversations are analyzed using Spencer-Oatey's rapport management theory. While audio recording serves as the primary tool to collect data, follow-up and in-depth interviews were conducted in which participants were asked to recall and evaluate others' and their own communicative behaviour.

Findings from the data analysis suggest that participants exhibit an appropriate amount of their own inherent behaviour. Each of them contributes their own cultural traits and personalities to the intercultural communication process, which ultimately determines the general tendency of rapport management style. A diversity of rapport management strategies is identified according to participants' different rapport management orientations and individual dispositions. Some features of the work-

place culture are thus clearly revealed. Neither the local Chinese staff nor the foreign (native English-speaking) staff behave in a way that could be described as typical of their own culture; their behaviour conforms to a hybridized culture which shows characteristics of both the local Chinese and foreign cultures. The comparison of results from the two phases indicates that the workplace culture evolves according to the cultural and personal attributes displayed by participants. This process is associated with a pidgin language analogy. This study therefore yields a better understanding of the dynamic nature of intercultural workplace communication. While there has long been debate and emphasis on adaptation to a workplace culture, the present study suggests that cultural hybridization is the trend in such a multicultural university workplace. It is therefore implied that in order to manage rapport appropriately in intercultural communication, it is important to be able to negotiate one's behavioural norms to the workplace culture instead of only acclimating oneself to the local culture.

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