

Intercultural Communication in the US College Classroom: A Russian Professor's Perspective

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This paper describes my personal experience teaching American students and the experience of my students communicating with foreign professors in an attempt to identify the intercultural communication issues that may affect the success and increase the efficiency of the teaching-learning process. The basic assumption underlying my research holds that communication between people raised in different cultures is a dynamic process, a journey toward harmony, where both parties experience a series of changes, adjustments, and transformations striving to reach better understanding and accomplish the goals they set for themselves. The cultural differences in professor-student communication have been studied at a group level (interaction with a group of students) and at an individual level (interaction with individual students in out-of-classroom settings).

1. The Experience of a Russian Professor

I should make a disclaimer that my case is probably not the most typical one for several reasons. A native speaker of Russian, I arrived to the United States for the first time at the age of 40 having my academic degrees in English and Linguistics from Russia and Israel. I have never taken classes in the US and was absolutely unfamiliar with the American higher education mechanism and its functions. Foreign-born professors teach a broad array of disciplines in numerous college classrooms across the country. They teach biology, physics, chemistry, math, arts, music, computer sciences, political sciences, modern languages, etc. However, hiring a foreign professor for teaching writing, composition, and linguistics courses for the English department, which is precisely what I am doing, is relatively uncommon. Most of the Russian-born professors I contacted through the Linguist List admitted that they immigrated to the US earlier in their lives, obtained their degrees from American universities, and didn't remember experiencing any communication issues in teaching. The studies on the topic of intercultural communication in classrooms between American students and foreign professors are scarce and focus on the distinctions in content, teaching strategies, and methodological differences rather than on the cultural-communicational aspects of the process. Probably since the situation is not

a very common one, there was not much research studying specifically the communication between American students and Russian professors, and even less in the field of linguistics, which made me curious and determined to analyze my own experience and the opinions of my students.

My study involved the analysis of the differences in verbal and non-verbal behavior, the different perception of politeness and directness in speech and body language, and also the distinction in values and beliefs which influence the efficiency of communication in classroom environment.

1.1 Verbal Behavior

Usually the first class period of every semester begins with a short introduction, when professors introduce themselves by name and provide the contact information. Some faculty use the title (T) and last name (LN) formula, some suggest addressing them by their first name (FN). Both options would be highly inappropriate in Russian universities where the usual term of address is FN followed by a patronymic, using the polite 2nd person plural 'vous' (vy) form. Titles (Doctor or Professor) followed by the LN are almost never used in terms of address in Russia, and addressing a professor using his/her FN or 2nd person singular 'tu' (ty) is quite unacceptable. I introduce myself as Dr. Marina Gorlach, and most of the students use the TLN or the MsLN form. A very small percent of the students choose to use the FN address, more frequently in their emails than in oral communication with me, and on each such occasion I have to suppress my emotions. Since I never initiate it, and it is so contrary to the communication norms I have followed for so long, it strikes me as almost rude and disrespectful.

The use of titles also shows a discrepancy, for example, the word 'professor' is limited in Russian universities to the usage parallel to 'full professor' in the US and presumes about fifteen years of college level teaching experience after obtaining a Doctor's degree. This title is habitually used by the American students in the generic meaning of 'faculty member' and applied to the faculty who don't have a Ph.D. by the administration.

During the next 15 minutes of the introductory lecture in the US college, many faculty talk about their background, education, experience, and some may even supply personal information (having family, pets, hobbies, etc.) While knowing more about the person who is going to teach them that semester might be beneficial for the students, it also reflects the 'focus on the individual' philosophy of the US society at large. Since the speakers of Russian have long been trained to emphasize the common good and de-emphasize the individual, talking about oneself has been regarded as an inappropriate thing to do for several generations; therefore I can only feel comfortable talking about myself when asked a direct question.

One of the most obvious things that can interfere with the communication between American students and foreign-born professors is the accent, and here both professors and students face a challenge. Although the students usually attribute the difficulty to the pronunciation alone, miscommunication most frequently occurs due to the combined effect of several factors involved: phonetic (modifying and/or substituting certain sounds), prosodic (using different tone and intonation), lexical (making different or unusual vocabulary choices), conversational (employing different rules for turn-taking, gaps between the turns, interruptions), non-verbal (using a different type and amount of body

language), and cultural (following different principles with regard to politeness, directness, systems of values). In addition, the class material is typically rich in unfamiliar terms and concepts, which is superimposed on the other factors and creates the effect of 'not understanding' or poor understanding reported by the students. I had a student who left the classroom fifteen minutes into my introductory class saying, "I won't be able to understand you – I am not a visual learner, and your accent will make it impossible for me." Though it only happened once, there were students who admitted by the end of the semester that they had experienced comprehension problems earlier in the semester.

Ironically, the relative difficulty of understanding the non-native speech of a professor has a positive effect on the efficiency of his/her teaching – students are more attentive, focused, listen more closely, and ultimately learn more.

Problems in intercultural communication often emerge from different perception of politeness held by different cultures. Certain verbal and non-verbal acts viewed as polite in one culture can be judged as inappropriate, impolite, and even rude in another culture. Stereotyping that follows such misunderstanding can be harmful for communication. For example, I noticed that both my students and peers show a significantly higher sensitivity for interruptions than their Russian-speaking colleagues, who value high-involvement conversational style with cooperative overlaps and view it as a sign of empathy, genuine concern, and active participation in a conversation. This approach proved to be much less successful in the United States, and I had to change my behavior radically. When at first I felt compelled to chime in and say something in support of what my conversational partner or a student in class was saying, overlapping with their turn, they suddenly stopped talking and let me continue, making my effort counterproductive. Having realized that interruptions are regarded as much more rude here than in Russia, I had to learn to listen to my students without interrupting and express my agreement only after they finished speaking.

Another different feature in our perception of politeness is what I would call "absolute engagement": many Americans get fully absorbed in conversation with one person to the extent they don't notice anything or anybody around them. This trait may be regarded as both positive and negative. On the positive side, being focused on the conversation to the point of abstracting oneself from one's surroundings shows the utmost respect to one's conversational partner. However, people from other culture, such as Russian, may see it as a sign of egotism and arrogance and perceived as rude and disrespectful toward other people. To illustrate this attitude, I will bring an example from a real classroom situation. After the end of the class, students who have questions usually come to my desk and form a perfect line waiting for me, being mutually polite and suggesting "You go ahead" to the others. But as soon as they get the floor, they talk, make comments, ask questions, tell jokes, and totally disregard the fact that the break is just 15 minutes long, and there is a line of people waiting to talk to me. At first, I felt uneasy about other students waiting and sometimes leaving not having asked their question. But when I realized that everybody seemed to deem the situation as natural, I stopped worrying and learned to shut the rest of the world off while speaking to someone, which turned out to be an even easier thing to do. Presently, I focus on my immediate counterpart only and detach myself from other people around, displaying almost the same degree of 'absolute engagement.' However, in Russian culture, no matter with whom one is talking at the moment, he or she always says 'hello', smiles, or waves to any familiar person who happens to appear in their field of

vision, and failure to acknowledge their presence is considered rude and even offensive. I guess in this case the rules of the individual-oriented society come in conflict with the rules of the societies where the common good is given a priority, and the role of each individual member of society is deliberately downplayed.

Politeness in general is viewed differently by the two cultures, the stereotype pictures Russians as not very polite and even rude. They are often perceived by the westerners as intrusive, over-assertive, demanding, argumentative, aggressive, and too direct (Larina 2006). There is definitely an issue of directness/indirectness of speech, which differs significantly from culture to culture. If the Japanese find the American way of expressing themselves too direct, Russians find it too indirect. At first, I am afraid I misinterpreted the meaning of students who used the usual language of understatement: *I don't understand this material very well*. The interpretation of the equivalent Russian utterance would be: *I understand it, just not very well*, while in the American version the *very well* part is a tribute to indirectness carrying no meaning: the interpretation is *I don't understand this material*.

Similarly, Americans rarely give direct negative answers:

Q: *Can I use this article for my term paper?*

A: *Well, I am not sure this is the best idea.*

In Russian, yes/no questions imply yes/no answers, and using the formula *Maybe this is not such a great idea* for saying 'No' would make one sound insincere and evasive. On the other hand, Russian directness sounds too harsh and sometimes too categorical and even antagonistic to an American ear. My journey of bridging cultural gaps is taking me away from my habitual *No* to more subtle and less direct formulas that are perceived as less threatening.

It's surprising, though, that the directness of expression is not immediately correlated with truthfulness and openness in communication. Russian culture is not very open when it comes to revealing any negative aspects of one's life and the personal life of one's family members, such as criminal past, mental disorders, or relationship problems. One can acknowledge such things when answering a direct question, but never volunteer any information that would cast a negative light on their significant ones. That is why it came as a shock to me at the beginning when students told me about having alcoholic abusive husbands, suffering from bipolar disorder, depression, undergoing psychiatric therapy, and others. I felt uneasy learning about such private and confidential details, but they did not see why such facts should be concealed.

The last point on the issue of politeness would concern the use of frozen conversational formulas and clichés. Russians try to avoid using them as they view them as a sign of poverty of expression and lack of imagination, and clichés are a taboo in educated speech. I was surprised by their frequency in the speech of an average American student. Another unexpected finding: according to my students, many foreign professors use richer vocabulary and are more aware of their word choice than their American professors. I would link it to the fact that the word choice for foreign professors is a more conscious and less natural process, demanding more effort, which results in more carefully selected wording and more limited use of neutral/clichéd/bland language.

1.2 Non-verbal behavior

Numerous differences can also be observed in Russian and American non-verbal behavior. For example, I noticed almost immediately that American **personal space** is bigger than Russian, and made a conscious effort to increase the physical distance between myself and my students while we talked. The awareness of the possibility of sexual harassment, a concept that is not very well developed in Russia yet, seems to have a strong effect on the body language norms in the US because Americans are using much less touching, patting on the shoulder, and actual kissing (not brushing cheeks) than Russians.

Unlike many other cultures, Americans smile to strangers, and some of them do so every time they make an eye contact, which is very uncommon in Russia. One of my students while visiting Pskov, Russia, tried to evoke a smile by making funny faces, blinking, smiling broadly at people in the street, and never succeeded. However, he recalls that when he was introduced to someone, people immediately changed their expression and gave him a friendly smile. Fortunately, this feature was the easiest to adopt, and I am happy to be a part of the smiling culture. Some of my students remarked, though, that rare smiles must be more meaningful and genuine, carrying more communicative weight, and never appearing as superficial or fake.

Some features of the American body language are criticized by Russians as impolite, especially putting one's feet on the table, wearing a hat or a cap by men inside buildings or cars, and shaking hands with women. On the other hand, my students notice that foreign professors use many more hand gestures, touch their face and hair, and sometimes stare at other people in the way that disagrees with the American standard of good manners.

1.3 Values

Some differences in verbal and non-verbal behavior are possibly rooted in the tendency to deliberately erase the distinctions between the genders, which is a very sensitive spot for Americans, but much less so for Russians. Some of my female colleagues and students feel a strong need to fight for equality and promote women's rights, which surprised me since I had never come in contact with feminism before. The equality of men and women was proclaimed in Russia back in 1917 as one of the major principles of socialist society, and whether actually observed or not, resulted in the absence of a feminist movement. Several generations of the Soviet women were legally entitled to perform any physical job, pave roads, unload cargo wagons, and operate huge construction cranes. The number of female physicians, teachers, and engineers has always been higher than that of male ones, and the general conviction of the Russians was that women enjoyed equal rights with men. Such ideological gaps can only be bridged if a foreign professor demonstrates great tolerance and open-mindedness while discussing sensitive social issues in sociolinguistics, semantics, and composition classes.

The relative importance attached to many moral values in American and Russian cultures shows a significant difference, and some ethical standards Americans have been faithful to for several decades are only beginning to evolve in Russia. The examples of such priorities are respect for animal rights, devotion to the preservation of the environment expressed in recycling, prevention of air and water pollution, and adherence to confidentiality rights of individuals. Since I teach sociolinguistics, semantics, anthropological linguistics, and other classes where we discuss values, I had to make the adjustments and be prepared for discussions that focused on such issues. I also had to deal with various views on religion and faith, and it demanded a certain psychological shift

since I was raised by a society dismissing the very possibility of religious beliefs. I think foreign professors should be extremely diplomatic and tactful when it comes to discussing political or religious views in their classes since they may not be very well familiar with the broad spectrum of existing views and are at risk of making false assumptions. On the other hand, being new to the culture and its political tensions, they may be less firm or established in their own views and beliefs, which can make them more accepting of various opinions and can ultimately be beneficial for students.

Among other differences in values, the difference in interpersonal relationships between Russian and American students should be mentioned. Many American students have few to no friends in the classes they take, which can be attributed to the organization of the teaching process based on individual plans and programs. Both in high school and in college they take different classes and form multiple temporary groups, unlike Russian students who study in permanent classes with the same peers for five years in college or university. As a result students in Russia exist in dense social networks, regard school as source of their most stable and close social relationships, and develop life-long friendships with their schoolmates. In my experience with American students, the journey of many young people through their school years is rather solitary, and many of them show little curiosity towards their fellow students, showing weaker socialization skills and stronger tendency for individualism.

2. Students' Perspective

In order to critically evaluate the interaction with foreign professors from students' point of view, I designed a short survey consisting of 10 simple questions (see the Appendix). The survey was taken by 100 students in my classes this semester, and all of them completed it. For question 1, most of the answers (55.0%) revealed that no major adjustment was needed on the students' part for getting used to their foreign professors' communication patterns. Many students mentioned the difficulty of understanding teachers with heavy accents, which was a predictable concern. For question 2, the majority (42.4%) replied that foreign professors were more thorough and precise than American professors in their presentation of the material. One of the comments to this question suggested that 'foreign teachers are more energetic about the material they teach.' Another comment held: 'I certainly see a more detailed approach by foreign professors which I appreciate and understand thoroughly.' On the flip side, one student noted that foreign professors are not familiar with the jargon that American professors use, so their courses 'aren't always taught with the sort of pun that some use to make their classes more fun.'

The answers to question 5 showed that a significant number of students (41.2%) think that the atmosphere foreign professors create in their classrooms is more formal than with American professors. Some of the comments suggested that foreign professors '...are better suited to discourage disruptive behavior' and 'expect better behavior and discipline from students.' Looking at it from my perspective as a teacher, I can definitely endorse this view – my expectations of student behavior are high, and my interpretation of class discipline is probably more rigid than that of my American colleagues. It was hard for me to accept at the beginning that students can eat, drink, leave the room, or speak from their seats. In Russian colleges all these are a definite 'no-no': students are not allowed to bring food or drinks to classrooms, get up and leave their seat during a class period, and talk without the permission of the instructor. Although I have changed many things during my six years of teaching in Denver, I still insist that students raise their hands. This policy

evokes different attitudes: younger students do not like this policy, but there are also students who express gratitude for this approach claiming that they are shy and would have never mustered up the courage to speak otherwise. They admit that they keep quiet in most other classes not feeling enough confidence for participation in discussions.

At the same time, students appreciate the respect I show for their opinions, never imposing my own and trying not to be critical or judgmental. One of the students' comments reflects this situation: 'I feel more liberated and am empowered to give my thoughts.'


Taking into account my Russian 'directness', I was anticipating that I would rank low on the politeness scale, but students' responses proved the opposite. For question 6, 48.0% of the students replied that foreign professors are more polite than American professors. One interesting comment regarding politeness holds: 'Something entirely different. It's a direct, but professional and intellectual approach. I can't find the adjective to describe it, but it's there.'

For question 7, a statistically significant number of 41.8% of the students reported that the body language of foreign professors is 'slightly different.' Several comments shed light on the type of this difference: 'I could be wrong, but they seem to use more hand gestures,' 'More aware of themselves,' 'Foreign teachers tend to be more animated and talk with their hands a lot.' Body language can often be an individual trait, and it is possible that the frequency of using hand gestures is approximately the same for American and foreign professors, but since the gestures used by foreign professors are less familiar, they may become more noticeable for students creating the impression of their abundance.



I must admit that I was glad to discover that the overwhelming majority of the students (58.6%) responding to question 9 claimed that the intercultural differences in communication with their foreign professors have a positive impact on their learning. Expanding on the subject, they wrote that intercultural differences allow for a wonderful and new perspective and make them 'empowered to learn more of the numerous diversities that surround them daily.' One student stated that he or she respected foreign professors more because they speak more languages and are better traveled.



Summarizing my experience, I should say that I am still going through various transformations and assimilation/acclimation processes, but my communication with students seems to become more successful by the day. Given my unusual background and the relative lateness of my first encounter with American colleges and students, the mutual understanding we have achieved reflects temporary and manageable nature of cultural differences and high probability of successfully bridging the gaps between cultures. Teaching American students is an incredibly gratifying experience: they are polite, respectful, curious, and appreciative. I am thankful for this priceless experience.



Foreign Professors in US Classrooms - Survey Summary



1. Is there any difference in the way you communicate with American and foreign professors?			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Yes, it's different		4.0%	4
There are some minor differences		32.0%	32
No, I don't notice any difference		55.0%	55
 Other (please specify)		16.0%	16

2. In their presentation of the material, foreign professors are			
		Response Percent	Response Count
More thorough and precise than American professors		42.4%	42
Less thorough and precise than American professors		1.0%	1
Very much the same as American professors		43.4%	43

2. In their presentation of the material, foreign professors are			
 view	Other (please specify)	17.2%	17
3. The requirements of foreign professors regarding classroom conduct are			
		Response Percent	Response Count
slightly different from most American professors		26.3%	26
very different from most American professors		5.1%	5
very similar to most American professors		59.6%	59
 view	Other (please specify)	11.1%	11
4. Foreign professors 'interrupt' students' answers			
		Response Percent	Response Count
More frequently than American professors		17.0%	17
Less frequently than American professors		18.0%	18
With the same frequency as American professors		58.0%	58

4. Foreign professors 'interrupt' students' answers			
 view	Other (please specify)	9.0%	9
5. The atmosphere foreign professors create in their classrooms is			
		Response Percent	Response Count
more formal than with American professors		41.2%	40
less formal than with American professors		7.2%	7
very similar to every other classroom		44.3%	43
 view	Other (please specify)	11.3%	11
6. Foreign professors are			
		Response Percent	Response Count
more polite than American professors		48.0%	47
less polite than American professors		4.1%	4
very similar to American professors when it comes to politeness		41.8%	41

6. Foreign professors are			
 Other (please specify)		6.1%	6
7. I find the body language of foreign professors			
		Response Percent	Response Count
slightly different		41.8%	41
very different		4.1%	4
almost the same as of my American professors		51.0%	50
 Other (please specify)		8.2%	8
8. I find communication with foreign professors			
		Response Percent	Response Count
less difficult than with American professors		6.1%	6
more difficult than with American professors		19.2%	19
exactly the same as with American professors		58.6%	58

8. I find communication with foreign professors			
 Other (please specify)		20.2%	20
9. Intercultural differences in communication with my foreign professors			
		Response Percent	Response Count
have a negative impact on my learning		1.0%	1
have a positive impact on my learning		58.6%	58
don't have any impact on my learning		33.3%	33
 Other (please specify)		11.1%	11
10. I have experienced miscommunication problems with my foreign professors			
		Response Percent	Response Count
rather frequently		5.0%	5
rather rarely		47.0%	47
as frequently as with my American professors		38.0%	38

10. I have experienced miscommunication problems with my foreign professors

[view](#)

Other (please specify)

13.0%

13