

Review of Language and Culture in Context: A Primer on Intercultural Communication

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Godwin-Jones, R. (2020). *Language and culture in context: A primer on intercultural communication*. Virginia Commonwealth University.

<https://open.umn.edu/opentextbooks/textbooks/978>

The considerable value of zero-cost Open Education Resources (OER) and textbooks is that it democratizes higher education: OER make course materials available for students who struggle to buy textbooks and for life-time learners who study outside an institutional setting. However, unlike textbooks by established publishers, not all OERs are peer-reviewed, so the quality of the resource is variable.

The discipline of communication is fortunate to have many open-source textbooks. After a 30-minute Google search, I found 10 free-access textbooks on Public Speaking, three in introductory-level communication, four in media and mass communication, at least one in technical communication, crisis communication, communication theory, interpersonal communication, group and organizational communication, and public relations. I found two intercultural communication textbooks, *Intercultural Communication* by Shannon Ahrndt (2020), and *Language and Culture in Context: A Primer on Intercultural Communication* by Robert Godwin-Jones (2020).

I focus on Godwin-Jones's (2020) *Language and Culture in Context: A Primer on Intercultural Communication*. The book has many strengths and a few weaknesses. I discuss

accessibility and readability, its scope, topics covered in its seven chapters, and provide an overview of the strengths and weaknesses.

The interface shows a well-designed book. Readers can choose among pdf, MS Word, or EPub formats to read or download the text. Each chapter includes an online tutorial with a video introduction of the learning objectives and the author's cultural blog (*Dr. GJ's Culture Blog*). The chapters end with "information literacy" (applying the topics to the online environment), key concepts, and a list of books, online resources, references and credits.

The title, *Language and Culture*, reveals the scope in which intercultural communication (IC) is discussed: Pairing culture and language invites more discussion on ethnic culture and social functioning and less on areas connected to language in a more subtle way (such as power, globalism, and gender). Although some faculty might see this as a weakness, it makes the textbook useful for other fields such as ESL, introductory linguistics, cultural studies, and general communication and capstone courses, where the focus is less on the interaction and the negotiation of meaning among people from different groups and backgrounds and more on communicative tools and principles.

The text is organized into seven chapters: (1) Broadening Horizons, (2) Building Identities, (3) Using Language, (4) Conversing and Relating, (5) Communicating Nonverbally, (6) Contextualizing Intercultural Communication, and (7) Encountering Other Cultures. Each chapter is divided into two major parts (I and II), along with two subtitles that discuss five or six sub-subtopics; the structure makes the material easy to restructure or skip parts. Breaking the text into several distinct levels also means that the chapters are long (26-28 pages of text and 31- 33 pages with additional material), information heavy, and provide more than enough material for

courses of 11 weeks (of quarters) or 15 weeks (of semesters). In the next section, I analyze the chapters and discuss the depth and breadth of the content.

The first chapter, “Broadening Horizons,” introduces intercultural communication by explaining the definition of IC, its need, the central role of culture, culture’s complexity, and communication as a human necessity. Some western-centric overtones appear in the text. For example, Godwin-Jones writes, “While many in developed countries enjoy international travel, increasing prosperity, and safe communities, those in other parts of the world continue to experience severe deprivations (food, water, housing), mass unemployment, and violent communities” (Godwin-Jones, 2020, Ch1, pp. 2-3). As inequality in the western countries reached extremes in the 2020s, we do not need to hold to the old western/developed-non-western/underdeveloped dichotomy to contrast prosperity and safety with poverty and unsafety; these have arrived in our own backyard.

The Godwin-Jones takes a critical stance regarding globalization, acknowledging it “is by no means, as often portrayed, a benign process, benefiting humanity universally” (Godwin-Jones, 2020, p. 2). However, the disadvantages of globalization are not discussed with the same depth as the advantages, so cultural globalization/cultural imperialism are explained on the surface by unifying ideals, standardization, and homogenization that transcend geographical boundaries. The statement culture is a “slippery concept” needs clarification from a wider and more critical perspective (p. 5). This superficial discussion visits cosmopolitanism, defined as a “[m]oral view of the individual as having an allegiances and personal responsibility to the world” (p. 26), leaving out a crucial aspect of cosmopolitanism, viz., that it affects attachments to nation and local communities and their shared cultures. Finally, Godwin-Jones argues, because it is difficult to deal with the increasingly complex world, many people go on “disbelieving scientific

evidence” (p. 8). This statement overlooks why and how science is socially, culturally and ideologically constructed.

The first chapter continues under a second subtitle, “Cultures under Study and in the Media,” which discusses IC as an academic discipline and cultural dimensions from Hall and Hofstede (individualism/collectivism, power distance, polychronic/monochronic time, and avoidance of uncertainty). This would be a good place to list cultural dimensions and taxologies we find scattered in various chapters. Essentialism and reductionism are presented as the “dangers” of cultural taxonomies, which would be a good introduction to explain why social sciences need generalizations, how these differ from stereotypes, and the positive meaning of strategic essentialism.

As a conscious step to avoid western centrism, Godwin-Jones suggests “Western approaches to intercultural communication need to be supplemented—and in some cases, corrected—through the different life experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives offered by non-Western scholars” (Godwin-Jones, 2020, p. 10). Godwin-Jones suggests an anthropocosmic perspective as a grounding for Chinese and global ethical theory; indigenous perspectives; and insights from African scholars be included in IC. Although anthropocosmic perspective (that emphasizes the unity of self, community, and cosmos based on Confucian principles) is discussed in Ch1, other perspectives are not discussed (p. 12). Since indigenous American decolonizing rhetoric and Afrocentric and African worldview scholars are available, this remains a reminder what is largely missing from the textbook.

The first chapter ends with ethical considerations (digital divide, social justice, and othering); countering the media echo chamber (algorithms, citizen journalism, solutions journalism); information literacy (search engine optimization, netiquette, culture-of-use) and

defining active listening. As this overview demonstrates, there is a little about many things in this chapter.

Based on the first chapter's title, "Broadening Horizons," we might expect that the latest global developments that show a "dividing" horizon line in the global infosphere (and global power) remain undiscussed. This might be a vestige of the text age and an increasingly fast-changing world but also a lack of a critical perspective.

The second chapter, "Building Identities," discusses how identities are built, including cultural identity (microcultures, endogamy- exogamy, co-culture), integration and marginalization (assimilation, pluralism, marginalization, hegemony, ethnic homogeneity, American symbolic ethnicity), social identity (involuntary, such as age, race, family, and voluntary, such as club, church, or political party), worldviews and religions (with additional value orientations). The section avoids more recent examples of intercultural communication and ideology, instead referring to Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony, and Said's Orientalism to prove the general notion that culture itself is a form of ideology.

The author talks about ideology and its constraints, western superiority, colonialism and subjugation, racism, prejudice, intolerance, stereotypes, micro-aggressions, "model" minorities, and ethnocentrism (Ch2, pp. 14-15). It is not clear why these are discussed in the "identity" section and not a "culture" section. Although these additions make the text usable for other than IC courses, they also neglect many conventional identity concepts discussed in other textbooks.

The second part of the second chapter presents, "Judging and Treating Others Fairly." This section includes categorization and stereotyping; addressing prejudice and intolerance; food and culture; and online identities. The author explains muted group theory, communication

theory of identity, contact theory, and critical reflectivity. In my opinion, however, critical reflexivity would be better placed in IC methods.

The third chapter is titled “Using Language,” the central topic of the whole book, and one might wonder why the author starts discussing this in the third chapter and not earlier. Godwin-Jones breaks down the first subtopic, language and culture, into further sub-topics such as language helps us process the world around us, language reflects culture, sociolinguistics as a field to study language in use, world languages, and bilingualism and multilingualism.

In the second part of this chapter, the author discusses language learning: approaches to language learning, understanding the nature of language, learning a second language, English as a world language, and language learning and technology. It is not clear why second language learning is discussed in such a large extent in an IC textbook, but this is another example of how the material is broad enough for use in other than IC courses.

The fourth chapter requires the users select preferred parts and drop others since the chapter is wide-ranging and overloaded with information. The author discusses “Conversing and Relating,” and the first sub-topic, communication in practice consists of sections about language and relationships, communication styles, communication contexts, communication accommodation, and uncertainty management.

The second part, “Language in Society,” includes sources of miscommunication, culturally embedded language use, gender and communication, communication in personal relationships, romancing across cultures, and communicating and relating online. Instead of discussing in the first chapter’s taxonomies, the author explains low context-high context communication styles here; this adds to the weaknesses. The chapter ends with a discussion of communication accommodation theory, uncertainty reduction theory, anxiety/uncertainty

management theory, social penetration theory, miscommunication, conversation analysis, cultural schemas and scripts, and gender and language.

Moving to the fifth chapter, “Communicating Nonverbally,” we find a thorough discussion about nonverbal communication such as body language—including the nature of nonverbal communication, gestures across cultures, the universality of facial expressions, personal space, and physically interacting with others.

The second section, “Nonverbal Messaging,” continues with paralanguage, managing conversations (signals), and physical appearance and dress. Nonverbal expectancy violation theory, music (another form of nonverbal communication), and semiotics and the internet are interesting topics rarely discussed in other IC textbooks.

In the sixth chapter, Godwin-Jones continues with “Contextualizing Intercultural Communication.” The first part is about “Environmental Contexts,” in which the author discusses the impact of the environment on conversations, built environments and communication patterns, privacy across cultures, cultural spaces, car and driving behavior in a cultural context, and time orientation. This section informs the reader about the cultural communication of Wal-Mart, which affects why the store is successful or not in different parts of the world. The impact of the environment on conversations—including the design of built environments—are more topics that make the text useful for a variety of fields (such as social work, education, business, nursing, and psychology). The text also applies well to rarely discussed concepts like semi-fixed featured, fixed-featured, and informal spaces (p. 5). Interestingly, privacy and monochronic and polychronic time are considered “environmental contexts.”

The second part of this chapter is titled “Professional and Institutional Contexts.” This includes business and organizational contexts, equity and ethics, names, communicative genres, translation and interpretation, education, and professional discourse and privacy in the online environment. This section ends with discussing equity and ethics, the importance of names, communicative genres.

Finally, the seventh chapter is titled “Encountering Other Cultures,” including “Communicating across Cultures” examining personal encounters, conflicts and language, conflict resolution, the concept of face, cultural schemas, and mediated encounters. The author refers back to the “Cultura project”—originated at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the pioneering institution for OER—calling attention to the various cultural or political associations of particular words. Related theories are face negotiation theory and intercultural conflict style inventory. The first part of the chapter closes with cultural schemas and discourses.

The second part covers “Moving Among Cultures,” that is, experiencing a different culture, cross-cultural adaptation, refugees, culture shock, study abroad, achieving intercultural competence, and reflective writing. The author clarifies the meaning of immigrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, economic refugees, sojourners, compatriots, and the expatriate community, concepts which acquire more importance with the recent epidemic of mass migrations. It would be timely to add *migration en masse*, since mass migration, in this form, is itself a complex communication phenomenon and creates new problems for IC. As a good example of the many pragmatic uses of this textbook, Godwin-Jones recommends students document their intercultural learning experiences outside of class by using the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters project developed by the Council of Europe as a shared portfolio (p. 25). However, it also makes the already lengthy chapter even longer.

In conclusion, Godwin-Jones' *Language and Culture in Context: A Primer on Intercultural Communication* has many strengths and some weaknesses. As discussed, one of its greatest values may be that it is free. Another major strength—not the least important—is that its content is quite interesting. The text has an accessible interface with options, and the text flows well. The intended scope discussing language and culture has a limit, since language is only one element of culture. Disregarding this limit, the author takes a broad angle, uses a variety of lenses, and a wide range of topics (almost too many), in which the author includes various perspectives. The author did good work regarding modularity: Well-separated subtopics in each chapter can be reshuffled or excerpted easily—the same is true for several sub-subtopics. The material can also be expanded using video resources and online links. The text is accessible for readers with various abilities. The photos show diversity. The material is easily understood. It uses field-specific language, but the author explains the concepts. The strength of the textbook is also in its multiple useful theories.

However, we need to be aware of the weaknesses—which are not absolute and might vary based on users—before we assign this text. The textbook's versatility—the fact that it is not exclusively an Intercultural Communication textbook—should be a weakness for some because it shows that the author doesn't have a specific audience in mind, or envisions a very broad audience. As an introductory IC textbook, it works well with careful selection, requiring planning ahead. However, it is not broad and deep enough for more advanced level IC courses.

The organization of the topics is clear but not always logical; a separate “culture” chapter is missing. This could include things now missing from culture—such as culture (and language) of globalism, neo-colonialism, ideologies like nationalism, liberalism/neoliberalism, and power. Also, the sidebars do not always help clarity; many lack important context. I find the vocabulary

listed are too many, and the explanations often are poor. Topics are not specific enough, they are often scattered throughout the text, and many times lack a depth. Missing are deep structures of culture, atheism, spirituality, more about religions, and a clear list of cultural dimensions and taxologies.

Many data are old. Major challenges like global universalist language and ambiguous words (democracy, liberty, help) stripped from cultural meaning are not discussed. “Culture” is analyzed in post-structuralist frame—something that is out there, can be observed, analyzed, and built theory about it—not something that is socially constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed every day in front of our eyes. The standpoint is sometimes western-centric.

The author focuses on lecturing, not asking or discussing key questions that would require critical and analytical thinking. This textbook is less likely to prepare students to do critical analysis on their own. I am also unsure whether it offers enough tools to recognize how recent cultures are born and develop among us, like LGBTQ+, gender, trans, childrens’ rights, youth liberation and climate-action culture.

There is some inconsistency in organization: the two sub-titles in the Table of Contents that mark the two major sections (sub-topics) in each chapter are missing in the text. In the absence of these, we can find the topics based on the sub-sub-titles only. Finally, the book design might not be satisfying for users with high expectation regarding aesthetics, but this is not too much of a price to pay for free access.

Ultimately, Godwin-Jones’ *Language and Culture in Context: A Primer on Intercultural Communication*, was designed to be a primary (introductory) source for IC with a focus on language and culture. These goals are achieved. Therefore, the textbook is more than enough to teach IC. However, teaching faculty need to spend time with the text to learn how to make the

best use out of it. From a reader's perspective, the book is an excellent source from which to learn IC concepts, theories, or gain IC competencies without paying for an expensive textbook. The text is versatile to use for many other courses, and provides useful information also for those who want to know more about the field outside of educational institutions.