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Cultural Differences Between United States and Chinese Students' Use of Behavioral Alteration Techniques and Affinity-Seeking Strategies with Instructors

Alan K. Goodboy, San Bolkan, Steven A. Beebe, & Kara Shultz

The purpose of this study was to investigate cultural differences in college students' use of behavioral alteration techniques and affinity-seeking strategies with instructors in the United States and China. Participants were 265 U.S. students and 180 Chinese students who reported on their communication behavior with an instructor. Results indicated that Chinese students self-reported using 13 BATs more frequently than U.S. students (i.e. honesty-sincerity, complaining, pleading, guilt, flattery, play on the teacher's ability to relate, group persuasion, public persuasion, utilitarian justice, emotional displays, general excuses, referent to higher authority, and verbal force/demand). U.S. students self-reported using seven affinity-seeking strategies more frequently (i.e. assume control, comfortable self, conversational rule keeping, dynamism, presenting interesting self, trustworthiness, and achievement) whereas Chinese students reported using six affinity-seeking strategies more frequently (i.e. altruism, comfortable self, inclusion of other, influence perceptions of closeness, flirting, and gifts).

Keywords: Student Affinity-Seeking; Student BATs; Student Communication; China

Alan K. Goodboy (PhD, West Virginia University 2007) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Bloomsburg University. San Bolkan (PhD, University of Texas-Austin 2007) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at California State University – Long Beach. Steven A. Beebe (PhD, University of Missouri-Columbia 1976) is a Regents Professor and Chair in the Department of Communication Studies at the Texas State University – San Marcos. Kara Shultz (PhD, University of Denver 1991) is a Professor and Chair in the Department of Communication Studies at Bloomsburg University. Correspondence to Alan K. Goodboy, 1128 McCormick Center, 400 E. 2nd Street, Bloomsburg, PA, 17815, USA. Email: agoodboy@bloomu.edu

Culture plays an important role in human communication. According to Bruner (1996), “learning and thinking are always situated in a cultural setting and always dependent upon the utilization of cultural resources” (p. 4). Research has revealed that culture helps explain and predict communication that occurs in instructional settings (Gay, 2006; McCroskey, 2002, 2003; McCroskey & McCroskey, 2006). Yet, despite the important link between culture and communication, relatively few studies have investigated the role of culture in instructional settings (McCroskey, Fayer, Richmond, Sallinen, & Barraclough, 1996; McCroskey & McCroskey, 2006; McCroskey, Richmond, Sallinen, Fayer, & Barraclough, 1995; McCroskey, Sallinen, Fayer, Richmond, & Barraclough, 1996). As McCroskey and McCroskey (2006) noted, “the overwhelming proportion of instructional communication research has been conducted by U.S. researchers representing the Anglo culture of the United States and has involved participants who were also representing the predominant culture of the United States” (p. 42). Considering that culture influences both the value that students place on learning and the communication norms that regulate classroom communication, instructional communication researchers are wise to compare and contrast student behavior across different cultures.

Research suggests that Chinese students’ communication needs are different than U.S. students’ instructional needs (Zhang, Lin, Nonaka, & Beom, 2005). Because of well-documented differences in cultural values, norms, and expected behavior (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Li, 1999), comparing differences between Chinese students and U.S. students may provide important insights about the role of culture in influencing student behaviors in instructional contexts.

In addition to the comparative lack of research that has explored the role of culture in instructional settings, another under-developed area in instructional research is the role and importance of student communication behaviors. Most instructional research has investigated how *instructor* communication influences affective and cognitive learning (Chesbro & Wanzer, 2006; Myers & Martin, 2006; Roach, Richmond, & Mottet, 2006). As noted by Mottet, Beebe, and Fleuriet (2006), relatively few studies have investigated *student* communication responses in the classroom (Astin, 1984; Martin, Mottet, & Myers, 2000; Mottet, Beebe, Raffeld, & Medlock, 2004; Mottet, Beebe, Raffeld, & Paulsel, 2004).

To better understand student communication in the classroom, it is useful to examine the goals that motivate student communication behaviors (Mottet & Beebe, 2006). It is theorized that college students are motivated to communicate in the classroom for a variety of reasons; two primary reasons students communicate are to develop a relationship with the instructor and to succeed in the course (Martin, Myers, & Mottet, 1999). Relational/Rhetorical Goal Theory (Mottet, Frymier, & Beebe, 2006) posits that students have both a relational goal (to be liked) and a rhetorical goal (to achieve their instructional goals), but not all students are driven equally by each goal. Mottet et al. (2006) noted that both of these student goals, driven by their individual needs, are met, in part, through interactions with their instructor. One way students may meet their rhetorical/academic needs, such as achieving their educational goals in the form of learning and grades, is through the

use of student behavioral alteration techniques. Student behavioral alteration techniques (BATs) are persuasive compliance-gaining strategies students use to make an instructional request from the instructor (Golish, 1999). In addition, students achieve their relational needs, such as developing a confirming, positive instructor-student relationship, through the use of student affinity-seeking strategies. Student affinity-seeking strategies are messages that students use to increase liking from an instructor (Wanzer, 1998).

Although students may use both BATs and affinity-seeking strategies to meet their relational and rhetorical classroom needs, it is also likely that these student communication behaviors are influenced heavily by culture (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Li, 1999). And because culture may influence the level of student need to achieve their relational and rhetorical goals, it would be useful to confirm whether culture is linked to specific student use of BATs or affinity-seeking strategies. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate differences in student use of BATs and affinity-seeking strategies in the United States and China.

Student Behavioral Alteration Techniques

Behavior alteration techniques play a major role in how instructors and students achieve their rhetorical or instrumental goals in instructional settings (Roach et al., 2006). Although there is a well-established body of research that has identified *instructor* use of BATs (for a review on instructor BAT use, see Chory & Goodboy, 2010), there is, by comparison, scant research that has investigated *student* use of BATs. Golish (1999) found that students use 19 unique compliance-gaining strategies to persuade instructors to make decisions that may benefit students' academic goals, often in the form of grades, known as student BATs. These strategies are *honesty-sincerity* (communicating the truth), *blame* (blaming the instructor), *complaining* (complaining numerous times), *begging* (pleading for compliance), *guilt* (attempting to induce guilt), *flattery* (communicating in a flattering manner), *play on teacher's ability to relate* (evoking empathy), *group persuasion* (using numerous students to make the request), *public persuasion* (making a request in front of students), *private persuasion* (making a request privately), *evidence of preparation/logic* (using logic and reasoning), *earned credibility/past performance* (arguing competence from previous assignments), *stress/overload* (describing an overwhelming workload), *utilitarian justice* (arguing that the request will benefit the whole class), *emotional displays* (using emotional nonverbal displays), *general excuses* (using any reasonable excuse), *punish teacher* (threatening to give a bad evaluation), *reference to higher authority* (threatening to report to a chair or dean), and *verbal force/demand* (demanding compliance).

Additional research by Golish and Olson (2000) found that, although U.S. students are capable of using all student BATs, the most frequently used BATs were private persuasion, flattery, group persuasion, evidence of preparation/logic, and honesty/sincerity. U.S. students were less likely to use verbal force/demand, reference to higher authority, punishing the teacher, pleading, and emotional displays than other

types of BATs. Generally, students in the United States preferred using prosocial BATs over antisocial BATs (Golish & Olson, 2000). Moreover, students high in trait verbal aggression perceive complaining, guilt, play on the teacher's ability to relate, and public persuasion as both appropriate and effective (Kennedy-Lightsey & Myers, 2009).

Culture may play a role in determining the types of BATs students use when communication in the classroom. Specifically, because self-expression is not encouraged in the Chinese classroom (Warden, Chen, & Caskey, 2005), Chinese students are hesitant to express critical views (Ngwainmbi, 2004); and Chinese instructors are perceived as strong authority figures (Lu, 1997) by Chinese students. According to Fox (1994), "in many Asian and African languages and cultures, metaphor, euphemism, innuendo, hints, insinuation, and all sorts of subtle nonverbal strategies—even silence—are used to both spare the listener possible embarrassment or rejection, and to convey meaning that they are expected to grasp" (as cited in Gay, 2006, p. 22). Lu (1997) compared Chinese and U.S. college teachers' use of BATs and found that Chinese teachers tended to emphasize authority, morality and modeling and favored implicitness and indirectness. Collectivism, saving face, maintaining harmony, filial piety, interdependence, modesty in self-presentation, and restraint in taking oppositional points of view are all characteristics of Asian communicative inclinations (as cited in Gay, 2006). Because discourse styles are cultural, it is likely that there are differences between U.S. and Chinese students' use of student BATs. Given the paucity of research on student BATs in general, and no research that compares Chinese and U.S. students' use of BATs, the following research question is offered:

RQ1: Does Chinese students' perceived use of BATs differ from United States students' perceived use of BATs?

Student Affinity-Seeking Strategies

Affinity-seeking refers to the active communicative process through which individuals attempt to get others to like and feel positive toward them (Bell & Daly, 1984). Affinity-seeking strategies influence both how both teachers and students achieve their relational goals in instructional settings (Frymier & Wanzer, 2006). While a considerable amount of research has examined how instructors use affinity-seeking strategies to gain liking with students (for a review on teacher affinity-seeking, see Frymier & Wanzer, 2006), only two studies have revealed how students enact similar strategies to increase liking with their instructors. Wanzer (1995) found a positive relationship between students' use of affinity-seeking strategies and instructor liking. Instructors reported greater liking for students who reported greater use of affinity-seeking strategies toward their instructor. Wanzer (1998) identified 27 affinity-seeking strategies that students use to gain liking from an instructor including *altruism* (helping in the classroom), *assuming*

control (presenting oneself as a leader), *assuming equality* (presenting oneself as equal), *comfortable self* (acting comfortable), *conceding control* (allowing the instructor to take charge), *conversational rule-keeping* (communicating politeness during conversations), *dynamism* (being enthusiastic), *elicit disclosure* (encouraging the instructor to talk), *facilitating enjoyment* (performing enjoyable behavior), *inclusion of others* (including the instructor in events), *influence perceptions of closeness* (communicating to make the instructor feel close), *listening* (paying close attention in class), *nonverbal immediacy* (using behaviors that reduce psychological), *openness* (self-disclosing), *personal autonomy* (presenting oneself as an independent and free thinker), *physical attractiveness* (appearing attractive), *presenting interesting self* (appearing as interesting student), *self-concept confirmation* (complimenting), *self-inclusion* (setting up frequent encounters with the instructor), *sensitivity* (communicating care and concern), *similarity* (communicating similarities), *supportiveness* (being supportive of instructor decisions), *trustworthiness* (being a reliable student), *requirements* (completing work on time, attending class, and being prepared), *achievement* (working hard and producing good work), *gifts* (giving presents to the instructor), and *flirting* (engaging in flirtatious behavior).

Wanzer (1998) discovered that U.S. students reported using conversational rule keeping, nonverbal immediacy, elicit disclosure, requirements, and self-inclusion the most frequently, whereas instructors perceived students as using self-inclusion, conversational rule keeping, achievement, elicit disclosure, and self-concept confirmation the most. Additionally, a strong relationship was discovered between student and instructor perceptions of strategy rank order.

As was speculated in students' use of BATs, differences in cultural expectations may influence students' use of affinity seeking behaviors. Because Chinese students value relational harmony (Zhang et al., 2005) and Chinese instructors are viewed as mentors and models for behavior (Lu, 1997), it is likely there are differences in Chinese student use of these affinity-seeking strategies compared to their U.S. counterparts. As previously noted, Lu (1997) found differences between U.S. and Chinese college teachers' use of BATs. Given the documented role of culture in influencing classroom communication, cultural differences may also be found in students' perceived use of affinity-seeking behaviors. Ma and Chuang (2001) identified "anshi" (hinting), "i shen zuo ze" (setting an example by one's own action) and "tou qi suo hao" (strategically agreeing to whatever pleases others) as the predominant themes in the persuasive strategies utilized by Chinese college students in interpersonal contexts. This tendency to favor indirectness is indicative of the Chinese cultural preference for maintaining interpersonal harmony and face, including engendering feelings of liking. Therefore, the second research question is offered:

RQ2: Does Chinese students' perceived use of affinity-seeking strategies differ from United States students' perceived use of affinity-seeking strategies?

Method

Participants

The participants were 445 undergraduate students enrolled in introductory or upper-level college courses at mid-sized universities in the United States and in mainland China. The participants were 93 men and 166 women (6 unreported) whose ages ranged from 18 to 45 years ($M = 19.62$, $SD = 1.99$) in the United States and 46 men and 103 women (31 unreported) from 18 to 25 years ($M = 19.27$, $SD = .96$) in China.

Procedures and Instrumentation

As part of a larger study, participants completed an anonymous survey consisting of Student Affinity-Seeking Typology (Wanzer, 1998), and Student Behavioral Alteration Techniques Typology (Golish, 1999) in addition to demographic items. The scale items on the questionnaires collected in China were translated into Mandarin Chinese, and there were no problems observed in the translation process after back translation. Participants completed this survey in reference to the instructor and course they attended immediately before the data collection (Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1986) during the last two weeks of the semester.

The *Student Behavioral Alteration Technique Typology* is 19 items and asks participants to indicate the likelihood that they would use BATs to gain compliance from their instructor. Samples items include “You purposely ask your professor about the class or an assignment in front of another student when persuading him/her, thinking that it would be more difficult for him/her to say no” (public persuasion) and “You would give the professor a bad course evaluation. You might also use statements like, ‘this will reflect poorly on your evaluations or how other students see the course’” (punishing the teacher). Responses were solicited using a 5-point Likert-type response format ranging from (0) *not very likely* to (4) *very likely*. In this study, the obtained Cronbach alpha for the summed scale was .91 ($M = 19.57$, $SD = 12.20$) for the U.S. sample and .91 for the Chinese sample ($M = 25.40$, $SD = 12.43$).

The *Student Affinity-Seeking Typology* is 27 items and asks participants to indicate how frequently they use each of the student affinity-seeking strategies to increase liking from their instructor. Samples items include “I get my instructor to like me by: ‘giving the instructor a gift’ [gifts] and ‘showing evidence of hard work and achievement in class’” (achievement). Responses were solicited using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from (0) *never* to (4) *very often*. In this study, the obtained Cronbach alpha for the summed scale was .91 ($M = 46.12$, $SD = 16.64$) for the U.S. sample and .94 for the Chinese sample ($M = 44.13$, $SD = 16.85$).

Results

To examine research questions one and two, two separate Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVAs) were computed with culture (i.e. United States, China)

Table 1 Results of ANOVAs between Culture and Student BATs.

Student BATs	<i>M/SD</i> (U.S.) (<i>N</i> = 261)	<i>M/SD</i> (China) (<i>N</i> = 168)	<i>F</i>	η^2
1 Honesty-sincerity ^{3b}	1.30(1.26)	1.82(1.28)	17.66†	.04
2 Blame	1.02(0.98)	1.10(0.99)	ns	
3 Complaining	0.77(0.95)	1.19(1.01)	19.55†	.04
4 Pleading	0.75(0.97)	1.08(1.03)	11.57**	.03
5 Guilt	1.05(1.03)	1.74(1.14)	43.68†	.09
6 Flattery ^{2b}	1.39(1.17)	1.87(1.24)	17.35†	.04
7 Play on teacher's ability to relate	0.76(0.97)	1.02(1.01)	7.56**	.02
8 Group persuasion	1.44(1.19)	1.81(1.16)	10.69**	.02
9 Public persuasion	0.69(0.92)	1.22(1.05)	30.43†	.07
10 Private persuasion ^{1a, 1b}	2.11(1.34)	1.97(1.17)	ns	
11 Evidence of preparation/Logic ^{3a}	1.69(1.23)	1.62(1.16)	ns	
12 Performance ^{2a}	1.77(1.17)	1.79(1.13)	ns	
13 Stress/overload	1.10(1.11)	1.25(1.04)	ns	
14 Utilitarian justice	1.10(1.10)	1.37(1.11)	6.29*	.01
15 Emotional displays	0.61(0.93)	1.10(1.00)	27.24†	.06
16 General excuses	0.69(1.05)	1.04(1.02)	12.13**	.03
17 Punishing the teacher	0.67(0.98)	0.79(0.80)	ns	
18 Reference to higher authority	0.34(0.69)	0.78(0.74)	40.85†	.09
19 Verbal force/demand	0.33(0.73)	0.85(0.74)	53.06†	.11

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. † $p < .001$. ns = nonsignificant. All significant BATs were used more frequently by Chinese students. 1a, 2a, 3a = top three ranked U.S. BATs; 1b, 2b, 3b = top three ranked Chinese BATs.

servicing as the independent variable in both models and the scores on individual student affinity-seeking strategies or student BATs serving simultaneously as the dependent variables. Results of the MANOVAs yielded a statistically significant model for student BATs, Wilks' $\lambda = 0.73$, $F(19, 419) = 8.04$, $p < .001$, and for student affinity-seeking strategies, Wilks' $\lambda = 0.48$, $F(27, 411) = 16.67$, $p < .001$. Significant univariate effects for these student communication behaviors are reported in Tables 1 and 2.

Discussion

Because culture is assumed to influence communication, the purpose of this study was to investigate differences in students' use of BATs and affinity-seeking strategies in comparing students from the United States and China. Two notable findings emerged from the data. First, Chinese students perceived that they used 13 BATs more frequently than U.S. students. And second, U.S. students used seven affinity-seeking strategies more frequently than Chinese students; Chinese students used six affinity-seeking strategies more frequently than U.S. students.

Student Use of Behavioral Alteration Techniques

Chinese students perceived that they used 13 BATs (honesty-sincerity, complaining, pleading, guilt, flattery, play on the teacher's ability to relate, group persuasion,

Table 2 Results of ANOVAs between Culture and Student Affinity-Seeking.

Student affinity-seeking	<i>M/SD</i> (U.S.) (<i>N</i> = 260)	<i>M/SD</i> (China) (<i>N</i> = 179)	<i>F</i>	η^2
1 Altruism	1.20(1.06)	1.67(0.99)	22.53†	.05
2 Assume control	1.54(1.12)	1.08(1.00)	19.31†	.04
3 Assume equality	1.13(1.10)	1.53(1.07)	14.06†	.03
4 Comfortable self	2.47(1.10)	1.80(1.00)	42.53†	.09
5 Concede control	2.23(1.24)	2.01(1.13)	ns	
6 Conversational rule keeping ^{3b}	3.18(0.98)	2.78(0.97)	17.66†	.04
7 Dynamism	2.73(1.08)	2.33(1.03)	15.50†	.03
8 Elicit disclosure	1.90(1.17)	2.08(1.03)	ns	
9 Facilitate enjoyment	1.82(1.21)	1.86(1.07)	ns	
10 Inclusion of other	0.77(1.01)	1.08(1.02)	10.43**	.02
11 Influence perceptions of closeness	0.53(0.86)	1.12(0.97)	44.54†	.09
12 Listening ^{2a, 2b}	2.88(1.06)	2.84(1.01)	ns	
13 Nonverbal immediacy	1.92(1.35)	1.68(1.16)	ns	
14 Openness	1.29(1.16)	1.15(1.08)	ns	
15 Personal autonomy	1.80(1.28)	1.58(1.03)	ns	
16 Physical attractiveness	1.27(1.22)	1.21(1.01)	ns	
17 Presenting interesting self	1.67(1.22)	1.36(1.00)	7.46**	.02
18 Self-concept confirmation	1.03(1.04)	1.07(0.91)	ns	
19 Self-inclusion	0.83(1.02)	0.70(0.90)	ns	
20 Sensitivity	1.32(1.18)	1.11(1.01)	ns	
21 Similarity	1.50(1.14)	1.31(0.94)	ns	
22 Supportiveness	1.98(1.20)	2.16(1.05)	ns	
23 Trustworthiness	2.60(1.22)	2.06(1.05)	23.64†	.05
24 Requirements ^{1a, 1b}	3.27(1.09)	3.08(1.05)	ns	
25 Flirting	0.25(0.72)	0.42(0.85)	5.10*	.01
26 Gifts	0.25(0.72)	0.75(0.98)	36.95†	.08
27 Achievement ^{3a}	2.76(1.22)	2.29(1.09)	17.19†	.04

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. † $p < .001$. ns = nonsignificant. 1a, 2a, 3a = top three ranked U.S. student affinity-seeking strategies; 1b, 2b, 3b = top three ranked Chinese student affinity-seeking strategies.

public persuasion, utilitarian justice, emotional displays, general excuses, referent to higher authority, verbal force/demand) more frequently than U.S. students. American students did not self report using any BATs more frequently than Chinese students.

The data indicate that Chinese students perceived that they used a broad range of behavior alteration techniques and affinity-seeking strategies. The three most statistically significant items highlighted by Chinese student respondents are guilt, reference to a higher authority and verbal force/demand. These three items appear to contradict previous research findings suggesting Chinese communicative inclination toward implicitness and indirectness. Ma and Chuang (2001) point to similar discrepancies in their study finding that Chinese college students used a group of behaviors to persuade others in interpersonal contexts they label as “direct or logical appeals” (yi li shui fu). Ma and Chuang (2001) argue that these appeals are indicative of a “situation-centeredness” characteristic of Chinese discourse. This “situation-centeredness” might explain both the Chinese tendency to use a

greater range of BATs and the specific use of BATs such as verbal force/demand and reference to a higher authority which are indicative of a more direct and explicit communicative style than is typically attributed to Chinese communication. These findings also support Ma and Chuang's argument that "Chinese individuals can use language in a specific way to accomplish specific purposes in a given situation and relationship" (p. 267). Within the context of education, Chinese students are clearly motivated to adapt by using a range of communicative styles both direct and indirect.

Student Use of Affinity-Seeking Strategies

American students self-reported using the affinity-seeking strategies of assume control, comfortable self, conversational rule keeping, dynamism, presenting interesting self, trustworthiness, and achievement more frequently than Chinese students. Chinese students, however, reported using altruism, comfortable self, and inclusion of other, influence perceptions of closeness, flirting, and gifts more frequently than U.S. students.

The affinity seeking strategy distinctions found in this study are much more in keeping with the research indicating that Chinese communication is more focused on collectivism and the maintenance of interpersonal harmony and face. However, the preferences of both BATs and the affinity seeking strategies found in this research supports Lu's (1998) argument that collectivism ("yi" or morality, benevolence, righteousness, faithfulness) and individualism ("li" or benefit, profit) are both characteristic of traditional and contemporary Chinese communication. According to Lu (1998) Chinese communicators, not unlike U.S. communicators may be rule-followers in keeping with a goal of harmonious relationships and willing to manipulate for utilitarian purposes. Thus the "value orientations of the Chinese people are diverse and manyfold" (Lu, 1998, p. 308).

Limitations

The current study is not without limitations. One limitation involves a potential social desirability bias with the student BATs typology. Although the survey was anonymous, because the typology consists of numerous antisocial strategies, it is possible that students underreported their use of the more hostile strategies, such as reference to higher authority and verbal force/demand. A second limitation involves the translation of a U.S. typology to Mandarin Chinese. Although the translation process was successful, is it possible that students in the Chinese sample may perceive unintended meanings from identical wording. It is also possible that rewording of some of the items in Chinese may have operationalized each student BAT or affinity-seeking strategy more accurately. For instance, Lu (1997) discovered that although instructors in the United States and China use the same BATs with students, the representative messages that Chinese instructors communicate are different from the messages that U.S. counterparts use. Then again, for comparison purposes, it is important to operationalize variables in a consistent manner.

Conclusion

This study supports the premise that culture influences student behaviors in instructional settings. These data suggest that Chinese students perceived that they used 13 BATs more frequently than U.S. students. In addition, American students self-reported that they used seven affinity-seek strategies more frequently than Chinese students. In addition, Chinese students reported using six affinity-seeking strategies more frequently than U.S. students. The research confirms that culture may help explain differences in students' responses to instruction. Further, culture may explain differences in students' motivation to achieve their relational and rhetorical goals. Implications from this study include helping instructors to be more aware of the role of culture when teaching students. Specifically, this research helps instructors be more attuned to differing student uses of BATs and affinity-seeking strategies.

Additional research is needed to make a clearer connection between the specific student behaviors expressed (BATs and affinity-seeking strategies) and the underlying student motivation for communicating in instructional settings. In addition, future research should more explicitly explore how culture may influence students' communication behaviors in achieving their instructional rhetorical and relational goals. Given the importance of culture in all communication contexts, but classroom settings in particular, future research should continue to heed McCroskey and McCroskey's (2006) call to examine cultural differences in the classroom to determine which classroom communication processes are pancultural versus unique to each culture.

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