

# How Do American, Chinese and French Students Characterize their Teachers' Communication?

*Cecilia Brassier-Rodrigues*

University Blaise Pascal - France

## Abstract

This investigation, which uses a sample of 53 students from China, the United States and France, aims to determine what types of communication styles students of different cultural backgrounds expect from their teachers. Previous studies have already produced some results on this issue, but little attention has been paid to exploratory research that allows students to provide their own definition of their teachers' communication. While some scholars focus on the technical skills that successful teachers must possess, this research reveals the degree to which communication competence remains critical. In this way, the present study adds to research on teachers' communication.

**Keywords:** *interpersonal communication skills, teacher's effectiveness, culture*

---

*“Competent teachers are competent communicators who are able to build and sustain interpersonal relationships across culture and across conflict.” (Mahon 2009: 46)*

## Introduction

Considerable efforts have long been made to characterize a good teacher, that is, an individual who is able to impart knowledge and draw students' attention. While some studies have determined the skills necessary to teach (Fawcett et al. 2005, Krishnaveni & Anitha 2008), others have argued for bringing together the teaching styles of teachers and the learning styles of students (Ament 1990, Filbeck & Smith 1996, Henson & Borthwick 1984, Ladd & Ruby 1999, Thompson 1997). In much of this research, teachers have rarely been considered as communicators, first and foremost. We cannot forget, however, that a teacher communicates with students. Schematically, he relays messages via a channel (e.g., voice, presentations, etc.), to help students learn. In doing so, he creates exchanges and interactions with students (e.g., they ask questions, etc.), which are the basis for communication. If teachers are not effective communicators, we can assume they will not be effective in teaching regardless of the technical methods they employ (Majid et al. 2010). Students have often been included in this body of research, as they are part of the communication process (Fisher et al. 2005, Levy et al. 1997, Mainhard et al. 2011, van Tartwijk et al. 1998, Wubbels & Brekelmans 2005). Questionnaires have been administered, and structured interviews have been conducted. The effects of teachers' characteristics (e.g., gender, education, lecture style, etc.) on students' satisfaction and/or outcomes have also been analyzed (Opdenakker & Van Damme 2006, Schwerdt & Wuppermann 2011). However, little attention has been given to exploratory works in which students are not asked pre-determined questions but in which they can explain in their own words how they perceive and understand their teachers' communication styles. The present study adds to the line of research on teachers' communication by addressing these absences.

This research aims to enhance students' performance by discovering what type of communication they expect from teachers in higher education. Because “learning preferences are not fixed and universal but tend to vary over cultures” (You & Jia 2008, p.836), we investigate how students from three countries (China, United States and France) qualify good practices in teachers' communication at the master level.

We aim to answer the two following research questions: (1) How do students characterize their teachers' communication? (2) Is there a link between students' definitions of their teachers' communication and their cultural background?

## Understanding teachers' interpersonal communication

Although teaching is a form of communication (Wubbels & Brekelmans 2005), the ability to transmit information simply and clearly is no longer sufficient to be characterized as a good teacher nowadays.

The teacher encodes a message (e.g., his ideas, feelings, etc.), which is transmitted to students via a channel (e.g., voice, images, etc.). When the students receive the message, they decode it and interpret its content. They then send feedback verbally (i.e., by uttering words) and/or non-verbally (i.e., by smiling or nodding the head) to the teacher. This process takes place within a context with a physical dimension (e.g., classroom, organization of tables, temperature), a temporal dimension (e.g., time and length of the class), a socio-psychological dimension (e.g., the different statuses of the teacher and students) and a cultural dimension (for the teacher and the students) (De Vito 2008, Klopff & Mc Croskey 2007). This definition is consistent with the transactional view of communication, which proposes that communicators are connected and interdependent. In fact, in the learning context, there is strong consensus that students' perceptions of their interactions with teachers have an impact on their motivations, outcomes and achievement (Opdenakker & Van Damme 2006, Noels et al. 1999, Telli et al. 2007). The degree to which those skills contribute to teachers' effectiveness is still under investigation.

## Analyzing teachers' effectiveness inside the classroom

Even today, the question "What do professors do?" (Gordon 1984) can be posed. In the university setting, teaching, conducting research and performing administrative duties is expected. Thus, the question of teachers' effectiveness is open-ended, as one may be effective in one task and not in another. In our research, we examine a portion of the teacher's job: the teaching-training role.

Research attempting to define teachers' effectiveness in training dates back many years, over the course of which different points of view have been adopted. A number of studies have considered teachers as, first and foremost, individuals. For Oliva (1972 in Oliva & Henson 1980, p.117), an effective teacher is "fully prepared in his/her subject, has a broad general education, understands the role of the school in our society, etc." For these scholars, *who the teacher is* is more important than *what the teacher does*. This conception changed in the 1980s, when professional skills, such as motivation, class management and leadership, were added to the definition of teachers' effectiveness (Lease 1985, Fawcett et al. 2005, Opdenakker & Van Damme 2006). The objective of this vast field of research is to identify what should be done to curtail the "learn by doing" approach, which had been the rule for many teachers (Lease, 1985). Previous research has taken into account students' opinions of good teaching practices (Zhang 2004). Some recent works have also examined how teaching style can influence the interest and attitude of students in class (Fisher et al. 2005, Mainhard et al. 2011, Majid et al. 2010), while others have focused on the determinants of students' motivation and have found that teaching style can, to some extent, explain students' academic achievement and well-being (Levy et al. 1997, van Tartwijk et al. 1998, Wubbels & Brekelmans 2005).

Much research has been conducted on this topic, and many skills have been identified. However, the following three primary categories have emerged: basic skills, interactions with students and personality characteristics. The first category - basic skills - refers to technical knowledge a teacher possesses on a particular subject (Krishnaveni & Anitha 2008) as well as recent developments (Rose 2002), preparedness and classroom operation (Zhang 2004). Teaching methods (e.g., lectures, discussions, experiences, etc.) that are at the center of learning style analyses also belong to this first set of behaviors. The second category - interactions with students - concerns the relationships the teacher develops with students, i.e., connectedness and attitude with them both inside and outside class (Zhang 2004). The third category - characteristics of personality - includes motivation, enthusiasm (Zhang 2004, Majid et al. 2010); open-

mindedness, patience, sense of humor (Oliva & Henson 1980); empathy, rigor (Fawcett et al. 2005); dynamism and commitment to teaching (Yeo et al. 2008). The ways in which teachers use this collection of skills explain their *teaching style*.

In much of this research, teachers' effectiveness has been analyzed from both a technical perspective (with the first category of skills) and a behavioral perspective (with the second and third categories of skills). A communication perspective is not explicitly mentioned, although the interpersonal communication skills we use everyday to interact with people, such as verbal and non-verbal skills, are included in the behavioral perspective to some extent.

## Understanding teachers' communication styles

Over the last thirty years, many scholars have considered the in-class relationships between teachers and students (Levy et al. 1997, Mainhard et al. 2011, Opdenakker & Van Damme 2006, Wubbels et al. 1992, Wubbels & Brekelmans 2005). They have introduced the question of verbal and non-verbal behaviors and have analyzed the influence of teachers' communication styles on students' outcomes.

In the learning context, communication style may be defined as the preference for a teacher to use specific interpersonal skills to interact with students. Some studies have examined the use of verbal versus non-verbal language as predictors of communication styles (Greenbaum 1985, Smothergill et al. 1971), while others have proposed different categories of styles based on teachers' attitudes in class, such as being "open, attentive, relaxed, precise, impression leaving, dramatic, friendly, animated, contentious, and dominant" (Emanuel & Potter 1992, p.398-399). Over the years, however, teachers' communication styles have frequently been analyzed on the basis of dimension scores, such as elaborative versus non-elaborative work (Smothergill et al. 1971), power (Blunt Bugental et al. 1999, Noels, 2002, Wubbels et al. 1992), proximity (Fisher et al. 2005, Wubbels et al. 1992), etc. For instance, Wubbels et al. (1985) associated the dimensions of *influence* and *proximity* and developed a model for interpersonal teacher behavior. Based on Leary's communication model (1957), these authors propose that eight types of patterns of interpersonal relationships can be found in classrooms, which they call communication styles: "authoritative, directive, drudging, tolerant, repressive, tolerant/authoritarian, uncertain/aggressive, uncertain/tolerant" (Wubbels & Brekelmans 2005, p.12). Over the last ten years, this model has frequently been used to measure the perceptions students have about teachers' behaviors inside the classroom (Fisher et al. 2005, Rickards et al. 2005, Telli et al. 2007). Based on the Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction (QTI), these studies link students' outcomes with specific communication styles. For instance, authoritarian and directive teachers are found to produce the highest student attitude scores (Wubbels & Brekelmans 2005). Thus, the goal of such research is to help teachers adapt their behavior in specific dimensions to enhance student performance. Their research does, however, present some limitations. First, they only emphasize one to two dimensions of non-verbal behaviors, excluding the others from their analysis. Secondly, these studies do not explicitly mention verbal communication skills. They consider how non-verbal acts may create a favorable climate in class, but they forget that those behaviors support a message transmitted with words.

Weisz and Karim (2011) propose a more global approach to communication styles. They choose not to use specific dimensions of behaviors but instead to take into account the development of individuals to build a communication styles inventory. The authors suggest that "each system of needs which the child expresses and satisfies during different stages of development – affection during infancy, attention during toddlerhood, structure and limits during preschool, and esteem during middle childhood – tends to manifest itself during adulthood" (p.2113). Consequently, they propose that individuals primarily use the following four communication styles to satisfy different types of needs: relationships (R) for affection, ideas (I) for attention, structures (S) for confirmation and values (V) for esteem. Table 1 proposes the main values of each style, its specific strengths and weaknesses.

**Table 1:** Summary of communication styles (in Weisz & Karim, 2011)[1]

	Interpersonal languages
--	-------------------------

	Relationships (R)	Ideas (I)	Structures (S)	Values (V)
Interpersonal needs	Affection, care, contact, proximity, reassurance, sharing, exchange, belonging, having a place, understanding, harmony, permission.	Getting attention, being listened to, being privileged, be important for the other one, encouragement, rhythm, complicity, play and laughter, quantitative sensory stimulations, freedom, movement, exploration.	Confirmation, compliance, structure, limits, process, procedures, learning, learning how to learn, knowledge, answers, position, trust.	Esteem, personal recognition, acknowledgement, difference, respect, consistency, assessment, ranking of values, fairness, surpassing, pushing the limits, strong excitement.
Main values	Feeling, expression, warmth, kindness, harmony, cooperation, solidarity.	Freedom, interest, desire, availability, movement, motivation, curiosity.	Trust, contracts, clarity, experience, expertise, efficiency, good citizenship.	Difference, excellence competition, action, independence, effectiveness, ambition.
Specific strengths and qualities	Welcoming, greeting, guessing, sharing, supporting, co-operating, gathering, federating, networking.	Creativity, stimulating, encouraging, livening, things up, introducing movement, humor, entertaining, playing, associating ideas.	Organizing, planning, optimizing, being efficient, being professional, being rigorous, being pragmatic, being realistic, being dedicated.	Deciding fast, commanding, managing risks, innovating, being original, introducing change, evaluating, action taking, taking initiatives.
Specific weak points	Not asking, dealing too gently with people, feeling in danger, being worried, calling for help, taking care of people too much.	Not ranking priorities, not finishing, repeating, liking to argue (“Yes”, “But”), Ping pong, contradicting.	Not taking initiatives, being too formal, being rigid, “it’s impossible”, following blindly, submitting to authority.	Not accepting mistakes, not accepting limits, being autocratic, risking too much, deciding too fast, “Me”, “I”.
Specific evasion patterns	Not doing anything, inhibition, making people feel guilty.	Tension, unproductive, reactivity, agitation.	Doing as little as possible, rigorist, fanaticism, dogmatism.	Aggressiveness, violence, persecution.

The underlying assumption of the communication styles inventory of Weisz & Karim is that each individual has a preferred way of interacting with others; their framework improves the understanding of the reasons why people choose one interaction style over another. In terms of learning context, this approach means that each teacher may develop a specific way of interacting with students, which is composed of distinctive behaviors that can be observed in class.

## Teaching styles and culture

In education research, culture's influence on teaching style has been examined, and a link has been found between the two concepts (Levy 1997, den Brok et al. 2002, Yamazaki et al. 2004, You & Jia 2008). Indeed, culture seems to be a relevant variable in explaining preference for a specific teaching style.

In the management field, many dimensions have been developed to explain cultural differences among countries and to better understand individuals' personal and organizational behaviors (Hall et al. 1990, Hofstede 2010, Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 1997). The dimensions proposed by Hofstede present an enormous advantage, as they have been evaluated in sixty-nine countries, which can be analyzed and compared. These dimensions are: power distance, individualism, masculinity and uncertainty avoidance.

Hierarchical distance measures how an unequal distribution of power is accepted or rejected in society. If a high level of hierarchical distance is preferred, power is in the hands of few people; the society expects them to make decisions and give orders, which will be followed. When a low level of hierarchical distance is preferred, power is easily distributed among many people. Individualism displays how individualist versus collective values are displayed in society. In individualistic countries, people like to act by themselves and for themselves; the society is made of individuals working side by side. In collectivistic countries, belonging to a group is essential and the group is even more important than the society as a whole. A society is considered masculine when its members praise ambition, competition, success, money and material goods; goals must be achieved, and conflicts are not a problem. As opposed to this, a feminine society values quality of life and solidarity among individuals, and consensus is preferable in business. Uncertainty avoidance is a way in which societies deal with what is uncertain. A high level for this dimension reveals that people are reluctant to change. When the level of uncertainty avoidance is low, proposing innovations is normal and appreciated.

To take into account the cultural variability in our study, we need to analyze the students' perceptions of teachers' communication in diverse countries. We selected United States, China and France.

**Table 2:** *The scores of the United States, China and France on Hofstede's dimensions*[2]

	<b>Power distance</b>	<b>Individualism</b>	<b>Masculinity</b>	<b>Uncertainty avoidance</b>
<b>United States</b>	40	91	62	46
<b>China</b>	80	20	66	30
<b>France</b>	68	71	43	86

Finally, many researches have proposed to improve teachers' effectiveness and/or communication styles to enhance students' outcomes in class. However, many of these studies devote little attention to exploring what students expect from their teachers' communication. The present study attempts to fill this gap. Our objective is to analyze if the models traditionally used to describe effectiveness in teaching and communicating mirror students' perceptions or if they must be adjusted to take into account students' expectations and/or cultural backgrounds.

## Method

Many tools measuring learning styles have been developed and tested in multicultural contexts. Ament (1990) proposes using Kolb's, Gugliemino's or Jacobs-Fuhrmann's learning style inventory. In our research, we focus on teachers' communication skills as only a portion of teaching style. To better understand these competencies, a more explorative tool is necessary. We chose the technique of the repertory grid developed by George A. Kelly (1955).

## Participants

The survey has been conducted by one researcher on three groups of students in 2008, during lectures he did to those groups. The 18 American students were coming from Oklahoma University (May). The Chinese group was made of 17 students of the Faculty of Finance of Shanghai Normal University (October). The French group was composed of 18 students coming from Blaise Pascal University (September). All the students were 22 to 27 years-old, attending business courses at a master level. The classes were composed of men and women, good and poor students and motivated and unmotivated students. Our objective was to collect data from diverse students to obtain diverse answers. A total of 53 students participated in the survey. With repertory grids, it has been observed that theoretical saturation is obtained with 15 to 20 people (Stewart 1997, Tan 1999) and that additional participants are not expected to elicit new constructs. Thus, a sample of 17 to 18 students seemed sufficient to collect relevant data.

## Data collection

The data collection was realized in class. At the beginning of a session, the researcher, who was their teacher, told the students that they were participating in a survey. He explained that all the findings would be kept anonymous and that the results would be available to everybody. The American, Chinese and French students were then told the instructions to fill the empty repertory grid that was given to them. As the language used in class was English, the survey was already conducted in English and the students gave all the answers in that language. This was not presenting any difficulty for Chinese and French students who were used to have classes in English as they were in a degree of international business.

A repertory grid is composed of four components: topic, elements, constructs and evaluation system. In our study, American, Chinese and French students were questioned about their teachers' communication (topic). Each interview began by asking the students to match a specific teacher with five definitions (figure 1). Van Tartwijk et al. (1998) stated that students' perceptions of teachers' interpersonal styles are primarily formed when the teacher is in front of the classroom and not during individual seatwork. For this reason, we asked students to speak about teachers they had in class at the master level.

### Figure 1: *The definitions proposed for the elements of the repertory grid*

1. The best teacher you have ever had in class
2. A good teacher you had in class
3. An average teacher you had in class
4. The worst teacher you have ever had in class
5. The ideal teacher

Then, the students were asked to name (and write on the grid) characteristics they associate with their teachers' communication (constructs) by comparing the approaches of different teachers (elements). To do that, comparisons between three teachers were proposed to students with the following question: "What do two of these teachers have in common in the way they communicate, as opposed to the third?" Students identified constructs explaining how they perceived their teachers' communication. Finally, they expressed the importance of each construct by giving it a grade (evaluation system). With this method, we could discover how students associate their teachers' effectiveness with specific communication skills.

## Data analysis

In the survey, the students expressed the qualities they use to describe their teachers' communication using the technique of the repertory grid. A total of 532 constructs were collected (238 for American

students, 116 for Chinese students and 178 for French students). To interpret the data, we used “a technique in which the constructs of all interviewees are pooled and categorized according to the meaning they express” (Jankowicz 2004, p.33). At the end of this content analysis, we established the following seven categories of constructs elicited by students when speaking about their teachers’ communication: (1) credibility, (2) information delivery, (3) human qualities, (4) interaction, (5) content and format material, (6) control of class and (7) availability and open-mindedness. Thanks to the repertory grids’ evaluation system, we were able to determine which behaviors American, Chinese and French students associate with the communication of good teachers for each category.

The results’ validity was controlled. After analyzing the data, we brought one colleague who was not involved in our research into the process; we provided him with the constructs elicited by the three groups of students and asked him to identify relevant categories for each group, to allocate the constructs to each category and to label each category. After discussing the meaning of the categories, we established a 92% rate of agreement, meaning that the data can be considered reliable.

## Findings

### The constructs qualifying teacher’s communication

**Table 3:** *The seven categories of constructs chosen by students to qualify their teachers’ communication (author)*

Categories of constructs associated to teachers’ communication	Constructs generated by American students	Constructs generated by Chinese students	Constructs generated by French students
	The teacher:	The teacher:	The teacher:
<b>Credibility</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has experience to demonstrate how to use the material</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is a man</li> <li>• Is not a “young” teacher</li> <li>• Has experience</li> <li>• Is intelligent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is old</li> <li>• Has experience in the subject</li> <li>• Has knowledge</li> <li>• Is an expert in the subject</li> <li>• Is enough qualified in the field</li> </ul>
<b>Information delivery</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is verbally understandable: speaks clearly, at a good pace</li> <li>• Is precise, descriptive, informative</li> <li>• Clearly explains objectives and goals; he states what is expected</li> <li>• Presents material in an easy way to understand</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gives logical explanations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explains a lot, clearly</li> <li>• Speaks clearly, is easy to understand</li> </ul>

<b>Human qualities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrates passion about the subject</li> <li>• Is enthusiastic</li> <li>• Has sense of humor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is patient</li> <li>• Is polite</li> <li>• Is serious</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is patient</li> <li>• Is motivated</li> <li>• Is dynamic</li> <li>• Demonstrates passion about the subject</li> <li>• Has sense of humor</li> </ul>
<b>Interaction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Turns class interesting by involving students in the discussion</li> <li>• Keeps students engaged</li> <li>• Encourages discussion in class</li> <li>• Makes class interactive and challenging</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Makes students like the topic by involving them in the discussion</li> <li>• Creates interaction by asking questions</li> </ul>
<b>Content and format material</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses several media to teach: traditional vs technological methods</li> <li>• Relates material discussed in class to real world</li> <li>• Uses updated material</li> <li>• Is organized in the way he presents material</li> <li>• Prepares students for exams</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prepares theoretical classes</li> <li>• Presents updated material</li> </ul>
<b>Control of class</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Speaks with parents when results are not sufficient</li> <li>• Errors are punished</li> <li>• Teaches by punishing</li> <li>• Is responsible for students</li> <li>• Adopts different behaviors with good and bad students</li> <li>• Respects the students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is strict, authoritarian with students</li> <li>• Keeps the control of his class by giving some rules</li> </ul>
<b>Availability and open-mindedness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allows flexibility in thinking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is helpful for students in class</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is available for students during class</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourages individual initiatives,</li> <li>• Is easy to contact</li> <li>• Is accessible to answer questions</li> <li>• Is available for students after class</li> <li>• Accepts errors from students, makes them understand and improve</li> <li>• Assumes that students are at the same level than teachers</li> <li>• Takes time to personally know the students</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is open-minded</li> </ul>
--	--	--	--

The category (1) *credibility* is composed of the qualities students give importance to when they evaluate if they can trust their teacher. For the Chinese students, we observed that if the teacher “is a man, is not young, has experience and is intelligent”, he has a higher chance of being a good communicator. The category (2) *information delivery* deals with the way the teacher speaks and transmits knowledge. For example, the teacher must “explain a lot, speak clearly, give logical explanations, etc.” These qualities are closely related to verbal communication (i.e., how information is transmitted using words). The category (3) *human qualities* presents some personality characteristics that students associate with their teacher when he communicates. For example, he should “be enthusiastic, patient, polite, motivated, have sense of humor, etc.” The category (4) *interaction* introduces the fact that teachers and students exchange messages and play different roles in class. Similar to the communication process, the teacher speaks, and the students listen. However, depending on the way in which the teacher constructs interactions, students may be active (e.g., the teacher “turns class interesting by involving students in discussion, makes class interactive and challenging, etc”) or passive. The category (5) *content and format material* is complementary to the category *information delivery*, by which we refer to how material is presented to students (e.g., the teacher “uses several media to teach, related material discussed in class to real world, presents updated material”). The category (6) *control of class* introduces the fact that the teacher is in charge of the classroom, and for the Chinese and French students, he “is strict, authoritarian, gives some rules”. The category (7) *availability and open-mindedness* is complementary to *human qualities*, which refers to specific qualities that allow teachers to be present for students (e.g., the teacher “is helpful for students in class, he is accessible to answer questions, etc.”) and that enable these ones to develop their way of thinking (e.g., the teacher “is open-minded, allows flexibility in thinking”).

## The teachers' communication styles

In our research, we asked students to qualify their teachers' communication by comparing the behavior of several teachers. We suggest that the constructs elicited by the students may reveal the communication styles they expect from their teachers. In this context, it seems relevant to use the communication styles provided by Weisz and Karim's inventory (2011) to interpret the data collected because, according to their model, each individual can develop a specific way of interacting with students, which is composed of distinctive behaviors that can be observed.

**Table 4:** The constructs generated by American, Chinese and French students associated with the four communication styles of Weisz & Karim (2011) (author)

Communication styles	Constructs generated by American students	Constructs generated by	Constructs generated by French students
----------------------	---	-------------------------	---

		Chinese students	
<b>Relationships (R)</b>	<p><b>Interaction</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Turns class interesting by involving students in the discussion</li> <li>• Keeps students engaged</li> <li>• Encourages discussion in class</li> <li>• Makes class interactive and challenging</li> </ul> <p><b>Human qualities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrates passion about the subject</li> <li>• Is enthusiastic</li> <li>• Has sense of humor</li> </ul>	<p><b>Interaction</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>No construct</i></li> </ul> <p><b>Human qualities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is patient</li> <li>• Is polite</li> <li>• Is serious</li> </ul>	<p><b>Interaction</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Makes students like the topic by involving them in the discussion</li> <li>• Creates interaction by asking questions</li> </ul> <p><b>Human qualities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is patient</li> <li>• Is motivated</li> <li>• Is dynamic</li> <li>• Demonstrates passion about the subject</li> <li>• Has sense of humor</li> </ul>
<b>Ideas (I)</b>	<p><b>Availability and open-mindedness</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allows flexibility in thinking</li> <li>• Encourages individual initiatives,</li> <li>• Is easy to contact</li> <li>• Is accessible to answer questions</li> <li>• Is available for students after class</li> <li>• Accepts errors from students, makes them understand and improve</li> <li>• Assumes that students are at the same level than teachers</li> <li>• Takes time to personally know the students</li> </ul>	<p><b>Availability and open-mindedness</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is helpful for students in class</li> </ul>	<p><b>Availability and open-mindedness</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is available for students during class</li> <li>• Is open-minded</li> </ul>
<b>Structures (S)</b>	<p><b>Credibility</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has experience to demonstrate how to use the material</li> </ul> <p><b>Information delivery</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is verbally understandable: speaks clearly, at a good pace</li> <li>• Is precise, descriptive, informative</li> </ul>	<p><b>Credibility</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is a man</li> <li>• Is not a “young” teacher</li> <li>• Has experience</li> <li>• Is intelligent</li> </ul> <p><b>Information delivery</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gives logical explanations</li> </ul>	<p><b>Credibility</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is old</li> <li>• Has experience in the subject</li> <li>• Has knowledge</li> <li>• Is an expert in the subject</li> <li>• Is enough qualified in the field</li> </ul> <p><b>Information delivery</b></p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clearly explains objectives and goals; he states what is expected</li> <li>Presents material in an easy way to understand</li> </ul> <p><b>Content and format material</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uses several media to teach: traditional vs technological methods</li> <li>Relates material discussed in class to real world</li> <li>Uses updated material</li> <li>Is organized in the way he presents material</li> <li>Prepares students for exams</li> </ul>	<p><b>Content and format material</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>No construct</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explains a lot, clearly</li> <li>Speaks clearly, is easy to understand</li> </ul> <p><b>Content and format material</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prepares theoretical classes</li> <li>Presents updated material</li> </ul>
<b>Values (V)</b>	<p><b>Control of class</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>No construct</i></li> </ul>	<p><b>Control of class</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Speaks with parents when results are not sufficient</li> <li>Errors are punished</li> <li>Teaches by punishing</li> <li>Is responsible for students</li> <li>Adopts different behaviors with good and bad students</li> <li>Respects the students</li> </ul>	<p><b>Control of class</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is strict, authoritarian with students</li> <li>Keeps the control of his class by giving some rules</li> </ul>

## Discussion

### How do students qualify their teachers' communication?

Our results are consistent with the interpersonal communication process model proposed by Klopf & Mc Croskey (2007). According to these authors, the message exchanged by the speakers and listeners at a given moment is conditioned by the knowledge of the subject being discussed, the speech skills and the attitudes toward the listeners. In this model, knowledge of the topic approximates the *credibility* category in which the constructs elicited by the participants such as “*has experience, has expertise, is enough qualified*” are included. For the constructs associated with *information delivery* (i.e., “*being verbally understandable, speaking clearly*”), we found that speech skills were important; these skills, to some extent, also approximate the category of *content and format material*. Attitudes toward listeners can be associated with the *interactions* created with students, as they speak about “*making class interactive and challenging, encouraging initiatives and discussion, etc.*”, but also with *human qualities* (e.g., motivation, enthusiasm, patience, sense of humor) and with *availability and open-mindedness*. These

behaviors are similar to the non-verbal skills an individual must demonstrate to improve interactions with others. Finally, verbal and non-verbal skills were present in the answers provided by the students in some categories. One result we found was that when students qualify their teachers' communication, they mention the two facets of interpersonal communication skills; the use of appropriate words and the way they are pronounced (Klopf & Mc Croskey 2007) are relevant for students and must be considered as equally as non-verbal behaviors in future research.

Comparisons may also be drawn between these results and those of studies that have attempted to define teachers' effectiveness, which have suggested that good teachers possess basic skills, develop interactions with students and have particular personality characteristics. Basic skills, as defined by scholars, refer to technical knowledge and its development, preparedness and classroom operation and to teaching methods. We identified such criteria in the categories *credibility* (e.g., the teacher "has experience, is an expert, has knowledge"), *information delivery* (e.g., the teacher "clearly explains objectives, presents material in an easy way to understand, explains a lot"), *content and format material* (e.g., the teacher "presents updated material, uses several media to teach, is organized"). Interactions with students concern the relationships teachers develop with their students and their connectedness and attitude. The constructs proposed in the categories *interaction* (e.g., the teacher "keeps students engaged, creates interaction") and *control of class* (e.g., the teacher "teaches by punishing, is strict and authoritarian with students") are related to this definition, even if they may display different relationships that can be experienced with students. Personality characteristics are composed of motivation, enthusiasm, open-mindedness, patience and empathy, among others. They are consistent with the constructs found in the categories *human qualities* (e.g., the teacher "is enthusiastic, is patient, is motivated, is dynamic") and *availability and open-mindedness* (e.g., the teacher "is easy to contact, is helpful, takes time to personally know the students"). These results suggest that students understand their teachers' communication in a more complex way than simply as verbal and non-verbal behaviors. They associate communication with the criteria relating to effectiveness in teaching, and they view their teachers' communication as being composed of basic skills, interactions with students and personality characteristics.

Our survey not only confirms that communication is a teaching skill but also emphasizes the fact that students perceive its two sides: verbal and non-verbal language. More important, however, is that the results reveal that communication skills are more critical in teaching than has been presented in the literature where they do not explicitly appear in teachers' definitions of effectiveness. In fact, when studies have asked about the competencies an effective teacher must possess, teachers' knowledge and technical skills are automatically discussed. Therefore, it seems appropriate to include them in training programs (Chamoso et al. 2011). Communication skills are considered secondary and are normally viewed as implicit because it seems obvious that a teacher would know how to communicate effectively. Teachers are not, however, born with communication skills. For Medsker & Fry (1997, p.214), such competencies consist of "intellectual skills and attitudes, managed by cognitive strategies." Once identified, they can be learned and transferred to many professional situations. Therefore, teachers must be trained to develop and use interpersonal communication skills adapted to the learning environment. As it is discussed in the following section, adapting to students must also be considered.

## **Is there a link between students' definitions of their teachers' communication and their cultural background?**

Interpreting the constructs elicited by the students highlighted three definitions of ideal teachers in the United States, China and France. When we analyzed these propositions using the inventory of communication styles, the results (table 4) revealed that the ideal teacher must use several interpersonal languages to interact with students.

This first observation is consistent with Weisz and Karim's statement that "a well-adapted personality uses each of the four psychological languages to some degree", even if individuals have a preferred way of interacting with others (2011, p.2107). In fact, for each communication style, a continuum exists, where each individual can be more or less "relationship"-oriented, "idea"-oriented, "structure"-oriented or "values"-oriented. This idea explains why we observed differences in the answers provided by students. In fact, the American students preferred that their teachers develop facets of communication related to relationships, ideas and structures. The Chinese students preferred teachers to be oriented

toward structures and values and slightly toward relationships and ideas. The French students attached importance to the ways in which teachers emphasize relationships, structures and, to a lesser extent, ideas and values in their communication style. These results suggest that the definition of teachers' communication is culturally linked, which is consistent with studies that have analyzed the influence of culture in the learning environment (den Brok et al. 2002, Levy et al. 1997). The following analysis of the constructs elicited by American, Chinese and French students using Hofstede's cultural dimensions leads to the same conclusion.

To begin, we observed that the American students elicited the highest number of constructs (13 constructs per American student, 7 per Chinese student, 10 per French student). The American students seemed to find it easier to speak about their teachers' communication than did the Chinese and French students. Levels of power distance can explain such behaviors to some extent. This dimension refers to the fact that people may (or may not) tolerate an unequal distribution of power in society. For example, Americans consider people as equal, regardless of their status. Teachers "assume that students are at the same level as them". The American students did not even mention constructs associated with *controlling the class*. For students, interaction is key to the relationships they develop with teachers who "involve students in the discussion, keep them engaged". The teacher should be "available, easy to contact, take time to personally know the students". The category of *availability and open-mindedness* is much more developed for them than it is for the participating students from the other two cultures. The Chinese and French students, however, valued hierarchy. The teacher is seen as the superior inside the classroom; he "is strict, authoritarian, he teaches by punishing". The Chinese students do not comment *the content and format material*, probably because it is the teachers' job. When the Chinese and French spoke about their teachers, they considered his credibility and the reasons for his superiority, such as "he has knowledge, he is an expert in the subject, he is enough qualified in the field". The status and role of each individual in society are critical elements. Any sign of difference among people is considered, even age: "he is not young, he is old".

For the dimension of individualism, the American and French students shared a high level of individualism, while the Chinese students were more collectivistic. For the Chinese students, the notion of group was important. In their constructs, they never spoke about individuals; they mentioned groups, such as "good and bad students, parents". This dimension also explains that teachers are "responsible for students", as they are the leader of the group. The American and French students were more individualistic, viewing the individual as more important than the group. Anything that may allow individuals to participate in class was valued, such as "encouraging individual expression, initiatives, discussion in class". Moreover, they appreciated when things were done clearly and simply, as was mentioned in the *information delivery* category (i.e., the teacher is "precise, descriptive, informative; he speaks clearly").

The American and Chinese students displayed more masculine values than did the French students. They were interested in succeeding and achieving objectives. Therefore, it was important for the American students that the teacher "clearly explains objectives and goals, prepares students for exams" and for the Chinese students that the teacher "speaks with parents when results are not sufficient, teaches by punishing". This dimension can also explain why "being a man" was considered important for the Chinese students. The French students did not speak about the results and valued more the environment in which they were learning. This finding may explain why they emphasized more than the other nationalities the human qualities of the teachers. The ideal teacher should be "patient, motivated, open-minded, have sense of humor", which illustrates the importance accorded to feminine values in France.

The score for the dimension of uncertainty avoidance was quite high in France, moderately high in China and low in the United States. The importance given to the category *credibility* illustrates this cultural dimension to some extent. The American students elicited few constructs for this category, and they only considered the experience teachers have. The Chinese students added age, gender and knowledge. For the French students, all these qualities (except gender) must be taken into account along with expertise and qualifications. Depending on their culture, students must find ways in which they can trust their teacher.

Finally, these results reveal that the students' answers are consistent with the cultural dimensions of their country of origin, which confirms previous research (den Brok 2002, Levy 1997, Yamakazi & Kayes

2004). Because of their education, students expect certain behaviors from their teachers, which are related to cultural dimensions; this result confirms that students are sensitive to a particular model of transmitting knowledge or to a particular communication style. Therefore, even if American, Chinese and French students associate communication skills with effectiveness, the definition of a competent communicator is culturally linked. What is considered to be a skill effective teachers must possess in one culture is not valued in the same way in another. This statement is also true for technical skills, which are often considered objective. For instance, content and format material is not perceived identically in the United States, China and France. In this way, we can conclude that students' expectations about their teachers' communication can, to some extent, be predicted by analyzing their national culture. Teaching methods adapted to particular cultural groups must be developed and included in teacher training programs.

## Conclusion

Efforts have been made to understand what makes teachers effective. Some studies have analyzed the necessary skills of teachers, while others have attempted to understand the teaching styles they develop. However, in much of this research, effectiveness has rarely been associated with teachers' communication. The aim of this investigation was to discover what types of communication styles students with different cultural backgrounds expect from their teachers. To conduct this analysis, the technique of repertory grids was used to interview 53 students of three nationalities (American, Chinese and French). The given definitions were compared to the existing models measuring teachers' effectiveness and interpersonal teacher communication to produce the following results:

1. Seven categories of the qualities students use to define their teachers' communication were identified: credibility, information delivery, human qualities, interaction, content and format material, control of class, availability and open-mindedness.
2. These categories are relevant to the teachers' effectiveness. The students viewed their teachers' communication as composed of basic skills, interactions with students and personality characteristics, which are the three categories of skills traditionally used to define teachers' effectiveness.
3. Verbal and non-verbal behaviors were explicitly mentioned by students when discussing communication. These two aspects of interpersonal communication skills must be integrated in teacher training programs in the same way as technical skills.
4. The definition of a good teacher is culturally linked.

This study confirms that cultural background explains the communication style expected and preferred by students. Degrees of power distance, masculinity, individualism and uncertainty avoidance reveal the characteristics students appreciate in their teachers' communication. Thus, teaching methods must remain local. These results show how it may be dangerous to reproduce teaching methods used in other countries. If students are not prepared, they will not be able to absorb information, which will decrease their motivation and outcomes. However, the most important result of this study is identification of the link students make between communication and effectiveness. Regardless of their culture, students associate communication with teachers' effectiveness. A teacher who is not a good communicator will not be perceived as a good teacher by students.

Finally, this study highlights the fact that *social skills* are not sufficiently examined in research on teachers' effectiveness. The results reveal that both interpersonal communication competencies and cultural adaptation skills are critical to effectively transmitting messages to students. As such, they must be integrated in teacher training programs. Thus, further research must examine different points, taking into account the limitations of this study, such as the place social skills and technical skills truly have in defining teachers' effectiveness and the importance accorded by students to the categories of qualities they use to define their teachers' communication.

## References

- Ament, L. (1990). Learning and training: a matter of style. *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 22, 3, 13-16.
- Blunt Bugental, D., Lyon, J.E., Lin, E.K., McGrath, E.P. & Bimbela, A. (1999). Children "Tune out" in Response to the Ambiguous Communication Style of Powerless Adults. *Child Development*, 70, 1, 214-230
- den Brok, P.J., Levy, J., Rodriguez R. & Wubbels T. (2002). Perceptions of Asian-American teachers and their students on teacher interpersonal communication style. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 18, 447-467.
- Chamoso, J.M., Caceres, M.J. & Azcarate, P. (2011). Reflection on the teaching-learning process in the initial training of professors. Characterization of the issues on pre-service mathematics teachers reflect. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 1-11.
- Emanuel, R.C., & Potter, W.J. (1992). Do Students' Style Preferences Differ by Grade Level, Orientation toward College, and Academic Major? *Research in Higher Education*, 33, 3, 395-414
- Fawcett, S.E., Brau, J.C., & Fawcett, A. M. (2005). Perceptions of the teacher-leader in modern society : insights from the master teacher's pedagogy. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 28, 465-487.
- Filbeck, G., & Smith, L.L. (1996). Learning styles, teaching strategies and predictors of success for students in corporate finance. *Financial Practice and Education*, Spring-Summer, 74-85.
- Fisher, D, Waldrip, B., & den Brok, P. (2005). Students' perceptions of primary teachers' interpersonal behaviour and of cultural dimensions in the classroom environment. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 43, 25-38
- Gilley, J.W. (2000). Manager as learning champion. *Performance Improvement Quarterly*, 13, 4, 106-121.
- Gordon, P.J. (1984). What do professors do? *Business Horizons*, 3, 38-43.
- Greenbaum, P.E. (1985). Nonverbal Differences in Communication Style between American Indian and Anglo Elementary Classrooms. *American Educational Research Journal*, 22, 1, 101-115
- Hall, E.T. & Hall, M.R. (1990). *Guide du comportement dans les affaires internationales – Allemagne, Etats Unis, France*. Paris : Editions du Seuil.
- Henson, K.T. & Borthwick, P. (1984). Matching styles: a historical look. *Theory into Practice*, 23, 1, 3-9.
- Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G.J. & Minkov, M. (2010). *Cultures et organisations*. Paris: Pearson Education France.
- Jankowicz, D. (2004). *The easy guide to repertory grids*. London: Wiley.
- Kelly, G., (1955). *The Psychology of Personal Constructs*. New York: WW Norton.
- Klopf, D.W. & Mc Croskey, J.C. (2007). *Intercultural communication encounters*. Boston: Pearson Edition.
- Krishnaveni, R. & Anitha, J. (2008). Towards standardizing education : specific dispositions for educators and their impact on teacher efficacy. *Vikalpa*, 33, 1, 85-92.

- Ladd, P.D. & Ruby, R. (1999). Learning styles and adjustment issues of international students. *Journal of Education for Business*, 4, 363-367.
- Lease, J.E. (1985). Teaching effectiveness: an intensive seminar for business Ph.D. students. *The Journal of Business Communication*, 22, 4, 67-73.
- Levy, J., Wubbels, T., Brekelmans, M. & Morganfield, B. (1997). Language and cultural factors in students' perceptions of teacher communication style. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 21, 1, 29-56.
- Mahon, J. (2009). Conflict style and cultural understanding among teachers in the Western United States: exploring relationships. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 33, 46-56.
- Mainhard, M.T., Brekelmans, M. & Wubbels, T. (2011). Coercive and supportive teacher behavior: within- and across-lesson associations with the classroom social climate. *Learning and Instruction*, 21, 345-354.
- Majid, N.A., Jelas, Z.M., Azman, N. & Rahman, S. (2010). Communication skills and work motivation amongst expert teachers. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 7C, 565-567.
- Medsker, K.L. & Fry, J.P. (1997). Acquisition of interpersonal communication skills: a research-based approach. *Telematics and Informatics*, 14, 3, 209-218.
- Noels, K.A. (2002). Learning Spanish as a Second Language: Learners' Orientations and Perceptions of Their Teachers' Communication Style, *Language Learning*, 51, 1, 107-144.
- Noels, K.A., Clement, R. & Pelletier, L.G. (1999). Perceptions of teachers' communicative style and students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. *The Modern Language Journal*, 83, 1, 23-34.
- Oliva, P.F. & Henson, K.T. (1980). What are the essential generic teaching competencies? *Theory in Practice*, 19, 2, 117-121
- Opdenakker, M.C. & Van Damme, J. (2006). Teacher characteristics and teaching styles as effectiveness enhancing factors of classroom practice. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 22, 1-21.
- Richmond, V.P. & Mc Croskey, J. (2004). *Non verbal Behaviors in Interpersonal Relations*. Boston: Pearson International Edition.
- Rickards, T., den Brok, P. & Fisher, D. (2005). The Australian Science Teacher: A Typology of Teacher-Student Interpersonal Behaviour in Australian Science Classes. *Learning Environments Research*, 8, 3, 267-287.
- Rose, R. (2002). Teaching as a "Research based profession": Encouraging practitioner research in Special Education. *British Journal of Special Education*, 29, 1, 44-48.
- Schwerdt, G. & Wupperman, A.C. (2011). Is traditional teaching really all that bad? A within-student between-subject approach. *Economics of Education Review*, 30, 365-379.
- Smothergill, N.L., Olson, F. & Moore, S.G. (1971). The Effects of Manipulation of Teacher Communication Style in the Preschool. *Child Development*, 42, 4, 1229-1239
- Stewart, V. (1997). *Business Applications of Repertory Grid*. Enquire Within Developments Limited.
- Tan, F.B. (1999). Exploring business-IT alignment using the Repertory Grid. *10:th Australian Conference on Information Systems*, 931-943.

- Telli, S., den Brok, P. & Cakiroglu, J. (2007). Students' perceptions of science teachers' interpersonal behaviour in secondary schools: development of a Turkish version of the Questionnaire of Teacher Interaction. *Learning Environments Research*, 10, 115-129.
- Thompson, T.C. (1997). Learning styles and teaching styles: who should adapt to whom? *Business Communication Quarterly*, 60, 2, 125-127.
- Trompenaars, F., & Hampden-Turner, C. (1997). *Riding the waves of cultures, Understanding diversity in business*. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.
- Van Tartwijk, J., Brekelmans, M., Wubbels, T., Fisher, D.L. & Fraser, B.J. (1998). Students' perceptions of teacher interpersonal style: the front of the classroom as the teachers' stage. *Teacher and Teaching Education*, 14, 6, 607-617.
- de Vito, J.A.(2008). *Interpersonal Messages: Communication and Relationship Skills*. Boston: Pearson International Edition.
- Weisz, R. & Karim, J. (2011). Weisz communication styles inventory (WCSI : Version 1.0) : development and validation. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 15, 2105-2116.
- Wubbels, T., Brekelmans, M. & Hooymayers, P.H. (1992). Do teachers ideals distort the self-reports of their interpersonal behaviour? *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 8, 1, 47-58.
- Wubbels, T. & Brekelmans, M. (2005). Two decades of research on teacher-student relationships in class. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 43, 6-24.
- Yamazaki, Y. & Kayes, C. (2004). An experiential approach to cross-cultural learning. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 3, 4, 362-379.
- Yeo, L.S., Ang, R.P., Chong, W.H, Huan, V. & Quek, C.L. (2008). Teacher efficacy in the context of teaching low achieving students. *Current Psychology*, 27, 192-204.
- You, Z. & Jia, F. (2008). Do they learn differently? An investigation of the pre-service teachers from US and China. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24, 836-845.
- Zhang, L (2004). Thinking styles: University students' preferred teaching styles and their conceptions of effective teachers. *The Journal of Psychology*, 138, 3, 233-252.

## About the Author

Cecilia Brassier-Rodrigues is an associate Professor in Communication at Clermont University (FRANCE). She teaches courses in intercultural business communication, marketing, sales promotion, interpersonal communication to French students, but also to international ones (in Kansas, Oklahoma, Bratislava, Steyr, Shanghai, Rotterdam, etc.). She is the leader of a post-graduate programme in Business and Communication. Her topics of interest in research deal with intercultural and interpersonal communication and how this kind of communication affects organisations.

## Author's Address

University Blaise Pascal  
Faculty of Applied Languages  
Business and Communication  
Dept. Communication  
34 avenue CARNOT,  
63000 CLERMONT-FERRAND

FRANCE

Tel.0033 6 15 94 03 73

[cecilia.brassier@univ-bpclermont.fr](mailto:cecilia.brassier@univ-bpclermont.fr)

---

[1] This article was published in *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Vol 15, Weisz, R., & Karim, J. Weisz communication styles inventory (WCSI : Version 1.0) : development and validation., 2105-2116, Copyright Elsevier (2011).

[2] From [www.geert-hofstede.com](http://www.geert-hofstede.com). The scores (moving from approximately 10 to 120) express the preference of individuals toward the dimension evaluated.

---

Journal of Intercultural Communication, ISSN 1404-1634, issue 38, July 2015.

URL: <http://immi.se/intercultural>