Conflict Resolution in Multilingual Classrooms: An Exploration Based on Face Negotiation Theory

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Abstract. This study explores conflict resolution in a multilingual classroom, focusing on face-threatening issues arising from cultural differences and differences in language proficiency. By applying the theory of face negotiation, it analyzes the differences in students' perception of face threat and their coping strategies in different cultural backgrounds. It was found that students often use strategies such as avoidance, competition, and cooperation to cope with conflicts. This study proposes that teachers should guide students to deal with face problems appropriately through strategies such as establishing an inclusive classroom environment, designing a fair participation mechanism, providing language support, and cultivating cross-cultural communicative competence, so as to enhance the quality of interactions in multilingual classrooms.

Keywords: Multilingual Classroom; Conflict Resolution; Face Negotiation Theory; Intercultural Communication; Teaching Strategies.

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization, multilingual classrooms have become microcosmic arenas of intercultural conflict. Research has shown that language power asymmetry (e.g., the suppression of other language groups by English as the lingua franca) and cultural cognitive differences (e.g., the collision of high- and low-context communication styles) together constitute the deep-rooted triggers of conflict [1]. Existing studies have focused on superficial descriptions of conflict behaviors (e.g., language frequency statistics), but neglected the central role of "face" as a cultural psychological mechanism. And Ting-Toomey's Face Negotiation Theory (FNT) provides a key framework for analyzing this kind of conflict: it defines face as "the sense of self-worth that an individual maintains in a given situation" and reveals how cultural values (e.g., individualism/collectivism) can be transmitted through the face strategy. It defines face as "the individual's sense of self-worth in a given situation" and reveals how cultural values (e.g., individualism/collectivism) shape conflict resolution paths through face-saving strategies. By integrating the perspectives of FNT and educational linguistics, this study proposes the concept of Cultural Face Capital, which is the ability of individuals to mobilize cultural resources to negotiate face in cross-cultural interactions, to make up for the inadequacy of existing theories in explaining the dynamics of educational contexts.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Face Negotiation Theory

Face Negotiation Theory (FNT) provides a structure for understanding cultural differences in communication styles and conflict resolution. According to existing literature, studies have shown that collectivist societies focus on others' face and mutual face issues, while individualist societies emphasize self-face issues [3]. However, different cases do not show the same focus on resolution for example cross-cultural studies have found differences in face work strategies and conflict resolution skills between countries such as Ecuador and the United States [4], as well as between international students and local faculty in multicultural academic settings [5]. The application of FNT in different domains that are beginning to show varying degrees of usefulness especially in conflict resolution has been investigated in many different settings, especially in interethnic conflict where

effective resolution depends on indigenous knowledge and cultural competence [6]. The in-depth understanding of these cultural nuances in problem-facing and conflict resolution preferences will help teachers and mediators develop more successful conflict resolution programs in multicultural and multilingual settings.

2.2 Cross-Educational Applicability of Face Negotiation Theory

The fundamental hypothesis of FNT posits that conflict arises from the conduct of Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) [7]. In educational contexts, FTAs are categorized into three types: (1) Devaluation of language proficiency, such as educators overtly correcting the grammatical errors of students from minority language backgrounds; (2) Denial of cultural identity, exemplified by the disregard for the speaking practices of non-Western students; (3) Entrenchment of power relations, illustrated by the marginalization of native speaker identity within a monolingual instructional framework.

Ting-Toomey further suggests that the dynamic balance between Autonomy-face and Fellowship-face determines conflict styles: while European and American students tend to defend Autonomy-face through direct debate, East Asian students are more likely to protect Fellowship-face with silence or third-party mediation. This difference echoes Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions: in high-power-distance cultures (e.g., the Middle East), students deflect face threats through religious discourse invocations (e.g., "Allah's will"), reflecting implicit obedience to teacher authority.

2.3 Tensions in the Role of Teachers as "Face Brokers"

Teachers need to play both the role of rule enforcer to maintain classroom order and the role of cultural mediator to balance the needs of multiple faces, resulting in a conflict of roles. For example, when Latino students refuse to answer a question individually due to the notion of "collective face", the teacher's forced naming of them may trigger a "double loss of face", i.e., the student's self-esteem is compromised while his or her sense of belonging to the group is disintegrated [8]. The study suggests the use of cultural frame switching strategies, such as indirect feedback instead of direct criticism in collectivist culture-dominated classrooms.

3. Methodology

This study speaks about summarizing the role of Face Negotiation Theory in the multilingual classroom through literature analysis method as the main research method.

3.1 Literature Search

The 100 papers most relevant to this study were screened through Scopus, Web of science, Semantic, Scholar and some Chinese databases. Most of these papers studied conflict resolution strategies in multilingual classrooms with respect to the theory of face negotiation. However, for the purpose of further detailed analysis and case comparison, only 10 representative papers were retained for this study. These analyses of 10 studies in different educational settings and cultural contexts suggest several models of how to manage cross-cultural conflict.

3.2 Screening Process

The initial screening criteria for the literature in the database for this study were the following three:

a. Educational setting: does the study take place in an educational setting?

b. Language setting: does the study involve interactions between two or more different language groups in an educational setting?

c. Face negotiation: does the study include an analysis of face-saving, face-threatening, or face-negotiating behaviors?

The above three points also address the basic viewpoints of face theory in resolving conflict in multilingual classrooms, and it is through these three points that this study initially sifted through 100 related literature studies.

Table 1. Characteristics of Included Studies in Representative Literature

Study	Study Setting	Cultural Context	Participant Types	Research Focus
[17]	Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC), USA	Arabic language classrooms, cultural conflicts between instructors and learners	Instructors and learners	Impact of political polarization on cultural Conflicts in Arabic classrooms
[10]	Prestigious university in China	Cross-linguistic, international students	International students	Face attacks in Conflict discourse in online chats
[9]	University in China	Intercultural interaction between American and Chinese individuals	American visiting professor and International office staff member	Identity or face-based goal issues in intercultural conflicts
[18]	Junior high school	Chinese cultural context, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms	One female EFL teacher and 49 EFL students	English teachers' use of threatening acts in EFL classrooms
[13]	Online synchronous class	Intercultural communication among Korean, Malaysian, and Japanese students	Korean, Malaysian, and Japanese students	Facework among second language (L2) speakers in intercultural communication
[14]	Japanese language instruction setting	Intercultural context involving Japanese teachers and foreign students	84 Japanese teachers, 214 Chinese students, and 154 Korean students	Causal attribution and conflict resolution strategies in Japanese language instruction
[15]	Secondary school in London	Mandarin lesson, English used as medium of communication	28 students and a teacher	Rapport management in classroom conflict talk
[5]	Private university in Malaysia	Intercultural interactions between Malaysian Instructors and international students	105 Indonesian undergraduates, 106 Chinese under- graduates, and 106 Malaysian instructors	Facework strategies and intercultural conflict management procedures
[16]	EFL classroom setting	Comparison between native speaking (NS) and non-native	NS and NNS teachers, students	Face in the question-answer process in EFL
[11]	English as a Second Language (ESL) writing classrooms at a U.S. university	speaking (NNS) teachers' EFL classes Non-native speakers or English as a lingua franca (ELF) speakers	Multilingual instructors and students	classrooms Multimodal communicative strategies for resolving mis-communication
Unnamed Study	Not mentioned/found	Not mentioned/ found	Not mentioned/ found	Not mentioned/ found

Based on these 100 articles, this study continued to add the following screening criteria:
d. conflict focus: did the study examine interpersonal or group conflict in educational settings?

e. research design: was the study an empirical investigation (qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods), a systematic evaluation, or a meta-analysis?

f. Setting relevance: Was the study conducted primarily in an educational setting (as opposed to a workplace, community, or other setting)?

g. Range of linguistic settings: Is the study conducted in a multilingual (not exclusively monolingual) setting with frequent use of multiple languages?

h. Type of study: Does the paper include empirical findings (not purely theoretical discussion)?

After the above steps this study came up with the final 10 literature studies. After going through further review of conflict resolution strategies, cross-cultural conflict finding results, and summarization of different educational settings, all literature is presented through Table 1.

This study identified a variety of settings in 11 studies. The most common were language teaching settings (2 studies) and universities in the United States (2 studies) and China (2 studies). Other settings included middle schools, online programs, and universities in the United Kingdom and Malaysia.

In addition to this, language classrooms were the most common cultural context, appearing in 5 studies. Cross-cultural contexts were also frequent, mentioned in 4 studies. One study focused specifically on the cross-linguistic context.

Teachers or lecturers were the most common type of participant, appearing in 5 studies. Students or learners were mentioned in 4 studies, and international students were specifically mentioned in 4 studies. The studies also identified one instance each of staff and professor participants.

The studies covered a range of research foci, with face-related issues being the most common theme (appearing in 4 studies under various terms such as facial aggression, face work, and face/identity issues). Conflict management or resolution was the focus of 2 studies. Other foci included cultural conflict, threatening behavior, rapport management, and communication strategies.

Overall, the studies examined language learning environments with a focus on face-related issues in cross-cultural communication and conflict situations.

4. Analysis and Findings

4.1 Face-saving Strategies in Multilingual Settings

The analysis revealed that face-saving strategies play an important role in conflict resolution in multilingual classrooms. Key findings include: cultural differences in face work: [13] identified three types of face-saving strategies used by L2 speakers: self-deprecating humor, group embarrassment, and attempts to build group cohesion. These strategies were observed among learners from different cultural backgrounds (Korean, Malaysian, and Japanese) in cross-cultural communication. Linguistic competence and face saving: [16] reported that non-native speaking (NNS) teachers were more linguistically powerful than native speaking (NS) teachers in EFL classrooms, which influenced their approach to face threatening behavior. Nonverbal Conflict Resolution Strategies: [11] emphasizes the use of multi-modal resources including gestures, specific actions, and nonverbal vocalizations when resolving miscommunication. [13] points out the importance of nonverbal face-saving strategies when verbal resolution is inadequate.

4.2 Power Dynamics and Conflict Mediation

In addition to this, the analysis also revealed the role of power dynamics in conflict resolution in multilingual classrooms. The main observations include: teacher-student relationship: [15] found that students were able to make their voices heard in a Mandarin class in a secondary school in London, which was valued by the teacher. Institutional context: [17] reported that at the Foreign Language Center of the Defense Language Institute, non-native speaking teachers played a crucial role in preventing and mediating conflicts between native speaking teachers and students. Mediation methods: [5] found that mediation was the most favorable conflict management process for culturally diverse groups, including Malaysian teachers and international students. Changing power dynamics:

[16] reported that non-native teachers are linguistically more powerful than native teachers in some EFL settings.

4.3 Cultural Attributions and Solution Strategies

Research on the role of cultural attributions in conflict resolution strategies. Key findings include: cultural difference awareness: [14] found that students' attribution of conflict to cultural differences affected their choice of resolution strategies. Adaptive Strategies: [5] observed that while both Indonesian and Chinese undergraduate students preferred integrative strategies, they differed in their use of avoidance and dominance strategies. Resolution Preferences:

[5] reported that mediation became the generally preferred method for cultural groups.

[17] found that non-native speaking teachers were particularly effective mediators in some situations. Cultural Differences in Facing Issues: [9] Identifying identity or face-based targeting issues is central to cross-cultural conflict. Multi-modal Conflict Management: [10] emphasize the need to consider linguistic and multi-modal elements when understanding conflict management in cross-cultural settings, especially in online environments.

In addition to the above analysis as well as findings, this study also summarizes the resolution patterns under conflict in different language classrooms. Table 2 will demonstrate the relevant information.

Table 2. Conflict resolution model in multilingual classrooms

Cultural Group	Preferred Resolution Strategy	Face-Work Approach	Effectiveness Indicators
Chinese students	Compromising strategies (cooperation, obedience)	Indirect, avoiding direct confrontation	Effective in attributing conflicts to cultural differences
Korean students	Less inclined towards non-confrontational strategies	More direct approach	Effectiveness not clearly indicated
Indonesian undergraduates	Integrating strategies, high preference for negotiation	Balance between direct and indirect approaches	Rated negotiation highest among conflict management procedures
Chinese undergraduates	Integrating strategies, inclination towards dominating and avoiding strategies	Mix of direct and indirect approaches	Rated mediation highest among conflict management procedures
Malaysian instructors	Preference for mediation	Not mentioned/found	Significantly preferred mediation over other procedures
American (context-specific)	Not mentioned/found	Direct communication style inferred	Ineffective in managing face needs in email interactions with Chinese counterparts
Japanese teachers	Not mentioned/found	Emphasis on maintaining harmony inferred	Expectation gap with students' use of assertive strategies
L2 speakers (mixed nationalities)	Self-mocking humor, group embarrassment, attempts to build group cohesion	Adaptive face-work strategies	Effective in mitigating face-threats in intercultural communication
Non-native speaking	Communicative	More powerful linguistic	Effective in managing
Teachers	Strategies to weaken face-threatening acts	Strategies than native speaking teachers	Classroom dynamics
English as a Lingua	Enhanced explicitness,	Adaptive, using both	Effective in resolving
Franca (ELF) speakers (mixed nationalities)	Use of multi-modal resources	Verbal and non-verbal strategies	Miscommunication in multi-lingual settings

5. Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the critical role of Face Negotiation Theory (FNT) in addressing conflicts in multilingual classrooms, offering both theoretical and practical implications for intercultural education. Theoretically, this research bridges a gap in the existing literature by operationalizing the concept of "face" as a dynamic cultural resource rather than a static psychological construct. By introducing cultural face capital (CFC), this research extends [19] framework to educational settings, emphasizing how individuals mobilize linguistic, nonverbal, and sociocultural competencies to navigate face-threatening acts (FTAs). This aligns with the observation of [5] that conflict resolution in multilingual contexts requires a dual focus on autonomy-face and fellowship-face, mediated by cultural scripts. For instance, East Asian students' preference for indirect strategies reflects collectivist values, whereas Western students' confrontation mirrors individualistic norms [4]. Such cultural nuances validate FNT's adaptability to educational linguistics, particularly in explaining how power asymmetries exacerbate FTAs for minority language learners [17].

Practically, the study provides educators with actionable steps to manage conflicts through culturally sensitive facework:

1) Diagnose Face Needs: Identify whether conflicts stem from autonomy-face threats or fellowship-face violations. For example, [18] analysis of EFL classrooms revealed that teachers' direct corrections often triggered "double face loss" among East Asian students, necessitating indirect feedback.

2) Reframe Interactions: Utilize cultural frame-switching [8] to align strategies with students' cultural orientations. In high-context settings, metaphors may reduce defensiveness, whereas low-context groups benefit from explicit rule-based discussions [14].

3) Co-Construct Solutions: Encourage collaborative problem-solving, as seen in Malaysian instructors' success with mediation [5]. This involves creating "face banks" where students earn social capital through cooperative acts, redeemable during conflicts.

4) Leverage Multimodal Resources: Nonverbal cues and code-switching can de-escalate tensions. [11] study highlights how ELF speakers combine verbal clarity with visual aids to resolve miscommunication.

However, challenges persist. Teachers' dual role as "face brokers" and authority figures creates tension, especially when institutional policies contradict students' cultural needs [15]. To mitigate this, professional development programs should integrate FNT-based training modules, emphasizing power-sensitive pedagogy and multimodal communication literacy.

In conclusion, this study repositions FNT as a vital tool for fostering equitable multilingual classrooms. By prioritizing cultural face capital, educators can transform conflicts into opportunities for intercultural learning, ultimately cultivating classrooms where diverse identities coexist and thrive. Future research should explore how digital platforms reshape facework dynamics, particularly in hybrid or online multilingual settings.

6. Conclusion

This study explored conflict resolution in a multilingual classroom through Face Negotiation Theory (FNT), emphasizing the critical role of cultural face capital (CFC) in responding to face-threatening behaviors (FTAs) and promoting cross-cultural understanding. The study found that students and educators employ a variety of face-saving strategies, ranging from indirect approaches in collectivist cultures to direct methods in individualist cultures, which are influenced by cultural values, linguistic power dynamics, and institutional frameworks. Nonverbal communication, adaptive conflict resolution skills, and the role of the teacher as a cultural mediator also proved critical. Although the study provided valuable insights into FNT in multilingual classrooms, its limitations of relying on literature review rather than empirical data need to be validated through further research. Areas such as empirical testing, face dynamics in digital and blended learning environments, long-

term effects of culturally sensitive strategies, teacher training programs, and cross-cultural comparisons could be explored in the future.

To conclude, this study reaffirms Face Negotiation Theory (FNT) as an effective framework for resolving conflict in multilingual classrooms, emphasizing the transformation of conflict into intercultural learning opportunities through cultural face capital and culturally sensitive approaches. Future research should further refine the application of FNT in education to ensure that multilingual classrooms become inclusive and harmonious learning environment.

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