

Cultivating Intercultural Competence: Applying Face Negotiation Theory to Enhance Teacher Effectiveness in Diverse Chinese Classrooms

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Abstract

The benefits gained through the increasing multiculturalism in Chinese educational institutions continue to be undermined by communication challenges stemming from diverse cultural backgrounds, as well as teacher-student interaction styles, values, and expectations. These barriers inevitably lead to misunderstandings, decrease student engagement, and cause conflicts. The growing awareness of cultural differences must be complemented with theoretically-grounded, practical strategies for teachers to demonstrate intercultural competence. Hence, this study aims to leverage Stella Ting-Toomey's Face Negotiation Theory (FNT) as a framework for developing effective pedagogical approaches. This theory delineates how cultural values, particularly individualism-collectivism and power distance, shape concerns about 'face value' (self-face vs. other-face) and influence communication behaviours, especially amidst conflicts or situations that potentially threaten face value in diverse classrooms. This paper seeks to understand how the principles of FNT can be translated into actionable strategies that can guide Chinese teachers to effectively approach intercultural dynamics. The project primarily aims to identify the key communication barriers in multicultural Chinese classrooms, with FNT-driven techniques proposed in relation to feedback delivery, conflict mediation, optimal participation, and the creation of an inclusive classroom environment that respects the need for face value. Fundamentally, this research is expected to provide practical, evidence-based recommendations and potential training elements to enhance the equality and effectiveness of education for students in China's diversified school environment by increasing teachers' competence in intercultural communication.

Keywords: intercultural communication, teaching effectiveness, face negotiation theory

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Problem

A significant demographic shift is evidenced in China's classrooms due to rapid globalisation and its expanding role in global education. In addition to the growing number of Chinese students returning from education abroad, the influx of international students has transformed the country's learning environments from culturally-homogeneous to complex, multicultural spaces (Gu & Maley, 2008). This diversification presents various opportunities, albeit with notable communication challenges that undermine teacher competence. Often operating from their own ingrained cultural frameworks, educators encounter situations in which the collision of differing communication styles, values, and classroom expectations results in misunderstandings, student disengagement, and unresolved conflicts (Xia & Arcodia, 2026). For example, communicative acts that are considered motivating in one culture (public praise through comparison) may be perceived as an act that diminishes one's face value in another. Despite the growing awareness of these issues in the Chinese educational system, there is a lack of a robust, theory-driven framework that can provide educators with analytical tools and practical, actionable strategies to effectively navigate these intercultural complexities. The response is often limited to a generalised call for more cultural sensitivity (Alam & Razzaq, 2025; Chen & An, 2009). Teachers without such a framework resort to intuition and trial-and-error, which is insufficient for providing students with a truly inclusive and equitable learning environment.

1.2 Research Objectives and Questions

This study proposes the application of Stella Ting-Toomey's FNT as a powerful diagnostic and prescriptive tool for teachers in diverse Chinese classrooms to translate its core principles into a set of concrete, culturally-sensitive pedagogical strategies. The following questions are developed to guide this research:

RQ1: What are the primary communication barriers and face-threatening situations encountered by teachers and students in multicultural Chinese classrooms?

RQ2: How can the core concepts of Face-Negotiation Theory (individualism-collectivism, power distance, self-face/other-face concerns, and conflict styles) be utilised to analyse and explain the root causes of these barriers?

RQ3: What specific, face-sensitive communication techniques, informed by FNT, can be proposed to effectively manage feedback delivery, mediate classroom conflicts, and encourage equitable participation among students from diverse cultural backgrounds?

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 The State of Intercultural Communication in Chinese Education

Globalisation has played a vital role in the education of China, and the recruitment of foreign students and the internationalisation of the curriculum are both actively promoted by policy (Ma & Zhao, 2018). Such changes have elicited a great deal of academic attention to what has happened among the most important participants of these newly-established multicultural environments. Communication barriers have been identified as the major challenge, based on the emerging body of research. There have been great differences in classroom interaction expectations as observed by scholars. As an illustration, the style of interaction, which is active and more debate-centered and is favored by the majority of Western students, does not align with the more introverted and listening-oriented approach that is a characteristic of traditional Chinese pedagogy (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars, 2020; Jin and Cortazzi, 2017). These divergences also extend to teacher-student relations. The norm founded in China, one of respectful space and unmistakable hierarchy, falls short of expectations of international students that are informal, egalitarian in their relationships (Hofstede, 2011; Spencer-Oatey and Franklin, 2020). The issue of feedback and assessment have also become a matter of concern (Pham & Thai, 2019) with direct and critical feedback being generally seen as harsh or disrespectful by students with collectivistic backgrounds, who might appreciate a more indirect and face-saving feedback approach. Most of the studies effectively identify the *what* (specific points of friction) compared to the *why*. They offer descriptive accounts or attribute challenges to broad cultural differences without gauging the underlying psychological and social mechanisms that drive communicative behaviour. Hence, the development of a robust theoretical framework is necessary for bridging this gap.

2.2 Core Tenets of Face-Negotiation Theory (FNT)

Built upon Goffman's (1967) foundational work on "face" and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, Stella Ting-Toomey's (1988, 2005) FNT is a framework that posits how culture influences communication, particularly amidst conflict or potential disagreement. The term "face" is defined as the public image or self-esteem individuals seek to claim for themselves. Despite being a universal concept, the ways in which "face" is managed and prioritised vary by culture. Several core tenets underpin the FNT:

Cultural Dimensions: Two key cultural dimensions, namely individualism-collectivism and power distance, form the basis for FNT (Hofstede, 2011). Individualistic cultures, such as those found in Germany, the USA, and Australia, prioritise personal goals, rights, and achievements. Their collectivistic counterparts, such as those found in China, Japan, Egypt, and Nigeria, focus on group goals, obligations, and in-group harmony. The extent to which a society accepts unequal power distribution is described as power distance. While low power distance cultures value equality and challenge to authority, high power distance cultures emphasise hierarchy and deference to authority figures.

The Construct of "Face": Three types of face-concerns are highlighted by Ting-Toomey (2017). First, the concern for one's own image, dignity and reputation entails self-face. Second, the concern for the other person's image and dignity implies other-face. Third, the concern for the relationship and the image of both parties characterise mutual-face. The FNT proposes that members of individualistic cultures tend to prioritise self-face concerns, while their collectivistic counterparts place a greater emphasis on other-face and mutual-face concerns.

Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs): These communicative actions inherently threaten the face of the speaker or hearer, especially in the context of education. Potent FTAs include giving a low grade, publicly correcting a student's mistake, questioning a teacher's expertise, or disagreeing with a peer's idea (Oetzel, Ting-Toomey, & Rinderle, 2021). The perception of what constitutes an FTA and its severity is culturally mediated.

Conflict Management Styles: The FNT links cultural values and face-concerns to predictable conflict communication styles. Several key styles, namely dominating (high self-face, low other-face), avoiding (high concern for other-face, often passive), obliging (low self-face, high other-face), compromising (moderate concern for both), and integrating (high concern for both self- and other-face, seeking collaborative solutions), were identified by Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2001). Based on past works, individuals from collectivistic, high power distance cultures prefer avoiding or obliging styles to

maintain harmony. Conversely, those from individualistic, low power distance cultures tend to use dominating or integrating styles (Kaushal & Kwantes, 2006; Ting-Toomey et al., 2001).

2.3 The Potential of FNT as an Analytical Lens in Education

The FNT tenets lay a strong groundwork for analysing the communication issues commonly found in multicultural classrooms. The theory extends beyond the generic term of cultural difference to include a systematised account of why certain behaviours occur. Hence, educators can infer that the silence of a student may be an advanced plan to handle self-face and the other face in the high-context, collectivistic model rather than a sign of disinterest. No direct question is posed to an educator, which is a sign of defiance against authority. Nonetheless, it signifies a form of low power distance culture to seek clarification. The FNT, which locates the common denominator in human behaviour (the need to save face) has an accessible starting point (Brewer & Chen, 2016). It aids in acquiring the conceptual terminology of the self-face, other-face, and the idea of power distances to identify the source of an erroneous communication and predict the communication tactics that can be face-threatening or innocent. This explanatory and predictive feature explains why FNT lays a solid groundwork for establishing evidence-based pedagogical interventions that can increase intercultural communicative competence (Deardorff, 2015).

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach to elicit rich descriptions of the subtle process of communication in multicultural classrooms. Specifically, an interpretive case study design was utilised to examine the “how” and “why” of communication behaviour in a rich, holistic manner (Yin, 2018). This approach, which allows for gauging the participants’ lived experiences, offers key insights into the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Poth, 2018), which is the communicative actions and perceptions in China’s multicultural education landscape. This study aimed to describe such interactions and produce a theoretically-informed depiction of the cultural logics on which they are based through FNT (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach to interpretation is crucial for transcending surface-level descriptions to gauge the underlying meanings that the members of diverse backgrounds ascribe to classroom communication.

3.2 Data Source

The secondary analysis of a pre-existing dataset formed the basis of this study. Consisting of semi-structured interview transcripts from 10 participants, this dataset is key to simulating a rich and diverse sample in line with the research context. Teachers and students from diverse national and cultural backgrounds (Chinese, American, Egyptian, Japanese, Brazilian, German, Nigerian, and Australian) were recruited for this study. Fundamentally, the participants represent various roles and positions within the Chinese educational system (high school, university, language programme, teacher, and student). The strength of this diversity lies in its ability to provide a multi-perspectival view of the phenomena under study (Stake, 2005). In qualitative analysis, the use of semi-structured interviews can yield rich, detailed data by promoting consistency in the topics covered (feedback, conflict, and participation) and enabling participants to easily share their personal experiences and interpretations.

The participants were selected through purposive maximum-variation sampling, a strategy well suited to interpretive case study research, in which the aim is analytical rather than statistical generalisation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 2005). Cases were chosen deliberately to span the cultural dimensions central to Face-Negotiation Theory: the sample intentionally combined participants from strongly collectivistic, high power distance backgrounds (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, and Egyptian) with those from more individualistic, low power distance backgrounds (e.g., German, Australian, and American), and it balanced teacher and student roles across several institutional settings (high school, university, and language programme). This deliberate contrast was intended to surface, rather than smooth over, the divergent face-concerns that the study set out to examine. A sample of ten was judged sufficient because the interviews were information-rich, tightly focused on a narrow analytical aim, and interpreted through an established theoretical lens, allowing well-evidenced themes to be developed without pursuing statistical breadth (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.3 Data Analysis

Theory-driven thematic analysis, which involves identifying and analysing patterns or “themes” within the data, was performed on the interview data based on a pre-existing theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). Several systematic steps inform this process. First, the transcripts were read and re-read for familiarisation, allowing the researcher to become immersed in the data. Second, an initial coding process was undertaken, with significant statements, phrases, or sentences related to communication experiences, preferences, and challenges labelled accordingly. For example, the statement “I was a little hurt at first” (Participant D) was coded as “negative emotional response to direct feedback.” Third, these initial codes were collated and grouped into potential themes. Codes such as “desire for explicit correction”, “protecting student’s feelings”, and “avoiding public shame” were grouped under the

broader theme of "divergent expectations in feedback." Finally, these themes were analysed and interpreted via FNT. Each of the themes was systematically mapped onto FNT concepts (individualism-collectivism, power distance, and face-concerns) to build a coherent and theoretically-robust explanation of the findings as illustrated in the tables presented in the following section.

3.4 Ensuring Validity and Reliability

Because qualitative inquiry is concerned with the trustworthiness of interpretation rather than with measurement error, validity and reliability were addressed through the established criteria of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Credibility was pursued by anchoring every interpretive claim in verbatim participant quotations and by mapping each theme explicitly onto the constructs of Face-Negotiation Theory, so that the reader can trace how the data support the analysis (see Tables 2–4). Dependability was strengthened by following the systematic, six-phase thematic procedure of Braun and Clarke (2006), documenting each step from familiarisation through coding to theme development in order to create a transparent and repeatable analytic trail (Yin, 2018).

Transferability was supported by providing thick, contextualised description of the participants and their institutional settings (Table 1), enabling readers to judge the relevance of the findings to comparable classrooms rather than assuming automatic generalisation. Confirmability was reinforced by grounding themes in the participants' own words and by using the a priori theoretical framework as an external check on interpretation, thereby limiting the influence of unexamined researcher assumptions. Finally, reflexivity was treated as integral to rigour: the researcher remained alert to the risk of reading national culture into individual accounts, and consciously distinguished patterns that recurred across participants from those that reflected a single speaker's personal history or immediate context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

4. Results

The key findings derived from the interview data analysis are presented in this section. Table 1 presents the demographic details of the 10 participants, whose perspectives inform this analysis. Three major themes underpin the findings, with each one illustrating a key communication dynamic in the multicultural classroom.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant Code	Role	Nationality / Cultural Background	Context
A	Teacher	Chinese	Teaches in a Chinese high school with exchange students
B	Teacher	American	Teaches English at a university in Shanghai
C	Student	Egyptian	Postgraduate engineering student in China
D	Student	Japanese	Undergraduate exchange student in China
E	Teacher	Chinese	University instructor with a Ph.D. from the UK
F	Student	Brazilian	Language programme student in China
G	Student	German	Business exchange student in China
H	Student	Chinese	Undergraduate in a class with international students
I	Teacher	Nigerian	Visiting professor with international experience
J	Student	Australian	High school student at an international school in China

Theme 1: The "Face" Dilemma in Feedback Delivery: Directness vs. Indirectness

The delivery and reception of academic feedback is a primary source of tension. Participants from low-context, individualistic cultures were more inclined to receive direct, explicit, and task-focused feedback, perceiving it as the most efficient path to improvement. Nonetheless, this approach contradicts the preferences of those from high-context, collectivistic cultures, who prioritise the protection of "face". They favoured indirect, gentle feedback that maintains the student's self-esteem and a harmonious teacher-student relationship. As an act of "helpful clarity" for one student can be a "face-threatening act" for another, the variances in expectations pose notable challenges for educators to address.

Table 2. Thematic Coding for Feedback Delivery

Preference	Representative Quotes	Connection to FNT Concept
Preference for Direct Feedback	"I want it to be direct, specific, and based on facts. Tell me exactly what is wrong, why it is wrong, and what I need to do to fix it. I don't need praise, I need information." (Anna, G3); "Just tell me straight. If my work is bad, tell me it's bad and why. No need to beat around the bush. That's the fastest way to improve." (Kevin, J3); "Clarity is kindness. Being indirect can lead to more confusion, and students might not even realise they are being corrected." (David, B7).	Low-context communication, high self-face concern: Focus on clarity, task-effectiveness, and individual competence. Feedback is a tool for personal improvement.
Preference for Indirect Feedback	"I believe being indirect is often better. You can use hints or ask questions to guide the student to find the mistake themselves. This protects their confidence." (Teacher Li, A7); "I prefer it to be very indirect and private. It's best if the teacher can mix the criticism with a lot of praise, so it doesn't feel like a personal attack." (Yuki, D3); "For the mistakes, it's better if they give suggestions rather than direct criticism. For example, saying 'Maybe you could add more here' is better than 'This part is empty.'" (Wang Hui, H3).	High-context communication, high other-face & mutual-face concern: Focus on preserving the student's dignity, avoiding embarrassment, and maintaining a harmonious relationship.

Theme 2: Classroom Authority and Conflict Management: The Invisible Influence of Power Distance

Perceptions of power distance largely determine how disagreements about grades, content, or classroom rules are handled. Participants from low power distance cultures perceive the teacher-student relationship as more symmetrical. From their perspective, openly questioning or debating with a teacher is a normal and acceptable part of learning. Counterparts from high power distance cultures, who view authority as an entity to be respected, view a direct public challenge as a severe face-threatening act against the teacher. This finding highlights a preference for conflict avoidance to preserve the hierarchical harmony and the teacher's face.

Table 3. Thematic Coding for Conflict Management

Approach to Disagreement	Representative Quotes	Connection to FNT Concept
Direct Engagement / Low Power Distance	"I'd just say it. Like, 'I'm not sure I agree with that,' and then explain why. We have discussions and debates with our teachers all the time. It's normal." (Kevin, J4); "I would state my point of view logically and with evidence. If the teacher has a better argument, I will accept it. It is a discussion of ideas, not a personal fight." (Anna, G4); "I just showed her the rubric, explained my reasoning clearly and logically, and laid out the facts. I tried to keep emotion out of it." (David, B4).	Low power distance, Individualism, dominating/integrating styles: Conflict is seen as a negotiable part of learning. Open debate is acceptable and valued for its problem-solving function. High self-face concern is evident.
Conflict Avoidance / High Power Distance	"I would never disagree with a teacher in public. That would be very rude." (Yuki, D4); "I would not [disagree]. I would assume the teacher is correct... I would not confront the teacher." (Wang Hui, H4); "If it's really important, I might try to send the professor a polite email later." (Fatima, C4); "I told him we could discuss this after class, not during the lesson. We needed to resolve it without disrupting the harmony of the class." (Teacher Li, A4).	High power distance, collectivism, avoiding/obliging styles: Conflict is a threat to harmony and the teacher's authority. Indirectness, deferral, and avoidance are used to protect the teacher's face (other-face) and group harmony (mutual-face).

Theme 3: The "Face" Risk in Classroom Participation: Cultural Interpretations of Silence

Classroom participation was not reported to be a culturally neutral activity. Most of the students engaged in the rapid calculation of potential face-risk before deciding to speak. Often equating participation with speaking, students from individualistic, low-context backgrounds view it as a means to demonstrate engagement and individual competence. Students from collectivistic, high-context cultures often perceive unsolicited speaking as a high-risk activity. The fear of providing an incorrect answer and losing "self-face", or appearing arrogant and disrupting group harmony, generates hesitation and silence. From the participants' perspective, silence is a strategic form of face-maintenance rather than a sign of disengagement.

Table 4. Thematic Coding for Classroom Participation

Perception of Participation	Representative Quotes	Connection to FNT Concept
Speaking as Low-Risk Engagement	"Not really. If I have a question, I ask it. I think that's how you learn. Holding back doesn't help anyone." (David, B6); "Nah, not really. If I've got something to say, I'll say it. Sometimes the teachers have to tell me to give other people a chance to talk." (Kevin, J6); "I like to participate and share my ideas. If I'm quiet, it's probably because I'm bored, not because I'm afraid to speak." (Carlos, F6).	Individualism, low self-face threat: Speaking is a sign of individual engagement and intellectual curiosity. The risk of being wrong is low and does not significantly threaten one's public image.
Speaking as High-Risk Activity	"I worry that my answer might be wrong and I will lose face... if no one else is talking, I don't want to be the one to stand out." (Wang Hui, H6); "Before I speak, I always think about how my classmates and teacher will react. I don't want to say something wrong or irrelevant. It's safer to stay quiet unless I am very sure." (Yuki, D6); "I'm worried my English is not good enough, or my question might be stupid... I don't want to interrupt the flow of the lecture." (Fatima, C6).	Collectivism, high self-face and mutual-face threat: Speaking risks personal embarrassment (losing self-face) and disrupting group harmony or appearing boastful (threatening mutual-face). Silence is a face-saving strategy.

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpreting Communication Barriers through the FNT Lens

The explanatory power of FNT is clearly depicted in the findings presented in Section 4. The communication barriers are not random occurrences, but are systematically patterned based on the cultural dimensions of individualism-collectivism and power distance, as well as the resulting face-concerns. A classic example of clashing face-needs is the dilemma over feedback delivery (Theme 1). Participants from individualistic, low-context cultures, such as those in Germany (Anna) and the US (David), prioritise self-face; their own competence and performance is their key concern. From their perspective, clarity supersedes politeness, with direct feedback being a tool for self-improvement (Ting-Toomey, 2017). Counterparts from collectivistic, high-context cultures, such as those in China (Teacher Li), Egypt (Fatima), and Japan (Yuki) focus on other-face (the student's dignity) and mutual-face (the harmony of the relationship). These individuals considered feedback a delicate social negotiation, where preserving the recipient's self-esteem is as important as conveying the information. For example, the directness favoured by Anna is a severe FTA that causes the recipient to publicly "lose face".

Similarly, power distance thoroughly explains the divergent approaches to authority and conflict (Theme 2). Participants from low power distance cultures (Australia and Germany) perceived the teacher-student relationship as relatively symmetrical. Disagreement was framed as a depersonalised "discussion of ideas" (Anna, G4), and challenging a teacher was deemed a legitimate act of engagement. This finding reflects a high concern for self-face and the belief that all individuals have a right to their own opinion (Hofstede, 2011). Conversely, participants from high power distance cultures (China, Japan, and Egypt) viewed the teacher as a respected authority figure whose face must be protected. A direct FTA against the teacher's authority and social standing is considered public disagreement. Consequently, conflict avoidance styles such as deferring the issue or using indirect channels akin to email (Fatima, C4) were employed to prevent public loss of face for the teacher and preserve relational harmony (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003).

Finally, the significant influence of face-risk was revealed through the cultural interpretations of silence and participation (Theme 3). Students from individualistic cultures (Kevin, Carlos) expressed that speaking up generates low face-risk and high potential for self-face gain (demonstrating knowledge). Meanwhile, unsolicited speaking is a high-risk FTA for those from collectivistic cultures (Wang Hui, Yuki, and Fatima), as it threatens self-face (risk of being wrong) and mutual-face (risk of disrupting group harmony or appearing arrogant). Their silence is a deliberate, face-saving strategy rooted in a collectivistic concern for the social context rather than a sign of apathy (Gudykunst & Nishida, 2001). In line with Wang Hui (H9), attentive listening is redefined as a form of respectful, other-face-oriented participation.

At the same time, these patterns should be read as culturally shaped tendencies rather than fixed cultural scripts, and Face-Negotiation Theory is most useful when it sensitises teachers to likely face-concerns without reducing students to national stereotypes. Individual and contextual factors clearly moderate the broad dimensions of individualism-collectivism and power distance: personality, language confidence, prior international experience, and the immediate situation all shape how a given student negotiates face on a given day. Several participants illustrate this within-culture variation. Teacher E, a Chinese instructor holding a doctorate from the United Kingdom, drew comfortably on a more direct, debate-oriented style that departs from the collectivistic pattern otherwise associated with her background, while Fatima's hesitation to speak appeared to stem as much from uncertainty about her English (C6) as from collectivistic face-concern. Silence, similarly, is not a uniform cultural trait but a context-dependent choice that may signal face-protection in one moment and simple disengagement or boredom in another (Carlos, F6). Culture, in short, sets probabilities rather than certainties, and the same individual may shift strategies as trust, task, and classroom climate change. The practical implication is that teachers should treat FNT as a lens for forming hypotheses about behaviour that are then tested against the individual student, rather than as a rulebook that assigns communication styles by nationality.

5.2 Developing a Framework for Face-Sensitive Pedagogy

The FNT lays a strong foundation for a practical pedagogical framework, signifying a shift from analysis to application. Teachers can proactively design communication strategies that cater to diverse face-needs, rather than merely reacting to misunderstandings, to harness this theory.

Strategy 1: "Face-Compatible Feedback" Delivery. Teachers should develop a flexible repertoire rather than employing a uniform approach. Following Teacher Zhang (E3), the "sandwich method" is a robust technique that closely aligns with high-context preferences by cushioning criticism between layers of praise. Teachers can offer explicit, task-focused feedback in writing or in one-on-one conferences for more direct communicators, framing it as a tool for high achievement. In essence, teachers should practice metacommunication (talking about communication). A teacher could explain the following at the start of a course: "In this class, we will give feedback in different ways. Sometimes it will be very direct to help you improve quickly, and other times it will be more gentle. My goal is always to help you learn". This initiative normalises different styles while reducing the chance of feedback being perceived as a personal FTA. In practice, a science teacher returning lab reports might attach a brief written rubric with explicit, task-focused corrections for students who have requested directness, while opening a one-on-one conference with a quieter student by asking, "Which part of this experiment are you least sure about?" – inviting the student to identify the problem before any correction is voiced. A simple colour-coding scheme (for example, green comments for strengths and blue comments for "next steps" rather than red marks for "errors") can further soften written feedback without sacrificing clarity.

Strategy 2: The Teacher as "Cultural Mediator" in Conflict. Teachers who practice FNT act as a mediator instead of a judge in the wake of disagreements. It is important for them to first recognise whether the conflict stems from a low power distance norm (challenging ideas) or a high power distance violation (challenging authority). For example, Teacher Zhang's strategy of reframing "disagreement" as "discussion" and setting rules to "critique the idea, not the person" (E4) is a robust way of applying FNT. It validates the low-power-distance desire for debate while also protecting the self-face of all participants, specifically those from collectivistic cultures. With regard to grade disputes, Teacher Li's approach of shifting the conflict to a private space (A4) is an effective face-saving strategy that acknowledges high power distance norms while concurrently allowing for resolution. For instance, when a German student openly challenges a graded answer in front of the class, the teacher can publicly welcome the point as "a good question for all of us" and invite the class to weigh the evidence, thereby honouring the low power distance expectation of debate; the same teacher can then follow up privately with a Japanese student who looked uneasy, signalling by a short email that "your perspective is welcome here too." Establishing a shared norm early – such as a posted classroom rule that "we question ideas, not people" – gives both high- and low-power-distance students a face-safe script for disagreement.

Strategy 3: Creating a "Low Face-Threat Environment" for Participation. Teachers must systematically lower the perceived face-risk to encourage participation from quieter students. David's strategy of using small group discussions first (B9), which allows students to test their ideas in a lower-stakes setting before presenting them to the whole class, effectively lowers the threat posed on their self-face. Using anonymous polling software or asking students to write questions on slips of paper, as suggested by Fatima (C10), removes the risk of individual face-loss. Based on Teacher Zhang (E9), teachers must extend the definition of participation beyond speaking to acknowledge and value active listening, thoughtful note-taking, and insightful written responses. The communication styles of high-context, collectivistic learners and their engagement are thus validated. Concretely, a teacher might open a discussion with a sixty-second "think-pair-share," letting students rehearse an answer with one partner before any public response, or gather contributions through anonymous tools such as Mentimeter or written exit slips so that a wrong answer never carries a public loss of self-face. Assigning rotating, low-stakes roles – timekeeper, note-taker, or summariser – allows students who fear speaking spontaneously to contribute through a defined, face-protected channel, and explicitly crediting a thoughtful written reflection in front of the class signals that quiet, listening-oriented participation is genuinely valued.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary of Key Findings

This study has demonstrated the significance of applying FNT to comprehend and address the communication barriers identified in multicultural Chinese classrooms. Three key areas of intercultural friction, namely the directness versus indirectness of feedback, the management of authority and conflict, as well as the culturally-rich nature of classroom participation, were derived from analysing the interview data. These non-arbitrary issues are systematically embedded in the cultural dimensions of individualism-collectivism and power distance, which then shape whether individuals emphasise self-face, other-face, or mutual-face in communicative interactions. Based on this study, communicative acts were not universally interpreted; an act of "helpful honesty" in one cultural frame can be a severe "face-threatening act" in another. The study's use of FNT provided a solid theoretical foundation for developing effective pedagogical solutions by explaining their underlying causes beyond merely describing problems.

6.2 Practical Implications

The proposed framework and elicited findings have significant practical implications for enhancing teacher effectiveness and promoting educational equity.

For Teachers: Individual educators can use the FNT framework as a diagnostic tool to accurately interpret student behaviour and develop a flexible repertoire of communication strategies. Teachers who effectively deliver "face-compatible feedback", mediate conflicts as a "cultural mediator", and create a "low face-threat environment" teachers can increase psychological safety and equitable participation.

For Teacher Training and Professional Development: Educational institutions and teacher training programmes should incorporate FNT into their curricula. Furthermore, workshops can be designed using case studies (similar to the ones presented in this research) to aid pre-service and in-service teachers in identifying face-concerns and applying face-sensitive strategies. Such measures would provide the educators with the intercultural competence needed for diverse classrooms (Deardorff, 2015).

For Educational Institutions: Schools and universities should foster an institutional culture that values intercultural dialogue by developing clear communication protocols, providing international students with resources that enable them to understand local academic norms, and creating platforms for both students and faculty to openly and respectfully discuss and navigate cultural differences.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study is not without its limitations. First, the rich qualitative data were derived from a simulated set of interviews with a small, purposive sample. The focus was more on theoretical depth rather than statistical generalisability. Second, this analysis depended on broad cultural dimensions (individualism/collectivism), which risks oversimplification and disregards individual variation in cultures. Personality, context, and personal history significantly influence the communication styles of people, who are not cultural robots.

Future scholars could consider performing large-scale quantitative studies to test the relationships between cultural values, face-concerns, and specific classroom communication behaviours across a wider population. Ethnographic studies involving direct classroom observation could provide richer, more contextualised data on how face is negotiated in real-time interactions. Further research could also be conducted to empirically develop and test the effectiveness of a structured teacher training module based on the face-sensitive pedagogical framework proposed in this study. Such studies contribute to establishing more inclusive educational environments in China and beyond.

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Author contributions

Niu Jing and Dr. Sarina Yusuf were responsible for study design and revising. Niu Jing was responsible for data collection. Dr. Sarina Yusuf drafted the manuscript and Dr. Ghulam Safdar revised it. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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