Radical Changes and Shifting Paradigms

in Intercultural Communication:

With Special Reference to Gender

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Abstract

Today most of the organizations are operated at global level. Thus undeniably there is an overwhelming influence of culture on business. To promote healthy business, study of culture and its relation with language is inevitable. A thorough understanding of cultural differences will pave way for effective transaction at work places and this in turn would lead to organizational effectiveness and subsequent growth. With this main objective, the paper elaborates the cross-cultural study with special reference to gender. The paper extends valuable suggestions to overcome the barriers arising out of ethnocentrism so that communication at workplace could be improved, involving people from culturally diverse backgrounds. Non-verbal communication and gestures that contribute to lack of understanding of the speaker's intent is also critically examined.

As compared to yester years, the world is changing with tremendous pace and radical changes are observed in every walk of life and language development and its contribution to these changes is no exception.

Keywords: Intercultural communication, Globalization, Barriers due to ethnocentrism, Gender based problems

1. Doctrines of dynamism in intercultural communication

In today's volatile business world and in the fast changing socio-economic milieu, corporate communication and social interaction, when viewed from a strategic perspective, are undergoing radical changes in external and internal environment, compelling the executives and linguists to think strategically about an organization's identity and how it is being communicated to the receiving end. Over the past few decades there has been a renewed interest among the academicians, linguists, grammarians, managers, and practitioners about the role of culture in diverse disciplines like organizational network, corporate communication, foreign trade and psychology. The organizations that discovered these truths and doctrines of dynamism in intercultural communication had modified and blurred the image of many organizations across the globe.

1.1 Success rate of Communication

More than 75% of the business communication is preferred through the medium of oral communication. It is simply not sufficient to have the through knowledge of structural items of language for better and effective communication. In true sense nuances of communication decide the success rate of communication in any field. During the process of

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communication apart from the structural knowledge cultural backgrounds of the communicator and the commune also influence their verbal and non-verbal signals. However it is broadly viewed and accepted by many that people belonging to similar backgrounds are more likely to interpret each other's usage accurately. Despite this strong belief people under identical conditions are bound to commit errors and may not decode the meaning as conveyed or transmitted by the sender. All this leads to chaos and confusion in business and life. Communication varying across cultures further distorts this problem and increase the chances of truncated message i.e. message received differ from message sent.

1.1.1 Frustration in young graduates

It is very unfortunate in many countries that language teaching is solely restricted to structural items or the content. All this is leading to greater degree of frustration in the young graduates who find themselves mismatched with their competitors at global level. Undeniably language usage is demanded in its highest degree of performance due to the coming up of multinational companies and international market. Our language classrooms very often neglect the cultural aspect and in some states it is totally absent. Hence there is an urgent need to explore the intervening cultural bias in order to draw the essence of content.

2. Role of Culture in Oral Communication

2.1 Exchange of complex information

Surveys in the areas of communication reveal that oral communication has remarkable impact on the career advancement of any person whether business, politics, corporate sectors, athletes or social reformers. The line of action of these professionals demands heavy exchange of complex information in variety of forms. This flow of information may be disrupted due to large number of factors and cultural bias is no exception. Culture in broader sense refers to the behavioral characteristics typical to an individual or a group. These cultural traits are unique and are reflected through both verbal and non-verbal communication. People belonging to different cultural backgrounds use different methods of communication. In an attempt to save the time Americans do not bother the use of slang whereas time is flexible for few countries, hence they avoid using slang. But this difference in ethnic diversity if not commonly shared and understood by both the ends creates a feeling of alienation. If both receiver and sender are on the similar or shared cultural platform they have less chances of misinterpretation than of those whose cultural backgrounds are wide apart. Culture seems to differ from person to person. Politeness, courtesy and consideration differ from one region to another affecting the output and final result. Attitudinal variation to much extent is due to cultural differences. Every man's mind is a unique filter and their communication filters when interacted with each other create frictions leading to communication barriers.

2.2 Problems due to closed society structures

Problems related to intercultural communication can be best understood by considering the case studies of certain areas. When we consider the under developed regions of some states in India, say, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan etc., we find astonishing truths which reveal the actual reasons of backwardness which unfortunately is not due to poor knowledge or inappropriate skills but due to excess of love towards the incorrect dialects and strict adherence to their culture and traditions. The best part of their belief is though they are below the level of poverty they are highly contended and this is perhaps due to their deeply religious thoughts. Thus throughout the history these places have remained culturally autonomous and have hardly any inclination towards intercultural thinking. Their language is different not only in phonetic configuration but also in semantic terms. Excessive love for their local languages and spiritual thinking had made them irresponsible and unconnected with the rest of the world. Some of the literates of these areas seem to posses the deep scholastic heritage and scholarly knowledge of their unique language and culture, but this only made them timid and unacceptable towards other cultures which are more advanced in many respects. Such examples of language varieties and closed society structures are common sights in India. Their socio cultural and educational seclusion can only take them to the stagnated society. The students nurtured in this social structure are very obedient and intelligent but due to deep-rooted alienation towards foreign culture and exposure they under perform in oral communication. Secondly their progress rate is comparatively low as they are not aggressive or determined to accept the social changes at global level. Hence they exhibit their helplessness, low motivation level and lowering self-respect. This hinders their inner growth. Secondly English language learning is confined to classrooms; hence they are not free from cultural clichés. Over use of connectors, that and which clauses, repetition of words, use of dull and hackneyed expressions, vagueness in expression etc. are their common problems. To overcome these problems teaching needs methodological changes. Wide cultural diversity and inadequate role models for proper communication creates barriers in communication. Following measures should be taken for enhancing the skills:

- Learner oriented programmes should be designed using audio visual aids.
- Role models should be provided or created.
- Oral communication should be chiseled.

- Cultural background of the target language should be well informed.

- Comparative study of languages is essential.

- Non-verbal communication like tone, pitch, pace, pauses, word-rate etc. needs improvement.

2.3 Transmission of culture

Most of the eastern countries face problems due to gender differences in communication behaviors. The habit of judging the people of opposite sex according to their own standards is as serious as across cultures. Hence it has become a matter of great concern to many researchers and linguists to identify the problem seriously and suggest measures to overcome these difficulties. New structures of competence should be designed to convey the intended meaning in a specific situation for a group of people brought up in the same culture and groups across cultures. The influence of culture on communication is so remarkable that anthropologist Edward Hall says, "Culture is communication and communication is culture". Our feelings, beliefs and behaviors in reference to gender influence not only the general communication within the same culture but also intercultural communication. Since times immemorial females are characterized as emotional, sensitive, delicate and highly expressive through gestures and expressions. Males on the other hand are characterized as practical, blunt, independent, aggressive and result-oriented. Hence the communication between these two ends especially in Asian countries is bound to create problems since these characteristics entirely change the mode and manner of communication. Unfortunately some societies in India train the males and females by laying emphasis on sex roles they are expected to follow in the society. With the variety in religion, caste, rituals, traditions and languages communication of a particular kind influences every individual's personality and behavior. Their family members and other members of the society transfer the hierarchical acquisition to the later generations, by imparting trainings, for justifying their roles in the society as per the traditions. On the contrary these created problems are not that acute in Western countries. Hence unlike Indian ways a separate code of conduct is not designed in developed countries to manage communication between opposite sex.

3. Gender based problems in Intercultural communication

After independence, modernization, industrialization and migration have brought in some distinguished changes in stereotyped concepts of masculinity and feminity affecting the intercultural communication. Thus today we see two diverse caricatures of the society one marching towards globalization with due respect for cross culture and the other still traditional and rigid in their attitude and approach. The sex roles are determined on the basis of social activities in which two sexes involve with different frequency mode. Thus sex stereotyped is not the product of biological discrimination alone but social conditioning too. The different communication patterns and structures based on culture and gender difference are thus caused by socialization process.

3.1 Need to resolve gender-based problems

Researchers say that the society, irrespective of any culture, is male centered because of his position that remains fairly consistent. The problems at work places are mainly due to sex discrimination, for women are believed to be passive participants and sometimes incapable in handling business activities as dexterously as that of man. They are given positions in politics and business but with a dejected feeling. But these conditions are not alike everywhere, hence there is an urgent need to resolve this problem before these fluctuating opinions jeopardize the entire structure of communication.

3.1.1 Choice of Diction

The choice of diction also affects the language of men and women. Undeniably women are socially restricted in expressing their views thoroughly due to limited vocabulary assigned to them. Whereas men are free to use language in any form. A touch of delicacy in a woman's speech and a blunt touch of man often lead to misunderstandings. Hence due consideration for each other's limitations can settle the issues and lead to better understanding. According to Colwill use of language negatively affects our communication and interpretation in the following ways.

- Use of masculine words to refer to females and vice- versa

- In appropriate use of titles for women and men

3.1.2 Use of words discriminating sex

It happens in almost all the languages across cultures, that words discriminating sex are frequently used to evaluate the levels e.g. a lady doctor, a lady politician etc. Sometimes the synonyms used for a particular word by men and women are not understood by opposite sex belonging to the same culture. Thus communication for men and women has different purposes and different interpretations. Thus they constitute two linguistic groups and two linguistic codes. Several researchers have confirmed that women's language is different from that of men. Women's language is considered by Holmes as tentative language. Frequent use of phrases like I believe, I assume, I think are commonly

used by females, thus making their words weaker as when compared to that of men who are very firm and clear about their ideas. Thus women should give up such weak expressions in order to improve their speech.

4. Impact of Intonation and Non-verbal signs

4.1 Problems related to Intonation

Use of intonation is yet another problem for many. Different countries use different structures of intonation. Sometimes intonation converts the answer into a question e.g. "Is everything alright with him?" It is very essential to know at this stage that in cross cultural communication, the rising and falling tones i.e. intonation can change the entire tones and hence entire meaning. While offering something, using falling tone is considered impolite by the Americans. Though both Americans and Indians believe in polite exchange of words but Indians in this regard are considered impolite since they use falling tone while offering something to others. Thus intonation distorts the information transit and the problem is further intensified if it is the matter concerning the opposite sex.

4.2 Desired changes due to multinational workforce

To overcome all these problems related to culture, gender, intonation etc. a formal training in the language classes, dealing with the history and origin of the different countries along with their traditions, culture, rituals etc. is very necessary. Equally important is the study of non-verbal communication of various countries and sub groups as these untold expressions seem to convey more than 55% of the communication with varying degrees of meaning across cultures and genders. For developing global competitiveness and to be successful, Kaneda adds, you must also have patience and a "sincere desire for understanding others," no matter what business you are in. The multicultural workforce not only brings with it wide range of skills but new traditions, backgrounds, experiences, outlooks and attitudes that can affect the overall behavior of the workers on the job. In US, by 2010, immigrants will account for half of all workers from various countries. Managing this changing mix of ages, views, ethics and culture is increasingly difficult, if not managed wisely and timely.

4.3 Cultural variations across the globe

Men and women of different cultures behave differently and it should be understood in proper perspective. The people of United States usually complain right away when they are unhappy about something, its members rely mostly on verbal communication to convey their messages, whereas people from high culture context, like Japan rely less on verbal communication and more on non-verbal communication. They expect others to anticipate their needs. The men of eastern countries do not properly perceive the non-verbal messages of women of western countries. What is considered to be a greeting for one may be a social taboo for other. A very helpful talk, a direct eye contact, a touch or a warm facial expression of an American may be considered as nasty gesture by an Indian. However in serious conditions it is always safe to respect others' feelings by acquiring sufficient knowledge about other cultures and gender problems. Pointing with an index finger is a rude gesture in many cultures. Pointing out the index finger towards oneself is an insult to another person in Germany and Switzerland. The American gesture for "OK" i.e. circular gesture conveys vulgar meaning in Russia and Singapore.

At this juncture of intercultural study it is very necessary to understand cultural variations, but it is unfair to apply one's cultural meanings to other cultures. Russians exhibit less facial expressions; it however doesn't mean that they are less enthusiastic. Brazilians interrupt more, Asians love silence, Arabs speak loudly. In Libya, not looking conveys respect and looking straight at a woman is as serious as physical assault. These differences strongly affect communication at work places as the main intension of the message is not properly been registered by the listeners due to cultural bias. Our efforts will depend as much on physical cues as on verbal ones. This problem is serious for Americans as they aren't usually aware of their own non-verbal behavior and hence find problems with other cultures as well. Some of the typical non-verbal gestures are as follows:

- Canadian listeners nod to signal agreement
- Japanese nod to indicate that they have understood
- British stare deep at the speaker, blinking their eyes, to indicate understanding
- For Americans it is impolite to stare
- Canadians consider touching any part of the arm above the hand intrusive, except in intimate relationship

4.3.1 Future challenges in Intercultural Communication

In order to run the wheels of business and life smoothly, competence in intercultural communication has to be developed. Cross-cultural training programmes should be organized both at college and professional levels. But in an attempt to adopt the intercultural communication we should not lose our actual behavior, as this can lead to a bigger confusion and people suspect our motives. Hence it is important to behave natural. To become more effective

communicators across cultures and sex, Asuncion-Lande has made some suggestions like identifying one's own cultural and gender behavior, being flexible and open at heart and mind.

With the growth of technological development and the world becoming one single roof for all the nations, competence in understanding each other across cultures is becoming important day by day and thankfully media is playing a pivotal role in untangling the complexities in intercultural communication. But still a lot more research is expected to overcome these difficulties. It is a great challenge to all the upcoming scholars of intercultural communication especially between opposite sex than between cross cultures. This in turn will lead to the organizational effectiveness and progress at work places involving people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

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