INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION BARRIERS – AN INTERPERSONAL APPROACH

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Abstract

The following article aims to stress out the importance of intercultural communication in the globalised world. Due to the rapid growth in technology, communication and transport intercultural meetings have become much more likely, nowadays. This is why one should develop their own skills and competence in order to profit as much as possible from the intercultural encounters. The challenge is to overcome the barriers to effective intercultural communication, such as assuming similarities, language, nonverbal misinterpretation, preconception and stereotypes and others.

Keywords: globalization, intercultural communications, barriers to communication

JEL classification: F6 - Globalization

1. The new context for intercultural encounters

In the last fifty years the world became much more interconnected and thus, the countries more interdependent. These tighter links between nations can be observed in the different sectors such as mass media, education, research, business and finance etc. On the one hand the new technologies, digital communication and improvement in the transport sector made the world seem "flat", but, as Thomas Friedman put it, also "hot and overcrowded" (Friedman, 2009).

"Globalization is the new phenomena which affects all of our lifes. Through this we are exposed to different goods and services, to foreign capital

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and financial flows and to different ways of understanding things; in other words, we are facing, almost every day, people from different cultures, with a different mindset, with different values and norms, with different understanding of good and evil, of desirable and tabu behaviour" (Baltador et al, 2013)

Moran and Riesenberger have indicated in 1997, three phases of the globalization process. The first one refers to the period after the Second World War, from 1945 to 1975, "when high demand and growth led to a focus on economy of scale and a rising in standard of living. The emphasis was on raw materials, quantity, capital and efficient use of labor" (Schmidt et al, 2007) that, in turn led to an eventual surplus in many industries. Quality became the new focus, along with an emphasis on low cost and technical advances. Governments provided lower tariffs and tax incentives to encourage global companies to build new factories in their countries" (Schmidt et al, 2007). The third phase (1985-2000) during which "strategic alliances increased whereby regional trading blocs offered economic advantages for those states that are members. This has created volatile change and as globalism has come to dominate international business" (Schmidt et al, 2007).

Conrad and Poole (2002) consider today's globalization is unique because "technological developments have fundamentally changed the way that information and expertise is disseminated around the globe". What it implies is the fact that nowadays the world, as a whole, and the nations, as parts, have to address some difficult problems which require a different approach. On the global scale, major concerns regarding pollution, climate change, world poverty, over-population and, linked to this, the competition for natural resources are major challenges the world community has to overcome. The national states, on the other hand, face problems such as immigration, ideological divisions, aging population, growth of minority groups (Samovar, Porter, Daniel, 2012).

Of course, the picture is not all dismal. Alongside global challenges come global opportunities. The availability of a wide variety of goods and services from abroad, the chance to study or to work in another country, as well as the opportunity to visit and getting to know parts of the world and global business connections are just some of the positive aspects of globalization.

But, the future doesn't seem to put an end to the challenges faced by the global communities, as many problems haven't found an answer and many

others are arising. In the aftermath of the financial crises that started in 2007 in the US, many scholars have pointed out the potential danger that the globalization of the financial market have on the well functioning of each economy in the world. There is no country who wasn't affect, more or less, by the outburst and proliferation of this crisis and, what's even more alarming, "the economic interconnectedness will continue and grow in complexity (Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, 2012, p. 6). The US was the dominant force for the last (half) of the century and continues to be at the present. Still, some argue that there is a power shift going on and that the emerging economies of Brazil, Russia, India and China (BRIC group of nation) 'will surpass the current leading economies by the middle of this century, a tectonic shift that by this reckoning will eventually nudge the United States and Western Europe away from the center of world productivity and power (Kramer, 2009 apud Samovar et al, 2012). Immigration might be another challenge that has to be addressed: climate refugees (upwards to 200 millions in 2050) might be added to the already growing number of immigrants motivated by economic, religious and political persecution, armed conflict and ethnic discrimination. In Western Europe immigrants already make up for 10% of the populations with a tendency to rise (Treacherous, 2009).

As some authors consider "global has been turned into more than just a geometric construct; it has become a socioeconomic concept that recognizes that most – if not all – human activity happening around the world is interconnected and interdependent" (Friedman, 2009). All these tendency we can already see today will force people, at all levels, to improve their intercultural communication skills, as most will meet the "others" at school, at their working place, at the supermarket, while doing (global) business. It is a must, in order to benefit from the cultural synergy, which "builds on the varying differences in the world's people for mutual growth and accomplishment through cooperation" (Schmidt et.all, 2007).

2. Communicating in the world bazaar

Communication is something that people have done since the early ages. In its simplest form it is the passing of a meaningful message from one person to another person. When communicating, people try to persuade, to inform or to entertain the other(s). Julia Wood considers that "communication is a systemic process in which individuals interact with and through symbols to create and interpret meanings" (Julia Wood, 2010).

There are usually eight structural elements that are needed for "the management of messages with the objective of creating meaning" (Griffin, 2005 apud Samovar et.al, 2012). **The sender** is the person(s) originating the **message** (information the sender desires to have understood) which is transmitted through a **channel**, that consists of any means that provides a path for transferring the message from sender to receiver. **The receiver** is the recipient of the message and the also the location in which meaning is being created. But, the message the sender initiates might not contain the information that the sender thinks it has and, furthermore, it might not be what the receiver understands. So after interpreting the message the receiver prepares a **response,** meaning any action taken by him as a result of the meaning assigned to the received message. Somehow related to the response is the **feedback,** which enables an evaluation of the effectiveness of a message. Of course, communication takes place within a physical and contextual environment. The **environment** has an impact on the way we are communicating, because people tend to adjust this according to the place, situation, speaking partner etc. The **noise** is also different in different environments, as interferences and distractions can vary much in certain circumstances and it may be a very important barrier in communication.

The way we communicate and the way we understand another person's communication is a result of our knowledge and past experiences. So, when receiving a message or seeing a behavior, we reach into our mind and attempt to understand and give meaning to it. But this understanding depends very much on our own culture and on the culture of our speaking partner. In Confucius's word "human beings are drawn close to one another by their common nature, but habits and customs keep them apart."One of the first definition of culture goes back more than 100 years and it's attributed to Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, who said, in 1871, "culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (apud Samovar et al., 2012). About 100 years later, in 1973 Clifford Geertz considers culture "a historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodies in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life". Or, as Geert Hofstede put it "it's the software of the mind". Some major characteristics of culture refer to the fact that

culture is transmitted intergenerational and, thus, learned, it is symbolic and dynamic and most of the time ethnocentric.

Another approach attributes culture four meanings:"(1) High culture, the achievements of a society in terms of the most esteemed forms of literature, art and music, (2) Culture as behavior, the ways people agree to behave, act and respond. (3) Culture as way of thinking: modes of perception, beliefs and values. (4) Culture as language, the close link between language and culture" (Saints-Jacques, apud Samovar et al, 2012)

Communication in the multicultural environment worldwide might prove to be even more difficult. "Intercultural communication occurs whenever a person from one culture sends a message to be processed by a person from a different culture" (Samovar et.all, 2012). In our shrinking world, it is important to become interculturally aware in order to overcome and reduce the chance for misunderstanding. Some author's consider that "the powerful impact of globalization on culture has not been sufficiently analyzed and researched...it has created a mixture of cultures and people within each culture" (Saint-Jacques, apud Samovar et al 2012).

3. Barriers to intercultural communication

In every process there are some factors that might disturb the message one person sends to another person, even more so if they don't share the same cultural background. There are several barriers to effective intercultural communication, but some of the more important include the assumption of similarities, language differences, nonverbal misinterpretation, preconceptions and stereotypes, tendency to evaluate and high anxiety.

In order to understand culture, especially the determinants of one, and the differences between cultures, many scholars have tried to find different categories. Edward Hall, one of the pioneers in the field of intercultural communication determined high-context cultures and low-context cultures. Hofstede examined six dimensions that would help to configure a sort of map, starting from the predominant tendency towards one of the extremes: individualism – collectivism, femininity – masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, long term or short term orientation and happiness. Although some criticized these methods as being simplistic and even inaccurate, the opposite assumption is also wrong and may have consequences on the transmitted message and especially on the way it is received by people from other countries. Assuming similarities might be due to different reasons: one's

inability to face the difference, based on the fact that we are all humans, ethnocentricity and others. Different cultures have different ways to relate to subjects, to behave and to react, so one has to go beyond its own habits, beliefs and values in order to understand the others reactions. Communication has to be adjusted to the circumstance, which is not an easy task to do, because, as previous mentioned cultures are dynamic and, furthermore, individuals belonging to one culture do not all act in the same way. Still, one has to keep in mind that the cultural context has a great impact on how we see and understand the world around us, meaning we are not the same.

If the communication takes place between two people from different culture than there is a great chance that at least one of them doesn't speak in his native language. This fact implies that there will be difficulties regarding "the tenacity with which someone will cling to just one meaning of a word or a phrase in the new language, regardless of the connotation or context. The infinite variations possible, especially if inflection and tonal qualities are present, are so difficult to cope with, that they are often waved aside" (Barna, 1994).

Another stumbling block that affects intercultural communication is nonverbal misinterpretation. While learning the deep meaning of words can be quite difficult, understanding nonverbal particularities is even harder. We can find cultures in which one gesture is allowed and others in which, the same gesture is being considered rude. Also, gestures, postures and other body movements can have different meaning and thus one has to be very careful when preparing for a visit abroad. "To enter into a culture is to be able to hear, in Lionel Trilling's phrase, its special 'hum and buzz of implication'" (Frankel, 1965 apud Barna, 1994).

Another possible barrier one might face in intercultural communication is connected to one's own prejudices and stereotypes. Some authors consider prejudices to be "positive or negative attitude toward a group or its individual members (Schmidt et al, 2007). Others focus mostly on the negative meaning: "an antipathy based on a faulty and inflexible generalization...expressed...toward a group as a whole, or toward an individual...member of that group (Allport, 1954 apud Schmidt et al, 2007))

The journalist Walter Lippman considered stereotypes as "pictures in our head", "suggesting that they have both a cognitive component and an affective component. Stereotyping is a selection process that we use to organize and simplify perceptions of others, and stereotypes are our mental

representation of others" (Schmidt et al, 2007). Prejudice and stereotypes have a direct and major influence on the communication process, even more if it takes place between people from different backgrounds. Consciously or unconsciously the partners have some expectations to confirm these and this might affect the whole communication process.

One great fear of all human kind, unaffected by the cultural context is the fear of the unknown. In order to overcome it, many people have the tendency to evaluate other persons, in terms of "good" or "evil", based on prejudice, stereotypes or on past experience with "similar" people. If beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder, than the measure for other aspects regarding the individuals must lie in the subjective perception, as well. Several studies concluded that there are cultural differences in how people categorize objects. Nisbett and Miyamoto (2005) found that "people from the Western cultures focus on salient objects and rules when categorizing the environment. By contrast, people in East Asian cultures focus more on relationships and similarities among objects when organizing the environment" (Liu et al., 2012).

In this same context we can include the high level of anxiety, which is present in most intercultural encounters. "Stress, indeed, is considered to be inherent in intercultural encounters, disturbing the internal equilibrium of the individual system. Accordingly, to be interculturally competent means to be able to manage such stress, regain internal balance, and carry out the communication process in such a way that contributes to successful interaction outcomes (Kim, 1991, apud Barna, 1994).

4. Developing intercultural competence

All the previous mentioned barriers of intercultural communication can be (partially) eliminated, through adequate actions. They reside inside the subject, so it requires a personal, subjective effort to overcome them and, by doing so, to get closer to mutual understanding. As some authors consider "the interconnectivity brought about by globalization means that we must be equipped with global knowledge, situating world events in our local geographic, political, historic, environmental, and cultural context" (Liu et al, 2012).

Many authors consider that communication competence is a context-specific behaviour, and, for intercultural communication competence there are four relevant domains: the knowledge component, the affective component,

the psychomotor component and the situational component, which are interrelated. "Generally, as knowledge increases, one's attitudes to intercultural communication become more positive and the motivation to engage in it increases. As motivation increases, one is more likely to translate it into behaviours – that is to participate in intercultural communication. If the outcomes from intercultural encounters are successful, this positive experience functions as feedback and encourages the person to participate in future interactions. Greater opportunities for intercultural encounters can enable the person to build a richer intercultural knowledge stock, which in turn can facilitate subsequent communication" (Liu et al., 2012).

Some strategies that might help in developing intercultural communication competence regard overcoming the perceived differences, and seeking out what is common: "we may wear different hats but we all show the same smile; we may speak different languages but they are all rooted in the same basic grammar; we may have different marriage customs but we all fall in love' (Morris, 1994 apud Liu et al. 2012). Overcoming stereotyping and prejudice can be achieved by practicing cultural relativism, thus avoiding ethnocentrism. In doing so, one can understand the behaviour of others from their own cultural perspectives. An open mind for all that's new and different is of crucial importance.

5. Conclusion

The globalization contributed, like few phenomenon before, to the fact that the world is changing, the nations are changing and people do so, as well. "Tensions exists within nations and between nations that never would have existed were these nations not in such intensive cultural communication with another" (Barna, 1994). Communication is a systemic process, and it is very difficult to transmit one's thoughts to other persons, even more so, if the receiver doesn't share the same cultural background as the sender. The most common stumbling blocks of intercultural communication are assumption of similarities, language differences, nonverbal misinterpretation, preconceptions and stereotypes, the tendency to evaluate and high anxiety level. In order to overcome these barriers of intercultural communication, people have to increase their knowledge of other cultures, to build a mutual understanding with their counterparts, to develop flexibility and openness. This means to overcome the stereotyping and prejudice one's have about the "others". By developing key competence in intercultural communication most aspects of

one's life may be improved, as globalization affects our place of work, the way we spend our leisure time, the way we react towards new things and new persons.

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