

Areas of Intercultural Communication

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ABSTRACT

In recent years practitioners in a wide variety of fields—scientific cooperation, academic research, business, management, education, health, culture, politics, Ambassadorial , development, and others—have realised just how important intercultural communication is for their everyday work. Fast travel, international media, and the Internet have made it easy for us to communicate with people all over the world. The process of economic globalisation means that we cannot function in insulation but must interact with the rest of the world for viability. The global nature of many widely diverse modern problems and issues such as the environment, administration of the Internet, poverty and international terrorism call for cooperation between nations. Intercultural communication is no longer an option, but a indispensable. Because important decisions in business, politics, education, health, and culture these days usually effect citizens of more than one nation, the question of whether communication between people of different nations is effective and whether all parties emerge with the same understanding is of crucial importance. Individuals who deal with people from other cultures want to learn how to improve their performance through improving their communication skills. Numerous resources have aggravated up to meet this emerging market in the business, academic and international relations communities

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Introduction

Intercultural communication is a field of study that looks at how people from different countries and differing cultural backgrounds behave, communicate and perceive the world around them, in similar and different ways among themselves, and how they endeavour to communicate across cultures. In general it is probably used for comparisons between cultures. Culture” refers to all the characteristics common to a particular group of people that are learned and not given by nature. That the members of a group have two legs is thus not a cultural characteristic but a natural one, while a special but common way of walking would probably be cultural.

Intercultural Communication Tips

Working across cultures is a new experience for many people. Intercultural Communication can be a dynamic and creative affair but occasionally due to the inability to interpret people correctly it can be a challenge. Building an Understanding of other people’s cultures, their communication styles and Behaviors can go a long way in improving relationships and being more successful in an intercultural environment. Even without trawling through lots of books, articles or even taking part in an intercultural communication workshop it is possible to implement some Basic principles to help improve one’s intercultural communication skills. The following intercultural communication tips are provided to help people working in international and multicultural environments gets some basic insight into dealing more effectively with people and not letting culture become an issue.

1. **Be Patient:** Working in an intercultural environment can be a frustrating affair. Things may not get done when expected, communication can be tiresome and behavior may be inappropriate. Patience with yourself and others helps move beyond such issues and address how to avoid similar incidents in the future.
2. **Establish Rules:** Sometimes if working in a truly intercultural team it may be necessary for all to take a step back and set down some ground rules. I.e. how do we approach punctuality, meetings, communication, emails, disagreements, etc? It is always a good idea to try and develop the rules as a group rather than have them imposed.
3. **Ask Questions:** When you don’t understand something or want to know why someone has behaved in a certain way, simply ask. Asking questions stops you making assumptions, shows the questioned you did not understand them and helps build up your bank of intercultural knowledge.
4. **Respect:** The foundation of all intercultural communication is respect. By demonstrating respect you earn respect and help create more open and fruitful relationships.
5. **The Written Word:** Sometimes people who do not have English as their mother tongue will read more proficiently than they speak. It is a good idea to always write things down as a back up.

6. **Time:** Not everyone in the world thinks, “Time is money”. Understand that for many people work is low down on the priority list with things like family taking a much higher precedence. Do not expect people to sacrifice their own time to meet deadlines. It is good practice to always leave a bit of spare time when considering deadlines.
7. **Humour:** In an intercultural environment one man’s joke is another’s insult. Be wary of differences in the sense of humour and also the acceptability of banter and the like in a business environment.
8. **Always Check:** The easiest way of minimizing the negative impact of intercultural communication is to check and double check. Whether agreeing something or giving instructions, a minute spent double checking all parties are ‘reading from the same sheet’ saves hours of work later on down the line.
9. **Be Positive:** When faced with incidents of an intercultural nature steer clear of blame and conflict. Stay positive, analyze the problem areas and work as a team to build strategies and solutions to ensure the same never Occurs again.
10. **Self-Reflect:** A good intercultural communicator not only looks outwards but also inwards. Take time to reflect on your own communication, management or motivation style and see where you can improve as an individual. Research into the area of intercultural communication and working in a multicultural environment continues to show that the culturally diverse team is usually the most inventive and vibrant. However, unless businesses and individuals start to address the area of intercultural communication as a serious business issue, this potential will not be realized.

Dimensions of Culture

Here are four primary cultural dimensions:

Patterns of thought – common ways of thinking, where thinking includes factual beliefs, values, norms, and emotional attitudes

Patterns of behavior – common ways of behaving, from ways of speaking to ways of conducting commerce and industry, where the behavior can be intentional/unintentional, aware/unaware or individual/interactive.

Patterns of artifacts – common ways of manufacturing and using material things, from pens to houses (artifact = artificial object), where artifacts include dwellings, tools, machines or media. The artifactual dimension of culture is usually given special attention in museums.

Imprints in nature – the long lasting imprints left by a group in the natural surroundings, where such imprints include agriculture, trash, roads or intact/ruined human habitations. In fact, “culture” in the sense of “growth” (i.e. a human transformation of nature) gives us a basic understanding of what the concept of Culture is all about.

All human activities involve the first two dimensions. Most activities involve the third dimension and ecologically important activities also involve the fourth. When a particular activity lastingly combines several of these traits, one usually says that the activity has become institutionalized and that it is thus a **social institution**. Similarly, one may speak of a **culture** or a **subculture** when one or more of the characteristics are lastingly connected with a certain group of people. In the context of Intercultural communication, the groups are often associated with national states, and we may speak about Swedish culture, French culture, etc.

After looking at problems with some definitions of communication, I suggested that in order to communicate well with someone from a different culture, knowledge of that person's culture was necessary. This might be fine for people going to live in another country or for people who deal mainly with people from one or two other countries or Cultures. The most important objective of any training course is to raise people's awareness of areas of difference. There are five broad areas found useful to look at:

Cultural behaviour. People from different cultures do things in different ways

It is important to increase our awareness of and sensitivity to culturally different modes of behaviour. We need to recognise different cultural patterns at work in the behaviour of people from other countries and cultures. It is also useful to be aware of how our own cultural background influences our behaviour. And we need to develop tolerance for behaviour patterns that are different from our own.

Some useful areas to look at are:

- Silence
- Time
- Distance and personal space
- Touching
- Body language
- Posture & movement
- Eye contact

Students' perception/expectations

It is important to try to see what expectations the students have of studying and living in this country, to try to see the learning process and experience of living here from the student's point of view. How do students see the learning process? What is the role of the teacher/host family? What part is the student expected to play in all this? What can

Students expect and what is expected of them? Individual ideas and opinions are encouraged and expected. In many parts of the Far East students are taught to learn through imitation and observation. They believe that they need to internalise the existing knowledge before contributing their own ideas. Educational institutions and families could help by making their expectations of the student's role clear.

Culture

Most teachers, secretaries and host families will share the same culture, but not all learners will. Culture is an inherited wealth, in which we all can share, but it is passed on to us from different sources, and we share it in different parts with different groups to which we belong. What cultures do lecturers or host families and students in Higher Education share? What knowledge is expected/presupposed? Different groups of people share in this knowledge in different ways.

Cross cultural pragmatics

It is often difficult for speakers of other languages to understand "what is meant" by "what is said". It is also difficult for mono-lingual speakers to understand that this is a problem. People from different cultures use language to do things in different ways. A student who says, "Give me a coffee" is seen as rude by an English speaker in the UK. Jenny Thomas defines politeness as a linguistic phenomenon rather than equating it with any moral disposition towards one's interlocutor. The student is therefore making a linguistic error rather than being rude.

Some examples which have been studied are:

- Complimenting
- Apologising
- Requesting
- Inviting
- Offering and responding

Language

We all, as language teachers, know about language problems, but how can we help people who are not English teachers to deal better with International students. Second language speakers may:

- be unfamiliar with much idiomatic or technical English
- be unfamiliar with jargon/acronyms
- not be used to hearing English - speed of delivery is a problem
- not be used to the pronunciation of some words
- not be familiar with complex language
- have particular difficulty with some areas of language e.g. prepositions cause trouble “

Students in higher education have particular difficulty understanding their lecturers. I give the following advice to lecturers who ask for help in making their language more accessible to Students in Higher Education:

Lectures

- Make your organisation clear
- Support the lecture with writing/visuals/OHP/handouts
- It is useful to provide a core word list
- Be careful with handwriting on the board
- Provide reading before the lecture

Speaking

- Don't keep changing the subject - make one point at a time
- Signpost
- Summarise often
- Repeat if necessary
- Be careful of background knowledge assumed
- Avoid unfamiliar, idiomatic or technical English - use formal language
- Be careful of speed of delivery/clear pauses etc.
- Pronunciation clearly
- Do not talk while eating or with your back to the audience: face the class
- Be careful of background noise etc.
- Organise questions - ask students to write them down or prepare in groups
- Be explicit

Assignments

- Set written coursework early in order to identify problems
- Give clear instructions for coursework
- Provide clear feedback in written work but be careful with handwriting

Exams

- Set exams as late as possible to allow students to improve their English

General

- Provide a simplified brochure/application form
- Provide an international student tutor
- Don't try & answer grammar questions - give a model of good English
- Leave grammatical explanations to the experts
- Assume different expectations so be specific

If everyone in the institution who deals with Students in Higher Education is helped to become aware of these differences, communication will be easier for everyone.

Conclusion

The world today is characterized by an ever growing number of contacts resulting in communication between people with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This communication takes place because of contacts within the areas of business, military cooperation, science, education, mass media, entertainment, tourism but also because of immigration brought about by labor shortage or political conflicts. In all these contacts, there is communication which needs to be as constructive as possible, without misunderstandings and breakdowns. It is our belief that research on the nature of linguistic and cultural similarities and differences here can play a positive and constructive role.

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