

Intercultural Barriers and Ways to Overcome Them in the Process of Communication

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Abstract: This article studies the problem of obstacles and misunderstandings, commonly referred as barriers in intercultural communication. The author explores the concepts of "intercultural communication", "cultural barriers» within the framework of culture and communication. Several key barriers such as anxiety, ethnocentrism, stereotypes, prejudices and language barriers were identified, as well as ways of overcoming them were investigated.

Keywords: intercultural communication, intercultural competence, communication barriers, strategies.

Contemporary society is structured to effectively promote intercultural communication, education, dialogue, and tolerance. Consequently, striving for better adaptation to our diverse surroundings, intercultural communication is regarded as an ideal objective.

The idea of communication encompasses numerous definitions, with each field of study offering its own interpretation based on its principles. In a broader sense, communication denotes the transfer of information between individuals. Without this exchange, interaction, collaboration, problem-solving, and decision-making would be unattainable. Communication involves transmitting messages from one person to another. Scholars have identified distinct stages in the communication process, forming a chain of identifiable links. These links include the sender, encoding, decoding, receiver, and feedback [3].

Due to the diversity among cultures, individuals' communication practices and behaviors naturally differ due to their unique perspectives on the world. Intercultural communication, as defined by Samovar and Porter [8:70], is the examination of communication between individuals whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to influence their interactions. In their model of intercultural communication, Samovar and Porter illustrate how the interpretation of a message can shift when it is encoded by someone from one culture and decoded by someone from another culture, each interpreting it within the context of their own cultural background [8].

Furthermore, historical instances of cultural interaction highlight the inherent potential for conflict within intercultural communication. Throughout the communication process, individuals encounter diverse ethnocultural interests and differences, striving to attain a deeper understanding of both themselves and their counterparts. Additionally, partners in communication react variably to the level of compatibility with each other's cultural attributes. Consequently, reactions span a wide spectrum, ranging from passive dismissal of foreign values to active resistance against their expression and assertion.

Within the framework of intercultural competence, the issue of mutual understanding assumes significance, as individuals frequently encounter situations where their words and actions are misinterpreted, hindering effective communication and potentially leading to conflicts. These

challenges arise due to the varying degrees of intercultural differences between communication partners, which cannot always be immediately resolved during interaction. Such obstacles to communication, often termed intercultural communication barriers, necessitate specific efforts and specialized knowledge to overcome, given their practical importance [4].

In a broad sense, barriers are defined as problems that arise in the process of interaction, hinder it or reduce its effectiveness. LaRay M. Barna has formulated an approach to explore barriers to intercultural communication at a general level. In his categorization, he identifies six barriers: *anxiety, ethnocentrism, stereotypes and prejudice, nonverbal communication, and language*. Recognizing and understanding these common barriers can aid in enhancing one's intercultural communication skills [2].

According to Barna, *anxiety* stands out as one of the most prevalent barriers to intercultural communication. Scientist explains that individuals often become preoccupied or absentminded when they experience significant anxiety. It's worth noting that heightened anxiety can lead people to feel unsure about how to act, causing them to fixate on their feelings of anxiety rather than focusing on the ongoing communication exchange. For example, someone might feel extremely anxious on their first day at a new job, leading them to behave awkwardly and appear out of place. This could create a negative impression among their colleagues [2].

Ethnocentrism, characterized by the conviction that one's own cultural behaviors, norms, and thought patterns are superior to those of all other cultural groups, represents a significant hurdle in intercultural communication. This mindset can obstruct effective communication and restrict understanding of the customs and traditions of other cultures [5].

Stereotypes can encompass both positive and negative perceptions formed about individuals based on observable aspects of their identity, such as culture. Prejudice, however, denotes a broader sense of general animosity or dislike towards a specific group.

Both stereotypes and prejudice can significantly impede intercultural communication. Stereotypes may lead individuals to hold preconceived notions about people from different cultures, inhibiting them from engaging freely in interactions. Similarly, prejudice fosters suspicion and distrust among cultures, creating barriers that hinder effective communication. Overall, both phenomena contribute to undermining the potential for constructive and meaningful exchanges between diverse cultural groups [6].

Prejudice typically refers to deeply ingrained negative sentiments directed towards a specific cultural group. It manifests as an irrational aversion, suspicion, or hatred aimed at a group based on factors such as race, religion, or sexual orientation. Rogers and Steinhart define prejudice as an unfounded attitude towards an out-group, often arising from comparisons with one's own in-group. Prejudicial communication often takes the form of hostile remarks, humor, ironic comments, the use of group labels, or vocabulary that asserts the superiority of one group over another [9].

Additionally, *non-verbal cues* can be easily misinterpreted, necessitating consideration of the cultural context when deciphering their messages. Some cultures place significant emphasis on non-verbal cues to convey meaning, while others prioritize verbal communication. For instance, high-context cultures like Chinese, Korean, and Japanese cultures rely heavily on non-verbal indicators, whereas low-context cultures such as those in North America, Australia, and Northern Europe prioritize verbal expressions.

Furthermore, cultural norms regarding gestures vary; in some cultures, like Italy, gestures are encouraged to complement verbal communication, while in others like Japan and Thailand, restraint is favored. Deciphering non-verbal communication can be challenging and prone to misinterpretation, particularly when interacting with individuals from different cultures without a familiarity with their customs.

Language serves as a vital conduit for communication, facilitating the exchange of values, ideas, and thoughts between different cultural groups. When communication involves cross-cultural

exchange, language often becomes a significant barrier, leading to a communication gap due to linguistic differences [11].

Moreover, language barriers can be mitigated by employing specialists in cross-cultural communication and anthropology. These experts play a crucial role in overcoming language barriers and promoting effective intercultural communication. Additionally, organizing specialized training programs to enhance speakers' speech tendencies and language fluency can further minimize and control language barriers, ensuring effective communication across cultures [11].

Interacting with individuals from different cultures often triggers significant psychological tension, anxiety, and apprehension. Studies conducted by international researchers have indicated that individuals from foreign cultures tend to establish better mutual understanding with those from individualistic cultures compared to collectivist ones. This phenomenon stems from the fact that collectivist cultures emphasize the integration of individuals into a cohesive group, prioritizing the group's unity and protection of its members. Conversely, in individualistic cultures, individuals are encouraged to act according to their own beliefs and preferences, even if they diverge from the group's consensus [10].

Furthermore, in surmounting psychological obstacles to communication, each person must possess internal psychological capabilities linked to alleviating undue stress, proactively engaging in communication, emotionally attuning to the communication context, selecting appropriate verbal and nonverbal communication methods, and leveraging emotions as effective communication tools, among other skills. Essentially, overcoming these communication barriers necessitates individuals blending self-awareness with understanding of their communication partner and the specific communication scenario.

Overcoming cultural communication obstacles requires cultivating cultural awareness. This includes grasping the norms, values, and perspectives of diverse cultures. It's essential to set aside any preconceived ideas or biases when engaging with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Based on researches some main tips for effective intercultural communication were identified. Here they are:

Avoiding Stereotypes: It's important to steer clear of stereotypes when interacting with people from diverse cultures. Making assumptions based on race, ethnicity, or nationality only reinforces communication barriers. Instead, focus on understanding individuals on a personal level.

Respectful Behavior: Respect is fundamental across all cultures. When engaging with individuals from different backgrounds, demonstrating respect for their customs and traditions is crucial. This might involve using appropriate greetings, titles, and gestures.

Attentive Listening: Effective communication involves active listening. When communicating with individuals from other cultures, paying close attention to their words and non-verbal cues, such as body language, is key to understanding their perspective.

Patience: Patience and understanding are essential when bridging cultural gaps. Take the time to clarify any misunderstandings and be willing to repeat information as needed.

Adapting Communication Styles: Flexibility in communication styles is vital for overcoming cultural barriers. Learning to adjust your approach based on the cultural backgrounds of others can help prevent conflicts and improve understanding.

Effective Use of Non-verbal Communication: Non-verbal cues, such as body language and gestures, play a significant role in cross-cultural communication. Being aware of cultural differences in non-verbal communication can help convey messages accurately and avoid misinterpretations. For instance, while shaking hands may be customary in Western cultures, it may not be appropriate in others.

Establishing Relationships: Effective communication thrives on trust and respect, which are nurtured through relationship-building. Invest time in getting to know individuals from diverse cultures, showing genuine interest in their customs, traditions, and beliefs. This effort helps forge connections and fosters a sense of trust, facilitating smoother communication [1;6;7].

To sum up, cultural communication barriers pose significant challenges in various relationships, both personal and professional. Addressing these barriers requires a commitment to cultural competence. By actively learning about different cultures, values, beliefs, and communication styles, individuals can navigate cultural differences with sensitivity and understanding. This awareness enables them to mitigate misunderstandings and cultivate stronger, more inclusive relationships across cultural boundaries.

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