

Intercultural communication

Hallo. My name is Elena Triapitcyna. I am Head of the department of English Philology and Pedagogy. I work at the Institute of Philology and Cross-cultural Communication Northern (Arctic) Federal University. Intercultural communication has always been among my scientific interests. And today I would like to talk about this subject area.

So, what makes intercultural communication an arena for heated debates? What does the term “intercultural communication” mean? Is it possible to learn to communicate across cultural borders? These are the questions I am going to address today.

We live in a world where nobody is isolated from others. People have been thrown into contact more than ever before. Just a few decades ago the majority of people in Russia spent their holidays at home or travelling through the county. Any meeting with a foreigner seemed hardly possible. Rare cases of travelling abroad were under principled control. The whole world was divided into “us” and “them”. Compare it with the situation at hand. We travel globally. We have a lot of foreign friends. We shift the borders.

Cooperation has replaced ideological and military confrontation, especially between neighbouring countries. A good example of regional cooperation is the Barents Euro-Arctic Region, with the Arkhangelsk region as one of the participants. The concept was introduced to meet the demand for closer cooperation in the North between the Northern parts of Russia, Sweden, Finland and Norway.

Today we do not longer use a strict distinction between “here” and “there”. The use of digital technology has created a new spectrum of opportunities to go beyond cultural borders. Students now have the capacity to connect with their foreign friends via Facebook or using Skype. Teachers can bring together students from different cultural background through webinars and videoconferences.

All these changes bring new chances and new challenges.

If we want to integrate successfully in a globalizing world with intensive voluntary or non-voluntary mobility we all need to adapt to new circumstances and a global culture. That is why skills of effective intercultural communication are increasingly seen a pre-requisite for social harmony, personal and professional success.

The credit for “intercultural communication” as a term is often given to E.T. Hall, an American anthropologist, who for the first time used it in his bestselling book

“The Silent Language” published in 1959. Prior to publishing the book, E.T. Hall worked for the Foreign Service Institute, USA. Together with his colleagues, E.T. Hall developed a methodology of training people in intercultural matters to help them be effective in intercultural encounters.

When we talk about intercultural communication, it is important to understand that we actually use a metaphor. Cultures can communicate only through people. That is why the focus in intercultural communication is on interaction between people belonging to different cultures.

When we interact with others in our own culture, we do not often pay so much attention to difference. Much in our behavior is highly predictable, thus it comes naturally and easy. The situation changes when our partner in communication comes from a different culture. We often feel uncertain of our partners’ behavior and reactions, thus the communication between us acquires a new status. We unconsciously need some support and encouragement, some additional knowledge about the partner.

Scientists who created intercultural communication as a theory were well aware of these difficulties. They wanted to explain why we felt so unsure and how we could cope with our problems. They started with the analysis of spheres which are activated in human interaction and found several fields for detailed exploration.

One of the spheres has always been cultural anthropology which studies the human as an individual, the product of society and the maker of culture. Actual people are central to anthropology and the nature of their necessity to live in a system of symbols, beliefs, structures and patterns of behavior, in a word, culture.

Specialists in intercultural communication want us to see what is mostly invisible, still what guides our behavior and interaction. It is something that is hidden in everything we can see, hear, smell and touch. It is something that is a constituent of social systems and institutions. It is something that is expressed in beliefs, norms and attitudes.

There has been several attempts to grasp cultural differences according to core cultural values. One of them was undertaken by G. Hofstede, who describes cultures in terms of the 6-D model. The 6 dimensions are: power distance, individualism/collectivism, gender, uncertainty avoidance, pragmatics, indulgence. For instance, cultural specifics of Norway, according to G. Hofstede, can be presented in the following way:

- 1) As the notion of power in Norway is decentralized, strict bureaucratic structures are not common there. Control is disliked. Communication between people is more consensus-oriented.
- 2) Norway is an individualistic society, where the notion of “self” means a lot. There are clear lines between work and private life. Job mobility is high.
- 3) It is the second most feminine society after Sweden. Free time and flexibility are favoured there. Taking care of the environment is important. Trying to be better than the others is neither socially nor materially rewarded. Status is not shown.
- 4) There is focus on planning, but plans can be changed at short notice and improvisations are made. Emotions are not shown much, people are fairly relaxed.
- 5) People exhibit great respect for traditions.
- 6) Desires and impulses are controlled, but not totally.

Another important factor in intercultural communication is human language. We often think that the ability to speak a foreign language fluently is essential in intercultural communication. For a long time fluency in language was associated with correct grammar, a wide range of vocabulary, flawless use of pronunciation and intonation patterns. Now we know that language is not just a structure. It is a system for communication of meanings and representation of cultural backgrounds.

When E.T. Hall developed the theory of intercultural communication he was exposed to the concept of linguistic relativity - the "hypothesis" claiming that the structure of a particular language influences its speakers' perception and cognition. This hypothesis owes to E.Sapir and perhaps even more to Sapir's student Benjamin Lee Whorf. It says that a language's grammatical categories provide speakers with configurations of meaning. It also claims that language influences what ideas are socially expressible, because communication depends on the language and how it organizes meanings.

However great is the role of language for the human information exchange, the message can be conveyed not only through language use. E.T. Hall managed to present a systematic study of non-verbal aspect of intercultural communication. He emphasized the out-of-conscious level of the largest part of this information exchange.

There are different forms and ways of non-verbal communication. They are usually explained in such terms as paralinguistics, kinesics, haptics, proxemics, chronemics. Let me give you some examples.

It is no wonder that most of us who haven't been abroad tend to take our facial expressions for granted. And indeed, many cultures around the world have similar ways of expressing emotions such as anger, sadness, and joy. But the same expression can have more than one meaning; for example, in some cultures a smile can mean that the person is embarrassed. In addition, the extent to which facial expressions are used varies across cultures. The Japanese, for example, tend to display fewer facial expressions than people in the U.S. or Latin America.

The term "proxemics" was coined by E. Hall to address the study of our perception of space. Proxemics studies place and space from the cultural vantage point. According to E. Hall, North American culture is characterized by the use of 4 distinct zones of space: intimate, personal, social and public.

Chronemics is the study of time. It explains the ways people from different cultures perceive and value time, structure and react to it. According to specialists, cultures can demonstrate 2 distinct inclinations towards the use of time. The so-called "monochronic" cultures like to do one thing at a time. They value orderliness and do not value interruptions. Polychronic cultures like to do several things at a time. They find switching from one activity to the other both productive and stimulating. Interaction between people with different attitude to time can be problematic. Imagine, for instance, the feelings of a monochronic person at a meeting when his/her partner (a polychronic) is interrupted by phone calls and other people. But cultures often combine different time attitudes. Like in the case with Japan. Japanese people are known for their adherence to schedules which is a monochronic trait. But they are also characterized by relationship building behaviour with lengthy discussions of issues which is polychronic.

Finally, I would like to stress that according to E.T. Hall as well as many other experts in this field, people can acquire intercultural competence through leaning. Several models of intercultural competence have been developed in recent decades, yet the result of them is invariably seen as the ability of an individual to behave adequately in an intercultural environment.

There are certain barriers which a student of intercultural communication is expected to overcome.

One of the most obvious dangers is the attempt to analyze cultural behavior in terms of a generalized national character, ascribing stereotypical characteristics to national groups of people. It might seem as an innocent joke like that: "Paradise is where cooks are French, mechanics are German, policemen are British, lovers are Italian and it is all organized by the Swiss. Hell is where cooks are British,

policemen are German, lovers are the Swiss, mechanics are French, and it is all organized by Italians". The case becomes worse when a stereotype is combined with prejudice and generalization. For example, when all Americans are characterized as superficial people and all Russians as drunkards.

Another barrier is a quick intolerant judgment. Sometimes tolerance is viewed as a personal trait of people's character. But in intercultural communication it is understood mainly as acceptance of the right of other people to think and behave differently.

So as you see, intercultural communication is not always an enjoyable journey. It is challenging and demanding, sometimes even frustrating. But the potential benefits of trying to reach across cultural borders are well worth the effort. And I wish you good luck in your intercultural experience.