

## **Intercultural communication**

**Dr. MERBOUH Zouaoui**  
**Université Sidi-Bel-Abbès**

**With the increase in international trade, the global economy and the globalization of English usage, more and more students are seeking to study in order to gain intercultural understanding, to achieve individual academic goals. One of the most common reasons for students wanting to study is to improve their English competence and to improve their communicative ability with other people.**



One effect of the globalization of the English language is a significant increase in the number of intercultural interactions. More people than ever before are involved in interactions with foreigners and communities are becoming increasingly multilingual and multicultural to mix with people from their own community rather than interact or communicate with students from other cultural backgrounds.

An understanding of intercultural communication is crucially related to an understanding of the ways in which the spoken word may be interpreted differentially, depending on the context. The message received is not always the one intended by the speaker. Although speakers engaged in intercultural communication typically choose a single language in which to communicate, individuals typically bring their own sociocultural expectations of language to the encounter. Speakers' expectations shape the interpretation of meaning in a variety of

ways. To manage intercultural interaction effectively, speakers need to be aware of the inherent norms of their own speech practices, the ways in which norms vary depending on situational factors and the ways in which speakers from other language backgrounds may have different expectations of language usage and behavior.

So, it is important to define intercultural communication and understand the various implications of the term. There are many definitions for intercultural communication, depending on the way culture and communication are defined. Damen (1987: 23) defines it as "acts of communication undertaken by individuals identified with groups exhibiting intergroup variation in shared social and cultural patterns. These shared patterns, individually expressed, are the major variables in the purpose, the manner, the mode, and the means by which the communicative process is affected".

To achieve effective intercultural communication, people should develop intercultural competence; which refers to the skills required to achieve successful intercultural communication. Jandt (1998, 2004) identifies four skills as part of intercultural competence: personality strength, communication skills, psychological adjustment and cultural awareness.

Intercultural communication, in Lustig and Koester's words (2003: 49-51), is a "symbolic process in which people from different cultures create shared meanings". It occurs "when large and important cultural differences create dissimilar interpretations and expectations about how to communicate

competently". Jandt (2004: 4) pointed out that intercultural communication is not only between individuals but also between "groups of diverse cultural identifications". In summary, intercultural communication describes the interaction between individual and groups with different perceptions of communicative behaviour and differences in interpretations.

Studies in intercultural communication examine what happens in intercultural contacts and interactions when the communication process involves culturally diverse people (Samovar & Porter 1997). A common problem in intercultural communication arises "when persons who describe themselves as the same nationality or ethnicity do not share ideas about how to enact their identity and disagree about the norms for interaction" (Collier 1997: 43).

Intercultural communication obviously occurs in intercultural contact settings. These settings, and the types of people who may be involved, can be very variable. According to Fan (1994), from a language point of view, there are three main types of contact situations:

1. cognate variety situations, which involve participants who speak the same language but possess different sociocultural rules;
- 2- partner variety situations, which involve native speaker – nonnative speaker interaction;
- 3- party variety situations, in which the participants use a language that is nonnative for all of them (e.g. Algerians – Moroccan interacting in French).

However, most of the problems that EFL learners face in intercultural communication are not only communicative but also pragmatic. Teachers of EFL often choose not to stress pragmatic knowledge in their classrooms, focusing instead on linguistic knowledge. Eslami-Rasekh (2004) warns that this might result in pragmatic failure when EFL learners actually communicate with native speakers, something that is attributed to some other cause, such as rudeness. The only way to minimize pragmatic failure between native speakers and non native speakers is by acquiring pragmatic competence, that is, "the ability to use language effectively in order to understand language in context" (El Samaty 2005, p. 341). For example, our students find it extremely difficult to produce or sometimes understand a speech act because they are not exposed to the target community and culture.

Compliment responses are one type of speech acts that differs considerably from Arabic to English. Native speakers of English might consider the way Arabic

speakers respond to compliments offending or bizarre, because they understood only the words without the cultural rules that govern them and vice versa. A compliment is one form of speech acts and it can be defined as “an utterance containing a positive evaluation by the speaker to the addressee” (Liu, 1997). There is an infinite number of words that could be chosen to compliment, but the set of lexical items and grammatical patterns we use in our daily interaction when complimenting and have high frequency in our daily discourse are very restricted. According to Wolfson (1986), two-thirds of English compliments use the adjectives “nice, good, beautiful, pretty, great”, and 90% make use of just two verbs “like and love” (p. 116). The lack of creativity in the form and content of English compliments is related to their function in discourse. Herbert (1986) demonstrates that compliments are used to “negotiate solidarity with the addressee” (p. 76).

On the surface level, there is not much difference between Arabic and English cultures in the use of compliments. However, if we look at compliment responses, differences arise. When communicating with native speakers of English, Arabs may sometimes sound bizarre or offending. This is due to some differences in the way the two cultures use compliment responses. In the Arab society, it is a deeply-rooted religious belief that humility is a virtue. Even when accepting a compliment, Arabs tend to return the compliment (which might sound insincere to native speakers), or insist on offering the object of the compliment to the speaker (something that might be embarrassing to the native speakers who did not expect this behaviour). Therefore, differences may result in serious communicative interference in cross Arabic and English culture communication. A number of contrastive studies have been conducted to compare compliment responses in different languages and language varieties. Arabic and South African English speakers were found to prefer accepting compliments rather than reject them. Speakers of Asian languages, on the other hand, were likely to reject compliments (Urano, 1998).

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