**INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA**

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***Abstract***

*There is a tendency to interpret intercultural communication as problematic, especially with the diverse cultures that regularly come into contact with one another. Most often than not, misunderstanding and communication breakdown in communication can be traced to intercultural contacts because interlocutors depend on the norms of their mother tongue and culture to negotiate meaning. This paper set out to identify the sources of misunderstanding in intercultural communication in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). A cross cultural analysis of an excerpt based on an ELF interaction revealed that the misunderstanding in intercultural communication in ELF is caused by cultural differences which affect English language interpretation, ambiguity of a speaker’s utterance and the lack of shared knowledge. A range of intercultural communicative skills were suggested to enable interlocutors in cross cultural contexts communicate effectively. The paper concludes that conscious development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC), skills and an awareness of cultural differences by interlocutors in any contact situation is pivotal to avoiding misunderstandings in ELF interactions, thereby ensuring successful ELF communication.*

**Keywords:** Intercultural communication, English as a lingua franca, misunderstanding.

**INTRODUCTION**

Intercultural communication has become an indispensable subject these days because of its concentration on the topic of cultural awareness and appropriateness of language use in different socio-cultural contexts. With the advancement of communication systems and transportation technology, contact between people of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds have become more frequent and in ways that were formerly inconceivable. Considering the ubiquity of linguistic and cultural contact, it is clear that communication between interlocutors across lingua-cultural borders can only happen through a common medium, that is, a lingua franca for communication. Today, English has taken up the role of a lingua franca that performs the communicative function of connecting people from different nations in various cross-cultural milieus. However, communication in English between the distinct cultural groups require not only knowledge about its grammatical rules but also added knowledge about the skills and competences of how to use language appropriately; and in ways that are acceptable to others in a particular sociocultural context.

 According to Scollon and Scollon (1995, p22), “when communicating with people who are very different from us, it is very difficult to know how to draw inferences about what they mean, and so it is impossible to depend on shared knowledge and background in our interpretation”. This lack of shared knowledge between participants in contact is in fact the cause of various misunderstandings in intercultural communication. Samovar and Porter (1991, p21) support this view when they affirm that, “the chief problem associated with intercultural communication is error in social perception brought about by cultural diversity that affect the perceptual process” and they also state that “unintended errors in meaning may arise because people with entirely different backgrounds are unable to understand one another accurately”. With particular focus on the function of English language as a medium of intercultural communication, this paper attempts to investigate the role of culture in intercultural misunderstanding in ELF communication. To achieve this, it is necessary to examine the sources of misunderstanding in intercultural communication in ELF by carrying out a cross-cultural analysis of an ELF extract titled “An understanding supervisor” from Holliday et al. (2010, p33 -34). This paper also applies the theory of Hofstede in order to compare cultural differences affecting the participants’ ELF communication and Reuben’s model of ICC to explain the different skills and communicative competence needed to make ELF communication successful and end with a formal conclusion.

**English and Intercultural communication**

The interaction between people with different unintelligible languages can only be successful if the individuals in contact resort to using a language that is spoken and comprehended by them. Writing in 1997, Crystal articulates that a shared language is essential to its speakers for the reason that it provides them with ample opportunities for successful interaction. In essence, successful communication can be realised by the adoption of either one participant’s first language (L1) or a foreign language spoken by the parties involved in the interaction process. Presently, the English language functions or operates as a common communicative medium used widely in intercultural communication. This statement is captured vividly in Kachru (1980) when he comments that,

For the first time a natural language has attained the status of an international (universal) language, essentially for cross-cultural communication; Whatever the reasons for the earlier spread of English, we should now consider it a positive development in the twentieth-century context (cited in Seargeant, 2012, p87).

 Knapp and Meierkord (2002, p13) describe a lingua franca as any natural language used by speakers who do not share the same mother tongue or first language. While this definition highlights interactions between non-native speakers only, Seidlhofer (2004, p211) points out that interactions in English as a lingua franca often involve participants who are native speakers of the language. She states however that , “what is distinctive about ELF in most cases is that, it is a ‘contact language’ between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common national culture and for whom English is the chosen foreign language of communication” (Seidlhofer, 2004, p239). In other words, when English is adopted as the common medium of communication among people with different language backgrounds across linguistic and cultural boundaries, the most suitable term is Meierkord’s (1996) “English as a medium of intercultural communication”.

In referring to the demographics of English language use across the globe, Kachru (1985) categorised world Englishes into three concentric circles. They include: the expanding circle, the inner circle and the outer circle (cited in Crystal, 2003, p61). The *expanding circle* constitutes countries like China where English is used as a foreign language, the *inner circle* includes countries like Britain or America where English is spoken as a mother tongue; and the *outer circle* is made up of countries like Nigeria, India, Malawi, etcetera, where English has historical roots and is now used as a second or official language for institutional and administrative purposes. Graddol (2006) points out that currently, non-native English speakers in both the outer and expanding circles outnumber the native speakers of the language in the inner circle. He adds that almost eighty five per cent of interactions between non-native speakers in the aforementioned circles are carried out in English.

However, in the discussions of ELF, there have arisen normative issues as well as issues related to ownership and custody over what is the acceptable use of English by native speakers. Writing in 1994, Widdowson observes that the people who claim custody over the supposed ‘Standard English’ are doing so to guard their position as norm-providers. Instead, he advocates for diverse Englishes; adding that, a language which serves both the communicative and collective needs of peoples from different linguistic communities must be diverse (Widdowson, 1994, p385). At this point, it becomes pertinent to differentiate between ELF and EFL, that is, English as a foreign language. What forms the crux in EFL is that English is a subject taught in institutions in the expanding circle and learners are expected to achieve native-like competence while ELF aims at enhancing mutual understanding between people with distinct mother tongues in intercultural communication.

In the words of Samover and Porter (2004, p15), “intercultural communication involves interaction between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter the communication event”. Lustig and Koester (1999, p52) add that “intercultural communication is a symbolic process in which people from different cultures create shared meaning”. However, this definition seems to suggest that when intercultural communication occurs, it may prevent people from retaining aspects of their own culture. In line with Samover and Porter’s definition, this paper defines intercultural communication as the interaction (in any natural language) between individuals whose cultures vary sufficiently to influence successful ELF communication. These constituents of culture (that is, belief system, values, and perception) not only determine the way individuals use language, they also affects the way the interlocutors in contact interpret the meanings of English utterances in a particular intercultural environment.

In his work on intercultural communication between members of ethnic minorities whose languages have distinct characteristic features, as observed in Asian English, Gumperz et al. (1979) point out that misunderstandings in intercultural communication occur for either of the following reasons:

Different cultural assumptions about the situation and appropriate behavior and intentions within it; different ways of structuring information or an argument in a conversation; or different ways of speaking, that is, the use of different unconscious linguistic conventions (such as tone of voice) to signal connections and logic, and to imply the significance of what is being said in terms of overall meaning and attitude (p21).

 A limited awareness of such differences which arise from a lack of shared knowledge in the cross cultural context can cause misunderstanding between interlocutors in ELF communication. From this standpoint, intercultural communication in English is often times not successful, as the meanings which interlocutors attempt to negotiate among themselves are misinterpreted due to differences in sociocultural contexts, which also define their communicative performance (that is, the way we express and interpret meaning with others) in the language. It is therefore important for interlocutors in contact to understand what skills they need to become competent cross-cultural communicators in English; and prevent the misconceptions that can arise from cultural differences in intercultural communication. The next section deals with a cross-cultural analysis of the extract aforementioned in the introduction of this paper beginning with a brief description of the situation.

**Description**

The extract, “An understanding supervisor”, narrates the experience of a South African student, Jabu and a lecturer, Jeremy in an Australian University. The narration begins with a brief description of Jeremy’s enthusiastic attitude toward supervising a black student from South Africa based on his knowledge of the South African culture. However, the actual communication event between them is not successful because the intended message which Jeremy tries to negotiate across to Jabu in the cross-cultural context is misunderstood as a result of different cultural perceptions of the situation.

**Cross-cultural Analysis**

The term ‘culture’ has been ascribed many definitions; however, Hofstede et al. (2010, p6) point out that “culture is a collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group from others”. The word ‘programming’ in this definition reveals that culture is not acquired hastily, rather it is the way of life (that is, patterns of thinking, ways of behaving, and common values) specific to a society that can only be developed slowly by people overtime. From the extract, misunderstanding in ELF communication between Jabu and Jeremy can be traced to the different cultural interpretations attached to English utterances in Jabu’s South African culture.

 Hofstede (1980) compares cultures under six headings which he labels ‘dimensions’, to enable individuals evaluate cultural disparities between countries (cited in Jones, 2007, p3). Using Hofstede’s dimensions, if one is trying to understand the situation of Jabu and Jeremy, the dimension labelled ‘individualism versus collectivism’ presents the most striking difference. By ‘individualism versus collectivism’, he means the extent to which individuals are integrated into groups or prefer to work alone. His research has been criticised strongly by several scholars (Lubrosky 1959, p326, Nasif et al. 1991, p83-84) on the basis that it is over simplistic and essentialist (that is, sufficient information about different national cultures cannot be evaluated generally based on five to six dimensions). However, if such generalisations are avoided or put aside, his dimensions can be used to make meaningful comparisons.

Based on Hofstede’s comparison of national cultures, South Africans appear to be highly collectivist while Australians are individually motivated. Although English is the language of intercultural communication between the interlocutors in contact, Jabu’s interpretation of Jeremy’s utterances in the cross cultural context seems to be influenced by her collectivist background. For instance, when Jeremy states that “he knows her ‘context’ very well” (Holliday et al., p33), the sentence invokes another meaning to Jabu. Based on Kachru’s (1985) concentric circle of English use around the globe, South Africa belongs to the outer circle; therefore, Jabu has acquired English as a second language. However, South Africa is a collectivist society where individuals’ tend to be strongly integrated into closely knit groups like family and long friendships, and this affects the meaning Jabu attaches to that particular English sentences in the Australian context. She quickly gets offended and judges Jeremy’s harmless utterance as inappropriate and refers to collectivist view of the utterance stating the fact that “even her closest friends at ‘home’ did not presume to know her so well that they could speak of her like this- no one except perhaps her mother” (p 33).

Jabu also analyses the way Jeremy speaks like “his tone of voice” and “his speed of voice”. As Gumperz et al. (1979, p21) state, misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication can occur because of “different ways of speaking, that is, the use of different unconscious linguistic conventions (such as tone of voice) to signal connections and logic, and to imply the significance of what is being said in terms of overall meaning and attitude”. While Jeremy thinks he is speaking in ways that will make Jabu feel comfortable in her new cross-cultural environment, she misunderstands his intention and states instead that he thinks “she might not understand normal English” (p33). On closer analysis, one would say that Jabu’s attitude toward Jeremy’s harmless use of unconscious linguistic conventions can be interpreted as defensive. This is because she does not try to understand the reason behind the way he speaks, instead she rules it off and interprets it from the norm of her culture as an inappropriate and unacceptable way to speak to a student he has only just come into contact with. This explains why she feels he treats her as one who is “handicap of some sort” (p33).

Even though Jeremy is a native speaker (that is, inner circle) of the English language, he seems to lack knowledge about communicative competence, that is, the ability for a language user to choose what to say, when to say it and how to say it (Berns, 2009, p719). As aforementioned, Australians tend to be individually motivated and this is perhaps the reason why Jeremy’s interaction with Jabu is mostly based on his personal experience “…of a three-year science education project in secondary schools in South Africa”. Though Jeremy feels his knowledge of Jabu’s culture will provide the connection she needs to feel understood and supported, his lack of communicative competence leads him to use culturalist language without realising the effect on his listener. For instance, when Jeremy tells Jabu that he understands “black culture in South Africa”, therefore, he can help her “…understand concepts” or that he knows what it is like with “the history of black people” and how “she suddenly had to compete in every sphere” (p33), he feels that Jabu would understand the meaning behind his words. But, because they have different cultural interpretations of such English utterances, it leads to misunderstanding once more.

Although that may be his way of structuring information in English about understanding Jabu’s culture and the cultural shock she may be experiencing in Australia, his choice of English words and sentences are inappropriate, especially in a university setting which tends to be multicultural. One can say that his preconceived notion of Jabu’s culture only leads him toward essentialism, because he tends to suggest that she is inferior to the other students based on history, that is, white dominance over blacks through colonisation, and not as she views herself. Hence, using phrases like ‘black culture’ and ‘black people’ only index him as racist, although he is unaware. The consequence is that Jabu interprets his language as racist and a strong let down of her intellectual ability. This explains the connection she makes to Jeremy “having the ignorant audacity to be thinking that she might have difficulty keeping up with ‘white people’” (p33).

Another cultural difference between South Africa and Australia causing misunderstanding is the dimension of ‘power distance’ which describes the extent to which power is unequally distributed in a society (Hofstede, 1980). Power distance appears to be lower in Australia, as opposed to South Africa which tends to have a high power distance. Thus, a South African studying in an Australian university will find the idea of equality between lecturer and student difficult to cope with, irrespective of a common language of communication. From the extract, one can link Jabu’s disapproval of the lecturer-student relationship in Australia to the influence of the high power distance society she comes from and this is evident in the language. For instance, she talks about the “lots of informal friendly bits of conversation in which he always “put on a very ‘kind’ face about ‘food’, ‘rituals’, ‘marriage practices’ and ‘ceremonies’” (p34). Such exchange between teacher and student (where teacher-student relationship seems to be stiff and learning is teacher centred) based on informal topics in South Africa may be viewed as inappropriate, and may be a possible reason why she feels invaded by Jeremy. Obviously, both interlocutors lack shared knowledge about this cultural difference and once again, misunderstanding occurs in the ELF communication because of “different cultural assumptions about the situation and appropriate behavior and intentions within it” (Gumperz et al. 1979, p21).

**Aspects of Intercultural Communicative Competence needed for successful ELF interaction**

Hymes (1980, p5) describes “communicative competence as knowledge of sociolinguistic rules that is separate from knowledge of grammatical rules” (cited in Berns, 2009, p719). He adds that “communicative competence is what the users of a language realise in choosing what to say as well as when and how to say it”. In other words, competent communication in English as a lingua franca is one that is not only effective but also appropriate within the cross cultural context where the interaction takes place. However, acquiring such sociolinguistic skills to enable successful communication in English between people with different sociocultural perceptions can only be achieved gradually through self- awareness in the cross cultural environment. From the excerpt, Jeremy appears to have limited intercultural communicative competence in English. This is because he does not seem to be aware of the sociolinguistic rules that govern communication in English with people from different cultural backgrounds.

 Ruben (1976) points out seven basic skills of intercultural communication competence which can enable interlocutors in contact function effectively in any cross cultural domain (cited in Lustig and Koester, 2006, p72-76). Ruben’s dimensions are not only simple, but they can be applied to very practical situations. Among the seven dimensions, Jeremy will need ‘orientation to knowledge’ which Ruben views as the skill of being able to suspend one’s view and perception as standard. Jeremy keeps making essentialist statements about Jabu’s shortcomings based on the stereotype view about the South African culture and this plays out in the English words and sentences he uses. Jeremy will need to develop this skill mentioned above to enable him become aware of the effect of making cultural statements like “black African culture” which is inappropriate in the university context and can result in misunderstanding in ELF communication. Jeremy also needs to develop ‘interaction posture’ which deals with the ability to express oneself in ways that are not judgemental. Developing this skill will enable him see the uniqueness in the individuals (like Jabu) he views as the ‘other’ and not judge them based on their national culture. This will also influence the choices of English words and sentences he uses to negotiate meaning in any ELF communication.

 On the part of Jabu, she will need to develop ‘empathy’ which means the ability to show one is attempting to understand someone else’s cultural context. Jabu tends to read negative meanings to Jeremy’s utterances even though she acknowledges that “he was really trying his best” to be an understanding supervisor. She needs to consciously develop this skill to enable her understand and adjust to the Australian environment and also empower her to avoid being too sensitive to innocent English utterances which she seems to interpret through the lens of South Africa, where she has acquired English as a ‘nativised’ second language. She also needs ‘tolerance to ambiguity’ which will enable her cope with uncertainties, like acknowledging that everyone structures information in English differently, in different cross-cultural context.

**Conclusion**

The notion of intercultural communicative competence in ELF communication across lingua-cultural boundaries is very significant in today’s globalised world. As intercultural contact between people of different linguistic, social and cultural milieus become increasingly commonplace, it is important that individuals become aware of cultural differences and develop the skills needed to function maximally in ELF communication in cross-cultural contexts. This paper aimed at investigating the role culture plays in misunderstanding in ELF communication between participants with different English language backgrounds. The cross-cultural analyses above revealed that misunderstanding in ELF communication emanates from cultural differences affecting meaning negotiation and mutual understanding. The analysis also showed that ambiguity in a speaker’s utterances and a lack of shared knowledge are also sources of intercultural misunderstanding in ELF communication. Since culture resides partly in language, this paper concludes by pointing out that conscious development of intercultural communicative competence, skills and an awareness of cultural differences by interlocutors in any contact situation is pivotal to avoiding misunderstandings in ELF interactions, thereby ensuring successful ELF communication.

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