ACHIEVING NATIONAL PEACE THROUGH INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

[1.]AmeenAkeem, [2]Ebenezer O. Onabanjo, [3]Muritala Imam Suleiman, [4]Zakari Ishiak and [5]Kolawole Saliu

[1-5]Department of General Education Studies, Kwara State College of Education (T.), Lafiagi

Corresponding Author: ameem.akeem@gmail.com

Abstract

Communication is central in human interaction. It is a social process that facilitates exchange of ideas and feelings among individuals in societies. However, most of the times when communication takes place, it involves interaction between individuals who do not share similar characteristics. In other words, the interactants, though may speak the same language while engaging in communication, can differ in terms of cultural backgrounds. And because they differ, their world views tend to differ too thereby resulting to crises and conflicts. It is, therefore, not enough to have linguistic knowledge but also to have intercultural communication competence in order to reduce uncertainty in the mind of the receiver of the message and to establish relationships through the process of interaction thereby preventing miscommunication as each culture is distinguish and unique. So, considering the role of culture in various domains including communication and interaction process, the role of communicative competence in general and intercultural communicative competence in particular cannot be ignored. This is important for our educational system as it will go a long way in addressing some of the conflicts emanating from the lack or poor knowledge of intercultural communication. Hence, this position paper highlights the importance of intercultural communication competence as a method of ensuring peace among the people in the society. It is the belief of this paper that such knowledge of intercultural communication competence will enhance the learners' ability to communicate appropriately in all situations. It will bring about peace communication, a situation where intercultural communicators reciprocate empathetically and develop trust. This will also lead to emergence of 'interculturality' in which people with differing cultural identities learn from each other, develop intercultural personhood, and mediate between different perspectives.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication, Competence, Conflict, Peace building

Introduction

In human relationship, communication is essential. It is a social process that makes it easier for people in civilizations to communicate their thoughts and feelings to one another. But most of the time, when communication occurs, it entails engagement between people who don't have a lot in common. In other words, although the interactants communicate using the same language, they come from different cultural backgrounds. And because they are different, their worldviews also tend to be different, which leads to disputes and crises. Therefore, just linguistic knowledge alone is insufficient; one must also possess intercultural communication skills. This is because, according Pate and Dauda (2015), the aim of communication is to exchange information; reduce uncertainty in the mind of the receiver of the message and establish relationships through the process of interaction. These aims are bound to be defeated if the interlocutors differ in their cultural affiliations. This is not unconnected to the fact that it becomes a much complex task when it involves people across cultures as interactants view the world through their culturally perceived lenses, thereby influencing and shaping their understanding of the world around them. The case of Deborah Yakubu Samuel a second-year student of Home Economics at ShehuShagariCollege of Education Sokoto, Nigeria, who was killed by a mob of fellow students after being accused of blasphemy (The Punch Newspaper, May 12, 2022), can be a good example here.

Therefore, our understanding of culture and cultural differential in terms of language use plays an important role in our communication and interaction towards ensuring peaceful relationship. It provides the "lens" through which one views the world; the "logic" by which one orders it and the "grammar" by which it makes sense. Supporting this view, Thomas (2003) stated that culture has an impact on all individuals of a society's perception, thought habits, judgment, and action. Hence, the culture-specific system of orientation dictates not only the conditions and boundaries of action, but also the possibilities and motivation for action. This further means that whether cultural differences are viewed as a burden or enrichment, it does not change the fact

that they exist and that they influence our perception, thinking, feeling, and behaviour, thereby affecting communication and cooperation between people of different cultures (Thomas, 2010). As a result, in an intercultural encounter, the capacity to intuitively grasp cultural differences and change behaviour properly may have a beneficial, long-term influence on relationships in terms of communication and sustainable cooperation (Thomas, 2010).

Supporting this view, Mafela and Ntuli (2017) opined that culture introduces many ways of knowing, seeing and interpreting life. According to LeBaron and Pillay (2006), ideas of truth, relationships to others, and appropriateness of behaviors are all profoundly influenced by culture. Therefore, differences in cultural beliefs and values can lead to people misinterpreting each other's intentions or behaviors, which usually increase the potential for conflict. It is important to state that cultures can be based on racial, ethnic, generational, gender, religious or socioeconomic aspects.

In essence, every culture has its set of rules and standards about behaviors. It is impossible for anyone to learn a culture perfectly. All actions are bound to be wrong in some cultures or offending in someone's view. Communication between cultures is likely to be less effective because of the violation of culture's norms. In fact, interactants would never know if they are expected to follow another culture's norms or behave normally according to their culture. Assuming similarity instead of difference means that interactants assume that it is okay for them to behave the same way as in their respective cultures thereby making them forget the important differences. This then results in miscommunication as each culture is distinguish and unique (Chi, 2016).

In short, it is not enough to have competence in a particular language with our co-interactants. Interlocutors should possess communicative competence in general and intercultural communicative competence in particular. This is important for our educational system as it will go a long way in addressing some of the conflicts emanating from the lack of or poor knowledge of intercultural communication. Speakers should, thus, bear in mind that culture differential influences interaction. In other word, the cultural context in which human communication occurs is perhaps the most defining influence on human interaction. It provides the overall platform

wherein humans learn to organize their thoughts, emotions, and behaviours in relation to their environment. In addition, it instructs individuals how to act, especially in relation to communicating with others. According to Rosenberg (2011), culture provides people with an implicit theory about how to behave and how to interpret the behaviour of others. Interactants from different cultures possess different implicit theories, which are learnt through socialisation. This implies that "the way we perceive is culturally determined" (Gibson 2000, p. 20). In view of this, this paper is an attempt at highlighting the importance of intercultural communication competence as a method of ensuring peace among the people in the society.

Intercultural Communication

Culture is the set of norms by which things are run, and the logic by which order is given to the world. It refers to experience, knowledge, meanings, beliefs, values, attitudes, religions, concepts of self, the universe and self-universe, relationships, hierarchies of status, role expectations, spatial relations and time concepts accumulated by a group of people over generations (Novinger, 2001). On the other hand, communication is the process by which a message or information is exchanged between people. In this situation, the role of culture cannot be over emphasized. Humans are defined by their culture. It is the whole communication framework for words, actions, body language, emblems (gestures), intonation, facial expressions, how one manages time, space, and materials, and how one works, makes love, and plays, among other things. Complete communication systems have all of these features and more. Only someone who is conversant with these units of conduct in their cultural context may appropriately read their meanings. As observed by Samovar and Porter (2004), a person's perception of the world around them is deeply entrenched in the system of symbols that their culture uses to make sense of the world.

Therefore, intercultural communication, according to Klyukanov (2005), is a process that is inherently variable and subject to interpretation. While individuals and groups bring their unique and special meanings to this term, in the most basic sense, intercultural communication means that some form of culture and some form of communication has interacted or intersected in a particular space, time and context (Patel, Li &Sooknanan, 2011). That is, when large and significant cultural differences

create disparities in interpretations and expectations about how to communicate competently, intercultural communication occurs (Lustig& Koester, 2010).

Rogers and Steinfatt (1999), define intercultural communication simply as 'the exchange of information between individuals who are unalike culturally' (p. 1). This is similar to Berry et al. (2011) who conceptualise intercultural communication as the 'exchange of information (verbally or nonverbally) between members of different cultural populations' (p. 471). According to Müller-Jacquier (2004), intercultural communication denotes 'a peculiar communication situation: the varied language and discourse strategies people from different cultural backgrounds use in direct, face-to-face situations' (p. 295). For Zhu (2011), it refers to a situation where people from different cultural backgrounds come into contact with each other; or a subject of study that is concerned with interactions among people of different cultural and ethnic groups. Samovar, Porter and McDaniel (2010) saw intercultural communication as involving interaction between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter the communication event' (p. 12). Jandt (2007) defined intercultural communication as face-to-face interactions among people of diverse cultures' (p. 36). It also refers 'not only to the communication between individuals of diverse cultural identities but also to the communication between diverse groups' (Jandt, 2010, p. 18).

According to Panocová (2020), intercultural communication takes place when people from different cultures and ethnicities start communicating. It means the sharing of information on different levels of awareness and control between people with different cultural backgrounds, where different cultural backgrounds include both national cultural differences and differences which are connected with participation in the different events that exist within a national unit (Arent, 2009). What this definition means is that people who live in the same city or region but who do not share the same social groups, their conversation can also be regarded as intercultural as two or more people who came from opposite corners of the world because they are from two subcultures. Therefore, intercultural communication also points to a situation where the interactants use the same language to communicate; it does not mean the interactants use different languages to communicate. That is, interlocutors may have the same language to be produced but do not have the same way to think about how the language

is produced. According to Issa, Ali-Garga and Yunusa (2015), intercultural communication basically means communication across different cultural boundaries. That is, an interaction between Hausa and Yoruba cultural groups is an intercultural communication, because it occurs across cultural boundaries, even though they are from the same country. To Zegarac (2007), a communication situation can be defined as intercultural if the distance between the interactants is great enough to have an effect on at least one of the interactants.

Regardless of the various definitions, it is important to note that during an intercultural communication event, problems arise as a result of a person failing to recognize the individual's uniqueness; failing to focus on the message; failing to understand the belief systems and values upon which cultures are founded; and making judgments from one's own culture's perspective. In other words, people contribute to the issues by misinterpreting the intercultural communication event.

Concept of Intercultural Communication Competence

According to Chen and Starosta (1998), intercultural communication competence is the ability to effectively and appropriately execute communication behaviors to obtain a desired response in a specific environment. This means that competent communicators not only know how to interact effectively and appropriately with other people in specific contexts, but how to fulfill their own communication goals while using this ability (i.e. adroitness). In other words, as Hinner (2017) explains, one must be able to correctly detect the intents and communication of others. It entails keeping track of one's own and others' behavior and communication; being able to behave and communicate in a way that is appropriate for the situation and is perceived as such by others; and being aware of how one's own subsequent communication is being perceived by others so that one can communicate appropriately if the situation requires it. This talent necessitates understanding whether or not to communicate in a given setting. And, if one must communicate, one must understand how to communicate effectively in this situation. Even for interlocutors from the same culture, this is a difficult undertaking. Culture further complicates the situation because different cultures produce different value systems and perceived meanings (Lustig& Koester, 2013; Oetzel, 2009), all of which have a significant impact on one's preferred behavior,

communication style, and norms, as well as how they are perceived by others.

Scannavini (2013) was of the view that in order to be a good communicator, one must have intercultural knowledge and practical experience so as to be able to implement communicative behaviours in terms of competence and ability. Based on that a good intercultural communicator intercultural should have interest, curiosity about different world vision; have the ability to track his own cognitive stereotypes and arising prejudices; and should have the ability to identify stereotypes and prejudices of others both as individuals and members of (different) social groups. In addition, he should have the ability to overcome his inner discomfort induced by the experience of diversity. According to Scannavini (2013), however, being interculturally communicative competent does not necessarily make individuals better people, but at least they may have the opportunity to become capable people to take responsibility for collective creation of meaningful and a peaceful social coexistence.

Peace Building through Intercultural Communication Competence

The goal of intercultural communication, in essence, is to promote peace communication. According to Bruneau (2000), that peace communication across cultures occurs when inter cultural communicators reciprocate empathetically and develop trust. This "mirrored reciprocity", according Bruneau (2000), will lead to "mutual arising" as the essence of intercultural peace and harmony. For instance, Kale (2015) highlighted the human spirit and the positive peace as ethical foundations for intercultural interactions and urged that intercultural communicators should address people of other cultures with the same respect that they would like to receive themselves; seek to describe the world as they perceive it as accurately as possible; encourage people of other cultures to express themselves in their uniqueness; and strive for identification with people of other cultures. Earlier on, Mowlana (1997) highlighted the ethical principles of international and intercultural communication to include the prevention of war and promotion of peace; respect for culture, tradition and values; the promotion of human rights and dignity; and the preservation of the home, human association, family and community.Furthermore, the awareness about intercultural communication will equip intercultural communicators with the basic

human mechanisms that help to bridge the cultural gap. These are taking on the role of the other and the process of self-reflection (Dai, 2017). The ability of the interlocutors to take on the role of the other is fundamental to human understanding and cooperation. It allows them to see things from the perspective of their counterparts in interaction, which enables them to understand cultural others, sympathize with cultural others, and reach an agreement with them (Charon, 1998). Similarly, the reflective mechanism urges the intercultural communicators to examine their own weaknesses and search for other life possibilities. Once they come to realize the validity of others' way of representing reality, they are ready to relate themselves to cultural others and engage them in dialogue.

Mindfulness, according to Gudykunst (2005), refers to cognition as well as the monitoring and control of one's own behavior and communication so that they are effective in specific situations and with specific individuals: the communicator does not use general, stereotypical categories (i.e. schemata, scripts, and frames) when communicating with strangers. Instead, the good communicator personalizes the categories so that they are better suited to talking with one's counterpart on an individual level rather than a stereotypical level (Gudykunst, 2005). So, know ledge and awareness of differences in culture are import ant in understanding differences in meaning (i.e. cognition) and the more one knows about the other persons and their culture as well as their preferred style of behavior and communication, the better one can decode the behavior and communication of the other person (Oetzel, 2009).Another importance of intercultural communication competence is the emergence of interculturality. According to Zhu (2014), this refers to the process in which people with differing cultural identities learn from each other, develop intercultural personhood, and mediate between different perspectives. This therefore means the multiple connections between cultures through which culturally different individuals endeavor to reduce cultural distance, negotiate shared meanings and mutually desired identities, and establish reciprocal relationships (Dai, 2017). It thus implies that the development of interculturality is a dialogic process that involves two or more culturally different individuals who desire to talk, to learn and to establish connections with each other (Buber, 2002), the goal of which include mutual understanding, relational trans

formation, self-growth and communication pattern change (Heidlebaugh, 2008). Therefore, the critical role of interculturality, according to Dai (2017), is reflected in four aspects: accommodating differences and cultivating a positive attitude to diversity; developing intercultural perspective and enhancing mutual understanding; promoting mutual critique and working toward a rational solution; and facilitating joint action and enhancing intercultural harmony.

According to Dai and Chen (2017), while it becomes imperative for people to interact, conflicts arise as a result of tensions stemming from different cultural perceptions, disparate social preferences or diverse value orientations. Supporting this view, Wilmort and Hocker (2007) stated that an intercultural conflict occurs when people have incompatible expectations, value, interests or goals in their interactions. So, it is important to note that conflicts take place when relational partners perceive incompatible ideas, emotions, needs or goals (Collier, 1991). In order to avoid this, both parties should know their cultural differences; clarify misunderstandings; find out common needs, interests and goals; and further strengthen relationships (Ting-Toomey &Oetzel, 2001). A mutually shared perspective, a common understanding of the root of the conflict, and a coordinated action are the key factors of successful intercultural conflict (Dai & Chen, 2015; Ting-Toomey, 2009). Interculturalityconnects two cultures and creates a space where individuals with differing cultural identities adapt to each other to develop an intercultural perspective and foster intercultural personhood.

The study of intercultural communication opens up a lot of doors for personal development and expansion. We have opportunities to learn more about ourselves and those who have been socialized in a different context as we confront language and cultural differences in our personal, educational, and professional lives, whether at home or abroad. If we are truly open to this potential, exposure to various ideas and practices combined with critical reflection on our own intercultural attitudes and behaviors might eventually propel us to higher levels of intercultural competence (Jackson, 2014).Being interculturally communicative competent will enable us have "flexibility". According to Bhangoo and Pillay (2006), "flexibility" is a strategy that asks that we remain open to difference as we encounter others. Remaining open to difference can help people manage intercultural conflict. That is, "the capacity for

flexibility means suspending judgment and perceiving with a spirit of inquiry. Suspending judgment is not to abandon our beliefs or values, but to create a space for curiosity inside ourselves and between us and others" ((Bhangoo&Pillay, 2006, p. 115). It will also bring about creative engagement which can help people to find non-threatening ways to interact with others when conflict arises.

Worchel (2005) argued that the recognition of others' right to exist, interest in their cultures and a willingness to engage in a cooperative interaction with them are some of the keys to peaceful coexistence. So, intercultural communicative competence will inculcate in the individuals the recognition of these "keys" in such a way that interactions becomes 'less tensioned' and bring about peace communication. The point is that our society now demands "a global connectivity that thrives on intensive competition and cooperation between people from different cultures" (Dai et al., 2017, p. xiv). Similarly, Rothman (2008) argued that a commitment to intercultural competency entails more than just knowing about different cultures and honing culturally appropriate communication skills. It also entails a dedication to personal awareness, growth, and comprehension, as well as the unlearning (as much as possible) of any biases, stereotypes, or prejudices. The acquisition of (inter)cultural knowledge and skills, accompanied by critical reflection on 'real world' intercultural interaction can, ultimately, lead to a broadened sense of self and more satisfying intercultural relations (Jackson, 2014).

Furthermore, in our personal, academic and professional lives, it is becoming increasingly important for all of us to develop intercultural conflict competence, which entails 'the mindful management of emotional frustrations and conflict interaction struggles due primarily to cultural, linguistic, or ethnic group membership differences' (Ting-Toomey 2012, pp. 279–80). To accomplish this, LeBaron and Pillay (2006) argue that we need both 'conflict fluency' and 'cultural fluency'. The former means 'recognizing conflict as a difference that offers us choices and growth', while the latter entails recognizing that culture is 'a series of underground rivers that profoundly shape not only who we are, but how we cooperate and engage conflict' (LeBaron&Pillay, 2006, p. 12).

Finally, preserving one's own cultural frame or adapting to that of one's

interactant is not an option in an intercultural contact. It is rather an issue of finding a middle ground between these two stances and taking a third place. As a result, the interaction participant becomes an 'experiencer' (not an observer) of difference. Intercultural competence thus has to do the ability to discover this third spot. It is not required to learn all of the languages of one's possible interactants in order to adopt a multicultural viewpoint in interaction. The understanding of one's own culture and the manner in which language mediates this culture is a crucial learning. As a result, the third place is a point of interaction, hybridity, and discovery.

Conclusion

While communication is an integral part of the society, contemporary society is complex and highly heterogeneous. Individuals at all levels will need more than linguistic ability to function and interact with other members of the society towards ensuring peace. Therefore, it is important to realize and inculcate in ourselves the knowledge of intercultural communication. It is believed that this will help to enhance understanding and reduce uncertainty and conflicts. It will contribute to the peace much yearend for. And as a suggestion, we need formal courses or training programmes that will help nurture willingness and open-mindedness towards otherness and develop intercultural awareness and skills for intercultural interaction (Feng, 2009). In sum, practical issues have driven the examination of intercultural competence. Businesses, government agencies, and educational institutions all desire to choose employees who will be effective in intercultural assignments. Lack of intercultural competency may result in failing corporate endeavours, and unsatisfactory learning experiences for students.

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