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Non-verbal barriers to effective intercultural communication

Barreras no verbales para una comunicación intercultural efectiva

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ABSTRACT

Although globalization and communication technology are bringing the world closer together in a global village, language barriers constitute a common challenge to individuals, groups, international companies, governments, nations, and the whole world. This qualitative study aimed at exploring the factors that cause non-verbal language barriers, their types and impact on effective communication, and our life, as well, are making people aware of the importance of overcoming them. This study concludes that misunderstanding, miscommunication, and misinterpretation of non-verbal messages arise when the sender (speaker) and receiver (listener) do not fully understand each other's language and culture.

Keywords: Communication, Language Barriers, Misinterpretation, Misunderstanding.

RESUMEN

Aunque la globalización y la tecnología de la comunicación están uniendo al mundo en una aldea global, las barreras idiomáticas constituyen un desafío común para las personas, los grupos, las compañías internacionales, los gobiernos, las naciones y el mundo entero. Este estudio cualitativo tuvo como objetivo explorar los factores que causan las barreras del lenguaje no verbal, sus tipos e impacto en la comunicación efectiva, y nuestra vida, así como las formas, están haciendo que las personas sean conscientes de la importancia de superarlas. Este estudio concluye que los malentendidos, la falta de comunicación y la mala interpretación de los mensajes no verbales surgen cuando el emisor (hablante) y el receptor (oyente) no entienden completamente el idioma y la cultura del otro.

Palabras clave: barreras del lenguaje, comunicación, malas interpretaciones, Malentendido.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Human communication is a social interaction process. It is an essential part of our daily life. It is a process of creating, exchanging, sharing ideas, information, opinions, facts, feelings, experiences attitudes between a sender and a receiver. Communication is fundamental to the existence and survival of individuals, groups, societies, and nations. Language is the most common tool of communication. It plays a vital role in helping people build a bridge of relationships. At the same time, language acts as a destroyer of bridges of human relations, because it separates people from each other. Language continues to remain a barrier to convey our messages to people in the globalization and communication era. Non-verbal Language barriers are a common challenge in international business, aviation, social settings. They affect our daily life. Non- verbal language barriers are the root causes of many problems or obstacles in health care, negotiation, politics and business, and education. There is an overwhelming international consensus on the negative impact of verbal, non-verbal language, and cultural barriers on our lives.

What is the definition of human communication?

It has numerous definitions: (Riemer & Jansen: 2003) (1) Sharing: of meanings, ideas, opinions, facts, feelings, experiences, information between a sender and a receiver. (2) Meeting of Minds: mutual understanding or agreement between the sender and the receiver on common issues. Communication occurs only when the message has been understood, and understanding occurs in the mind of the receiver. So we should speak to people according to their level of understanding to get our messages across to them (3) Understanding: effective communication happens when the receiver understood the message (4) Getting feedback: feedback or response is critical to ensure that accurate understanding of the message has occurred. A simple definition of communication is that the process of exchanging ideas, feelings, opinions, facts, information, and experiences between the sender and a receiver verbally (spoken, written and non-verbally, sign-language, and body language.) through a channel of communication. To understand the human communication process, one must understand how people relate to each other.

What are the Forms of Communication?

A language is a valuable tool that helps people communicate with people around themselves and the world. "Language is a set of symbols shared by a community to communicate meaning and experience." (Jandt: 2017). It takes two forms: (a) Verbal Communication: the exchange of ideas, thoughts, feelings, opinions, and experiences through spoken or written words. (b) Non-verbal Communication is an exchange of ideas, thoughts, information, emotions, opinions, feelings, attitudes and experiences through both sign language (charts, photos, pictures, symbols) and body language (facial expression, eye-contact, head, hand and leg movements, posture, physical appearance, and space). Body movements are culturally specific symbols, and they are always based on a specific communication context.

Our body Talks: We use body language from the day we firstborn. We did most of it unconsciously. The movements of our body parts (behaviors) are a reflection of our inner and emotional state, culture, identity, personality, religion, and nationality. They communicate both positive and negative wordless powerful messages. Most information is exchanged through behavior. Our body speaks words (a nod of a head can be yes or no), sentences, phrases, and punctuation. "Language speaks louder than words", and speaks all the languages of the world. There are vast differences and diversities of non-verbal language among different cultures, races, and regional. It has been estimated that human beings can produce up to 700,000 different physical signs. The face alone can produce 250,000 expressions, and at least 5,000 distinct hand gestures have been attributed to verbal equivalents. Another researcher has cataloged 1, 000 postures, and their accompanying gestures. (Axtell & Fornwald: 1991) Non-verbal communication plays an important role in our daily life. The majority of our communication is expressed through our bodies 90% of our emotions are expressed non-verbally (Spinks & Wells: 1997). However, body behaviors have different meanings in different cultures. What is considered rude behavior in one culture may be welcomed as friendly or polite in another culture. Our non- verbal messages let others read our ideas and personalities and know how we feel about

ourselves, the environment, and about them. Figure: 1 Presents the communication process, and how does communication take place? The Communication Process is composed of the model or map of the communication process that shows the relationships between the elements or components of the communication process.

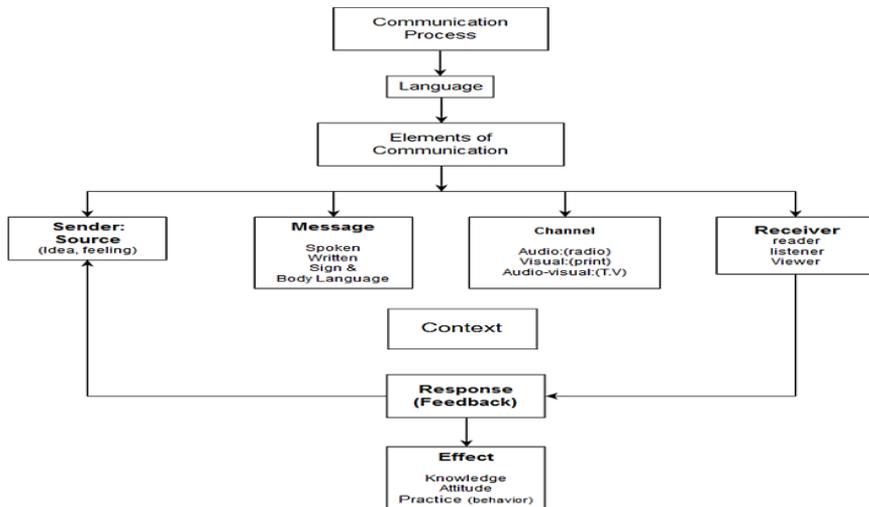


Figure 1. The communication process

The steps or elements or components of the communication process :

Sender (Source): The initiator of communication and the originator of a message. He is responsible for being sure that the message is accurately received and understood. (2) Encoding: a process in which the ideas to be conveyed are translated into a code or set of symbols or some other format of expression. (3) Message: the idea, information, opinion, fact, feeling, etc. It is the heart of the communication process. It can be a Spoken, written word, sign language, and body language. (4) Channel: the medium used to convey the message to the receiver. The media of communication include radio, newspaper, telephone, TV, and internet. (5) Decoding: is the process of translating the message into a language that can be understood by the receiver. (6) The receiver is the individual or individuals to whom the message is directed. (Listener, reader, and viewer). (7) Feedback: verbal and nonverbal reaction or response to the communicated message. It can be either positive or negative. It allows the sender to be confident that his receiver has understood his message. Understanding of a message is based on the receiver's ability to decode it and his educational, social, religious backgrounds and experiences. If the message is not understood, the receiver the sender has to send it for the second time. (8) Effect: Everyone communicates in different ways for a variety of purposes. Measure the success of your communication by the outcomes you get. So, the sender communicates in order to influence the receiver's knowledge, attitudes, and practice or action or behavior (KAP). Context: The situation (environment or circumstances, place, time, location culture, international culture. etc.) in which a message is delivered to the receiver. Non-verbal communication depends on context: body language in certain situations might not mean the same in another. For example, someone is scratching his nose might have an itch, rather than concealing a lie. Context gives a big picture. On-verbal behavior, intentionally or unintentionally, communicates messages .

How does the communication process happen?

(a)The sender has an intention or idea or feeling and meaning that exists in his mind. He encoded them into a message. (b) The sender transmits his message through the right channel to the receiver. (c) The receiver gets the message, decodes and interprets it based on his understanding of the meaning of the language and reacts or responds by sending feedback (new message) to the sender. Thus, he becomes a sender. (d)The original sender now becomes a receiver and reacts to the response of the sender (receiver). Based on the results of the communication process, the change may happen in the knowledge, attitude, and behavior (action) of the receiver. Communication is an interactive process; its effectiveness is judged by how closely the receiver's understanding matches the sender's intention.

What is Effective communication?

It is a communication between two or more persons in which the intended message is encoded correctly, delivered through an appropriate channel, received and adequately decoded and understood by the receiver or receivers. (9) It is a two-way process. It is crucial for communicating successfully with others. It helps people build trusting relationships and maintain them and accomplish goals, jobs, and tasks. Merely speaking, effective communication is the process of sending the right message to the right receiver through the right channel at the right time and place with the right feedback.

What is effective intercultural communication?

Koester & Lustig (2012) defined "intercultural communication is a symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual process in which people from different cultures create shared meanings." It is a two-way process of communication that allows a speaker and a listener to understand each other regardless of their cultures.

WhaT are the barriers to Effective Communication?

They are obstacles or problems or challenges that breakdown the communication process because they prevent the flow of information between a sender and a receiver. There are numerous barriers to communication, and these may occur at any stage in the communication process. They can be classified into the following categories: mechanical, physical, psychological, social, noise, religious, cultural, and verbal and non-verbal language barriers.

What is the impact of language barriers on communication?

Language is the most powerful tool of communication. Its function includes the: communication of ideas, thoughts, opinion and emotional expression, social interaction, using the power of sound, recording facts, expression of identity. However, it is, at the same time, a common barrier to effective communication. Language barriers arise when a lot of words or symbols or signals have more than one meaning, and a sender and a receiver try to communicate in the language, which themselves do not understand properly. So, communication is not always successful. There may be some obstacles in the communication system, which may prevent the message from reaching the intended receiver or its destination. Language barriers are generally arising in five areas: the way a message is originated and sent by a sender, the context (environmental interruptions), and the way it is received and understood by a receiver. Verbal and non-verbal language barriers are significant because they are often an impediment to building and maintaining relationships with others. They can cause misunderstandings that lead to conflict, frustration, offense, embarrassment, racism discrimination, hate crimes, violence, hurt feeling, frustration, disappointments, and wasting time, effort, money, and lives of the people. Summary, language barriers are problems or issues that interfere with a person's ability to send, receive, and understand a message. They are one of the main obstacles that limit or block effective communication. They can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations or verbal and non-verbal messages between people across cultures. They can also refer to the complete absence of communication between the two people who speak different languages and from different cultures.

2. METHODS

This study aimed at identifying non-verbal language barriers to effective intercultural face-to-face communication, their types and root causes and discusses their impact on our ways of exchanging messages and making people, groups, governments and nations aware of the importance of recognizing and learning them in order to reduce or limit them and make recommendation based on the study results for improving the effectiveness of intercultural communication. Because understanding non-verbal barriers to effective intercultural communication of various cultures is essential due to the current trend of globalization.

In today's globalized world, it is essential to build relationships between people by using body language (behaviors) as a bridge of communication in politics, tourism, business, negotiations, hospitals, religions, education, and the military. At the same time, body language can act as a barrier (wall) or a challenge that separates and prevents people from different cultures exchange simple, clear, and accurate non-verbal messages because misreading body language may cause misunderstandings of the non-verbal messages that lead to destroying relationships between people. Therefore, the most important questions are: how can we communicate with people from another culture who speak a different language successfully? Moreover, how to bridge the gap of communication between people in different intercultural communication situations in order to have a mutual understanding? In a culturally diverse world, understanding what people mean through their body language can be a challenge. Even a simple handshake can vary from culture to culture.

The study focuses only on the non-verbal language (body language) barriers to effective intercultural communication.

A qualitative methodology was chosen as the best suited to analyze in-depth communication process, and the meanings of body language in intercultural communication. The paper also presents research aiming to explore factors, which cause non-verbal language barriers in face to face communication in real life, give examples about the effectiveness of non-verbal language barriers on the intercultural communication process, and discuss the strategies of reducing or overcoming the non-verbal language barrier to effective intercultural communication.

Research Questions:

(1) What is the definition of communication? (2) What are the non-verbal barriers to effective intercultural communication? (3) What are the barriers to effective communication? (4) What is the impact of non-verbal language barriers on intercultural communication? (5) What are the root causes of non-verbal barriers to effective intercultural communication? (5) What are the strategies of reducing or overcoming non-verbal barriers to effective intercultural communication?

Why does non-verbal intercultural communication breakdown? There is an overwhelming international consensus on the negative impact of verbal, non-verbal language, and cultural barriers on our lives. For example: Accent 10%, time zone 40%, culture differences 45% and language barriers 47 % (Kai et al.: 2005).

How do non-verbal language barriers of communication have a great influence over the social environment and the whole communication process?

When analyzing the meanings of the non-verbal communication cues, we should take into consideration the following factors : (a) Context: body language depends on the context. It is in a certain situation that might not mean the same in another. For example, somebody rubbing his eyes might indicate irritation, rather being tired or disbelief or upset. (b) Evidence: A single body language signal is not as reliable as several signals. Clusters of body language signals provide a much more reliable indication of meaning than one or two signals in isolation. (c) Culture: norms, rules, language, and customs. Here are some examples which show cultural differences in terms of the interpretation of non-verbal communications in different contexts:

1- Cultural differences: certain body language is universal, for example, smiling, frowning, but somebody's language is specific to a culture. For example, "O. K.," gesture has different meanings to different people: U.S "Okay", France - "Zero," or Worthless, ", Japan – "money, ", Germany and Brazil – "vulgarity." (Desmond: 1994).

2- Language differences: Non-verbal language can be a barrier to intercultural communication not only in terms of the level of knowledge about a foreign language but also because language shapes the way we see

or perceive the world our style of communication and the way we behave in social interaction. Therefore, language is an obvious obstacle to intercultural communication because people from different cultural backgrounds tend to misinterpret each other's meaning. Even when cultures use the same language, there are still differences in the meanings of body language cues or behaviors. For example, touching the back of the head of a friend in Jordan is acceptable, but touching the back of an Egyptian's head is very offensive.

3- Ambiguity: Non-verbal communication is ambiguous. It does not have one specific meaning. Therefore, it often leads to misunderstandings and misinterpretations of body language. It is culture-bound because "the meaning of body language cues varies depending upon cultural factors described as languages of context, time and space" (Bash et al.: 2009, pp.475-483). For example, head nodding is confusing, moving the head up and down interpreted in the western culture as agreement, whereas in India, it means disagreement. Moreover, moving the head from side to side means an agreement in India and disagreement in Western cultures (Samovar et al.: 2007). Non-verbal language is always based on both specific culture and context.

Physical Appearance is another form of non-verbal communication. It includes body shape, weight, hair, skin color, the color of the face, clothes all can affect the communicated message. People are judged by their appearance. Clothing has the power of influence "dress to impress". Physical appearance can communicate many positive and negative messages: moral character, religion, social background, social position, and positive and negative impressions or assumptions. For example, when I was studying in America, I noticed that the Americans have wrong assumptions about Hijab (head covering) of Muslim women: "covering the head is covering the mind" it means that Muslim women are closed-minded. Another wrong assumption that Muslim women cover their heads is because they are bald. A Muslim woman responded to these claims: "I decided to cover my head but not my mind." As a result of these assumptions, some of the American companies did not hire Muslim women because they are closed-minded. Head covering is a traditional dress of both Catholic Nuns and Muslim women despite huge differences in their religious beliefs. However, for the Roman Catholic Nuns, they call it modesty a habit.

4- Aggression: One of the non-verbal barriers to intercultural communication is aggression. It is an unpleasant, frightening, and intimidating behavior. It takes a variety of forms and can be mental, verbal, and physical. For example, In July 2009, An Egyptian Muslim woman Marwa Al-Sherbini (Headscarf Martyr) Germany, was stabbed to death 18 times by a German man in a court during hijab trial, which fuels protests in both Egypt and Germany (Hurn & Tomalin: 2013).

5- Deception: Non-verbal communication influences others. Some people control their body language in order to hide or conceal information to deceive others. For example, "a female airport security officer reported that she had apprehended a woman who had been carrying drugs strapped to her body. The woman looked pregnant, but, according to the security officer, her suspicions were aroused when she noticed that the suspect did not have a 'pregnant face'. Such sensitivity to detail (the language of the body) has much to do with intuition, or 'having an experienced eye for the unexpected". Men disguise in women dress to steal things.

6- Taboo Touch: communication through touch is an important form of non-verbal communication that conveys positive and negative messages. For example, shaking hands, hugging, kissing, and touching both a Muslim and an Arab woman outside the family is taboo, because Arab and Islamic communication style is deeply rooted in the Arabic language and in both Arabic and Islamic cultures. But it is the opposite of western cultures. Muslim and Arab women greet the others by putting their right hands to their hearts with a slight bow. Another example, In Poland and Germany it is common to greet children by patting their heads, but it is both an offensive and taboo in both Thailand and India because the head is the most sacred part of the body (Axtell: 2007).

7- Misinterpretation of the message: when someone misreads a person's body language. For example, someone with their arms folded and tapping their feet might be impatiently waiting for some else who is late, but you might look at them and assume that they are cross with you. This can put you off, asking for help.

8- Racial Prejudices: irrational hatred or hostility towards others based on the individual's belief, nationality, country, race, the color of the face. For example, the color of the face is a form of non-verbal

communication, but for biased Westerners, blackface means inferiority, slavery, crimes. Prejudices or biases often serve as barriers to effective intercultural communication. They exist in all cultures around the world. They can be reduced by eliminating social status differences between the sender and the receiver (black and white) and by showing tolerance to others.

9- Perception and Viewpoints: covering the face of a Muslim woman and communication. Veiling is non-verbal communication. Its meaning varies by culture and context. The veil in Islam symbolizes piety, modesty, and religious identity. To Westerners, a veil is a threatening symbol of political Islam, oppression, terrorism, violence, barbarity, and backwardness (Bullock: 2002).

Bullock (2002). *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical and Modern Stereotypes*. London: The International Institute of Islamic Thought.

10- Posture: sitting cross-legged and showing the sole of the shoes or feet means relaxation in America. However, showing the soles of one's shoes and crossings legs are considered a sign of disrespect or offensive and rude behavior in both the Arab and Islamic world, especially in the presence of someone older or more respected than you. We should respect the other's culture.

3. RESULTS

Summary, the examples mentioned above show how powerful body language in intercultural communication can be, and also show cultural differences in terms of the interpretations and analyzing non-verbal communication. Therefore, without proper meaning of body language, misunderstanding and misinterpretation often prevail between cultures because what is appropriate behavior for one culture can be inappropriate in another. So, communicators must strongly consider the cultural factors of the language of context body language because context gives us the big picture of the communication event. All in all, not accepting the cultural differences will cause embarrassment, violence, confusion, aggression, prejudices, biases, hate crimes, conflict, disappointment. So, we should study, analyze, understand, and accept cultural differences in order to reduce or limit those barriers in order to have effective intercultural communication. Respecting cultural differences is the key to delivering successful messages.

How to Overcome Language Barriers?

Strategies of overcoming, reducing, or limiting non-verbal barriers of intercultural communication. Non-verbal language barriers prevent people from sharing their ideas, thoughts, and feelings, experience, information, and expectations, give feedback or communicate effectively. It blocks the communication process. Here are some of the main solutions to reduce or eliminate them: It is extremely important to raise awareness of the cultural differences and the tremendous role of non-verbal communication among people from all over the world.

Use the receiver's body language .	Frequently check for understanding by asking for feedback.
Politely ask for clarification and avoid any assumptions.	Build awareness of body language of the peoples from different cultures.
Use non-verbal messages appropriately.	Observe and try to do like the others.
Avoid stereotyping.	Hire qualified interpreters and translators
Adjust your behavior according to the cultural context or situation or environment.	Do not judge immediately body language has different meanings in different parts of the world.
Respect cultural differences.	To communicate effectively you need to learn the other's body language and to use it with words.

Check meanings. When communicating across cultures, never assume that the other person has understood your message.	Do not judge people's behavior from the first impression.
Use pictures, diagrams, graphics charts, because they speak a thousand words, communicate across language, and explain complicated concepts to help the receiver understand what the sender is trying to convey.	Do not judge gestures individually but in a cluster. Do not interpret hand or face gesture in isolation, because a whole cluster is more reliable than trying to interpret individual behavior.
Forgive of others and yourself – give the benefit of the doubt.	Individual linguistic ability is important train your people.
Have an understanding of how the message may impact the feelings of the receiver.	Thinking about your receivers and how they best receive your message.
Do not take stranger's non-verbal behavior personally, even if it is insulting in your culture.	Do not judge someone from other cultures by your own cultural values until you know them well.
Be patient with the people that have a different culture.	Develop an awareness of your own non-verbal communication patterns that might be insulting in certain cultures.
Recognize that you cannot change a culture (or Yourself) overnight.	Be open to understand and to respect others' cultures.
Do not assume you understand any non-verbal signals or behavior unless you are familiar with the culture.	-To be sensitive to the actions of the people and try to understand without any judgment
Avoid using body language that contradicts your words, for example smiling when irritated, laughing when worried.	Cultural competence of other cultures.

Table 1. Strategies of overcoming or reducing or limiting non-verbal barriers

Knowing to read, use, and interpret body language effectively in intercultural communication is the best strategy to reduce or limit non-verbal barriers to effective communication. For example, in 2006, The U.S. Army Training Command and Doctrine issued a handbook. No. 2, titled " Arab Culture Awareness: 58 Factsheets." To be distributed to the American soldiers working in Iraq in order to make them aware of the Iraqi culture in order to avoid misunderstandings that might lead to conflict.

4. CONCLUSION

Nonverbal communication is any information or emotions communicated by body language due to behaviors. It differs from culture to culture. Cultural differences play a significant role in non-verbal communication, for it makes people differ in the interpretation and meaning of specific non-verbal cues. Non-verbal language barriers are the obstacles or problems or walls which separate people and prevent them from understanding each other. They are a common challenge to individuals, groups, international companies, governments, nations, and the whole world. The study concluded that misunderstanding cultural context during intercultural communication and misreading human behavior generate non-verbal cultural barriers. Misunderstanding, miscommunication, and misinterpretation of non-verbal messages will arise when the sender (speaker) and receiver (Listener) do not fully understand the cultures of each other.

Therefore, Non-verbal language barriers can create problems of miscommunication between people in intercultural communication such as misunderstanding, misinterpretation of messages, distorted messages, misinformation, confusion, mistrust, uncertainty, frustration, embarrassments, poor and wrong feedback,

deaths, tension, conflict, stereotyping, racial prejudices, discrimination, wrong assumptions. Violence among people can lead to Factors that hindering effective communication. The best strategy to promote effective intercultural communication and get messages across is to bridge the language barriers by hiring qualified and licensed translators, cultural competency, learning cultures, and have training programs about intercultural communication. The future of individuals, groups, societies, and nations depends mainly on their ability to communicate effectively with others in a globalization and communication era.

Recommendation: Based on the above findings the study recommends nations and higher education cultural ministries and multinational companies to start their training programs about intercultural communication.

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