THE INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE. DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Oana-Antonia ILIE

"Nicolae Bălcescu" Land Forces Academy, Sibiu, Romania
antonia_ilie@yahoo.com

Abstract: *Effective intercultural communication has become a priority today because of the importance it has gained in the understanding of the cultural diversity of the world. Immigration, urbanization, international employment, study exchange programs and ease of foreign travel are facilitating daily contact between people of different cultural backgrounds. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the importance of developing the attitudes and the communication skills necessary for multicultural exchange, in everyday life and within organizations. Learning about other cultures and developing intercultural communication competences and skills can help facilitate the multicultural encounter and can lead to more openness and tolerance towards the significant other.*

Keywords: **intercultural communication, globalization, intercultural competence, intercultural sensitivity, intercultural awareness**

1. Introduction

Intercultural communication, or communication between people from different cultures, is as old as history itself. It has occurred for millennia, in the form of wars, commercial activities or social exchanges. Today, as the world has become a global community, the intercultural interactions have become a natural process and a necessity.

Communication with people of different cultures is a common activity in the classroom, in the workplace, in healthcare or politics. Intercultural communication is a fascinating area of study within organizational communication. The term intercultural communication also refers to the wide range of communication issues that arise within an organization, between individuals of different religious, social, ethnic, and educational backgrounds. Each of these individuals brings an unique set of experiences and values to the workplace, characteristic to the culture in which they grew up and are now operating.

Globalization, increasing migration, the development of the transportation systems, the advance of information technologies, international employment, study exchange programs, interdependent economies, foreign travel, political alliances and global peace threats are bringing together people of different cultures and religions with an unprecedented regularity and urgency[1]. Intercultural communication is an essential requirement in the critical efforts to ensure

world peace, stability, necessary to improve relationships between countries, ensure resource sustainability and promote values like tolerance and diversity.

All communication takes place in a culture, therefore the differences between cultures is the primary obstacle in intercultural communication. Different cultures are characterized by different languages, values, behaviors and attitudes towards aspects such as time (the importance of punctuality), context, customs, distance, non-verbal signs, etc.

Employers and business owners agree that the most important element in effective intercultural communication is language:

"*Language issues are becoming a considerable source of conflict and inefficiency in the increasingly diverse work force throughout the world"* [2].

The ability to speak is universal, but language is culturally determined. Culture and language are thought to be strongly connected. In the research field there are strong debates on whether culture shapes language or language shapes culture. *Linguistic Relativity Theory* or the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis asserts that the structure of a language affects its speakers' world view or cognition. Our reality is determined by the language that we use; people speaking different languages will automatically have different worldviews. English is the third largest language by number of native speakers, after Mandarin and Spanish. Approximately 330 to 360 million people around the world speak English as their first language and there are more than 50 English speaking countries. While it is not an official language in most countries, it is currently the language most often taught as a foreign language. It is used as a communication language due to the convenience and ease it provides and its widespread nature. Managers and business owners should avoid discriminating—either a employee, or partner—based on ethnocentric assumptions of their own culture's superiority. Being open-minded, receptive to new cultural information, avoiding stereotypes and respecting difference are key solutions for efficient intercultural exchange.

2. The intercultural communication competence (ICC)

The *intercultural communication competence* (ICC) refers to the active possession by individuals of qualities which contribute to effective intercultural communication, and can be defined in terms of three primary attributes: knowledge, skills and attitudes.

Attitudes: respect, openness, and curiosity/discovery are key attitudes requires for efficient intercultural communication. Consideration for the others, active listening, or showing that they are appreciated and valued are especially important to create lasting relationships with people with different beliefs and values. Openness and curiosity refers to the willingness to move beyond our comfort zone.

Knowledge – when we refer to culture, defined as the beliefs, values and norms of a group of people, that influence individuals' communication behaviors, more categories of knowledge can be considered: *sociolinguistic awareness, cultural self-awareness*, *culture-specific knowledge*, and *deep cultural knowledge.*
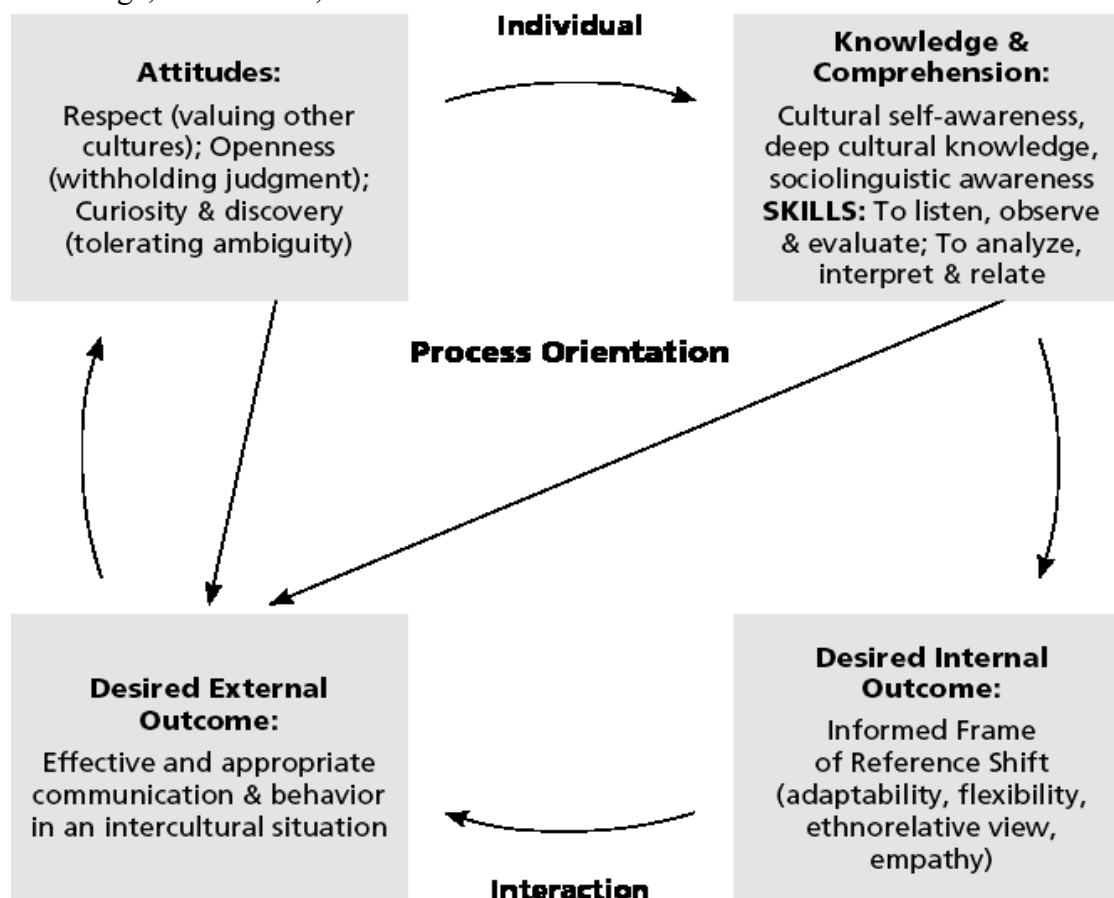
Skills: observing, listening, analyzing, evaluating, interpreting, and relating are the key abilities used for processing the acquired knowledge. Also, essential to the development of intercultural competence is critical self-reflection.

Internal Outcomes: if the key attitudes, knowledge, and skills are acquired, ideally, internal outcomes, as empathy, flexibility and adaptability will be achieved. As a result, individuals will become able to respond to the other person according to his/her expectations. The effectiveness of

communication would be the result of the amount of skills and knowledge acquired.

External Outcomes: the attitudes, knowledge, and skills, and the internal outcomes would lead to efficient intercultural communication behaviors [3].

Individual

Attitudes:

Respect (valuing other cultures); Openness (withholding judgment); Curiosity & discovery (tolerating ambiguity)

Knowledge & Comprehension:

Cultural self-awareness, deep cultural knowledge, sociolinguistic awareness
SKILLS: To listen, observe & evaluate; To analyze, interpret & relate

Process Orientation

Desired External Outcome:

Effective and appropriate communication & behavior in an intercultural situation

Desired Internal Outcome:

Informed Frame of Reference Shift (adaptability, flexibility, ethnorelative view, empathy)

Interaction

3. Efficient intercultural communication skills

Global business professionals require excellent skills in intercultural communication because they must exchange information with people from all over the world. In order to be truly effective, they also need to take into consideration the cultural context and conventions, such as timing of an intercultural dialogue, the distance that different cultures require, the differences in nonverbal communication codes.

Successful companies impose acceptance of diversity as a legal and moral obligation, vital for improving work climate, morale, creativity and productivity. By recognizing that different groups of people solve asserted tasks in different ways, employees learn to value their differences and appreciate the different approaches, solutions and points of view.

Guo-Ming Chen and William G. Starosta's model of intercultural competence (1996) recognizes three perspectives:

- *Intercultural sensitivity* - acknowledging and respecting the cultural diversity;
- *Intercultural awareness*- understanding culture variation and being aware of one's own cultural identity ;
- *Intercultural androitness*- message skills, knowledge of appropriate self-disclosure,flexibility,interaction management, social skills.

ICC includes adapting previously acquired communication competences and including the specific requirements of intercultural competence such as:
- to possess good interpersonal and interaction skills;
- to be able to communicate in a second language;
- to be able to use communications technologies,
- searching for, processing and analyzing data from various sources;
- to be able to adapt easily to new situations and environments;
- to show awareness of gender issues and equal opportunities;
- to be able to work in a multinational team;
- to be able to work in an intercultural environment;
- to manifest tolerance, cultural sensitivity and cultural awareness
- to show appreciation and respect for people of different cultures;
- to possess knowledge about different cultures and customs [4];

There are various theoretical approaches that attempt to identify the skills needed to achieve effective intercultural communication.

The *communication approach* identifies four skill areas:
- *personality strength*- individuals must have a strong sense of self, must know themselves well, and through their self-awareness to initiate a positive communication with the other;
- *communication skills- message skills* (individuals must have verbal and nonverbal communication competence, to be able to understand the language and give the appropriate feedback) and *social skills* (empathy and identity maintenance, being able to relate to people with different cultural background).

- *psychological adjustment* – individuals must be able to adapt to new cultural contexts and overcome the culture shock, the feelings of stress and alienation caused by the unfamiliarity of a new environment.
- *cultural awareness* – understanding of the cultural values, behaviors and norms of the host culture, as different from one's own, understanding how people from different cultures think and behave.

The *business approach*, referring to the skills needed in international business, mention: *self-maintenance skills* (skills needed to maintain identity), *interpersonal skills* (needed to maintain communication with the host-nationals), and *cognitive skills* (the correct perception of the host environment). The *military approach* as stated by the US Navy (*Overseas Diplomacy*, 1979) identifies eight skills needed for success in intercultural communication:

1. *Self-awareness* –ability to use information about oneself in multicultural situations, to use that information in order to cope with difficult situations;
2. *Self-respect*- self-confidence, respect for oneself and respectful behavior;
3. *Interaction*- effectively communicating with people coming from another culture;
4. *Empathy*- understanding the other people's feelings and worldview;
5. *Adaptability*- adjusting to unfamiliar environment or to norms different than your own;
6. *Certainty*- attitude of confidence in confronting with contradictory situations;

7. *Initiative and acceptance*- tolerance or willingness to accept things that differ from what you are familiar with [5].

In **conclusion**, the acquiring of intercultural communication competences and skills involves more than language use and knowledge about other cultures; in the development of intercultural competence, skills and attitudes are equally important. Organizations must be aware that the cultural differences in communication behavior among the employees could be notable, and to establish effective intercultural communication practices. Adapting to a new culture is a lengthy and complex process. Acculturation, intercultural adaptation and learning are most effective when both parties are involved and willing to cooperate.

References

[1] Larry A. Samovar, Richard E Porter, Edwin R, mc. Daniel, Carolyn S. Roy, *Communication between Cultures*, Cengage Learning, 2017, p. 6

[2] John P. Fernandez, *Managing a Diverse Work Force: Regaining the Competitive Edge*, Lexington Books, 1991

[3] Deardorff, "*The Identification and Assessment of Intercultural Competence as a Student Outcome of Internationalization at Institutions of Higher Education in the United States*," Journal of Studies in International Education 10, no. 3 (2006): 241-66; Deardorff, The Sage Handbook of Intercultural Competence (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2009).

[4] Berardo, Kate, and Darla K. Deardorff, *Building Cultural Competence: Innovative Activities and Models.* Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2012, http://www.tuningjournal.org/article/view/765/1088.

[5] Fred E Jandt, *An Introduction to Intercultural Communication, Identities in a Global Community*, California State University, SAGE Publications, 2010, p.52-55.