

CONTEXT IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: A STUDY

**DR. LAXMI DHAR DWIVEDI,
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
AND LANGUAGES
VIT UNIVERSITY
TAMIL NADU, INDIA.**

**M.SENGUTTUVAN
ASISSTANT PROFESSOR
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
AND LANGUAGES
VIT UNIVERSITY
TAMIL NADU, INDIA.**

Abstract

The era of globalization today enables trades to take place and flourish in many parts of the world, transcending cultures, geography and language. The advancement of technology, along with the accessible and affordable telecommunication gadgets allows efficiency of time and space for global communication. The movement of people is also less restricted, hence making cultural encounters become more often. The context as a salient construct influences the quality and quantity of communication. Lack of effective communication abilities in various contexts causes misunderstanding amongst the people of other culture. The paper examines complexity and the significance of contexts in different cultures. It also explores educational, historical and political contexts of various cultures and suggests some strategies for better intercultural communication understanding.

Keyword: context, culture inter cultural communication, globalization

CONTEXT IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: A STUDY

-DR LAXMI DHAR DWIVEDI

AND

M. SENGUTTUVAN

Intercultural communication is a newly-emerging field of study that looks at how people from different cultural backgrounds endeavor to communicate. In the area of intercultural communication, the different contextual parameters play very important role. It can be said that most of our communication interactions are guided by contexts. This means human beings communicate within contexts to influence the quality and quantity of communication. (Calloway Thomas & Blake 1999).

In the field of intercultural research, perhaps the most significant study was conducted by Geert Hofstede (1984, 1991). The research identified four dimensions on which country culture differ

Individualism versus collectivism: Individualism versus collectivism is the most widely researched dimension. Several studies have provided theoretical and empirical evidence that the value orientation of individualism and collectivism are pervasive in a wide range of cultures (Hofstede, 1991; Schwarz & Bilsky, 1990). Individualistic cultures emphasize individual achievements and rights. Individuals are free to take decision for them. On the other hand, collectivistic cultures emphasize the groups achievements and rights, including the group's right to make decisions for the individual.

Power distance: Power distance is the degree to which less-powerful members will tolerate unequal distribution of power. In fact cultures can be divided in two groups. One which is powerful, and other which is powerless or having less power. 'Might is right' prevails in almost in all the cultures of the world and it has a great impact on the communication behavior of individuals

Masculinity versus femininity: masculinity, according to Hofstede, is a way to characterize cultures that value assertiveness, competitiveness and material success, whereas femininity characterizes cultural preferences for collaboration, nurturing, and harmony. (Beamer & Varner 2001) all these communication have great impact on communication behavior of individuals.

All human interaction is influenced to same degree by social, physical and cultural settings in which it occurs. Generally, when we communicate with members of our own culture,

we have internalized the rules that govern the behavior within the context and we are able to communicate without giving much thought to those rules. But when we are engaged in intercultural communication, we must influence the communication context; otherwise we may encounter variety of surprises (Samovar, Porter, & Stefani, (1998).

Significance of context is recognized by scholars who observe various cultures and develop classification systems of cultural behavior based on nature of the context of given cultures (Calloway-Thomas, Cooper, & Blake, 1999).

Hall and Hall (1990) defined 'context' as "information that surrounds an event; it is inextricably bound up with the meaning of the event" (P.6).Hall (1976) observed two types of cultures, namely "high" and "low" context cultures. The communication behavior of an individual is very much linked to the type of his/her culture. A high-context communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person while very little is in the coded, explicit transmitted part of the message" (Hall, 1976, P.79) A low-context communication or message in contrast is one in which "the mass of information is vested in the explicit code" (P.70).

Hall (1976) further classified countries of Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand as low context culture, whereas countries in African, Asia, and other non-western areas of the world as high context cultures.Gudykunst& Matsumoto (1996) concluded, "Members of individualistic cultures predominantly use low context. Communication and tend to communicate in a direct fashion, whereas members of collective cultures predominantly use high context messages and tend to communicate in an indirect fashion"(P.29).

People from high context culture are less verbal, hence more inclined to communicate non-verbally like India, Japan, China, Taiwan and Indonesia. People from low context culture on other hand, value verbal expressions and are more communicative, like USA, Germany, and Australia. Indian culture in general is a high context culture. People in India are very context sensitive. In Indian culture one needs to learn about the expectations regarding the food and hospitality-when,where,what and how food is prepared, presented and eaten and socialize and establish a relationship before one starts doing business. In many formal and informal business meetings or discussions, the context serves as a basis for expressing the views and opinions.

Calloway-Thomas, Copper and Blake (1999) give better understanding of contexts. They have observed that the challenge that we have in intercultural communication with regard to context is the extent to which we recognize the significance context plays in our interactions and willingness to fly as hard as possible to understand others who do not share our roots and have not used the same routes. There are various contexts in communication but following contexts seem to be more common. In these contexts we are more likely to encounter people from other cultures.

Educational Context: The Chinese have saying "by nature all men are alike, but by education widely different. "As children grow what they learn and the ways in which they learn

influence their thinking and behavior. Education imparts in children a set of guidelines and values. Children are shaped by school as they become aware of what they need to know in order to lead productive, successful and satisfying lives (Henry, 1976).

Historical and Political context: When groups of different countries meet and communicate, their political beliefs, values perceptions and cultural features guide them. Historical relations between countries and groups play an important role. When it comes to intercultural contacts and communication, the more we become aware of historical contexts the better prepared we are for promoting effective interpersonal communication. When people show respect for others political ideology, history and culture, they have better chances of achieving effective intercultural communication and relationship.

Non-Verbal communication context: Non Verbal communication is an important part of intercultural communication process. Hall (1959) suggested, "I am convinced that much of our difficulty with people in other countries stems from the fact that so little is known about cross communication". Mehrabian (1982) estimated that only 7% of the meaning of any message is carried through the verbal message -through words. 93 percent of the meaning is carried through the non verbal communication channels, 38 percent through the voice, and 55 percent through the face. BirdWhistell (1970) presented a more conservative estimate, suggesting 65 percent of the message's meaning is conveyed through non-verbal channels. Though these studies are quite old, they have their significance even today.

An important part of nonverbal communication is silence. In Low context cultures where ideas are explicitly encoded in to words, silence is often interpreted as the absence of communication. High-context cultures have a different attitude towards the use of silence. In some of the Asian countries like Japan, India people believe that silence is preferable to conversation. It is through silence that one can discover the truth inside oneself (Beamer & Varner 2001)

There are other dimensions of nonverbal communication such as chronemics, proxemics, kinesics, haptics, paralanguage and appearance. Each one has its own significance in its cultural context.

Different contexts mentioned in this paper are important issue in intercultural communication. If we are to communicate effectively with all these different people, it is important to keep an open mind and try to learn as much as possible about their various cultures and to be sensitive to them. Intercultural dialogue is possible only if the participants satisfy three criteria: they must adopt an attitude of openness towards each other's cultural perspectives; they must come to understand each other's perspectives; and they must communicate under conditions which they mutually can accept as fair.

In a nutshell, the ever expanding growth in the communication across cultures has made the world a more complex place to manage, but simpler and easier place to live. The enhanced communication has allowed the world to move towards a 'world without boundaries'. If various

contexts mentioned in this paper are understood properly, misunderstandings can be avoided to a great extent. Our communication with other cultures will be more accurate, meaningful, and effective to learn and utilize the benefits from other cultures and societies.

Works Cited

Beamer, L., & Varner, I. (2001). *Intercultural communication in the global Workplace*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.

Birdwhistell, R. (1970) *Kinesics and Context*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Calloway-Thomas, C., Cooper P. J., & Blake, C. (1990). *Intercultural Communication: Roots and routes*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Furnham, A. (1992). Strangers' adaptation. In W. Gudykunst, & Y.Y. Kim (eds.). *Readings on communication with strangers: An Approach to intercultural communication* (pp. 336-345). New York: McGraw-Hill

Gudykunst, W.B, & Matsumoto, Y. (1996). Cross-cultural variability of communication in personal relationship. In W.B Gudykunst, S. Ting-Toomey, & T Nishida (Eds.). *Communication in personal relationships across cultures* (pp.19-51). Thousand Oaks: Sage

Hall, E.T. (1959). *The Silent Language*. Greenwich: Fawcett

Hofstede, G (1984). *Culture's Consequences*. Abridged ed. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage

Mehrabian, A. (1982). *Silent messages: Implicit communication of emotion and attitudes*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth