Eliminating Barriers to Cross-Cultural Communication through Curricular Interventions

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ABSTRACT

With the world fast becoming a global village, communicating across cultures has become an inevitable reality. On one hand, cross-cultural communication or intercultural communication presents a fine opportunity to foster global peace and prosperity as we mine the potential value of cultural diversity. On the other hand, it can present unpleasant consequences if not well managed. The latter seems more prevalent in our world today as a result of the barriers cultural diversity imposes on intercultural communication. Intercultural or cross-cultural communication barriers such as anxiety, uncertainty, stereotyping, and ethnocentrism are caused by inadequate cultural knowledge and the lack of intercultural communicative skills. Eliminating these barriers will require adequate training in intercultural communication and exposure to cultures outside ours. The school provides the best motivation, structures, and resources for training or socializing our younger generation therefore this paper proposes a number of curricular interventions the school can implement to equip learners to overcome intercultural communication barriers. These interventions include the adoption of multicultural education in our schools, the introduction of literature and cultural studies as subjects, the use of communicative language teaching approach in teaching language, and the use of the new media in the classroom. The justification (for these interventions) presented in this paper is drawn mainly from published accounts and exploratory ethnographic studies.

INTRODUCTION

Intercultural communication or cross-cultural communication is a relatively new field of study, yet it has generated a lot of interest. Research in this area has been diverse yet interdisciplinary, making it possible to link intercultural communication to a broad spectrum of disciplines such business, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, and psychology. Studies in intercultural

communication gained prominence after efforts by anthropologists and linguists like Hall and Lado to link language, culture, and communication (Kramsch, 2001). Initial research in the area focused on developing guidelines or principles for training people who were engaged in multinational businesses, international diplomacy, and missionary activities (Kramsch, 2001).

Today, however, many new grounds, in terms of research approaches, have been broken, and more and more theories have been developed to deepen our understanding of intergroup communication. For instance, through various studies it has been possible to distinguish between intercultural and cross-cultural communication, with the former focussing on face-to-face communication between people of different national cultures while the latter involves the comparison of face-to-face communication across cultures (Gudykunst and Mody, 2001). But these two areas are two sides of a coin, and sometimes the terms are used interchangeably (Kramsch, 2001).

More than the pioneering work of early researchers, global dynamics have remarkably made the field of cross-cultural or intercultural communication attractive. Today there is rapid internationalization of every institution and system in our world: school, religion, business, governance, and so on. This rapid globalisation, being fuelled by unprecedented technological advancement in transport and telecommunication, means people of different cultural backgrounds are increasingly getting close to one another to maximise the value cultural diversity offers. But as we get face-to-face with people of different cultural backgrounds the challenge of dealing with our cultural differences and harnessing the potential benefits of cultural diversity becomes enormous. Cultural differences have significant impact on our intercultural communication. They are the source of misunderstanding, misinterpretation,

anxiety, and uncertainty, which ultimately result in miscommunication (Stephan and Stephan, 2002:127; Gudykunst, 2002; Gudykunst and Lee, 2002).

Studies in intercultural or cross-cultural communication are helping shape many facets of our human interaction by drawing attention to the characteristics of verbal and nonverbal behaviour across cultures, the impact of culture in constructing meaning, the structure and communicative goals of discourses, and factors that influence our ability, or otherwise, to interact and interpret discourse (Kramsch, 2001). Theories and empirical studies in intercultural communication have had serious implications for social action and social change (Rogers and Hart, 2002:14).

It is the purpose of this paper to justify the inclusion of activities that promote intercultural training in school curriculums. This paper proposes a number of activities or interventions the school can implement to help learners deal with the barriers inherent in intercultural communication, and eventually equip them to be effective communicators. The justification presented in this paper is drawn mainly from published accounts and exploratory ethnographic studies.

KEY CONCEPTS

Culture, Communication, and Intercultural Communication

In studying intercultural communication many researchers have attempted to conceptualise culture and communication from various perspectives in order to appreciate their interrelationship. Generally, culture is conceptualised as a shared way of life collectively developed and shared by a group of people and transmitted from generation to generation (Tubbs

and Moss, 1994). Culture embodies many complex elements such as beliefs, values, language, political systems, and tools which together give a group its code or characteristics (Griffin, 2000; Tubbs and Moss, 1994). This code is not imposed by one individual or an external body. Rather, it is "socially constructed" (by members that make up the group) and "historically transmitted" (Philipsen, 1992, cited in Griffin, 2000:390).

More significantly, culture is owned by a group of people who by consensus accept and share a common code, verbal or nonverbal, reflective of specific values, beliefs, customs, and so on (Barnet and Lee, 2002). Goodenough (1964) views culture not in terms of things or behaviour but in terms of a picture of things a people form in their minds, and their models for perceiving, relating, and interpreting things and behaviour (cited in Barnet and Lee, 2002:276). The convergence one could draw from all these definitions is the fact that each group is bound by a certain unique way of doing things and interpreting things or behaviour.

Communication, though variously defined, generally describes a process by which information is exchanged among two or more people in a given context. Ultimately, this process of exchanging information is bound by a purpose: that is, to reduce uncertainty and develop a common understanding among the interactants (Barnett and Lee, 2002).

Intercultural communication is thus "the exchange of information between well-defined groups of people with significantly different cultures" (Barnett and Lee, 2002:277). The process is quite complex in the sense that this exchange of information takes place in a context which is a fusion of significantly different systems. The process also requires conscious attempts by each party at

reducing "uncertainty about the future behaviour of the other party through an increase in understanding of the other group" (Barnett and Lee, 2002:277; Gudykunst, 2002).

Clearly, cultural variability (the extent to which cultures differ) is key to any conceptualization of intercultural communication. Various studies have examined cultural variability at the level of power distribution (or power distance), uncertainty avoidance, gender roles, face negotiation, individualism-collectivism, and others (Gudykunst and Lee, 2002; Griffin, 2000). One popular conclusion is that cultural variability is the main predictor of how successful one can be in any intercultural communication encounter.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Gudykunst's Anxiety and Uncertainty Management Model

Gudykunst and associates developed the anxiety and uncertainty management theory to explain what happens when we communicate with people of different cultural backgrounds. The theory suggests that when interlocutors of different cultural backgrounds clash in face-to-face interactions, they are confronted with uncertainty (which Gudykunst describes as cognitive) and anxiety (affective) (Griffin, 2000:396). The uncertainty describes our inability to explain actions and reactions of the "strangers" we communicate with. It demonstrates how unsure we are about the interpretations we impute on the behaviour of the people we communicate with (Griffin, 2000). Anxiety, on the other hand, portrays our feeling of uneasiness and apprehension about what might happen in the intercultural communication encounter. The extent to which we are influenced by anxiety and uncertainty would determine how effective we would be in our intercultural communication (Gudykunst, 2000).

Although anxiety and uncertainty exert some influence on intra-group communication, their impact is profound in intercultural communication. Anxiety and uncertainty filter the mutual understanding that must exist to make any communication encounter successful. But anxiety and uncertainty are not entirely negative. Rather they compel us to approach our communication with a level of "mindfulness", a deliberate thought over the communication process. In our state of uncertainty and uneasiness, we constantly become conscious of our choices and in the long run manage the communication situations to minimise misunderstanding.

In intercultural communication anxiety and uncertainty are heighten by cultural variability. If the differences between cultures are profound, anxiety and uncertainty would increase when members of the different cultural groups engage in intercultural communication. In a schematic representation Gudykunst demonstrates the underlying causes of uncertainty and anxiety as motivational, knowledge and skill factors.

For this paper these factors offer relevant support for the need to incorporate various interventions into our school curriculum to train learners in intercultural communication. The skill factors include our ability to empathise, tolerate ambiguities, adapt communication, and gather appropriate information. Knowledge of more than one perspective, similarities and differences, alternative interpretations are some of the knowledge factors relevant for effective intercultural communication. The motivational factors are needs, attraction, social bonds and openness to information.

Clearly, all these factors are not divorced from the traditional aims of education for which schools are established. Fundamentally society has vested in the school the responsibility of

equipping the young generation with skills, knowledge, and the right motivation for dealing with personal and societal challenges (Sadker and Sadker, 2003: 140; Ornstein, 1995). It is therefore not out of place if the school realigns its curriculum to accommodate interventions that would train young people in intercultural communication, a growing challenge in this globalised world.

Through curricular interventions proposed in this paper learners would acquire the requisite skills, knowledge, and motivation to manage their intercultural communication in more effective ways. Training in intercultural, among other things, exposes learners to barriers such as anxiety, uncertainty, stereotypes, and ethnocentrism inherent in intercultural communication and equips learners with skills such as mindfulness necessary for managing intercultural communication. This theory strongly support the need for training in intercultural communication and in my view the school has the space, time, orientation, and resources to offer such training.

Communicative Competence

Hymes (1972) developed the theory of communicative competence to establish a link between language and culture (Richards and Rogers, 1986:69). This theory asserts that both linguistic knowledge and sociocultural or contextual knowledge are prerequisites for any effective intercultural communication (Richards and Rogers, 1986:69). Communicative competence highlights the view that language and culture are inseparable. Therefore linguistic competence should go along with a commensurate cultural competence, that is, one described as communicatively competent must have both linguistic and cultural competence. Linguistic competence is demonstrated in the grammatical knowledge one possesses, such as knowledge of words, phrases, and sentences and rules governing their combination in discourse. Cultural competence, on the other hand, focuses on the cultural propriety of linguistic choices in a real

communication encounter. Different social situations require different routines that are culturally defined. The competent communicator chooses the appropriate linguistic forms that meet the cultural expectation of the context in which the communication takes place.

In some contexts in Ghana, for instance, "Please" is a polite marker not just for requests but all forms of speech acts or discourse, especially with adults. Therefore, it is not uncommon to hear expressions like "Please, Good morning," "Yes, Please," and "Please, my name is Kofi". The speaker with communicative competence would have to vary his routines to meet the differences in cultural expectations. If the same communicator meets a native British the above use of "Please" would be avoided.

The theory of communicative competence lends enough credence to the call for training in intercultural communication in our schools through direct and indirect curricular interventions. Traditionally, our school system has focused on training learners to acquire grammatical knowledge. This paper calls for a commensurate training in contextual competence. Such competence will include knowledge of the different expectations different cultural contexts impose on different communication situations. This knowledge is vital in reducing anxiety and uncertainty which are inherent barriers in intercultural communication.

Recent studies in intercultural communication strongly support the need for intercultural training of employees, both domestic and international, in areas of cultural diversity and intercultural communication (Albert, 1994). The position of this paper is that the school (from the basic to the tertiary levels) is a better placed to offer this training.

BARRIERS TO INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Misunderstanding is the ultimate barrier to communication (Griffin, 2000:394). Communication is said to have taken place when interlocutors have been able to reach some common interpretation of their intentions. Even in intra-group communication it is almost impossible to reach absolute understanding. This makes inter-group or inter-cultural communication even more challenging. The existence of cultural variability is in itself a barrier to intercultural communication. When cultures are widely apart or different, it means the level of cultural variability is high, resulting in high levels of anxiety and uncertainty, which ultimately bring tension and misunderstanding into the intercultural communication situation.

To illustrate: I gave a gift to a colleague who came from a different cultural background. My expectation was an extended response of appreciation from him. My disappointment was with the left hand with which he took the gift and the brief appreciation he expressed. He didn't like, or he didn't value it. I was worried he would not be nice towards me again. All these interpretations I made reflected my uncertainty about his actions and my anxiety reflected my worry and apprehensions about what might happened. My cultural context reflects a high context type in which more attention is given to interpreting non-verbal behaviours. By sharp contrast my colleague belonged to a low cultural context which stresses direct and explicit communication, that is, verbal messages are vital in a communication process.

Mistranslation

Barriers to verbal communication include cultural mistranslation (Tubbs and Moss, 1994). This is common in second and foreign language context. Scholars are divided over how such mistranslation should be perceived (Kachru, 1990). While some have described mistranslation in derogatory terms like "interference" and "sub-standard forms", others have perceived them as innovations which reflect cultural dynamics. But the reality is that in intercultural communication mistranslation undermines understanding. Literal translation such as "I am going to come" instead of "I shall return" can be sources of misunderstanding. Expressions such as "I am going to greet the king" or "to the white house" or "to the end room" (meaning "I am going to the toilet") are cultural innovations that can be sources of misunderstanding in inter cultural communication.

Norms and Roles

Norms are culturally defined rules for determining acceptable and appropriate behaviour (Tubbs and Moss, 1994). They include those that govern social situations and conversational routines such as greetings, making requests, and expressing various emotions. In intercultural communication interlocutors may be tempted to transfer their cultural norms to contexts that are not appropriate (Richards and Sukwiwat, 1983). Roles are also sources of cultural variability. Roles are sets of norms applicable to specific groups of people in society. In a particular culture, different roles are assigned to men and women, children and parents/guardians, husbands and wives, and so on. In some Ghanaian contexts women are expected to kneel while talking to men; subjects cannot talk directly to a chief except through linguists. Violations of these roles may pose serious threats to intercultural communication.

Beliefs and Values

Beliefs and values impede understanding in intercultural communication. Some interlocutors will not be forthright with information on personal ambition, finances, and career plans because of their beliefs, especially beliefs that assert strong influence of the supernatural on man. Beliefs in witchcraft, for instance, would scare people from giving out personal information to strangers. On the other hand, people would usually readily communicate their values and feelings, especially when such values are being disrespected.

Stereotyping

Stereotypes are our value judgements about people (Pang, 2001:114). They are born out of our inadequate information about people, making us make unintelligent choices in our intercultural communication. Cultural stereotypes, like any other type of stereotypes, hinder understanding because they exaggerate or overgeneralize what we perceive about people (Tubbs and Moss, 1994). Overgeneralised thoughts result in misinterpretation of actions, thus heightening anxiety, which is a threat to understanding. Almost everyone imposes one stereotype or the other on individuals or groups of people. Stereotypes can be favourable or unfavourable to a group (Pang, 2001). Some stereotypes include perceiving some groups as quick tempered, dishonest, smart, and liars.

Generally, stereotypes are born out of our fear of the group we stereotype or the lack of knowledge of the group, or misconceptions, or high levels of cultural variability (Pang, 2001). The media is unfortunately perceived as a strong promoter of stereotypes (Tubbs and Moss, 1994; Pang, 2001). This is because the media is a major source of information about foreigners or strangers. As we watch movies or international news we form exaggerated opinions about the

groups represented. Usually the amount of information we gather is limited thus leading us to form such inadequate conclusions. Dispelling stereotypes seems almost impossible, and in intercultural communication the challenge to dispel stereotypes is even more profound. However, since stereotypes are born out of inadequate cultural information or experience of other cultures, cultural awareness and intercultural training can be helpful in dealing with cultural stereotypes.

Ethnocentrism

Our own cultural experience inadvertently causes us to feel that culture is innate. Hence we are forced to feel or think that our group's way of life is the standard against which all other groups' culture should be assessed. Therefore any contrary code or behaviour is considered improper or irresponsible or politically motivated (Hall, 1976, cited in Tubbs and Moss, 1994:443). This tendency to judge the code of other cultures by using our culture as the standard is described as ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism creeps into intercultural communication to filter understanding by heightening anxiety, which, as shown, is a threat to understanding (Stephan and Stephan, 1992). The higher the level of ethnocentrism, the higher the level of anxiety. Cross-cultural awareness is can go a long way to reduce ethnocentrism and, invariably, anxiety and enhance our capacity to handle intercultural communication in effective ways.

CURRICULA INTERVENTIONS

Curriculum refers to the totality of the experience the school offers learners. It includes both planned and unplanned activities, the physical and socio-cultural environment which impact directly or indirectly on the learner. This paper proposes that the school, through its curriculum, make conscious efforts at promoting intercultural training. Below are the interventions proposed:

Multicultural Education

With the world shrinking into a global village, nations, businesses, schools, organizations, and our societies at large are becoming culturally diverse (Spring, 2002). On daily basis we are compelled by globalization to interact or relate with people of different cultural origin. To deal with the challenges of cultural diversity there is the need for our schools to adopt the multicultural educational approach. Multicultural education is not just accommodation different cultures in a school setting. Rather multicultural education aims at providing an enabling school environment which equips learners to function in other culture without losing ties with their original culture (Spring, 2002).

A multicultural school environment brings together learners of different cultural background for the purpose of equipping them with skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will make them functional both to themselves and to the larger society. Such settings are better posed to respond more effectively to children of different cultural backgrounds and exploit those differences as foundations on which new learning can be built (Tozer, Violas, and Senese 2001). Multicultural education directly or indirectly equips learners to be able to manage the uncertainty and anxiety that usually characterise intercultural communication. Gudykunst's axiom 37 asserts that when we share a common objective with strangers our anxiety levels decrease and we are able to build the needed confidence in predicting their behaviour. At the very superficial level, just putting together people of different cultural origin under the common goal of schooling or education would help reduce misunderstanding that usually comes from uncertainty and anxiety (Griffin, 200:401)

A multicultural curriculum offers an excellent educational environment for learners to learn more about people of other cultures, thus reducing stereotypes and ethnocentric tendencies. Stereotypes results from limited experience or information about other cultures. If learners get to experience other learners of different cultural backgrounds they learn more about their cultures. In Ghana, until recently, secondary schools and colleges were characterised by students of different cultural backgrounds. This provided real opportunities for students to appreciate the cultural diversity of the country. Though each school was culturally diverse there existed a strong common bound in each school, especially during inter collegiate competitions. Here diversity well managed brings unity. This situation is unfortunately being replaced by community schools, which are generally culturally homogenous. I proposed that when community schools are established educational systems should promote diversity in the positing of students to school and colleges.

Cultural Studies

Not long ago, cultural studies was a subject in basic schools in Ghana and learners were exposed to the diverse cultural groups in the country. Beneficiaries of this curriculum acquired basic knowledge of the different cultural groups. They had the opportunity to acquire, among other things, knowledge of conventional routine differences, differences in political institutions and values. A unique feature of the cultural studies curriculum was the approach. Teachers were encouraged to use resource persons in their communities. These were indigenes of the cultures being represented or taught. Again, role plays, field trips and audio visual materials were included in the teaching methods of the subject. Cultural studies provided a platform for learners to juxtapose their culture with others in order to appreciate the diversity and its prospects, especially in this age of globalisation.

Cultural knowledge reduces "cultural shock" which sometimes leads to negative attitude towards a new culture (DeVito, 2002). Gudykunst's axiom 41 supports the view that an increase in our knowledge of strangers' language and culture will produce an increase in our ability to manage our anxiety and an increase in our ability to accurately predict their behaviour (Griffin, 2000:400). Certainly there are enough reasons for the inclusion of cultural studies in our school curriculum.

The Study of Literature

Literature as a discipline provides an ideal opportunity to integrate cultural content into the school curriculum (Pang, 2001:224). While providing delight and enjoyment, literature sharpens our imaginations and offers us a vicarious experience in the world we live in (Huck, Helper, Hickman, and Kiefer, 2001:8). Literature offers us the fastest, cheapest, but the most thrilling cruise around the world. The experience we enjoy in literatures is timeless as we read from across the globe. We can also travel as far back as the era of Beowulf, Sophocles, Chaucer, and Shakespeare or fly into the year 2044 in Welwyn Wilton Katz's *Time Ghost*. In all these experiences literature offers a unique approach to learning about the culture of people in different parts of the world, how their culture existed, how it is evolving, and how it may change with time. Texts which portray authentic intercultural interactions provide readers with the motivation, knowledge, and skills to overcome anxiety, uncertainty, and other barriers of intercultural communication. The Comprehensiveness of literature experience provides meaningful ways of reducing stereotyping and ethnocentric tendencies.

Language Teaching and Learning

Traditional language curriculums focus on grammatical competence while communicative competence suffers neglect. Products of such curriculums usually display high competence in linguistic knowledge but lack requisite skills in handling authentic communication (Dzamishie, 1997; Richards and Rogers, 1986; Richards and Sukwiwat, 1983). What they lack is a basic understanding of the socio-cultural function of language.

In second and foreign language learning contexts the challenge has always been which model learners should be exposed to and which language culture should be emphasised. Of course it makes sense to adopt the target or native speaker model, with all the cultural attachments, as medium of instruction. But such a choice without recourse to the changing communication needs of learners will not be appropriate. To address the dilemma of which model to use, Norrish (1978) calls for a liberalisation of views on non standard language varieties.

The English language, for instance, has metamorphosed into several Englishes. Therefore, "to teach only one form of English would seem to be asking for a conflict between the different Englishes in use." (Norrish 1978:35). The most meaningful approach then is to "consider the different uses of English in a particular country" (Norrish, 1978:35). The question should be: Which models will serve the communication needs of learners? If learners need English to communicate with native speakers, then the native model should be taught. Similarly, if learners would largely communicate in a typical Ghanaian context, for instance, then the Ghanaian model, with its cultural innovations, should be the model. In so far as it is possible, more than one model should be taught. This is the poly-model Norrish proposes. The poly-model exposes

learners to the culture behind language. It emphasises socio-cultural or contextual awareness in communication especially between inter-groups.

Concerning approach, the communicative language teaching model is popular today (Richards and Rogers, 1986; Dzameshie 1997). This approach focuses on communicative competence. Its curriculum is experience-based and learner-centred (Richards and Rogers, 1986). The content generally includes "well-selected experiences" that reflect the real life or authentic communication needs of learners (Richard and Rogers, 1986). The value of this approach in intercultural communication is the experience the language curriculum offers. Communicative language teaching addresses learners' language needs, equipping them to communicate effectively in a world of cultural diversity.

The New Media in the classroom

The digital age is not only making it easier and faster for us to get closer to each other, it is also making it possible for us to see and know what others are doing. The new media in the classroom provides learners with a window through which they can see people of other cultures. Through virtual tours to places of different cultural backgrounds, documentaries, interviews, and social sites, learners bridge the gap of knowledge they know about people on the other side of their culture. The prospects are tremendous but the challenges are enormous. The digital divide is still too wide for us to be able to explore other cultures. In many developing countries access to the new media is still a luxury.

IMPLICATIONS

The inclusion of intercultural training in our school curriculum is worthwhile for our schools, and the world of work, which are fast becoming culturally diverse. Unfortunately many students, teachers, and school authorities are being frustrated by the diversity invading the school. Training learners and educators to deal with the barriers diversity creates in their intercultural relationships will transform our schools into peaceful and conducive learning and working environments while preparing learners to face the communication realities in the world outside the school. Intercultural training will certainly link the school with industry or the world of work. If the school provides adequate intercultural training through various curricular activities, it will reduce the cultural shock learners are bound to face after school.

Although many disciplines are craving for attention and inclusion in our school curriculum and curriculum developers are overwhelmed by what should be where at what time and with what resource, the best decision lies in counting the cost, weighing the options available and taking bold political and socio-economic steps. Implementing these curricula interventions would involve the realignment of the school curriculum, bearing in mind various needs and interests. In this case there should be a clear policy framework that will guide design, implantation, and evaluation of the new curriculum being proposed. Again, there would be the need to adequately resources our schools to accommodate the changes proposed.

CONCLUSION

This paper has proposed that the school curriculum provide space for activities that will train learners to overcome barriers inherent in intercultural communication. There could be many other interventions, but what this paper seeks to suggest is that interventions through the school

curriculum should be the first option. Neither educational level nor geographical boundaries are specified in this paper. This is born out of the belief that intercultural relation or communication is real and knows no limits. This paper has provided justification for the inclusion in our school curriculum training in intercultural communication. The next challenge that should attract the attention of researchers is how to design, implement, and evaluate the propose curricula change.

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