

Bridging Linguistic and Cultural Differences: A Case Study on Intercultural Communication

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ABSTRACT

Culture and language are always interrelated and there is always an interplay between these two whenever communication is carried out among individuals from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. With the advent of globalisation, the need to communicate across diverse cultures has gained momentum. In the contemporary global landscape, possessing only linguistic competence and communicative competence is inadequate; it is essential to acquire and possess intercultural communicative competence also to navigate in this multicultural and multilingual world. There is a constant interaction of people from diverse cultures in the educational institutes. With the coming of all these, to be an effective communicator, an understanding of the cultural nuances that come into play during an interaction becomes important. The objectives of this paper are to find out how students belonging to different communities try to mediate cultural differences and how possessing Intercultural Communicative Competence will help them in addressing and interpreting cultural differences. This study finds that Intercultural Communicative Competence is indispensable, and it helps in bridging linguistic and cultural divides and equips learners to gain the ability to interpret, mediate, and critically reflect on cultural differences.

Keywords: Competence, Intercultural communication, Culture shock, Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), Linguistic Proficiency

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND STUDY

Culture and language are always interrelated and shape how individuals communicate and interact with one another in today's developing world.

In general, many contemporary scholars define culture as a shared set of values, beliefs, customs and artefacts specific to a particular group of people. Kramsch (1993) states that language and culture are inseparable. Language is a carrier of cultural meaning, and cultural context shapes the use of language. This interplay implies that when a foreign or second language, particularly English, is taught inside the class, educators need to teach not only the grammar and vocabulary of this language but also the cultural elements that are embedded in the language. And they also need to take into account the different cultural backgrounds of the learners. So, when students learn a foreign or second language like English for the purpose of education and communication, they have to be aware that they need to have an in-depth understanding and possess a high level of intercultural communicative competence (ICC).

Intercultural communication involves a reciprocal exchange of information, ideas and messages between individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds. Given the nature of communicating outside one's own accustomed sphere, it becomes prerequisite for both the involved parties to navigate cultural differences and achieve effective interaction. Mutual understanding and an open mindset are extremely important when one attempts to share messages interculturally. The skills required for good intercultural communication go beyond mere linguistic competence.

Hymes (1972) came up with the notion of 'communicative competence' in which he contended that language competence comprises of competence in grammar and competence for use. He includes the concept of appropriateness and acceptability in competence. According to him, there are four sectors of 'communicative competence' which are possibility, feasibility, appropriateness and accepted usage. His theory of 'communicative competence' is further expanded by Canale and Swain (1980) who introduced and explained its three components: Grammatical competence, Sociolinguistic competence and Strategic competence. Grammatical competence includes the knowledge of how words are formed, rules of sentence formation, structure of sentences, sound study and semantics. Sociolinguistic competence consists of knowledge of producing utterances according to the context such as appropriate register, attitude and style. Strategic competence is the ability to cope with insufficiency in grammatical knowledge and social uses. Later Celce-Murcia et al. (1995)

developed a pedagogically motivated model of 'communicative competence' consisting of linguistic competence, strategic competence, socio-cultural competence, actional competence and discourse competence.

However, in this globalized world where English has become a means of communication among people who have different cultures and backgrounds, it has become a necessity to develop competence both linguistically and interculturally in order to communicate effectively among ESL speakers. However, in the types of competence highlighted above, there is no inclusion of cross-cultural communication. The theories are mostly concentrated on linguistic and social usage of language. Thus, there arises the need for studies on intercultural communicative competence, and this came to light in the 1990s.

Zarate (1994), who came up with the concept of 'intercultural speaker', opined that an 'intercultural speaker' does not try to achieve the native speaker's level of competence but rather tries to mediate a number of cultural perceptions between the target language and the source language. Chen and Starosta (1996) argued that intercultural communication competence is an umbrella term that is composed of the cognitive, affective and behavioural abilities of the persons who are interacting in an intercultural situation. They have constructed a model of intercultural communicative competence, which analyzes it from three perspectives: intercultural sensitivity, intercultural awareness and intercultural adroitness. Intercultural sensitivity means the acknowledgement and respect we must pay to cultural diversity. Intercultural awareness is being aware of our own cultural identity and, at the same time, understanding the variations in different cultures. Intercultural adroitness is all about the skills of managing interactions across diverse cultures through self-disclosure, flexibility and social skills.

An intercultural competent speaker should possess intercultural sensitivity. According to Bennett (1984), intercultural sensitivity involves an individual's capacity to adjust not only their emotional responses but also their thought processes and behaviours during interactions with people from different cultures. It involves the transition from the stage of denial to the stage of integration in the process of developing intercultural communication. The intercultural speaker who is interacting is able to reach the stage of dual identity where he/ she overcomes the problems

of denying and concealing the existence of other cultures and develops empathy and understanding of cultural differences. According to Chen and Starosta (1996), an individual needs to have six affective elements to become interculturally sensitive, which are – self-esteem, self-monitoring, open-mindedness, empathy, interaction involvement and suspending judgement.

Byram (1997) came up with the model of intercultural communicative competence which has been widely used as the model to assess intercultural communicative competence. According to Byram (1997), both communicative competence and intercultural competence constitute ICC. The speakers have to be aware of how to use sentences appropriately in varied intercultural situations. He presented a model of ICC which has five different components which are attitude i.e., the ability to suspend disbelief about other cultures while believing one's own; knowledge of social interaction both in one's own culture and the target language; one's skill of interpreting and relating the two cultures, skills of discovery and interaction which helps in acquiring even new culture, and critical cultural awareness, which is the ability to use perspectives, practices, and products in one's own culture and in other cultures to make evaluations (Sinicrope et al., 2007).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Kramsch (1993) establishes a foundation for understanding the deep connection between language and culture. As Halliday and Hasan (1989) have argued, "The notions of text and context are inseparable: text is language operative in a context of situation and contexts are ultimately construed by the range of texts produced within a community..." (as cited in Kramsch, 1993). They emphasize that every communication is rooted in cultural practices and norms, proving wrong the idea that language can exist alone without cultural elements.

Kim (2001) introduces an integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation. She says that to have successful intercultural communication it involves more than just acquiring language proficiency. It also requires an empathetic understanding of the host culture. Her work stresses adaptation and adjustments in both linguistic behaviours and cultural perceptions which are needed for flexibility in an increasingly globalized world.

Deardorff (2006) shifts the focus toward the assessment of intercultural competence in her model of intercultural competence (IC). Her model has key components such as attitudes, knowledge, skills, and internal outcomes. She highlights that all these components collectively shape effective intercultural communication. Her model underscores that developing intercultural sensitivity is a process that must be nurtured through ongoing educational practices, influencing curriculum design in higher education.

Spitzberg et. al. (2009) also contribute to the ongoing discourse by conceptualizing intercultural competence as a multidimensional construct. Their research highlights that effective intercultural communication depends on an individual's ability to adapt to new cultural contexts and negotiate meaning through dialogue. They stress that the interplay between linguistic structures and cultural expectations creates a complex matrix that requires continuous learning and self-reflection, suggesting that intercultural adaptation is an ongoing process rather than a stagnant one.

Lustig et.al (2018) extend the discussion of intercultural competence by emphasizing that it involves both cognitive and affective dimensions. They argue that understanding cultural nuances, which include nonverbal cues and contextual factors, is essential for successful communication. Their work underscores the dynamic nature of intercultural interactions, highlighting that misinterpretations can arise if communicators fail to engage actively with the cultural backgrounds and communicative styles of others.

A CASE STUDY ON THE MEDIATION OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Manipur is a state where people of different ethnicities and cultures coexist and as such intercultural communication is quite common. In such situations, it can be easily said that language learners frequently encounter a rich variety of cultural practices that both challenge and expand their communicative abilities. Thus, intercultural communication is not a new phenomenon in Manipur. However, few academic studies have been carried out so far to explore the multifaceted aspects of intercultural communicative competence. The researcher conducts a case study which involves selected students of Manipur University belonging to different communities of Manipur viz. Anāl, Meitei, Meitei-Pangal, Moyon, Mao, Rongmei and Tangkhul. The study is focused on how the participants

navigate their cultural differences and mediate intercultural communication across different cultures in a higher educational institute.

Through semi-structured interviews, data is collected from the respondents. A thematic analysis of their input is carried out to assess the level of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and to highlight the importance of ICC in the context of Manipur. This analysis follows Byram's (1997) model of ICC, which is based on five components: knowledge, attitude, skills for interpreting and relating to two cultures, skills for discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness.

EXPERIENCES OF CULTURE SHOCK

A prominent theme that emerges from the narratives is the experience of culture shock. For example, respondents belonging to the Anāl and Rongmei recount the initial bewilderment at physical gestures of apology when someone accidentally stepped on or touched them by feet and other unfamiliar customs, like the taboo of not letting one's feet touch a pillow or the respectful gestures of touching vehicles before they board it. Similarly, a respondent belonging to the Meitei community experiences shock when he observes practices, such as allowing women to enter kitchens during menstruation in other communities, a practice which is considered taboo in his own culture. Respondents from the other communities also discuss the different rituals of funerals, where in most of the hill-based cultures, the process of burial of dead bodies is common. On the other hand, most Meitei communities in the valley follow cremation. These incidents underscore the emotional and cognitive adjustments required when individuals are immersed in environments where everyday rituals and social etiquettes differ markedly from their own experiences.

Alongside these shocks, clear differences in cultural practices and values are evident. One recurring observation is that the concept of personal space and physical contact varies between communities. Respondents belonging to hill tribes note that while their tribal background may endorse a higher degree of physical closeness among friends and peers, the Meitei and Meitei-Pangal communities do not exhibit this. Additionally, they have narrated the differences in wedding customs, the practice of the bride eating only after the groom in Meitei weddings contrasts with more egalitarian practices observed in tribal communities, and the selective

nature of giving wedding invitations in Meitei culture further differentiates it from the inclusive approach where everyone in their village is invited, which is common in their hometown. The tribal respondents also share their appreciation of the way that when lovers elope in Meitei society, they are allowed to get married along with the traditional rituals and customs. This practice is not there in their communities and the couple are disowned by the Church, until they confess their wrongdoings to ask for forgiveness from the Church. These differences highlight the complexity of social norms within Manipur and illustrate the necessity for individuals to develop nuanced understandings of cultural diversity.

EVALUATING THE LEVEL OF ICC

An assessment of the level of ICC from their inputs by following Byram's model framework is carried out. In the attitudinal component, it is evident that all respondents are willing to engage with unfamiliar customs. One respondent belonging to the Anāl tribe, for instance, transitions from initial cultural shock to eventually incorporating gestures of apology into her repertoire, while one respondent belonging to the Muslim community adapts his food practices without compromising his cultural identity. One respondent from Rongmei tribe also states that when parents of Meitei community smell the head and gently bite the hand of their children, she was bewildered at seeing this act for the first time. But when she learns and understands the cultural significance underlying the practice, she accepts and appreciates the motherly gesture done to protect their children from misfortunes or evil spirits. Such openness and curiosity that are developed in them are critical for displacing one's own cultural assumptions.

Secondly, in the knowledge component, the respondents are ready to acquire a comparative understanding of their own cultural norms alongside those of other communities. For example, the Rongmei and Moyon respondents compare and try to understand the underlying reasons embedded in the practice followed by Meitei community of restricting women from entering the kitchen during menstruation which is not there in their community. A respondent belonging to Mao also experiences and compares the style of serving food between his community and Meiteis during a feast. He learns that normally Meitei people do not self-serve their food or touch the Manipuri Brahmins who are serving food. The different

respondents are constantly trying to compare and understand the cultural significance of those practices which are unique to a particular group. This dual awareness of self and others equips them with the background needed to interpret and negotiate intercultural interactions effectively.

Thirdly, in the skills of interpreting and relating, the respondents reflect their ability to make sense of new cultural practices. For example, the respondent belonging to the Anāl tribe interprets the respectful gestures she encounters as manifestations of deep-seated communal values, while the respondent belonging to the Meitei community also comes to know the meaning of certain words that are used by other tribes, which otherwise seem derogatory or disrespectful words in their cultural context. These skills enable them to bridge the gap between differing cultural codes and foster mutual understanding.

Fourthly, under the skills of discovery and interaction, the participants show how they can relate to and even adopt some of the cultural practices that seem fine. One example is over time, the respondent belonging to the Anāl tribe begins practising the unfamiliar gestures herself, and the Muslim respondent opts for vegetarian options when 'halal' food is unavailable, thereby showing that they are not only learning new practices but are also adapting them in real-time to suit their personal values.

Finally, in the critical cultural awareness component, each participant reflects on the deeper significance of the customs they encounter. Rather than accepting differences at the surface meaning, they critically evaluate how these practices align with or challenge their own cultural beliefs. Such reflection is vital in preventing the uncritical acceptance of stereotypes and in fostering a balanced and informed approach to intercultural engagement.

From the above study and assessment, it is evident that the integration of these components of ICC in the experiences of individuals in Manipur underscores the critical importance of it in learning and usage. In a region like Manipur, which is characterized by diverse cultural identities and practices, fostering ICC in education and intercultural communication is not simply an option but rather a necessity that is central to the overall communicative competence of learners. When students gain the ability to interpret, mediate, and critically reflect on cultural differences, they are better equipped to communicate effectively in real-world situations. They

not only learn to use language correctly but also learn to appreciate and negotiate the cultural contexts that give the language its true meaning.

Moreover, by incorporating ICC into language instruction, educators in Manipur can prepare students for global citizenship. This preparation is crucial in a globalized society where intercultural interactions are the norm rather than the exception. A language learning model that prioritizes ICC will help learners to develop empathy, adaptability, and critical thinking skills, all of which contribute to a more harmonious, respectful, and effective communication environment.

CONCLUSION

The case study reveals that while initial encounters with different cultural norms can be challenging and difficult, the process of learning and adaptation ultimately enhances their level of intercultural communicative competence. The components of ICC, like that of Byram, will help learners in Manipur train themselves not merely on linguistic proficiency but on the aspect of intercultural communicative competence also. This competence is indispensable in using language for communication across cultures, and it will help in bridging linguistic and cultural divides, foster mutual respect, and equip individuals to navigate the complexities of an increasingly interconnected world.

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