



INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AMONG COWORKERS IN A MULTINATIONAL COMPANY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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Abstract

This phenomenological study examines the intercultural communication of non-native English-speaking professionals working in the UK's multinational company to form a basis for comparison with their native English-speaking colleagues. In this research, five native English speaking professionals currently working in the UK were interviewed. The respondents were asked to describe their professional and intercultural experiences through interactions with non native English-speaking coworkers. This study focuses on the expected cross-cultural interactions or violations of expectations and any miscommunication that may have occurred. Most respondents reflect positively on their intercultural interactions and share their vocal adaptations as well as communication challenges. To overcome their challenges, all the respondents claim to slow their speech or ask some confirming questions such as "Do you need further explanation?" or "Is there anything you want to ask?" to reduce conflict and miscommunication possibilities. However, all respondents agree that there are potential unintended and often offensive consequences to occur. Some coping mechanisms are considered impolite or disrespectful. Based on the results, all respondents claim to have good intentions in their actions but lack the skills to better facilitate communication with their non native English-speaking colleagues.

Keywords: *Cultural diversity, intercultural communication, multicultural workplaces, phenomenological studies, qualitative research.*

Abstrak

Studi fenomenologi ini meneliti komunikasi antar budaya dari para profesional yang bukan penutur asli bahasa Inggris yang bekerja di perusahaan multinasional Inggris untuk menjadi dasar perbandingan dengan rekan penutur asli bahasa Inggris mereka. Pada penelitian ini, lima profesional penutur asli bahasa Inggris yang saat ini bekerja di Inggris diwawancarai. Responden diminta untuk menggambarkan pengalaman profesional dan antar budaya mereka pada interaksi dengan rekan kerja yang bukan penutur asli bahasa Inggris. Studi ini berfokus pada interaksi antar budaya yang diharapkan atau pelanggaran ekspektasi dan miskomunikasi yang mungkin terjadi. Sebagian besar responden merefleksikan secara positif interaksi antar budaya mereka dan berbagi adaptasi vokal serta tantangan komunikasi yang mereka hadapi. Untuk mengatasi tantangan yang ada, semua responden mengaku memperlambat tempo berbicara atau

mengajukan beberapa pertanyaan konfirmasi seperti "Apakah Anda memerlukan penjelasan lebih lanjut?" atau "Apakah ada yang ingin Anda tanyakan?" untuk mengurangi kemungkinan konflik dan miskomunikasi. Namun, semua responden setuju bahwa ada potensi munculnya konsekuensi yang tidak diinginkan yang seringkali menyinggung. Beberapa mekanisme resolusi dianggap tidak sopan atau tidak hormat. Berdasarkan hasil, semua responden mengaku berniat baik dalam tindakannya, tetapi kurang memiliki keterampilan untuk lebih meningkatkan komunikasi dengan rekan mereka yang bukan penutur asli bahasa Inggris.

Kata kunci: Keanekaragaman budaya, komunikasi antar budaya, tempat kerja multikultural, studi fenomenologi, penelitian kualitatif.

I. INTRODUCTION

The free market made it possible for multinational companies to exist. In the past decade, this phenomenon encourages the growth of migrant workers in many countries. As of December 2019, it is estimated that there are 2.31 million EU citizens and 1.34 non-EU citizens working in the United Kingdom (ons.gov.uk, 2020). According to Oxford University's latest study, the phenomenon increases the long-term migration rate within the UK's border by up to 34% (ox.ac.uk, 2019).

In between, 2004-2019 diversity initiatives in the workplace are trending up, especially in western countries (Köllen, 2019), and improving the language and context of multiculturalism will only increase in importance. The intercultural communication study may help native English-speaking professionals better understand their non-native English-speaking colleagues. Biggs believes that peo-

ple can improve their mindfulness to be more in tune with the environment through deliberate practice (Evans and Suklun, 2017). That improved engagement with others is hoped to lead to better relationships among workers in a multicultural workplace.

People attempt to integrate and assimilate into the local culture after moving into a new place. Glenn and Kuttner in Swartz et al. (2019) argue that the urge to "fit in" and avoid adverse treatments or misunderstandings has often been the motivation for assimilation. For some, the multicultural workplace can be challenging. Combining personal and local cultural elements can complicate communication and create misperceptions. This study focuses on the interactions between native and non-native English-speaking workers based on the native English speaker's experiences working at a multinational company in the UK.

This study is intended to identify and compare verbal conflicts between non-native

and native English-speaking professionals working at a multinational institution in the UK. Analysis of the intercultural communication deficiencies in the multicultural workplace may help determine the source of intercultural conflict. By understanding the conflict's root, future approaches to improve intercultural communication may be narrowed and appropriated. Finally, this study is hoped to develop a scholarly interest in resolving and reducing intercultural conflicts arise from language use and other cultural barriers.

As for comparison, the indicators utilized in the Suklun (2014) research are reflected in this study. They are communication and conflict; foreign accent; Affect and understanding; directness; and coping with language barriers. However, respondents in this research are native English-speaking professional men, while on Suklun's research were non-native English-speaking women. Modern literature regarding native and non-native intercultural communication approaches has also been integrated to complete the former study.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars believe that there has been a globalization of migration (De Haas et al., 2019). In recent years, professional workers often relocate in search of better job oppor-

tunities (Castelli, 2018). Ozgen et al. (2018) argue that the increased migration rate creates more multicultural workplaces and social diversities. The complexity of mixed cultures affects countries with higher immigration rates (Selmer and Lauring, 2013). According to Yong (2019), developed countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States are countries with one of the highest immigration rates, creating significant multicultural workplace growth.

2.1 Cultural Diversity in the Workplace

According to UNESCO World Report (2020), the meaning of diversity has evolved from a primary focus on racial differences to include sex, political alliance, cultural heritage, gender identity, religion, and sexual orientation. Although diversity has become one of the most discussed topics in literature, managing diversity effectively appears to be an elusive challenge for many companies and organizations.

Morris in Verkuyten (2020) explained that in 2017, global leaders struggled to promote tolerance and respect for diverse group identities. According to Morris (ibid), since 2016, the topic of tolerance and respect has been an intense area of sociological study. Many scholars are researching ethnic minority

groups such as the Black Lives Matter movement and non-Christian immigrants.

Wolfson et al. in Scott (2016) explained that institutions that encourage diversity gain the more significant potential to hire and retain employees while improving their job satisfaction. According to Damelang and Haas, culturally diverse employees bring various skill-sets and outlooks to workplace challenges (Duchek, Raetze, and Scheuch, 2020). Pieterse, Knippenberg, and Dierendonck in UNESCO World Report (2020) concluded that a homogeneous workplace is discriminatory and unwise. It also decreases competitiveness compared to a culturally diverse workplace.

2.2 Verbal Communication

According to Del Giacco, Anguera, and Salcuni (2020), people co-construct and negotiate meanings in their ongoing interpersonal communication. Verbal communication varies among people due to their life experiences. Zabetipour, Pishghadam, and Ghonsooly explained that visible cues such as facial gestures could give clues to meaning, direction, emotional context, and communication's motives (Evans and Suklun, 2017).

Kapoor et al. (2018) argue that previous experiences formulate the present dialog. Therefore, the reliability factors between commu-

nicator's message and experiences and those of the communicants' determine the efficacy of the ongoing communication. Because of the different experiences between non-native English professionals and their native English colleagues, they tend to communicate differently in verbal communication.

That difference is often first noticed by the accent. In many studies, the accent is usually listed as a primary contributor to communication barriers, even among native speakers. Liu (2017) concluded that an accent could cause miscommunication because the native speaker cannot recognize phonetic segments, particular words, or distinguish between groups of words and a big word.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research extended Suklun's (2014 and 2017) studies to include native English-speaking professional men's views. This extension was intended to understand a new perspective of intercultural conflicts in the workplace caused by language and cultural barriers. In this study, five native English-speaking professional men were interviewed. These men are 25 years of age or older and currently working at a multinational company in the UK. Respondents' names and the institution are kept confidential. It is crucial to

maintain the confidentiality of the respondents and their personal experiences with non-native English-speaking colleagues. To minimize potential bias, the interviews were conducted by a native speaker. Therefore, the respondents were able to share their experiences freely without fear of offending the interviewer. To achieve the research goal, the author used purposive sampling. The questions were designed carefully and attempted to provide an understanding of respondents' shared experiences. The questions were asked to the native English-speaking professional men without inference or influence of the interviewer's opinion. During the analysis, each sentence was categorized based on what was revealed about the lived experiences.

IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Findings

4.1.1 Communication and Conflict

Based on the interviews, all respondents claimed that even though they never had personal conflicts with foreign colleagues, the language barriers often induced misunderstanding when communicating with some of them. Also, non-native English speakers sometimes use words in an unexpected manner, and those words usually have different connotations. Additionally, the idiomatic

phrases are often perceived as offensive or off-putting. Similar to Suklun's (2017) findings, three out of five respondents stated that sometimes, the language barriers make non-native English-speaking coworkers, especially women, becoming irritated or quiet at once.

4.1.2 Foreign Accent

Qatar Two respondents thought that it is their fault for not understanding the accents of their foreign coworkers. Other respondents claimed unable to hear their counterparts clearly. All of the respondents explicitly stated that none of them have personal problems with non-native English-speaking colleagues. Four respondents said that it is more difficult to understand female non-native English-speakers' accents than male speakers' accents.

All respondents admitted that some accents are more challenging to understand than others. Though, three respondents claimed that they are able to identify the speaker's country of origin. Three respondents stated that adjusting their hearing on foreign accent takes time. Therefore, in the beginning, communicating with non-native English speakers is somewhat tricky. All respondents claimed that they ought to adjust quickly. Otherwise, they are afraid that they might leave a wrong impression on

their foreign counterparts. Due to the accent, all respondents noted that they often misunderstood the non-native English-speaking colleagues' word selection.

4.1.3 Affect and Understanding

All respondents overall provided positive experiences with non-native English-speaking coworkers and left generally positive opinions of them. Four of the five respondents said that they attempt to be polite and respectful by slowing their speech pace to provide a better understanding. One respondent argued that being too polite to female non-native English-speaking colleagues (from certain countries) can provoke misunderstanding. According to him, a few of his former coworkers perceived his friendly and polite gestures as flirting.

Three out of five respondents note that non-native English-speaking men tend to be more reserved in communications. Others said the men are more talkative and often use euphemism in conversations compared to the women. In this research, respondents shared experiences regarding non-native English-speakers that seem to understand the conversation, only to find out that they have an incorrect or incomplete understanding. Three respondents said that it happens more often

while conversing with female non-native English-speaking colleagues than males. When questioned, the respondents believed that their non-native English-speaker colleagues usually use different references to interpret the information.

4.1.4 Directness

All of the respondents noticed that mostly non-native speaking female coworkers are more direct than males. As mentioned before, men often use euphemism in conversations, especially when talking to their supervisors or female native English speakers. However, the respondents believed that directness could not be generalized since, despite the gender, non-native English-speaking colleagues from certain countries are more direct than others.

Up to some point, some respondents felt satisfied with the non-native English speakers' directness and found it more useful to get the job done. Others found a direct nature merely impolite. One respondent explained that one of his former coworkers was a very decisive and direct person on and off work. One day, out of the blue, the same person even asked the respondent if he wanted to have a casual relationship with her.

4.1.5 Coping with Language Barriers

Respondents shared their personal approaches to cope with language barriers as follow: asking affirmations to the non-native English-speaking colleagues after receiving unclear statements; asking to repeat what's just explained with their own words; avoiding idiomatic expressions; being polite, friendly, and making the non-native English-speaking coworkers feel welcomed; clarifying correct understanding by asking "do you need further explanation?"; encouraging the non-native English-speaking coworkers to ask questions by asking "is there anything you want to ask?"; keeping an open mind at all time; observing facial expressions for contextual cues that may indicate confusion or understanding; slowing speech pace; using simpler vocabulary instead of something more technical.

4.2 Discussion

Compared to the results of Suklun's (2014 and 2017) studies, both native and non-native English-speaking professionals had shared similar challenges working at an intercultural workplace in the UK. Both groups faced the cultural elements' complexity as a primary cause of misunderstanding that often induces unintended outcomes. Moreover, the

findings confirmed that accent is one of the significant hindrances in intercultural interactions, even among native English speakers, due to verbal misunderstandings it might cause.

According to all respondents, this research discovered that non-native English-speaking female coworkers are more direct in communication. While non-native English-speaking male colleagues are the opposite, especially when talking to their supervisors or female native English speakers. The males often use euphemism or sugar-coating their messages. However, both this research and previous studies revealed that directness is a culture-related element. Some non-English-speaking countries are more direct than English-speaking countries. Thus, directness is not something that can be generalized. Based on the comparisons, both native and non-native English-speaking professionals formed similar approaches to cope with language barriers between cultures.

Binmore concluded that migrations make a blended culture. It then will create new norms that sometimes violate previous ingrained values and beliefs that can cause conflict (Edberg and Krieger, 2020). However, according to Walker and Avant, local

culture often becomes the new cultural norm for behaviors that are considered appropriate and acceptable in that particular environment (Brooks, Manias, and Bloomer, 2018). Perih (2017) argued that as hard as the professional immigrant workers strive to assimilate, the efforts often contradict their native cultural elements, such as accents. According to Blume, Baldwin, and Ryan in Evans and Suklun (2017), multicultural sensibility awareness is crucial to promote openness, interest, and compassion in a diverse environment.

V. CONCLUSION

This research revealed that while the diverse workplace is increasingly valued in recent years, a lack of intercultural communication skills may actually induce unintended conflict and hinder the institutions' growth. Therefore, to decrease potential conflicts, multinational institutions should create an environment where all employees generally accept and always appreciate differences among one another. The head of multinational institutions should also provide teambuilding-related activities to accelerate the assimilation process. The frequent engagement will lead to improved relationships among the employees. Correspondingly, the possibility of conflict and misunderstanding will decrease.

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