What intercultural communication barriers do exchange students of Erasmus Program have during their stay in Turkey, Mugla?

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Abstract

We live in a culturally diverse world. People will encounter individuals from different races, religions, and nationalities in their day to day encounters as the world is turning into a global village. For that reason, developing an understanding of intercultural communication has on the recent agenda. The purpose of this study is to determine the attitudes and beliefs of some European university students to Turkish people during their stay in Turkey for an exchange program. In doing so, the purpose is overcome barriers that prevent intercultural communication between European countries and Turkey, a country that is trying to enter the European Union.

Keywords: intercultural communication, ethnocentrism, stereotypes, prejudice, nonverbal communication, language barriers.

1. Introduction

Human beings have a great desire to be with people who are similar to themselves. This is because they share the same way of doing things, the same values and operate by the same rules. When we are people who are similar to ourselves, the ways of doing things we have just seem like common sense. However, sometimes work or study or a sense of adventure takes us out of our comfort zone. When this

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happens we realize that the things we took for granted about human interaction are not necessarily the same for everyone.

We live in a culturally diverse world. People will encounter individuals from different races, religions, and nationalities in their day to day encounters. There is often anxiety surrounding unfamiliar cultures. What manners are acceptable? What will offend a person from a very different background? It can be paralyzing to deal with other people if we do not know what to expect.

The desire to communicate is the first step in being effective. No matter what tools you gain in cross cultural communication. The desire to connect with another human being is the bond that will express itself clearly. A genuine effort to understand another person goes a long way in the path to communication.

Knowing about other cultures will help the concerned develop skills. Being proactive when approaching a new culture is an essential. This is a learned skill which means it will require research, practice, and growth. People from different backgrounds may have varied approaches to conflict management, learning styles, family structure, religion, and most other aspects of life. It is impossible to know the varied systems of all cultures, so approach this process one culture at a time as one meet and deal with new people.

1.1. Intercultural Communication

As cultures differ from one another, the communication practices and behaviors of people will inevitably vary as a result of their different perceptions of the world. Intercultural communication is defined as the study of communication between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter their communication (Samovar and Porter, 1997: 70). In their model of intercultural communication, Samovar and Porter (1997) illustrate the process of how the meaning of a message changes when it is encoded by a person in one culture and decoded by a person in another culture in the context of his or her own cultural background. In some cases, the message may be interpreted to carry a different meaning than it was intended.

1.2. Barriers to Intercultural Communication

LaRay M. Barna (1997) has developed an approach to examine barriers to intercultural communication on a general level. In his list he has developed six barriers: anxiety, assuming similarity instead of difference, ethnocentrism, stereotypes and prejudice, nonverbal communication, and language. His categories of barriers will be used when discussing problems that can arise in intercultural encounters. Taking these common barriers into account can help you improve your inter-cultural communication skills.
1.3. Anxiety

The first barrier is high anxiety. When you are anxious because of not knowing what you are expected to do, it is only natural to focus on that feeling and not be totally present in the communication transaction. For example, you may have experienced anxiety on your very first day on a new college campus or in a new job. You may be so conscious of being new—and out of place—and focus so much of your attention on that feeling that you make common mistakes and appear awkward to others.

Sugawara (1993) surveyed 168 Japanese employees of Japanese companies working in the United States and 135 of their U.S. coworkers. Only 8% of the U.S. coworkers felt impatient with the Japanese coworkers’ English. While 19% of the Japanese employees felt their spoken English was poor or very poor and 20% reported feeling nervous when speaking English with U.S. coworkers, 30% of the Japanese employees felt the U.S. coworkers were impatient with their accent, and almost 60% believed that language was the problem in communicating with the U.S. coworkers. For some, anxiety over speaking English properly contributed to avoiding interactions with the U.S. coworkers and limiting interactions both on and off the job to other Japanese only.

1.4. Assuming Similarities Instead of Differences

The second barrier is assuming similarity instead of difference. When you assume similarity between cultures you can be caught unaware of important differences. When you have no information about a new culture, it might make sense to assume there are no differences, to behave as you would in your home culture. In 1997, a Danish woman left her 14-month-old baby girl in a stroller outside a Manhattan restaurant while she was inside. Other diners at the restaurant became concerned and called New York City Police. The woman was charged with endangering a child and was jailed for two nights. Her child was placed in foster care. The woman and the Danish consulate explained that leaving children unattended outside cafés is common in Denmark. Pictures were wired to the police showing numerous strollers parked outside cafés while parents were eating inside. The Danish woman had assumed that Copenhagen is similar to New York, that what is commonly done in Copenhagen is also commonly done in New York.

The inverse can be a barrier as well. Assuming difference instead of similarity can lead to your not recognizing important things that cultures share in common. It’s better to assume nothing. It’s better to ask, “What are the customs?” rather than assuming they’re the same or different everywhere.

1.5. Ethnocentrism

The third barrier to effective intercultural communication is ethnocentrism, or negatively judging aspects of another culture by the standards of one’s own culture. To be ethnocentric is to believe in the superiority of one’s own culture. Everything in a culture is consistent to that culture and makes sense if you understood that culture. An example for ethnocentrism would be when a white teacher walk into the class, he realizes he is the only white person in the class. He thinks ‘oh my God’ but as it turns out, it is a really good class.
Another name for ethnocentrism is the anthropological concept of cultural relativism. It does not mean that everything is equal. It does mean that we must try to understand other people’s behavior in the context of their culture before we judge it. It also means that we recognize the arbitrary nature of our own cultural behaviors and be willing to reexamine them by learning about behaviors in other cultures (Cohen, 1998).

In his model, Bennett (1993) refers to three stages of ethnocentrism. The first stage is denial, in which a person confronted with cultural difference avoids or denies the existence of any difference. This can happen through isolation or separation. The second stage of ethnocentrism is defense. This strategy occurs as a way to counter the impact of cultural differences which are perceived as threatening. A person does this as a way of maintaining the integrity of their own world view. Minimizing is the third stage of ethnocentrism. In this stage, people will seek to hide difference under cultural similarities. Part of minimizing is an assumption of universal characteristics shared by all humanity. However this assumption is usually made by the dominant culture. Bennett suggests that people tend to use their own world view to interpret other’s behavior and that the idea of universal truth is usually based on one’s own values.

1.6. Stereotypes

Stereotypes are perceptions and beliefs we hold about groups or individuals based on our previously formed opinions or attitudes (Samovar& Porter, 1991). Stereotypes do not develop suddenly but are formed over a period of time by our culture. They are made up of bits and pieces of information that we store and use to make sense of what goes on around us. Stereotypes may be positive or negative. As Barna (1997) points out, they help us make sense of the world by categorizing and classifying people and situations we encounter.

While stereotyping may reduce the threat of the unknown, it interferes with our perceptions and understanding of the world. When applied to individuals or groups, often stereotypes are problematic because they are oversimplified, over generalized and exaggerated. Statements like ‘blacks are…….’, ‘athletes are not ……..’, ‘women should…..’ are stereotypes because their content are beliefs based on half-truths or distortions about a group of people.

There are a number of ways in which stereotypes are harmful (Jandt, 2001): first, stereotypes can cause us to assume that a widely held belief is true, when it may not be. Second, the continual use of stereotypes reinforces our beliefs and can also cause us to assume a widely held belief is true of any one of the individual in the group. If a group is stereotyped as dishonest, for example, we tend to apply that stereotype to all members of that group, regardless of individual differences. Third, when we use negative stereotypes to interpret the behaviour of individuals within a group, this further impedes intercultural communication by reinforcing those negative stereotypes. Such negative stereotyping can become a self-fulfilling prophecy for those who are stereotyped and hence place them at risk. An example of this would be the prevalent stereotype that women are not good at math and science, which in turn may cause women to internalize such beliefs and avoid studying or pursuing math or science related professions.
1.7. Prejudice

Prejudice, like stereotypes, can be either positive or negative although it is generally referred to as the unfair, biased or intolerant attitudes or opinions towards another person or group simply because they belong to a specific religion, race, nationality or another group (Samovar and Porter, 1991). A person who thinks ‘I don’t want (name of group) living in my neighbourhood’, for example, is expressing a prejudice. Again like stereotypes, prejudice involves the preconceptions of individuals or groups based on unfounded opinions, attitudes or beliefs. Jandt’s definition of prejudice further elaborates the damaging effect of prejudice as persons within the group are not viewed in terms of their individual merit but according to the superficial characteristics that make them part of the group.

Prejudice can take many forms, ranging from those that are almost impossible to detect (unintentional) to those that are clearly intentional. As an extreme and intentional form of prejudice, discrimination impedes intercultural communication as it involves the unfavourable treatment and/or denial of equal treatment of individuals or groups because of race, gender, religion, ethnicity or disability (brisling, 1988).

1.8. Language

Language is one of the most obvious barriers to intercultural communication but perhaps not the most fundamental. People who do not share a language or who feel that they have imperfect command of another person’s language may have some difficulties communicating. There is also the possibility of misunderstandings occurring between people when they do not share a common language. However, sharing a common language does not always guarantee understanding. Even speakers of the same language do not have exactly the same understanding of the meanings of the words.

Ways in language can be barrier to intercultural communication are problems of vocabulary equivalence, idiomatic equivalence, experiential equivalence and conceptual equivalence (Jandt, 2001). Lack of vocabulary equivalence occurs when there are not words in one language that correspond precisely with the meaning of words in another. Idiomatic equivalence can cause communication problems because although native speakers understand the meaning of an idiom, they can be very difficult for a non-native to understand and translated directly they can be either bizarre or meaningless. For example, ‘the old man kicked the bucket’ is meaningless unless you know that to kick the bucket means to die.

Another problem is that of experiential equivalence. Objects or experiences that do not exist in one culture are difficult to translate into the language of another culture. For example, the Chinese concept guanxi has no precise English equivalent although it does have connotations that can be expressed in English words such as relationship, connection, obligation and dependency.

Conceptual equivalence is barrier for communication if ideas or concepts are not understood in the same ways in different cultures. Jandt (2001) gives the example of concepts such as freedom. Understandings what is meant by the notion of freedom in the USA may different from what is meant in other countries.
1.9. Nonverbal communication

Nonverbal communication can be a barrier to intercultural communication. Nonverbal communication is communication without words. Messages are sent through gestures, proximity, eye contact, expectations regarding time and so on. These forms of communication can easily be misinterpreted.

Nonverbal messages can take a number of forms. Some of these are our use of personal space, gestures, facial movements and eye contact; use of time and space and use of touch. Other important nonverbal messages can involve interpretations of the meanings of silence, clothing, the arrangement of space and furniture and so on. Because the meanings which are attached to all these things differ from one culture to another, it is possible to misread the message.

Some examples of ways in which nonverbal messages can be misinterpreted are (Jandt, 2001):

The distance that one would stand when talking to a stranger varies from culture to culture and someone breaking this unspoken rule makes people very uncomfortable.

Gestures and eye contact can have very powerful meaning which vary across cultures. In some cultures the appropriate greeting is a handshake, in others a bow, in others an embrace. It is cited in a study that Arabs, Latin Americans and Southern Europeans look into the eyes of conversational partners whereas Asians and North Europeans only use a peripheral gaze or no gaze at all.

Our use of time also varies. How long you should be kept waiting can vary from culture to culture. Silence, for some cultures, can indicate respect (Chinese people) while it can be interpreted as shyness or lack of interest (Australians).

Touch has different meanings in different cultures. In Thailand it is rude to for strangers to touch the top of a child’s head because it is the home of the sprit and the soul but in Western countries it very common to affectionately touch the top of a child’s head. In Australia walking hand in hand with friends of the same sex can indicate a romantic relationship.

2. Methodology

2.1. Thesis Statement:
What intercultural communication barriers do exchange students of Erasmus Program have during their stay in Turkey, Mugla?

2.2. Participants

There were 10 university students aged between 20 and 23 answering the interview questions about intercultural communication barriers. These students were from different European countries such as France, Germany, Poland, Hungary; Austria, Finland and Czech Republic. They were studying for 2010 Spring term of their university education in Turkey on the European Exchange Program that was organized by Erasmus between European universities and it was their first stay in Turkey. These
interviewees were studying not just one department but different departments such as tourism, physical education, business management. The participants of the interview have already lived long enough in Turkey to have communication barriers that resulted from intercultural barriers.

2.3. Instrument

There are six interview questions to determine intercultural communication barriers. These interview questions were derived from literature on intercultural communication barriers (LaRay M. Barna, 1997; Jandt, 2001; Bennett, 1993). The layout of interview questions was as follows:

The following questions are prepared to determine barriers to intercultural communication. As students of Exchange Program coming from different universities and having lived long enough in Turkey to comment on these barriers, please do not hesitate to give open and honest answers to the questions. Your contribution to the study depends on how much information you will provide based on your experience in Turkey. The information provided will be kept confidential. Note that names of the interviewees will not be mentioned in order not to harm personal privacy.

When you first came to Turkey, were you anxious because of not knowing what you are expected to do?

What language barriers have you been facing during your stay in Turkey?

What nonverbal communication (messages that are sent through gestures, proximity, eye contact, expectations regarding time and so on) barriers have you been facing during your stay in Turkey?

Before coming to Turkey, did you hear about any beliefs that stated superiority of European countries over Turkey?

Did you have any perceptions or beliefs you held about Turkey or Turkish people based on your previous opinions or attitudes?

Lastly, are there any comments you would like to make that cause intercultural communication barriers?

2.4. Data analysis

The first interview questioned was asked to reveal anxiety that is caused by being new to a culture. One of the participants reported for the first question that she had heard that Turkish people were very friendly, nice and helpful here in Turkey. Other two people in the interview group reported that they were totally not anxious of coming to a different country. She said there were a few people from the same country and everything was okay. Another participant stated that he was not anxious but excited about what will come. Another one reported that she was a little bit anxious because she did not know about the role of women in Turkey, she heard a lot of frightening things about women, that women have to wear scarves, that there was no personal freedom for women and that she was afraid of the power of the men. Another one reported that he was worried about Turkey when he first came here because a lot of people Europe say that Turkey is a very poor country and different from the European countries.

When answering the second question that is about language barriers, four of the participants reported that not many Turkish people (even the students) know English well and that for that reason sometimes it is hard to communicate with people even in basic things like asking for the way, etc. Another one stated that even if a lot of Turkish people do not speak English very well, it is really good that they can speak English. Another interviewee reported that not all the teachers in the department of
sports speak English, that because of language misunderstandings with Turkish classmates during the lessons and that sometimes there were problems with bus drivers about bus stops, places people should get off because of language barriers. Only two of the interviewees said that Turkish people know English better and that there were no big problems in communicating with them and that in cases of difficulty, dictionaries would help a lot. Another one reported that she had accommodation problems because of language barriers.

For the question about nonverbal communication, one of the interviewees reported that some people can disturb by looking directly at you and that some gestures by hands mean different in Europe than in Turkey and that they can be really wrong. Another interviewee said close contact between man on the way and expression of gestures during the talk can disturb people. Other sources of non verbal communication barrier reported by six participants were touching one’s shoulders which is not usual in other countries, direct deep and long eye contact that means a bit more for them and smiling that could be misinterpreted. Another participant complained about proximity that means different in Turkish culture. It was stated by the participant that in Europe people need their comfort zone and that people could easily feel offended when someone comes close and enters this zone.

Answering the fourth and fifth questions were about beliefs based on previous attitudes that stated stereotypes and prejudices of European countries about Turkey, Some of the interviewees avoided answering the fourth and the fifth questions. Two stated that in Europe Turkey was believed to be like an Arabic country and that Turkey was full of terrorists. Another one confessed that she thought Turkey was a poor country in terms of standards of life and that there were some limits on human rights in Turkey. Other four interviewees confessed that they thought Turkey was men-dominated, there was political pressure in Turkey, and that there were less educational opportunities for women in Turkey and inequality between men and women in social rights. Lastly, one of them stated that Turkey was thought to be a country with dirty streets and low-quality products.

Lastly, when the interviewees were asked to make extra personal comments on intercultural communication barriers, only six interviewees gave their personal ideas. One of them stated that Turkish and European culture is different from one another in some points. It was stated by the same interviewee that things that are accepted in Turkey might not be accepted in their country. Another person claimed that the main problems are prejudices. The interviewee reported that some of the people in their country have a stupid image in their heads about people with darker skin and people from East. A third interviewee reported that some of the Turkish people think that speaking loudly in Turkish will make it possible to be understood. He thinks Turkish people should learn English to express at least the basic things. In that sense, two interviewees think that there are language barriers in communication. Two of the participants complain about the status the female in Turkey. They say women are not yet free of men’s power and will and that it is always the male who makes the rules. One of them stated that it is terrible for her to see how Turkish women cannot escape men’s superiority.

The last interviewee making extra comments on intercultural communication barriers was not a pessimistic person. He claimed that he was happy to be able to live with these barriers because they just
somehow let us recognize that there are still different cultures in the world. He believes that traveling makes it so interesting and sometimes surprising. He says that the behaviors of people play an important role and that therefore all cultures have to be respected when visited.

3. Conclusion

3.1. Findings

One of the interviewees reported that she was a little bit anxious when she first came to Turkey because she did not know about the role of women in Turkey, she heard a lot of frightening things about women, that women have to wear scarves, that there was no personal freedom for women and that she was afraid of the power of the men. Another one reported that he was worried about Turkey when he first came here because a lot of people Europe say that Turkey is a very poor country and different from the European countries. When you are anxious because of not knowing what you are expected to do, you may be so conscious of being new—and out of place—and focus so much of your attention on that feeling that you make common mistakes and appear awkward to others (LaRay M. Barna 1997).

More than half of participants reported that not many Turkish people (even the students) know English well and that for that reason sometimes it is hard to communicate with people even in basic things like asking for the way etc. One of them claimed that because of language misunderstandings, there were problems with Turkish classmates during the lessons and that sometimes there were problems with bus drivers about bus stops, places people should get off because of language barriers. According to Jandt (2001), language is one of the most obvious barriers to intercultural communication. People who do not share a language or who feel that they have imperfect command of another person’s language may have some difficulties communicating. There is also the possibility of misunderstandings occurring between people when they do not share a common language.

When talking about nonverbal communication barriers, one of the interviewees reported that some people can disturb by looking directly at you and that some gestures by hands mean different in Europe than in Turkey and that they can be really wrong. Another interviewee said close contact between man on the way and expression of gestures during the talk can disturb people. Six participants drew attention to touching one’s shoulders which is not usual in other countries, to direct deep and long eye contact that means a bit more for them and to smiling that could be misinterpreted. Another participant complained about proximity that means different in Turkish culture. It was stated by the participant that in European people need their comfort zone and that people could easily feel offended when someone comes close and enters this zone. Nonverbal communication can be a barrier to intercultural communication. Nonverbal messages can take a number of forms. Messages are sent through gestures, proximity, eye contact, facial movements, use of time and space, use of space and expectations regarding time and so on. These forms of communication can easily be misinterpreted. Other important non verbal messages can involve interpretations of the meanings of silence, clothing, the arrangement of space and furniture and so on. Because the meanings which are attached to all these things differ from one culture to another, it is possible to misread the message (Jandt, 2001).
Talking about stereotypes and prejudices that European countries have about Turkey, the interviewees reported such extreme stereotypes and prejudice that it was impossible to believe them. The image of Turkey in their eyes is a country of terrorism, poor life standards and educational opportunities as well as a country of inequality in social rights between men and women. Two stated that in Europe Turkey was believed to be like an Arabic country and that Turkey was full of terrorists. Another one confessed that she thought Turkey was a poor country in terms of standards of life and that there were some limits on human rights in Turkey. Other four interviewees confessed that they thought Turkey was men-dominated, there was political pressure in Turkey, and that there were less educational opportunities for women in Turkey and inequality between men and women in social rights. Lastly, one of them stated that Turkey was thought to be a country with dirty streets and low-quality products. Likening Turkey to an Arabic country of terrorism can be considered to be a stereotype due to Turkey’s old relations with Arabic world because stereotypes are related to previously held beliefs and attitudes (Samovar & Porter, 1991). These negative attitudes that European countries hold towards Turkey interferes with their perceptions and understanding of the world. When applied to individuals or groups, often stereotypes are problematic because they are oversimplified, overgeneralized and/or exaggerated.

Regarding Turkey as a country of lower educational and life standards as well as a country of poor qualities, on the other hand, are prejudoes as all of these assumptions are unfair, intolerant attitudes or opinions towards another person or group simply because they belong to a specific religion, race, nationality or another group (Samovar and Porter, 1991). As a result, these prejudices that Europeans have towards Turkey can cause resentment on the part of Turkish people as they are not true. This resentment that is caused by prejudices of European countries functions as a barrier to mutual respect and understanding between Turkey and European countries as countries of different origins. Let us give a concrete example: The integration of Turkey into European Union is frowned upon all the time by the Europeans. According to the results of this interview it is possible to draw a conclusion that EU does not want to admit Turkey because they have prejudices towards Turkey as a country of poor life standards, inequality between men and women, and less educational opportunities. That seems to be the exact definition of how, as an extreme and intentional form of prejudice, discrimination impedes intercultural communication as it involves the unfavorable treatment and/or denial of equal treatment of individuals or groups because of race, gender, religion, ethnicity or disability (brisling, 1988).

3.2. Discussions

Technological advance has turned the world into a global village. In this global village more and more people all over the world are living in countries other than their home lands for business, education or other reasons. As a result, different cultures, languages and faiths are mixing in this global village. This trend has given rise to intercultural communication which can be termed as harmonious communication between different cultures. In order for intercultural communication to take place, different cultures should be vehicles for positive advancements rather than barriers. There are some steps that need to be taken for the positive role of culture in intercultural communication to come into existence.

First, people from different cultures need to break the assumptions they have about other cultures. Everyone makes or has assumptions about others. Assumptions are beliefs rather than objective truth and
are usually influenced by a number of subjective factors. For intercultural communication to truly work, people need to assess their assumptions and ask themselves why they hold those ideas or beliefs. By doing so and even openly examining them with others, the initial barrier to intercultural communication is overcome.

People from different cultures need to emphasize one another. In order to come to appreciate and understand people from different cultures, empathy is vital. Through putting yourself in someone else's shoes you come to see or appreciate their point of view.

Thirdly, everyone should be involved in the process of intercultural communication. Involving others in tasks or decision making empowers and builds strong relationships. Using intercultural diversity is in essence a more creative approach to problem solving as it incorporates different points of view.

Herd mentality should be discouraged. Herd mentality refers to a closed and one dimensional approach. Such a way of thinking curbs creativity. People are restricted in how to think approach and engage with people or challenges. Intercultural communication can only flourish and therefore contribute if people are encouraged to think as individuals, bring their cultural influences to the table and share ideas that may be outside the box.

Insensitive behaviour should be avoided. People can and do behave in culturally insensitive ways. By attacking someone's personality, you attack their culture and therefore their dignity. This can only be divisive. Intercultural communication is based upon people thinking through words and actions to ensure they do not act inappropriately. When insensitive behaviour is witnessed it is the responsibility of all to shun (avoid) it and ensure it remains unacceptable.

Lastly, people should be wise. Wisdom is not called wisdom for nothing. People need to be aware how to interact with people with respect and knowledge. Intercultural communication is essentially founded upon wisdom, i.e. showing maturity of thought and action in dealing with people. Through thinking things out and having background knowledge to intercultural differences much of the communication problems witnessed within intercultural communication could be avoided.

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