

Intercultural Business Communication: The Implications of Language Barriers

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ABSTRACT:

Effective intercultural business communication depends upon the application of a mutually understandable language; a prerequisite that is almost non-existence in numerous businesses within and across our borders. Language is identified as one of the most austere operational problems for most intercultural business. The study with the use of Shannon and Weaver's theory approached the barriers caused by language and its implications to intercultural business transactions. In order to gain insight into various ways in which language could impede effective intercultural business communication, the study explored various published research studies on the problem statement. Findings from the content analysis of the reviewed literature provided an exhaustive and precise discourse of the effects and implications that language barrier could have on intercultural business. Furthermore, the review highlighted how language affects the way by which business organisations deal with their tasks and their relationship with foreign counterparts. The study concluded that inability to communicate effectively in intercultural business-related transaction could pose challenges to business. The study therefore, recommends multilingual employees, language training and repetition of information for clarification as ways to curb language barriers.

Keywords:

Business organisation, Intercultural business communication (IBC), Language barriers, Relationship, Shannon and Weaver Model

1. INTRODUCTION

Intercultural business transactions require the use of understandable language as a medium of communication between the business entities and their potential customers/clients (Bodomo and Che, 2020). Language, therefore, is a critical means of smooth business transactions (Adanlawo, 2020). According to Ai et al. (2019), language is used as a medium of communication in different forms, with the purpose of accommodating or communicating with all groups in business transactions. Fan et al. (2015) support that language allows mankind to express opinions, views, decisions or feelings, while, it also indicates cultural identities. The importance of language cannot be over-emphasized as it is the means of cultural transmission as well as continuity of cultural heritage. According to Ai et al. (2019), language remains the only critical means of transmitting or imparting cultural values, identities/practices to the younger generations. Seemingly, Bourdieu (2004) avers that language is a great asset of any tribe as it entails all the cultural identities and the realities that exist in their environments.

Tucker (2003); Ai and Wang (2017) identify language as a symbol of identity in which the speakers are proud of. Creese et al. (2008) explain that different languages come with different mentality, understandings and thought in grammatical expressions of each group's language. Thus, the researchers agree that expressions of one's thoughts or ideas differs in different languages, and also the language spoken by each member of a group plays significant role in his interactions or relationships with others in different situations or contexts. Bhatata et al. (2013) agree that grouping of different languages from different geographical locations is an attempt to identify common patterns in these languages to establish diversity in languages across the world.

Henslin (1999) in his study, reports that language is learnt by people from the environment they find themselves, thus, no one is born with any language. Similarly, Ai et al. (2019) concur with Heslin (1999) that people learn to acquire different languages through their interactions with the speakers of the spoken languages in their immediate environment. Furthermore, cultural practices, beliefs, values and

identities are learnt through the spoken languages among different groups. To achieve an effective intercultural business communication, it is thus necessary to understand the language of a particular business counterpart in order to understand their culture (Oetzel, 2017). Understanding cultural differences as posited by Kumar (2014) are more than ever becoming critical as to guarantee solid economic growth and sustainability.

Awareness of intercultural differences is a vital issue in intercultural business encounter. To conduct business in an intercultural environment, there is need to consider language-related aspects and pay attention to specific patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaviour which vary across cultures (Cordano et al., 2010). Distefano and Maznevski (2000) avow that language differences adversely affects relationship as people in a multicultural system tend to be influenced greatly by the dominating language. This implies that others have to learn and accept dominating language as a convenient medium of interaction (Kung, 2016). Language differences, according to Bodomo and Che (2020) affect or influence business communication as it may mars business achievement and growth. Language barrier, therefore, may be described as inability to understand or communicate with others in a particular language; thereby, affecting smooth relationship or cooperation in business spaces. As indicated by Ai et al. (2019), language barrier remains critical across borders and a serious threat to business activities among people of different languages. One significant rationale for this research was to explore the challenges that language barriers can pose to smooth intercultural business transactions.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted qualitative method using exploratory approach. Reviews of previous studies on language barriers have been carefully carried-out to build a theoretical basis for this study. The researchers engaged a secondary data collection approach by reviewing of extant literature. According to Kumar (2019) and Creswell (2014), the literature review is an efficient method of providing a basis for any significant study, because it provides information, findings and basis from related studies to a current study and analyse, argue, compare and contrast existing information that can strengthen or give credibility to the newly acquired information. The researchers' personal expertise and experience were also explored to generate unique, relevant workplace-based knowledge with regards to language barriers to intercultural business transactions.

Data collection through secondary data sources which include Internet, books, reports, journals, and articles were carefully accessed and classified according to the

purpose and aim of this study. The study made use of interpretive analysis of narrative data through content analysis method which entailed coding of sources according to the study aim, the codes were articulated into themes for discussion of findings (Kumar, 2019). The interpretivist paradigm facilitates access to rich, detailed information which enables contextual meaning through interpretations of findings (Creswell, 2014). Thus, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), the data analysis followed a holistic approach to problem-solving through emphasis on inductive processing.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK/RELEVANCE

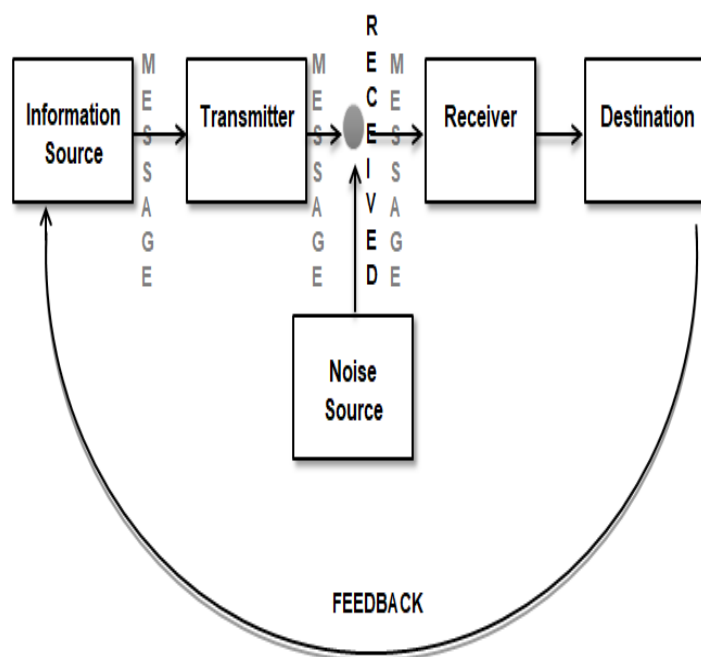
Shannon and Weaver Theory

Shannon and Weaver theory was used to underpin this study; the theory was used to explain the need for clear and understandable intercultural business communication without any barrier. According to Steinberg (2007), Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver were engineers working for Bell Telephone Labs in the United States. They developed a model of communication which was intended to assist in developing a mathematical theory of communication. Their aim was to ascertain utmost efficiency of telephone cables and radio waves. Hornsey and Fielding (2020) aver that Shannon and Weaver's model has a much wider application to human communication than a purely technical one. Similarly, de Vries (2020) adds that the model is the best-known example of the "informational" approach to communication. This study consider Shannon and Weaver model adequate as it describes the communication process from a technical point of view. Particular attention is paid to the noise source, which was altered to describe the factors that may hinder successful intercultural business communication.

As indicated by Sapienza et al. (2016), the model consisted of five elements which are: the information source, the transmitter, a channel, a receiver and a destination. Al-Fedaghi (2012) identifies noise which is the sixth element as a dysfunctional factor. The author describes noise as any interference with the message which may lead to the signal received being different from that sent. The theorists, Shannon and Weaver, opine that effectiveness of communication can be attained when both signals for transmitters (the sender) and the receiver aligned without any noise/barrier (Shannon and weaver, 1949). According to Eunson (2005), model use in communication theory is to remove barriers in communication for effective human interactions. Steinberg (2007) affirms that Shannon and Weaver's model focuses on removal of all noise (barriers) in communication process to attain

understandable communication between the sender and the receiver.

Figure 1: Shannon and Weaver's model of communication



Adapted from Hartley & Bruckmann (2002)

The above model entails different components such as information source, transmitter, **noise source**, channel, message, receiver, channel, information destination, encode and decode. The emphasis of this model is to enhance effective communication (Spellerberg and Fedor, 2003; Berrocal et al., 2016). The theory established “Noise” as a predominant factor that can affect communication process. Dennis and Valacich (1999) aver that interference of noise will cause distortion which may lead to misunderstanding between sender and receiver. Noise can include psychological distractions such as negative feelings towards the speaker. As opined by Soter (2016), thoughts and feelings are socio-culturally patterned, which can affect communication if not properly considered. In intercultural business setting, the context of “culture” is of essence. According to Manrai and Manrai (2010), culture facilitates full comprehension of intercultural communication process as it covers both the external (objective), internal (subjective) of individual culture which is determined by values, norms and morality.

According to Baek and Yoon (2017), meaning can be affected by contexts such as situational, social,

political, cultural and historical. Hessels et al. (2019) aver that social contexts have a key influence on the use of appropriate styles and contents in intercultural business communication. Likewise, Berrocal et al. (2016) affirm that situational context allow us to predict expected behaviour and the required interaction to meet both parties’ goals. According to the author, reception context does not exclusively determine meanings; “writing’ and ‘reading” contexts in a particular space and time may also affect meaning. The same text can be interpreted differently within different contexts. It is worth-noting that meaning only arises in the process of listeners actively making sense of what they hear (Hessels et al., 2019).

Similarly, Chandler (2002) avers that semiotics can as well affect meaning in an intercultural business transaction. The author defines semiotics as the study of signs and signals, sign systems, and sign processes. Elleström (2020) claims that messages are made of signs and conveyed through sign systems called codes. To derive meaning, according to Elleström, the receiver of the message must understand the code. In applying semiotics to visual communication, the concept of interpretation is important. Though, visual interpretation involves more than simple inference and for an understandable meaning be reached in an intercultural business communication, Galantucci and Garrod (2011) aver that that a viewer must pass through both denotative (realism, representation) and connotative (associations, attitudes, emotions) processes. Semiotics provides a unifying methods for use across culture, which include gesture, posture, dressing and speech. Chandler (2002) asserts that semiotics reminds that nothing is ‘natural’ about our values; they are social constructs that changes with time but differ radically from culture to culture.

In order for effective communication to be attained, the concept of culture has to be considered. The intended message of the sender must be well understood by the receiver and both the sender and receiver must agree that the message has been understood in its intended meaning. Shannon and Weaver submit in their theory that message can be distorted by noise or any other disturbance; which this study classifies as barriers in intercultural business communication. This theory is necessary in understanding barriers that can affect effective intercultural business communication, and also why communication in such intercultural contexts can be misunderstood by both the sender and the receiver (Quintanilla and Wahl, 2011). Therefore, it is imperative to understand clearly the message, so as to give feedback that can be understood in same precise

context. Hartley and Bruckmann, (2002) postulate that engagement of this mechanism enhances the concept of feedback, which is important to communication. Seemingly, Seiler and Beall (2011) affirm that the clarity of the message is significant to understandable feedback as intended by the sender. Hence, communication in intercultural business transaction attracts feedback that is influenced by the level of understanding of the message by the receiver.

To receive a suitable feedback, Reddy and Adanlawo (2018), Romero-Trillo (2019) aver that the non-verbal behaviour of the sender must reflect the actual meaning of the message. Thus, non-verbal communication can function to express meaning strengthening, replacing, or opposing the verbal message (Andersen, 1999). Hence, non-verbal communication can be used in influencing others as well as to check conversational flow of messages (Ntuli, 2012). It is established that non-verbal behaviours of people involved in intercultural business activities can influence both the message from the sender and the feedback from the receiver and thus, affect their business relationships. Unfortunately, Shannon and Weaver model does not give room for relationships between people as communicators. The model is linear, it assign secondary role to receiver. The original model had no provision for feedback, though, later added by other theorists.

4. LANGUAGE AS THE MAIN BARRIER TO INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

Communication is important in business, most especially intercultural business transactions. Kecskes (2015) recommends that parties involved in intercultural business communication should agree on a common language that can be understood and that can also ensure fulfilment of business goals. Ai et al. (2019) assert that communication in intercultural business has always been faced with the problem of common language. This implies why language has been established as a main barrier to intercultural business transactions across the globe (Bodomo and Che, 2020). Language as a significant barrier in business across the borders manifests in different aspects or phases of intercultural business activities; which include business strategy, structure, and techniques. Studies (Bodomo and Che, 2020; Ai, et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2018; Tam et al., 2016) agree that failure of some intercultural business revolves round the lack of intercultural skills and competence, the inability to communicate effectively in a global setting, and the failure to apply appropriate manners in business communication. This implies that business across borders, must appreciate and acknowledge cultural differences. To reach a mutual understanding,

people's cultural identities and heritage must be respected in intercultural business dealings. Bassnett (2003) asserts that every language is a cultural product of any group of people, and it strongly links to their culture. Language, therefore, is very important to every society. Seemingly, Shah (2004) opines that differences in language limit many business transactions across borders, thereby, leads to misunderstanding and inappropriate feedback.

5. CAUSES OF LANGUAGE BARRIERS

These factors have been identified as causes of language barriers:

5.1 Difference in language

Language is used to express or communicate ideas, feelings, opinions, and decisions to others in meaningful contexts that can be responded to (Bodomo and Che, 2020). As much as language can facilitate smooth business transactions, it can also be a serious barrier when there is no understanding among the parties. For example, business transactions between the people of Nigeria and China, or between South Africans and Japanese involves the use of a common language which is understood by both groups. It therefore, becomes a language problem when one of the parties cannot understand or respond in a language spoken by the other (Djite, 2020). According to Djite (2020), difference in language can be a critical challenge to business success when people find it difficult to understand themselves in order to reach agreement in business transactions. This explains why interpreters are usually involved in business transactions that involve individuals of different languages. Ai et al (2019) identify this reason for the employment of bilingual employees by Chinese to expand their businesses in Africa nations.

5.2 Regional Accents, Dialects and Lingo

Djite (2020) explains that language differences exist due to regional accents, dialects and lingo among people who reside in same geographical areas. People speak languages that indicate their accents and dialects which showcase their cultural identities (Bhatara et al., 2013). The languages sometimes may be technically the same with people speaking same language in different dialects and accents; however, the meanings and interpretations of words/messages are different, these differences may result in some kinds of misunderstandings in international business transactions (Chow and Schoenbaum, 2020). For example, if a Scottish businessman communicates with a British, they both have some words which have different meanings; though, they both communicate in English.

A word such as ham and bacon are used interchangeably in Scotland, but mean different things

in London. Likewise, lingo is an abridged word in a language used between people with different languages. This implies that certain words and phrases can have different meanings. However, this same language may be interpreted differently in intercultural business transactions. Seemingly, Ai et al. (2019) aver that differences in accents, dialects and other regional peculiarities remain language barriers to effective communication among Africans and Chinese people during business transactions. Also, Charles and Marschan-Piekkari (2002) assert that differences in accents present an additional challenge for oral communication over written communication as high-context communication is mostly adopted in intercultural business transactions. Nations such as China, Japan and North Korea are more likely to prefer communication via e-mails than phone calls as they will respond to e-mails at their own pace.

5.3 No Clear Speech

Language barrier may hinder intercultural business transactions especially when people speak in soft or in a low voice (Bhatia, 2014). Speaking in soft or low voice may lead to unclear speech, which may invariably results to misunderstanding between the parties in business communication. Bodomo and Che (2019) affirm that speaking common language does not rule out unclear speech among people; speaking in low or soft voice may as well lead to unclear speech which will hinder meaningful understanding. Unclear speech during communication will hinder effective intercultural business activities across borders (Vigouroux and Mufwene, 2020; Ai et al, 2019).

5.4 Use of Jargons and Slang

Jargons may be described as technical words that are peculiar to certain people. Because they are peculiar to certain people or professions, jargons may be interpreted differently at different times by different people. Jargons, such as medical terms used by those in medical profession or legal terms used by those in legal profession cannot be used in the same contexts outside the professions as the intended meaning will not be understood. According to Vigouroux and Mufwene (2020), business transactions have some business terms that must be clearly understood by all parties; especially, intercultural business where languages differ. Understanding business terms will generate appropriate feedbacks. Similarly, the use of slangs in intercultural business communication can lead to ineffective communication. Bodomo and Che (2020) aver that the use of appropriate language in business communication strengthens relationships and ensures successful business transactions across borders.

5.5 Word Choice

Business communication allows choice of words. However, cultural differences and respect for foreign counterparts must be considered in the use of words during intercultural communication. Bodomo and Che (2020) advice against the use of words which can be sarcasm in business communication as it can be taken as negative in nature. Therefore, use of words which can be interpreted with different meanings such as homonyms, homographs, homophones should be avoided in business communication to avoid misinterpretation or misunderstandings of words. The use of words with different meanings will not present the message as intended to the receiver and this is a common language barrier in intercultural business communication (Chow and Schoenbaum, 2020).

5.6 Literacy and Linguistic Ability

Construction of words in business communication depends on the competency level of both the sender and the receiver (Ai et al., 2020). According to Chow and Schoenbaum (2020), communication in business transactions across borders involve the use of low vocabulary in a particular language and very high vocabulary in different situations. Andersen and Rasmussen (2004) posit that literacy and education of parties involved in business communication determine how they communicate and also enhance their business vocabulary. Charles and Marschan-Piekkari (2002) aver that linguistic increases person capability to communicate effectively in a particular language with others. Thus, a person with high vocabulary and linguistic ability is able to communicate and negotiate business across border with others with low ability, although, people with low vocabulary may find it difficult to understand the words used by high vocabulary person. An exception to this is when low vocabulary is used for better understanding, otherwise, language barriers may arise which will lead to misunderstanding in the business transactions.

5.7 Grammar and Spelling

Grammatical expressions and spelling in intercultural business communication may become barriers to people from different parts of the world when using certain words differently (Luo and Shenkar, 2006). Grammar and spelling mistakes can create serious communication barrier in written communication. For example, in a business communication, typing done as don, will change the whole meaning of the sentence. Wrong use of metaphors or similes can hinder effective communication (Luo and Shenkar, 2006). As indicated by Barner-Rasmussen and Aarnio (2011), language barriers can deny business communication from being a productive and effective transaction. This implies that communication will be severed and business objectives will be unachievable (Lockwood,

2015). However, language barriers in business communication can be avoided or minimised through translation, interpreter, language classes, and visual methods (Harzing et al., 2011). Chow and Schoenbaum (2020) postulate that for smooth intercultural business transactions to be ensured, barriers relating to language must be avoided at all cost

6. POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS TO LANGUAGE BARRIERS

Language barriers can be avoided or minimized in intercultural business transactions if the following strategies are adopted:

6.1 Repetition

Repetition can be encouraged between sender and receiver in oral business communication for clarity of messages that are unclear. Partners can be asked to repeat words or statements for clear understanding. You can ask your business clients in an intercultural business transaction to repeat what is said, or provide an illustrative examples for clear understanding (Levin, 2005).

6.2 Code-switching

Code-switching enables second language users to communicate with others in their native language. Chow and Schoenbaum (2020) assert that code-switching enhances business transactions for parties who are able to code-switch between two languages when transacting business. In Harzing and Feely (2008) view, code switching can lead to exasperation, uneasiness and suspicion when the other party does not understand the switch language.

6.3 Machine Translation (MT) and Machine Interpretation (MI)

Machine transmission is another practical solution for written communications. According to Gu et al. (2018), this portable translation machine is mostly usable in a situation where the parties involved in intercultural business communication do not understand each other's language. Kumano et al. (2002) describe machine translation system as "a system" which includes a database for storing various information, database management section for performing database management, a bilingual correspondence data record subsystem for performing recording/learning processing of translation examples, a translation subsystem for performing translation processing, and dictionary management for performing dictionary management and database transmission/reception processing. Mikolov et al. (2013) assert that MT is cost effective in business transactions, for most translation objective is to extract

information from the source text and communicate the information into a target text in a second language. According to Tarditi Jr et al. (2009), machine interpreter (MI) is a recent machine translation kernel with a speech-recognition front-end (in the source language) and a post-translation speech generation module (in the target language).

6.4 External translators or interpreters

External translators or interpreters could be used to curb language barriers that could hinder effective intercultural business communication. External translators are primarily used for significant documents, like, to translate, and interpret technical languages because of the high cost of engaging the service of the professional ones (Harzing et al., 2011) External translators are valuable to business transactions that cut across borders (Yoshihara et al., 2002).

6.5 Language training

Language training is considered by many business organisations as an important strategy to overcoming language barriers (Yoshihara et al., 2012). The researchers are of the opinion that if business organisation representative across the borders are well trained in the art of language and conversation, it will reduce the challenges that language could pose in intercultural business encounters.

6.6 Bilingual employees as intermediaries or translation machines

Business organisation that transacts business across borders should consider hiring employees that are able to speak different languages as connecting pins to their business associates in foreign countries. This could serve as a way to avoid language barriers. These employees would act as communication nodes for the business organisation.

6.7 Locally hired non-native personnel

To reduce language barriers in intercultural business, it is advisable that business organisations should hire local non-native personnel for effective business transactions. These non-native personnel will be residents in the host country. They are locally hired and not expatriates. For example, a residing South African in Japan could be hired by South African company when transacting business in Japan to ease language difficulties. The familiarisation of these locally hired personnel with cultures and languages of the both nations make them perfect to act as intermediaries.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This discursive study explored language barriers as a significant hindrance to effective intercultural business transactions. The study emphasises that language barriers slow down business processes, incurring additional cost and can invariably lead to loss of business partners. Ineffective communication, cultural incompatibility between local business organisations and foreign counterparts are believed to be significant barriers to successful intercultural business transactions, more especially, when both parties come from different backgrounds and speak different languages. Language difficulty hinders effective communication, relationship and adherence to business strategies. Language barriers, therefore, can frustrate or limit business transactions across the borders. As discussed in this study, language problems are common due to inability of most businessmen to understand the language of their host business partners in foreign land. Poor and improper communication could as well obstructs business transactions and invariably leads to misunderstanding which can severely affect business relationship (Adanlawo and Rugbeer, 2019). Inability to communicate effectively in a business-related communication across borders can have negative consequences on businesses. The mentioned communicative and behavioural abilities presented in the theoretical relevance in our opinion should help to systematise the process of viable intercultural business communication, to establish productive contact with foreign partners, to achieve

mutual understanding, and to find acceptable ways of organising interaction and cooperation.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Questions should be asked repeatedly whenever message communicated is not clear or well understood. It should be noted by the parties that 'No crime in asking'. To attain an effective intercultural business communication, messages not clear should be asked to be repeated for clarification.

Multi-lingual employees should be employed by business organisations that indulge in businesses across borders. Employees that are able to speak different languages will be able to negotiate on behalf of their employers (business organisations) in a community/country where the language and culture are understood with no extra cost. This will help to alleviate the cost of incurring an interpreter for business transaction across the borders.

Business organisations should organise training on languages and cultural appreciation for their expatriate employees. Short courses and training on languages and culture will help in reducing the barriers that language might infringe on intercultural business transactions. These training will introduce the employees to the custom and norms of the nationals they intend to transact business with. Through regular trainings, employees will be exposed to cultural issues that can make them appreciate and respect the customs and norms of their host business partners.

There is a need to create a model of intercultural business communication that will identify the nature of intercultural interaction, necessary communicative and behavioural skills/competence toward effective intercultural business communication. Future research could focus on primary research on challenges faced by business organisations in non-English speaking countries and as well on how language differences affect business across borders especially in different context communication cultures (High context culture and Low context culture).

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