



ROLE OF CULTURE IN VERBAL AND NON – VERBAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

Culture is an important component in the ELT classroom as learners do not just need to focus on the language that they are learning but they also need to understand how culture plays a significant role in communicating with someone from an alien background. As culture includes people's manner of dressing, mannerisms, value additions etc. People coming from similar cultural background tend to listen to each other better. We can deduce that culture plays a significant role in both verbal and non-verbal communication. Thus, it is important to increase the awareness of learners regarding the cultural differences. As knowledge of culture helps people become better communicators. The current paper would also highlight that such a view of culture is restricted to developing communicative competence and it is totally different from teaching art, history, literature etc. of a culture.

Key words- culture, communication, verbal, non- verbal and knowledge

Introduction

One needs to be exposed to a culture to have a working knowledge about a culture. For instance, Hindus seek blessings of their elders by touching their feet in India or Arabs greet each other by saying salaam. This can only be understood by those who are exposed to their respective culture. Awareness of culture accelerates the rate of understanding between the sender and the receiver of the message. Hence, culture plays a crucial role in making individuals better communicators. Furthermore, it is very important both for verbal and non –verbal communication.

Role of Culture in Verbal and Non – verbal Communication

The revised, updated and illustrated Oxford dictionary defines culture to be a refined understanding of “the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement

regarded collectively.”¹ The Dictionary also defines culture to be “the customs civilizations and achievements of a particular time or people.”² When the topic under consideration is ‘Role of Culture in Verbal and Non – verbal Communication’ it cannot be denied that the latter definition is more apt than the former. Hence, culture is the sum total of people's manner of dressing, their mannerisms and other value additions. It is an accepted fact that culture plays a significant role in communicating with someone from an alien background. Culture includes people's manner of dressing, mannerisms, value additions etc. It is an accepted fact that people coming from similar cultural background tend to listen to each other better in comparison to those who come from different cultural backgrounds. So, knowledge of culture helps us become better communicators.

Culture undoubtedly plays a significant role in verbal communication. We know that language is broadly divided into four skills-listening, speaking,

reading and writing. And culture has a deep impact on these four language skills. For instance culture plays a significant role in the area of listening skill. Culture can both influence and distract the listening process. It is human nature to react positively to the things that are liked by us. To quote Sharma and Mishra "People coming from a similar cultural background tend to listen to each other better."³ They further add that "When a listener is exposed for the first time to people from other cultures where certain things are inherent in the way they speak, behave and react, listening suffers miserably."⁴

Speaking is also immensely influenced by the culture factor. Cross-cultural understanding is required to improve the verbal communication among the employees of a firm if they are coming from different cultural backgrounds. Sweeney talks at length about the extent to which one's students may travel to other countries or are likely to receive visitors,"⁵ from other countries. In such cases too understanding of culture can boost the verbal communication. Hence, knowledge about how people go about their business of living, what kind of culture they have influences the spoken mode of communication.

Even the reading skill is influenced by culture. Recent researches in Japan show that comics make for an interesting study material in over there. Culture plays an important role in the field of correspondence. The written mode of communication too relies heavily on culture. As Raman and Sharma point out "Beside having a thorough understanding of the product or service, you must know your readers".⁶ Which calls for knowledge of their age, interest areas, emotions and of course culture. Written mode of communication has another advantage .It bridges the gap between the people of different cultures. For instance "A customer in Australia or South America may find it very difficult to understand his supplier in England when he talks to him over the telephone. But this supplier is perfectly able to read the letter from the Englishman and is also able to write a good reply."⁷

In words of P.F.Drucker "the most important thing in communication is hearing what isn't said."⁸ So, he wanted to emphasize on the non-verbal aspect of the language. Communication that takes place without words is known as 'non-verbal communication.'

It can be agreed upon that both written and oral communication are an important part of the communication process. Many non- verbal aspects are peculiar to oral communication- such as stress, pitch, pauses and tone variations. Oral communication can be face to face as well as telephonic. In telephonic conversation we cultivate a suitable tone conveyed through the medium of most appropriate words.

History of non-verbal communication across the cultures: It seems that all cultures have a history of written or oral traditions expressing the importance of non-verbal communication. Some of them are listed below:

History of non-verbal communication in China: Over thousands of years "Chinese culture has developed a set of rules about how to judge the character of an individual by observing the size, shape and relative positions of the nose, eyes, eyebrows, chin, cheeks and forehead."⁹

History of non-verbal language in Greece: Ancient Greek culture has also utilized non-verbal skills to understand people. The famous playwright Theophrastus created a list of thirteen types of men "that he made available to other playwrights to assist them in the creation of characters for their plays".¹⁰ Theophrastus relied heavily on insights taken from non-verbal communication to describe these personalities. According to his insights the penurious man did not wear his sandals till noon. And the sanguine man had slumped shoulders.

History of non-verbal communication in India: The Hindu texts called the Vedas written around " 1000 B.C. described a liar as someone who when questioned, rubs his big toe along the ground, looks down, does not make eye contact, and so forth."¹¹

History of non-verbal communication in Africa:

African history has shown that one of the chief characteristics of the tribal chief was his ability to move his subjects with the power of his speeches made "particularly potent by the heavy use of non-verbal communication."¹²

Paralanguage is the non – verbal part of communication: The non – verbal aspect of communication includes kinesics, proxemics, paralinguistic and Chronemics

Kinesics: In words of Raman & Sharma whatever "the body communicates without words, i.e., through various movements of its parts"¹³ is known as kinesics. Dr. Shalini Verma in her book Body Languages – your success mantra rightly points out " Research has shown that most people pay more attention to, and believe more readily on their impression of how a person acts through body language than what is said through words"¹⁴ Body language includes personal appearance, posture, gesture facial expression and eye-contact. For instance, posture can determine the participant's or learner's degree of involvement and eye contact can reflect interest, attention and involvement. Example: In India if a young person looks in the eye of an elder and speaks it is a sign of disrespect. While it might not be so in some European countries.

Proxemics: Proxemics is the study of physical space in 'interpersonal relations'. To be precise no ideal measurements can be prescribed in this respect. As standard of proxemics varies from culture to culture. For instance the distance between two people would be different in a conference than in informal communication. The best solution would be to ensure that none of the parties involved in communication feels uncomfortable. In the American culture people maintain a safe distance while talking to each other while in Arabian countries people like to be more close to each other.

Paralinguistic: Characteristic nuances of voice are also very important. They are quality, volume, pace/rate, pitch articulation, pronunciation, voice modulation and pauses. All these are vocal cues. And if a cue or hint is taken intelligently it can guide

a person to carry out negotiations with a more productive result. For example a vocal cue can be the tone, the pitch in which the statement is concluded or left incomplete. For example, French people are very soft-spoken as compared to their Indian counterparts.

Chronemics: Chronemics is the communication which takes place through the use of time. To quote Raman and Sharma "In the professional world, time is a valuable commodity. When you are late for an appointment, people react negatively. If you arrive early, you are considered either over – eager or aggressive so always be on time"¹⁴ A good speaker is also conscious of the Chronemics. One has to give the presentation or speech within the time limit that is allotted; as it is a demand of the work culture.

Thus, it can be concluded that culture plays a significant role both in verbal and non-verbal communication.

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