

Indians' Inter-cultural Communication Competence as Perceived by European Expatriates

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Globalization has triggered the immigration to sky rocket for most of the developed and developing countries. People in search of employment settle down in such countries where they are constantly surrounded by a culture which does not belong to them. How to maximize the opportunities and minimize the challenges of cultural differences? Diversity can be a potent and a differentiating competitive edge. The present study aims at exploring the intercultural competence of Indian co-workers as perceived by European expatriates settled in India. The study revealed that the Indians were found to be adjusting if not adopting when communicating with people from other cultures.

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Introduction

With increase in cross border trade and globalization today's manager increasingly has to work in international and cross cultural environments. Worldwide the manpower constituting an organization is becoming multi cultural. Organizations at times have less than 15% of its employees from the home culture (Ray, 1998). Understanding of different cultures has become a necessity for anyone wanting to conduct business successfully in this global scenario. Managers, besides managing employees, are expected to deal with all kinds of challenges emanating from cross cultural differences. He must understand the laws, customs, and business practices of many countries and be able to communicate with people who speak other languages. The key to managerial efficiency in this modern environment is to have cross -cultural communication competency that includes understanding people , their perceptions, their backgrounds, values etc. in order to get the best out of a multicultural team.

Misunderstandings

Differences in goals, customs, behavior, values and thought patterns have led to many faux-pas especially in a diverse workforce with increasing numbers of expatriate workers not familiar with the host culture, its language, and communication systems in their intercultural experience (Chen & Starosta, 1998). Some are not serious, while others result in organizational and personal tragedies and affect company presidents and ambassadors, as well as tourists. Using the 2001 accident involving the sinking of the *Ehime Maru*, a Japanese fisheries high school training boat, Lingley (2006) highlights how differing cultural norms and values surrounding apologies in America and Japan caused serious intercultural communication problems. Gudykunst & Nishida (1994) termed this as the “violations of expectations” in a communication, causing an arousal in either or both interlocutors.

Intercultural Competence Model

Byram (1997) proposes a model of intercultural communicative competence which involves four elements: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and intercultural competence for interacting successfully with someone from a different culture. Competent communicators are able to identify their goals, assess the resources necessary to obtain those goals, accurately predict the other communicator’s responses, choose workable communication strategies, enact those communication strategies, and, finally, accurately

assess the results of the interaction (Parks & Kim, 2008). Thus, communicators who do these activities effectively and appropriately, are considered *competent* communicators. The final component—skill—of ICC competence reflects the needed behaviors to interact appropriately and effectively with members of different cultures. Research has discovered several behaviors that are positively associated with ICC competence: being mindful (Gudykunst, Nishida & Chua, 1986), intercultural adroitness (Chen & Starosta, 1996), interaction involvement (Cegala, 1984), recognition of nonverbal messages (Anderson, 1994), appropriate self-disclosure (Li, 1999), behavioral flexibility (Bochner & Kelly, 1974), interaction management (Wiemann, 1977), identity maintenance (Ting-Toomey, 1994), uncertainty reduction strategies (Sanders, Wiseman & Matz, 1991), appropriate display of respect (Ruben, 1976), immediacy skills (Benson, 1978), ability to establish interpersonal relationships (Hammer, 1987), and expressing clarity and face support (Kim, 1993). These behaviors reflect the ability to communicate in an adaptive, flexible, and supportive manner.

Towards Better Intercultural Understanding

Within the context of the global workplace, intercultural communication at its foundation aims to establish and understand how people from different cultures communicate (verbally and non-verbally) with each other, manage, work together, approach deadlines, negotiate, meet, greet, and build relationships and more. According to Phatak, Bhagat & Kashlak

Personal contact and mediated contact had a positive effect on intergroup attitudes, but that frequency of personal contact was a negative contributor.

(2005), successful communication is critical as cultural diversity in multinational and global corporations has become a reality. There is no denying that intercultural communication is becoming a significant part of people's daily life and work. Earlier, both the American as well as Japanese Intercultural communication scholars did lot of research highlighting the differences between the two cultures with regard to individualism/collectivism, low-context/high-context cultures, self-disclosure, and other values (Condon & Saito, 1974, 1976; Barnlund, 1975) since both these countries were seen as the major economies of the world. However, recently it is noticed that the subject has evoked the interest of scholars from different cultures as well across the world. Shim, Zhang & Harwood's (2012) two models examining the associations among Korean young adults' consumption of U.S. dramas, direct contact with a U.S. American person, and their attitudes toward U.S. Americans in general were tested. Results demonstrated that personal contact and mediated contact had a positive effect on intergroup attitudes, but that frequency of personal contact was a negative contributor. In addition, intergroup anxiety played a significant role in the contact modes and attitudes links. Brinson & Stohl (2012) in their study presents experimental findings on the impact of media framing of the 2005 London bombings. A total of 371

American participants were exposed to one of the two frames to test their effect on public attitudes towards civil liberties and Muslims, and support for counterterrorism policies. Results show that the "domestic homegrown" frame produces greater increases in the fear than the "international" frame. This leads to greater support for restricting civil liberties of Muslims and, under certain circumstances, general feelings of negativity towards Muslims.

The study of intercultural communication has drawn considerable interest in Australian tertiary education also. Gerber & William (2002) opine that it is of value not only to staff and international students but also to tertiary graduates who should have the ability to communicate across cultures as "cultural differences are indeed significant, especially in areas of dialogue and public participation". In another study, O'Sullivan, Coughlan & Ryan (2012) using the Grounded Theory principles to explore the service users' experiences of MH service and being treated by ethnically diverse professionals within it, found the initial apprehension of cultural difference in relation to e.g. language. Therefore, Deakins (2009) in his study infers that there is need to increase the awareness about the cultural diversity. He points out that the cross national interactions between international students studying in New Zealand and their domestic peers remains generally low. His findings are further reinforced by Kontio (2008) in his case study who advocates for positive internationalization at all levels through the teacher and student mobility programs.

Intercultural Communication in India

It is obvious that cross cultural communication competence is important for today's international business. Working with colleagues, customers or clients from different cultural backgrounds, with different religions, values and etiquettes can occasionally lead to problems. These cross cultural differences then follow on through to high level areas such as management styles, corporate culture, marketing, HR and PR.

Since the liberalization and opening of the economy, India has emerged as a new player on the international arena. In fact, international business in India grew manifold at the rate of 7% annually, thus attracting people from different geographical locations- US, UK, Europe, Africa, China, Japan etc. Communication could be a challenge to the foreigners in India since many see India as a sub-continent rather than a country because it is a land of multiple cultures, customs, traditions and many different languages are spoken here. A dearth of studies was found with regard to the intercultural communication challenges/problems the foreigners face in India.

Aims

A study was conducted by the investigator aiming at investigating the European expatriates' perceptions/experiences of their intercultural communication with their co-workers in India. A questionnaire was the tool used in this study. It was designed to

collect three broad types of information:

- Background information from each respondent about their personal and demographic characteristics.
- Information about individual experiences of problems with intercultural communication focusing on the language and communication competency.
- Information relating to respondents' perception of host nationals' intercultural communication competence.

An exploratory research design was used to find out the intercultural communication experiences of European Expatriates with their co-workers in India

Development of the Tool

Based on the review of literature and the discussions held with the expatriates in India, a tool of fifteen items covering two dimensions- the communication competence and the linguistic proficiency- was developed. These two dimensions were adopted mainly from the related literature since most of the researchers like Gudykunst & Kim (1984), Littlejohn & Jabusch (1982), Powers & Lowery (1984) say that for encouraging or promoting positive intercultural adjustment, it is important to develop effective intercultural communication competence (ICC). For validation of the tool, ten experts including academicians, managers from MNCs and the expatriates in India were requested to scrutinize the items and check their relevance and confor-

mity to the concept of intercultural communication competence with respect to its dimensions and were also asked to see whether the items measured adequately the dimensions they represented. They all confirmed that the items were representative of the intercultural communication compe-

tence and measured what these were intended to measure.

Further, to determine the internal consistency of the scale, coefficient Cronbach Alpha was calculated for both the dimensions of the scale and for the total sample as depicted in the Table 1.

Table 1 Coefficient Cronbach Alpha: Reliability on Communication Scale

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.661	.640	10

Table 2 Language Scale

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.581	.572	5

Both the scales are reliable with .5 and above Cronbach alpha score

The values of coefficients Cronbach Alpha for the two dimensions of the scale and for the total sample were found to be high and ranged between 0.58 and 0.61. Thus the scale was found to have high internal consistency and considered to be reliable.

Sampling & Data Collection

Two friends who work for Cresco International based in India which is into conducting management skills workshops, were able to identify the European expatriates who were working in various multinational companies. They have known them through their training programs which the former has been conducting for them. They requested their European clients to fill up the questionnaire explaining the purpose behind this

exercise. Respondents were from 2 sources: Europeans working in companies with which we work in India; and friends and clients who are working / have worked in India. Out of the 65 questionnaires, 15 were received by email (they were sent soft copy) and 39 were handed directly (they were given hard copy). Ten participants did not respond to our emails or to the questionnaire. The 39 persons who handed the questionnaire directly are currently working in India. They filled the questionnaire in front of us. The other 15 persons who sent the questionnaire by email have worked in India and have now left the country. They have sent back the questionnaire in maximum a week. Thus the total number of respondents was 54 out of 65.

Data Analysis & Results

In accordance with the objectives formulated for the study, data analysis

was carried out. Descriptive statistics – mean, standard deviation, and standard error of mean were calculated for the scores on intercultural communication scale and its two dimensions to study the nature of distribution of scores.

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics

Valid	N		Mean	Std.Devia- tion	Vari- ance
	Missing				
My co-workers are open in their communication	42	2	2.36	.983	.967
My co-workers are direct in their communication	42	2	3.02	1.179	1.390
My co-workers balance fact and emotion when communicating	42	2	2.81	1.018	1.036
My co-workers allow me to express my opinions openly	43	1	1.81	.732	.536
My co-workers listen carefully when I speak	43	1	2.28	.882	.777
My co-workers are open to different points of views	41	3	2.32	.986	.972
My co-workers are focused on taking decisions when communicating more than their point of view	42	2	2.95	1.058	1.120
My co-workers are focused on discussing their points of view when communicating more than taking decisions	42	2	2.69	.950	.902
My co-workers have clear action points from decisions taken in communication	41	3	3.07	1.081	1.170
My co-workers consider me too direct in my communication	41	3	2.95	.893	.798
My co-workers are aware of my comfort with English	43	1	2.19	.852	.726
My co-workers adjust their communication to make it easier for me to understand	43	1	2.16	.974	.949
My co-workers help me understand the Indian style of English	42	2	2.50	.994	.988
My co-workers avoid speaking in their native language around me	43	1	3.58	1.139	1.297
My co-workers help me learn basics of their native language	43	1	2.21	.989	.979
Communication (overall)	37	7	26.2162	4.77921	22.841
Language usage (overall)	42	2	12.6667	3.04972	9.301

Mean scores for the two dimensions of intercultural communication namely communication and language ranged from 1.81 to 3.58 and standard deviation from .732 to 1.179. The mean score and the standard deviation for the overall communication and language were found to be 26.21 and 12.66 and 4.77

and 3.04. The distribution was found to be normal.

Nature of Communication

Table 4 shows the percentage of expatriates who agreed or disagreed with the various statements on a five -

Table 4 Frequency Table: My Co-workers Are Open in Their Communication

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	7	15.9	16.7	16.7
	Agree	20	45.5	47.6	64.3
	Neutral	9	20.5	21.4	85.7
	Disagree	5	11.4	11.9	97.6
	Strongly Agree	1	2.3	2.4	100.0
	Total	42	95.5	100.0	
Missing	System	2	4.5		
	Total	44	100.0		

64% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that their co-workers are open in their communication

Table 5 Frequency Table: My Co-workers Are Direct in Their Communication

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	5	11.4	11.9	11.9
	Agree	10	22.7	23.8	35.7
	Neutral	9	20.5	21.4	57.1
	Disagree	15	34.1	35.7	92.9
	Strongly Agree	3	6.8	7.1	100.0
	Total	42	95.5	100.0	
Missing	System	2	4.5		
	Total	44	100.0		

On this item, there is no clear mandate. The respondents are divided in their opinion

Table 6 Frequency Table: My Co-workers Balance Fact and Emotion When Communicating

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	3	6.8	7.1	7.1
	Agree	16	36.4	38.1	45.2
	Neutral	10	22.7	23.8	69.0
	Disagree	12	27.3	28.6	97.6
	Strongly Agree	1	2.3	2.4	100.0
	Total	42	95.5	100.0	
Missing	System	2	4.5		
	Total	44	100.0		

This is more towards positive with 45% of respondents either agree or strongly agree

Table7 Frequency Table: My Co-workers Allow Me to Express My Opinions Openly

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	15	34.1	34.9	34.9
	Agree	22	50.0	51.2	86.0
	Neutral	5	11.4	11.6	97.7
	Disagree	1	2.3	2.3	100.0
	Total	43	97.7	100.0	
Missing	System	1	2.3		
	Total	44	100.0		

86% of respondents believed that their co-workers allowed them to express their opinion openly

Table 8 Frequency Table: My Co-workers Listen Carefully When I Speak

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	8	18.2	18.6	18.6
	Agree	19	43.2	44.2	62.8
	Neutral	12	27.3	27.9	90.7
	Disagree	4	9.1	9.3	100.0
	Total	43	97.7	100.0	
Missing	System	1	2.3		
	Total	44	100.0		

Close to 63% believed that their co-worker listened to them carefully when they speak

Table 9 Frequency Table: My Co-workers Are Open to Different Points of Views

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	9	20.5	22.0	22.0
	Agree	16	36.4	39.0	61.0
	Neutral	10	22.7	24.4	85.4
	Disagree	6	13.6	14.6	100.0
	Total	41	93.2	100.0	
Missing	System	3	6.8		
	Total	44	100.0		

There is open communication and everybody's point of view is heard

Engagement is big in the HR consultancy market, yet there is a dearth of academic research in this area.

Table 10 Frequency Table: My Co-workers Are Focused on Taking Decisions When Communicating More Than Their Point of View

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	3	6.8	7.1	7.1
	Agree	13	29.5	31.0	38.1
	Neutral	11	25.0	26.2	64.3
	Disagree	13	29.5	31.0	95.2
Strongly	Disagree	2	4.5	4.8	100.0
	Total	42	95.5	100.0	
Missing	System	2	4.5		
	Total	44	100.0		

Respondents seem to be disagreeing with this statement

Table 11 Frequency Table: My Co-workers Are Focused on Discussing their Points of View When Communicating More Than Taking Decisions

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	3	6.8	7.1	7.1
	Agree	17	38.6	40.5	47.6
	Neutral	13	29.5	31.0	78.6
	Disagree	8	18.2	19.0	97.6
Strongly	Disagree	1	2.3	2.4	100.0
	Total	42	95.5	100.0	
Missing	System	2	4.5		
	Total	44	100.0		

Table 12 Frequency Table: My Co-workers Have Clear Action Points From Decisions Taken in Communication

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	4	9.1	9.8	9.8
	Agree	7	15.9	17.1	26.8
	Neutral	15	34.1	36.6	63.4
	Disagree	12	27.3	29.3	92.7
Strongly	Disagree	3	6.8	7.3	100.0
	Total	41	93.2	100.0	
Missing	System	3	6.8		
	Total	44	100.0		

There is disagreement on this statement

Table13 Frequency Table: My Co-workers Consider Me Too Direct in My Communication

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	1	2.3	2.4	2.4
	Agree	14	31.8	34.1	36.6
	Neutral	12	27.3	29.3	65.9
	Disagree	14	31.8	34.1	100.0
	Total	41	93.2	100.0	
Missing	System	3	6.8		
	Total	44	100.0		

There is a divided mandate on this issue.

Table 14 Frequency Table: My Co-workers Are Aware of My Comfort with English

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	8	18.2	18.6	18.6
	Agree	23	52.3	53.5	72.1
	Neutral	8	18.2	18.6	90.7
	Disagree	4	9.1	9.3	100.0
	Total	43	97.7	100.0	
Missing	System	1	2.3		
	Total	44	100.0		

72% agree to the to the proposition

Table 15 Frequency Table: My Co-workers Adjust Their Communication to Make It Easier for Me to Understand

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	12	27.3	27.9	27.9
	Agree	16	36.4	37.2	65.1
	Neutral	12	27.3	27.9	93.0
	Disagree	2	4.5	4.7	97.7
	Total	43	97.7	100.0	
Strongly	Disagree	1	2.3	2.3	100.0
Missing	System	1	2.3		
	Total	44	100.0		

65% believe that their coworkers adjust their communication to make it easier for the expats to understand

Table 16 Frequency Table: My Co-workers Help Me Understand the Indian Style of English

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	6	13.6	14.3	14.3
	Agree	18	40.9	42.9	57.1
	Neutral	9	20.5	21.4	78.6
	Disagree	9	20.5	21.4	100.0
	Total	42	95.5	100.0	
Missing	System	2	4.5		
	Total	44	100.0		

Co-workers make them understand the Indian style of English

Table 17 Frequency Table: My Co-workers Avoid Speaking in Their Native Language Around Me

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	2	4.5	4.7	4.7
	Agree	7	15.9	16.3	20.9
	Neutral	7	15.9	16.3	37.2
	Disagree	18	40.9	41.9	79.1
	Strongly Disagree	9	20.5	20.9	100.0
Missing	System	1	2.3		
	Total	44	100.0		

The co-workers tend to speak in local language in the presence of the expats

Table 18 Frequency Table: My Co-workers Help Me Learn Basics of Their Native Language

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	10	22.7	23.3	23.3
	Agree	20	45.5	46.5	69.8
	Neutral	8	18.2	18.6	88.4
	Disagree	4	9.1	9.3	97.7
	Strongly Disagree	1	2.3	2.3	100.0
Missing	System	1	2.3		
	Total	44	100.0		

69% believe that their co-workers make them understand the native language and think consequentially prior to answering. They often focus on other's points of view than on trying to impose their own views.

point scale for communication competence.

Results & Discussion

Majority of the respondents perceived Indians to be open and effective listeners

Respondents ranging between 45% and 86% agreed with statements 1, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 8 and the personnel ranging from 2.3 % to 34.1% expressed their disagreement. 11.4% to 29.3% of personnel were found to be indifferent to these statements. Majority of the respondents perceived Indians to be open and effective listeners which can be qualified as that they maintained appropriate eye contact, displayed general attentiveness to what the speaker said and the assurance that everyone's ideas were being heard. They were seen as open and appreciative of diverse perspectives, ideas and information. They were not found to be rigid or parochial, rejecting any idea or information that went contrary to their set of information or belief system. They would validate by acknowledging what they had heard and appreciated another person's participation. They would acknowledge the other person's contributions without sounding judgmental. And when they listened, they listened to the message as well as to the sub, sub-sub text of the message as well. Also, the expatriates observed that the Indians in a decision making process would only be content in presenting their point of view and beyond that they will not show interest to take the discussion to its logical conclusions. This could be due

to the fact that the Indian decision making system is highly centralized, and taken at higher levels with only modest responsibility delegated to lower levels (Moran, Harris & Moran, 2009).

However, expatriates ranging between 11.4 % and 29.3 % did not subscribe to any of the statements. They expressed their neutrality which could be interpreted that perhaps they did not have substantial experience to have a conclusive view on the various statements pertaining to the intercultural communication competence of their co workers in India. They were not sure if the Indians were good listeners, flexible or rigid or parochial while interacting with the expatriates. They could not decide if they had had a good or bad experience of communicating with Indian co-workers. It could be also inferred from their responses that they may be partially satisfied with their Indian co workers' communication competence.

The respondents ranging between 2.3% and 34.1% disagreed on all the items of the scale especially the statements no. 2, 7 and 9. The majority of respondents perceived that the Indians were not direct in their communication. They felt that the Indians did not mean exactly what they said. They felt that there was sub-text or an implied meaning, or insinuation in their messages. This could be attributed to the impact of high context culture.

The majority of respondents perceived that the Indians were not direct in their communication.

Respondents ranging between 20.4% and 70.2 % agreed with the statements 1, 2, 3 and 5, and the personnel ranging between 6.8 % and 61.4% expressed their disagreement on all the statements related to language proficiency of Indian co-workers and 15.9% and 27% of personnel were found to be indifferent to these statements. The respondents felt that their Indian co workers were aware of their comfort with English language and they would try to communicate with them in English language only. Some of them were not perhaps comfortable with speaking English since it was not their native language but they would still make an attempt to communicate with them in English. They were conscious of the fact that their English dialect, vocabulary etc may impede the effectiveness of their communication with the expatriates. They would make all the required adjustments like the use of different ways to communicate their points lest it should be lost. They would speak clearly and slowly, use as many visual restatements as possible, such as pictures, graphs, tables, be more expressive to support the verbal message or use more facial and hand gestures to emphasize the meaning of words. They would perhaps repeat each important idea using different words to explain the same concept or pause more frequently or communicate through handout written summaries. However, 61% of the expatriates found that Indians would often resort to speaking in their native language in their presence though they would also help them to learn the basics of their native language to facilitate their understanding of the native tongue. This could be interpreted that the Indians were not

insulated or close people who would like to include even strangers in their systems.

Indians were found to be adjusting if not adopting with regard to their communication with people from differing cultures.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the result one can only make tentative conclusions about the generalizability of the findings since the sample size of the expatriates was not large enough to represent the general opinion of the expatriates with regard to communication competence of the Indians. However, the study could be indicative of intercultural communication competence of the Indians in general. The findings of the study are that the Indians were found to be adjusting if not adopting with regard to their communication with people from differing cultures. They were seen as good listeners, open and flexible in their attitude, have language proficiency, levels of ethnocentrism were not seen high except they were not direct in their communication and they were not found to be result oriented. They discuss things for the sake of discussion, not interested in taking the discussion to its conclusions. So in the perception of European expatriates it can be concluded that their co-workers in India possess substantial degree of linguistic, socio-linguistic, discourse and intercultural competence while interacting with someone from a different culture.

This small research study has added on new dimensions to the pool of behav-

iors that are positively associated with intercultural communication competence like effective listening, direct communication, open communication and decision making skills. The study highlights that in intercultural communication encounters especially during business interactions /meetings, the communicator from his /her host speaker expects to be empathic listener who accepts and appreciates others' point of view, is open and direct in communication and a person who is good at listening deliberately for feelings of the speakers as well as evaluating facts objectively.

Limitations

The major limitation of the study was that the sample size was very small which could not be said to be the representative of the entire population of European expatriates in India. The scope of the study could further be extended by including the expatriates from other cultures as well other than Europeans in India. A research could also be carried out using the variables of age, education, and length of experience in India with respect to expatriates' communication experience with Indians.

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