

A Study of Intercultural Communication on The Use of Sarcasm for Humorous Purpose and Intergroup Communication Between Thai and Non-Thai Staff at An Embassy in Bangkok

By

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Abstract

The use of sarcasm for humorous purposes and intergroup communication as leading problems caused by intercultural discourse between Thai and non-Thai staff at an embassy in Bangkok. The study specifically investigated Thai and non-Thai staff perspectives toward these issues to discern feelings, reactions and responses. In addition, solutions were formulated to resolve the intercultural communication problems. Qualitative data was collected divided in two sections: 1) Use of Sarcasm for Humorous Purpose; and 2) Use of Intergroup Communication. Results were that most Thai staff perceived humor negatively due to cultural unfamiliarity while non-Thai staff considered it less seriously. In addition, Thai staff preferred to communicate in Thai language with Thai colleagues, even when surrounded by non-Thai staff. Among solutions suggested were to boost sample cultural awareness, advice staff to think carefully before speaking, and present cultural introductions and workshops.

Keywords: Sarcasm, Humor, Intergroup communication, Intercultural discourse, An embassy in Bangkok.

Introduction

In the modern era of globalization, people can travel quickly to anywhere on the planet. Some decide to settle in new countries and conduct business (Ahmed, 2019). International organizations employ people from many different countries and efficient communication between staff members is essential. Nowadays, intercultural communication is paramount for a successful business environment. Lack of employee intercommunication or understanding leads to problems in the workplace. "There is no better way to build trust than through communication" (Hayhoe & Grady, 2008, p. 40). Communication skills in this context include both verbal and nonverbal as aspects that involve facial expressions, body postures, gestures and eye contact.

Sangmala (2008) defined the general concept of communication as, "Communication is a tool to communicate with people to provide and receive information, news, opinions and feelings to obtain good understanding and relationships in society." Intercultural communication is a method by which people from various cultures and backgrounds communicate with one another to ensure that the intended messages are received and understood correctly. People with higher communication skills are more likely to be successful in diverse workplaces. English is the main language used in intercultural communication. In Thailand, English is the official language in workplaces when communicating with foreign colleagues or customers. People from the same culture and

background generally find it easy to communicate with one another, with the intended messages correctly received. However, communication becomes more difficult for people from different cultures working together in the same company whose native languages may not be English, leading to misunderstandings or misinterpretations that often negatively impact workplace working relationships. Thus, workplaces containing diverse nationalities present challenges to both employees and employers because different cultural aspects make communication more complicated (Evans & Suklun, 2017).

Apart from cultural differences, language proficiency is also a factor in intercultural communication. Different accents and sentence structures present difficulties in both speaking and writing. To better understand communication between people from different cultures requires looking beyond words alone to comprehend the meaning and context of interaction. Thus, for effective intercultural communication, people working together must be aware of cultural differences and be open-minded. Patel, Li and Sooknanan (2011) suggested improving intercultural communication in the workplace by maintaining a positive attitude, understanding people's diversity, encouraging individual interaction, conducting induction programs and discouraging racism and discrimination.

Language is one of the most important factors in intercultural communication. People from diverse cultures use language differently to communicate. This causes difficulties or misunderstandings between those whose native tongue is different, especially when using humor, which is more complicated than general communication. Humor is not said directly and its purpose is often to mock or make fun of others. Different cultures use humor in diverse ways; some take it seriously, while others see it as a natural part of communication. Bell (2007) stated that the use and understanding of humor in intercultural interaction is an aspect of sociolinguistic competence particularly susceptible to misinterpretation. The occurrence of humor is universal but what is considered funny by some may not amuse others. The concept of humor varies across cultures and even between individuals within a shared culture. Even for advanced L2 learners, the construction and comprehension of verbal humor pose a significant challenge because they frequently necessitate sophisticated linguistic, social and cultural competence.

People from the same culture usually form their own groups, especially in environments with diverse populations such as international organizations. The identity of members in such groups is frequently distinguished by "individual differences" based on variables such as age, gender, race, ethnicity and family (Alderfer and Smith, 1982 cited in Ghosh, 2012). In a cross-cultural environment, people naturally prefer to communicate with others from the same culture in their native language. This can become a barrier when working as a team with people from different cultures. The language used should be one that everyone can understand because if one group uses their own language, then others may feel offended and excluded, subsequently impacting the working relationship and this requires effective intercultural communication.

When Thai and non-Thai colleagues converse in an embassy in Bangkok they sometimes misinterpret each other's messages. These issues stem primarily from intercultural miscommunication caused by the use of humor and intergroup communication, leading to misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Miscommunication occurs due to a lack of knowledge and cultural awareness and negatively impacts working relationships. Therefore, these issues require detailed study to promote good teamwork and effective communication within the embassy.

Purpose of the study

To discover how both Thai and foreign employees react when another group of people use sarcasm for humorous purpose toward them. Because of cultural differences, the true meaning and sense of the humor may be misinterpreted. Using humor in language may be amusing or normal to foreigners but can be viewed as sensitive or inappropriate by Thai employees. Lack of knowledge regarding different cultures may result in unintended negative impacts on working relationships.

To determine the perceptions of foreign staff toward Thai staff using intergroup team communication. An embassy in Bangkok employs both Thai and foreign staff and the primary language used when working together or as a team is English. However, some Thai employees prefer to communicate in with their coworkers, even when foreign employees are present or working in the same team. This may be interpreted as inappropriate and foreigners may feel excluded, resulting in teamwork failure.

Solutions proposed by organizational staff to solve problems they encounter in intercultural communication will be examined to develop working relationships and effective communication that promote success.

Use of Sarcasm for Humorous Purpose

Sarcasm could be used in different purposes such as humorous, self-defeating, self-enhancing, aggressive and maintaining relationship. It depended on how people would use it. Also, cultural differences had much impact on people's perspectives of humor as we could see that the westerners seemed to use sarcasm or humor more than the easterners. The perception of sarcasm for humorous purposes was perceived differently by people from western and eastern societies. Eastern societies seemed to have more negative attitudes toward sarcasm than the western do. The westerners considered humor as their natural part of life and used it whenever they wanted while the easterners seemed to be more serious as they would use less sarcasm or humor in conversations as much as they could in order to avoid miscommunication or misinterpretation. Moreover, the gender was also a factor of different perception of humor and sarcasm as many studies revealed that men and women used it and perceived in different way as men tended to perceive it as the tool to empower and be aggressive while women tended to use it in general context or just for making fun.

From studies on the use of humor could be classified into two major themes: negative and positive experiences.

The negative experience, it illustrated that the majority of Thai staff and a few of non-Thai staff had encountered negative experiences by being used or using sarcasm for humorous purpose, on the difficulties of language and cultures faced, for example Thai staff were being unable to understand the humor in English used by non-Thai staff. They were more sensitive with humor because they were unfamiliar with it and would easily misinterpret it as the tool for someone to make fun of others without caring their feelings. This could be evidenced from Bell (2007) that it would be difficult to for L2 to understand the native language, especially in humorous context, and that would lead to misinterpretation as they didn't understand in the same direction. Also, the majority of non-Thai staff perceived that their Thai colleagues didn't understand when they used humor in English due to the complexity of English words which could have multiple meanings when used in different

contexts, particularly in different culture. Thai culture appeared to be unfamiliar with the use of humor, especially in the workplace.

Cultural difference was another main factor. Some of English words could be meant in both negative and positive way when putting in humorous context depending on individual interpretation. However, for Thai staff, the majority of them thought that their non-Thai colleagues would not understand their use of humor because the way they use English words might not be correct and could confuse the listeners, but if they use humor with Thai colleague, they would definitely understand each other because they speak the same language. Shows that it demonstrated that people who come from different culture would not understand the use of humor to each other so they prefer to use it with the people who share the same cultural background to them in order to prevent misunderstanding that could have an impact on working relationship. Cultural differences are still the main factor of creating misinterpretation and misunderstanding caused by the use of humor.

Also, unfamiliarity of using humor as Thai culture seemed to consider humor as an occasional conversation that should be used between close friends rather than as a part of usual conversation that should be used between close friends rather than as a part of usual conversation. Inappropriacy was another negative experience subtheme faced by the majority of Thai staff and none of Thai staff faced this issue because they thought humor should be something that should not be taken seriously and it could be used in the workplace. However, humor should be used with carefulness, or else it will destroy someone's feelings, make someone feel offensive, and humiliate them in front of others, even if the speaker only intended to make fun of them. According to Holms and Marra (2008), humor could be double sword as sometimes it could make people laugh and create relaxing environment but in return, it could also create trouble and hurt some people's feelings if they do not perceive it as a joke, and that might cause breaking relationship rather than improving.

The positive experiences. Not all people had had negative experiences, but some of them, particularly non-Thai staff, saw humor as something positive, the using humor in the workplace could help reduce stress, create relaxing environment and improve relationship with colleagues but there are several factors that need to be considered before using it, particularly, colleagues from different culture. They just wanted to make workplace environment become more relaxing and wanted to improve relationship with the colleagues without thinking of cultural difference. When using humor, they had to consider the mood of their colleagues at that time whether they were in good mood or not. So whether they were used or used humor, they saw it as a source of entertainment. Environment and relationship were positive experiences which faced by the majority of non-Thai staff and a few of Thai staff. Some of Thai staff still preferred to talk directly rather than using humor in order to avoid a conflict that could happen. However, non-Thai staff used humor quite often with each other as it was a part of their culture to use it every day.

By the way, humor has been used to reduce stress and create a positive vibe by making people laugh, which supports the study result from Yue et al. (2016) reporting that it distracted people from stressful situations. Furthermore, humor can improve interpersonal relationships by making them feel closer rather than saying something simple in everyday conversation.

Use of Intergroup Communication

In many diverse workplaces which contained a lot of different people, one of the problems came from the situation that people from same culture preferred to talk with those who are considered as in-group members in their language. That might make the people considered as the outsiders feel negative, and excluded as they cannot understand. Intergroup communication could happen when people from the same culture would like to communicate to each other by using their own mother language. But doing this would not be the problem if people did not do it while being around by multi-national people, especially in workplace. The outsiders or people who did not speak the same language could interpret that they were being excluded and disrespected which would have an impact on working relationship in organizations. Thus, this issue should be addressed by the management or employer in order to prevent the conflict within workplaces.

From studies of the use of intergroup communication while working in a team with people of different nationalities could be divided into three major themes: negative experiences, positive experiences, and cultural differences.

The negative experience, that using intergroup communication while working with people from different cultures resulted in more negative experiences. The main issue that could be identified as a result of the negative experience was exclusion which encountered by the majority of non-Thai staff. When some people were surrounded by a group of people who spoke their native language to each other while working in the same team, they felt excluded because they couldn't understand it, which distracted them from participating in the teamwork, they were afraid that the messages they sent would be unclear and misunderstood due to cultural differences. Furthermore, when working surrounded by people from different cultures, the manner of using language was important. People should know when to speak their native language or when to speak English as the shared language they everyone could understand to prevent negative feeling of the members in the team and to work smoothly as a teamwork. This could represent a sign of power and relations related to language proficiency as supported by Siiskonen (2015). People who couldn't understand much of L2 considered themselves to be outsiders.

The positive experiences, some of people enjoyed working with new people from different cultures and saw it as a positive experience were feeling and development. All of non-Thai staff felt both exciting and happy when have to work with people from across cultures and also thought that this would be a good development to learn new cultures and build teamwork. They feel happy and exciting when have to work with people from different cultures who don't speak the same languages as them because they thought it's like opening the new world to them to know people more broadly. They were able to exchange knowledge and ideas especially for Thai staff, they thought they could practice their English skills. The non-Thai staff thought at the end we all have to adapt to each other. Thai staff thought they can learn and practice their English but they were still afraid that other members in the team would not understand them when they communicate in English while the non-Thai staff thought even they enjoyed working with people from different cultures but they still concerned that other members would not understand clearly as well. According to Ayoko et al. (2001) The findings revealed that checking understanding of the group members was the most important strategy to do to avoid miscommunication and the leader of the groups should reverse the communication breakdown and achieve the consensus of

the onset of task. Moreover, it was suggested that the members should have interpersonal control and know how to use it in order to avoid mis-conflict in the group.

As previously stated, working with multi-cultural colleagues could bring happiness and excitement at the same time. It also contributed to development as they could learn new languages and cultures of each other and build relationships across cultures in order to work together as teamwork.

Cultural differences, Because of the collectivism culture, the majority of Thai staff preferred to work with Thai colleagues. They felt more at ease working with people from the same culture and who spoke the same mother tongue because it is easier to communicate, According to Ghosh (2012) The findings of this study discovered that most employees prefer to work with people who shared same identity when they had to work as a team because they could understand easily which helped to proceed work faster. While working while none of non-Thai staff perceived in the same way. Some people who work in international organizations may find it difficult because they have to deal with people from different cultures on a daily basis. Non-Thai employees, on the other hand, appeared to be more open to working with people from other cultures. They want to learn new things and meet new people.

Conclusions

An embassy in Bangkok values diversity and inclusion, employing both Thai staff and non-Thai staff from all walks of life. However, problems caused by intercultural communication are unavoidable. Using humor caused problems for some Thai staff due to cultural practices that differed from non-Thai staff who mostly came from western cultures. Holding a training workshop to raise cultural awareness would be detrimental to the entire staff. Consistent with Jiang et al. (2022) that management should listen closely to employees and find ways to solve these problems to build a positive atmosphere in the workplace. English, as the standard language, should be used by all staff to communicate with one another while working together. Communication involving people from diverse cultures who spoke different mother tongues was sometimes difficult and some preferred to converse with colleagues in their native language. This made those who could not speak the native language feel ignored. This problem affected both Thai and non-Thai employees. The management team should take action to make the organization more inclusive and achieve the goals of intercultural communication.

Suggestions for Future Studies

This future studies should focus on other similar organizations to compare how they handle similar issues. It would also be beneficial to conduct observations during staff meetings or when staff were talking to each other during their break times, or working together as a team to expand the findings to other contexts in the workplace.

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