

UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE AS A COMMUNICATION BARRIER AMONG EXECUTIVES IN CORPORATE ORGANIZATION TOWARDS EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Muhammad Firdaus Daud¹
Ahmad Syakir Salman Salleh @ Abdul Latif²
Ku Nurul Atiqah Ku Ahamad³
Muhammad Azril Izuan Ramlan⁴
Mohamed Shafiq Mohamed Ayub⁵
Rosdi Safian⁶
Siti Faidul Maisarah Abdullah⁷
Noor Ashmalia Mohd Ashraff⁸

Abstract

This research is conducted using qualitative method in understanding the deeper meaning of language as a communication barrier. A conceptual framework has been developed to understand these communication barriers on a deeper level and they are categorized into three dimensions which are, 1) slang, 2) speed of talking, 3) language proficiency. To achieve these objectives, a total of 5 informants have been interviewed using in-depth interview method. The informants are chosen among the executives working in Sime Darby Bhd as the organization is a conglomerate consisting of multiracial employees and they are selected using purposive sampling. The location of this study is the headquarter of Sime Darby Bhd, situated in Jalan Raja Laut, Kuala Lumpur. The findings of this current research has found that the issues revolving around language barrier still remain the same as past research findings whereby the use of slang, jargon, abbreviation would cause problems in knowledge transfer and thus resulting in communication breakdown. However, these problems can be overcome through the use of proper gesture and even visualization.

Keywords: Communication barriers, language, slang

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¹ Lecturer, Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UITM), Cawangan Negeri Sembilan Kampus Rembau, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, Tel: +60196321621 E-mail: firdausdaud@uitm.edu.my

² Lecturer, Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UITM), Cawangan Negeri Sembilan Kampus Rembau, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, Tel: +60145057954 E-mail: ahmadsyakir@uitm.edu.my

³ Lecturer, Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UITM), Cawangan Negeri Sembilan Kampus Rembau, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, Tel: +60123354415 E-mail: kunurul@uitm.edu.my

⁴ Lecturer, Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UITM), Cawangan Negeri Sembilan Kampus Rembau, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, Tel: +60172431484 E-mail: azrilizuan@uitm.edu.my

⁵ Lecturer, Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UITM), Cawangan Negeri Sembilan Kampus Rembau, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, Tel: +60197745464 E-mail: mshafiq@uitm.edu.my

⁶ Lecturer, Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UITM), Cawangan Negeri Sembilan Kampus Rembau, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, Tel: +60133910602 E-mail: rosdi2290@uitm.edu.my

⁷ Lecturer, Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UITM), Cawangan Negeri Sembilan Kampus Rembau, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, Tel: +60166436421 E-mail: mairsarah842@uitm.edu.my

⁸ Lecturer, Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UITM), Cawangan Negeri Sembilan Kampus Rembau, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, Tel: +60196716545 E-mail: ashmalia295@uitm.edu.my

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to understand language barrier towards effective communication among executives working in Sime Darby Bhd. Ford and Chan (2002) state that effective communication is a two way information processing practice which involves one party sending a message that can easily be understood by the receiver party. Effective communication is not just about a matter of exchanging information. It is also referring to the understanding and accepting the emotion and meanings that lies behind the information. In addition, effective communication can also be said like a two way street. It is not only how one conveys an information in order for it to be understood and acknowledged by somebody in correctly to the way he has envisioned, it is also how a person attends to obtain full connotation of what is trying to be conveyed hence making the other person feel that he is heard and understood, and this concept is also applied in organizational communication. In organizations, effective communication is used by employees to enable the transfer of information which leads to higher profit and commercial success. In language barriers, the factors that could cause ineffective communication include 1.) speed of talking, 2.) different language competency, and 3.) use of jargon (technical terms) and abbreviation.

The contents of this paper are structured as follows. First, an explanation on the dimension communications barriers are briefly described. Second, the theories that are used in this study brought into highlight and how they are relevant in this study. Thirdly, the method of how this study was conducted is presented. Then, the results of this study is discussed. Last but not least, the researcher concludes on the findings of this study.

Communication Barriers

Broecker (2006) demarcates barriers in communication to be all types of hindrances that takes place during a communication process between two people and disturbing the process of information transfer which leads to misinterpretation and misunderstanding of a message. The chronological dimensions and the incoherence in communications are the indications that communication barriers exist.

In other words, communication barriers or barriers of communication are the aspects and factors that prevent effective communication to take place as information is not being able to be conveyed properly. Disturbances in the flow of information and the creation of problems to comprehend and understand a certain message are known as communication barriers. According to Hutchings (2005) communication barriers can be demarcated as hindrance and obstacle in a workplace that thwart effective interchange of ideas or thoughts. In the opinion of Larsson, Bentsson, Henriksson, & Sparks (1998) barriers of communication are the factors, causes or and problems that appear in the process of communication between two parties which leads to confusion and miscommunication.

Language as Communication Barrier

According to Shapira, Youtie, Yogeessvaran and Jaafar (2005) knowledge sharing is embedded within the knowledge-processing scope where knowledge is generated and put to use. One of the major communication problems is when employees do not share and speak the same language and this problem is known as language barrier. This problem can clearly be seen when an employee tries to communicate to the other employees and the information is not delivered as the other party is unable to understand and comprehend the words that are used by the sender. Yoshihara (2006) indicates that misunderstandings and delays in decision-making are the most important costs associated with the language barrier. The most important direct problem associated with the language barrier was that everything takes more time and is more costly. Hence decision making would generally be slower and less efficient if different languages are involved. Luring (2008) claims that the major factor which causes misinterpretation and miscommunication between employees is caused by language differences. This language difference has also been viewed as counterproductive especially in communication. Another communication barrier which hinders effective communication to take place between employees in corporate organization is language barrier. When employees do not share or speak the same language, this can be considered as a major problem as effective communication could not be practiced. This problem is manifested when attempting to communicate information from one party to another. The use of jargon also contributes to communication barrier and is being parked under language barrier. Ramesh and Tiwana (2004) state that in corporate organizations in Malaysia, communication barriers also exist because employees use certain jargon that are not prominent, resulting in failure for a message to be delivered and even miscommunication. This problem hinders effective communication especially towards junior executives who just joined an organization. This scenario occurs during communication between junior executives and senior executives when abbreviation and technical terms are used during their communication. As a result, the content of the message is not fully comprehended by the junior executives. According to Valkenburg and Dorst (2002) lack of understanding of an information due to the use of jargon reduce the quality of work because the communication between employees are considered ineffective. Often, jargon words are used by employees in organizations to refer to technical terms and even abbreviation of longer words. Shapira, Youtie, Yogeessvaran and Jaafar (2005) also state that it is common for employees in corporate organizations in Malaysia to not fully be able to share knowledge amongst themselves often because their language competency is not on the same level. Prior to this, only certain knowledge or information is being able to be shared between the communicating parties.

THEORIES

Semiotic Theory

This is the theory which explains about the production and interpretation of words, signs and meaning for effective communication. Its general and basic concept is that communication happens when one person produces certain sign or words that gives meaning and related to the other signs which produced by the receiver. The signs have complex meaning and relationship

between one another primarily relations of contrast and subordination such as members in organization and even community. The signs or words are produced between two parties that can mutually understand what is trying to be shared or conveyed (Baudrillard & Poster, 1998)

This theory is applicable to this research as it explains about how people process the information that are conveyed to them. It is also used in organization by employees in order for them to make sense of the information that is shared between them. If they fail to understand the content of information or message that is trying to be delivered, then the communication between them can be considered as ineffective. This is because effective communication can only take place when both parties (encoder and decoder) are able to share information between them and able to respond accordingly.

The Feedback Loop Model

The concept of semiotic theory is supported by a communication model designed by Wilbur Schramms. Schramms was the founder of the basic communication model which gives lives to other communication models. In 1954, he developed a communication model which explains about how a message is being encoded by the sender and decoded by the receiver. He proposed that this process is scripted in a basic human interaction and it is reciprocal between two people who are communicating with one another. Below is the communication model that was illustrated by Schramms.

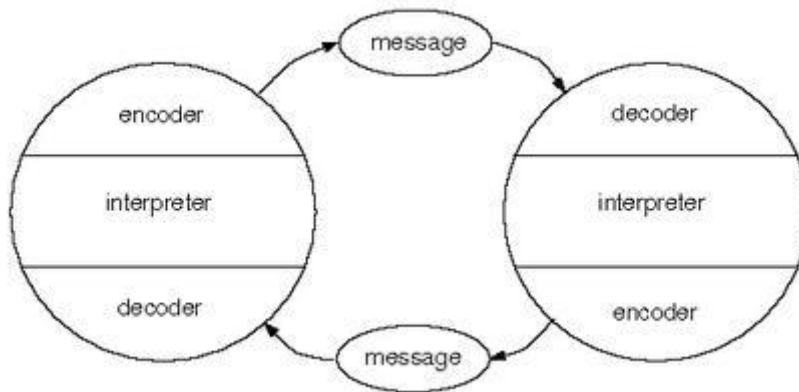


Figure 1: Feedback Loop Model by Wilbur Schramm

This model compliments semantic theory as it explains about the communication process. The message is first transferred from the first speaker and conveyed the receiver. This step is known as encoding. After that the receiver decodes or tries to understand the message and responds to it. This creates a complete circular communication, or in other words, effective communication. However, if communication barriers exist, the circular communication process might not be able to be completed as the receiver fail to decode the message or information that is trying to be conveyed by the first speaker.

Methodology

In-depth interviews took place between April and May 2017. The five executives that were interviewed were carefully selected by the researcher and they all are permanent employees with a minimum of two years of working experience with the organization. The researcher decided to choose and focus on the main office or the head quarter of Sime Darby which is located in Jalan Raja Laut, Kuala Lumpur, as the location for this research because the main office of Sime Darby acts as the main communicator which communicates and conveys information to all of its five divisions, namely, Plantation, Property, Motors, Energy & Utilities, and Industrial. First, the researcher wrote a letter to the Head of Human Resource in Sime Darby to seek for permission to conduct interview with the employees within the organization. With the permission of interviewees, a digital recorder was used to record the conversations, which helped the researcher to conduct the interview smoothly and efficiently. All interviews were undertaken at the interviewees' places of work. The interviews were conducted in English and/or Malay - depending on which language the interviewees preferred. During the interviews, a set of questions was used to guide the conversation and, importantly, the researcher also posed probing or follow-up questions to stimulate the conversation on the topics discussed. After the interview, the researcher transcribed all the interview data.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data of this study were also analysed using the thematic approach. Data from the interviews were transcribed verbatim based on the recording. The next step was categorising the data into few key themes and then the data were analysed according to themes.

Findings

This section presents the results gathered from the in-depth interviews. Informants were five executives working in Sime Darby Bhd. Two key themes are highlighted and these are related to the communication barriers laid out in this study: (1) use of English in a formal setting while in informal setting depends on the other person whom the executive is communicating with; (2) Slang and speed of talking hinders knowledge transfer.

Categories

Themes Derived

Language Barrier

- Use of English in a formal formal setting while in setting depends on the other person whom the executive is communicating with
 - Slang and speed of talking hinders knowledge transfer
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Key Theme 1: Use of English in a formal setting while in informal setting depends on the other person whom the executive is communicating with

Based on the interview conducted with five informants working as executives in Sime Darby Bhd, the researcher has grouped the response into two themes. The responses were rather unanimous whereby all executives mentioned that in a formal setting, they would use English as the language to converse with other executives eventhough when there are only Malay employees present at that particular moment. This is because the organization cultivates and encourage all employees to use English in line with the effort of improving the confidence level of each employee and making them comfortable whenever they are using the language. Another reason is due to the fact that Sime Darby Bhd is a conglomerate and consists of employees from multiple background. This means that the organization consists of foreign employees as well and since English is known as an international language, the employees are expected to converse using the language to avoid any miscommunication involving these foreign employees. This theme is supported by an informant of this study and has been transcribed by the researcher as per below:

“the organization deals with people from all over the globe. In light of that information, it is pretty obvious that in a formal setting, the language that we have to use is English. Even if there are only Malay people present in the meeting, we still have to use English because that is kind of like a normal practice here. Well my guess is the reason why such culture is being exercised in the company is because the big bosses want to ensure that every executive is able to use the language confidently and increase our proficiency.”(Informant 3, line 211 - 216)

This is also supported by another informant of this study and the response is as per below:

...formal scenario such as in a meeting, sending out emails, conversing in the office, of course language to use is English. Regardless if we are communicating with a fellow Malay employee, we are required to use English as Sime Darby is a conglomerate and internationally renowned organization. So any information that is work related must be conveyed using English. (Informant 4, line 320 - 324)

In an informal setting, the executives are not required to use English as they have the freedom to use whatever language that they are comfortable with. However, the type of language that executives would use to communicate with the other person entirely depends on whom he is communicating with. A Malay employee would use *Bahasa Melayu* when communicating with another Malay employee but would prefer to use English when conversing with employees from other races such as Chinese and Indian. The same could be said for the employees from other races as well. In short, they would rather prefer to use their native language when communicating with people from the same background but would use English whenever communicating with employees from other races. Additionally, this theme is also mentioned by the following informant and the feedback is as per below:

...informal setting such as during lunch time, we are free to use whatever language that we feel comfortable to use. For example, a Chinese employee can use mandarin when talking to a fellow Chinese employee and an Indian employee can use tamil when speaking to a fellow Indian employee and the same goes to Malay employees as well. We are free to use Bahasa Melayu when talking to a fellow Malay employee. However, normally when an employee of different races such as Malay and Chinese or Indian are talking to one another, they would surely use English to communicate. (Informant 4, line 324 – 331)

This theme is then reinforced through the statement of another informant and the response is as per below:

...such as when hanging out with my teammates, I would use Bahasa Melayu because it's a lot easier that way and not having to worry about our grammatical mistakes all the times. And plus most of my teammates are Malay, so I don't see any reason why I should use English with them. But sometimes, I also tend to mix the languages that I use between English and Bahasa Melayu. It really depends on the situation. (Informant 5, line 435 - 440)

According to the excerpts on the above, the researcher could clinch that due to the fact that Sime Darby Bhd is a conglomerate, the executives have no choice but to use English as their number one language to communicate with other employees. This is because English is considered as an international language and since the organization deals

with companies all over the globe and has branches across the world, they have made it compulsory for the employees to use English in their daily communication, specifically in a formal setting. This is because if there are other languages that are being used in their daily communication and it is related to the business, other employees might not be able to understand the content of the message. For example, if a Chinese employee send out an email in Mandarin, the Malay, Indian, and other foreign employees would face the risk of not being able to understand what is trying to be conveyed. That is why it is crucial for all employees to use a common language in order to avoid inability to understand a certain message and hence enabling everyone to work accordingly.

The researcher also finds that Sime Darby Bhd also gives freedom to all of its employees to use whatever language that they are comfortable to use in an informal setting such as during hang out session and lunch. These executives however, would only use their native language if they are communicating with other employees from the same race. Nevertheless, they would still use English to communicate with other employees even in an informal setting if they are talking to another employee from a different race. This shows that they are very much concerned about getting their message through and understood by the receiver so that they can create a healthy and productive environment amongst themselves.

Key Theme 2: Slang and speed of talking hinders knowledge transfer

Based on the interview with the informants, the second theme for the language barrier revolve around the slang and speed that executives use when communicating with one another. This problem is often associated with foreign employees, especially those who are from the European countries. On a day to day basis, we are exposed to the use of English with American slang and these would normally come from the television and even the radio. These English announcers and commentators would often use English when talking and so naturally, the executives would have adopted and able to understand English if it is being used in an American slang. However, when English is being used in a different slang such as British and Australian, the executives would find it difficult for the grasp the gist of what is being said and hence ineffective communication takes place. This theme is supported by the informant of this study and the response has been transcribed by the researcher as per below:

...I do have my preference as to the native speaker that I talk to. For example, people from the US are easy to understand because their pronunciation is pretty much the same as our, but it's those speakers from British that I am concerned with. I find that it's difficult to keep up with what they are talking about due to their slang. It's English but it's different. (Informant 5, line 538 - 542)

Once again this theme is reiterated by another informant and the response is recorded as per below:

...I gotta admit, there are a few of foreign speakers who use English with a certain slang and sometimes I'll get lost during our conversation. Well I don't wanna look stupid for not being able to understand what they are saying so I'll just nod or sometimes laugh. (Informant 2, line 120 - 123)

Other than slang, the second factor which influence the effectiveness of communication between the executives working in Sime Darby Bhd is the speed of talking. Whenever someone is talking too fast, some of the messages would be missed by the recipient and so he would not be able to fully comprehend the full message. This would result in the executives not being able to perform and function effectively. This factor is also often associated with executives from foreign countries because they are used to talking at a high speed. This statement is clarified by the informants of this study and the response is transcribed as per below:

...they are either talking too fast or they are talking use some slang which I do not understand. British for example. (Informant 1, line 35 - 36)

Once again this statement is repeated by another informant and the response is recorded as per below:

...I felt a little bit intimidated because an English man speaks so damn fast and even with slang and sometimes I find it hard to catch what they're trying to say. (Informant 3, line 222 – 224)

Based on the two themes above, it can be concluded that language proficiency plays a vital role in ensuring knowledge transfer between executives working in Sime Darby Bhd. Due to the nature of the organization's business and the fact that it is a conglomerate, the organization emboldens its employees to use English most of the time. This is because they would want the executives to be confident and proficient whenever they are using the language, other than the fact that they would want to avoid any miscommunication involving the foreign employees. Previous research findings have proven that the use of slang during communication would affect knowledge transfer between people and based on the findings of this study, it can be confirmed that the use of certain slang would hinder effective communication. Talking at a high speed with another person is also another factor which can be associated with language barrier, especially with people who are not familiar with English. The correct speed when talking is just medium speed whereby the recipient will not get bored or space out if the sender is talking at a low speed and hence able to comprehend the content of the conversation or message.

The researcher also finds that this can be considered as one of the major communication barriers that is taking place in Sime Darby Bhd. When someone uses a slang and even talks at a speed so fast, and thus causing the receiver unable to understand the message, this could potentially become the cause ineffective communication. For an effective communication to take place, both parties (sender and receiver) would have to understand the message and the receiver needs to give the right respond to the message that the sender has conveyed. If the receiver is unable to comprehend the message, then ineffective communication would certainly take place and could jeopardize the business in Sime Darby Bhd. This is simply because when someone is not able to understand a certain instruction or what is expected of him, he will not be able to function properly and deliver what is ask of him. Since this problem is unanimously highlighted by the informants, the researcher strongly believes that Sime Darby Bhd really needs to look into this matter. Perhaps they could send their foreign executives who are working in Malaysia for a speech therapy or training so that they can improve the way they speak and hence enabling the local Malaysian executives to understand their speech delivery.

Conclusion

The researcher could summarize that this study has significantly improve the understanding on communication barriers namely office culture, language and emotional specifically in Sime Darby Bhd. The findings from past researcher findings could not be generalize to the organization or if not has become obsolete due to the advancement of technology which causes people to become more exposed to other culture and has affected working culture of the employees in Sime Darby Bhd. The findings of this study clearly shows that one of the factors of communication barriers which is sharing of knowledge which was laid out by past researcher could is not applicable towards the employees working in the organization as they really practice good process of information and knowledge sharing with one another.

Referring to the findings of this research, the communication barrier which is known as the language barrier that still remains as the main cause for ineffective communication between the employees. This communication barrier was laid out by the previous past researchers and is still relevant and in fact happening in Sime Darby Bhd. The use of slang and the speed of talking are the two main factors which cause this communication barrier to persist in the organization. Employees should find commonness in their slang and talk at a speed which can be comprehended by one another in order to avoid miscommunication and ensure effective communication.

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