ETHNOCENTRISM AND TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION: STUDY IN WEST

BENGAL'S TECHNICAL EDUCATION CENTRES

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Abstract

The growing number of students from outside West Bengal coming into the engineering degree colleges in recent years gave birth to a new challenge in the field of technical communication which is based on ethnocentric biasness of the different regional groups inside the class room. Ethnocentrism is judging another culture on the basis of the values and standards of one's own culture. Ethnocentric individuals form their opinion of other groups relative to their own ethnic group or culture, especially with concern for language, behavior, customs, and religion. These ethnic contrasts and subgroups serve to define each ethnicity's distinct cultural identity. The classroom getting divided into different small groups of regional students, the communication between different ethnic and cultural groups are getting narrowed down, causing provincialism to rise among certain groups. The article advocates the adoption of a more harmonious perspective in light of the convergence of cultures and seeks for alternative methods of mixing up of different peer groups inside the class room.

Keywords: Communication, Cultures, Language, Education, Ethnocentrism.

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Introductory objective

Our topic of research is Ethnocentrism. But before we move into the depths of what that is, we must first look into how it serves as an obstacle to effective communication; and eventually leads to the hampering of the smoothness in that process.

How communication is defined?

Communication is a two-way process involving two or more entities or groups that concerns the exchange of a piece of information through the use of mutually accepted signs, directions, symbols and roles.

Communication involves certain steps. The process of a smooth communication involves the following steps: Firstly, the process of thought generation. This will lead to the formation of a message in mind (elaboration on what needs to be expressed). Next, the encoding of the message (the person would be referred to as the encoder). This step is going to be followed by the sending of the message through the use of expressions, gestures and most importantly, speech. Then the transmission of the already encoded message takes place using a particular medium (sometimes also known as interface). Then, crops up the issue of the interference of the signal when being transmitted owing to certain factors including both human activity (unintentional and deliberate, both) as well as natural forces (mainly various kinds of noises). This leads to the partial loss of the transmitted signal (usually 1-2%). Reception of the remaining (98-99%) of the original signal by the receiver forms the next step. It is followed by

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the decoding of the received message (the person would be referred to as decoder). The decoded

message is interpreted and necessary use is made of it. The generation of thoughts in the

decoder's mind forms the next block of communication process. The feedback is sent from the

receiver back to the sender. The feedback is accepted by the sender. The communication

process comes to an end.

Types of communication:

1. Non-verbal communication (that involves the conveying of a message in terms of non-

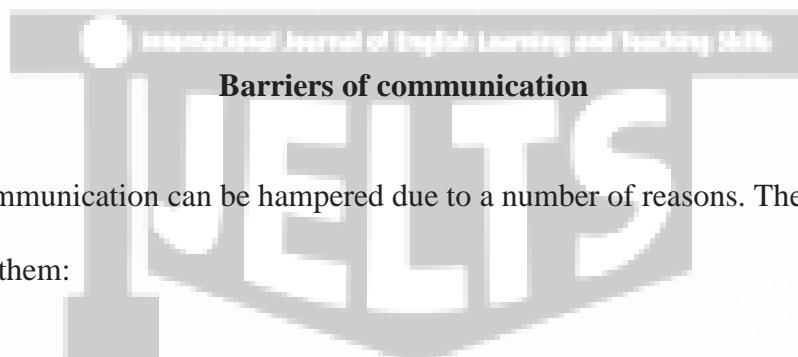linguistic expressions). Examples of non-verbal communication include:

I. Body language;

II. Grooming (The dressing sense: how someone dresses)

III. Facial expressions;

IV. Haptic communication (The communication carried on by touch)

V. Chronemic communication ("CHRONEMICS" coined by Thomas J. Bruneau of

Redford University towards the end of 1970's refers to the communication that involves

the role of time)

Not only that, the non-verbal communication also tends to throw light on the real intention of

a delivered message. These may be again classified as-

[a]voluntary, deliberate movements, for example shaking a leg, winking, breaking knuckles

of the hand etc. and [b] involuntary movements, for example sweating.

Paralanguage in the forms of rhythm, stress etc. are non-verbal elements. It influences communication. Written text including the factors like handwriting style, spacing of words, and expression of a situation all leads to the establishment of an impression.

2. Verbal communication (that involves the conveyance of a message either in written or spoken form). From the very childhood, a child is taught a language (at least one, usually the mother tongue or the colloquial one or both). This leads to the beginning of "Language Learning". And when the child grows up, he learns to nurture this thought that his language is the best in the world and there in begins the first essence of ethnocentrism.

Barriers of communication

Effective communication can be hampered due to a number of reasons. The following enlists some of them:

I. **Physical barriers:** The major factor responsible for this hurdle is the surrounding environment. Narrowing our view to our country, India, is not a cashless economy. There exists a plethora of castes, classes and divisions. This leads to a serious communication gap between the members of two separate classes of people.

II. **Cultural barriers:** This is by far the most important hurdle faced in the path of an effective communication, as concerned to our point of discussion. There are thousands of cultures followed across the globe: between religious outfits and in organizations; where different people have different opinions, ideas and expectations. For example, it may seem weird but in some countries, nodding the head up and down signifies NO while shaking the head sideways signifies YES (The reverse being followed by almost every other part of the world).

III. **Physiological barriers:** This is a minor case, but nevertheless contributes as an obstacle in the path of clear communication. This is the case, where ill health, weak eye power, hearing discomfort weighs in.

IV. **Attitudinal barriers:** Weak management, individual conflicts at a personal level, dictatorship instead of democratic approach, lack of motivation, dissatisfaction to work all result to Attitudinal Barriers.

Cultural barriers when mixed with attitudinal barriers lead to the rise of Ethnocentrism.

What is Ethnocentrism?

Ethnocentrism (word coined by Ludwig Gumplowicz and later coined by William G. Summer) is the belief of superiority in one's personal ethnic group, but it can also develop from racial or religious differences and differences in belief. Members of one ethnic group help out each other but there could be a stalemate between members of two different groups, which is not always visible, but it is like a silent cold war.

According to William G. Summer, ethnocentrism is "the technical name for the view of things in which one's own group is the centre of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it".

The Damage Done

Ethnocentrism does more damage than most realize. When two specific ethnic groups interact with each other and in general do not approve of each other's mannerisms or habits or culture, there could be an unnecessary hostility, unwillingness to help out each other. But this is not the proper behavior expected to be cultivated among students who, in the future, would be

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taking jobs in different fields in a country where different people exist with different norms and customs. If one does not adapt himself there will be constant arguments and disruption of peace, uncalled for hostility.

Out of the total population of West Bengal (supposedly ten cores) almost three-fourth bears their religious allegiance to Hinduism. Out of the one fourth left, most of the people are Muslims. Buddhists, Christians, Jains, Sikhs and the like constitute small minority communities throughout West Bengal.

The primary language of West Bengal is Bengali which is spoken by almost all the inhabitants of West Bengal. Other languages include Hindi, Santali, Urdu (primarily the language of Muslims), Punjabi and Nepali (spoken largely in the area of Darjeeling). A minor percentage of the people of West Bengal speak Kurukh, the language of the Oraon indigenous group. English, together with Bengali, is the language of administration, and English and Hindi serve as lingua franca at the national level. However, the ethnocentric bias in West Bengal is quite high compared to some other states. Ethnocentric individuals judge other groups relative to their own ethnic group or culture, especially with concern for language, behavior. Here is an instance how:

One of the cornerstones of anthropology in India is the idea of cultural relativism. Although a very debatable topic, whether or not we should observe a stance of strict cultural relativism there is an urgent need to make policies free of ethnocentric bias to the greatest extent possible. Often we find people saying the people of tribal areas devour rats, snakes, insects and ant larvae because of the shortage and inadequacy of food. There should be policies to utilize our resources and provide them with quality food. This is nothing but sheer ignorance. Tribal

people eat those items because due to illiteracy as they consider those as their foods and not cheap and easily available alternatives to chicken/mutton or rice and wheat and the various foods we the "so called" civilized people consume. We continually used and depleted their resources. We have transformed their grazing lands to mining grounds, stone crushing factories and water reservoirs and what not. We have transformed their forests into bunch of "good looking" eucalyptus trees which do not yield anything but fuel woods. We never try to learn and gather information about the systematic relationship between tribal people and their habitat. Sadly, anthropologists and other social scientists including activists who do understand the process are either suppressed or paid off by the corrupt policy makers or are too romantically involved in the trend of so called "going native". Instead we see site for industrialisation in their own barren lands, we tend to calculate our gain from the land yield according to various statistical data sheets and reports.

Ethnocentrism has crept into the Technical institutions of West Bengal, although there is also a probability of it existing in institutions of primary and/or secondary education also, because the sense of ethnocentrism is not induced in a period of a few days, this mentality could develop from early age.

We are shown, often in the news, how particular groups of students in different colleges are victimized and harassed due to their minority or caste. This happens not only in West Bengal, but throughout the country, and even in other countries, which is quite shocking. Why? Because the people who perform the torture or mistreatment are almost always extremely ethnocentric, believing they are superior to the so called, minorities.

Often, ethnocentrism could go a long way to form deep-rooted hate and apathy for a certain community which could lead to tension and could trigger riots which is later exploited by political parties to play their dirty game. Riots sparking in colleges or institutions would lead to a massive damage not only to education but the institutions themselves, which has been seen happening in many colleges across the country and could as well happen in West Bengal if we, even unknowingly, support ethnocentrism.

If the indigenous don't even try to communicate and interact with the outsiders, the rootless ideas and preconceptions they hold about each other, as has been passed down to them by their ancestral generations, would stay in their minds which would be fatal for work progress and give rise to unnecessary conflicts in the undertakings of the institute. Also, the factions co-existing in the institute would remain unaware of the rich culture and heritage of their counterparts, defeating the purpose of the system of mixed classes taken by the institutes.

Psychological Factors:

This sort of mentality stems from superiority complex, which is not something new. One is too proud of his or her own culture to consider other cultures worthwhile. But pride is not the only factor. One's idea of unity among their own ethnic group and intolerance towards other groups may even stem from the "Survival of the fittest" or as we know Darwin's law. One may go far enough to ensure survival of their own race by wiping out other races. The muddle in human ethics over the level at which altruism is desirable- Family, nation, race, species, gender, orientation or all living tiling-is mirrored by a parallel muddle in biology over the level at which altruism is to be expected according to the theory of evolution. Even the group-selectionists would not be surprised to find members of rival groups being rude to each other: in this way,

like trade unionists or soldiers, they are favoring their own group in the struggle for limited resources. As bizarre as it sounds, another scientifically proven cause of this ever-evolving problem of ethnocentrism is a hormone as basic as oxytocin because it triggers the emotion of favouritism among the people belonging to the same group, eventually giving rise to inter-factional contempt. A mentality like this would surely bring doom upon everyone, including the people who support it. The aspect of keeping one's own kind and culture to progress while belittling other cultures and comparing them to one's culture is what ethnocentrism is all about.

Social factors:

Social and cultural norms can be defined as the predetermined rules and behavioural expectations meted out by the ancestors of a certain social or cultural group. These are stringent boundaries which often do not provide the subject with any valid logic or reasoning. These decide what is (and is not) appropriate behaviour and often subconsciously governs our attitude towards people of other cultures and social backgrounds whether or not we claim to follow them. A variety of external and internal pressures make sure that the concerned member follows these norms irrespective of their will. The external pressures include social disapproval, humiliation and in some extreme cases, punishment. This gives birth to an unnoticed yet deep-rooted prejudice in the hearts of the young minds against individuals belonging to other social factions, which plays a major role in ethnocentrism too.

Narrowing down the focus to West Bengal…

With the recent advent of numerous private institutes in West Bengal, aspirants from all over the country, if not the world, have travelled from afar to grab the seats and have

unknowingly entered into the boundaries of ethnocentrism, to be inevitably inflicted on them by the emotionally-driven citizens of the state.

As controversial of an idea as it sounds, prejudice is a pest in this happening State. Where strong sentiment meets prejudice, social evils are bound to breed. Stereotyping has been an old practise in this State, which does not allow the idea of universal brotherhood to be implanted in the minds of the ambitious youth.

As the socio-psychological model of inter-group conflict, the Realistic Conflict Theory suggests, contempt can also arise from competition over limited sources, which holds a considerable responsibility for ethnocentrism in the technical institutions of West Bengal. The reservation quotas for outsiders have a deep impact on the youth of the state which results in a natural grudge towards the former faction. Neither side is to be blamed.

Another probable cause for discriminating tendencies can be language barriers. Quite a handful number of students in West Bengal are bent upon using regional languages in conversations which are detrimental to intergroup communications necessary for building unity rising above preconception.

Positive effects of Ethnocentrism:

Every cloud has a silver lining:

There are a few positive points that crops up in relation to ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism promotes solidarity and harmony in a particular group or class or tribe, bounded by this common objective to consider his/her own culture superior. It eventually leads to promotion of nationalism as well as patriotism among the members of a respective

society. But, saying this, it must be remembered that the negative effects of ethnocentrism far overwhelm the positive ones. It is harmful if sustained and allowed to grow in a society. Remedial measures must be formed to bring about improvement and progress in the society.

What should be done?

In technical institutions of West Bengal, the best way to overcome the problem of ethnocentrism is to build that harmony among different ethnic groups that already exist within each group. Various activities like group studies, research work and technical projects could be assigned by forming groups of multicultural and multiethnic students. With a common goal ahead, the students would naturally work together to bring out the best ideas, thus forgetting their hostilities. It is often seen in many famous technical institutions how different students from different parts of the state or even country come together and learn united. Contests that support healthy competition, example debates and sports which support team work and the teams could be strategically created so that the members of different ethnic groups come and work together thus reducing chances of ethnocentrism.

Students may be encouraged to develop their technical skills and communication skills so that they could better understand each other and their problems, thus working together as a team. Professors in the institutes of this state should strictly stick to the global language, English in order to cater to the widest spectrum of ethnicities, which would otherwise be helplessly deprived of valuable information just because of the ease of use of regional languages by the competent personnel. English, as a language has the capability to bridge the communication gap between the students from different ethnicities, thus letting the institutes do away with the ills of ethnocentrism. Students prejudiced against one another can thus be disillusioned so they can

work together in harmony for the greater good of both the parties. With proper attention

imparted to teaching the ways of technical communication, students not only learn how to use

the language to put forward their views and requests, but also to pay appropriate respect to their

collaborators and to be polite in their conversations. This not only proves to be beneficial for the

students in their learning stages but also to maintain harmonious relationships with their

colleagues.

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