

## Discussion among Language Learners: Conflict in Communication

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### ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the conflicts that occur in discussion among secondary school students. The objectives were to investigate and discuss the types of conflict that were present. The sample comprised fifteen subjects from a secondary school who were divided into small groups and then given a topic for discussion. The subjects were given the chance to raise any conflict that was encountered during their discussion. The results of the study reveal that this type of discussion helped subjects to become actively involved in dialogues and increased their confidence towards learning. It is hoped that future studies will focus on the advantages of conflict in discussion among learners.

**Keywords:** Conflict, communication, learning, utterance, culture.

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Conflict occasionally arises among speakers of a second language. This is due to the fact that the L2 speakers may experience trouble in overcoming their fear of speaking the target language and hence will tend to make mistakes in uttering words or sentences. Child and teenage learners will have to face these conflicts and will try their best to amend the mistakes that they have made, either immediately or through the corrections and suggestions of others. This type of conflict is pervasive and occurs at different levels of interaction and in different settings: at work, among friends and within families (Normaliza Abd Rahim et al., 2008). Usually once such conflict occurs, the relationship can either be weakened or strengthened. Thus, the way in which the conflict is handled varies and can lead to deeper understanding, mutual respect and closeness among

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speakers. Whether or not the conflicts can be resolved will depend on the individuals or groups, but most will try their best to resolve conflicts positively.

According to Tubbs (2009, 2011), conflict in communication arises due to the different thoughts and opinions held by the speakers, leading to the changes in the topic under discussion. Lane (2012) lists the six barriers in communication that can lead to conflict for the reason that the speakers have different thoughts and opinions. These barriers can be dealt by an adult or moderator to direct the discussion towards the original theme. Fromkin and Rodman (2003) suggest that language plays an important role in communication although there is conflict in communication, language will still play a major role in understanding the content of the discussion. Simpson (2008) postulates that culture plays a major role in having communication conflict. This is particularly the case in situations that the speakers are from different cultural backgrounds and their communication is based on their respective cultures. According to Pearson et al (2011), human communication can be successful if the speakers are able to understand the other speaker's culture and overcome the cultural barriers that exist in communication. If this occurs, communication can successfully take place in a positive way without there being conflicts that derail the communication among the speakers.

According to Abigail and Cahn (2011) and Cahn (2006) the management of conflict has to go through several stages, including using the basic conflict and communication skills that are needed for managing and resolving everyday interpersonal conflicts (Normaliza Abd Rahim, 2011b). Abigail and Cahn (2011) add that managing conflicts will deepen the understanding of the conflict itself and therefore enhance positive communication. Cahn (2006) suggests that conflicts help people to achieve better understanding and therefore deal with the conflict more effectively. Wolfe (2011) forms a case study in which extremely disturbing conflicts occurred in the author's workplace and the best way to deal with these conflicts was for individuals to engender discussion with work colleagues, address the issues by themselves, discuss them with close family or friends, or discuss them with a therapist or religious counselor. Wolfe (2011) postulates that discussion is helpful in resolving conflicts and leads to successful communication in work environment. In another setting, Inon Beydha Lukman et al., (2009) investigate the sources of communication conflicts in the domestic workplace among Malaysian employers and Indonesian domestic workers in Kuala Lumpur. Specifically, the data were collected from 110 Malaysian employers and 110 Indonesian domestic workers who were surveyed in January 2009. The findings indicated that, firstly, the conflicts in communication in the domestic workplace among participants arise due to culture-based differences in terms of the context and pattern of communication, different assumptions

about verbal and non-verbal or direct and indirect communication styles and differences in the strategies used to manage these conflicts. Secondly, the Malaysian employers tended to use either an abominating or an integrating style in dealing with conflict, whereas the Indonesian domestic workers tended to use either a avoiding or integrating style in dealing with conflict. The study therefore proposes recommendations as how to better prepare Indonesian domestic workers for working with Malaysian employers in the domestic workplace setting as well as for other Indonesian domestic workers in intercultural or international domestic workplaces, so as to allow this group to be able to resolve culturally-based interpersonal conflicts more effectively. The research also argues that by resolving conflict, people will be better able to understand the conflict and manage it especially when language and communication both reflect and shape society. Abigail and Cahn (2011) and Normaliza Abd Rahim (2011a) likewise propose that the understanding of conflict will also help in future communication and therefore enable the development of a more positive working environment.

Normaliza Abd Rahim et al., (2008) examined a sample of 20 subjects from a school in Selangor, showing that negotiation plays an important role in resolving conflicts in communication. The subjects were advised to negotiate when they were faced with conflicts in communication. The subjects reported feeling happy when their conflicts were resolved and tended to negotiate with their peers in a way that promoted positive understanding from both sides. Both Abigail and Cahn (2011) and Cahn (2006) state that negotiation is a part of resolving conflicts in communication. Without using negotiation skills in interpersonal conflict, children, teenagers and adults all tend to end the communication in anger, rage and dissatisfaction and therefore their conflicts will not be resolved. Johnson (1986) claims that an interpersonal conflict exists whenever an action by one person prevents, obstructs or interferes with the action of another person and therefore the conflict may be overcome concurrently through communication, with negotiation playing a major role in resolving the conflict. Zaitul Azma Zainon Hamzah et al., (2008) state that language and culture conflict exists when there is a rise in opposition towards the comprehension of language and culture between two community groups. Their study looked at 30 pupils studying in primary schools in rural and urban areas in Malaysia. The data were gathered by using recording and interviewing methods and the distribution of questionnaires. The data were analysed using the socio-pragmatic approach. The findings indicated that language and culture conflicts among children start from the differences between their respective languages and cultures and then continue so as to incorporate contemporary lifestyles and their influence on ways of speaking, thinking, behaving, eating and dressing. Zaitul Azma Zainon Hamzah et al., (2008) propose that in order to

avoid conflict, each individual must try to fulfill the needs of the language and culture of the community. Apart from this, linguistic and cultural conflict can be avoided based on customs, communication, rights, reputation control and respect.

The current paper investigates and discusses conflicts in discussion among students at the Presentation Secondary School in Limerick, Ireland.

## **2.0 METHODOLOGY**

This study sample comprises fifteen subjects aged between 16 and 17 years old. The subjects were from Malaysia, Italy, Poland, Ireland, Greece and Portugal. They communicated with each other by using the English language. The subjects were divided into groups of four. Each group was given a topic for discussion. The conversations were recorded and selected conversations were then analysed for the purpose of the current study.

## **3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **3.1 Conflict via Questions**

Subjects experienced different degrees of conflict in their discussion and they tended to ask questions to ensure better understanding. Such questions included, 'What do you mean by that?', 'What are you talking about?', 'Why do we have to discuss about this topic?', 'What can I say?', 'Why must we give our own ideas?' and 'What does the topic say?' Judging by these questions, it seemed that the subjects experienced conflict at the beginning of the discussion. They were confused by the topic of the discussion and questioned the nature of the discussion itself. It appeared that subjects were not focused on the content of the discussion and the teacher as such gave more input on the topic of the discussion. In fact, the teacher gave examples of possible discussion based on the topic given. The subjects were seen nodding their heads, showing that they then understood the topic. After this, the subjects started the main body of the discussion and, as they gave ideas, conflicts arose. This conflict was shown through questions such as, 'What do you mean by your statement?', 'Do you mean that parents' played the only role in this matter?', 'Why do you have to say that now?', 'Does that mean parents have to help in this matter?', 'Why do you think that way?', and 'What have you done so far to help with this?'. This type of question seemed to indicate that the subjects were involved and engaged in the conversation and were asking questions pertaining to the topic of the discussion.

At times, they were not content with the ideas given by their peers and questioned these ideas in order to confirm the issue involved. It appears that the questions were seen as conflicts that had a positive impact towards the discussion. Therefore, it can be suggested that conflict expressed via questions helped the subjects to improve the quality of their discussion.

### **3.2 Conflicts via First Language**

Subjects experienced conflict in the discussion in such a way that they tended to use their first language to express their opinion. These conflicts thus took the form of interference by the first language. The subjects displayed conflicts with words in the first language such as, 'I have to \*\*\* sure that the discussion is ready', 'Parents ought to help their children \*\*\*\* and \*\*\*\*', 'Women will have to be \*\*\* when the conversation starts', 'This is not \*\*\*', 'Men should be the \*\*\* who have to work', and 'Both men and women are the \*\*\*'. From this, it seemed that conflicts arose when their conversation was interrupted by their first language. Most of the subjects occasionally used their first language in the discussion in order to express their ideas and at times they were seen to be trying hard to find suitable words in English; if they were not able to find an appropriate English word, they used their first language. The translated words were uttered immediately after they mentioned the words in the first language. In the above examples, the asterisks represent the first language. Words like, 'be', 'everyday', 'all the time', 'strong', 'right', 'one' and 'equal' were supposed to be said in the discussion. Besides the conflicts with words in the first language, subjects also experienced conflicts with short sentences in the midst of their discussion. The short sentence conflicts can be translated in English to become such expression as, 'I don't like that idea', 'Parents should be responsible', 'I would rather have that in my discussion', 'Parents would not like their child to be that way', and 'Teachers should facilitate'. According to these translated conflicts, it can be seen that the subjects had a good rapport in the discussion despite the fact that in the beginning they experienced conflicts during the discussion. They gave the English version immediately after they uttered the sentence in their first language. As such, the conflicts they experienced did not stop them from contributing ideas to the discussion.

### **3.3 Conflicts via Culture**

Subjects encountered conflicts in the discussion content itself, with culture being the most discussed topic. Although the discussion topic was not specifically about culture, students nevertheless came to discuss cultural issues. Since the subjects were from various countries, they had their different cultures to talk about. The subjects appeared excited when they were given the chance to

discuss their culture. Conflicts arose in the form of questions pertaining to their peers' cultures, such as, 'How many races are there from your country?', 'Do you speak the same language in your country?', 'What is the main food in your country?', 'Do you celebrate Christmas in your country?' and 'What do you wear when you celebrate an important event?'. These questions suggest that this type of conflict arose due to curiosity among the subjects, who wanted to know more about the cultures of other countries and were thus happy to listen to the answers from their peers. The answers to the above questions were, 'More than one race', 'Yes, we speak the same language', 'potatoes', 'Yes, we celebrate Christmas', and 'I am not sure whether we have a special dress since I used to wear a full suit for special occasions'. The subjects appeared to be contented with these answers and some of them were seen nodding their heads to indicate understanding. Cultural conflicts between various countries were discussed continuously for a few more weeks since this clearly represented an interesting topic among the subjects. It was discussed actively with some members wanted to give more input on the matter. The subjects also gave information such as, 'In my country, we bow to our elders when we meet', 'In my country, you shouldn't talk back to your parents if they are angry at you', 'In my country, we shake hands with elders when we meet', 'In my country, we eat turkey on the first day of Christmas', and 'In my country, we wear our traditional clothes on our special days, like weddings and festive celebration'. From the above statements, it can be seen that the subjects were trying to convey their message to their peers by using introductory phrasing such as 'in my country'. This showed that they were happy to share their knowledge of the cultures of their own country with their peers. Subjects seemed proud to share their knowledge about their own country. However, for most of the time, such cultural discussions were off topic and soon after the teacher reminded them of this, they managed to return to the original topic.

All subjects tended to experience conflicts in discussion and to ask questions in the beginning of the discussion for better understanding. They tended to also show conflict within the discussion and to ask questions for assurance and confirmation of the topic. These results were parallel to those from Cahn (2006) and Normaliza Abd Rahim et al., (2008), both of which found that discussion led to conflicts. Subjects also tended to use their first language when they could not find the appropriate words in English, representing another type of communication conflict. Abigail and Cahn (2011) found similar results in that in order to express their conflicts, students would speak in their native language. Subjects also tended to use their first language to express their loss of simple sentences in English. Furthermore, they tended to discuss their cultures which represented another type of discussion conflict as they mentioned their own culture every time they tried to talk about culture from their own country.

## 4.0 CONCLUSION

Conflicts in discussion seemed to be positively taken as being a motivation for discussion among subjects from various countries. Since the subjects were still struggling to use the English language with full fluency, they were trying to best address the topic that had been set for discussion. The findings as such have a great impact in terms of showing how subjects managed to fulfill their needs during the discussion. The findings of the study also have a significant impact for subjects learning a second language, a context in which communication plays a major role in relaying messages and giving ideas. The implications of the findings in this study are clear. Teenagers in schools were able to resolve discussion conflict despite their having some problems with understanding the language of communication. The students were confident in giving ideas and using positive methods of discussion. Therefore, it is hoped that future studies will identify the sources of interpersonal conflict and examine the ways in which teenagers at secondary schools with students from various countries manage conflict with their peers.

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