"Describe some common barriers to effective intercultural communication, and suggest the way that those may be overcome."
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There are various types of communication styles in the world. The encounter of people who have different communication styles often brings about conflict between them. In this essay, I will discuss the miscommunication that occurs when those who have different communication styles encounter each other, in order to address ways for reducing anxiety and uncertainty in intercultural communication. For this purpose, I will take examples of Japanese and Western communication styles, in which I show my personal experience as a Japanese person, in order to describe the common barriers to effective intercultural communication, particularly at the individual level.

First of all, we need to understand that there is a significant difference in communication styles. That is high-context and low-context communication. The former can be seen in collectivistic cultures and the latter in individualistic cultures. The Japanese communication style can be categorised as 'high-context' communication that 'most information is either in the physical context or internalised in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicated transmitted part of the messages'.[1] In short, high-context communication is that style in which people use indirect ways to convey messages to others. In high-context cultures, people need to guess highly contextual meanings of intended messages. In Japan, this communication style can be expressed as '*kuki wo yomu*' which literally means '*reading atmosphere*'. Atmosphere here means contextualised and indirect meanings of messages in communication. In contrast, low-context communication, which can be seen in individualistic communities (Western and American communities), uses a different communication style. In low-context cultures, meanings of messages are directly and explicitly expressed in verbal communication. People communicate with each other trying to make their messages clear as possible. Cohen states that 'accuracy (the "truth ethic") is the highest virtue'[2] in low-context communication.

When thinking about barriers in intercultural communication, conflict between high- and low-context communication styles is likely. Therefore, it is important for us to cope with the difference when communicating with strangers. Furthermore, it can be said that coping with the difference is one of the ways to reduce anxiety and uncertainty for effective intercultural communication.

Considering these, many barriers stemming from the difference between high- and low-context communications can be pointed out. One of these is the different attitude toward communication itself. The reason why high-context cultures use indirect communication style is that people try to avoid confrontation in communication in general. Callister points out that the Japanese from high-context cultures, for instance,

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[1] Hall, E.T. 'Beyond Culture', New York; London : Doubleday, 1981, quoted In: Gudykunst, B. W. *'Bridging Differences: Effective Intergroup Communications'*. p.57

[2] Cohen, R. *'Negotiating Across Cultures: International Communication in an Interdependent World'*. United States Institute of Peace. 2002. p.33

see confrontation in communication as that which they have to avoid if at all possible, because they think that confrontation does not contribute to long-term and everlasting human relations as a result. In contrast, Westerners and the Americans of low-context cultures see confrontation in communication as a productive step for the establishment of the future.[3] Due to these different attitudes toward confrontation in communication, people of high- and low-context cultures often face problems. For instance, the Japanese tend to hesitate to make a counterargument even if it is their own opinion, because they try to harmonise human relations in communication. In contrast, Westerners and the Americans actively try to make counterarguments and do not hesitate in confrontation. When people of high- and low-context cultures communicate with each other, these different attitudes toward confrontation make them irritated, frustrated and even disappointed. This is because from the view of people of high-context cultures, active confrontation by people of low-context cultures in communication seems very aggressive and a negative thing for the long-term and good human relations. In contrast, from the view of people of low-context cultures, the modest or passive attitude toward confrontation by people of high-context cultures seems irritating, and they think these people are dishonest because they do not show their own opinions in communication.

In relation to the different attitudes toward confrontation in communication, it is quite often observed that the Japanese often become silent in a meeting or conference, which makes Westerners and Americans irritated because they feel that such an attitude is the result of indifference. However, in many cases, Japanese people do not intend to counter them by not speaking, but they are showing that they have no objection by doing so.

Another barrier is the linguistic problems stemming from the difference between high- and low-context cultures. Since 'language is a social instrument' and 'a device for preserving and promoting social interests as much as a means or transmitting information'[4], linguistic problems are barriers to effective intercultural communication, especially when people have to speak a language which is not their mother tongue. One of the problems is vocabulary. This is because vocabulary is limited by cultural influence, which makes communication with different cultures difficult. In the case of communication between the Japanese and Americans, this problem quite often occurs. For instance, the Japanese who speak English as second language often find that they cannot find appropriate English words and expressions to replace the Japanese ones, because the Japanese and English languages do not always share the same concepts of words and expression. Concretely speaking, the Japanese often hesitate to use direct and explicit words in order to convey messages generated in the Japanese way of thinking, which are largely influenced by their own traditional culture. In this case, the Japanese feel uneasy because they think that their direct and explicit expressions might offend companions. In the worst case, which is often observed though, Japanese people are likely to hesitate or be reluctant to communicate with strangers who send messages in English.

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[3] Gudykunst, B. W. & Kim, Y. Y. *'Communicating With Strangers: An Approach to intercultural Communication'*. 1992. pp.84-87
[4] Cohen, R. op. cit., p.32

Barriers to effective intercultural communication as shown above are very noticeable for almost everyone, because these can be to some extent understood by experience. However, critically analysing the nature of 'communication', there could be unnoticeable barriers in relation to the difference in communication styles. For example, the assumption that people who are living in the same community communicate in the same style is possibly wrong. In particular, in ethnically and culturally diversified societies, miscommunication due to these differences is likely. Therefore, it is also worth noting barriers in 'in-group' communication in order to consider effective intercultural communication.

Even in the case of Japan, which is highly homogeneous in terms of culture, it is not rare at all that people fail to interpret messages in communication. Empirically, I have witnessed that although the Japanese try to guess messages in high-context communication as usual, they face miscommunication. As an explanation for this, a hypothesis that the traditional communication style, which here particularly means high-context communication, is not perfect is possible. In the case of Japan, in spite of the homogeneity of its society, people have been affected by other cultures in their daily life. Various types of media (e.g. movies, newspapers, TV programmes) have been bringing the diversified ways of thinking of other cultures to Japan, and some Japanese are born and grow up outside the Japanese culture. Since cultures are not static but changeable and interactive with other cultures, it can be said that Japan is no longer the fully traditional society which can be applied to stereotypical 'collectivism' and 'high-context' theories. However, as Eto points out, Japanese people are in fact likely to have 'a tacit assumption in their lives that other individuals are an extension of one's self'.[5] As a result of this problem, it is very likely for the Japanese to exclude people of the same cultural group, of which they believe themselves to be a member, when they feel that they are strangers because of the different communication styles. At worst, they may stop communication due to such a disappointment of expectation. At the individual level, it can be often observed between children as bullying.

Therefore, we cannot expect that all the Japanese communicate in the high-context style. This empirical observation in Japan may imply that expecting rigid communication styles within our own cultural group causes barriers to effective communication that are partially intercultural although it can be categorised as in-group communication. From this observation, it can be said that we need to be aware of such a miscommunication even in a community where we are likely to expect the same communication style. In particular, this sort of miscommunication could be possible in more culturally diversified societies, such as the US and European countries.

As already analysed so far, I described some common barriers to effective intercultural communication; culturally different communication styles (e.g. high-/low-context cultures); linguistic problems stemming from cultural differences;

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5 Eto, J. 'Japanese shyness with foreigners' In: Norbury, P.(ed.) 'Introducing Japan', quoted by Kowner, R. *'Japanese communication in intercultural encounters: the barrier of status-related behaviour'*. International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 26. 2002. p.341

and our unnoticeable expectation in communication. If these issues are not solved in communication, people feel anxiety and uncertainty against strangers, which are ultimately the barriers. I here propose the following suggestions as possible solutions for realising effective intercultural communication.

First, what we must do is acknowledge different communication styles (high-/low-context cultures). Knowing the differences can contribute to understanding why we have miscommunication with strangers, especially with those who come from different cultures. Without information about people with whom we are going to communicate, anxiety and uncertainty inevitably increase. Therefore, being aware of different communication styles is primarily important in order to prepare for intercultural communication.

Second, one of the solutions could be to learn foreign languages, although I admit the criticism that this is too ideal. As already mentioned above, languages are the constructions of cultures. Every language reflects its own cultural background. Moreover, a language is optimised by its particular communication style. As those who speak multiple languages experience, languages play significant roles in intercultural communication. Therefore, learning foreign languages is possibly synonymous with learning different communication styles. As a result, this attempt helps us cope with intercultural communication.

Third, understanding not only people of out-groups, but also our own group (in-groups) is important. Understanding why 'they' feel anxiety and uncertainty in intercultural communication is not the only matter. Why 'we' feel anxiety and uncertainty in intercultural communication must be important as well. Although it is difficult for us to be aware of what we take for granted, we cannot cope with intercultural communication without understanding ourselves. This is because 'communication' is in nature an interactive act of human beings. Understanding both 'them' and 'us' must be important.

Fourth, we need experiences of intercultural communication, even if those experiences are not always successful. Hubert et al. point out that anxiety and uncertainty 'generally decrease over time in interpersonal and intergroup encounters as individuals get to know each other.'[6] A survey by Straffon proves, the students of international schools are comprehensive about intercultural communication because of 'increased mobility and contact with other cultures'.[7]

Finally, we need to be sensitive about cultural differences in communication. If we persist in our own style, communication breaks down. If we do not know the reason why such a thing happens, we perhaps become reluctant to communicate with strangers once again. Therefore, we need to understand that our own communication style is not

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[6] Hubert, N. K. et al. *'Intergroup Communication Over Time'*. International Journal of Intercultural Relations. 23(1). 1999. p.15

[7] Straffon, A. D. *'Assessing the intercultural sensitivity of high school students attending an international school'*. International Journal of Intercultural Relations. 27. 2003. p.490

perfect for everyone in the world. Straffon's survey proves that students of international schools have high intercultural sensitivity through daily encounters with different cultures. Moreover, they have such high intercultural sensitivity, while they have a strong sense of their own cultures. As Straffon points out, intercultural sensitivity is significant, we therefore in a sense need to be cultural relativists for effective intercultural communication.

In conclusion, intercultural communication is sometimes a very stressful interaction with strangers. We often feel anxiety and uncertainty in communication. At worst, these feelings cause adverse emotional responses. In order to realise effective intercultural communication, we need to reduce anxiety and uncertainty, which are caused by the different communication styles. Although there are many ways to reduce these feelings, my proposals above are possible choices. It is not necessary for us to attempt all of the proposals I have suggested above. Trying one of them could be effective enough to understand different communication styles stemming from the cultural difference. Ultimately, what we must do is continue communication and not stop discourse with strangers. Positive attitudes toward intercultural communication may be the most important approach.

(1980 Words)

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