1. **Barriers to Intercultural Communication**

Not all situations of intercultural communication result in mutual understanding; miscommunication and conflicts are common. Gibson (2000) listed five main barriers to intercultural communication: attitudes, perception, stereotypes, interpretation, and culture shock.

* **Attitudes**

For social psychologists, interactants’ way of behaving in an intercultural situation, and the way they perceive it are directly driven by their attitudes and motivation, “ psychological work in intercultural communication has always been based on the assumption that the attitudes, interactional goals, and motives of interlocutors determine their choice of language and non-verbal behaviour […] as well as their evaluation of it” (Brabant, Watson and Gallois, 2007 p.56).

Attitudes and motivation play a major role in hindering or facilitating intercultural communication, be they negative or positive respectively, thus, the intercultural communication effectiveness does not rely only on cognitive aspects, but needs also emotion regulation; in other words, the way individuals deal with their negative emotions and their way in resolving conflicts are major determinants of the success or failure of intercultural communication. In this sense, negative emotions may function as a driving force that motivates people to react and be engaged in culture conflicts. Individuals can regulate their emotions through holding them and avoiding direct reaction, which gives them space and time for critical thinking. The latter allows for the recognition of hidden and real causes of the situation besides openness and flexibility to similarities and differences that exist between cultures.

Henceforth, Matsomoto, Yoo and LeRoux (2007) posited four main components for successful intercultural interaction: emotion regulation (E.R), critical thinking (CT), openness (OP), and flexibility (FL), which together form the so-called « the psychological engine » of adaptation and adjustment. Thus, if intercultural communication success is aimed at, the consideration and inclusion of emotion regulation is of salient importance.

* **Perceptions**

Gudykunst and Kim (1992) distinguished two types of intercultural interaction contexts. The external context; it includes both the location of the interaction, and the societal attached meanings. The internal context; it refers to the way interactants perceive the situation and the meanings depending on the culture to which they belong (cited in Byram and Feng, 2005).

Intercultural misunderstanding occurs because of the difference in the ineractants’ internal context; variation in the perception of the communicative situation causes misunderstanding. This idea can be more illustrated through the example of open versus closed doors. Most Germans keep the doors of the room or office closed as a sign of order and human respect. Reversely, Americans keep their doors open as a sign of friendliness. Hence, such variation in perception causes misunderstanding, for Americans tend to perceive the German act of closing doors as a sign of unfriendliness, while Germans perceive Americans’ act of opening doors a sign of disorder and disrespect (Kramsch,1993).

* **Stereotype and Prejudice**

A stereotype can be defined as “fixed idea or image that many people have of a particular type of person or thing, but which is not true in reality” (Gibson, 2000 p. 12). Shaules (2007), in his turn, claimed prejudice to function primarily out of conscious awareness and often result from judging behaviour based on criteria that the sojourner assumes is neutral and absolute, but which is actually based in hidden cultural assumptions .

The unfavourable attitude ‘prejudice’ stems from “the cognitive beliefs that people hold towards the characteristics of other groups” (Kaouache, 2008 p. 95) or stereotypes. Stereotyping persons tend to describe all the members of a group similarly; the observed characteristics of an individual are used to describe the whole community. Thus, stereotypes are the result of over-generalization, as they could be passed down from one generation to another.

To overcome falling in prejudice and negative judgments, individuals should be aware of the differences between the two cultures especially the hidden aspects. Besides, in intercultural communication, individuals can avoid making stereotypes by distinguishing between what is cultural and what is personal to interpret the situation (Gibson, 2000).

* **Interpretation**

In ‘intercultural sociolinguistics’, the notion of ‘*speech activity’* refers to “mental models or schemata of goal-oriented actions” (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz, 2007 p.16) through which participants could interpret, judge, expect and infer information from the context, and relate it to their previous knowledge. Hence, interactants use their previously acquired knowledge to appropriately interpret the situation.Accordingly, besides the ability to deal with grammar and semantics, **“** interpretations […] rely on perceptions of extra-linguistic context, knowledge of the world, as well as the cultural presuppositions that are brought to the interaction” (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 2007 p.17).

Therefore, the interpretation of the communicative situation is influenced by previous knowledge / indexical knowledge which is developed through interactive experience in a cultural environment, and influence the interactants’ future responses. However, when participants do not share background knowledge / indexical knowledge, interpretations may differ and lead to misunderstandings. The addressee may fail to interpret the message / the informative evidence because of the absence of a shared knowledge, in this case, either the evidence is not recognized, or the interlocutors’ belief /assumptions contradict with each other (Žegarac, 2007). This is better clarified through the following example:

A Japanese businessman is negotiating with a Norwegian partner. The Japanese says that the deal will be very difficult. The Norwegian asks how her company can help to solve the problems. The Japanese is puzzled by the question  (Adler 1997 cited in Gibson, 2000 p.14)

The situation above is an example of intercultural misinterpretation. The Japanese meant that there was no deal, indirectly to be polite, but the Norwegian could not recognize the informative evidence, rather she interpreted the situation depending on her native culture assumptions.

In addition to previously acquired knowledge, interactants can rely on conversational inference. The latter is a process of interpretation in which participants rely on an exchange with other interlocutors to assess the intended meaning, and on which they base their response.

* **Culture Shock**

Culture shock is a feeling of anxiety, astonishment, frustration and rejection. It is an emotional experience that is experienced by those detached from their native culture; they feel the pressure to go through a lot of adjustments at the same time, in addition to a sense of ‘non belonging’ and loss. When interacting with different others, one may witness what shocks him/her and perceive it as obscene or barbaric. Culture shock most of the time occurs when sojourners feel under pressure to make a lot of adjustments; however, it can also take place in a foreign language classroom (Merrouche, 2008). There are five main areas where culture shock may take place:

* Shocks related to the difference in perceiving time and space;
* Shocks related to the difference in the structure of the family;
* Shocks related to the difference in sociability (hospitality, codes of well being…);
* Shocks related to the difference in help requests;
* Shocks related to the difference in religious beliefs.

Gibson (2000) described different phases of culture shock, a process that can be described using a W curve. In the first phase, ‘honey moon’, individuals enjoy their presence and contact with the new culture, as the name suggests; they view the aspects of the new culture positively. However, this satisfaction is followed by a period of frustration and anxiety when these individuals recognize that they have to make adjustments to cope with the new environment; they feel irritated and often seek refuge in people belonging to the same cultural background. The third phase is a stage of acceptance and recovery; individuals eventually learn to adapt themselves with the new culture, they are recommended to try to see things from the others’ perspective. The following period is characterized by periods of culture shock and recovery until a sense of familiarity with the new culture is established.