Unit 9:  
Introduction to Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication

Introduction

Our communication skills are influenced by the culture we have been socialized in. They are strongly affected by a person’s values, believes and attitudes. Every person communicates verbally and non-verbally. It is a general believe, that most communication takes place non-verbally. 

*Verbal communication* means communicating with words. This can be accomplished directly or indirectly. Many non-native speakers, while fluent in English, still experience communication problems. This is due to their lack of understanding the words in the context given. The cultural context, e.g. high- or low context, has an enormous impact on the message.

*Non-verbal communication* refers to communication that does not use words and the message is conveyed with other means. Focusing on intercultural communication it is important to understand that the same non-verbal behavior can have different meanings depending on the culture it is being used.

The following areas of non-verbal communication give some insight in these differences.

*Body language*

thumbs up in the USA means approval while in Iran it is a vulgar gesture. Some cultures value direct eye contact.

*Eye contact*

Direct eye contact is seen as a sight of attentive listening and respect. Other cultures, often found in Asia, feel quite uncomfortable by it.

*Interpersonal space (proxemics)*

Cultures have different preferences for interpersonal space. In Latin America it is quite common to kiss on both cheeks when greetings someone, while in Western countries a firm hand shake is expected. This, however, also varies within these cultures. Germans are known to shake hands often. A practice not found in the UK, where business people typically shake hands only once upon greeting.

*Facial expressions*

While a smile is a universal sign of happiness it can have a different meaning in some cultures. In parts of Asia, e.g., South Korea or Japan, it can signal the expression
of a very personal situation like a mistake that someone has made or even the news that someone has passed away.

To avoid miscommunication, it is essential to neutrally assess a situation before making a judgment about the meaning of a non-verbal gesture. Finally, it is important to understand that for effective intercultural communication verbal and non-verbal behavior must be in sync with one’s culture and authentic.

**Critical incidents**
A critical incident is a situation in which the common behavior in one culture causes misunderstanding in another. These situations illustrate how we are often stuck in our own cultural believes of what is acceptable. Critical incidents help to raise awareness of values and believes in cultures different from our own. The following incidents illustrate potential areas of misunderstanding in an international business context.

*Critical incident: negotiations between the UK and Germany*
Key account managers from the UK and Germany are in a negotiation about a sales project. The discussion is getting more difficult. The German representative is sitting upright in his chair while the manager from the UK is leaning back seemingly relaxed. The German’s interpretation is that the representative from the UK does not take the situation seriously. The UK manager feels that the negotiation is becoming more and more aggressive.

*Explanation:*
While the British manager tries to defuse the situation for a better outcome, the German representative indicates the seriousness of the situation. Both people act according to their cultural norms and fail to understand that these differ and that neither intends to upset the other.

*Critical incident: eye contact*
An American manager complains about her Japanese staff. Whenever there is a problem, they don’t look her in the eye.

*Explanation:*
Direct eye contact is a sign of respect and honesty in most Western cultures. In many parts of Asia this would be to personal in a business context and regarded as disrespectful.
Critical incident: interpersonal space
Mario, a student from Brazil, is attending a course in international studies at an American University. He often stays after the lecture to ask his American lecturer, Monica Berman, some questions. When Mario approaches, Ms Berman begins to step back because she feels uncomfortable. Mario is surprised about the behavior and wonders about what has gone wrong.

Explanation:
Cultures have a different comfort zone for personal distance. Typically, people from Latin America get closer to each other compared to people from Western Europe. In this situation the lecturer might interpret Mario’s behavior as interest in her as a person rather than the subject of the course.