

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE AMONG THEATRE ARTS STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITY OF BENIN CITY, EDO STATE, NIGERIA

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Introduction

There is hardly any part of the world today where people from different cultures do not interact in one way or another. For such cross-cultural interactions or relationships to be smooth, intercultural competence is required to manage the differences that exist due to the cultural backgrounds of the people interacting. Wiseman (2003, p.192) noted that intercultural competence “involves the knowledge, motivation and skills to interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures”. This knowledge does not come by itself; it must be acquired and integrated for people from different cultural backgrounds to coexist peacefully in multicultural environments. In this regard, King and Baxter-Magolda (2005, p. 576) refer to intercultural competence as the

Ability to shift perspectives/behaviours into an alternative cultural worldview, capacity to create an internal self that engages challenges to one’s views and beliefs and that considers social identities in a global context, capacity to engage in relationships with diverse others that are grounded in an understanding and appreciation for human differences, social systems, and rights of others.

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In line with King and Baxter-Magolda's (2005, p. 249) definition is the idea that intercultural competence is linked to people's willingness to learn about others and reasonably accept others and their differences, and a similar sentiment is supported by Deardorff (2006) who states that intercultural competence is a "general openness toward intercultural learning and to people from other cultures".

Modern-day theatre practice is one such multicultural environment as the theatre now exists in cities and metros with people who come from an array of cultures and use the form of the human body as a communication medium and symbol to express socio-political issues through dance, dialogue, mime, and dramaturgy (Mlama, 1991) to an audience. Essentially, when it comes to the culture of a people, it is known that theatre is used to express culture, both who they were and who they are. In this regard, Barranger (1995) acknowledges the role of theatre when it comes to the intermingling of diverse cultures. According to Barranger (p. 321), theatre has "transgressed the borders of specific cultures through its itinerant audiences, [and] universal subjects...". Hence, words like transculturalism, multiculturalism and interculturalism are not strange to the theatre. In fact, plays of the classical period by playwrights like Aeschylus, Sophocles and others in the 5th century BC are products of interculturalism (Barranger, 1995) because the plays' productions and audiences were multicultural. This intercultural setting has, hitherto, remained within educational settings, where the art of theatre, as a discipline, involves communicating issues about diverse cultures.

In educational settings, the management of intercultural classrooms and settings requires intercultural competence to educate students about the importance of diversity. Interculturalism is a factor of education that locates students from different cultural backgrounds in an environment in which they are required to be interculturally sensitive. An element of intercultural sensitivity is acculturation in which, in the context of students, they are able "to adapt to one another's cultures" (Fielding and du Plooy-Cilliers, 2018, p. 117). Intercultural sensitivity is also a fusion of people of heterogeneous cultural backgrounds and acceptance of others' cultures. For instance, a higher institution of learning is made up of people from different socio-cultural backgrounds; it is a learning environment and a centre for socio-

cultural activities both for educational purposes and community relations (UNESCO, 2006). By implication, UNESCO (2006) acknowledges learners as a vehicle of cross-cultural integration. In the case of Nigerian universities that have melting-pot classrooms, intercultural communication competence is required to strengthen the multicultural understandings that are necessary when students are from different sociocultural backgrounds. In the university environment in Nigeria, there are students from many different cultures who are likely to see or interpret communicative contexts differently. This is the situation because communicators encode a message influenced by their own cultural frame of reference or cultural background (Fielding and du Plooy-Cilliers 2018). Effective communication in an intercultural setting is paramount. In the next sections, language in cross-cultural communication and the method adopted for this study are described before discussing the findings.

Language as a medium of communication in cross-cultural communication

Language and culture, which include rituals, festivals, norms, and values, are intertwined. In theatre practices that mirror the basis of every human culture or day-to-day activities; language and culture are fundamental to how individuals relate in the society. For instance, the language, set, ideas, costumes, spectacles, storylines, actions and other elements of theatre are borrowed from a society within a culture and are used to interpret and give meaning to the issues of the day.

Language is used by human beings to communicate ideas, needs, and emotions to each other through several platforms provided in theatre practices. By implication, interactions in theatre practices between actors and everyone else involved are conducted using language. As Nigeria is a multicultural nation, the different contexts in which language can be used correctly in intercultural situations require clear articulation. For example, each spoken word in theatre practices in Nigeria has its own characteristics that are uniquely acceptable and identified within specific cultures. An understanding of language is essential because “much of the time the meaning of language does not reside inside the individual but is discovered between people” (Fleming, 2011, p. 9). The way that people speak their

language is part of their existence or lived reality. Lived realities are expressed in people's norms, values and mores, which include important symbols such as food, greetings, ways of showing respect, and dress codes and are part of theatre practices.

Physical signs, symbols and gestures are a form of non-verbal expression in theatre practices that are also rooted in culture and thus require intercultural understanding to better relate them to the contexts in which they are used. In theatre practices, non-verbal expressions are appearances that soothe the eyes or expressions that help to convey the meaning as used in the originating culture. For instance, a costume on an actor on a stage called *iro* and *buba*, *buba* and *sokoto* (*shirts* and *trouser*) will indicate that one is dealing with the Yoruba culture; *ugbegbe ododo* (red velvet wrapper) and *ubuluku* (long and wide skirt) will indicate the Edo-speaking people's culture; and people of the Niger-Delta dress in a wrapper known as an "up and down," and complement it with a blouse and head gear worn by the Itsekiris and other tribes. Delta Ibos and Igbos across the Niger wear *Akwocha* (made of velvet and woven threads). These are different ways of dressing that communicate non-verbally what is specific to the different cultures. Thus, in an intercultural context, it would be wrong for a character depicting the Edo-speaking people to appear in Itsekiri apparel. All of these nuances are taught in theatre workshops to theatre arts students, and this theme is reflected in the responses given by the participants in this study.

As posited by Obi (2014), theatre performances are concerned with how the use of language has helped to realise the objectives of performances. This is where there is careful consideration of the choice of words and the context in which the words are used. As a vehicle of communication in theatre practice, language becomes the means through which an actor tells or conveys the playwright's thoughts to the world. In the context of intercultural communication, language is used to build trust and mutual understanding, to bridge the gap between the audience and the actor(s) on stage, and the medium actors use to express their ideas and feelings. Fleming's (2011) argument that language is not entirely transparent should not be overlooked especially when attempting to capture the complexity of the underlying issues and intentions of intercultural communication.

Methods

In the sections that follow, the context of this study and the method and procedures used to gather and analyse the data are considered.

Context of the study

The participants in this study were from the University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria. The university is one of the higher institutions of learning in Nigeria where people of different genders, ages, cultures and backgrounds, religious beliefs and understandings meet in order to obtain knowledge and skills. Admission to the university is open to all Nigerians and a few international students, resulting in the admission of students from different cultural backgrounds. A catchment area criterion based on the immediate geographical area to encourage learners from disadvantaged zones has favoured the admission of students from varying cultural backgrounds because the city in which the university is located is multicultural. The university also admits students from other regions because it is nationally owned. The student population thus reflects the cultural groups across the country; however, the majority of students are from the immediate environment.

The mosaic of culture at the university is reflected in the different departments across the university. One such department is the Theatre Arts Department. One of the courses offered in the Department of Theatre Arts is the Theatre Workshop.

The participants in this study are students who enrolled in Theatre Workshop, which is a two-semester course. As described by the department, the first-semester Theatre Workshop I, which is a 3-credit course, is “an experiential course designed to give students an immersion experience in the play production process. The student will function as a theatre company, creating a theatrical performance on stage” (Departmental Handbook, 2018/2019, p. 32). The second semester provides a more thorough background in workshop practices with an emphasis on techniques and approaches in acting, voice, speech, and movement.

In these theatre workshop classes, one of the challenges encountered was the intercultural backgrounds of the students. The second challenge was the students' inability to communicate in such a way that the meanings intended were as though the students were from the environment of the play being produced, which requires some level of intercultural competence. It is essential that a performance reflects the context and environment of the play. Unlike other forms of communication, theatre communicates directly to its audience through several media to make its messages clear and acceptable. Beyond the environment of the play is the need to communicate through the pattern of life of which we all have experience. A typical theatre performance includes costumes, scenic design, make-up on actors, language used for the delivery of the performance, props, and thematic discourse. All of these aspects bear the hallmark of the different cultures to be considered for the intended outcomes of the performance.

Participants and procedure

The participants in this study were 147 students who took the Theatre Workshop for the first and second semesters in 2019. The students came from a number of cultures including the Edo people ($n = 70$), which comprised 35 Benin, 18 Esan, 12 Etsako, 3 Akoko Edo, and 2 Owan. Delta students ($n = 45$) comprised 8 Ibo, 5 Itsekiri, 4 Ijaw, 6 Kwani, and 22 Urhobo and Isoko. There were 6 from Akwa Ibom state, comprising 4 Annang, 1 Orong and 1 Ibibio. There were 2 participants from Benue state, 1 from Tiv and 1 from Idomma. These were followed by Igbo participants across the Niger River. This group was made up of 13 participants from Anambra, Enugu and Imo states. The Yoruba-speaking participants ($n = 8$) were from Ogun, Ondo, Ekiti and Osun states. Participants from the Northern part of Nigeria included 1 participant from Kaduna and 1 Jukun-speaking participant from Taraba State. Finally, there was one participant from the Elmina-speaking people of Ghana.

The population of the class is representative of the plurality of the nation of Nigeria that has 36 states and a state capital. Out of the 36 states, 13 states are represented by students in the class. The class is made up of about 40 different ethnic groups out of about 300 ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Data collection method

Interviews took the form of unstructured conversations with the participants; these interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. According to Borg (2006), interviews are verbal encounters. In a research situation, they are more relevant for data collection and investigation of phenomena than other methods. In addition to the unstructured interview, data were also collected through observation by participant lecturers. Students were observed in terms of how they dealt with intercultural issues while engaged in the workshop.

The observations and unstructured interviews were conducted while students were engaged in the preparation for and performance of two popular plays, *Wesoo*, *Hamlet* (a Femi Osofisan adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*), which has its setting in the Ijebu dialect-speaking part of the Yoruba nation and the play *The Hiatus* (by Alero Uwawah Agbonkonkon-Ogbeide), which has its setting in the Itsekiri-speaking part of Nigeria.

Participants were observed during rehearsals and the eventual performance. Unstructured interviews followed observations of the student performances in both plays. These were in the form of personal interactions and involvement with the students spanning the period of one academic year. The findings emerged from the observations and unstructured interviews undertaken; however, first the purpose of the plays must be explained.

Purpose of play productions

It is a common statement in theatre by drama critics that every playwright taps into ideas from his/her environment, and such ideas inform the realist and naturalist positions that playwrights create: their works reflect the existing issues in their environments. Performances are meant to portray human experiences as written by the playwright that are true to life; passing on a believable and trustworthy message that will otherwise be impossible. In doing this, Stanislavsky's position is that for an actor to represent a character on stage, such an actor must be able to act as if the unfolding events are happening for the first time and are true to life (as cited in Brockett and Ball, 2004). This means that actors must project themselves

into the world of the play and may learn to do so through the *magic if*, that is, through imagining how they would feel or act if they were the specific character in the specific situation.

The challenges encountered by students from different social and cultural backgrounds in the classes chosen for observation and interviews during the rehearsals and performances of *Wesoo*, *Hamlet* and *The Hiatus* are described below. The intercultural challenges encountered while performing the two plays by a class of 147 students were identified and in preparing the analysis, participant input was sought.

Both plays were acted in English, but the actors used the local dialects of the culture of the target audience or the audience for which the plays had been adapted. For example, *Weso Hamlet* was adapted to be portrayed in Yoruba's Ijebu culture and *The Hiatus* was adapted to be portrayed in the Itsekiri culture.

Language challenges

From the workshop experience, the role of language cannot be overemphasised. Having almost 98% of the participants performing on stage in a language that is alien to them means that the process of actualising the plays was not easy. There were proverbs and idioms as well as expressions of surprise and joy that actors spoke in the language of the plays. Participants therefore had to do some basic study of the language to figure out how the idioms and expressions are appropriately used in areas of diction, sound, and tone. According to the participants, learning to use vocabularies from unfamiliar languages was a huge challenge. Every word in a language has its unique pronunciation, and if the words are correctly pronounced, actors are able to understand the moods and actions of the character in the play. Participant 1 (PT1), after encountering a few words of the Yoruba language for the first time, said the following:

Understanding and dramatizing the culture of an unfamiliar tribe was a big challenge. For instance, the play *Weso...Hamlet* is a Yoruba play. There is a need to understand the environment of the play to be able to communicate the message and exhibit the beauty thereof. Initially, there were difficulties in understanding the play and ensuring nothing is left out, that makes

bringing it to life difficult. Learning the language in which the play was written and marrying this with the culture of *Hamlet* was not easy. This is because there was a need to make sure the *Weso* play is seen properly in the Yoruba language without deducting the original culture in which the play was written. I guess that is the beauty of Theatre Arts after all: The ability to successfully imitate an action on stage and create believability.

According to PT1, it was important that he studied the Yoruba language to make sure that there was an accurate interpretation from the culture of Hamlet into the culture of the Yoruba. This required an intensive culture-specific translation, which is studied and memorised for performance purposes. Above all, it requires intercultural competence in the form of interpersonal competence by the participant (PT1), which includes the interactive skills of understanding non-verbal cues, signals and the context relevant to the target culture (Stier, 2006) and this is to be done within a short space of time.

Another participant (PT2) acknowledged that he experienced a communication barrier while performing the play. According to him,

It was really difficult for me to understand the play at first. Oftentimes, I had to look for a Yoruba student who is well grounded in the language. Unfortunately, this was not easy to find since many speak the popular Yoruba genre and not Ijebu language or Ijebu dialect. I could remember I had issues with pronouncing names of characters like '*Leto*', as 'Let to,' instead of 'Lay to.'

As explained by PT2, the challenge was pronunciation due to differences in the sociolinguistic background where certain letters are pronounced differently. Such pronunciation is automatically reproduced as it is used in the participant's culture, thus neglecting the need to pronounce it in the Yoruba culture because the target audience is mainly Ijebu-speaking. What PT2 required was sociolinguistic competence because he lacked "awareness of the relation between language and meaning in societal context" (Deardorff, 2006, p. 249).

PT3, from the Itsekiri ethnic group in Nigeria, commented as follows:

Bearing in mind that I am an Itsekiri lady, I still had challenges with the Itsekiri words in the play *The Hiatus*. We had to learn some words and sing in the language as well. It was really tasking for me because in my spare time, I had to learn how to pronounce the words correctly because during training, we were told by the lecturer in charge of the course that pronouncing it wrongly would change the meaning or render the word meaningless. This, in my case, as an Itsekiri guy became compounded because I am used to 'street' pronunciation of many Itsekiri words.

According to PT3, she was not only learning how to pronounce words but also learning how such words are pronounced in the universe of others or the universe occupied by the assumed target audience. In other words, PT3 has to enter the universe of her target audience and talk in the way that the target audience is assumed to talk. PT3 had to demonstrate intercultural competence to live and talk in the universe of her target audience.

The analysis thus far demonstrates a correlation between pronunciation and the meaning received by the audience. PT3's response is clear in this regard. As the participant was not familiar with the culture in which the play *Hiatus* was set, she was challenged to spend time in learning how to pronounce some words to render the words meaningful to the target audience.

PT3's experience reflects the general situation of the theatre workshop. The plays that the participants were asked to rehearse and perform were not from their own cultural backgrounds, so they found themselves in a complex language situation. The participants' responses confirm Afdillah's (2015) findings while researching the use of the English language among Saudi students, which showed that vocabulary limitations, misuse of words, use of wrong words, inappropriate terms, or poor pronunciation makes learning new languages difficult. Vocabulary that refers to the kind of words or register used in a particular field or discipline also includes the words or language used collectively. Vocabulary is the key element for communication and important in language learning (Alabsi, 2006; Lajooee and Barimani, 2013). Therefore, it is necessary to know both the meaning and nuances of a particular word (Alabsi, 2006) to perform before the audience in the theatre. It is equally important to note the usefulness of language by saying that using vocabulary is an essential part of intercultural communication, but it is not enough when it is not used in the contexts in which it will be

understood by the target audience (Lajooee and Barimani, 2013) or the proper context that situates the performance in its original culture and the multicultural audience who will watch the play.

Signs and symbols

Symbolic emblems of a cultural heritage (for instance, a staff of office, royal stools, wall designs, clothing materials or dress code, food and other objects) differ from one culture to another. For instance, the Benin culture is fond of beads and agate as accessories. In the same vein, the costume used in a culture is a symbolic emblem of its cultural heritage that is non-verbal communication, and costumes play an important role in any theatre production. When it comes to intercultural competence, the ability to identify a costume in relation to the character on stage is important because costume in theatre is a language in itself. It is non-verbal communication that draws on the visual, but in the context of theatre practice, the costume must also appeal to the audience for it to be relevant to the outcome of the play. This includes how the costumes are worn. Although this may sound bizarre, when dealing with how a costume would historically and interculturally portray meaning to a target audience, there is the need to use appropriate costumes that are rich in the history and environment or situation that would allow the character and play to be understood.

A typical example is that of *The Hiatus*. In the opening scene, the participants playing the roles of traders and buyers in the market had to turn their wrappers up when the demise of a king was announced. Interestingly, the mode of announcement was drumbeats. The women listened, but many could not interpret the drumbeat. This failure resulted from their ignorance of the communication that particular drumbeats symbolize. However, participants who were Itsekiri-speaking with a deep understanding of their culture were quick to understand this part of the play as they listened and quickly turned their wrappers upside down. The participants from other cultures had to be told what to do. The turning of wrappers up and down is a form of non-verbal communication that is only understood by someone who has knowledge of the culture of the people being portrayed; such actors and audiences can understand and interpret such actions on the set. This was not explained to the participants as the lecturers believed that students learn

better from their inadvertent mistakes. When such mistakes are corrected, the chance of them repeating the mistake is limited. The inability of students to understand what the beating of the drum and its concomitant wrapper-wearing style denote, is an example of intercultural incompetence. However, given that they were not familiar with the culture, the services of the troupe to personally teach the students how the Itsekiri people wear their costume were employed, because this is quite different from the other Deltans who also have a similar dress code.³

Assigning gender roles

One of the glaring themes evident in the data collected was how different cultures place value on gender roles. In performing the plays of *Weso* and *The Hiatus*, it is important to acknowledge that some roles were gender sensitive, but it was not anticipated that this would be a problem for acceptance of the assigned roles by the participants. Having observed the objections voiced to some of the roles that participants were given, a decision was taken to switch some roles in line with participants' preferred gender roles. Participants said they were not ready to do a culture shift to play a role that would mean that they were doing things that were diametrically opposed to what is permitted in their culture. In other words, the participants were not ready to learn what it would take to play or depict characters that are not specific to their cultures.

There was the notion that it is wrong to take up certain roles because of the prescriptions of their cultures. This also shows in the way that such participants verbalised issues about sex. The language used by some of the students in verbalising issues about sex reflected how the issues of sex or gender are articulated in their cultures. The participants either resorted to circumlocution or used euphemistic terms to describe actions in which women are involved, and this, in most cases, detracted from the meaning that the plays intended to portray to the audience.

Some of the participants did not have a problem in taking any of the roles assigned, but these participants found a way to portray issues concerning

³ People from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria are referred to as Deltans.

sex and gender that reflected the sensitivity about them in their culture. When asked why she took up the role even when her culture would have urged her to choose something else, PT4 commented that

It was generally known how he would respond in terms of the choice of words to use. The audience expected the choice of words that was used. There was no loss of meaning in terms of context and nuances because members of the audience knew words that were to be substituted for some of the gender-specific terms used. Thus, taking up the role to categorically articulate what was expected in the manner I did was for me very fulfilling. In addition, theatre practice is about seeing beyond the confines of one's culture. I guess that was what I did.

PT4's response is a clear articulation of some of the elements of intercultural competence because she stated that there was a need to see "beyond the confines of one's culture" in theatre practice. Seeing beyond one's culture means learning what pertains to other cultures, and this manifested in PT4's response regarding the choice of words she used in order to convey nuances and contexts as required.

Others who refused to take up assigned roles were very categorical in pointing out that they considered their assigned roles to be inappropriate because such roles connoted sexual messages with which they could not relate after their performance. These participants were interested in their futures after the performance. In other words, they wanted to be able to talk about their performances in terms of how they projected their culture and not the immediate satisfaction in performing the plays at a workshop level in class. Put differently, the question of intercultural communication or competence is not important to this category of participants because of their culture and imagined future.

This issue of human biological composition is a major barrier to intercultural communication in theatrical performances in higher institutions in Nigeria. For instance, some years back, during a viva voce, a colleague raised a question concerning a female actor who played the role of a king of the 16th century AD. The colleague wanted to know if the recent regalia of the Edo-speaking people was the costume of the time. Research showed that the Benin Kings of that era usually tied their wrapper around their waistline.

This could have been possible if the actor was a male. Unfortunately, the most qualified participant in the class at the time of the presentation was a female student. Since it was not a nudist theatre where nakedness was tolerated, a 19th century costume that was different from the 16th century costume was used. The most recent case was when difficulties were experienced in getting a student to play one of the drums during the training session of the Itsekiri troupe. The men rejected one of the female students who was good at drumming. The rejection of the female student by the troupe members on account of her gender was borne out of the tradition of the Itsekiris that forbids females from beating a drum. Fortunately, the beats were recorded.

Immediately after they left, the female student took over because she was the only student who could play the drum rhythm, and she performed well. In order not to abuse the culture of the Itsekiri people during the production, the female participant who was drumming was costumed like a male.

Difficulty in participants playing the role of a character

A very demanding intercultural challenge encountered was getting participants to play the role of a character outside their cultures. This was considered as a challenge because of the difficulty in coaching some participants to act like Itsekiri chiefs. The difficulty stemmed from the reluctance of some participants to perform behaviours that they considered did not fit with their culture and were not considered in line with religious prescripts. The difficulty encountered in getting an Urhobo-speaking boy to role-play an Itsekiri Chief in *The Hiatus* is narrated below by PT5:

In the process of acting an Itsekiri man, I faced various challenges because I am not from there. I am an Urhobo man. It means I had to do culture shift momentarily in which I adopt the Itsekiri culture to be an Itsekiri chief. First, I had to accept myself in the adopted position in order to project what the position entails flawlessly. This meant I had to learn Itsekiri's choice of words while on the Itsekiri chief's throne. Do I say it was easy doing this? No, it was difficult, but that was what the education of Theatre Arts means. Learn to be many things to be able to project what people want to see while being your original self. It was difficult learning their songs. The wording sounds like Yoruba but unlike Yoruba the language has different meanings

and these would need to be projected as an Itsekiri chief. For instance, a word like 'Obon' (market); in Yoruba, 'obo' means monkey, and if the words are not clearly pronounced in the proper context, the audience would misunderstand you.

Some of the participants simply refused to play the characters assigned to them on the grounds of what they believed the characters symbolised. For example, PT6 said that he refused to play the role of a chief because:

I simply hate chiefs as they are patriarchal, polygamous, feudalistic, and oppressive in their communities. Even [if] the role I am being asked about does not include any of the negatives I mentioned, the fact that those negatives define what they represent to the people is one reason I don't want to play the role of a chief or a king. Their values are just too antithetical to my values and the culture [in which] I was brought up.

The challenge encountered emanates from the differences that exist in the cultural nuances and sensibilities prevalent in the background culture of the actor and the background culture of the play. This clearly proved to be a big challenge for the actors' understandings and interpretations of the play, and it manifests further in the cultural beliefs shown by some of the participants.

Cultural beliefs

There are some cultural beliefs that inhibit participants from accepting certain roles that are culture-bound. This is a very crucial aspect of intercultural communication, especially, when participants believe they are superior by culture, and so, rather than take this role, some students preferred to abandon the course. PT7 said:

I would rather repeat the course as I am likely not to do the Workshop next time. Repeating to avoid a role that is out of my worldview and gaze of my culture is a worthy repetition, isn't it? This is a noble view ... I mean rejecting a role that goes against my cultural beliefs and is irrelevant in my future as a Theatre Arts person. Doing a role that projects other cultures is like a subtle swipe to mine, especially the role I have been asked to play.

PT7 has clearly demonstrated ethnocentrism. According to the participant, he must either play a role congruent with his culture or play nothing. Such an ethnocentric view makes it difficult for anyone to overcome intercultural challenges in any intercultural setting, especially in higher education where intercultural environments are the norm.

PT8 expressed a similar view:

Ma, if my parents should hear that I take this role, I'm a goner. Please ma, give me any other role because I do not want to be a goner – I want to be here to complete my studies. Give me another role that speaks to my lived reality or the essence of [my] culture. I want a role that outlives my workshop experience and not one I will hurriedly expunge from my memory.

The two participants see the roles they play as something they want to talk about after their workshop experience and their university days. They point out that they would easily relate to their assigned roles if these resonated with their cultures and their continued lived experience. Although the participants were ethnocentric and might not easily overcome intercultural barriers in multicultural environments, their responses also show that cultural practices that do not advance people's day-to-day reality stand to be easily rejected. These two participants are of the view that it is better not to take up the roles assigned to them because such roles have no place in their continued intercultural encounters with people.

In addition, from the observations of, and further talks with the participants, a particular participant was interviewed, whose ancestors were special religious drummers in their hometown. According to this participant, drumming was very much part of his family's history, and it was well known that everything about them revolved around beating a drum. In religious circles, his parents were always called on to perform with their drums, especially in traditional religious activities in which men are initiated to age-related community activities. According to Watt (2021), religion plays a central role in the way people view issues, and religion thus becomes a point of focus for the way people communicate interculturally. In this regard, when it became clear that his assigned role was not drumming or beating a drum and he was asked to audition to play a priest during

rehearsal, he refused because it did not align with his ancestral and familial heritage of beating a drum. The participant claimed that his refusal to role-play a chief priest was due to his Christian faith because chief priests are not Christians. The participant protested loudly as he felt that the participant who was asked to beat the drum would suffer some physical health challenges. In other words, the participant was protesting to protect the female participant who was asked to beat the drum because there are cultural beliefs that forbid females to play certain drums. The belief is that any attempt to make a woman beat a drum or to be a drummer will lead to the unusual enlargement of the woman's clitoris. This is a commonly held belief in some cultures.

Theatre Arts is not only about entertainment but also a platform for awareness and education, so it was decided to allow the female participant to beat the drum during rehearsal, and she agreed without being coerced. In other words, we believed that at the end of the rehearsal, it would become clear to other participants (students) who hold the unusual belief that a woman's clitoris becomes enlarged by drumming that a woman could beat the drum without ending up with an enlarged clitoris.

Allowing the female participant to beat the drum was a calculated attempt to dispel unfounded beliefs that students have about women beating drums. In this way, Theatre Arts was used to create awareness and to educate students about culture, especially the fact that what is forbidden in one culture is an acceptable practice in another culture. Therefore, accepting each other's cultural practices without negative labelling is required.

What is clear from the above analysis is the participants' allegiance to their cultures and ancestral and family preferences. This, according to the literature, is expected in cultures that are very religious, for example, Davies and Bentahila (2012) have noted consistent themes with respect to Arabs' behavioural attitudes. They stated that the Arabs have "respect for hierarchy, attachment to family and group loyalties ..." (Davies and Bentahila 2012, p. 235). Participants rejected roles assigned to them because they were against their cultural beliefs and not in line with their ancestral practices. Culture is learned from family, and the way it is practised is, in most cases, a reflection of one's upbringing. Thus, when a participant rejects

a role because of his or her culture, the participant is showing his or her preference for his or her familial culture as passed down to him or her. What follows is a discussion about the implications of the themes extracted.

Implications of the findings

The implications of the findings confirm what previous studies have stated about work contexts, namely, that an effective understanding of intercultural communication and its application improves performance (Yang, 2018; Okoro, Washington and Thomas, 2017). Likewise, this can be considered as true with respect to students' performances. This means that the findings reported in this study deserve close scrutiny regarding their relevance to students and their lecturers at their university.

The data analysed show the kinds of insights that can be gained from intercultural encounters between students from multicultural backgrounds. The analysis provides valuable information for lecturers involved in intercultural encounters to consider with respect to the kinds of issues that are likely to arise as their classes settle down to work on theatre practices. Particularly, the examples of intercultural encounters may serve as useful resources to draw upon when planning to mitigate culture shock and cultural clashes and help students to overcome intercultural barriers in a multicultural classroom.

The findings show mixed views about intercultural competence that encompasses intercultural communication. The findings emphasise the need to reassess the level to which aspiring Theatre Arts students are willing to adapt, assimilate, and integrate other cultures where necessary before they are offered admission into Theatre Arts education.

The discussion and analyses show that determining what is considered to be normal and suitable in a multicultural setting is difficult because it involves a host of issues such as cultural contexts and prevailing sociohistorical factors. Lecturers have to weigh these factors as they plan to teach classes in which there are students from different cultural backgrounds.

Based on the analysis, it is plausible to state that students should be made aware of the mechanics of conversation and the way in which people from

the dominant majority use language to achieve their goals (Fuentes, 2012). This will help students to understand the different purposes for which the dominant group employs language to achieve its communication objectives. In this way, students can use their language in ways that are similar to the dominant language and achieve the intended objectives by reflecting the socio-historical perspectives that are necessary.

Conclusion

This study has attempted to contribute to knowledge about how to overcome communication and language issues in theatre performances among students across cultures. It uses as a case study, the University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria, where students from different social, economic, and cultural backgrounds are admitted to study theatre arts and are fused into a system despite their diverse cultures.

Certain cultural beliefs that could hamper theatre performances were also explored. Cultural aspects such as religious beliefs and the assigning of gender roles were a focus. The importance of the language skills of students and their intercultural communication competence, which includes understanding the worldview of the playwright, the context in which the play exists, and the customs, language, taboos, stereotypes, image, symbols, etc., that inform the dialectic relationships between theatre and society were also addressed. Some cultural expressions during performances were described. Finally, it is recommended that because culture plays a significant role, students who are performers must identify the important role that culture plays in theatrical performances before taking roles in theatre productions.

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