Cross-cultural Communication Barriers in Southeast Sulawesi

(Case Study: Chinese & local workers)

Aldilal

Master of Communication Science, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Hasanuddin University

Email: Aldilalkomunikasi@gmail.com

Abstract

The phenomenon of the arrival of Chinese workers in Southeast Sulawesi has its pros and cons. The process of adaptation has led to conflict between the local community and the Chinese workers. The purpose of this research is to find out the obstacles to cross-cultural communication between Chinese workers and locals at PT. Virtue Dragon Nickel Industry in Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia. This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach to describe social phenomena. The study depicts the social reality in the area where the author performed the study. The snowball sampling method was used to recruit the study subjects of this study. The findings showed that the cross-cultural communication barriers between Chinese and local workers at PT. Virtue Dragon Nickel Industry in southeast Sulawesi are differences in language, nonverbal communication, the group's bond, and cultural differences. This paper contributes to the literacy of foreign and local workers in Indonesia and to the development of communication sciences, especially intercultural communication.

Keywords: Culture; communication; cross-cultural communication; foreign labour.

RIKSAWAN INSTITUTE®

Introduction

It is not in doubt that Indonesia is a country with tremendous natural resources, but ironically, the wealth of natural resources has not been fully enjoyed by its citizens, since many of the companies that manage natural resources in Indonesia still employ many foreign workers. Especially, Chinese workers are mostly employed in PT. VDNI (Virtue Dragon Nickel Industry) in Southeast Sulawesi. Data released on February 18, 2019, by Saemu Alwi, head of Southeast Sulawesi Labour Department, indicted that the number of foreigners working in PT. VDNI amounted to 1452 workers. The "invasion" by Chinese workers of various companies, especially in Southeast Sulawesi, has sparked concern in the community regarding the dynamic conflict that exists because of the cultural differences between the Chinese workforce and local workers. This may lead to violence in the community, which could take the form of cultural or direct violence.

Chinese workers working in mining companies have given their opinion regarding their presence in the community. Some of them are confident that they will bring about transfer of knowledge, i.e. provide an opportunity for the transfer of international skills and standards to local workers. Ideally, there would be no conflict if the local and Chinese workers as well as the local people understand the importance of diversity. Coexistence and collaboration between Chinese and local workers are important to create a developed economy in the area, despite the different cultures, languages, and habits of daily life.

Chinese workers working in various mining companies in Southeast Sulawesi have cultural background, education, and habits that differ from those of the local workforce. This could pose problems within the company. Cultural barriers are obstacles that occur because of differences in norms, habits, and values adopted by the parties involved in communication (Cangara, 2012).

Culture can be interpreted as a set of organized rules on how individuals in the society must communicate with each other, their way of thinking and their environment. Also, the simplest definition of intercultural communication is interpersonal communication performed by people of different cultural backgrounds (liliweri, 2013). Individuals or groups entering a new culture have to undergo a second process of enculturation, called an acculturation process. Acculturation is adjusting to a new culture, where some values are imbibed by individuals without abandoning the old cultural identity (Mulyana, 2005).

Culture and communication can't be separated because culture determines who is talking to whom, about what, how people decode the meaning that messages have, the tools used to send messages, paying attention and interpreting messages. Our behaviour relies heavily on the culture in which we were raised. Culture is the cornerstone of communication. If there are diverse cultures, there are also various communication practices (Mulyana D. &., 2010).

Other issues that cause conflict in cross-cultural communication are stereotypical thoughts, prejudices, uncertainty and anxiety about new cultures. These issues would certainly have an impact on individuals entering a new culture to find out the characteristics of the new culture, including the habits, language, customs, and meaning of the symbols used by the culture. Further, language is one of the factors that cause ineffective interaction in intercultural communication. Inability to understand different languages can cause misunderstanding and discomfort, and as a result of these misunderstandings, we encounter many conflicts, which occur as a result of ethnocentrism. According to William G. Sumner, ethnocentrism is to see everything in the group itself as the center of everything, and other things are measured and assessed based on the group (Gudykunst, 2003).

The Chinese workforce within the company will experience barriers while trying to adjust or adapt to the environment. When Chinese and local workers attempt to adapt and interact within the company (PT. Virtue Dragon Nickel Industry), they experience anxiety and uncertainty about cultural differences. Uncertainty refers to our inability to predict or explain other people's behaviours, feelings, attitudes, or values. When we reduce uncertainty about others and ourselves, understanding is possible. Anxiety refers to the feeling of being uneasy, worried, or apprehensive about what might happen. It is an affective (emotional) response, not a cognitive response like uncertainty (Gudykunts, William B dan Kim, 2003).

Cross-cultural communication is defined as a comparative analysis that prioritizes cultural relativism. As for the relationship with multicultural communication, cross-cultural communication is more focused on inter-nation relationships without having to form new cultures as they occur in intercultural communication. It is difficult to communicate effectively. Many obstacles can ruin communication. According to Effendy (2003), Chinese workers who have a different cultural background with local communities in Southeast Sulawesi will surely have difficulties in the process of interaction. Therefore, it is important to conduct research on the obstacles of communication between Chinese and local workers in Southeast Sulawesi.

Research Method

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach to describe a social phenomenon. The research was conducted at PT. VDNI in Southeast Sulawesi, where foreign workers from China work together with locals. The time and place of the research was influenced by the schedule and wishes of the research subjects. This research uses two types of data, namely primary and secondary data. Primary data are data obtained directly by using interviews to determine the causes of obstacles in communication between Chinese and local manpower in PT. VDNI. On the other hand, secondary data are obtained through the study of libraries, documents, and results of relevant research.

The sampling technique used in this study is snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is a sampling technique where the number of research subjects is initially small but grows larger (Sugiyono, 2011). Sample size determination in qualitative research occurs when researchers enter the field and during the research (emergent sampling design). Nasution (1988) explained that the determination of the sample size was deemed adequate when it was up to the "redundancy" level (the data is saturated and the samples no longer provide fresh information).

The technique of data collection used in this research is interviews with informants, using the interview guidelines that have been prepared earlier. Data obtained in this study guided the research question used in the problem formulation. The data analysis technique used in this research is the analysis of the interaction model developed by Milles and Huberman (Miles & Michael, 1992). The obtained data was subjected to three processes of qualitative data analysis, including data reduction, data presentation, and withdrawal of conclusion.

Results

Identity of Chinese and local workers

A Chinese worker is an individual who is a foreign citizen from China and works at PT. VDNI, a company operating in Morosi, Southeast Sulawesi Province. However, a local worker is individual who is a citizen of Indonesia and resides and works at PT. VDNI.

Table 1. Data on Chinese workers who served as informants

No	Name	Country	Age	Job Position	Period settled
1	Jiang lili	China	26	Secretary HRD	1,2 Years
2	Mr. Chang	China	35	Construction Supervisor	2 Years
3	Mr. Tsun	China	37	Coal Supervisor	8 Years
4	Mr. Huang	China	28	Jetty Coordinator	1 Years

Source: Results of processed primary data, 2019.

206

Table 2. Data of local workers that became informants

No	Name	Origin	Age	Job Position
1	Mrs. Anna	Kendari	28	Admin translate transport
2	Mr. Akbar	Kolaka	30	Admin finance
3	Mr. HeryAgustian	Morosi	24	Operator Helper
4	Mr. Warisman	Morosi	33	Security

Source: Results of processed primary data, 2019.

Preliminary adaptation of Chinese workers at PT. Virtue Dragon Nickel Industry

Table 3. Preliminary adaptation of Chinese workers at
PT. Virtue Dragon Nickel Industry

No	Name	Early adaptation of Chinese workers
1	Jiang Lili	• Cultural shock • Interaction with Chinese and local workforce • Language Constraint • Uncomfortable when asked repeatedly for things • Uncomfortable with local hospitality
2	Mr. Chang	• Language differences • Difficult interactions • No preparation • Dislikes the local working culture of a relaxed workforce • Learnt Indonesia language by opening himself
3	Mr. Tsun	• Surprised by the hot weather • Indonesian language training • Anxious about new cultures • While working with the local workforce, they blame each other • Dislikes the local workforce culture that is irritating or offensive
4	Mr. Huang	• Weather shock • Cultural shock • Food and cutlery differences • Constrained language • Many interactions with fellow Chinese workers

Source: Results of processed primary data, 2019.

Preliminary adaptation of the local workforce

Table 4. Preliminary adaptation of the local workforce

No	Name	Local origin	Early adaptation of local workforce
1	Mrs. Anna	Kendari city	• No difficulty in interaction • Friends • Differences in occupational culture
2	Mr. Akbar	Kolaka city	• Difficulty in interaction • Language constraint • Uncomfortable working with Chinese workers • Cultural differences
3	Mr. HeryAgustian	Morosi Village	• Language constraint • Cultural differences • Familiarized himself
4	Mr. Warisman	Morosi Village	• Language differences • Differences in occupational culture • Wage equality issues • Employment Recruitment

Source: Results of processed primary data, 2019

Discussion

After describing the adaptations of Chinese workers to the situation at PT. VDNI and the adaptations of the local workers to Chinese workers, it becomes pertinent to explain the intercultural communication obstacles between Chinese and local workers at PT. Virtue Dragon Nickel Industry.

1) Language differences: The differences between the languages of Chinese and local workers is a barrier to communication. Errors are made while attempting to interpret the meaning of messages that are delivered. It was observed that the average Chinese informant does not understand the Indonesian language, as well as English, well.

2) Nonverbal barriers are communication barriers that are not in the form of words. For example, while working, local workers sometimes send non-

208

verbal messages to Chinese supervisors, such as making red faces. In the local workers' sense, a red face indicates anger, but Chinese workers cannot interpret the red face as anger, leading to communication barrier during interaction.

3) The group's bond: The existence of a strong bond among fellow workers from the same ethnic group in the work environment causes communication barriers since there is no motivation for interaction with workers from the other ethnic group. Therefore, interaction does not occur, which makes the communication barrier happen for a long time.

4) Cultural differences: The cultural differences between the Chinese and local workforces resulted in frequent misunderstandings between them. The misunderstandings prevent frequent interactions between both workforces in an attempt to avoid further misunderstandings. For example, some local informants revealed that Chinese workers while working exhibit a rude attitude and like to raise their voices. Also, in the interviews with the Chinese workers, they describe the local workers' working culture as very slow and lazy. These cultural differences are obstacles to communication.

Many communication errors occur in the community because Chinese workers do not understand the symbols and codes that apply in the country. The process of communication, which is influenced by social and cultural conditions, develops a society. Communication involves a verbal code, which is a language, and a nonverbal code, which is a gesture. The differences in verbal code or the language differences between both ethnic groups will affect the adaptation of the Chinese workforce to its new cultural environment. The greater the differences between the Chinese and local workforces are, the more difficult the adaptation will be. There are great differences in the rules and norms of interaction and social relations, culture, educational background and daily habits between Chinese and local workers. Therefore, the adaptation process will be very difficult.

As individuals who come from a different country, Chinese workers have various forms of culture inherent in them. Therefore, when they entered a new environment or country, i.e. PT. VDNI in Konawe District, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia, it was a fresh experience for them, which caused them to experience cultural shock. In the early stages of adaptation of Chinese workers in Southeast Sulawesi, especially at PT. Virtue Dragon Nickel Industry, they experienced cultural shock due to language and other differences, as revealed by a Chinese informant at the beginning of his adaptation in Southeast Sulawesi.

The Chinese and local workforces have differences in physical and non-physical attributes as well as cultural backgrounds, resulting in incompatibility and adaptation barriers between them. At the early stage of the arrival of the average

Chinese worker, they experienced anxiety due to language and cultural differences. This is related to the theory of anxiety and uncertainty management expressed by William Gudykunst in Morissan (2009), which suggests that anyone who is a member of a particular culture will seek to reduce uncertainty in the early stages of their relationship with people of another culture, but they do it differently based on their cultural background. Regarding reaction to strangers, Gudykunst states the following: Our ability to process very complex information about others coming from distinct cultures will make us able to predict their behaviour more accurately. Our tolerance to ambiguity will affect the information we collect from strangers. Our increased ability to process complex information about foreigners will cause a decline in anxiety and an increase in our ability to accurately predict their behaviour.

During interaction, especially in the context of cultural diversity, sometimes, unexpected problems or obstacles are encountered, for example, in the use of language, symbols, values or norms of society, etc. The obstacles that occur may be due to lack of mutual understanding between individuals of different cultures. The sources of barriers in intercultural communication in the work environment are anxiety, roles and norms, beliefs and values, stereotypes and ethnocentrism (Mulyana D. &., 2010).

The group's bond according to the theory of anxiety and uncertainty management is related to the level of social categorization of strangers. Social categories are the way we organize social environments by grouping people into categories that are appropriate to us. With the categories, we position ourselves as members of the group or outside the group. Social categories also result in a form of social identity and involvement in intergroup behaviour with foreigners. This will lead to anxiety and uncertainty.

Uncertainty and anxiety in intercultural situations are caused by ineffectiveness and weakness in adaptation. The less the knowledge of other cultures is, the more uncertain and anxious someone will be. For this reason, the reduction and management of uncertainty and anxiety (uncertainty and anxiety management) is an important focus of intercultural communication. Uncertainty and anxiety are fundamental causes of intercultural communication failures; in other words, uncertainty and anxiety are two fundamental challenges faced by migrants in communicating with local residents.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis and discussion in the previous chapter, this study concludes that the obstacles of cross-cultural communication between Chinese and local workers in Southeast Sulawesi are as follows:

1) Language differences: Language differences cause difficulty in communication between the Chinese and local workforces in Southeast Sulawesi.

RIKSAWAN INSTITUTE®

2) Nonverbal Communication: Mistakes in interpreting nonverbal messages often cause misunderstandings between the Chinese and local workforces, making it a barrier to communication between both parties.

3) The group's bond: The group's bond makes the Chinese and local workforces unmotivated to communicate.

4) Cultural differences: Cultural differences between the Chinese and local workforces are a communication barrier due to the frequent misunderstandings that they cause. ***

Reference

Cangara, H. (2012). Pengantar Ilmu Komunikasi. Jakarta: Rajawali Pers

Effendy, O. U. (2003). Ilmu, Teori dan Filsafat Komunikasi. Citra Aditya

Gudykunst, W. B. (2003). Gudykunst, William B. Communicating With Strangers: An Approach to Intercultural Communication. Boston: McGrawHill

Gudykunst, W. B. (2003). Theorizing About Intercultural Communication. SAGE Publications.

Kim, Y. Y. (1984). Searching for Creative Integration" dalam William B. Gudykunts & Young Yun

Kim (eds). Methods for Intercultural Communication Research. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications

Lacey, H. (2003). How to Reselve Conflict in the workplace. Mengelola konflik di tempat kerja. Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama.

liliweri, A. (2013). Dasar-Dasar komunikasi Antarbudaya. Yogyakarta: PUSTAKA PELAJAR.

Liliweri, A. (2018). Prasangka Konflik & Komunikasi Antarbudaya. Kencana: Prenadamedia Group

Littlejohn, S. W. (2009). Encyclopaedia of Theory. Encyclopedia of Communication Theory.

Miles, M. B., & Michael, A. (1992). An Expanded Sourcebook Qualitative Data Analysis. Archives of Gynecology and Obstetrics. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02759913

Morissan. (2009). Teori Komunikasi Organisasi. Bandung: Ghalia Indonesia.

Mulyana, D. &. (2010). Komunikasi antarbudaya, Pengantar Komunikasi antarbudaya

Mulyana, D. J. (2005). Komunikasi Antarbudaya Panduan Berkomunikasi dengan Orang-Orang Berbeda Budaya. Bandung: Remaja Rosdakarya.

Nasution, S. (1988). Metode Penelitian Naturalistik Kualitatif. . Bandung: Tarsito.

Sugiyono. (2011). Metode Penelitian Kuantitatif, Kualitatif dan R&D. Bandung: Afabeta

RIKSAWAN INSTITUTE®