

Intercultural Experience, Relationships and Communicative Competence

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Abstract

Empathy, flexibility, and the ability to make meaningful connections are essential communication strategies for bridging cultural differences and accepting others. This report will describe cross-cultural experiences and strategies for raising awareness of relationship building as an important communication tool. A key focus will be discussions on problems of identity, cultural obstacles, and challenges involved with intercultural relationships.

As educators in Japan, we need to prepare learners to interact with different cultures. Language teachers are in a unique position to be able to use their experiences to develop empathy, intercultural awareness, flexibility, and the ability to negotiate meaning across differences. Global language learning necessitates fostering multiple competencies, a flexible perspective, and a multilevel awareness to make meaningful, cross-cultural connections. Four models of intercultural communication and relationship building will be discussed and considered to gauge how they can be applied to improving the overall intercultural experience both domestically and abroad. These models will be related to responses from 12 expatriates living in Japan who were surveyed regarding their experiences in various relationships, for the purpose of understanding the intricacies of intercultural relationships and subsequent strategies for communication across cultures.

Abstract

異文化体験、関係、コミュニケーション能力

共感、柔軟性、そして人と人との有意義なつながりを育む力は、文化の違いの架け橋としても、他者を理解するためにも欠かせないコミュニケーション戦略である。この報告書では、異文化体験と、大切なコミュニケーションツールの1つとしての人間関係を築く意識向上の方法について述べる。主な焦点は、異文化間コミュニケーションに関わるアイデンティティ、文化的な障害、そしてタブーにまでも目を向け、それらの問題を討議することである。

日本における教育者として、私たちは、様々な異なる文化に触れる機会を学習者に与えてあげる必要がある。言語教師は、自身の経験を用いて、共感する心、異文化意識、柔軟性、そして文化の違いを越えた意味の交渉をする力を持たせることができる唯一の立場にある。国際語を学ぶことは、有意義な文化間のつながりを持つために、複数の能力、柔軟な考え方、そして多層な認識の育成を必要とする。異文化間コミュニケーションと人間関係の構築の 4 つのモデルを、国内外における全ての異文化体験の促進にどのように応用できるかについて探るために論じて検討する。

I. Introduction

The following relates models of intercultural communicative competence and international exchange to different sojourners experiences abroad. The purpose is to gain a deeper, more objective or systematic understanding of intercultural relationships, which could be applied to language learning in order to help learners become more effective communicators. Empathy, flexibility, and the ability to make meaningful connections are essential communication strategies for bridging cultural differences and accepting others. Learners who possess these skills, are invariably better equipped to communicate effectively, and interact appropriately across cultures. Roberts, Byram, Barro, and Street (2001) contend that intercultural communication “is always a cultural process and that communication in a foreign (and in some contexts, a second) language involves mediating and establishing relationships across cultures” (p.7). This report describes how cross-cultural experiences or critical incidents can be understood and applied to raising awareness of relationship building as a fundamental communication tool. A key focus will be on problems of identity, cultural obstacles, and challenges involved with intercultural relationships. As Piller and Takahashi (2006) note, many successful learners were in, or desired to be in, an intercultural relationship without fully understanding the communication issues that went beyond language. Ward (1996) described intercultural contact and communication as a major, stressful life event, which should be understood carefully in order to prevent or reduce negative psychological or emotional effects. Spencer-Oatley and Franklin (2009) identify research conducted in ‘Intercultural Interactional Competence’, establishing measurable variables for effective communication. One study highlights essential factors: “(1) the ability to deal with psychological stress; (2) the ability to communicate effectively; and (3) the ability to establish interpersonal relationships” (p. 56). A second project determined intercultural communicative competence are correlated to empathy and bilingualism (p. 57).

As educators in Japan, we need to prepare learners to interact with different cultures. How can teachers develop empathy, intercultural awareness, flexibility, and the ability to negotiate meaning across differences? Can we apply our skills and experiences to help learners use relationship

building to become better communicators? Global language learning necessitates fostering multiple competencies, a flexible perspective, and a multilevel awareness to make meaningful, cross-cultural connections. Relating the experiences of several teachers, international business professionals and consultants to some key models and stages of cultural competence and adaptation, this report aims to apply this knowledge, insight and understanding towards producing learners who are flexible, adaptable and empathetic communicators. Four models of intercultural communication and relationship building will be discussed and considered to gauge how they can be applied to improving the overall intercultural experience both domestically and abroad. These models were selected because they represent a chronological evolution of contemporary thought regarding intercultural communication and cross-cultural interaction. They are also examples of the diversity of perspectives in thinking about human relationships, cultural differences, communication styles and the challenges that occur when interacting with others who are different from ourselves or have conflicting expectations or common sense. These models will be related to responses from 12 expatriates living in Japan who were surveyed regarding their experiences in various relationships, for the purpose of understanding the intricacies of intercultural relationships and subsequent strategies for communication across cultures.

II. Method

To better understand the practical, context specific and personal aspects of intercultural relationships, 12 expatriates living in Japan were surveyed and interviewed regarding their experiences in intercultural relationships. Participants countries of origin included Canada, United States, Australia, New Zealand, India, China and Tanzania. Their length of residence, outside of their home countries, ranged from 2 to 35 years. Each participant reported experience in intercultural relationships which included a mix of professional, friendship, romantic or familial connections. Participants were also asked to describe their reasons for coming to Japan, the nature of their intercultural relationships and elaborate on any difficulties or experiences that may be attributed to cultural differences. These responses were recorded, analysed and related to the 4 models of intercultural communication.

Outcomes of cross-cultural contact

In order to quantify objectively describe the abstract, ambiguous and complex nature of cross-cultural contact, Ady (1995) created six categories that can be used to analyse the outcomes of such interactions more empirically. These will be referred to as benchmarks for considering relevant

models of communicative competence. These models can then be related to individual experiences and critical incidents involving cultural differences to raise cultural awareness and a deeper intercultural understanding. Categories for analysing cross-cultural encounters can for this purpose be described as follows:

- 1) Satisfaction: General satisfaction with life, situation or interaction (Dunbar, 1992).
- 2) Adaptability: Emotional changes over time (Oberg 1960, Bochner, Lin and McLeod, 1980).
- 3) Acceptance: Social networks, engagement, interaction, acceptance or investment with local culture (Bochner, McLeod and Lin, 1977).
- 4) Stress: psychological difficulty, inability to connect with local culture or build relationships (Ward, 1996).
- 5) Integration: Transition strategies, ability to pass as a local (Black,1990).
- 6) Success: adapting and effectively internalising the values and ideals of the culture, cultural competence (Bochner, 1986).

These six stages transcend or are included in some form in the models described in this report. In this way they are a useful reference point to understand cultural, individual, social and communicative differences in relationship building. Aspects of these six stages will be used to analyse and discuss cross-cultural experiences and critical incidents in relation to each of the relevant models.

III. Stages of Culture Shock, Oberg, K. (1960), Ward, Bochner, Furnham (2001)

Description

One of the earliest models depicting intercultural contact, was initially proposed to describe what happens when sojourners spend extended periods of time in a foreign or unfamiliar culture. The model works on the premise that people tend to prefer interacting, communicating or engaging with those who have similar values, beliefs, expectations, traits or background with themselves. Although opposites attract and we can become interested or curious over individual and cultural differences, over the long term, these often, create communication difficulties of some form or another. The original model proposed by Oberg (1960) described this transition as the stages of culture shock usually illustrated as a 'W' curve. (See below)

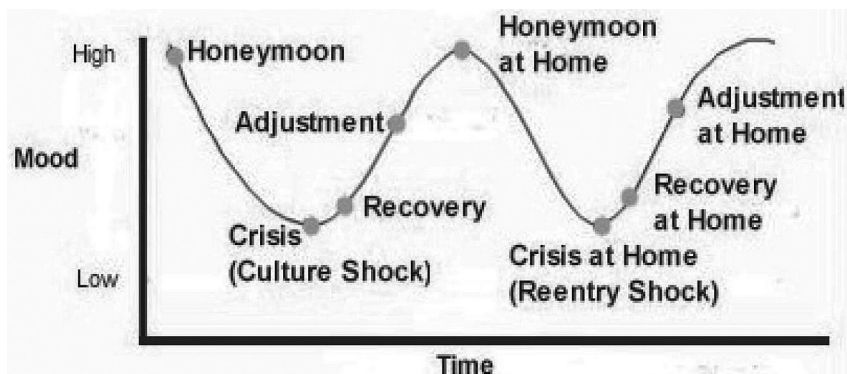


Figure 1: Cultural Adjustment Stages, Oberg (1960)

- 1) Honeymoon: Romantic, exciting, fascinating
- 2) Negotiation: Disillusion, frustration, anger and anxiety
- 3) Adjustment: Developing a 'normal' positive attitude
- 4) Adaptation: Becoming bicultural

These were further expanded and elaborated by Ward, Bochner, Furnham (2001) to include a more comprehensive measure of the effects of time on emotions and ultimate feelings towards the host culture, the sojourners home culture as well as changes to self esteem. For this purpose, three elements or stable outcomes were added. (A) Negative acceptance, where the sojourner has resigned themselves to the everyday challenges of living in another culture, (B) bicultural adaptation, in which both cultures are equally familiar and there is no difficulty with interaction and (C) total integration where the culture has been completely synthesised to the point that the visitor has become 'more Roman than the Romans.'

Experience

In the case of expatriates living in Japan, most of the participants surveyed stated that they remained in either a perpetual negotiation or adjustment phase even after several years living in Japan. Some examples of these include forms of daily perceived 'micro-aggressions' or small transgressions meant to be polite, curious or a form of relationship building, yet were taken as frustrating in their oversimplification, essentialism or othering. Examples of these include always being asked: *Can you use chopsticks? Can you eat sushi? or Where are you from?*

Another group described 'foreigners' who had become more Roman than the Romans by over-adapting and over-compensating elements of the local culture. Examples of this included the hyper use of overly polite language, demonstrating a deep and comprehensive knowledge of obscure language or dressing in traditional clothes that would generally be considered a rare or unusual custom. This overcompensation seemed to stem from a deep resentment or trauma of being an

outsider; considered a 'foreigner' or 'Gaijin' and not having a clear group of peers.

Application

The culture shock model can best be applied as an ongoing self evaluation of experiences in a foreign country. In this way sojourners can understand the emotions and challenges they are experiencing and essentially avoid the negative feelings brought on by culture shock. If we are able to interpret certain behavior with an open mind and view it as unintentional or non-hostile, then we may also be able to create feelings of empathy and improve future interactions.

IV. Intercultural Communicative Competence, Byram, M. (1997)

Description

Byram (1997) proposed a comprehensive model outlining essential skills (savoirs) for integrating and communicating actively, appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations. These included skills for increasing cultural knowledge, understanding, interaction, attitude and awareness. The four categories he describes represent the fundamental stages of becoming interculturally competent. These are as follows; knowledge (savoir), socio-cultural competence (savoir faire), attitude (savoir être), understanding "the other" (savoir s'engager) . When applied and related to different experiences, these categories allow us to understand and process, both the difficulties and successes learners have when engaging with different cultures.

Experience

Several of the participants commented that when they entered a new culture one of the most difficult challenges was acting or communicating appropriately in unfamiliar situations. The role of silence in turn taking and gauging the pace and flow of conversation was a common source of misunderstanding. In English, silence can signal a speaker has finished, can communicate shyness, lack of knowledge, disinterest, hostility, or a need for clarification. In Japanese however, the same silence can mean thoughtfulness, consideration, respect, contemplation, or modesty. The subtle nuances are quite different and can be the source of conflict and misunderstanding. Such important aspects of language and culture can only be understood through experience and related objectively to Byram's concept of cultural knowledge.

Application

Language learners can benefit from using Byram's framework both before and after engaging

in any form of intercultural interaction. Before contact with another culture, learners can consider the competencies and relate them to expectations and potential problems in the foreign language. Although these cannot possibly prevent miscommunication or culture shock they can serve as a guide or initial pre-research activity, geared towards raising awareness about the target language group in general. This has the added potential of lowering anxiety, reducing false expectations and possibly eliminating preconceptions and stereotypes. After returning from an intercultural interaction, language learners can use the framework to analyse, deconstruct and process their experiences. This also makes it possible to understand subjective experiences more objectively.

V. Intercultural Interactional Competence, Spencer-Oatley and Franklin (2009)

Description

The Intercultural Interactional Competence model considers examples of intercultural encounters from different disciplines such as anthropology, communication, psychology, marketing, management, and applied linguistics. The purpose is to apply diverse perspectives to understanding what is involved in intercultural behavior or even in the process of becoming “intercultural”. The major focus of this model is to explore differences in behavior and perceived misunderstandings on effective intercultural interaction. For this a meaning transfer approach to intercultural communication is used and several subsequent strategies proposed. These include strategies for dealing with psychological stress, communicating effectively and establishing interpersonal relationships.

Experience

Reflecting on intercultural experiences objectively is an important part of raising awareness and developing empathy. The multidisciplinary approach of the Intercultural Interactional Competence model makes it possible to view a single event or interaction from a variety of perspectives. Using an anthropological or ethnographic approach enables participants to deconstruct and process their experiences. Some of the subjects interviewed found it useful to divide experiences in terms of individuals, situations and outcomes in order to get a deeper understanding. At the individual level, it is important to have some knowledge of the social expectations or relationship in order to make sense of unfamiliar behavior. Individualist or collectivist, high or low power distance, or high or low context cultures, for example, will communicate abstract concepts such as status, modesty, appreciation, disappointment or praise differently. Situational variables can also be processed and understood in this way. Formal and informal, casual or professional, tense or relaxed

situations will impact communication based on similar social expectations and common sense. Without carefully understanding the social situation, the protocols, unwritten rules, nonverbal communication, voice inflections and other nuances, negotiating or transferring meaning successfully will be quite difficult and stressful. Finally, knowing the outcomes, purpose, goals, intentions or reasons for a certain behavior or communication are essential to interacting positively and effectively. Misunderstanding or misinterpreting a gesture, nuance or event are the causes of most culture shock, miscommunication or intercultural faux pas.

Application

The interactional model is perhaps one of the most practical, as it allows a careful and clear empirical analysis of social interaction. Applying a multifaceted and multidisciplinary framework for objective reasoning, allows students to consider issues deeply by researching or investigating areas of interest or concern, using an ethnographic method of inquiry. In this way, students can create their own projects to explore and gather further information from cultural informants through either, surveys, interviews or participant observation. This type of project provides agency, independence and a measure of control over variables that may otherwise be troubling or stressful. It also allows learners to manage their intercultural interactions by building confidence, raising awareness and promoting a deeper level of intercultural learning.

VI. Cultural Adaption Process, Frengos, T. (2016).

Description

Experience is ultimately the most important tool in being able to integrate and interact successfully and meaningfully with different cultures. The Cultural Adaption Process model makes use of both negative and positive experiences in order to develop key insights and build important skills such as resilience, discovering hidden strengths, overcoming adversity, persistence, leadership, curiosity, open-mindedness, social intelligence, and humor. These qualities subsequently foster positive emotions, confidence, self esteem and significantly impact the type and strength of motivation. As Frengos (2017) states in the introduction, "Life overseas can be hard but it can also be a chance to grow, to become more resilient." Using a framework to process, internalise and categorise experiences, this model helps sojourners make sense of more complicated or confusing interactions. This process can be summarised in the following steps outlined in the REAL integration process (Frengos 2016).

REAL: Integration process from “What I do” (rewards) to “What I am” (values)

Rewards: adapt for job, friends, controlled motivation

Everyone else: ‘fit in’, don’t want to disappoint others, controlled motivation

Align: own values with new culture values

Love: finding values, beliefs and behavior to be appreciated in the new culture

Experience

Working in a different culture proposes its own unique challenges. Common values and expectations tend to differ. Communication styles can be conflicting. Methods of praise, reward or appreciation are often unfamiliar and goals, protocols, procedures, group dynamics and working styles in general can be completely opposite or strange. Many participants responded that without a clear means of comprehending workplace differences, these issues can lead to strong negative feelings of depression, loneliness, frustration and unproductivity.

One participant working in a factory, was expected to be praised by their supervisor for saving a project from failure when the senior manager had made a critical mistake. To their surprise the whole team and even the person who made the error shared the praise, no one was singled out, promoted or reprimanded. Without support or consultation with others and without external feedback or empathy, they reported that this experience would have likely caused them to quit or severely limit their motivation to work and do their best.

Another participant observed that when a piece of equipment, which was meant for specific project tasks, was being used for general purposes, it was suddenly moved and made inaccessible to everyone, without any explanation. These examples show how group dynamics, hierarchies and communication styles can differ greatly and consequently cause difficult feelings, that could have serious consequences for professional relationships, worker moral and overall productivity. Processing these experiences, to find your own place of being, feel comfortable or otherwise fit in, is an essential first step in the transition from disillusion, resistance or hostility to acceptance, understanding and empathy.

Application

The strength of this model is in the fact that it applies not only to cross-cultural challenges but to domestic difficulties as well. Every workplace has unique dynamics which can come into conflict. Most students have had these experiences and can understand how personalities, egos or communication styles can impact relationships, motivation and productivity. Bullying, harassment, apathy, overwork and general stress are cross-culturally common issues, that require empathy and

understanding to process and eliminate. Using the model and framework described here, students can consider their own experiences, brainstorm ways to solve or prevent issues and then relate these to potentially similar, cross-cultural scenarios.

VII. Conclusion

This report has considered four models of intercultural exchange, interaction, integration and communication which are useful in processing, understanding and improving relationships, communicative competence and overall experiences with different cultures. Each model introduces a different measure of intercultural interaction and provides useful strategies or frameworks for comparing, analysing and processing experiences. Using the classroom as a resource to bring forth student's diverse experiences, relate these to those of teachers and connect them to a framework or model for objective consideration, can have a profound impact on the nature of future encounters. The main issues considered here were how learner agency and the ability to take initiative and control over one's experiences, could improve communication, enhance relationships and promote deeper understanding and empathy, when engaging with others who are different. When students are able to bring their own stories, experiences and issues to the classroom, their learning becomes real, relevant and effective. This type of agency builds strong motivation and helps students process and internalise abstract concepts that may otherwise remain trivial or forgettable. By understanding the complex causes that result in cross-cultural conflict and miscommunication, students can develop empathy and flexibility, which will greatly improve cross-cultural learning, integration and exchange. The ultimate effect of this becomes apparent in improved relationships that transcend differences in communication styles, values, expectations and common sense, making professional, personal and intercultural connections more meaningful, effective and rewarding. The final benefit is in the form of communicative competence. The goal of each model, and the end result of any positive intercultural exchange experience, is improved communication. Students who have experienced adversity, challenged their fears and anxieties and overcome obstacles, are better able to view their experiences positively and objectively. This further creates a deeper insight and appreciation for diversity and a greater flexibility and tolerance for differences, ambiguity or conflict, all of which are the essence of intercultural communicative competence.

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