A Case Study of Japanese Tertiary Students' Intercultural Sensitivity and Foreign Language Proficiency: An Abridged Literature Review

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Key words：intercultural communication, second language acquisition, the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), education research.

Introduction

This article comprises a modified version of the literature review from the author's current doctoral research project. This project focuses on measuring the degree to which proficiency on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) correlates to intercultural sensitivity, as measured by the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). The selected sample at the core of this investigation comprises one class of sophomore university students. Lastly, the academic citations included in this article are divided into two broad sections, the first being intercultural communication and the second being the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). The former section is substantially larger than the latter one.

Intercultural communication

The most prominent researcher in the earliest days of intercultural communication (ICC) was the cultural anthropologist Edward T. Hall. Hasegawa and Gudykunst have done a commendable job of summarizing Hall. They have written that, according to Hall, low context communication involves making direct and precise statements (Hasegawa & Gudykunst, 1998). In contrast, high context communication involves the use of understatements, indirect statements, and interpreting pauses in conversations (Hasegawa & Gudykunst, 1998). Not

surprisingly, low context communication is a feature of individualistic cultures, while high context communication is emphasized in collectivistic ones. Hall's building block paradigm for meaning-making allows for meaning to be faithfully translated from low context to high context cultures, and *vice versa* (Hasegawa & Gudykunst, 1998). This paradigm, then, acts as a bridge spanning the chasm separating the construction of meaning in low context and high context cultures.

Hall makes five recommendations for effective intercultural pedagogy. The first of these relates to the commonalties shared by all human cultures: the term which he uses for such commonalties is *interfaces* (Hall, 1985). Next, he recommends that indigenous education systems be encouraged and increased, and that these build on past successes. In addition, Hall makes the controversial recommendation that outstanding educators be rewarded. The fourth recommendation is that practitioners of cross-cultural education need to be highly aware of different learning styles; while the final recommendation advocates a wider recognition of the importance of the *"microculture of education"* (Hall, 1985, p. 170). In today's increasingly globalized world, classroom educators in Japan and elsewhere need to be aware of the differences and similarities amongst the various cultures represented in their classrooms.

While the conclusion that more research into intercultural competence, what Hall terms *cultural interface*, remains a valid one, certain elements of this 1985 article now appear dated. Examples include the repeated use of the terms *white* and *Indian*; the assertion that foreign journalists in Japan are assisting this nation by using *television* and *the cinema* to spread the use of English; as well as in his observation that while it is commonly believed in the West that all children learn the same way, this is not actually the case (Hall, 1985). Of course, Howard Gardner's widespread popularity has made almost all educational stakeholders keenly aware of multiple intelligences and different approaches to learning, while the internet and mobile

online devices have now become key players in terms of the globalization of the English language.

Shaules has lucidly explicated two widely-recognized schemas for describing intercultural value orientations (Shaules, 2007). The first one was originally created by Geert Hofstede, the second by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (Hofstede, 2000; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2004). Both paradigms attempt to describe universal categories of cultural comparison, and both share important conceptual elements, such as individualism and collectivism. There are also, as Shaules has observed, significant differences between them (Shaules, 2007).

Hofstede's starting assumption is that culture is best understood as a form of emotional and psychological programming which predisposes individuals to prefer certain emotional and psychological reactions over others (Shaules, 2007). In contrast, Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner have developed a theoretical framework which attempts to explain cultural difference in terms of the root-level challenges that humans face when organizing social communities (Shaules, 2007). Thus, while Hofstede views cultural difference in terms of psycho-emotional programming, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner view cultural difference in terms of diverse and internal, logical responses to environments (Shaules, 2007). In short, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner view culture as the way in which groups solve problems and reconcile dilemmas. They believe that the central problem facing cultural organizations is survival. Hofstede, on the other hand, is more concerned with the emotional and psychological characteristics of people from different cultural groups (Shaules, 2007).

Arguably, Hofstede's typology has a higher profile than that of Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner. This might explain why he has been more widely criticized. Although

Shaules refrains from delineating these criticisms, it is worth listing some of them here (Shaules, 2007). For starters, Hofstede arrived at his typology after having interviewed 100, 000 IBM employees, located in different offices throughout the world (Klyukanov, 2005). Thus, it is likely that his typology reflects the business culture at one specific transnational corporation, rather than the national culture of the nations that IBM operates within (Klyukanov, 2005). Secondly, since IBM does not have offices in every country, Hofstede's typology cannot fully reflect the earth's cultural diversity (Klyukanov, 2005)? In other words, Hofstede's typology is based on only the geographic regions, and particular cultures, where IBM has its offices (Klyukanov, 2005). Thirdly, given that IBM is a very Western enterprise, is it not also possible that Hofstede's categories are limited by a potentially ethnocentric, pro-Western, business worldview (Klyukanov, 2005)?

Fourthly, given that Hofstede conducted his research on the intercultural attitudes of his representative sample, that is the 100, 000 IBM employees, what about the distinction between attitudes and actual behaviour (Klyukanov, 2005)? After all, just because an individual might claim to have a certain opinion does not necessarily mean that her/his behaviour will be congruent with that professed opinion (Klyukanov, 2005). Finally, given that human attitudes can, and sometimes do, change with time, the criticism has been made that Hofstede's typology is limited by the precise time when the actual data was collected, and collated (Klyukanov, 2005).

Since it is based on identical empirical research carried out in language classrooms in both American and Japanese universities, Sakuragi can be viewed as being more essential to language educators (Sakuragi, 2008). Simply put, Sakuragi has localized in Japan an earlier study conducted with his foreign language students in America. Although, as he himself has noted, caution must be exercised when attempting to generalize such data from one relatively

heterogenous culture to another that is relatively homogenous (Sakuragi, 2008). Moreover, Americans may not be representative of all Western industrialized democracies, in terms of their attitudes toward foreign languages and cultures. More specifically, this article documents Sakuragi's effort to replicate his earlier American study, which examined the relationship between attitudes toward language study (a general attitude, instrumental/integrative attitudes, attitudes toward specific languages) and intercultural attitudes ("*worldmindedness*" and social distance), using a similar sample of university students in Japan (Sakuragi, 2008).

In marked contrast to his earlier 2006 study, the results of this survey of 116 Japanese students did not reveal a positive relationship between a general attitude toward language study and an intercultural attitude (Sakuragi, 2008). The results of this more recent study, however, were consistent with those of the previous study in terms of: (i) the relationships between different motives for language study and social distance; and (ii) the relationships between attitudes toward specific languages and social distance (Sakuragi, 2008). There would appear to be, then, a concrete need for more research akin to that of Sakuragi. Although his research into students' affective dispositions and attitudes is highly constructive, questions remain about the impact of the actual learning environment; about teachers' own attitudes and worldviews; about the teaching materials used; and about the means of assessment (Sakuragi, 2008). Presumably, answering such questions, and investigating these variables, will lead to heightened understanding in the emerging field of intercultural competence in language classrooms.

Ryan has documented the results of a transnational, empirical study that attempted to explore the cultural dimension of foreign language learning, in terms of the intercultural communicative competence of teachers and learners (Ryan, 2006). This quantitative comparative study contained an internet survey presented to secondary school teachers in

seven nations: Belgium, Bulgaria, Greece, Mexico, Poland, Spain, and Sweden (Ryan, 2006).

The main purpose of this seven-nation survey was to describe the average profile of foreign

language teachers (Ryan, 2006). Specifically, the web-based questionnaire included the

following foci: the objectives of foreign language and culture teaching time; students' culture-

and-language learning profile; culture teaching practices; culture in foreign language teaching

materials; opinions regarding different facets of intercultural competence teaching; and, the

foreign language intercultural competence, or "FL-IC," teacher (Ryan, 2006).

Now, Ryan has focused on just one of the areas found in this survey: teacher familiarity

and contacts with foreign cultures (Ryan, 2006). She wanted to research the reasons why some

teachers were favourably disposed toward intercultural competence, and others not. In addition,

she wanted to investigate why some teachers were more willing to devote more time to culture

teaching than others. Ryan found that teachers in the seven countries had very similar

responses (Ryan, 2006). Most said that they were very familiar with the daily life and routines,

the living conditions, and the food and drink of the foreign culture they were responsible for

(Ryan, 2006). Interestingly, most said that they were least familiar with international relations.

These findings suggest that "FL-IC" teachers feel sufficiently well equipped for a teaching of

culture which involves the passing on of knowledge about the target culture. Not surprisingly,

their knowledge is strongest in the cultural domains addressed in textbooks (Ryan, 2006).

Sercu asserts that it has only recently become accepted that foreign language learning

should be viewed in an intercultural perspective (Sercu, 2006). Sercu argues that the main

objective of foreign language education is no longer defined strictly in terms of the acquisition

of communicative competence (Sercu, 2006). Foreign language educators are now required to

teach intercultural communicative competence. The principal aim of this study was to

determine to what extent, and in what ways, teachers' professional profiles met the

specifications formulated in the theoretical literature regarding foreign language and intercultural competence teachers (Sercu, 2006).

With this aim in mind, an international research instrument was developed, involving teachers from seven countries. Unsurprisingly, this citation comprises a different component of the exact same transnational study that the Ryan citation is based on (Sercu, 2006). In this publication, however, the focus is on data that suggests that teachers' current foreign language-and-culture teaching profiles do not yet meet those of the envisaged foreign language and intercultural competence teacher (Sercu, 2006). Sercu has also found that patterns in teacher thinking and teaching practice appear to exist within, and across, the participating countries (Sercu, 2006). The two primary research questions underpinning the study were: (i) How can foreign language teachers' current professional self-concepts and language-and-culture teaching practices be characterized, and how do these self-concepts and teaching practices relate to the envisaged profile of the intercultural foreign language teacher?; and, (ii) Is it possible to speak of an 'average culture-and-language teaching profile', that applies to teachers in a number of different countries (Sercu, 2006)? The similarities here to the work done by Ryan are self-evident. Perhaps this is not all that surprising: after all, both scholars participated in the same seven-nation, transnational study.

Bodycott has examined the notion of cultural cross-currents, their implicit nature, and the potential they have to impact foreign language literacy learning, teaching and curriculum reform in Hong Kong primary classrooms (Bodycott, 2006). Despite the transparent implications for learning, the exploration of these cultural influences upon teacher and student thinking, and the resulting educational consequences, have remained unmapped (Bodycott, 2006). His central argument is that the cultural differences in attitudes, beliefs, and values of

cultural groups toward the way foreign languages are acquired needs to be made explicit, so as to facilitate language literacy teaching and learning (Bodycott, 2006).

The following quotation clearly reformulates the questions for future research articulated by both Ryan and Sercu, suggesting that even though they are operating outside of the East Asian, Confucian, *milieu*, their research can be perceived as valid in this geopolitical context:

"*Despite the potential to affect learning, cultural influences upon teacher and student thinking and the resultant educational consequences remain a largely unexplored area by second language (SL) researchers and curriculum designers. .... It is not until cultural differences in attitudes, beliefs and values of cultural groups are out in the open and freely explored that teachers and students can hope to navigate successfully the cultural stimuli that are awash in Hong Kong ESL classrooms.*" (Bodycott, 2006, p. 218)

Solé has analyzed how the understanding of a target culture can be addressed in beginners' level foreign language classes (Solé, 2003). She has discussed the means by which some theoretical and pedagogical principles from intercultural communication, cultural studies and second language acquisition (SLA) can inform the teaching of culture during the early stages of foreign language learning (Solé, 2003). While this article has already seen how culture and language occur in tandem, Solé, too, has lamented the dearth of reflection about how the target culture can be introduced in the adult beginner's language learning context (Solé, 2003). Her publication argues that the notion of culture as a negotiable entity can be introduced even at the earliest stages of language learning. The role of cultural identity and subjectivity in textbooks are the two key concepts on which her argument has been built (Solé, 2003). After this, her publication goes on to describe how such ideas can be transferred to three specific aspects of language teaching methodology: the need to portray heterogeneous national cultures and other markers of cultural identity; objectivity versus subjectivity in textbooks; and

thirdly, the creation of fictional personal testimonies to experience the target culture (Solé, 2003).

Despite being set in Spain rather than East Asia, this study possesses a definite bearing on the main field of this article, namely the newly emerging field of language learning and intercultural communication. One must also appreciate how Solé has lamented the paucity of research within the common ground shared by intercultural communication and foreign language pedagogy (Solé, 2003). With respect to Shulman's concept of generativity, Solé's explicit lamentation concerning this dearth of relevant research has concretely helped to publicize this gap in the literature (Solé, 2003).

Sato has examined education for cultural awareness in an overseas Japanese school (Sato, 2007). Adopting a methodology not completely unlike that of Ryan, Sato has done so from the perspective of the teachers (Sato, 2007). However, while the former study involved seven nations, the latter focuses on just one single school. Waseda University's Sato attempts to identify the potential pitfalls teachers should strive to avoid when teaching about an overseas host society, and its culture (Sato, 2007). Sato also examines how the school in question modified its existing approach to better address the dynamic and complex nature of intercultural understanding and exchange (Sato, 2007). This article does not directly relate to the teaching of English in Japan, although it obviously possesses an indirect relevance. However, it is directly relevant in so far as it reveals the means by which Japanese people strive to engage in intercultural communication (Sato, 2007). Yet again, the dearth of original research in the emerging field of intercultural competence in language classrooms is readily apparent.

Mehmet (2009) has observed that one of the outcomes of globalization is that humans around the world are engaging in more and more intercultural transactions. He goes on to note that with its shrinking population and its rapidly ageing populace, Japan is certainly no exception to this (Mehmet, 2009). Accordingly, this author explicitly laments the paucity of ICC literature focused on the study of foreign languages. Mehmet has also engaged in a "… discourse that will, hopefully, result in future research that could help remedy this gap in the literature" (Mehmet, 2009, p.102). Although, unlike many of the research studies discussed above, Mehmet has called for future research specifically focused on one nation: Japan.

The Test of English for International Communication

Predominantly in corporate Japan, but even in its public sector, a TOEIC score is generally equated with English language proficiency. Many Japanese university students are keenly aware that potential employers will use interviewees' TOEIC scores to gauge their English ability. It is customary to begin the process of "recruiting" for a career-oriented employer in the third year of undergraduate studies, and students know that the higher their scores are on their sophomore year's TOEIC, the better off they will be in their career-related job interviews which normally begin one year later. Moreover, given the domestic impact of globalization, combined with Japan's shrinking GDP (gross domestic product), it does not appear likely that this reliance on the TOEIC will abate any time soon.

Per annum, the TOEIC is now taken by over four and a half million candidates globally, while Japan and South Korea account for eighty-seven percent of total administrations of the "secure-format" of this test (Chapman & Newfields, 2008). The reading and listening version of this test is the one that was employed in the author's doctoral research. This version of the TOEIC was revised in 2006, and Powers, Kim, & Weng have published a study of its validity

(Powers, Kim, & Weng, 2008). These three researchers obtained test scores and can-do reports from 7,292 test takers in Japan, and from 3,626 test takers in Korea (Powers, Kim, & Weng, 2008). Specifically, Powers, Kim, & Weng administered a can-do self-assessment inventory to TOEIC examinees, one that gathered perceptions of their ability to perform a variety of everyday English language tasks (Powers, Kim, & Weng, 2008). These researchers concluded that scores for this version of the TOEIC related relatively strongly to test-taker self-reports, for both the reading and listening tasks (Powers, Kim, & Weng, 2008). With a few exceptions, the findings of this research project were generally supportive of the TOEIC's validity, with examinees at each higher TOEIC score level being more likely to report that they could successfully accomplish each of the language tasks in English (Powers, Kim, & Weng, 2008).

The pattern of correlations in this study's data also showed modest discriminant validity of the listening and reading components of the redesigned TOEIC (Powers, Kim, & Weng, 2008). This finding suggests that both sections of this version of the TOEIC contribute to the measurement of English language skills (Powers, Kim, & Weng, 2008).

As is often the case with standardized tests, however, there are diverse opinions about the 2006 reading and listening revision of the TOEIC. For instance, Chapman & Newfields (2008) have lamented the fact that this test continues to make use of a completely multiple-choice format. They also bemoan the fact that in fifty percent of the listening questions, applicants can read the questions as well as the possible responses, thereby mitigating the extent to which the TOEIC is actually measuring listening (Chapman & Newfields, 2008). They have also criticized the fact that over half of the TOEIC's questions still focus on sentence-level comprehension, rather than on "*discourse-level input*" (Chapman & Newfields, 2008). It is precisely for such reasons that the construct validity, content validity, and consequential validity of the original TOEIC were attacked (Chapman & Newfields, 2008).

Without downplaying such criticisms, however, this article pragmatically espouses the listening and reading version of the TOEIC simply because of its ubiquity within Japanese culture. Although TOEIC cannot be viewed as a perfect measurement of English language proficiency, it is never the less the most widely used, standardized English language test in Japan.

Conclusion

This article examined some of the scholarly literature from the fields of intercultural communication and second language acquisition/foreign language pedagogy. It uncovered the need for foreign language educators and researchers to be more aware of the so-called fifth language skill, intercultural communication. In addition, the dearth of original research in the emerging field of intercultural competence in language classrooms was also revealed. Finally, for many Japanese employers a score on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) is generally equated with English language proficiency. Therefore, discussions of tertiary level English language education in Japan would be incomplete if they neglected to discuss the TOEIC. The above research publications into the TOEIC reveal that the TOEIC is neither devoid of flaws nor overtly vigilant in promoting the fifth language skill. As such, this widely-utilized, standardized test does not always measure what it purports to measure, namely "international communication." This fact, of course, reveals an additional avenue for future investigation.

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flaws, glaring omissions, and/or epistemological inconsistencies are strictly mine, and mine alone.

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