

A Case Study of One Sample of Japanese Tertiary Students' Intercultural Sensitivity and Their Foreign Language Proficiency

日本人大学生の異文化間における感受性のサンプルと その外国語達成度ケーススタディ

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Introduction

This article consists of the literature review component of a research study that will investigate the interface of intercultural communication (ICC) and foreign language acquisition in one class of sophomore language learners in the faculty of textile engineering at a national university in Japan. This study aims to address the problem of Japanese students graduating from pre-service engineering programs with little or no ICC experience. Now, although this study has not yet been completed, the formal research proposal for it, which includes the ensuing literature review, has been. The fact that the following pages largely comprise this literature review will hopefully enable readers to gain a familiarity with the latest theoretical underpinnings of this study, without having to sift through dense layers of methodology, data collection explications, or time-consuming data analysis.

Rationale and Justification for the Project

Until very recently, in-service Japanese engineers have not always needed ICC proficiency, on account of a strong domestic demand for their services. However, as the economic recession shows few significant signs of abating, it is to be expected that an increasing number of Japanese engineering firms are going to be involved in overseas projects.

Logically, Japanese graduates from faculties of engineering can therefore be expected to require more ICC competence than their predecessors. Apparently, however, this increased need for ICC competence is not limited to Japanese engineers alone. Gilleard and Gilleard have observed that engineers have traditionally focused on “hard-skill” knowledge acquisition, even though the increasingly multicultural work practices of professional engineers now demand increased “soft-skill” proficiency (Gilleard & Gilleard, 2002). By “soft-skills” they mean skills and abilities such as foreign language ability, communication confidence, and intercultural experience (Gilleard & Gilleard, 2002). These two co-authors studied students and staff within a non-Japanese university engineering department to identify how intercultural language use potentially impacted academic and communication performance. They determined that pre-service engineering curricula are often focused on subject content at the expense of “soft skills” (Gilleard & Gilleard, 2002).

A more recent study has also found that ICC is becoming increasingly necessary for engineers. As a result of globalization, engineers now collaborate with business people and manufacturing personnel from various regions of the world, many of whom differ significantly from each other in their cultural backgrounds and worldviews (Radebaugh, D., Soschinske, K.A., Rimmington, G., & Alagic, M., 2006). Now, this publication has offered the development process of the Boeing 787 “Dreamliner” as a useful example of such collaboration (Radebaugh, D., Soschinske, K.A., Rimmington, G., & Alagic, M., 2006). In short, the development of the Boeing “Dreamliner” transcended the traditional customer-supplier relationship to become an intricate system of partnerships between globally located companies, ones that were all connected by their collaborative research, design, and capital investment (Radebaugh, D., Soschinske, K.A., Rimmington, G., & Alagic, M., 2006). Although not all engineers will necessarily join such huge, globe-spanning projects, this 2006 publication convincingly argues that effective cross-cultural communication is needed between

globally-located engineers, working under a diversity of cultural backgrounds and worldviews (Radebaugh, D., Soschinske, K.A., Rimmington, G., & Alagic, M., 2006).

The Literature Review

Given that the first of the above research questions specifically relates to the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity, or DMIS, as well as the TOEIC, this Literature Review will begin with the corresponding 1993 Bennett citation. Briefly then, the DMIS is a six-stage hierarchical framework. Its first three stages are called the ethnocentric stages, while its latter three stages are known as the ethnorelative stages (Bennett, 1993). Now, the first stage of ethnocentrism, which is called the denial stage, comprises the opinion that there are no real differences among different cultures (Bennett, 1993). Individuals in this stage perceive their own culture to be the only legitimate one. Awareness of different cultures cannot truly happen, because proximity to differences is avoided physically, or mentally (Bennett, 1993). There are two ways by which people maintain a sense of denial: isolation, or separation (Bennett, 1993).

Defence is the second stage of the DMIS (Bennett, 1993). In this stage, a person's own culture is experienced as the only legitimate culture. For individuals in this stage, cultural differences are not simply viewed with mistrust, but these differences are actually considered a threat to one's own identity and self-concept (Bennett, 1993). There are three means by which people can defend themselves against such differences: denigration, superiority, and reversal (Bennett, 1993). Denigration takes place when individuals respond to cultural differences with a negative judgment. An example of denigration would be a value judgment in which a particular behavior, or utterance, is considered negative, solely to cheapen the inherent cultural difference (Bennett, 1993). On the other hand, superiority occurs when individuals espouse a positive evaluation of their own culture without overtly denigrating any other culture (Bennett,

1993). Reversal, the least common of these three forms of defense, is used to devalue one's own culture as a way of demonstrating the superiority of another culture (Bennett, 1993).

Minimization is the final ethnocentric stage of the DMIS (Bennett, 1993). Minimization is characterized by attempts to over-generalize similarities between the emic group (the "*ingroup*") and the etic group (the "*outgroup*") (Bennett, 1993). That is, cultural differences are downplayed, or considered unimportant. Minimization can assume two forms, both with somewhat verbose names: *physical universalism* and *transcendent universalism* (Bennett, 1993). The former perceives all cultural differences as being mere biological deviations (Bennett, 1993). In contrast, transcendent universalism views all humans as the product of one transcendent and universal being (Bennett, 1993). For people in this stage, differences are not viewed as threatening. Minimization also comprises the belief that there are universal truths which impact upon all humans. However, the caveat here is that these values may well originate in one's own *ingroup* culture (Bennett, 1993).

The fourth stage, which is the very first stage of the three **ethnorelative** stages, is called acceptance (Bennett, 1993). It is profoundly different from the three preceding stages in that it acknowledges that cultural differences do exist, that they are important, and that they should be respected (Bennett, 1993). There are two forms of acceptance: respect for behavioral differences, including an acceptance of verbal and nonverbal behavior; plus, respect for differences in values, including an acceptance of the diverse points of view that inform many behavioral variations (Bennett, 1993). Acceptance is premised on an awareness of, and respect for, diversity in sundry worldviews (Bennett, 1993). To paraphrase, individuals at this stage of the paradigm understand that to respect cultural differences requires an ability to buy into an *outgroup* worldview.

According to Bennett, adaptation is the second ethnorelative stage (Bennett, 1993). It is also the fifth of the six stages. It is typified by an effort to use an individual's knowledge about

cultural differences to improve relationships with people who are culturally different (Bennett, 1993). To this end, individuals do not merely adopt a different set of cultural beliefs and behaviors to the exclusion of their own beliefs, values, and behaviors (Bennett, 1993). Instead, such individuals strive to integrate both the *ingroup* as well as the *outgroup* cultural beliefs and behaviors. Adaptation is frequently based on a kind of empathy, in which people are able to experience events differently from others in their own, ingroup culture (Bennett, 1993). Adaptation can also entail an internalization of two cultural reference points, which is known as pluralism (Bennett, 1993). In pluralism, individuals experience events in an original way, one based on the mixing of two cultural patterns. Such individuals may use skills or behaviors from either cultural framework, depending on which one would be most helpful in any given situation (Bennett, 1993).

Integration is the third ethnorelative stage (Bennett, 1993). It is also the sixth stage, and it is characterized by the mixing of various aspects of an individual's identity into a new whole, while still remaining culturally marginal, or fluid (Bennett, 1993). Consequently, people in this stage have the ability to communicate effectively with many cultural groups (Bennett, 1993). In other words, individuals in the integration stage can easily alter their behavior to adapt to various cultural landscapes (Bennett, 1993). Such adaptive behavior means that it can sometimes prove difficult to empirically measure this final stage of the DMIS.

Now, three researchers from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa have published a useful synopsis of more recent trends in ICC theory, research, and practice (Sinicrope, Norris, & Watanabe, 2008). These researchers have noted that in the past twelve years, Bennett's DMIS has served as the foundation for several ICC assessment tools, both commercial and non-commercial in nature (Sinicrope, Norris, & Watanabe, 2008). They also note that although Bennett does not explicitly describe the role of foreign language communication in the development of intercultural sensitivity, he does refer to communication as a developmental

strategy, particularly in the three ethnorelative stages of the DMIS (Sinicrope, Norris, & Watanabe, 2008).

These three University of Hawai‘i researchers have also observed that there has more recently been “sustained use” of two locally developed assessment instruments: Olson & Kroeger’s Intercultural Sensitivity Index, or ISI; and, Fantini’s Assessment of Intercultural Competence, or AIC (Sinicrope, Norris, & Watanabe, 2008). This particular research study shall employ both of these instruments.

Olson & Kroeger premised their 2001 research study on a survey of fifty-two New Jersey City University faculty and staff, a survey which aimed to assess the relationships between international experience, “global competencies,” and levels of intercultural sensitivity (Olson & Kroeger, 2001). Their survey utilized Bennett’s DMIS, in addition to definitions of “global competency” from Wilson, Stohl, Singer, and Hanvey (Olson & Kroeger, 2001). Perhaps not surprisingly, these two authors found that second language proficiency independently increases the likelihood that an educator will be more advanced on the DMIS (Olson & Kroeger, 2001). Olson & Kroeger’s research also offered up information about the relationship between second language acquisition, experience abroad, and ethnorelativism (Olson & Kroeger, 2001). Their findings suggest that global, intercultural, and professional development that is ongoing, substantial, and inclusive of work in another language and culture is needed (Olson & Kroeger, 2001).

With respect to “global competency,” Olson & Kroeger have defined it as being embodied in a person who has sufficient knowledge, perceptual understanding, and intercultural communication skills to effectively interact in today’s globally interdependent world (Olson & Kroeger, 2001). With respect to the DMIS specifically, these co-authors have opined that one of the most attractive features of the DMIS conceptual framework is its ability to help humans deal with the concept of “fundamental difference,” which they believe to be the

“most problematic and threatening idea that many of us will ever encounter” (Olson & Kroeger, 2001). Now, although the DMIS is certainly not the only ICC framework that aims to help humans transcend the concept of fundamental difference, the survey questions which Olson & Kroeger have produced will form the basis of the online survey component of this case study. All of these questions have been translated into Japanese, and their accuracy has been verified using back-translation. Thus, the sophomore participants in this online survey will complete all protocols in Japanese, their first language.

While the bulk of these online survey questions come from Olson & Kroeger, the majority of the individual interview questions derive from the Fantini citation. This latter citation includes a questionnaire form, one that was part of a research project conducted by the Federation of The Experiment in International Living, FEIL (Fantini, 2009). Fantini’s survey seeks to learn about various outcomes of intercultural service experiences: the level of intercultural competence developed by overseas volunteers, its effects on their lifestyle choices, and their impact, in turn, on communities and other individuals after returning home (Fantini, 2009).

According to Arasaratnam & Doerfel, one potential danger with ICC self-assessment may not be that individuals choose to respond inaccurately, a research problem usually referred to as socially desirable responding, but that they may be unable to respond accurately: “*a major short-coming in studies in the past is that often participants who have little experience in intercultural situations are asked for self-reports of behavioral choices in hypothetical intercultural situations* (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005, 141).” Given this very real potential danger in rural Japan, in addition to socially desirable responding, it was decided to augment the online (self-assessment) survey with face-to-face interviews. As will be seen in the Methodology section below, these interviews comprise the third and final data-gathering instrument of this case study.

The only other data-gathering instrument of this research project comprises the standardized Test of English for International Communication, or TOEIC. *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 will be employed by this research study. 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). According to these three authors, then, 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 have lamented the fact that this test continues to make use of a completely multiple-choice format (Chapman & Newfields, 2008). 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). These co-authors have written that 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 particular study 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.

Predominantly in corporate Japan, but even in the public sector of this culture, a TOEIC score is generally equated with English language proficiency. This simple fact cannot be overstated- notwithstanding the construct validity and content validity issues referred to in the previous paragraph, or the TOEIC's overall lack of ICC awareness! For better or worse, the engineering students in the representative sample are keenly aware that potential employers will use interviewee's TOEIC scores to gauge their English ability. These same second year students are also keenly aware that it is customary to begin the process of "recruiting" for a career-oriented employer in the third year of undergraduate studies. 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.

Returning now to the field of ICC, Shaules has lucidly and effectively explicated two of its most widely-recognized paradigms (Shaules, 2007). The first of these was created by Geert Hofstede, while the second was designed by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (Hofstede, 2000; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2004). Both of these ICC paradigms attempt to

describe universal categories of cultural comparison, such as individualism and collectivism, but there are also significant differences between them (Shaules, 2007).

As Shaules has summarized, 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 International Business Machines (IBM) employees, employees located in different IBM offices throughout the world (Klyukanov, 2005). Thus, it might be at least partially 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, is it not possible that Hofstede's typology does not 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 International Business Machines 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 alleged 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).

Although Shaules' research into the history of ICC provides useful background information, the exact requirements of this research proposal would argue for a stronger discussion of the process of developing intercultural competence in foreign language classrooms. Regrettably, Shaules has refrained from overtly discussing any possible links between students' foreign language ability and their own particular ICC development (Shaules, 2007).

Since his article 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 this case study (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 documented 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). In this light, then, this case study would articulate a concrete need for more research akin to that of Sakuragi. Although his research into students' affective dispositions and attitudes is highly constructive, questions do remain about his representative sample's empirical English language proficiency (Sakuragi, 2008). Presumably, answering this kind of question, and investigating such empirical variables, will lead to heightened understanding in the emerging, largely un-researched, field of ICC in the language classroom.

As additional proof of this, Sercu has asserted that it has only recently, since the mid 1980s, become accepted that foreign language learning should be viewed in an intercultural perspective (Sercu, 2006). Sercu has argued that the main objective of foreign language education can no longer be defined strictly in terms of the acquisition of communicative competence (Sercu, 2006). Foreign language educators should now be required to teach intercultural communicative competence (Sercu, 2006). The aim of her multinational study was to determine to what extent, and in what ways, teachers' current professional profiles met

the specifications formulated in the theoretical literature regarding the foreign language and intercultural competence, or FL-IC, teacher (Sercu, 2006).

To try and answer this question, then, an international research instrument was developed, involving teachers from seven countries (Sercu, 2006). Sercu's data suggests that teachers' current foreign language-and-culture teaching profiles do not yet meet those of the envisaged FL-IC teacher (Sercu, 2006). In other words, the confluence of ICC and foreign language education is such a new concept that even the personal profiles of FL-IC educators fall short of expectations. Moreover, this study ends up posing more questions than it began with, highlighting the field's abundance of unanswered research questions. While this assertion is true of nations in the EU, where this transnational study took place, it is even more valid in Japan, which has generally been slower to embrace the notion of communicative foreign language teaching and learning.

On a related note, Mehmet has observed that one of the outcomes of globalization is that humans around the world are engaging in more and more intercultural transactions (Mehmet, 2009). He goes on to note that with its shrinking population, not to mention its rapidly ageing populace, Japan is certainly no exception to this (Mehmet, 2009). However, this author explicitly laments the paucity of ICC literature that is focused on the study of foreign languages. Echoing the work of Sercu, 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 Sercu's seven-nation study, Mehmet has called for future research specifically focused on one nation: Japan.

Conclusion

The literature review that formed the primary focus of this article has aspired to provide readers with an enhanced familiarity with recent research into the confluence of ICC and foreign language education. At the same time, this article has also attempted to offer up a

preview of the theoretical foundations for the author's continuing doctoral research. This ongoing research possesses concrete pedagogical merit, given that, as a result of globalization and the prolonged domestic recession, increasing numbers of Japanese engineering firms are expected to be involved in intercultural projects. Consequently, undergraduate engineering students at Shinshu University can logically be expected to benefit from more exposure to ICC, and intercultural competence, than was available to their predecessors. Apparently, however, this increased need for ICC competence is not limited to Japanese pre-service engineers alone. Therefore, it is possible that the author's ongoing research might well have relevance beyond Japan's domestic borders.

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