

# **The Interface of Intercultural Communication and Foreign Language Education**

(異文化コミュニケーションと外国語教育のインタフェース)

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## **Introduction**

One of the outcomes of globalization is that humans around the world are experiencing more and more intercultural transactions. With its shrinking population, not to mention its ageing populace, Japan is no exception to this. However, as Sakuragi has discerned, the field of intercultural communication currently suffers from a distinct paucity of literature when it comes to the study of languages (Sakuragi, 2008). Having reviewed the extant literature, the author of this expository article has regrettably arrived at a similar conclusion.

However, the ensuing paragraphs constitute a discourse that will, hopefully, result in future qualitative research that could help remedy this gap in the literature. More specifically, and in an effort to build on the limited amount of scholarship that does exist, the following discussion will articulate an empirical need for research focused on the interface of intercultural communication and tertiary-level foreign language studies in Japan. Rather than presenting any findings from original data, then, the sole purpose of this *exposé* will be to reveal a conspicuous gap in the literature. Given this, the following pages can be seen as contributing to the professional development of foreign language educators, in the sense that such educators may be encouraged to contemplate a hitherto under reported aspect of foreign language acquisition.

## **Background to the Issue**

Individuals who have attained functional, or communicative, fluency in a foreign language have long known that linguistic prowess alone does not automatically equate with intercultural competence. And, as Sato has lamented, the teaching of the latter is by no means a straightforward enterprise (Sato, 2007). As the world-wide influences of globalization become more and more pronounced, some might even say ubiquitous, acquiring foreign language competency may become increasingly necessary. At the risk of sounding overly sensationalist, languages do not exist in vacuums, and the following pages will, it is strongly hoped, expose the fact that language students who ignore the intercultural aspects of globalization do so at their own peril! Ideally speaking, then, intercultural communication must be viewed as an integral part of foreign language teaching and learning. Unfortunately, the majority of SLA (second language acquisition) literature would appear to have either ruefully downplayed this fact, or to have myopically turned the proverbial blind eye to it.

Consequently, this generative paper shall advocate the construction of a firm research footing for the development of pedagogy that fosters intercultural competence in language classrooms. To help navigate these largely uncharted waters, Sercu has proposed physical settings; teachers; learners; teaching materials; and assessment methods as research variables for understanding the process of developing intercultural competence in language classrooms (Sercu, 2004). One imagines that few informed sources would contest these proposed variables.

Keeping these general research variables in mind, Ryan has concluded her highly practical publication by reiterating three currently unanswered questions that were initially proposed by two different scholars in the field (Ryan, 2006). The present author would, if possible, very much like to appropriate one or more of these three research questions, and investigate them within the context of Japanese foreign language classrooms:

- i) What are teachers' attitudes to the aspects of intercultural competence that focus on critical awareness and the development of students as citizens? (Guilherme, 2002)

- ii) What is intercultural competence today, taking into consideration present political and cultural developments on the global scene? (Risager, 2005)
- iii) What is the role of language learning for students' and teachers' general identity development in a complex world? (Risager, 2005)

### **Uncovering a Gap in the Literature: A Discussion of the Confluence between Intercultural Communication and Foreign Language Teaching**

Not wanting to mindlessly regurgitate the contents of Shaules' entire monograph, and keeping in mind Boote and Beile's exhortation to focus on the upper levels of Bloom's taxonomy of cognition, it would never-the-less be useful at the very outset of this discussion to examine two ground-breaking studies from the field of intercultural competence (Boote & Beile, 2005). Shaules has explicated these two, widely-recognized schemas for describing value orientations (Shaules, 2007). The first one was originally created by Geert Hofstede in 1984, while the second of these two schemas was designed by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner in 2004 (Shaules, 2007). Both schemas 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 written, significant differences between them.

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 (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2004). 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).

Hofstede's typology arguably 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. 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? 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? 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 intercultural competence is appropriate for setting the stage, 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 refrains from discussing students' attitudes and worldviews; the potential effects of the actual learning environment; teachers' own attitudes; the language teaching materials; or the assessment methods utilized in foreign language classes. As will be seen below, these variables are all significant for understanding the process of developing intercultural competence in language classrooms.

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 pertinent to the intercultural communication- foreign language acquisition (ICC-FLA) interface (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. 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 paper would hereby advocate a concrete need for more research like 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. 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. The main purpose of the survey was to attempt to describe an average profile of foreign language teachers (Ryan, 2006). Specifically, the web-based questionnaire included the following foci: the objectives of foreign language teaching and culture teaching time; student's 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 (FL-IC) teacher (Ryan, 2006). Ryan focuses on just one of the areas found in the survey: teacher familiarity and contacts with foreign cultures. She wanted to research the reasons why some teachers were favourably disposed toward intercultural competence and others not. As well, Ryan 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. Interestingly, most said that they were least familiar with international relations (Ryan, 2006). These findings suggest that

FL-IC teachers feel sufficiently well equipped for culture teaching as passing on knowledge about the target culture. Not surprisingly, their knowledge is strongest in the cultural domains addressed in textbooks.

Now, one question for future research that Ryan poses is: “To what extent is the content of textbooks a determining factor in terms of this finding that teachers’ knowledge is strongest in the cultural domains addressed in textbooks? Are other sources of information, such as travel and the media, also a contributing factor to this finding- if so, to what extent?” Another question for future research that Ryan poses is: “Why FL-IC teachers do not feel well-informed about the international relations of the foreign country that is their specialty?” This query becomes even more pertinent given Ryan’s finding that respondents in all seven countries claimed to have frequent internet or television contact with that country (Ryan, 2006). Similarly, the third question for future research she puts forward concerns indigenous communities. Ryan wonders why, given this frequent media contact, FL-IC teachers do not feel well-informed about different ethnic groups in the foreign country they are responsible for (Ryan, 2006).

Lastly, it must be acknowledged that Ryan has a very parsimonious, uncluttered, writing style. As a result, this citation was, arguably, the most “reader friendly” one in this literature review. The two main weaknesses of this research study, as far as this individual proposal is concerned, are that all of the respondents in the representative sample taught at the secondary level, and Japan was not one of the seven participating nations. Admittedly, though, all of the provocative questions for future research raised in this publication are directly applicable to Japanese universities.

Sercu asserts that it has only recently become accepted that foreign language learning should be viewed in an intercultural perspective. 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 aim of this study reported was to determine to what extent, and in what ways, teachers' current professional profiles meet the specifications formulated in the theoretical literature regarding the foreign language and intercultural competence (FL-IC) teacher.

To try and answer this question, an international research instrument was developed, involving teachers from seven countries. This is a different component of the exact same transnational study that the Ryan citation is based on. 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). More specifically, 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 striking. Perhaps this is not that surprising, given that both scholars participated in the same seven-nation, transnational study.

Gently shifting the spotlight back to Japan, Sato has examined education for cultural awareness in an overseas Japanese school (Sato, 2007). Adopting a methodology not 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 one 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). The major weakness of this article, in terms of its potential application to an ICC-FLA interface, is that it does not directly relate to the teaching of English in Japan; although, it obviously possesses an indirect relevance. However, it is directly applicable in so far as it reveals the means by which Japanese people strive to engage in intercultural communication. Yet again, the dearth of original research in the emerging field of intercultural competence for foreign language classrooms is readily apparent.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the above *exposé* has cited Ryan's three questions for future research into the ICC-FLA confluence (Ryan, 2006). As has been seen, the first of these three questions was originally posed by Guilherme, while the two latter questions were originally offered up by Risager (Risager, 2005). Very briefly, the first of these questions for future research relates to any possible connections between teachers' attitudes to the facets of intercultural competence that focus on critical awareness, and the development of students as citizens (Ryan, 2006). The second question queried the precise nature of intercultural competence in the autumn of 2008, given the impact of globalization (Ryan, 2006). A third and final question for future research, one that is frantically crying out for an answer, has to do with investigating possible correlations between language learning and identity development (Ryan, 2006).

Now, with respect to future research, and in terms of selecting a methodology for investigating one or more of the above questions, this expository paper would provisionally recommend an online, qualitative study- probably one using [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com). The rationale here is purely pragmatic, given that the author has made use of the Survey Monkey software package once before, and has a degree of familiarity with it. Perhaps one of the more attractive features of Survey Monkey is that it collates all of the survey respondents'

data into a single spreadsheet file, one which is conveniently emailed to the researcher upon completion of the data gathering period.

Finally, and with respect to the kinds of findings that such a qualitative inquiry might be expected to produce, one might hypothesize that tertiary-level foreign language teachers in Japan exhibit above average levels of intercultural competence. In addition, such an online survey might well be expected to produce data which reveals that students' levels of intercultural competence have been heightened as a result of globalization. As for both foreign language students as well as their teachers, the raw data could also be analyzed to test for correlations between general identity development and intercultural competence.

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