

Analysis of Previous Researches on Intercultural Communication

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Abstract

To respond to the increasing demand for people have high competencies in intercultural communication, introducing a conceptual framework for understanding the intercultural perspective, and which aims at improving understanding of acculturation and the intercultural competence development process is vital. However, there is no single consensus regarding the conceptualization of intercultural communication competencies and the framework, there are some key competencies identified as important by many researchers eminent in the field of intercultural communication. In this article, most commonly cited theories and frameworks are presented and analyzed.

Key terms: framework, key competencies, intercultural communication, acculturation

Introduction

In the world, the number of students who desire to study abroad to prepare for the globalization of today and future is significantly growing. Many countries in the world recognize the desires and needs for the internationalization in the education system. In Japan, at the beginning of the 1980s, internationalization was a part of the core manifesto of former Prime Minister, Nakazone. In 1983, the Ministry presented “plan to accept 100,000 international students” with a view to cultivate Japanese nationals who are able to both manage international activities and have a high understanding of foreign language, culture and history. At that time, the number of international students in Japan was much less than the number of foreigners studying in other developed countries, for instance, the U.S.A. was more than 33 times and France’s was about 13 times bigger international students population than Japan’s. After the plan was put into practice by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), the number of international students in Japan dramatically increased. The goal set in the “plan to accept 100,000 international students” was surpassed in 2003, and in 2005 the number reached a record high of 121,812 according to the Student Services Division of the Higher Education Bureau of MEXT (2006). MEXT and many universities expect a number of positive consequences from accepting international students: promotion of world multiculturalism, increase in international understanding, and the strengthening of international networks between Japan and other countries. Schools and the government promise the foreign students a great cultural experience, acquisition of Japanese language, and educational fulfillment. How foreign students adjust themselves into a new culture, and how they deal with culture shock has been a subject of study (Winkelman, 1994). Because the opportunities for cross-cultural contact have increased, and such contacts have been accompanied by misunderstanding and conflicts, a new research which analyzes current perspectives, introduces a conceptual framework for understanding the intercultural perspective, and which aims at improving our understanding of acculturation and the intercultural competence development process is vital.

Acculturation

The common considerations in the studies on the dynamics of cross-cultural interactions are acculturation, intercultural adjustment, intercultural communication competencies and intercultural sensitivity. Before carrying this theoretical discussion much further, it is important to define the meanings of these key terms. The original idea of acculturation was forced displacement of an oppressed group's culture by the culture of a more affluent group. Acculturation was introduced as colonial acculturation study by anthropologists, who explored the integral role of European migration issues from a social and political viewpoint (Stenhouse & Wood, 2005). Even in recent years, some researchers refer to acculturation as "...the modification or replacement of person's native customs, habits, language, life-style, and value of orientations" (Szapocznik et al., 1978, p. 114). In a model of assimilation in which several types of assimilation are described, the well-being of immigrants in their host culture is presumed to be their assimilation into the dominant society (Gordon, 1971). The people in a dominant group maintain particular ways to construe their worlds and induce minorities to see worlds in these ways and insist on the idea of their monolithic culture. However, some scholars refuse to embrace 'replacement' of the original culture as a part of the acculturation process. Acculturation is taken in this study to mean adapting to another cultural worldview to a range of levels, without relinquishing one's central cultural identity, which would be assimilation (Furnham & Bochner, 1986).

Acculturation as a Process

There are various models which describe the framework of the development of intercultural competencies (Deardorff, 2006a; Hoopes, 1979). McAllister and Irvine (2000, p.5) assert the higher value of process-oriented frameworks over non-process frameworks, such as frameworks created by Hoopes (1979) and Gudykunst and Hammer (1983), especially in education fields since non-process frameworks do not describe the development of cultural identities or/and worldview. According to Berry, acculturation is the process of cultural and psychological change that follows intercultural contact (2003).

Among the process-oriented frameworks, the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS), framework presented by Bennett (1993) is the most extensively recognized by researchers, and its theory is a more sophisticated model than ones created before. DMIS reflects cognitive, emotional and behavioral stages of increasing sensitivity to cultural difference (Paige, Jacobs-Cassuto, Yershova & DeJaeghere, 2003). In this study, intercultural sensitivity is used to describe the attitudes towards overall cultural differences. Bennett, Hammer and Wiseman (2003) define intercultural sensitivity to be "the ability to discriminate and experience relevant cultural differences" (p. 421); it is the overall and key competence for intercultural communication.

The reasons for the researchers' recognition of DMIS are it could be applied to a broad range of research subjects, and it is designed to describe subjects' diverse responses to similar experiences with cultural differences. Many studies have expanded the use of the DMIS to various types of populations. For example, based on DMIS, the intercultural sensitivity of pediatric resident trainees is assessed by Altshuler, Sussman and Kachur (2003). Their study successfully identifies the trainees' slight attitudinal changes associated with the developmental model. According to Burdette-Williamson (1996), the Bennett's model delineates an individual's "progress from a less to a more interculturally sensitive developmental state" (p. 65). There are two fundamental positions of this model which make this model applicable for this study. First, individual's intercultural sensitivity is seen as one of the nurture elements; intercultural communication is not an instinctual skill, but it is a skill that is a result of learning. Moreover, the theoretical base of this model is cognitive psychology. Intercultural competence which Bennett advocates is not ability acquired through "objective knowledge" (Klark & Martin, 2003, p. 448). The objective knowledge is knowledge which people can expand by learning customs

and history. The ability can be developed through “empirical knowledge” which can be obtained only by the subjective experience of intercultural contacts and reflecting on the experience of the contact.

DMIS is composed of two parts; the first part is ethnocentrism followed by ethnorelativism. The two parts are further distinguished by six stages: three ethnocentric stages (Denial, Defense, and Minimization) and three ethnorelative stages (Acceptance, Adoption, and Integration). The first stage of the ethnocentrism introduced by Bennett (1993; 1994) is “Denial”: the bottom stage of the DMIS framework. This stage is characterized by the negation of the existence of cultural differences. The cognition of experiencing intercultural interactions, therefore, does not exist. Stereotypes are formed in response to the practical need for identifying people. The second stage is “Defense.” In this stage, the cognition level of cultural difference rises, but people in this stage still sturdily maintain their world view. Because of the recognition of cultural diversity, people in this stage are more susceptible to the cultural differences and feel threatened by the differences. The final stage of the ethnocentric stages is minimization. The psychological trait of people in this stage of the Bennett’s model is minimizing the cultural differences and finding ultimate importance in the fundamental similarities in cultures. Because cultural differences are only perceived in the superficial level, differences in food, language, and table manner, cultural variety is seen as insignificant. Universal values and culture are considered as the best solution to establish understanding among people. Often people in the minimization stage do not realize their behaviors are based on the belief that one’s own worldview or culture is superior to that of other groups. In other words, they unconsciously judge others based on their own ethnocentric point of view. Even among workers and volunteers in non-profit organizations that promote international exchange (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994), and students in a culturally diverse university, people can still be found in this stage. (Olson & Kroeger, 2001).

Following the three stages of ethnocentrism, there are three stages of DMIS which are addressed as more ethnorelative in which an individual view, one’s culture in the context of other cultures. In the ethnorelativistic point of view, “Cultural difference is neither good nor bad, it is just different” (Bennett, 1993, p. 46). Because of this unbiased view, negative perceptions of cultural differences are supplanted by positive perceptions. The first orientation of ethnorelativism is acceptance. At this point, people experience dramatic changes in their perceptions towards diverse cultures. Individuals start accepting and respecting the values and beliefs of other cultures. Unlike the acceptance stage, actual cognitive and behavioral changes are required in the adaptation stage. This does not mean individuals must discard their own worldview, but individuals become multi-cultural or bicultural. Coexisting diverse cultures within individuals have an egalitarian relationship, not a stratified relationship. People develop skills to alter their worldview in accordance with cultures of others with whom they are interacting. The results of other investigations of acculturation also suggest that the bidimensional worldview, the combined involvement of host and native cultures, is the key for successful acculturation (Yoshikawa, 1998; Berry, 1997). The requisite of the Bennett’s stage of adaptation which entails the cognitive and behavioral modification or alternation somewhat refers to its affinity or identity with the aiming stage of acculturation process contended by several researchers. Acculturation is the learning process in which an individual partakes in values, beliefs and language patterns of the host culture through the experience of contacting with the culture (Berry, 1980). Such cultural participation involves alternation of the individual’s cultural repertoire to appropriately correspond to the collective life of another culture.

David Matsumoto and his colleagues (2001) provide a clear distinction between intercultural adaptation and adjustment. According to their definition, while adaptation emphasizes attitudinal and behavioral modification in response to different environmental context (p. 388), adjustment refers to the positive subjective outcome of intercultural communication. It includes variables which are ascribed from adjustment experience and are

incentives for having other adjustments. Some of the listed variables are the enhancement of self-esteem and self-awareness, psychological and physical health status, subjective-well-being, contentment and happiness. In this study, subjective happiness and well-being of individuals are incorporated in the Bennett's adaptation stage and also the integration stage introduced below, since subjective happiness is as important as the well-being of multi-cultural societies.

The final stage of Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity is integration. The significance of cultural differences is neglected, and people in this stage do not affiliate themselves with any explicit existing cultural groups. Their identity is continually in the process of changing.

One of the other most prominent conceptualizations of acculturation is Berry's bidimensional acculturation model (1980a). Unlike Bennett's model for acculturation, the model introduced in this Berry's model is not progress-oriented. However, it allows pluralistic societies to have multiple options. Individuals can evaluate their acculturation strategies based on two fundamental acculturation issues; the extent to which individuals are willing to maintain the culture and heritage of their origin and the extent to which individuals are willing to establish or maintain positive relationships with people of the host culture. Bakker and his colleagues find individuals react differently to acculturation strategies (2006); higher preference for the assimilation strategies are found among individuals who have flexible attitudes toward cultures different from their own than among individuals who have inflexible attitudes.

Individuals who have negative feelings towards keeping their native culture and desire to adopt their host culture are in the *assimilation* mode. The next mode mentioned in the Berry's model is *marginalization*. Individuals who have neither their host culture nor heritage culture are considered as having the marginalization strategies of acculturation. On the other hand, *integration* presented by Berry is characterized by strategies of recognizing the importance of establishing positive contact with people of their host society and at the same time retaining their culture of origin. Although Berry uses the same word, integration, unlike Bennett, Berry does not state the precise psychological changes of individuals in the integration condition. If the individuals have positive perceptions towards the cultural differences of the two cultures, they are in one of the ethnorelative stages; however, if the recognition of the importance of both host and native culture is based on their fundamental similarities, the individuals are still in the acceptance stage of DMIS. Berry's model only identifies behavioral traits of acculturation, and does not clearly delineate the exact psychological traits. However, his model of acculturation remains useful for conceptualizing different strategy types of acculturation in the various stages enumerated by Bennett.

Other Researches on Intercultural Communication Competencies

In the intercultural communication discipline, understanding intercultural communication competencies has been considered the major issue to increase understanding of the acculturation process. Many studies of intercultural communication focus on identifying the abilities which influence the process of developing intercultural communication. There are some concerns of the location of the intercultural communication competencies. Those who have such concerns analyzed previous studies on intercultural communication and learned there are two locations most researchers had judged: the individual context and the social context (Koester, Wiseman & Sanders, 1993).

Among researchers who believe the location of the competence to be in individual context, some assert individuals' characteristics are the crucial elements to determine success in intercultural communication (e.g. Matsumoto, LeRoux, Bernhard, & Gray, 2004). They utilize the predispositions of individuals' attitudes, beliefs and values as the predictors of intercultural effectiveness and analyze the moderating role of intercultural

competence on the individual level. The predictors are considered to affect process attitude formation and give guidelines essential for satisfying communication outcome. For example, based on successive researches using personality inventories, David Matsumoto and his colleagues (Matsumoto, 1999) posit four psychological elements connected with individuals' personalities and their attitudes as the predictors: emotion regulation, critical thinking, openness/flexibility, and tolerance of ambiguity (P.73).

Common belief within other researches is that intercultural competence resides in an apposite and effective behavior with foreign cultures. (Bandura, 1977; Chen & Satrosta, 1998; Collier, 1988; Fan & Mak, 1998; Hammar, Gudykunst, & Wiseman, 1978; Ruben, 1976; Taft, 1988). In some studies, intercultural communication competence is perceived to be social context matter rather than individual context. According to those studies, intercultural competence should be judged on the basis of social impression and acknowledgement. Although consensus has not been reached regarding the conceptualization of intercultural communication competencies, there are some key competencies identified as important by many researchers eminent in the field of intercultural communication.

Emotion regulation is an ability which allows persons to engage in successful strife resolution that results in effective interactions in intercultural events. Emotion regulation is self-regulation which consists of altering the way one interprets a negative environment so as to reduce one's emotional anxiety and controlling the way to express one's emotion (Matsumoto, 1999; Tice & Bratslavsky, 2000). Such emotion regulation is associated with "emotional intelligence" addressed by Mayer and Solovey (1997); the social skills to effectually perceive, understand, and control emotions which help further improvement of intellectual and emotional competency. The components of emotional intelligence are used to assess personal qualities, predict the success in communication performance and to identify high achievers. Therefore, the components comprise wider factors than the definition of emotion regulations addressed above. There are a number of components that Bar-On (1997) presents. Some of them include flexibility, problem solving skills, stress tolerance and an optimistic view of life. However, the key components of emotional intelligence are closely related with emotion regulation. The key components are having deep understanding of emotion and expressing it effectively, being able to understand others' feelings, having the competency of controlling self-emotions, being able to effectively react to changes in personal life and to find the solutions to the problems ascribed to the change and being able to promote self-motivation (Bar-On, 1997). Emotional intelligence has attracted many researchers in the study of intercultural communication; assessing the intercultural adjustment of managers working for international business field (Gabel, Dolan, & Cerdin, 2005); examining training for improving ability to effectively perceive emotion (Elfenbein, 2006); exploring correlation between cultural background and emotional intelligence (Parker, Saklofske, Shaughnessy, Huang, Wood, & Eastabrook, 2005); and discussing the benefits of possessing emotional intelligence in a cross-cultural environment (Shinn, 2003).

Another intercultural communication competency is tolerance of ambiguity (Gudykunst, Yang & Nishida, 1984; Matsumoto, D., Hirayama, and LeRoux, 2006; Ruben, 1976; 1983; 1989, Ting-Toomey, 1999). In the study by Berger and Calabrese (1975), uncertainty reduction is described as the competence for predicting and explaining events in which some degree of uncertainty exists. Such uncertainty arises between the participants in situations of inadequate information about the participants' unfamiliar attitudes and performances (Berger & Gudykunst, 1991). In the situations of intercultural communication, people are constantly challenged by high uncertainty and complexity, and the anxiety ascribed from the uncertainty correlates to high cultural variability (Griffin, 2005). Gudykunst's anxiety/uncertainty management theory (1988) suggests that as the level of anxiety and uncertainty increases, the possibility of misunderstandings is enhanced. Therefore, anxiety and uncertainty

should be addressed and adequately treated to reduce the possibility of misunderstanding and lighten their cognitive and behavioral impact. Berger (Berger, 1975; Berger & Calabrese, 1975) marked uncertainty as a stimulus for the anticipation of future interaction with the participants since it is axiom to feel dissonance and build anticipation to reduce existing uncertainty by seeking information. However, Sunnafrank (1986) addresses the motivation for having future interaction cannot be derived from negative experience but positive experience. Ruben (1976) indicates tolerance of ambiguity from the aspect of behavioral control. He states tolerance of ambiguity is the ability “to react to new and ambiguous situations with little visible discomfort” (p. 341). Individuals who have the high competency level are able to promptly react to unfamiliar situations and modify their behavior. Matsumoto and his colleagues (Matsumoto, Hirayama, & LeRoux, 2006) include interpersonal security as well as tolerance of ambiguity among his seven intercultural competencies. The degree of interpersonal security which is one of the intercultural competencies addressed by Matsumoto and his colleagues relates to alleviating anxiety. The classic psychoanalytic theory developed by Sullivan (1953) states that people sustain their interpersonal security by protecting themselves from anxiety.

Openness and flexibility are included in intercultural competencies by a number of intercultural communication theorists (Williams, 2005). Gudykunst finds thorough his series of researches on intercultural communication skills, self-disclosure positively affects on attributional confidence (Gudykunst, 1985; Gudykunst, Yang, & Nishida, 1985). Brislin and Yoshida (1994) state the trait of openness and flexibility means “accepting other ways of doing things, a lack of rigidity, and an ethnorelative perspective” (p.90). Flexibility refers to the willingness to understand diversified attributes of self, others and unfamiliar situations. Flexibility identified by Ruben (1976) is more task-oriented; it is how individuals can perform a task satisfactorily and achieve sufficient results.

Having and maintaining self-esteem and confidence are vital for intercultural adjustment since their absence negatively affects other abilities. Unconfident people often fail to regulate their emotions, have open, do not have flexible attitude or/and cannot provide productive criticism (Matsumoto, 1999). Self-esteem affects the emotional health and furthermore overall well-being. Lack of self-esteem produces feelings of inferiority and stress producing self-doubt. Since sojourners tend to be minorities within the host culture, such inferior and doubtful feelings towards themselves increase stress and anxiety. Matsumoto’s Intercultural Adjustment Potential Scale includes self-esteem as one of the reliable facets to predict the successful outcomes of intercultural communications (1999). Others apply self-esteem to measure the success or failure in acculturation (Aruguete, Yates, Edman, & Sanders, 2007; Berry & Sam, 1997; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Generally, self-esteem is categorized into global self-esteem and specific self-esteem. Global self-esteem is over-all psychological well-being (Neto, 2002; Pullmann & Allik, 2000; Rosenberg, 1986). On the other hand, researchers who assess the specific self-esteem of individuals study how positively or negatively people cognize particular events or situations, and such researchers’ interest inclines to converge on behavioral outcome (Pottebaum, Keith, & Ehly 1986; Webster, 2007; Webster & Kirkpatrick, 2006). Since the subjects of this study are international students living and studying overseas, their self-esteem in academic and nonacademic components are vital for the success with their sojourn. Several recent studies support the strong correlation between self-esteem and academic achievement (Byne, 1984; Marsh, Byrne, & Shavelson, 1988; Mzobanzi, 1989). There is an increasing interest in examining general self-esteem as one of the indispensable factors of acculturation (Erkut, Szalacha, Coll, & Alarcon, 2000; Tsytsarev and Krichmar, 2000).

Conclusions

The previous research efforts have contributed to the significant progress in our understanding of acculturation and intercultural communication competencies. The conceptual definitions and theoretical framework allow many researchers and institutions which are interested in issues involved with intercultural and/or cross-cultural communication predict the success of their projects and assess the quality of their systems and projects. However, there are not many culture-specific studies that are based on theoretically integrated perceptions. Moreover, the effect of interpersonal relationship between people of host culture and sojourners need to be concerned in the studies of intercultural communication.

Finally, research efforts will provide us with the opportunity to reveal factors of intercultural communication in university environments. Such studies can offer a very useful insight into the depth of issues with study abroad programs and those studying and living as foreign students in Japan.

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