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Teaching Intercultural Communication
in Monocultural Japan

James G. Ellis

Teaching intercultural communication (ICC) is perhaps one of the most exciting journeys one can embark on in a teaching career. The content of intercultural communication is, essentially, multidisciplinary in nature. The classroom teacher can draw resources from diverse disciplines such as anthropology, communication, international relations, linguistics, religious studies, social psychology, and sociology, and then construct a fascinating course out of the wealth of information provided. In addition, the process of teaching an intercultural communication course is a multifaceted learning experience. The intercultural communication teacher learns side by side with the students via the mutual sharing of unique intercultural experiences and reflections.

Educators in Japan have come to realise in recent years the need for an intercultural communication addition to the long-standing method of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) and other foreign languages in Japanese schools. As a result of continuing communication problems experienced by many Japanese who come into contact with people from other cultures, a number of universities have created new departments or programs of intercultural communication to expand the mandate of existing foreign language departments and to create a stronger focus on intercultural awareness and communication skills. This paper reviews some varied pieces of recent ICC literature, each of which sheds light on how ICC teaching might be carried out in monocultural Japan.

I. Intercultural communication as a subject of study

In the teaching/learning of EFL, the foreign language is being learned or acquired in the learner's home cultural and linguistic environment, or at least in an environment where English is not the dominant language. Learners may or may not have goals relating to functioning in the target language or in a foreign language culture. In Japan, EFL instruction has traditionally centered around grammar study and translation activities. It is now generally thought in Japan that this emphasis on grammar-translation is a primary cause of the widely recognized inability of Japanese to communicate well with people who come from, for example, English speaking cultures. The Japanese Ministry of Education has recently encouraged the creation of university departments of International Communication, within which courses in Intercultural Communication will be given. Moreover, some universities are developing Intercultural Communication courses within existing departments.

1. 1. Definition of intercultural communication and cross-cultural communication

Intercultural Communication surfaced as a subject of study, particularly in the United States, some twenty years ago, and much has been written on the topic at both the practical and theoretical levels. According to Lustig and Koester (1993, 56),

> Intercultural Communications is a symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual process in which the degree of difference between people is large and important enough to create dissimilar interpretations and expectations about what are regarded as competent behaviors that should be used to create shared meanings.

The degree to which individuals differ is the degree to which there is intercultureness in a given instance of communication. Consequently, communication situations in which the individuals are very different

from one another are most intercultural, whereas interactions in which the individuals are very similar to one another are least intercultural.

The term *cross-cultural* is usually used to refer to the study of a particular idea or concept within many cultures. For example, scholars who study self-disclosure patterns, child-rearing practices, or educational methods as they exist in many different cultures are doing cross-cultural research. Whereas intercultural communication involves interactions among people from different cultures, cross-cultural communication involves a comparison of interactions among people from the same culture to those from another.

1. 2.   Implications of the move towards ICC

The departmental addition of Intercultural Communication, if it is to be more than a cosmetic change, implies a shift from print-based, authoritative instruction towards performance-based, student-centered instruction.

In countries such as Canada, Australia, and the USA, high immigration results in ICC issues being a part of everyday life. In Japan, however, most communities remain monocultural, and most Japanese rarely have direct dealings with foreigners. Thus, there is a need for new Japan-specific syllabi in theoretical and practical ICC, syllabi which address the fact that Japan is monocultural, and that as a result, the Japanese have little opportunity to acquire an experience-based relativistic view of cultures, including their own. As will be examined later, however, much can be learned by examining recent developments in ICC teaching in multicultural countries.

1. 3.   Articulating the difference between EFL and ICC

Educators making a shift in instructional focus such as from EFL to ICC need to articulate the nature of the change, from the abstract level down to the practical level. The following outline of the differ-

ences between Japanese EFL and ICC is intended to be ad hoc,
reflecting the developments visible in recent publications in the ICC
field.

EFL in Japan has typically had two components: print-based study
of grammar, reading and English literature; and the study of oral
English, ranging through pronunciation, listening comprehension
and conversation. Most descriptions of ICC in recent literature (e.g.
Samovar et al, 1981) exclude print-related communication; however,
this is not representative of contemporary Japanese communication
styles, which often include reading aloud and frequent referral to text
and references. Perhaps Japanese written communication genres re-
flect an attempt to enter the other culture, and to mimic it, rather
than negotiate the shared cultural scenario which would apparently
distinguish ICC from EFL. Nonverbal communication, including
kinesthetic and paralinguistic communication forms, are generally
included in contemporary descriptions of ICC as distinct from EFL,
and although such forms are to some extent included in EFL cur-
ricula, they receive much more attention in ICC instructional materi-
als.

II.   Some possible components of an ICC curriculum

Even though teaching materials and methods which are useful in
the multicultural USA may not be directly applicable to monocultural
Japan, it is possible to identify many useful concepts and perspectives
from the considerable volume of recent American literature on the
topic of Intercultural Communication. The following section outlines
some of the findings of a survey of ICC literature. Although not
intended to be exhaustive, this report does propose an explicit struc-
ture and an implicit approach for such a search. Much of the follow-
ing structure is inspired by Lustig and Koester's *Intercultural Compe-
tence* (1993), a US entry-level university textbook which blends
theoretical and practical topics, yet remains at the abstract level.

Learning activities, however, are provided in the accompanying teacher's manual. Despite the fact that it is a reader rather than a communicative sourcebook, this is one of the most comprehensive skill-oriented ICC texts on the market today, as is suggested by the four main headings in the table of contents:

1. Communication and Intercultural Competence
2. Cultural Differences in Communication
3. Coding Intercultural Communication
4. Becoming an Interculturally Competent Communicator

In the interest of curriculum design, the four categories above may be reformulated as follows:

1. Knowledge about communication
2. Knowledge about cultures
3. Skills related to ICC
4. The teaching/learning of ICC

The following sections are discussions of how some recent literature relating to ICC can provide some guidance with regard to these four categories.

2.1. Knowledge about communication

The study of intracultural communication (communication between culturally similar individuals) predates the study of ICC considerably, especially as communication is defined so as to include discourse, which has been a topic since Latin was a living language. Central works in communication include the work of Edward T. Hall (1976, 1983). More recent works such as Deborah Tannen's (1986) *That's not what I meant* examine the linguistic aspects (such as confusion between messages and metamessages) of critical incidents where communication breaks down as a result of subtle conflicts of communication style. Although not addressing ICC, such works as Tannen's do provide extensive insights into English communication patterns and strategies: strategies in particular are often directly appli-

cable to ICC plights experienced by Japanese. For example, Tannen discusses cases that demonstrate the constant need for reframing a conversation as it continues; which is a predominant activity in a well-run conversation. This constant reframing can be a source of frustration and fatigue for communicators whose cultures have different principles and procedures for reframing.

Samovar and Porter's (1994) *Intercultural Communication*, a reader now in its seventh edition since 1972, is an extensive examination of models and theories relating to ICC, and contains discussion of critical incidents (points in time where communication breakdown begins) in ICC. The final section deals with managing intercultural conflicts, and although the book is consistently fixed at the information level, offering no practical experiences for the student, it is a wide-ranging and valuable source of background information.

Although addressing issues in business, and limited to description of westerners' experiences of interaction with Japanese, Gercik's (1992) *On track with the Japanese* provides extensive insight into the Western view of Japan as a target culture. Gercik herself is bicultural, which may be one reason her collection of case studies wins the approval of Japanese as well as western communication experts.

2. 2.   Knowledge about cultures

Description and comparison of cultures is not a new genre in Japan as books about other cultures, and particularly American culture, abound. However, some new ways of talking about cultures are emerging. Richard Brislin's (1993) U.S. university textbook, *Understanding Culture's Influence on Behavior*, is constructed around the premise that "research in cross-cultural studies can provide very helpful guidelines for people as they interact in a fast-changing world marked by increasing intercultural contact." (Brislin, 1993: v). In every chapter, Brislin provides concepts and conceptual frameworks ranging from types of knowledge to research methods to intercul-

tural interaction skills, all of which help to bridge the gap between cultural knowledge and communicative skill. Unlike many books of its kind, Brislin (1993) provides examples and pedagogical suggestions which may be readily applied to ICC teaching/learning, and to the monocultural situation so common in Japan.

Dean Barnlund's (1975) *Public and Private Self in Japan and the United States* is perhaps too old to be considered emerging literature, but it is already seen by many as a classic and must be mentioned here. Barnlund's model of interpersonal understanding as a function of (a) similarity of personal orientations, (b) similarity of belief systems and (c) similarity of communicative styles is a useful tool for curriculum planning, as well as a focus for student reflection in situations such as analyzing film. Although this work appears highly abstract, some of the research techniques, such as the role description checklist and self disclosure scale, are readily adaptable to use as student projects, requiring relatively few other-culture contacts; in fact these techniques would be quite revealing even if used in a monocultural setting where only personal, class and regional differences may be found between subjects.

Acquiring knowledge about another culture is widely recognized as a primary source of awareness of one's own culture, but in this respect a caution is voiced by Bateson (1989) who tries to encourage her students always to think in terms of three cultures, their own and at least two others — not one other, because she feels they could easily reduce true human diversity to a single dimension, "us and them".

2. 3.   Skills related to ICC

As may be seen from the preceding sections, recently produced ICC textbooks generally fall short in terms of impact of the practice-oriented classroom: models and cases remain at the abstract level, generally leaving practical activities to the imagination of the teacher.

Granted, there are a number of sources of practise-driven instructional activities, but much ICC instructional material comes from multicultural countries, and hence assume a mixture of cultural backgrounds within the classroom. For example, in Weeks, Pedersen and Brislin (1979), 33 out of 59 cross-cultural experiences for students of ICC require that the class have a multicultural population. So, even though the authors provide some wonderful teaching suggestions, the need for adaptation of such materials to the Japanese case may well be timewise prohibitive for many teachers.

In their communication sourcebook, *The Culture Puzzle*, Levine et al. (1987) provide an excellent set of model conversations and background communication information for immigrants to the United States. So much of the book's material is directly relevant to the Japanese student of ICC, but unfortunately the activities uniformly assume a multicultural classroom. This is yet another case of a book which begs adaptation to the Japanese ICC situation.

Some sources such as Sikkema and Niyekawa (*Design for Cross-Cultural Learning*, 1987), however, have an even more extreme operational premise: that much cross-cultural learning cannot take place if the students do not experience life in another culture.

Lustig and Koester (1993) do provide two well-known practical intercultural communication activities (BASIC, or Behavioral Assessment Scale for Intercultural Competence), which is designed to put learners directly in touch with their attitudes and biases towards other cultures, and D-I-E, or Description-Interpretation-Evaluation, an interaction tool which reveals to people just what interpretations and evaluations they automatically, unconsciously make when they receive information from the world around them.

2. 4. The teaching/learning of ICC

Teaching an intercultural communication course is like teaching any other undergraduate communication course with the prerequisite

that the instructor has to be exceptionally sensitive and mindful of what is going on in the classroom environment. The course emphasizes the integration of cognitive learning, affective learning, and behavioral learning.

Cognitive learning can be accomplished through lecture discussions, in-depth extensive readings, critical incidents' analyses, film discussions, and small group interaction sessions. Affective learning can be developed through the use of structured intercultural exercises, role-playing exercises, and intercultural simulations. Finally, behavioral learning can be achieved through actual intercultural field experiences, observations, and experience-based contacts with sojourners from diverse cultures. These three modes of learning are highly interdependent and they all facilitate the culture learning process.

In the case of ICC teaching/learning in Japan, the dominant question in the practical domain remains: how best to teach ICC skills and knowledge in an essentially monocultural society? The following are some small answers which are being adopted in varying degrees:

a. Foreign instructors

The use of foreign instructors is extensive in language teaching in Japan today, and ICC instruction has been obliged to follow suit. The foreign instructor can serve as cultural artifact, a reality check for curriculum components and as a source of teaching methodology from outside the Japanese system. There is no guarantee, however, that a foreign professor is a skilled intercultural communicator simply because she/he is a native speaker of English living in Japan. Some foreign residents know little about the language or culture of Japan; some, in their strong commitment to communicative instruction mode, may undervalue the Japanese focus on print skills in foreign language study; some may not be familiar with the full range of communication genres and related teaching methodology in the very

new field of intercultural communication. At the other extreme, some foreign instructors may have adapted so well to life in Japan that they no longer constitute a valid other-culture artifact in that they have grown inured to cultural differences, and may use too many Japanese communication skills such as language, non-verbals, and paralinguistics.

Certainly, the trend in Japanese universities to include an ICC component is at risk of restriction to cosmetic changes and adoption of materials and teaching methods which only appear to aim at developing the students' communicative ability.

b. Student Ethnographic Studies

Every Japanese community of any size has at least a few foreign residents, so there is an opportunity for ethnographic, community work by students. Any number of anthropological approaches, such as the ethnographic interview (see Spradley, 1979) may be adopted for student projects.

c. Film/Media

Ellen Summerfield's (1993) *Crossing Cultures Through Film* provides a thorough introduction to film sources on intercultural insight and also details some basic teaching methods which may accompany the showing of the many films suggested. This is a wonderful source of material, but the use of film as an instructional component for ICC is delicate, and requires considerable practice on the part of the teacher.

d. Simulations

There are only a few ICC-relevant simulation games on the market. *Barnga* (Thiagarajan, 1990) is a card game which is managed in such a way that participants are confronted with different assumptions. It induces the shock of realizing that in spite of many similarities, people from other cultures have differences in the way they do

things. Participants have to understand and reconcile these differences to function effectively in a cross-cultural group. In *Barnga* the group task is simulated by a card game. Salient similarities and subtle differences among the cultures are simulated by different versions of rules for the card game. Communication problems are simulated by requiring players to interact through gestures or pictures. One drawback to this activity is that it may only be used once with any given group.

The most widely-used simulation in the intercultural class is *BaFa BaFa*, (Shirts, 1977). The overall objective of *BaFa BaFa* is to create an experiential situation in which students can explore the influence of culture on the process of communication and test out new skills for effective communication. Students are first briefed on the general purpose of the simulation and are then divided into two groups: the "alpha" culture and the "beta" culture. Each group is introduced to the values, expectations, and customs of the new culture. Once all of the members understand the norms and rules of the new culture, observers from each culture are exchanged. The observers attempt to learn as much as possible about the values and customs of the other culture without directly asking about them. Participants develop hypotheses about the most effective way to interact with the other culture based on the information provided by the observers. When everyone in the group has had the chance to visit another culture, the simulation is ended. The participants then discuss and analyze the experience. The one drawback to this simulation is that it is time consuming and demands more perseverance on the part of the participants than *Barnga*.

The *BaFa BaFa* simulation, if conducted successfully, however, provides a rich intercultural experience for the students of concepts such as culture shock, intergroup attribution process, ethnocentrism, stereotypes, communication styles, and the intercultural adaptation process.

e.   Language and content

Following the lead of Mohan's (1986) *Language and Content*, a classic in that field, there is ongoing development of the notion that language is best learned through the study of topics other than language itself. This could be seen as a source for ICC methodology as well: so many culturally rich activities (e.g. cooking) and topics (e.g. gender roles) are available for study, and the ICC value is enhanced when the mode of study or instruction involves strategies and principles other than those found in the students' own culture.

f.   Foreigner contact

As Sikkema and Niyekawa (1987) urge, there is of course an undeniable need for varied, extended, personal contact with other-culture people in one's home country, or preferably, in another country. Factors such as cost and time make this a less than universal possibility, but it is a parameter to be maximized.

Conclusion

In examining Canale and Swain's (1980) three dimensions of oral communicative skill; grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence (defined as knowing what to do when communication breaks down) it could be proposed that the definition of strategic competence be extended to knowing how to do things with words. It appears that a theme for ICC teaching/learning would be knowing how to do things with words with people from other cultures.

Roger Harrison (1966, p. 4) makes a case for strong practical skill as a focus of ICC instruction: ". . . the communicator cannot stop at knowing that the people he is working with have different customs, goals, and thought patterns from his own. He must be able to feel his way into intimate contact with these alien values, attitudes, and feelings. He must be able to work with them, neither losing his own

values in the confrontation nor protecting himself behind a wall of intellectual detachment."

Intercultural communication, frequently seen now as the striving for a shared middle ground between the cultural perspectives of the communicating parties, surely ought to consist of mutual exploration and self-revelation in the cultural domain. Such a search for a shared middle ground might also involve an attempt to form a neutral, rational description of the objective of the ICC scenario in question.

Intercultural communication is still a new field. The teaching and learning of ICC is heavily influenced by the cultures of the would-be communicators, and by their communicative intentions. Some valuable recent developments in both theoretical and practical domains have been observed, but truly central theory and totally usable pedagogical approaches will require considerable further development.

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