Mitigation of cross-cultural differences in international communication

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Abstract

The paper addresses the issue of cross-cultural differences in international communication. The goal of the study is to clarify what skills might contribute to the mitigation of cross-cultural difference in a multicultural environment. The authors argue that the knowledge of English, as an International Language, and awareness of the cross-cultural differences might not be sufficient for successful international communication and cooperation, since the attributes of each culture（values, beliefs, attitudes, customs, etc.）may be different, and may not be easily perceived by outsiders. The study suggests that tact and mutual respect for diverse cultural values are the prerequisites for international understanding and cooperation.

Introduction

"When in Rome, do as the Romans do"
（Proverb）

Striving to educate the young generation of Japanese as global citizens, the Japanese Ministry of Education is setting new goals for educators to raise students' global literacy - cross-cultural and linguistic（English as an International Language）competence. New methodologies are offered for mastering English and building-up awareness of global issues（Nakamura 2002）. Developing awareness of global issues and being able to share opinions on them, however, might not necessarily lead to international understanding and agreement. Perception and evaluation of the same global issues by people from different cultures may be different, and would depend on the viewpoints presented by the national carriers of information and on cognitive mapping presented by the culture they grew up in（Hanvey 1976; Wierzbicka 1992）. Without a sense of tact and respect for different perspectives on the same issues, there would be no mutual trust, which is necessary for successful international dialogue and cooperation. As Robert Hanvey（1976, p. 15）argues, the level of "awareness of how another culture feels from the standpoint of the insider" may be an "important step in the development of a perspective that can be called global." If "tact", quoting Abraham Lincoln, is "the ability to describe others as they see themselves", then we at least have to be aware of how other people see themselves and how they see us, to understand each other's perspectives, beliefs and values, and not to trigger conflicting situations in intercultural interactions（Bousfield 2007; Silverthorne 2005）.

The goal of the present study is to clarify what skills might contribute to the mitigation of cross-

cultural difference in international communication, or when working in a multicultural environment.

The paper will discuss the role of common language, cross-cultural awareness, and hidden cultural attributes in international communication.

English as a Global Language

Claims that English, as an International Language, belongs to no single culture, but rather provides the basis for promoting cross-cultural understanding, and that learners of the international language do not need to internalize the cultural norms of native speakers of that language (McKay 2000) contradict the very idea that culture and language are closely interrelated, and that values and beliefs shape the way we think and speak (Kaplan 2002; Kohls 2001; Sapir 1949). Rather than mixing all the varieties of English, it could be more useful, when teaching English, to develop at least some awareness of the phonological, grammatical, spelling and terminological differences among the varieties of English, to understand each other when speaking different *Englishes*. If English is to be used by people of different nations as a means to communicate to the rest of the world their identity, culture, politics, and way of life (Smith 1976), adequate comprehension of the verbal message should be guaranteed by being aware of the following differences between *Englishes:*

1. Differences in pronunciation and intonation. For example, Australians pronounce "today" as "to die", and "space" as "spice". When Japanese use English they often mix the words "right" and "light", "daily" and "dairy", "berry" and "very", "cup" and "carp", "pen" and "pan", "see" and "she", without being aware of their mistakes. When Russians speak English, their loud voice and "intense" intonation patterns give an impression that they are quarelling (while, in fact, they are not) (Bergelson 2003).

2. Differences in grammatical structure of phrases and differences in style (native speakers often break literary rules according to the rules of colloquial style).

3. Differences in connotative and contextual meanings of the words.

4. Differences in idioms, fixed expressions, new words, wordplays, reminiscences of popular books, films and jokes, and their functions in different cultures.

5. Differences in economic, legal, and political concepts and terms. When ordinary words are used as special terms it is difficult to guess their correct interpretation based on general knowledge of the language. Some concepts do not have precise definitions in English and vary in interpretation by different authors in different contexts, which makes it difficult to understand what experiences stand behind the terms. For example, financial terms and concepts used in the USA and in transition economies are marked by cross-cultural differences resulting from the historic and political developments of two mutually exclusive economic systems (Sayenko 2000).

6. Differences between inexpressive, although grammatically correct, speech of non-native speakers of English and natural speech of native speakers.

7. Differences in the meaning of non-verbal communication signals. For example, in European culture, a certain amount of eye contact is required for successful communication. Looking people in the eye is assumed to indicate honesty. In Japanese culture, direct eye contact may be considered aggressive or rude. The meaning of some basic gestures may also be different, which would not help understanding. Non-verbal messages and signals are located within cultures and patterns of behavior and, therefore, cannot be

learned through mere classroom language acquisition（Shah 2004）.

8. Differences in the pragmatic meaning of the same verbal messages. As Yoshida（2002, pp. 29-30）argues, in contrast to Westerners who depend on words, Japanese can communicate through simple indications or hints. Words are merely an indication leading to the meaning, and the meaning itself is often buried between the lines without being explicitly expressed in a way that would be immediately understood by Westerners. What is uttered can be fully understood only by those who have had similar experiences. In contrast to European and American people, Japanese usually hesitate to say "No." A blunt "No" is considered rude, almost like a judgment on a person rather than on his ideas, so Japanese often use ambiguous expressions such as "I will think about it," meaning practically "No."

The first step to mitigate cross-cultural differences in communication is to be aware of them, and to avoid ambiguities. Different spheres and contexts of intercultural communication may require different levels of foreign language competence. For example, what is enough for a small talk may not be sufficient for a serious political negotiation. Unless the level of English language proficiency allows adequate understanding and expression of ideas and feelings, it is better to use a qualified interpreter to avoid any misunderstanding. Success of the American President Barak Obama, Japanese Prime-Minister Yunichiro Koizumi, and Russian President Vladimir Putin with foreign audiences can be explained, at least in part, by their ability to identify with the people they addressed, rather than by their knowledge of English. Furthermore, a foreign audience would usually be more impressed by the speaker's attempts to use a simple phrase in their native language, rather than by his attempts to speak English. Even in everyday interactions with foreigners, it is more rewarding to use at least some simple phrases in the local language to connect with the people. Some of them may not know English. Once they understand that you need assistance, they will find someone who can speak English to help you. Thus, cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity are sometimes more important for establishing mutual trust than English language skills.

Cross-cultural awareness

One of the ideas of our time is that contacts between nations lead to understanding. However, it is not always true. According to Robert Hanvey（1976, p. 16）, there are four levels of cross-cultural awareness（See Table 1）. Hanvey argues that only cross-cultural awareness at level IV can lead to global perspective and understanding. This level of cross-cultural awareness cannot be reached by tour-

Table 1. Four levels of cross-cultural awareness

Level	Information	Mode	Interpretation
I.	awareness of superficial or very visible cultural traits: stereotypes	tourism, textbooks, National Geographic	unbelievable, i.e. exotic, bizarre
II.	awareness of significant and subtle cultural traits that contrast markedly with one's own	cultural conflict situations	unbelievable, i.e. frustrating, irrational
III.	awareness of significant and subtle cultural traits that contrast markedly with one's own	intellectual analysis	believable, cognitive
IV.	awareness of how another culture feels from the standpoint of the insider	cultural immersion, living the culture	believable because of subjective familiarity

ists, nor, in the days of empire, was it reached by colonial administrators or missionaries. The missing elements are empathy, respect and participation（p. 15）. Hanvey（1976, p. 16）argues that when we speak of "humans" it is important that we include not only ourselves and our immediate group, but also all other people, however "strange" their ways. If we are to admit the humanness of those others, then the strangeness of their ways must become less strange. Level III cross-cultural awareness is more attainable than level IV, but it is not enough for cross-cultural understanding, because just being aware of the differences doesn't mean respecting them. Thus, we should attain at least some aspects of level IV awareness（p. 17）to develop a perspective that can be called global.

Understanding of other people's values（what is important for them in life）and being aware of their norms of social and professional behavior（expectations of how people should behave）in different situations can help mitigate many conflicts in intercultural communication. Hanvey（1976）stresses the importance of developing perspective consciousness - the recognition of the existence and the diversity of world perspectives. He argues that such an acknowledgment is an important step in the development of a perspective that can legitimately be called global. Understanding and respecting the rights of all nations to pursue their national values, irrespective of the differences in their traditions, beliefs, interests, or ideas, reflects the principle of Universalism（Schwartz 1992）. The maxims — "treat others as you want to be treated yourself", "respect others if you want to be respected", "do not hate or hurt, not to be hated or hurt" — are the main premises in the rhetoric of agreement and peace. Universalism allows concrete values（of power, security, self-direction, conformity）of all the parties to be harmonized.

Although not always obvious in communication — values, beliefs, expectations, attitudes, superstitions and assumptions can be recognized through traditional and modern proverbs, sayings and expressions from popular texts（songs, poems, movies, jokes, anecdotes, political speeches, etc.）

Verbal construction of hidden cultural attributes

Proverbs and sayings as a universal form of discourse undoubtedly present themselves as a window into values and beliefs of a given culture where these proverbial phrases are found. According to Kohls（2001）, looking at proverbs, axioms and adages of a culture provides a way to "get at the concrete yet evasive values that guide our lives"（p. 40）. Proverbs and sayings both reflect and can be reflected by values and beliefs that the culture has endorsed, thereby opening a window for the mind of the given cultural group in intercultural communication and training. Being a potential concrete value measurement, proverbs and sayings as a cultural product may be salient in understanding how values enter into concrete decision-making（Schwartz, 1992）.

For example, the Japanese proverb, "The nail that sticks out is hammered down," indicates how *individualism* is negatively viewed in Japanese society, whereas U.S. culture embraces it（Brightman 2005; Inoue 2007）, as can be reflected in some American proverbs（e.g. "The squeaky wheel gets the grease," "Better a live coward than a dead hero"）. Although the "tall poppy syndrome"（a perceived tendency to discredit those who have achieved notable wealth or prominence in life）may be to some extent a universal phenomenon, it is less common in the USA than in the UK, Canada, and New Zealand. A common Japanese saying, "Those who know do not speak. Those who speak do not know," and the Russian proverb, "Word is silver, silence is gold," emphasize similar aspects of culturally appropriate be-

havior. Modern popular expressions, or humorous reinterpretations of old sayings may serve as an indication of the effects of the globalization process, or changes in social, political and economic environment（Weng 2008）.

Conclusion

A working knowledge of English, as an International Language, and awareness of the cross-cultural differences might not be sufficient for successful international communication and cooperation. Different spheres and contexts of intercultural communication may require different levels of foreign language proficiency. However, even when people speak the same language（English）, they should be aware of the cross-cultural differences affecting the interpretation of their utterances. What is considered acceptable in one culture may be perceived as impolite in another.

Cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity are crucially important for establishing mutual trust in a foreign or multicultural environment. Understanding of other people's values（what is important for them in life）and being aware of their norms of social and professional behavior（expectations of how people should behave）in different situations can help mitigate cross-cultural differences in international communication. Tact and mutual respect for diverse cultural values are the prerequisites for international trust, agreement and cooperation.

Analysis of popular proverbs, sayings and quotations reflecting the values, beliefs and behavior norms indorsed in different cultures may allow better understanding of the cultural groups' perspectives, and may be used in developing cross-cultural perspective consciousness. The study of social, political, and economic environment that influences people's perception of norms and rules of behavior must be taken into account in developing international communication competence. Professional competence combined with tact and mutual respect for diverse cultural values are the prerequisites for international understanding and cooperation, and should be viewed as the main attributes of a global citizen.

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