DEFINING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE FROM INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract*: The article tackles the intercultural dimension in the language teaching process, focusing on teaching English. It also analyzes intercultural communicative competence from an international perspective, comparing American, European and Asian cultures. The aim of the paper is to characterize the main notions (the notion of self in society; the notion of language and communication and the notion of education and development), which are the main pillars in defining and developing the intercultural communicative competence, and to specify their impact in a non-European context.*
Key words: *cross-cultural approach, cross-cultural dimension, intercultural communicative competence, intercultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, non-European context.*

1. Introduction

Given current trends in international education, many universities seek to prepare students for life and careers in a globalized world. For many institutions, this means internationalizing their curricula, thus increasing educational exchange opportunities for both domestic and international students, and developing their intercultural abilities. So, the teaching process is nowadays focused on developing Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC).

It can be argued that ICC is an aim of language teaching firstly for instrumental reasons – the increased efficiency of communication as a consequence of ICC rather than 'communicative competence' or other descriptions of purposes, and secondly as part of the educational development of the individual, often referred to as 'personal development'. The rationale for the second of these includes the belief that understanding of otherness and, through comparison, an increased understanding of self are significant in the moral development of the individual and in enabling the individual to be a rational member of society. It might, however, also be argued that this emphasis on the development of individual, despite the notion of thereby becoming a 'better' member of society, is a 'western' way of thinking about ICC, and that this too would benefit from comparison and reflection.

In order to have a clear vision of this issue it is worth analyzing three groups of concepts and their implications for ICC in a non-European context:
- ✓ Concepts of self in society
- ✓ Concepts of language and communication
- ✓ Concepts of education and development

To illustrate the above points through just one example, Western individualism and Eastern collectivism are often set up as dichotomous concepts upon which are based all kinds of theories. Furthermore, in both Europe and Asia, there has been a significant 'voyaging' of concepts. Concepts of individualism are not only inherent in Eastern philosophies and cultures, but have also been imported to Asia over the past 400+ years by Western explorers, missionaries, traders and teachers. Similarly, 'Eastern' philosophies and their associated concepts are themselves widely travelled. The concept of collectivism attributed to Confucius' teachings has travelled not only across 2500 years of history, but also across thousands of kilometers of land and sea. Collectivism in Emperor Wudi's China (140-87BC, when Confucianism was a state doctrine) differs as a concept from collectivism in 10th century Wang dynasty Korea, and from collectivism in Tokyo

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in the year 2000. The development of commercial printing, followed by radio and television, and now the Internet, means that people now have direct access to concepts and to a multitude of interpretations of those concepts. The globalization of television has brought about a dislocation of 'culture' and related concepts, and has led to the juxtapositioning of a variety of global discourses. The same process of 'deterritorialization' of concepts and discourses applies to other information and communications technology, particularly the Internet. As a result, it is no longer possible to confine 'collectivism' to the East and 'individualism' to the West. On the contrary, both collectivism and individualism are available as global discourses, to be negotiated and renegotiated by individuals, organizations and societies in all areas of the world.

Although it has to be accepted that all concepts exist (at least potentially) in all cultures and societies, they may not be accorded the same value in all cultures and societies. The meaning and degree of value or importance attached to a particular concept may vary:

● across regions. Collectivism tends to be more highly valued in general in Asian societies, while individualism is more highly valued in most European societies.

● across societies/cultures within regions. While Europe is territorially small and relatively culturally unified (from an Asian perspective), Asia embraces over 60% of the world's population and all the world's major religions and philosophies. Needless to say, this results in variance across cultures within the region. While collectivism is valued highly in Korea, for example, individualism is more highly valued in Thailand.

● within societies/cultures. Not all groups within a society or culture value the same concepts in the same way. For example, younger people in China and Japan value individualism more highly than older people, while Japanese businessmen tend to value collectivism more highly than Japanese teachers.

● within organizations. Even within groups or organizations, the meaning and value of concepts can be contested. For example, Japanese Ministry of Education policy documents simultaneously promote the development of individualism and collectivism.

● among individuals. Both collectivist-oriented societies and individualist-oriented societies are made up of a variety of individuals who, due to life experience, personality and other factors, have a variety of values, concepts and world-views.

The meaning and value accorded to concepts across regions (e.g. East Asia and Europe) will be treated below.

2. Concepts of self in society

At the most basic level, the way in which a person sees himself/herself in the society in which s/he lives affects the notion of intercultural communicative competence. All communication is premised on assumptions of how people see themselves and others, and the relationships between self and others. Although these assumptions are to some extent shared in East Asia and Europe, the following East Asian concepts may not be familiar to Europeans:

2.1. No-self and fluid identities

Two of the three characteristics of being according to Buddhism are anicca (impermanence) and anatta (no-self). The essence of these concepts is summarized by Cush: "Like everything else, we ourselves are continually changing, both from life to life and day to day. There is no 'inner self', 'soul' or 'real me' that stays the same." This is a concept which, although it accords to some extent with recent western theories of identities, clearly contradicts most established western theories of self. The reality is a constantly changing arrangement of the different elements which make up the world. Belief in the self is rejected, 'I' and 'my' are concepts bearing no relation to truth. The man who perceives this truth will, therefore, no longer cling to the imaginary 'I'. There is, therefore, no constant self. Neither can a consistent self-identity be constructed. If this view is

adopted, the concept of self becomes situational and fluid. However, the convergence of post-modern and Buddhist theories on the concept of fluid, situational identities is probably only partial and may be superficial. The post-modern notion is based on the underlying notion that there are multiple selves. The Buddhist idea is based on the concept of no-self. An attempt to resolve this apparent conflict of 'selves' is made by Lebra (1992), who proposes three types of Japanese self: interactional, inner and boundless. The interactional self refers to the dimension of self which is in direct contact with others in a social context. The inner self (or kokoro, lit. trans. heart/mind) is more stable, defined by Lebra as a basis of autonomy from the social world and as the residence or shrine of the soul. The boundless self is tapped from time to time particularly when one faces a need of fundamental self-reorientation. The boundless self entails disengagements from the shackling world of dichotomies, dichotomies between subject and object, self and other, inner and outer realms, existence and non-existence, good and bad, and so on. The self as the subject or imposer of such dichotomies through thinking, willing, feeling, or evaluating, then, must be overcome. As far as defining and describing ICC is concerned, Japanese and other Asian concepts of fluid, situational selves are likely to present little problem because (a) intercultural communication is likely to take place at the 'interactional' level, which is common to Western and Eastern concepts of self and (b) references to other aspects of self in the Asian context are similar enough (at least superficially) to theories of multiple identities in the European context to provide a common reference point for concepts of self. Having said that, an awareness that the underlying foundations of concepts of self may vary is also important.

2.2. Relational identities

How does a fluid, shifting "self" manifest itself in interaction? The identification of situational co-ordinates has varied over history. For example, in Tokugawa, Japan these co-ordinates were prescribed, and people were categorized as a member of a family, community and class. The establishment of the co-ordinates has become the responsibility of the individual. In a fragmented market of identity contexts, some people seek these co-ordinates in the family or workplace, others in traditional patterns, social groups or religions. If it is accepted that selves are fluid and situationally coordinated, it follows that human relations cannot be seen, as they traditionally are in the West, as a relationship between the fixed entity 'I' and the fixed entity 'you'. Instead, the 'I', the 'you' and the link between the two are merged into a single process of 'human relationship'. Relationship is not substantive, but dynamic. It has to do with the creation of self and other. This means that not only the interpretation of human relationships, but also their spatial and temporal boundaries need to be redefined. In short, the "self" is formed by and within human relationships within and beyond life. In terms of implications for describing and defining ICC, this point has greater significance. Current descriptions of ICC are based on the premise that an independent "self" can be developed which is then capable of intercultural communication with others. In the scenario of a 'pure' East Asian relational self, this is an impossibility, because the 'other' is an essential prerequisite to forming the "self". Without the relationship, the intercultural self cannot be developed. In terms of assessment, too, the idea of assessing an individual's intercultural competence in isolation from an intercultural relation would present difficulties.

2.3. Group identities

In any society, people belong to a variety of groups, and membership and non-membership in these groups has an influence on an individual's sense of self. These groups and group identities are rigidly formalized and attached great importance in many East Asian societies, giving rise to the claims of East-Asian collectivism cited earlier. In Japan, for example, 'uchi' and 'soto' are a pair of words which literally mean 'inside' and 'outside'. 'Uchi' can also be used to mean 'house' or 'home', and is also frequently used as a referent for 'my family', 'my company', or any other group the individual belongs to, or indeed in some regions as a referent for the self, meaning 'I' or

'me'. Parallel sets of words in Japanese include 'tatemae' (face) and 'honne' (real feelings) and 'omote' (front, face) and 'ura' (behind). All the sets of words are used to express a differentiation between 'inside' or 'in-group' and 'outside' or 'out-group' behaviour. Relating these concepts to Lebra's dimensions of self, outlined above, the 'soto', 'tatemae' and 'omote' are equivalent to the 'interactional self'. This is the dimension of self and space which is activated in situations where a certain level of formality, or self-boundedness, is required. On the other hand, Lebra's 'inner self' relates to the 'uchi', 'honne' and 'ura'. This is the dimension which allows for spontaneity and relaxation of self-restraint. Different dimensions of self are appropriate to different situations and relations, but all dimensions are equally 'true' and equally real. What this means in practice is a constant modification of appropriate language and behaviour depending on the context. In a school staffroom, for example, a teacher will modify his/her behaviour and language according to the relationship, asking a junior colleague to do something in plain language, talking with another colleague in polite language and using honorific language with the principal. In interaction with an outsider, though, all these people become part of the 'uchi', and should be referred to using humble language. Likewise, the presence of an 'outsider' changes the rules of behaviour among 'insiders'. The presence of the outsider transforms the individual into a member of the group, and there is a strong expectation that group identity will predominate over personal identity when the group is interacting with outsiders. An awareness of such distinctions is important for the purposes of describing and defining ICC. The same basic principles of group identity and 'uchi' and 'soto' govern concepts of self in East Asia and Europe. However, the implications of group identity in governing behaviour and language within and between groups is perhaps different. A recognition of these distinctions of behaviour and language in the definition and description of ICC would make it more applicable to contexts, such as in East Asia, where group membership determines forms and content of interaction to a significant degree.

2.4. National and cultural identity

For ICC, which is premised on the use of another language and communication with people from another (national) language community, probably the most significant 'in-group' is the nation. However, the nature of national identity is still under debate. Two theories of national identity were developed by Smith (1991) and Kellas (1991). Smith suggests two models of national identity: a civic-territorial (or Western) model and an ethnic-genealogical (or non-western) model. The Western model emphasizes territory, a legal-political community, common culture and common civic ideology. This is contrasted to the non-western model, in which priority is given to common descent, ethnicity and blood ties. Smith points out that the two models are not complete contrasts, but have many similarities. Nevertheless, his distinction between Western and non-western has been refuted on the grounds that a geographical distinction is untenable. Kellas (1991) replaces geographical boundaries by the three categories of ethnic, social and official nationalism. Ethnic nationalism is very similar to Smith's ethnic-genealogical category, while official nationalism is contained within Smith's civic-territorial model. Social nationalism is defined by Kellas as self-definition by social ties and culture. In this case, the key element of national identity is cultural identity, and national and cultural identity are often synonymous. In the theories of both Smith and Kellas, national identity includes both a political element and a cultural element. Although Smith's distinction of 'western' and 'non-western' models of national identity is over-simplistic, it is true that ethnic and cultural factors play a crucial role in the development and maintenance of national identity in many East Asian societies. In terms of implications for ICC, there needs to be a recognition that national identity in East Asia is inextricably and strongly bound up with cultural and, in many cases, ethnic identity, and that this is explicitly supported through education. The self as a member of a particular nation, then, is also the self as a member of a cultural (and ethnic and/or linguistic) family. In terms of 'savoir être', it may be particularly difficult for students to relativize their selves, as this could require a complete restructuring not

only of identity, but also of the values associated with that identity instilled through education. On a broader scale, the link between ICC and citizenship education may need to be redefined in societies where the citizenship of a nation is based above all on cultural and ethnic (rather than legal and territorial) definitions of the nation and national identity.

2.5. Beyond national identity

In East Asia, there is a deep and widespread awareness of the world beyond the nation. Globalization and internationalization are keywords of Asian politicians, economists, policy-makers and ordinary people. Although commodities (e.g. McDonald's hamburgers and Nike trainers), information (e.g. world news and international sporting events) and principles (e.g. human rights and democracy) have, to some extent, become common currency, shared by people in Asia and America, Africa, Australasia and Europe, their interpretation and use are often culture- and society-specific. Although nation-states can no longer 'opt out' of the globalization process – any attempt to do so would probably result in political isolation and economic starvation – they are not obliged to accept without question the dominant discourses of internationalization and globalization. This leads to phrases "a plurality of national responses to the process of globalization". Internationalization and globalization have become issues of great concern in education policy making too. If ICC is to be responsive to a variety of contexts, it needs to take account of national responses to the process of globalization. ICC demands knowledge of the world from various perspectives, and willingness to question one's own assumptions and values. In a situation where national education policy and curriculum responds to globalization by filtering knowledge of the world through a national lens, and endorsing it with national attitudes, it will probably be difficult for teachers and students to acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for developing ICC fully.

3. Concepts of language and communication
3.1. Relationships, roles and face

In any society, the relationship between interlocutors determines the form of language communication and vice versa. In many East-Asian societies, this is a very obvious phenomenon. In Korea and Japan, for example, the relationship between two people (in terms of hierarchy and intimacy) can generally be deduced within the first 10-20 seconds of listening to their conversation. The same applies to other Asian languages, such as Javanese and Thai. All these languages demand that the interlocutors select vocabulary, grammar and style (polite/plain, honorific/humble, etc.) according to the age, sex and status of and the relationship with the other person, as well as taking into account the context and content of the interaction. Of course, this is not unfamiliar to European languages either, but to cite an example which shows the extent of the demands, even the word used for 'I' in a Japanese conversation has to be chosen from 10 or so available alternatives, depending on the speaker, the interlocutor and the relationship between the two. Similarly, the relationship between interlocutors determines the content and style of communication. Group identity is often expected to dominate over personal identity in interaction with outsiders. In this case, the individual's role as a member and representative of the group is more salient than the individual's personal characteristics and opinions. At this point, the issue of roles becomes closely tied up with the issue of face, defined as the assumptions made and maintained by interlocutors about each other and about their relationship. Scollon & Scollon point out that the concept of face is more familiar to Asians than Westerners. There is reason to believe that the "self" projected by Asians is more strongly under the influence of assumed or unmarked cultural assumptions about face. In other words, it is quite legitimate and 'real' in many situations in many Asian societies to interact at the level of role and face. In public and formal situations in particular, interaction which focuses on roles and faces assures smooth and predictable human relations – if both interlocutors are engaged in a collaborative effort to maintain each other's face

in a particular role, then 'unpredictable' elements such as personal opinion, which are probably irrelevant to the matter in hand, can be minimized. Of course, there are many occasions when people interact as individuals and are not concerned about face. What is important in East Asian cultures is to know when and where each type of interaction is appropriate. For definitions and descriptions of ICC to be applicable in many non-European cultures, there would need to be full recognition of and allowance for the importance of relationships, roles and face in interaction with and among people of cultures where these aspects are significant. In terms of the 'savoir', it may be necessary to place more emphasis on developing understanding of the influence of hierarchy and group identity on communication, and in terms of 'savoir-faire', it may be necessary to encourage the ability to identify and interact appropriately according to relationship, role and face.

3.2. Verbal and non-verbal aspects

It is worth noting that nonverbal as well as verbal aspects of communication have different forms and significance in Asia than they do in Europe. Silence, in particular, has an important function in East Asian communication. It is considered that Chinese people are more tolerant to silence than Americans, and see silence as a way of controlling what goes on. Silence is also important in communication with and among Japanese people. Among other things, it can signify that the person is giving thought to what the interlocutor has said, or that s/he disagrees. In the case of disagreement, the silence is usually accompanied by the tilting of the head, averted eyes and maybe the hand rubbing the back of the neck. Such non-verbal combinations negate the necessity of having to disagree with or deny something verbally. As far as the definitions and descriptions of ICC are concerned, it is important to include awareness and knowledge of the appropriate use of non-verbal communication together with verbal communication. In cases such as the above example of disagreeing in Japanese, for example, verbal competence in the language could actually reduce intercultural competence. The foreigner who is ignorant of the language will be excused almost anything – the foreigner who disagrees vehemently and verbally is likely to be an embarrassment.

3.3. English as the dominator language

Another factor which affects ICC within the framework of foreign language education is the history and nature of foreign language education in Asia. In most countries of Asia, English is either a second/official language or is the first and/or the only foreign language taught in schools. Most Asian countries are multilingual and multicultural but, rather than sanction this situation through education policy, as it is happening in Europe, most countries opt for education of and/or in English. English is also the accepted 'lingua franca' of communication within Asia. It is considered the key to economic and educational success.

In terms of ICC, this ambivalence regarding the status of the foreign/second language has significant repercussions. Firstly, the whole concept of needing to include intercultural competence in foreign/second language education is likely to be resisted by some people, who would prefer English to be, as far as possible, a 'pure' tool of communication. Secondly, the definition and description of ICC would need to take account of the deep ambivalence felt towards English (and towards the second most popular foreign language in Asia, Japanese, which shares the same associations of economic success and colonial history in most of East Asia). Thirdly, the definition and description of ICC needs to take into account the issue of the relative power of certain languages and people speaking those languages vis-à-vis others. To assume that all languages are politically and economically of equal status is of course ideologically correct and may work in Europe, but it is a long way from reflecting reality in most of Asia.

4. Concepts of education and development

4.1. The significance of education

The combined influence of Buddhist and Confucian traditions in East Asia has assured the paramount status of education through to the present day. According to the teaching of Buddhism, the way in which purity of mind, insight and calm can be achieved is through following the 'Eightfold Path'. The Eightfold Path, also known as 'the Middle Way' is grouped into three aspects; wisdom (right understanding, right intention), ethical conduct (right speech, right action, right livelihood) and mental discipline (right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration). All these aspects are attainable through education and, for centuries, Buddhist monks (much like the Catholic church in Europe) held the main responsibility for education in Asia, particularly education for the common people. The commitment to self-improvement, self-cultivation and education which has prevailed throughout the centuries in East Asia clearly has favourable implications for any education theory or policy which is accepted as worthwhile and implemented in the society. Once accepted, education policy is generally assured by the unified commitment of teachers, students and parents.

4.2. Content of school education

In terms of the content of learning, the emphasis in East Asia has traditionally been on 'knowledge that' rather than 'knowledge how'. This emphasis on 'knowledge that' has led to the domination of factual information, memorization and multiple choice entrance exams as the content of education. This kind of 'knowledge that' learning has been labelled as Confucian learning, and certainly the study of previous learning is an important facet of Confucianism. However, with the explicit aim of continued economic and political prosperity in the 21st century, many East-Asian governments are now turning away from 'knowledge that' to other forms of knowledge. In Singapore, for example, curriculum content has been reduced by 10-30% in order to make way for the new emphasis on creativity and thinking skills. In this process, East-Asian governments are adopting and adapting education theories and practices from the West, but are also turning back to a re-analysis of Confucianism. Confucian education is to cultivate the 'scientific spirit' in the educated by teaching them how to explore their inner world, and by encouraging them to learn what they have not yet learnt. The first enables them to be deep, and the second leads them to be open-minded. Searching for depth and being open to new things are central to the spirit by which modern sciences develop, and both are essential for a progression and continuity of human knowledge. Furthermore, the emphasis of modern education is shifting from purely accumulating knowledge to cultivating the ability to handle knowledge, and education is no longer meant for transmission only. Confucius said: "To study and not think is a waste. To think and not study is dangerous." Studying and accepting received wisdom and knowledge is, thus, important, but is not enough. Current movements in East Asian policy-making are thus converging with current definitions and descriptions of ICC into a process of Confucian 'self-transformation'. However, it may be worth remembering that current practice in East Asian schools is still heavily biased towards the 'knowledge that'. In the present East Asian context, far more emphasis would be placed on 'knowledge' (savoirs) than the savoir-apprendre or savoir-faire aspects of ICC, and that knowledge would probably need to be or would be much more explicitly defined before being acceptable as an element of the school curriculum.

4.3. Ways and roles of teaching/learning

Any discussion of ways of teaching and learning in East Asia has to take into account not only educational philosophy but also the notions of relational identities and roles. Teacher roles and student roles are clearly defined and are similar in classrooms throughout East Asia. The teacher is clearly higher and the student lower hierarchically, and this determines the language, behaviour and attitudes expected from each party. In terms of learning, the teacher gives

knowledge, helps and guides students. Students are attentive, take in knowledge, and actively engage in learning mentally, but usually not verbally. In terms of communication in the classroom, the teacher directs communication, and students defer to and co-operate with the teacher's directions. As has been reported by many observers of East Asian classrooms, then, the teacher is in charge of learning and students submit to the teacher's control. Delving to a slightly deeper level, though, the issue is not just one of control and authority. The role of the teacher in East Asia is to develop a deep human relationship with each individual student, and to contribute to the lifelong education of that individual. This 'human relationship' role derives from Buddhist and Confucian teaching and is prominent in contemporary education theory. The relationship between teacher and student comes before methods and content of teaching. The student is also expected to contribute to this relationship, and one of the aims of moral education in Japanese junior high school, for example, is to "deepen a feeling of love and respect for teachers". It is only once this relationship is established that teacher and students can embark upon the collaborative project of learning. In fact, the relationship between teacher and student in East Asia often outlasts classroom interaction by decades. In Hong Kong, for example, students go to visit their former teachers to pay their respects at New Year. In Japan, teachers are required to give speeches at the wedding ceremonies of students they taught a decade or more earlier. At a more informal level, students readily go to their former teachers for advice on life decisions, even when they are already in their 20s or 30s. The implications of this point for defining and describing ICC lie in the fact that ICC is learner-based. The role of the teacher in European descriptions of ICC is minimized, and this would make it less accessible in many non-European contexts. At the same time, little attention is paid to the relationship between teacher and students in the European context, whereas this is central to the East Asian, as well as many other non-European contexts of teaching and learning.

4.4. The aim of learning – the development of a good person

In most East Asian societies, the role of education in the moral development of the individual is seen as an integral and central function of the school. In their vision, education means developing the child morally, intellectually, physically, socially and aesthetically. The foundation of a person is his values. From these spring his outlook on life and his goals in life. Children also have to learn to relate to other people - their elders and their peers, people who are like us and people who are different. Confucian education is fundamentally humanistic. Its chief aim is to educate the learner to be fully human and to become a qualified member of the community of trust, and its primary approach is to enhance self-cultivation and develop students' capabilities of fulfilling responsibilities for themselves, for their families and for society at large. Within such a tradition, there is no need to carefully segregate so-called 'objective' (academic knowledge) and 'subjective' (moral, religious, personal development-related) learning into separate areas of the curriculum, as often happens in Europe in the attempt to limit the influence of the school over the student's moral and spiritual development. In fact, such a separation seems to be alien to most non-western education contexts. According to non-western educational traditions, the development of a 'good person' is the pre-eminent aim of most education systems and educators around the world, and issues of values, morality and spirituality are fundamental to this aim. To attempt to isolate values and moral education from the rest of the curriculum seems to be, to many nonwestern observers, a somewhat futile and uneducational exercise. As far as definition and description of ICC are concerned, this is probably the area in which ICC would fit even more easily into an Asian context than into a European context. The concern with values and attitudes would be unlikely to raise ethical concerns in many Asian contexts, but would be seen as adding depth and meaning to the ICC project. The nature and content of specific values and attitudes would differ, naturally, but the existence per se of a moral and values dimension would probably be considered positively.

5. Conclusion

As it has been stated before, the teaching process is nowadays focused on developing Intercultural Communicative Competence, which is one of the main skills required in the global economy. In order to succeed, there should be taken into account the cultural background of the students, and namely, the way they see themselves as part of the society, the language used, the education and personal development. Moreover, the Intercultural Communicative Competence is treated from two perspectives: European and Non-European. In both cases there should be taken into account cultural peculiarities and values.

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