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Intercultural Awareness: Theory into Research

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Abstract

Globalisation is influencing universities worldwide through market competition. Internationalisation of education has become a significant development in Australian universities. With the increase of international students’ participation in on-line, in-country and face-to-face teaching modes, universities have promoted research on intercultural communication and education. Research on intercultural communication gained acceptance through training and testing practice in the 1960s and 1970s, formed its basic framework in the late 1970s, and has made great achievements in theory and practice ever since the 1980s, both inside and outside the U.S. (Hart, 1996). The research themes and topics in intercultural communication are various and research has been carried out at different levels. The chief concern of this discipline is how culture and communication influence one another in the process of intercultural communication and how the researcher can predict and solve the problems that arise. Today, intercultural communication as a field of study is widely acknowledged and extensively researched in all parts of the world. This field of research has proved of value to diplomats, politicians, businessmen, tourists and international students, immigrants and whoever may come into contact with people of different cultural groups.

Key words: internationalization of education, intercultural communication, cultural awareness

Introduction

The world has opened numerous doors for people of different cultural and geographical backgrounds to interact. It naturally follows that intercultural contact has become more frequent, more abundant and, therefore, more significant than ever before. Also, public awareness of international education opportunities is becoming more widespread. Under such circumstances, Australian culture cannot be sheltered from external influences. As a result, internationalisation of education has become a significant development in Australian universities. According to Grove (2004), the most visible and widely publicised indicator of educational globalisation is the increasingly diverse ethnic and linguistic composition of the student population on Western university campuses. In 2002, international students composed 20% of the total student enrolment in the Australian university sector (Australian Department of Education, Science, and Training, 2003; Noonan, 2003, cited in Grove, 2004). International students residing in Australia doubled in number from 1997 to 2002, making up a substantial and growing proportion of Australian higher education students (Australian Department of Education, Science, and Training, 2004). Based on the increasing awareness of the need for intercultural communication in tertiary education in Australia, this study investigates the problems arising from communication between people of different cultural backgrounds and how best to address them.
Globalisation has not produced a leveling of cultural differences; on the contrary, under the image of apparent equality, there are cultural differences that directly affect communication between people from different cultures. Moreover, the types of problems which occur as a result of the globalisation of the world include serious aspects of intercultural communication.

The study of intercultural communication gained acceptance through training and testing practice in the 1960s and 1970s, formed its basic framework in the late 1970s, and has made great achievements in theory and practice ever since the 1980s, both inside and outside the U.S. (Hart, 1996). The subjects of study in intercultural communication are various and research has been carried out at different levels. The chief concern of this discipline is how culture and communication influence one another in the process of intercultural communication and how the researcher can predict and solve the problems that arise. Today, intercultural communication as a field of study is widely acknowledged and extensively researched in all parts of the world. This field of study has proved of value to diplomats, politicians, businessmen, tourists and international students, immigrants and whoever may come into contact with people of different cultural groups. With the increasingly large number of international students, it is very important for educators to pay more attention to intercultural communication.

The aim of this study is to explore some intercultural aspects of tertiary education, to consider these intercultural aspects in terms of cultural studies and to enable each student to develop their ability to communicate across cultures. This ability helps students to get on well with people from different cultural backgrounds. As a result, they can widen their horizon and develop a far broader outlook on life and insight into the world. All these abilities are conducive to their self-betterment and self-realization so they can become qualified global villagers one day. According to Gerber and Willian (2002, p. 175), “It is of value to tertiary graduates to have the ability to communicate interculturally as ‘cultural differences are indeed significant, especially in areas of dialogue and public participation’.

**Background**

It is recognized widely that one of the characteristics separating humans from other animals is the development of culture. The development of human culture is made possible through communication, and it is through communication that culture is transmitted from one generation to another (Gudykunst and Kim, 1992).

Culture and communication are not separate entities or areas (Schirato and Yell, 2000). Kress also (1988) stated, “Culture and communication are two sides of the same coin” (p.10). Understanding the intertwined relationship between culture and communication is crucial to intercultural communication. On the one hand, culture is the foundation of communication. According to Kress (1988), “Nothing outside culture can be a part of communication. Culture sets the ground entirely for communication, for what can be communicated, what is communicable, and for how it is communicated” (p.10). Without sharing and understanding between communicators, no communication is possible. On the other hand, culture is learned through communication. Kress (1988) also mentioned, “Anything outside the scope of communication is non-cultural, as communication is a cultural process, new cultural meanings are constantly produced in the processes of communication” (p.10).

As mentioned above, culture and communication, are indivisible from each other; the understanding of one demands the understanding of the other and the changes to one will cause changes in the other. “When cultures vary, communication practices also vary” (Samovar and Porter, 1991). If the culture is different, the communicative patterns in that culture will be different, too. “The cures of belonging to a culture is that we are ‘unable to observe the very eyes with which we are viewing the world’, a dilemma pointing to the fact
that we to a large extent are trapped in our own culture and frame of mind” (Stier, 2004). The major task of intercultural researchers is to find out how culture and communication condition and transform one another, so that real understanding can be achieved among intercultural communicators.

As culture is subconscious, people are generally least aware of their own cultural characteristics. Hall (1976) suggested, “Culture hides more than it reveals, and strangely enough what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants. Years of study have convinced me that the real job is not to understand foreign cultures but to understand our own”. What Hall meant by “Culture hides much more than it reveals” is similar to the iceberg metaphor of culture.

To increase people’s cultural fluency, they should be aware of and sensitive to different values, beliefs, attitudes and assumptions in diverse aspects of life as well as culturally different modes of behaviour. Awareness includes the knowledge of the context in which communication occurs and the knowledge of one’s own culture. Any communication is first of all contextual. In any case, competence is not developed in a vacuum – the situation and cultural context are indispensable to this process. An intercultural person should be well-informed of what behaviour is appropriate and what is not in a particular situation. Byram (1997) described an intercultural person as someone who has “the ability to interact effectively with people from cultures that we recognize as being different from our own”. In addition, Goodacre and Follers (1987) presented, “Successful intercultural communication comes to people who are alert and aware” (p.7).

As cultures vary, misunderstandings and difficulties in intercultural communication arise when there is little or no awareness of divergent cultural values, beliefs, and behaviours. To overcome many of those difficulties, so as to ensure smooth communication with people from different backgrounds, cultural awareness, which can develop sensitivity and understanding of another ethnic group, plays a key role, as people tend to assume, though often unconsciously, that the other party of the communication has the same values, beliefs, behaviours, and customs as they themselves. In addition, “the importance of increasing ‘cultural awareness’ has been emphasised by many researchers” (e.g. Brislin, 1990; Chen and Starosta, 1996; Triandis, 1990, cited in Nixon and Bull, 2005). Nixon and Bull also quoted the explanation from Brislin and Yoshida (1994), “Becoming aware of culture and cultural differences would help people to monitor their ethnocentrism, to respect and be sensitive toward culturally different others, and also to become comfortable with the differences”.

**Study Approach**

To gain an understanding of the importance of intercultural communication competence in the context of tertiary study, this research study sought the opinions of multiple perspectives: academic and administrative staff, and international and domestic students at the university. This study is reported as a narrative, containing direct quotations from interview statements. The results of the study are intended to provide specific advice to students and more broadly to the university, concerning the effectiveness of intercultural communication and the need for improving internationalised education in the university.

Intercultural competencies do not merely pertain to language skills or of how people from other cultures think and act, but also to understanding and relating to other people as well as to a notion of the impact one’s culture has on one’s conception of reality. Intercultural competencies are not to be seen as fully developed or universal, but remain flexible and must constantly be modified according to the context. To develop and refine one’s individual intercultural competencies is a long and necessary process (Stier, 2004).
Interview is a qualitative research method, involving a set of assumptions and understandings about a situation, in which researchers explore informants’ experiences and interpretations through special kinds of conversations or speech events (Spradley, 1979; Mishler, 1986; Denham, 2001). The research interview is based on the conversation of daily life and is a professional conversation (Kvale, 1996). Qualitative interviewing is a way of finding out what others feel and think about their worlds (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). Kvale defined the research interview in the following way: “…as an interview whose purpose is to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena” (p.5). It can be seen that the use of interviews as a data collection method begins with the assumption that the participants’ perspectives are meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit, and that their perspectives affect the success of the project.

This research study mainly used interview to collect data. One reason why interviewing as a research technique dominates qualitative research is given by Kvale (1996). The relationship is very simple: since conversation is the common technique most of us use to learn about phenomena in our world, this technique could obviously be used for research purposes, too. These data offer a sense of reality, expressing as clearly as possible what the informant feels (Burns, 2000). In addition, interviews can obtain information which other methods cannot reach (Wellington, 2000). However, comparability of the information between informants is difficult to assess and response-coding difficulties are likely to arise (Burns, 2000).

There are a variety of types of research interview. The semi-structured interview was used in this study. Semi-structured interviews sometimes called “informal” or “in-depth” interviews, is designed to go deeply into the understandings of the informants (Hatch, 2002). With semi-structured interviews, the interviewer has a clear list of issues to be addressed and questions to be answered (Denscombe, 2001). In a semi-structured interview structured questions are used, often followed by open-ended questions to obtain additional data. The structured interview, in which a carefully worded questionnaire is administered, is often associated with social surveys where researchers are trying to collect large volumes of data from a wide range of respondents (Denscombe, 2001). The structured interview also consists of a list of specific questions and is mostly a “question and answer” session. Generally, semi-structured and unstructured interviews are widely used in flexible, qualitative research designs (Robson, 1993).

Results

This study reveals that on the whole, international students experience greater difficulties and more anxiety in dealing with university life than local students. As also can be seen from the broader literature, academic problems of international students studying in Australia have been previously addressed by: Ballard (1987, 1989a, 1989b); Ballard and Clanchy (1984, 1991); Bradley and Bradley (1984); Burns (1991); Channell (1990); Elsey (1990); Mullins, Quintrell and Hancock (1995); Neumann (1985); Quintrell and Woodrow (1994); Rao (1979); Spaul (1991); Stewart (1989) and others (cited in Choi, 1997). In this study, the identified difficulties in interview data are discussed in terms of difficulties in language, styles of teaching and learning, experience of culture shock and relationship with supervisors.

Difficulties in Language

“Difficulty with English is often named as a major problem for non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) students studying in English-speaking countries” (Ballard and Clanchy 1984, 1991; Bradley and Bradley, 1984; Burns, 1991; Neumann, 1985; Rao 1976, 1979; Stewart, 1989, cited in Choi, 1997). The results from this study confirm this as a problem for intercultural communication, because in the social use of language, misunderstandings also arise from differences in cultural expectations. In addition, occasionally, students lacking
adequate language proficiency are accepted into study programmes where they struggle and sometimes fail (Stier, 2003). Almost all the respondents consider that the IELTS test does not always correlate with language performance in class, or predict academic success. In addition, reliance on English language support units is not the answer to problems of language and communication (Graham, 1987, cited in Bodycott and Walker, 2000). The interview data reveal that the difficulties are quite striking, particularly in regard to language skills, especially for academic purposes, and critical thinking, which international students found rather difficult in addition to the new approaches to doing their work systematically and analytically.

“I think the language skills, big need, learning how to write an essay, essay skill, very big issue, how to analyse and discuss in an essay” (Participant 3).

“And I think once people who pass the language test and come into a course that is enough. But I don’t think it is. I think also their language writing skills particularly, for many people and possibly for international students as well, not well-developed, although many international students have much better understanding of grammar and structure of language, native speakers do” (Participant 6).

Difficulties with Styles of Teaching and Learning

International students differ from domestic students in the way they study and what they study (Australian Department of Education, Science and Training, 2004). Overall, students’ learning was impeded by difficulties with English and classroom conventions. As observed by many researchers (Ballard, 1989a, 1989b; Bennett, 1986; Bradley and Bradley, 1984; Burns, 1991; Elsey, 1990), cultural differences in education hindered communication and contributed to difficulties in learning (cited in Choi, 1997). Respondents indicated that they experienced difficulties in discussions in class: some will ask questions if they don’t understand, however, this does not, apply to everyone; others are perhaps reluctant because of insufficient confidence in their language skills (Stier, 2003).

As educators, as one respondent indicated, when teaching students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, teachers should create a tolerant, respectful and comfortable learning environment, so that the students feel at ease and motivated. However, to be an effective teacher in today’s higher education classrooms, the development of intercultural understandings must not only permeate the curricula as designed, but it must be a shared responsibility of both teachers and students (Bodycott and Walker, 2000; Stier, 2003).

“They are away from home so it’s quite culturally different most of the time. So I mean if our native speakers are away from their own home they still have difficulty, because of the different place. They find information is more difficult to know how to access the services and the limitations of those services because of funding. Not being able to get access to those services when they need them, because quite often if they have assignments due, they have limited time to do them. So it may take them longer to do the assignment because they have to think about it and translate it into a language which is not their first language, maybe, and then have to access services to check and see if it is ok” (Participant 6).

“No. I tend to use the same style to all my students. If they have a problem of language, English is not their first language; I tend to give them my teaching notes, or give them a copy or notes of power points, then I spend extra time on them. I think as teachers and lecturers we need to be aware we have students in class who need additional help. We need to know what’s available for them out of school, English language centre, student association. And maybe a little bit of extra time for their assignments” (Participant 8).
“I think the classes have to be informal and interactive because then they feel more confident in being able to talk, then they can ask other students if they feel more comfortable, and other students will ask them, and I will ask them, do they understand, what’s happening, do they want to know anything more” (Participant 10).

Experiences of Cultural Shock

As stated earlier, cultural shock is considered as a common problem of international students in general. “The term cultural shock was first introduced by Oberg (1960), as a kind of occupational disease of sojourners. Cultural shock has been described as ‘a series of crises’ (Gudykunst and Hammer, 1987; Gudykunst, 1988), ‘stress’ (Y. Y. Kim, 1988), ‘ambiguity’ or ‘uncertainty’ (Gudykunst, Yang and Nishida, 1984; Gudykunst, 1988), ‘anxiety’ (Stephan and Stephan, 1985) and ‘insecurity’” (Herman and Schield, 1961, cited in Choi, 1997). ‘Going international’ and arriving in a new culture may produce frustration, strain, confusion, disorientation. Therefore, everyday is a learning experience (Stier, 2003).

As Bennett and Stewart (1991) argued, at the acceptance stage learners develop an understanding of their own cultural context and so can accept the existence of different cultural contexts. Thus, they can consciously adopt the perspectives of other cultural groups and modify their behaviours, when communicating with people from different cultures (cited in Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino and Kohler, 2003). This is reflected in a statement by Paige, Cohen, Kappler, Chi and Lassergard (2002, p.103), “My life is enriched by my relationships with people from different backgrounds and experiences”.

The important thing to recognize about culture shock is that it is universal. Experiencing culture shock does not mean that an individual is inflexible or inadaptable. It does mean that recognition of its virtual inevitability can lead to the development of steps to reduce its impact (Brick, 2004). It seems that Orientation Week on campus is quite useful, in this regard particularly if it involves academic departments, and also if individuals in key administrative offices are selected to serve as primary contacts for international students, to provide them with access to institutional resources (Trice, 2004).

It should be noted that it is the university’s responsibility to create an awareness among the staff and set in place (with adequate funding) educational programs about how best to cope with the ongoing problems faced by overseas students (Robertson, Line, Jones and Thomas, 2000).

“People don’t have enough background knowledge about other educational systems in other countries. So they just assume that everybody is coming from the same learning tradition and also because I think they assume that people have a good enough level of English when they come here, which often they don’t have”(Participant 5).

“Perhaps because of lack of understanding by some people, they think what they have to offer should just be one thought and they shouldn’t have to bother with people who are different maybe, so maybe …maybe people don’t understand enough about the differences, don’t want to check and see whether or not people understand”(Participant 6).

Relationships with Supervisors

The findings suggested that students’ relationships with teachers can also be problematic, due to different cultural roles expectations and attitudes, sometimes causing international students to feel lost and devoid of direction. It can be inferred that in Australia, undergraduate study is more or less teach (sometimes student) directed, while research in Australia is clearly more student self-directed (Choi, 1997). Because of their high expectations of teachers, international research students might encounter problems in the working relationship with
their supervisors. Quite a few respondents mentioned research students found difficulty in establishing and maintaining contact with excessively busy teachers. Australians are very much independent, finding ways by themselves; whereas international students’ background is different, they have different expectations of supervisors. Several respondents also suggested that it is important and necessary that proper action be taken to improve this relationship, such as, to identify whether they have the ability to do research and treat them differently. If students have inadequate academic or language skills, supervisors should help them early in the process. For example, they can go to workshops to improve their skills, before they conduct their research study.

As indicated above, in the field of higher education, students’ relationships with teachers or supervisors are of utmost significance to students’ study, because the more guidance and support they obtain from professional and academic staff, the more progress they will make in their study.

**Conclusion**

The study of intercultural communication can awaken people’s cultural sensitivity, the reflection and unlearning of ethnocentrism and help the cultivation of an open attitude and the general development of a healthy personality. There is no doubt that intercultural communication studies should focus both on the study of cultures, as well as on communication studies. This is not a smooth easy task as there are many cultural stereotypes and deep-rooted presuppositions which can hinder intercultural understanding.

**References**


