
CHAPTER 29

Intercultural communication

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Introduction

Intercultural or cross-cultural communication is an interdisciplinary field of research that studies how people understand each other across group boundaries of various sorts: national, geographical, ethnic, occupational, class or gender. In the United States it has traditionally been related to the behavioural sciences, psychology and professional business training; in Europe it is mostly associated with anthropology and the language sciences. Researchers generally view intercultural communication as a problem created by differences in behaviours and world views among people who speak different languages and who belong to different cultures. However, these problems may not be very different from those encountered in communication among people who share the same national language and culture.

Background

TESOL has always had as its goal the facilitation of communication among people who do not share the same language and national culture. But before the Second World War, the term ‘culture’ meant knowledge about great works of literature, social institutions and historical events, acquired through the translation of written texts. The rise of linguistics and of the social sciences after the Second World War, and the demands of market economies, gave prominence to spoken language and to communication across cultures in situations of everyday life.

While the term ‘intercultural communication’ became prominent in TESOL only in the 1980s, as the necessary supplement to communicative language teaching first developed in Europe in the early 1970s, the field itself can be traced to the work in the 1950s of Georgetown University linguist Robert Lado and of anthropologist and US Foreign Service Institute (FSI) officer Edward T. Hall. Lado’s *Linguistics Across Cultures* (1957) was the first attempt to link language and culture in an educationally relevant way; Lado had an enormous influence on the teaching of English around the world. In *The Silent Language* (1959), Hall showed the complex ways in which ‘culture is communication and communication is culture’ (1959: 191). The principles of intercultural communication developed by Hall and his colleagues in the Foreign Service were used by the Peace Corps, founded in the early 1960s. They gave rise to simulation games, studies of ‘critical incidents’ where miscommunication occurred, and comparative studies of Asian and American cultures, especially Japan (see, e.g., Brislin 1981; Hofstede 1983; Brislin *et al.* 1986; Thiagarajan and Steinwachs 1990). In the 1970s these studies were employed by the international business

community and applied to the training of salespeople and corporate executives. In the 1980s, following the Civil Rights Movement and the demands for cultural recognition by ethnic groups and minorities, intercultural communication became relevant also to ethnically diverse groups within one and the same country and was used by social workers and educators.

In sum, the field of intercultural communication grew out of the practical, competitive needs of post-Second World War American international diplomacy and business, and was only later applied to interethnic conflicts within the United States. Influenced by research in areal linguistics during the Second World War, and in business organisational management after the Second World War, its foundational disciplines were, besides linguistics, the behavioural sciences, especially psychology and social psychology.

By contrast, the field of intercultural communication in Europe was a direct outcome of the social and political upheavals created by the large scale immigrations into the industrialised countries. It has therefore been much more closely linked to fields such as anthropology, sociolinguistics, pragmatics and discourse analysis (see, e.g., Barth 1969; Blommaert and Verschueren 1991; Dahl 1995) even though behavioural training is also part of the field in Europe. It is worth noting that intercultural communication studies have not drawn to any notable extent on humanistic disciplines like semiotics, hermeneutics or cultural studies (see, however, Byram 1989).

Some of the major facets of human interaction that intercultural communication has helped to define are:

- the situation of communication itself; e.g. the socially conventionalised roles adopted by participants, their expected norms of interaction and interpretation, the way they construct a shared sense of reality;
- the stereotypes they entertain of each other, as individuals and as members of a social group;
- their non-verbal and paraverbal behaviour;
- the way they save their own and each other's face;
- the way they structure their discourse to meet their communicative goals;
- the attitudes, values and beliefs (called also 'discourses') they share with the social group they belong to;
- the way their language reflects these deeper discourses;
- the way members of different groups realise various speech acts (like making compliments, requests or apologies).

Intercultural communication training and research takes place in the US at centres such as the East–West Center in Honolulu, Hawai'i which was founded in the early 1960s to ameliorate deteriorating East–West relations. Other centres include: the Intercultural Communication Institute in Portland, Oregon and three National Foreign Language Centers with specialisation in some aspect of intercultural communication at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, at San Diego State University and at the University of Minnesota. The need to co-ordinate the business, governmental, private consulting and training, religious and academic organisations involved in intercultural education led in 1974 to the creation of the Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research (SIETAR), which now has affiliates in France, Germany, the Netherlands and Japan, among others. In Europe, towards the end of the 1970s, a project on intercultural education initiated by the Council of Europe led to the founding of the International Association of Intercultural Education within the larger International Communication Association (ICA). Major journals in the field are: *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*; *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*; *Multilingua: Journal of Cross-Cultural and Interlanguage Communication*; *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*; *Language, Culture and Curriculum*; *Cross-Cultural Research*.

Teachers of English are, however, encouraged to look beyond professional organisations and research journals explicitly dedicated to ‘intercultural communication’ and to acquaint themselves with academic research conducted within a cross-cultural framework in the general fields of applied linguistics, pragmatics, discourse analysis, linguistic anthropology, ethnography and cultural studies.

Research

One of the major concerns in the beginnings of the field was how to help FSI officers interact with people in the foreign countries to which they were dispatched. Thus, in *The Silent Language* (1959), Hall studied particularly the ‘out-of-awareness’ aspects of communication – the paralanguage of pitch, rhythm and intonation, the ‘silent language’ of gestures and movements (kinesics), and the use of time (chronemics). In his next book, *The Hidden Dimension* (Hall 1966), he studied the use of space (proxemics) and found, e.g., that Anglo-Americans establish a greater distance between face-to-face interlocutors than, say, Japanese or Arabs. In *Beyond Culture* (Hall 1981), he discussed the concepts of ‘high-context communication’, where most of the information is implicit because it is located in the physical context or part of a shared world view, and ‘low-context communication’, where the bulk of the information is to be found in the words uttered. The latter, he claimed, is more typical of Northern European style communication, whereas high-context communication is particularly characteristic of Chinese speakers.

Many intercultural researchers were influenced by work in cross-cultural psychology: Segall (1979) identified human universals in visual perception and cognitive processing of which each culture showed specific variations. Triandis (1995) – drawing on Hofstede (1983) – propagated the concepts of individualistic vs. collectivist cultures (e.g. American or Germany vs. Brazil or Japan). Some attempted to build an intercultural communication theory with a broad interdisciplinary base (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952; Condon and Yousef 1975; Gudykunst 1983). Because studies in intercultural communication are often spurred by a perceived sense of inferiority vis-à-vis a foreign country or by a desire to open up that country’s markets, there has been a flurry of comparative studies of American and Japanese interactional practices (e.g. Barnlund 1975; Gudykunst 1993). Today, many studies in cross-cultural psychology seem simplistic because they ignore the cultural diversity within a given nation-state and the increasing potential for change within a global economy.

Besides these psychological studies, linguistics entered the field with Kaplan’s (1966) contrastive study of the various rhetorical patterns found in the writing of ESL learners. This study illustrated the different ways various cultures have of expressing themselves. ‘Westerners’ were claimed to prefer a direct mode of expression; ‘Semites’ and ‘Latin-Americans’ to use a more loop-like way of argumentation, and ‘Orientals’ were said to favour digression and ‘beating around the bush’. Today, such characterisations sound dangerously ethnocentric. They show the difficulty of expressing one culture in terms of another without sounding critical or condescending.

Since the 1980s, the field has been broadened to include sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology. The most prominent work here is that of Ron and Suzanne Scollon. In their first book *Narrative, Literacy and Face in Interethnic Communication* (Scollon and Scollon 1981) they document the different nature and value attributed to literacy and orality practices among Anglo-Americans and Athabaskans. In the way they told stories, their own three-year-old daughter, Rachel, and her ten-year-old Athabaskan friend, Big Sister, were differentially literate. Even before she could read and write, Rachel told stories she made up according to a tripartite pattern (orientation–complication–resolution) familiar to her from the English bedtime stories she was read by her parents. By contrast, Big Sister’s spoken and written stories conformed to a four-part, repetitive pattern favoured by members of her culture.

In their second book *Intercultural Communication* (Scollon and Scollon 1995), the Scollons focus on the professional discourse between Americans and East Asians, especially Chinese. They

draw on classical work in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology: Hymes' (1974) work on the ethnography of communication, Gumperz' (1982) investigation of the link between discourse and social identity, Tannen's (1984a) exploration of cultural differences in conversation, Brown and Levinson's (1987) pioneering study on politeness and face and Blum-Kulka *et al.*'s (1989) studies in cross-cultural pragmatics. The Scollons pass in review the parameters of intercultural speech situations, the strategies of politeness and power, the conversational inferences, topics and face systems that regulate cross-cultural communication, and the realisation of speech acts across cultures. They also extend the usual boundaries of intercultural communication by discussing the discourse systems (or discourses, ideologies and stereotypes) that underlie the way people talk and interact with one another; examples of such systems are corporate discourses, professional discourses, generational discourses and gender discourses.

As intercultural communication moves into a critical examination of systems of thought, the work of linguists like Gee and Pennycook have yielded important insights into intercultural communication in recent years. Cultural differences are often of political importance and are linked to issues of power and control. For example, Gee (1990) shows how our autonomous concept of literacy is a Western construct, favouring the academic-essay type of literacy and the individual literate performance over more creative and community-based uses of the written language. Gee's work has far-reaching implications for the teaching of English reading and writing to members of cultures that have a view of literacy different from Western ones. Pennycook (1994) adds an important dimension to intercultural communication by problematising the field itself. He debunks the idea that the spread of English around the world is a natural, culturally neutral and necessarily beneficial phenomenon. Like Phillipson (1992) he argues that it is the result of a complex conjuncture of historical circumstances (e.g. the colonial legacy of the British Commonwealth, the victory of the English-speaking allies in the Second World War), American advances made in information technologies, purposeful language policies by government agencies like the United States Information Service (USIS) and the British Council, worldwide immigration patterns and the globalisation of the world economy. Certain uses of the English language bear traces of a colonial past that teachers of English should be critically aware of. Moreover, the spread of English and the concomitant globalisation of a certain kind of consumer culture are raising fears that they might displace local languages and cultures, or reinforce the gap between the international culture of the upwardly mobile, internet-connected elite and the geographically rooted, traditional local cultures.

Practice

The insights gained by research in intercultural communication have made English teachers aware of the cultural dimensions of language as social interaction. While literature and 'high' culture waned in importance, the small 'c' culture of attitudes and mind-sets, lifestyles and interactional styles became crucially important to successful communication in EFL. Success in business transactions and diplomatic negotiations is not dependent on grammar alone; one has to know how to say what to whom at the right time in the right place. Thus, many cross-cultural simulation games, case studies of miscommunication, culture capsules and handbooks of cross-cultural communication flooded the professional market in the 1970s and 1980s. They were mostly directed at English speakers learning about foreign cultures, but TESOL textbooks also focused explicitly on pragmatic strategies for effective behavioural training and on the realisation of speech functions in authentic situations with the help of role play and videotape observation. With the end of the Cold War a flurry of educational materials advocating the teaching of language and culture and the teaching of language as culture were introduced in the late 1980s and the 1990s (Valdes 1986; Byram 1989; Harrison 1990; Kramsch 1993; Heusinkveld 1996; Fantini 1997). TESOL now has a Special Interest Group in Intercultural Communication and an Intercultural Communication column editor in *TESOL Matters*.

Until recently, teaching intercultural communication in a TESOL class has been pretty much a one-way street, i.e. transmitting information about English-speaking countries and training non-English speakers to adopt the behaviours of English speakers. Because the student body in most ESL classes is multilingual and multicultural, any comparison between the target English-speaking culture and any one native culture has seemed futile. However, the pedagogy of intercultural communication is currently shifting from teaching accurate facts and culturally appropriate behaviours to teaching the social and historical contexts that have given present cultural phenomena their meaning within larger cross-cultural networks. In this regard, authentic texts lend themselves to being put in relation to other texts of various kinds – visual, musical, oral or written – in order to identify the social position of the non-native speaker vis-à-vis native speakers (see, e.g., Rampton 1990; Kramsch and Lam 1998), or to explore what a non-native perspective can add to the international culture of English as an international language (Widdowson 1990; Kramsch 1993).

Current and future trends and directions

The field of intercultural communication in the US has traditionally been a relatively apolitical field of research, grounded primarily in psychology and the behavioural sciences. With the increased importance it has gained in recent years because of world-scale geopolitical, economic and demographic changes, European and American research efforts in intercultural communication are converging to include other disciplines that pay more attention to the sociological, anthropological, discursive and symbolic dimensions of language and culture (see, e.g., Geertz 1973; Bourdieu 1991; Shore 1996). In addition, the rise of cultural studies and critical pedagogy has brought issues of conflict, power and control within the scope of intercultural communication as a field of research (see Kramsch 1998). For example, the spread of English as the world's lingua franca is often seen as displacing other national or regional languages and cultures. Thus, the notion of linguistic rights – officially proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights at an international conference in Barcelona in 1996 (Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 1994) – has recently been joined by that of 'intercultural rights' and 'intercultural linguistics' (Gomes de Matos 1997) as a way of integrating a human rights' philosophy into the research and practice of language teaching.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the essentialisation of national traits and cultural characteristics – i.e. the comparison of differences between one native and one foreign culture, seen as stable spaces on the map and permanent in time – seems too reductionist. Such a view of intercultural communication research doesn't reflect the complexities of a post-colonial, global age in which people live in multiple, shifting spaces and partake of multiple identities often in conflict with one another, and where the possibility for one individual to better his or her chances of success are not as clear as was once believed (in part, because the notion of 'success' itself is not universally shared). In a few years, the traditional binary tradition of Us vs. Them in intercultural communication will be replaced by the notion that in a networked, interdependent world the Other is in Us and We are in the Other. Intercultural communication will have to deal with shifting identities and cross-cultural networks rather than with autonomous individuals located in stable and homogeneous national cultures.

For the English teacher, new directions include looking at the social and historical conditions of teaching intercultural communication through English. New questions will be asked; not only 'How can I teach English more effectively, so that the people of the world can be "empowered" by knowing English?', but also:

- How does the teaching of English change the balance of the haves and the have-nots in local cultures around the world?

- What kinds of identities does the teaching of English create and promote in an international playing field that will never be level?
- How does our enabling individuals to speak English and pass TOEFL tests enhance world peace and harmony?; and, finally
- How can we train those who move back and forth over cross-cultural borders – i.e. diplomats, lawyers and English teachers – to foster intercultural rights and responsibilities?

These are momentous questions which the field of intercultural communication is only starting to address.

Key readings

Barth (1969) *The Social Organization of Cultural Differences*

Byram (1989) *Cultural Studies and Foreign Language Education*

Geertz (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*

Gumperz (1982) *Language and Social Identity*

Hall (1959) *The Silent Language*

Kramersch (1998) *Language and Culture*

Lado (1957) *Linguistics Across Cultures*

Pennycook (1994) *The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language*

Scollon and Scollon (1995) *Intercultural Communication*

Shore (1996) *Cognition, Culture, and the Problem of Meaning*