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Intercultural Communicative Competence

M. Heather Kotake

Introduction : Intercultural communication

In this paper I shall discuss some aspects of the topic of Intercultural Communicative Competence. I shall look at some of the problems involved in intercultural communication, and then consider how these problems can be minimised.

Why is the study of intercultural communication important? It is because more and more people are coming into contact with people from other cultures, and having to interact with them. In many cases they do not understand each other's language or culture. And unfortunately, ignorance breeds prejudice, prejudice breeds fear, and fear breeds hate. So we must do our best to know and to understand, as far as is possible, other ways of thinking and behaving. We do not necessarily have to agree with the other, but we should try to understand why we disagree.

It is often said that "in order to speak French well, it is necessary to think like a Frenchman". Intercultural communication requires two elements to be successful : sufficient command of language, and sufficient understanding of each other's culture.

Many people consider that the chief problem is the language barrier : that if only we all spoke the same language we would have no trouble communicating. This ignores the fact that people who have grown up in different places and in different surroundings have been socialised in different ways, and so do not react to the world around them in the same way.

Language, of course, is frequently a problem. If one knows that

one does not understand the other's language, one does not try to understand what he says. It is when one has begun to understand, but only partially, that the problems of language occur. Years ago, when I was fairly recently arrived in Japan, somebody said that it was "*mushiatsui*", humid, a word that was new to me. When I agreed that yes, there were a lot of insects about, she looked puzzled by this apparent non sequitur. Since the house where we were living, in the northern suburbs of Kyoto, was overrun by a large number of exotic insects, from giant *mukade* to 10 cm. *kamakiri*, my mind made the connection: "*Mushiatsui*" means "hot enough to bring out insects".

Then again, a few years ago a student told me how he had been accosted outside Sendai station by a persistent young man, an American missionary, who wished to talk to him about religion. Trying to get rid of him, the student said firmly, "*Aku made mo kyomi ga nai !*" —"I'm not even remotely interested!" The American beamed happily, and answered, "*Hai, akuma no hanashi o shimasho !*"—"Yes, let's talk about the Devil (*akuma*) !"

However, in the case of intercultural communication, very often it is not so much language as behavioural channels which can cause problems, when we interpret actions in different ways. Many Americans, for example, are very much given to touching the people they are speaking to, and may not appreciate that people in other cultures do not like this. After the 2004 tsunami disaster, well-meaning American aid workers patted children in Thailand on the head, as they would have done in their own country, unaware that in Thailand touching anyone on the head, and especially children, is totally taboo. The head is the most sacred part of the body, the seat of the soul, and as such must be kept safe from impure contact. Touching someone on the head gives grave offence.

Intercultural communication, therefore, involves not only language, but also patterns of behaviour. We may have a message to communicate that the other would understand perfectly well if it were presented

in a familiar manner, but because the manner is wrong, a different message may be what is actually received.

Business, politics and tourism constantly bring people of different cultural groups into contact with each other. Knowledge of the norms of different cultures can help people to communicate better across cultures.

One should also try to identify the features of one's own culture. This is by no means easy.

If you were asked to describe Japanese culture to a foreigner, what would you say? What aspects of this country's culture would you choose?

Most of the truly important elements of culture we are barely aware of. If asked what constitutes Japanese culture, most people would mention such things as flower arrangement, tea ceremony, and the Kabuki theatre. Some might mention more modern subjects, like *manga* and *anime*. But these, although colourful, are rather superficial. Japanese culture also includes such things as slurping soba, bowing while speaking on the telephone, and addressing one's elders as "*sempai*". These are probably truer expressions of Japanese culture, being unconscious, than the consciously learned traditional arts. The things which we take for granted are the true bases of our culture.

It is an ingrained part of Japanese culture to bow when speaking to superiors. Thus, foreigners are puzzled or amused when they see someone repeatedly bowing deeply when talking on the telephone—the person at the other end of the line cannot see this demonstration of respect, which is why it seems funny to the outsider. But the respectful language used in addressing a superior seems to produce an automatic culturally-induced response, astonishing to foreigners.

Another automatic response in Japan, one that can cause misunderstanding, is the way people make a noise when slurping noodles. In many countries this is very rude. We are taught as children *not* to

make a noise when we eat. So even when eating soba or udon, we eat silently. I remember once eating soba at a counter, and then suddenly realising that the two people on either side of me had stopped eating, and were silently staring at me. They had noticed the absence of noise from me, and found it strange. But newly-arrived foreigners find the Japanese slurping noises either ill-bred or rude.

Culture, then, is found as much in the unconscious activities of daily life as in the activities that are traditionally classified under the heading "Culture".

Although communication is not confined to spoken or written language, we do depend on language for all higher forms of communication.

Language created thought. Without language we cannot think ; and the language we use affects the way we think. We put labels on the world around us because we learned certain categories from childhood. We communicate satisfactorily with others because they label the world in virtually the same way. The common idioms of a language reflect the conscious or subconscious thought patterns of speakers of that language. They cannot be translated literally into another language. If they are, the results can be ludicrous.

Communicative Competence

Communication involves both a sender and a receiver, and we often communicate without being particularly aware of sending a message. Even before people start talking to each other, they communicate something, by the way they dress, by the way they stand, and by the way they look at each other. They reach conclusions about each other, without the use of words on either side. What was understood may not have been what they might have wanted to communicate, or thought they were communicating.

Our non-verbal communication is something that we never think much about. But behaving as we would at home can sometimes cause

grave offence. Most Japanese people, for example, would happily have their photograph taken in front of the Great Buddha at Kamakura, and think of it only as a holiday snapshot. In Sri Lanka, however, a Buddhist country, turning one's back on the Buddha is totally taboo, and would greatly anger anyone who saw such sacrilege. Non-verbal communication is an important part of our total communicative patterns, and one that is often under-estimated in its effect. Through aspects of our behaviour we may inadvertently fail to transmit our meaning, transmitting instead a different message.

So how do we know how to communicate, and when?

Obviously we learn to communicate in our native language, and learn the rules for talking to people through experience, as well as by being told by our parents what to say and what not to say, who to talk to and who not to talk to.

It is often said that everyone knows what is supposed to happen when two English people who have never met before come face to face in a train—they start talking about the weather. Why do they not start talking about the political situation in China?

The answer, of course, is that it is because they have learned over the years what is, and what is not, acceptable in making polite conversation to strangers, and, indeed, learned how to talk about the weather in such circumstances.

Communicative competence is the ability to recognise what is, and what is not, *acceptable* as communication in a given situation.

You have probably learned about Chomsky's definition of linguistic competence, by which a native speaker recognises what is acceptable as a sentence in his native language. But in real life, in social encounters, more is required.

Communicative competence can be described as "the linguistic ability to produce or understand utterances which are not so much grammatical, but, more important, *appropriate* to the *context* in which they are made".

I once saw a foreigner, who did not speak Japanese, greeting someone by enthusiastically holding out his hand to shake, and exclaiming "Sayonara!" This was presumably the only word of Japanese that he knew. The man he was greeting was understandably taken aback. The foreigner's body language—outstretched hand and broad smile—indicated greeting, but his words said the opposite. This is a perfect example of speech that is grammatical but inappropriate.

Or think of a hungry husband, returning from the office : Consider the different effect on a wife of the two utterances :

"I'm starving—what's for dinner ?" *or*

"Serve me dinner at once !"

The first will get him a loving reaction, and dinner swiftly on the table. The second will produce a sulky, resentful wife, and dinner slammed on the table, with no pleasant conversation.

Or, in an office, consider the boss addressing a typist. What he wants to say is something like "You must type this for me at once." But his acquired communicative competence tells him that he will get a better response if he phrases it differently, and turns an order into a polite request : "Do you think you could get this typed right away ?" The typist in turn knows, through her own communicative competence, that this is in fact an order, not a question, and that she does not have the option of replying, "Well, no, actually I can't."

We have all invested a considerable amount of time and energy during our lives to acquiring communicative competence in our own language, and in the behaviour of our own culture. So we can be completely disoriented when we find ourselves in another culture, and having to operate in another language, where the rules are not the same.

Some Problems in Intercultural Communication

Formulas : Question or greeting ?

Problems in intercultural communication often stem from the fact that we are not always sure how to interpret remarks made by the other person. Greeting behaviour, for example, often takes the form of a question : in English, "How are you ?" You have, I hope, learned that this is not a question requiring an answer about your present state of health. But in intercultural encounters people often take literally a greeting that is actually a standard formula, and treat it as though it were a true question requiring a factual answer. I had this problem long ago when fairly newly arrived in Japan. A small girl used to ask me, when she saw me on the street, "*Doko e iku no*?"— "Where are you going?"— and I, thinking that this was a request for information, would tell her. She always looked very puzzled, until I finally discovered that the correct reply was "*Chotto soko made*"—"Just down the road"—at which she looked relieved : I had given the right answer at last.

Then there was the neighbour who always asked, "*O-dekake desu ka* ?"—"Are you going out ?" By this time I knew that this was merely a friendly greeting, but it was a long time before I stopped wanting to reply, "*Mitara wakarun-desho*!"—"You can see that I am!"

This is one of the psychological factors which can make communicating in a foreign country and a foreign language such a strain —the normal routine of conversation that we never have to think about is disrupted, and we are continually asking ourselves if this is a formula or a question. The language has become ambiguous

Ambiguous language in an intercultural context can also include such casual remarks as "We must get together soon and have a cup of coffee", or "Come on over any time", or "*Dozo, itsudemo uchi e asobi ni kite kudasai.*" These are used to close conversations, and are not real invitations. A sojourner who wants to develop friendly relationships with hosts may misinterpret such remarks and push to set an actual

time and place for another meeting when none was really intended. He or she may even show up at a host's home unannounced, causing the host to feel embarrassed and to feel that the visitor is a bit pushy, while the puzzled visitor feels rudely rejected.

High-context and low-context communication

Habits of communication can be broadly classified as high-context and low-context.

A high-context communication or message is one in which most of the information is already known to the participants, while very little is in the explicitly transmitted part of the message. A low-context communication is just the opposite ; i.e. most of the information is in the explicit language.

Members of the same family, in particular husband and wife, have largely high-context communication. Since they are communicating every day, they do not need to explain everything. On the other hand, conversation with strangers is largely low-context communication. They do not have the background to understand the other's thoughts and opinions without explanation.

Cultures can also be characteristically high-context or low-context. In high-context cultures (e.g. Japan) people are very homogeneous with regard to experiences, information networks, and the like For most normal transactions in daily life they do not require, nor do they expect, much in-depth background information.

In low-context cultures (e.g. America) the population is less homogeneous, and therefore tends to compartmentalise interpersonal contacts. This lack of common experiences means that each time they interact with each other they need detailed background information.

In intercultural encounters, therefore, one side may be bewildered by insufficient information having being given, while the other is irritated by being told too much.

Speech and silence

High-context and low-context societies also affect the value placed on speech and on silence. In the United States, silence means lack of attention and lack of initiative. A person must speak up in order to participate. I have often noticed that Japanese students who have spent time at an American high school are apt to talk virtually non-stop, without necessarily saying anything useful or to the point. They have merely learned an American cultural rule : that one should never leave a silence unfilled, but fill it with speech ; and that the most voluble speaker is the one who will be heard.

An American proverb is "The squeaky wheel gets the grease". In other words, the one who talks longest and most persistently is the one who is most likely to get what he wants. This is not an attitude appreciated by most Europeans, or Japanese.

This difference in what is and is not felt to be necessary to express in speech is particularly noticeable in formal communication, either between strangers or in business contacts. These are situations in which most Westerners would want meanings, other than the most trivial of small talk, to be spelt out clearly, since they do not have the experience of what the other thinks. The difference in communication style often leads the American to see the Japanese as shifty and untrustworthy, because they do not state their meaning explicitly. On the other hand, the Japanese wonders why the American is too dense to understand what to him is perfectly clear.

Direct/indirect expression

Related to this is the problem of indirect expression. In high-context cultures indirect expression is frequent ; in low-context cultures it is much rarer.

I heard of one woman who said to her neighbour, in tones of praise, "How hard your daughter is practising the piano !" In this case, both being Japanese, the neighbour understood that this was a complaint

about noise, and apologised.

However, one young American told me that his neighbour in Japan remarked to him one day, "You are very fond of music!" He responded, slightly surprised, "Yes—how did you know?" She only smiled and said nothing. It was not till much later that he realised that she had been telling him indirectly that he was playing music too loudly and too late at night. Then he was a little indignant. "Why didn't she tell me that I was bothering her! How could I be expected to understand such a roundabout way of talking!"

The conflict here was between the American preference for directness and getting to the point, and the Japanese preference for consideration of other people's feelings. Being British, I find myself rather on the side of the Japanese attitude. Too much directness may be clear, but it can hurt people's feelings and cause resentment. But the point is that tactful indirection may not be understood by those from another cultural tradition.

Direct and indirect languages

Some languages seem to be direct in nature, as the speakers value directness. Other languages are more evasive, and their speakers value circumlocution. At one end of the scale you would find Polish, or Dutch, speakers of both of which believe in saying things clearly in a straightforward way. At the opposite end of the scale you would find Asian languages, which are far more indirect. English is on the less direct side of the scale, though it would be more direct than, for example, Japanese. American English is more direct at a conversational level than British English (e.g. "I want . . ." is more frequent than "I'd like . . ."), but less direct than Polish or the Scandinavian languages.

Speakers of "direct" languages often find the polite evasions and complex sentences in "indirect" languages to be irritating. A Dutch speaker said how she found English expressions like "I wonder if you

could possibly help me . . .” and “I’m terribly sorry, but I’m afraid that . . .” annoying in the extreme. More to the point, she felt silly when she was saying them Speakers of direct languages find the use of polite and friendly intonation patterns and tone of voice in English equally silly. They feel strange and embarrassed using polite intonation. Letters in British newspapers have noted the influx of immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe (speakers of direct languages) who have taken jobs in catering in London. They seem abrupt and rude to customers because they ignore polite intonation, deferential body language and (most importantly) the need to smile.

But since this is all part of a continuum, if the customer sees the smiling politeness as excessive, he will also rate it negatively. Many British and Americans have judged Japanese politeness to be superficial, only on the surface, for this reason. Transferring the patterns of polite communication of one’s own language to another can make the speaker seem either rude, or else unreliable.

Culture shock

Most people encountering a new culture will experience, to a greater or lesser degree, culture shock. Not only language, but also behaviour, are so different that the newcomer has lost the comforting, subconscious knowledge of communicative competence.

Culture, it has been said, is like water to a fish : unnoticed and taken for granted until the fish is removed from it. Few fish can survive this treatment ; people, fortunately, are rather more adaptable.

Like the air we breathe, or like water to a fish, the culture into which we were born, and in which we grew up, is just there, the environment that sustains us. It is only when we are exposed to differences in culture that we first begin to become aware of our own, and to consider what those differences are.

Culture shock, briefly, is the feeling of disorientation and helplessness that overcomes people in a new culture or language environment,

when they realise that the old, familiar ways of doing things are no longer applicable, and that what at home would have been easy to understand and to deal with has become ambiguous. They are no longer sure what is the right thing to say or the right way to behave. The world around them has become full of ambiguity.

The effects of culture shock on intercultural communication are obvious. The newcomer's intercultural communication becomes less effective. For example, frustrations with the new culture may be interpreted by intercultural receivers as hostility to them. Intercultural communication receivers need to be sensitive to the difficulties of culture shock that an individual may be experiencing.

One kind of ambiguity that individuals face in cross-cultural contexts occurs when they are confronted by situations that are somewhat familiar, but that carry different significance or consequences from those that apply in their own culture. Often in such cases individuals are unaware of what appropriate responses would be. Adding to the confusion is the fact that even within a given society or culture, expected responses may vary from situation to situation and from individual to individual. For example, topics like, say, politics, may be joked about in some circumstances, but must be taken very seriously in others.

Another form of ambiguity can occur when an individual has many associations or predetermined conceptions. People tend to see what they expect to see. As a small example, many years ago I met a young American woman, fairly recently arrived in Japan, who had been invited to dinner at a Japanese restaurant by other teachers at the school where she worked. The girl was horrified to find that there were no tablecloths on the tables, and immediately decided that it was a very cheap and insanitary establishment. She was surprised and shocked to think that her colleagues had invited her to such a place. Her norms required clean cloths on tables ; she had not the information about Japanese restaurants to enable her to judge by Japanese stan-

dards. I gathered that her relationships with her colleagues became poor because of what was intended as a generous welcoming gesture.

Intercultural communicative competence

There is much more that we could say about possible problems. But let us look at some of the tools for coping with them.

Individuals must be competent in verbal and non-verbal behaviours. Intercultural communication skills require *message skills, behavioural flexibility, interaction management*, and *social skills*.

Message skills

We are assuming that one or both of the participants is using a foreign language, probably English. The message skills, then, obviously require a certain degree of fluency on the part of both speaker and hearer. They involve listening as much as speaking, but from the point of view of the speaker, the most important thing is to be *clear*. European businessmen hold many meetings in English as a common language, discussing delicate and difficult matters, but they get on much better when there is no native speaker present. The reason is that native speakers unconsciously use many idioms which confuse the non-native hearers. So, as a speaker,

1. State your points clearly and precisely, avoiding jargon and idioms.
   Quite recently, a friend sent me an e-mail asking me to check the English of the abstract of an academic paper. I wrote back, "Can you wait for a few days? I am up to my ears in work just now." My friend, who is a doctor, replied, "Yes, I can wait. What is wrong with your ears?"
2. Adjust to the other person's level of understanding, and do not speak too quickly. It is very easy to forget that the brain requires more time to process a foreign language, especially if numbers are involved.

3. Repeat key points, encourage questions, and check for understanding, even if you are sure that you have understood.
   Arranging to visit together a patient in hospital in Rome, my Italian friend said to me, "Meet me at the bar of the hospital" —and I went to the coffee bar, while she waited at the main gate—the "barrier".
4. Avoid slang. It can give a wrong, and very unfavourable, opinion of you.

Elicit other people's opinions, but do not be pushy if they do not seem to want to answer specific questions. Ask if you have understood correctly what has been said, and remember that people may be reluctant to say no, or to make a refusal.

As a hearer, learn to be a good listener, and do not be afraid to ask questions when you do not completely understand. This is often quite difficult, especially if it is not one-to-one communication, or on the telephone when the other cannot see your reactions.

When listening, avoid saying "Yes … yes … " if you are not actually agreeing with what the other has been saying. A much safer strategy is to make a non-committal noise such as "Mmhmm" or "Uhhuh", to show that you are paying attention without necessarily agreeing with the speaker.

To disagree, a common and polite way is to begin, "Yes, but … "

Consider also thanking. As part of our cultural upbringing, we have learned how to thank someone for a gift. Elsewhere habits may be different. In Arab cultures, profuse thanks are expected. If you do not repeat and repeat your thanks, you will be seen as ungrateful and unappreciative. On the other hand, in England restrained thanks are proper. Too much exuberance is offensive, and suspect. And most cultures do not repeat thanks at a latter date, as in Japan's "*Kono aida wa domo*"—"Thank you for the other day."

Normally, we want to be polite in our language, and one good way is to make use of *hedges*. Hedges are expressions which soften the

impact of the following statement. They are designed to prepare the listener for what is to follow. "I'm sorry to have to tell you . . ." warns of bad news to come. "I hope you don't mind me saying . . ." warns of criticism to come. Many hedging devices are simply polite additions : "Do you mind if . . .", "May I ask you to . . .", "Would it be possible to . . ." Hedging expressions are most frequent, as well as most elaborate, in indirect language cultures. They are designed to show respect for the privacy of the listener (by apologising for intruding or speaking), and in Britain privacy is valued. They can also be compared with the body language of deference and appeasement. If an elaborate hedge, or deferential body language, is used, it is harder for the listener to take offence.

Indirect questions and statements are simple examples of mild hedging, making it easier for the other to avoid answering. It is thus immediately obvious that "Do you know what time it is ?" or "Could you tell me who she was with ?" sounds more polite than "What time is it ?" "Who was she with ?" The addressee can then easily reply, "I'm sorry, I don't know."

Hesitation devices (er, um, yes well, let me see) are a type of hedge, and are also a way of gaining thinking time, which is invaluable for any speaker of a foreign language.

Behavioural flexibility

In Ancient Greece, the Oracle at Delphi said, "Know yourself". In all communication, it is essential to know oneself, to understand as objectively as possible how one appears to others, and even more so in intercultural communication where the rules may be so very different. This is not easy, because we are all enclosed in our own little world with oneself at the centre. But it is important to "see ourselves as others see us", and conversely to "see others as they see themselves".

Each one of us has grown up within a particular culture and been unconsciously influenced by its way of looking at the world around us.

Other people, in other cultures, have been subjected to different influences. We should try to identify what it is that is distinctly different about our own culture, and where our attitudes and beliefs may cause problems in communicating with those whose attitudes and beliefs are not the same.

We may find that the attitudes, beliefs or actions of others are ridiculous, backward or just plain wrong, but if something is important to them then it should be respected, and not ridiculed.

Learn to be open and flexible. Do not stick to one single style of communication—if one approach does not work, try another. Increase contact with the host culture, as far as possible. The more people one knows, and the more situations in which one finds oneself, the easier it becomes to communicate successfully.

Do not try to change the other. Do not expect the other person to adapt to you, especially if you are in his country. In Japan, if the foreigner does or says something wrong, try to take him aside and explain.

Beware of thinking, "Our way is the only right way". There are many ways. In Finland, it seems, business discussions are conducted in the sauna. Major corporations use the sauna bath as a setting for meetings, saying, "In the warm, informal atmosphere both sides are more open to frank discussion. The trappings of rank tend to disappear when no one has any clothes on."

And if you happen to be left-handed, remember that in many countries it is deeply offensive to touch a person, or to offer a gift, with the left hand.

Above all, never be patronising or condescending to those who behave or believe differently.

Interaction management

Communication style involves the topics people prefer to discuss, their favourite forms of interaction—ritual, repartee, argument, self-

disclosure—and the depth of involvement they demand of each other.

For example, in Japan (and in Britain) modesty is valued, and one should not boast to others about one's own achievements. But in mobile America self-advertising is valued, and necessary. If someone does not tell you himself about his qualities, accomplishments, and successes, no one else will, because probably no one around him knows what they are. So in communicating with Americans we have to accept this as a cultural trait, not as vulgar boasting, and adapt our own style to the situation. Of course, we must hope that the American also adapts!

We must also consider timing. Americans want to get down to business at once, without taking much time for generalities and "getting to know you", but other cultures require varying amounts of time to be spent on pleasantries.

Years ago, when I was fairly newly arrived in Sendai, I was peacefully choosing vegetables in a local shop, when a lady, quite unknown to me, started when she saw me, and immediately said in English, "When I was in Texas people were kind to me, so I want to be kind to you. What can I do for you?" A little preliminary conversation would have been desirable, I thought! I am afraid that the result was that, rather than seeing her as a person of goodwill, I saw her as a possibly dangerous lunatic! Her learning of American rules of directness and timing obviously left a lot to be desired.

Social skills

This covers a wide field, including:

When, if at all, do you bow?

When, if at all, do you touch members of the opposite sex (shaking hands, and so on)?

What refreshment should be offered to a guest?

Should a departing guest be accompanied to the door, or further?

Is it a "ladies first" or a "men first" culture?

Do you sit down at once, or remain standing until asked to be seated?

What are the customs regarding age? Does age imply seniority, or not?

Who goes through the door first? In the Arab world, for example, in theory all are equal before God, but when going through a doorway the most important man goes first, followed by the others in descending order of importance. Religious theory takes second place to social realities.

Gift-giving can be a problem here, especially for businessmen. In many countries, gift-giving is an essential part of doing business, and can range from an expensive dinner to a cheap calendar. Americans tend to regard anything more than the latter as a bribe, which is illegal, and could render a company liable to prosecution.

It is important to consider:

—*what* to give (e.g. in France, something intellectual, like a book),

—*how* to *give* it (e.g. what kind of wrapping paper), and

—*how* to *receive* it (e.g. in China, a present should be declined at least two or three times before being finally accepted).

Conclusion

Finally, be conscious of your *actions*, and careful in your choice of *words*. All communication has both intended and unintended consequences. In intercultural communication, we have to learn to try to minimise the unintended consequences as far as possible.

Intercultural communication behaviour should not only be free of racism and prejudice, conscious or unconscious, but should reflect an attitude of mutual respect, trust and worth. Communication will not be successful if, by actions or words, the communicators act in a superior or condescending attitude.

It is not easy to adapt. It requires that we possess a willingness to communicate, to have empathy toward foreign and alien cultures, be

tolerant of views that differ from our own, and develop a universalistic, relativistic approach to the universe. It is our ability to change, to make adjustments in our communication habits, that gives us the potential tools to make the contact successful.

To communicate successfully with other cultures it is not necessary to identify completely with the other. What is necessary is the ability to be flexible, to adapt, to be willing to try to see things as other people see them. Sometimes this is easy, sometimes difficult. There may be as many ways of approaching a given situation as there are people involved.

Intercultural communicative competence therefore is achieved by a combination of *knowledge* of various communication tactics, *good will*, and, in the end, just as with children, *trial and error* to find what actually works best.

Happy communication!

Inner Speech and Language Learning

Keith Adams

This article seeks to introduce the concept of native language (L1) Inner Speech and to touch on how our knowledge of the nature and characteristics of L1 Inner Speech could be utilized in second language (L2) learning.

The article will first focus on a 'definition' of Inner Speech by examining the relation between thought and language and the specific characteristics of Inner Speech. In addition to a text-based discussion, visual illustrations and tasks are included in the hope of giving the reader a chance to pause and examine his/her own Inner Speech in the course of reading this paper.

The article will conclude with some preliminary suggestions of how the concepts of Inner Speech could be introduced to L2 learners with the long-term aim of trying to develop L2 Inner Speech.

What is Inner Speech ?

Thought and Language

The recognition that we have internal, silent dialogues with ourselves whilst we are thinking has been acknowledged for centuries ; however, the most notable proponent of the theory of Inner Speech in modern times is the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky's investigations of L1 Inner Speech began shortly after the Russian Revolution during the early Soviet times until his death in 1934. Unfortunately, his theories did not become widely known to the outside world until his works were translated and published many years after his death. Though Vygotsky is recognized for his major contributions

to the theory of L1 Inner Speech, there has been considerable debate about the definition of Inner Speech.

One of the core issues in the debate concerns the relationship between thought and language. Are they separate, independent modules or dependent on each other? The viewpoints for both sides of the argument are quite varied and beyond the scope of this paper; however, I will include a few examples of the diverse positions taken on the question.

Fodor (1975) would argue that language and thought are separate and that "the language of thought" is not our L1, but rather 'Mentalese', an innate metalanguage in which our cognitive processes are carried out.

Fodor's theory of Mentalese might be regarded as the extreme position, but the author of this paper would like to give three simple examples of the position supported by Fodor and others that language and thought are not one and the same.

For the first example, we can look to the animal world. Animals do think and learn, yet they do not have a language (i.e. similar to our human language) that can be used to aid or develop their thoughts. We can also see this same phenomenon in humans. Prelinguistic babies (approximately before the age of two) also think, but their thinking is nonverbal. Finally, even humans who are fully mature linguistically and intellectually think without using language to form their thoughts and also use language without thinking. If you suddenly drop a glass of water on the floor, language may result in the form of a verbal outcry—"Oops"—but the use of language is not necessary for the initial thought derived from an emotional, automatic reaction. The last two examples could be interpreted by Vygotsky's definition of "lower, natural mental processes" which have not been "transformed into higher mental functions by language" (in de Guerrero, 2005, p. 17).

Although Vygotsky (1986) accepted the separation of language and thought, as seen in the thoughts of babies and the "mindless speech" of

adults (1986, p. 250), he differs from Fodor's concept of Mentalese in the sense that Vygotsky sees Inner Speech as being the place where thought and language meet and complement each other.

Characteristics of Inner Speech

What is it like ?

Many models of the process beginning with "the first dim stirring of a thought" (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 217) to speech production for others or even for oneself (external speech) have been proposed. In addition to Vygotsky, Luria (1973) and Vocate (1994) have outlined the various steps involved. This section of the paper will look at the general characteristics of the development of thought to speech seen in the different models presented by these scholars and others.

Before discussing the details of the models, one important point should be mentioned. The development from thought to word is not a neat, linear phenomenon. In the process of putting our thoughts together, we are continuously moving back and forth between "thought to word and from word to thought" (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 218). With this point in mind, let's examine the nature and characteristics of this very private, un-observable role of Inner Speech in the process.

The first step is the stimulus for the thought process to begin. In other words, we need a motive for thinking, which may come from a variety of sources, such as personal needs or from a social situation we find ourselves involved in. Then we try to put these vague thoughts together.

In the beginning, these thoughts may be lurking in our subconscious and the only expression we have of them may be a non-verbal image in our mind or an emotion. As the process continues, unique, personal 'sounds'—words or any other type of sound—may emerge silently in our head. We talk to ourselves silently and hear that voice. In a sense, we can hear ourselves think.

This brings us to the type of language we use in our Inner Speech.

Since Inner Speech is private and not intended for others, it is very brief and different from the speech we use for external, public speech. Syntax is greatly reduced since we know what we are thinking about so there is no need to be as precise or complete as would be required in speech for others. For example, the subject of our thoughts is known to us, so we can omit pronouns such as 'I' or 'she ' etc. in our Inner Speech.

Similarly, the words we use in our Inner Speech have very powerful associations that capture a range of senses or experiences. To draw an analogy, the saying that "A picture tells a thousand words" testifies to the impact of one source of stimulation, visual or otherwise, which can convey so much. That is, we do not need to use many words in Inner Speech because our semantic choices are condensed into relatively few words which evoke rich meaning and significance.

Inner Speech Tasks

At this point, I would like to give you the reader the opportunity to look at your own Inner Speech by means of two tasks. The first task requires very little language to process since it involves interpreting the visual image below. Therefore, whether your L1 is English, Japanese

or another language, this task gives everyone the experience of L1 Inner Speech.

Please remember that the key point is to try and monitor your thinking as you approach the task from the beginning and through the process of arriving at an answer.

Task One : What do you see ?

Discussion

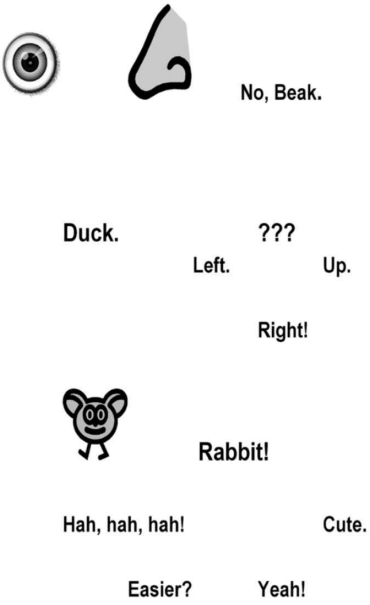
Since Inner Speech is so vague and impressionistic, it is very difficult to draw 'a portrait' to illustrate what goes on in our minds during this thinking process. Nevertheless, I have attempted to capture some of the elements in my Inner Speech when I dealt with Task One as seen on the following page.

An Inner Speech Portrait

In this simplified 'portrait,' some of the important features of Inner Speech can be seen. First, Inner Speech is not only made up of words, but also images (the eye, nose, and rabbit), mental states (*???* symbolizing confusion) and emotions (*Hah, hah, hah*!).

Furthermore, the brevity and personal nature of Inner Speech syntax and semantics make it very difficult for others to understand us even if our Inner Speech could be heard. Although you the reader know the context of my Inner Speech, you do not know what was confusing to me, whether I was laughing happily or sarcastically, or to what "*Yeah !*" referred. Of course, it was all perfectly clear to me.

Task Two serves two purposes. First, it gives you another opportunity to examine your Inner Speech with a very different type of problem from the visual illusion in the first task. Task Two also acts as a bridge to the final section of this article. It is quite evident that this task is based on processing language to get an answer, but it also raises the issue of L2 Inner Speech. In other words, can we really think in a second language ? Can we develop an L2 Inner Speech ?



Before we move on to address this issue, please devote your attention to finding an answer to Task Two first. An English version of this problem is in the Appendix of this paper. If you are bilingual in Japanese and English, do the task in your L2 first and then in your L1. After that, compare your Inner Speech experiences in both languages. For example, how much were you relying on your L1 when you were trying to solve the problem in your L2? Did you 'think' in your L2? If you did, how often and when did you do so?

Task Two: Climbing Up the Well

蜘蛛が 10 フィート (3.05 メートル) 下の井戸に落ちます。蜘蛛は毎日昼間に 2 フィート(60.96 センチ)ずつ井戸をよじ登りますが、夜には 1 フィート (30.48 センチ) ずつ下にずり落ちてしまいます。

- 蜘蛛が井戸のてっぺんまで着くには何日かかりますか。

The answer to this task appears at the end of the References section of the paper, though please keep in mind that the experience of trying to get an answer and reflecting on our Inner Speech is more important than getting the right answer!

Inner Speech and Second Language Learning

In the introduction to his paper, Tomlinson (2000) writes:

> In learning a native language (L1), the inner voice develops naturally at the same time as the external voice. But in learning an L2 formally, the emphasis is often on the immediate development of an external voice. Many learners fail to develop an effective L2 Inner Voice and are therefore handicapped in their attempt to understand and produce the L2 intelligently and creatively.

Tomlinson uses the term 'Inner Voice' rather than Inner Speech, and it can be said that the terms are not inter-changeable. Nonetheless, Tomlinson states that he is referring to the importance of "the phenomenon of producing speech sounds in the mind" (p. 125) in second language learning.

Although Waters (2006) does not specifically mention Inner Speech or Inner Voice, he does stress the importance of thinking for language learning and bemoans the lack of activities that encourage "a range of thinking levels" (p. 319) and states:

> One possible reason for this situation may be a lack of awareness about the ways in which the thinking level of activities can be conceptualized, and the implications for lesson design.

So how can we develop our students' L2 Inner Speech and thinking abilities? Both Tomlinson and Waters have identified various areas

and techniques—such as problem-solving tasks similar to Tasks One and Two in the previous section, Inner Speech Tasks. Once again, a detailed discussion of practical classroom applications is beyond the parameters of this paper. However, this writer will report on specific areas and activities used with his learners to develop their L2 Inner Speech and thinking skills in a future paper.

In the meantime, perhaps the first step in this process is to raise our learners' awareness of Inner Speech and how it can be applied to their second language learning. Although we know that we 'talk to ourselves,' we often do not focus on the specific nature and possible uses of our inner dialogues.

To begin the process of heightened awareness, this writer provided his third and fourth-year Japanese university students with the following simple definitions of L2 Inner Speech and some situations where it can be used in their English language studies. In some cases, what follows may be considered Inner Voice with its pedagogical orientation rather than pure Inner Speech but to repeat Tomlinson's words earlier in this paper, all references are to those "speech sounds" in our minds regardless of the label we give them.

An Introduction to Inner Speech in English

What is Inner Speech ?

● Inner Speech (IS) is any type of language in English that 'happens in your mind'.

● It is English 'inside your head' that is not spoken to other people at the time it happens.

● IS includes sounds, words, phrases, sentences, dialogues or even conversations in English.

How can we use it Inner Speech language learning ?

Use IS while you are listening or reading.

● Repeat a word or phrase you hear or read several times in your

head or in a low voice.

Use IS after you have written or said something.

● Ask yourself about your accuracy (grammar/vocabulary) or clarity (meaning, pronunciation).

Use IS to get ready to speak.

● Plan a future conversation before you have it.

Use IS when you are just 'thinking to yourself' (with no plans to communicate with others).

● Imagine conversations or describe things and events in English.

Conclusion

This paper first sought to provide a brief overview of the nature and characteristics of our L1 Inner Spech and the important role it plays in the process of developing our thoughts and transforming those thoughts into external speech.

The focus then turned to a discussion of the potential applications of our knowledge of L1 Inner Speech to language learning. Is it possible to develop an effective L2 Inner Speech? If so, how can the concepts of Inner Speech be presented to second language learners and what L2 Inner Speech activities can incorporated into our teaching?

In order to address these questions, the author included a sample paper given to students which provided them with a simple definition of L2 Inner Speech and examples of its relevancy and application to different language learning situations. Examples of L2 Inner Speech activities were illustrated by two tasks which readers were asked to complete.

A future paper by this author will present a detailed description of an L2 Inner Speech instructional approach and activities which were designed to give learners the opportunity to draw upon their own thinking abilities and creativity in their second language learning.

Appendix

Task Two : Climbing Up the Well

A spider falls to the bottom of a 10-foot (3.05 metre) well.

The spider climbs up two feet (60.96 cm) every day, but every night it slides back down one foot (30.48 cm).

How many days will it take the spider to get to the top of the well ?

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Task Two Answer

Nine days.

- The net gain after each **day and night** is one foot (climbs two feet, loses one), so that after eight **days**, the spider will be eight feet up.
- On the ninth day, the spider will climb the last two feet to the top of the well **before nightfall.**

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