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**ANXIETY AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION
COMPETENCE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN JAPAN¹**

ABSTRACT. This paper presents a narrative review of selected studies related to intercultural communication competence (ICC), foreign language (FL) learning, and anxiety. The objective is to examine the role that anxiety plays in the development of ICC in FL learners in Japan. The author first overviews the state of ICC scholarship and its relevance to the Japanese context. She then looks at the impact of anxiety on ICC development, and examines studies in FL education and behavioral science to investigate the prevalence of anxiety in Japan, and its possible causes. The paper ends with a consideration of the pedagogical implications for FL educators in Japan.

Keywords: intercultural communication competence, anxiety, foreign language education, Japan.

Introduction

Globalization has caused a rise in the frequency and complexity of intercultural interactions (Chen, 2005; Kramsch & Thorne, 2002). As a result, teachers around the world face the challenge of equipping students with the skills, attitudes, and knowledge necessary for effective intercultural communication. This has drastically changed the focus of foreign language (FL) education. Where linguistic mastery was once the primary goal, communication skills that enable FL learners to negotiate meaning with individuals from a wide

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variety of cultural backgrounds have become key to successful language acquisition (Lázár et al., 2007; Risager, 2007).

In 2017 the author carried out a survey of FL learner perceptions of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in Japan. The study surveyed first-grade students (n=23; 3 males, 20 females) enrolled in the Department of British and American Studies at a private university in Japan. The researcher aimed to investigate (a) learner perceptions of the nature of ICC, and (b) challenges faced by learners in the development of ICC (see Sakamoto, 2018). Survey responses were coded according to Byram's influential ICC model (1997), but the framework proved unable to account for all of the participants' responses. Learners identified anxiety-related factors as an important determinant of their success as intercultural communicators. Byram's model fails to consider emotional issues such as this in its conceptualization of what effective intercultural communicators need. Most other ICC models are similarly lacking.

If educators are to effectively facilitate the development of ICC in FL classrooms, it is important that they have an understanding of what their learners need to achieve, and how to best help them do so. The purpose of this paper is to

investigate the needs of FL learners in Japan pertaining to the development of ICC.

Methodology

This paper is a narrative review of studies from the fields of intercultural communication studies, FL education, and behavioral science. The focus in this paper is on the development of ICC by FL learners in Japan, and the role that anxiety plays in that process. The author will first give a broadly representative account of the dominant frameworks for ICC (particularly in FL education) and comment on their suitability or otherwise in the Japanese context. She will then review studies examining anxiety to ascertain its effect on an individual's ability to develop ICC. Finally, she will refer to the literature to identify possible reasons for the high incidence of anxiety in Japan, and consider how FL educators can help learners manage or overcome their anxiety to effectively cultivate ICC.

A narrative review format was chosen to facilitate synthesis of previous findings to present a broad perspective on the chosen topic. The researcher carried out background reading and a preliminary online search of the literature to see what other work could be found drawing links between Japanese learners,

anxiety, and ICC. Having established the need for a review in this area, the author adopted Slavin's "best-evidence synthesis" approach to identify individual studies for inclusion in the study (Slavin, 1995). Papers included for review were selected from material printed in Japanese and English, based on their relevance to the issues identified for examination.

This paper does not attempt to provide a definitive review of any of the subtopics it addresses, but rather seeks to cross-reference between disciplines and bring clarity to the bigger picture concerning ICC, anxiety, and FL learners in Japan. Rather than providing new empirical evidence, this study aims to make explicit the connections between existing research, and to consider the implications for FL teachers in Japan.

Intercultural Communicative Competence

Intercultural communication has been the subject of extensive interdisciplinary scholarship for more than thirty years, and a range of terms have been employed to describe it (e.g., cultural competence, acculturation, intercultural competence, intercultural communicative competence, intercultural sensitivity). This study focuses on intercultural communication in a FL, and thus employs the term "intercultural communicative competence" (ICC), defined by

Michael Byram as the ability to communicate effectively *in a foreign language* with a person from a different cultural worldview (Byram, 1997). Byram focused on ICC in relation to FL education and identified separate “linguistic” and “intercultural” competences in his 1997 ICC model. The intercultural component of ICC, he characterized as comprising the various types of knowledge, attitudes, and skills that interactants need to communicate effectively. The linguistic element relates to FL competency.

Since the publication of Byram’s model, attention to ICC in FL circles has grown to the extent that a wide range of ICC models attempting to characterize the components, actions and developmental processes involved are now available (for a selective review of ICC models see Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). These models are diverse in their details, but show remarkable similarity on a broader level, generally following Byram’s lead and categorizing their ICC components into the three domains of *knowledge*, *attitudes*, and *skills*. *Knowledge* involves facts related to one’s own and other cultures and communication styles; and metacognitive knowledge such as how to locate, access, and process new information. The *skills* category includes abilities related to adapting, interpreting, collaborating, listening, conversing, and deferring judgement. The *attitudes* domain relates to the mindset necessary for

effective interaction and encompasses such dispositions as openness, curiosity, and willingness to engage. Many ICC models identify the *attitudes* component as pivotal, and suggest that in order for an individual to effectively acquire the *knowledge* and *skills* needed for ICC, he or she needs to first have the appropriate *attitudes* in place (e.g., Borghetti, 2011; Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002; Deardorff, 2006).

Generalized ICC frameworks are useful as a starting point for educators when considering the types of competencies to target in FL courses, but they share a number of weaknesses. The first problem is that in attempting to make universally employable generalizations about ICC, the models necessarily exclude any consideration of environmental and contextual issues. A second issue is that most generalized models fail to consider the emotional aspects of individual interactants, treating them as rational and intentional in their actions. This is a serious oversight, given that communication is often carried out subconsciously, and humans inevitably experience some degree of emotional reaction to the process of communication. A further concern related to ICC frameworks is their ethnocentricity, as the majority of ICC scholarship has been carried out in English and the dominant ICC models have been developed in the West. Inevitably, these models tend to assume that Western ideas of competence

and interculturality are normative, when in fact they may not be appropriate in other cultures and contexts.

In 2005, Arasaratnam and Doerfl attempted to address the ethnocentric nature of ICC scholarship by collecting and analyzing multicultural perspectives of ICC. They identified five variables associated with ICC, which were later incorporated into the Integrated Model of Intercultural Communication Competence (IMICC) (Arasaratnam, 2006). The five factors were empathy, experience, motivation, global attitude, and interaction involvement (active listening). The model was later amended to include sensation-seeking and ethnocentrism as factors (Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2011). Sensation-seeking refers to an individual's predisposition to engage in adventure or thrill-seeking. It correlates negatively with anxiety, making it of interest in the Japanese context. Even the IMICC model, though, cannot be directly applied to Japanese learners. It is, like all the influential ICC frameworks to date, a generalized model, and as such cannot be expected to allow for the inevitable differences that arise between (and even within) groups of individuals. The specific environment and needs of learners must be scrutinized and resolved if educators are to design and deliver courses that effectively facilitate learner development of ICC.

ICC in Japan

In 2009 the term “Galapagos Syndrome” was coined to describe the propensity of Japanese technology to develop in isolation from the rest of the world. The term has since been applied to the increasingly inward-looking tendency of Japanese youth, who have displayed reluctance to work or study abroad (Sanchanta, 2010), or even to become active in global society (The Japan Times, 2013). In 2009 the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) launched the Global 30 Project, which aimed to facilitate greater mobility of university students by (a) internationalizing higher education in Japan to encourage more foreign students to study in Japanese universities, and (b) internationalizing Japanese students to prepare and motivate them to study abroad (MEXT, n.d.).

The Global 30 project was followed in quick succession by three further initiatives: the Re-inventing Japan Project in 2011, the Go Global Japan Project in 2012, and the Top Global University Project in 2014 (Rose & McKinley, 2018). These projects are illustrative of the urgency felt by the Japanese government to reverse the inward-oriented tendency of Japanese youth. A government report released by the Council on Promotion of Human Resource

for Globalization Development (2012) employed the language of the dominant Western ICC scholarship to identify *skills* (linguistic and communication skills), *attitudes* (positiveness, a spirit for challenge, cooperativeness, flexibility, a sense of responsibility) and *knowledge* (of one's own culture and that of others) that Japanese graduates should possess. As yet though, there has been little investigation into the appropriateness of Western models in the Japanese context.

Scholarship related to ICC in China found that the dominant Western-centric ICC frameworks were ill-suited to application in the Chinese context, and required significant adaptation to incorporate Chinese conceptualizations of ICC, which included emotional, collectivist, and philosophical aspects (Wang & Kulich, 2015). Wang (2017) suggested that a group-oriented focus exists in Asian countries and that this is likely to engender anxiety in intercultural interactions. This hypothesis is supported by a recent study conducted by the researcher, which suggested that anxiety did have a significant impact on Japanese learner development of ICC (Sakamoto, 2018). If that is indeed the case, then FL educators in Japan need to consider the implications of anxiety for ICC development, and how to assist learners to manage or overcome anxiety in their quest for ICC.

Anxiety and ICC in Japan

The tendency of Japanese learners to experience anxiety that negatively impacts on the FL learning process has been widely documented (e.g., Klopff, 1984; McCroskey, Gudykunst & Nishida, 1985; Sim & Roger, 2016; Todaka, 2009). Anxiety is problematic for FL learners in several ways: it uses up cognitive resources that could otherwise be used for learning (Kondo & Yang, 2004), has a negative effect on memory and recall (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994), and affects classroom performance (Saito & Samimy, 1996).

In addition to its negative effect on the linguistic aspect of ICC, anxiety also impacts on non-linguistic factors. Students who are anxious often seek to minimize risk (Brown, 2004), which can manifest as an unwillingness to try to communicate. Matsuoka (2008) explained that even learners who are highly motivated and linguistically competent in a foreign language are not necessarily effective communicators, and suggested that willingness to communicate may in part account for this gap. All of the dominant ICC frameworks identify a willing and open mindset as key to effective intercultural communication, so it makes

sense that anxiety can impact deleteriously on an individual's ability to progress towards ICC.

Japanese society has been identified as a culture in which anxiety levels are higher than the norm. In FL education research, scholars have paid considerable attention to the high incidence of language anxiety in Japan. The 'language anxiety' construct was first proposed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) as a distinctive form of anxiety arising from the apprehension and tension associated with second language contexts. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope drew on three interrelated types of anxiety as the base for their construct: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Klopff, in his 1984 study of communication apprehension in the pacific basin, found that his Japanese sample exhibited considerably higher levels of language anxiety than the other groups investigated. Subsequent studies have continued to reinforce this result (e.g., McDowell & Yotsuyanagi, 1996; Pryor, Butler, & Boehringer, 2005; Sim & Rogers, 2016), and Matsuoka (2008) went so far as to say that communication apprehension among the Japanese "may be ranked as the highest in the world" (p. 38).

A wider look at the literature reveals that the Japanese predisposition to high levels of anxiety is not limited to FL situations. McCroskey, Gudykunst

and Nishida (1984) investigated communication apprehension among Japanese college students when communicating in Japanese and in English, and found that their sample experienced high levels of anxiety regardless of the language in which they were operating. Brown (2004) suggested that the Japanese have a predisposition to ‘trait social anxiety.’ This is defined as a fear of embarrassment in social situations, and is most commonly manifested in situations that are “unstructured, novel, ambiguous, and involve strangers” (p. 7). Since the majority of intercultural interactions exhibit these characteristics, it seems fair to suggest a vicious cycle, where social anxiety is exacerbated by intercultural situations, and then acts to reduce an individual’s ability to communicate effectively in that situation, with further negative consequences for anxiety.

Causes of Anxiety

The Japanese have been shown to consistently exhibit higher levels of anxiety than other nations and research suggests that augmented levels of anxiety impede the development of ICC. If FL educators are to effectively cultivate ICC in learners then, it is important to find ways to help learners manage or overcome their anxiety. In order to address the anxiety issue, we first

need to understand its origin. This section discusses possible reasons for the Japanese propensity to experience anxiety. A review of the literature yields three key factors: cultural values, biological traits and the education system.

Cultural Values

Matsuoka (2008) identified “other-directedness” as an indicator of anxiety. She defined this as excessive focus on how one is perceived by other people and suggested that it underpins the preference for reticence in Japanese culture. Limiting verbalization reduces the risk of conflict and generates harmony among the group. Matsuoka’s idea echoes theories of collectivist versus individualistic cultures. Japan is often cited as an example of a collectivist culture, where the group is prioritized over the individual (see Brown, 2004; McDowell & Yotsuyanagi, 1996). In fact Brown’s research (2004) showed that trait social anxiety was more common in group-oriented than individualistic cultures. There is a tendency in collectivist cultures to avoid ‘plain speaking’ in order to preserve group harmony (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1994), and this can lead to augmented levels of anxiety when one is required to engage in explicit verbal communication.

Another influential ideology that can be applied to explain the prevalence of social anxiety in Japan is Hall's theory of high and low-context societies. According to Hall (1976), living in the high-context Japanese society requires one to "know considerably more about what is going on at the covert level" (p. 112) than living in the West. In low-context societies it is perfectly acceptable to seek information directly, but in high-context societies such as Japan information is largely transmitted without explicit verbalization, and you are simply "supposed to know" (Hall, p. 112). Being talkative then, is generally not perceived as a virtue in Japan.

Biological Traits

The IMICC model identifies sensation-seeking as a factor in ICC (Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2011). Zuckerman, a psychobiologist with an extensive background in sensation-seeking research, found that sensation-seekers show more behavior associated with affiliation and approach, and less hesitancy and self-monitoring than low-level sensation-seekers (Zuckerman, 1994). They are more open and curious, enjoy social interactions and are less intimidated by differences in communication style, such as personal space issues (Zuckerman, 1994). It makes sense, then, that higher levels of

sensation-seeking predict more effective intercultural interactions. Zuckerman (1979) compared the sensation-seeking levels of Japanese undergraduates with results for other national groups and found that the Japanese sample scored significantly lower than their Western counterparts on the Sensation Seeking Scale.

Research suggests that sensation-seeking levels are affected by social learning, but are also biologically determined to some extent. Zuckerman points to hormonal and neurological factors as the key determinants of sensation-seeking at the biological level (1994). It could be, then, that the Japanese are genetically predisposed to lower levels of sensation-seeking than other populations. No studies could be found that directly linked sensation-seeking to the widespread anxiety felt by Japanese people. It seems likely, however, that the two are related, and this is an area that warrants further investigation.

Education System

While some researchers explain the Japanese predilection for shyness by referring to an outward-looking socio-cultural norm, others point to the education system. Hinenoya and Gathbonton (2000) suggested that the Japanese

education system is based on traditional Confucian conformist ideas, and requires students to listen and obey rather than act or question. This has given rise to high school FL classes that focus on grammar and vocabulary rather than on active language use. When students enter university, the expectation that they produce output can come as a shock, leading students to feel stressed and anxious (McDowell & Yotsuyanagi, 1996). A grammar-focused teaching approach tends to emphasize the importance of accuracy in language use. Sim and Rogers surveyed Japanese university students and found that many, despite understanding that making mistakes was important, felt fear or negativity about mistakes (2016). A study undertaken by the author found similar results. Students explicitly stated that they needed to lose their fear of mistakes in order to become effective intercultural speakers, but explained that they struggled to do so (Sakamoto, 2018).

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

The ability to deal with anxiety impacts not only on a learner's linguistic proficiency, but also on his or her openness and willingness to communicate, which are key attitudinal factors in the ICC development process. It follows then, that anxiety is a predictor of intercultural communication success. Yet the

majority of ICC frameworks do not account for emotional factors such as social anxiety. Educators need to understand the gaps in the existing intercultural models and endeavor to foster ICC development in culturally-appropriate ways.

In developing FL courses targeting ICC in Japan, instructors need to be aware of and actively target anxiety-related problems. Given the fundamental roots that anxiety has in the Japanese education system, cultural values, and biological make up, simply telling learners not to be shy is inadequate and inappropriate. Various underlying causes of anxiety are at work in Japan, and understanding, support, and considered pedagogical approaches are needed to help learners manage anxiety and find ways to participate in, and perhaps even initiate, social encounters.

In this review, the researcher has sought to shed light on the problem of anxiety for ICC among FL learners in Japan. To date, researchers have investigated ways to minimize the effects of language-anxiety on language learning, and methods suggested in their research may also be useful in addressing the wider anxiety issue in Japan. For example, Kondo and Yang (2004) identified four coping strategies that students employ to deal with anxiety (preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, and peer-seeking). Instructors can facilitate these techniques by providing learners with the information and

resources they need in order to prepare; giving them sufficient time to complete a task; actively encouraging deep-breathing or other relaxation techniques; promoting visualization activities; and providing opportunities for learners to consult with each other. Humor can also help relax students (McDowell & Yotsuyanagi, 1996), and focusing on fluency activities rather than on accuracy may be effective in helping learners lose their fear of mistakes (Matsuda & Gobel, 2001).

It remains necessary, however, to build a more extensive body of research considering the impact of different types of anxiety on not only linguistic development, but also non-language aspects of intercultural communication. Further research is also needed to identify methods to mitigate the impact of anxiety in the development of ICC. Ultimately, educators would benefit from an ICC model that relates specifically to FL learners in Japan.

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