Exploring Intercultural Competence at Meetings in a Multi-cultural Workplace in Japan

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Communicators from diverse backgrounds tend to have culture-specific assumptions, perceptions, expectations and practices, as well as varying levels of proficiency in the primary language of communication. Such factors may lead to an imbalance of power relations among intercultural communicators in the workplace. The research on which this paper is based aims to explore the experiences of participants with respect to their perceptions and construction of their cultural identities and demonstration of their intercultural competence. The paper examines some aspects of how participants actually demonstrate intercultural communication competence by examining their use of communication strategies. It contributes to the wider research goals of exploring how affective factors such as intercultural sensitivity, empathy, open-mindedness, and nonjudgmental attitudes can help reduce the power asymmetry among multicultural communicators in the workplace.

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly interconnected world, people need to learn to respond constructively and effectively to cultural differences. Intercultural communication competence can be conceived as:

> the ability to negotiate cultural meanings and to execute appropriately effective communication behaviors that recognize the interactants' multiple identities in a specific environment, but also how to fulfill their own communication goals by respecting and affirming the multilevel cultural identities of those with whom they interact (Asante, Miike, & Jing Yin, 2008, p.219).

In relation to types of competence, Spitsberg and Cupach (1984) propose seven generic types of competence: fundamental competence, social competence, social skills, interpersonal competence, linguistic competence, communicative competence, and relational competence.

To understand the mutual negotiation of cultural meanings in intercultural communication, Dinges (1983) and Collier (1989) have classified the study of intercultural communication competence into different approaches. For example, Dinges (1983) identified six approaches: overseasmanship, subjective culture, multicultural person, social behaviorism, typology, and intercultural communicator.

The overseasmanship approach, first proposed by Cleveland, Mongone, and Adams (1960), identified common factors in effective performances among sojourners or individuals on extended, nonpermanent stays in cultures other than their own. According to this approach, in order to be considered competent, a sojourner must show the ability to convert lessons from foreign experiences into effective job skills (Chen

Guo-Ming & Starosta, 2008, p.220). Second, the subjective culture approach requires individuals to have the ability to understand the causes of interactants' behaviors and reward them appropriately, and to modify their own behaviors suitably according to the demands of the setting (Trandis, 1976; 1997). Next, the multicultural person approach emphasizes that a competent person must be able to adapt to exceedingly difficult circumstances by transcending his or her usual adaptive limits (Adler, 1975; 1982). According to this approach, the individuals must learn to move in and out of different contexts, to maintain coherence in different situations. Regarding the social behaviorism approach, it emphasizes that successful intercultural coping strategies depend more on the individual's pre-departure experiences, such as training and sojourning in another country, than on inherent characteristics or personality (Guthrie, 1975). In contrast, the typology approach develops different models of intercultural communication competence. For instance, Brislin (1981) proposed that a successful intercultural interaction must be based on the sojourner's attitudes, traits, and social skills. He argued that non-ethnocentrism and non-prejudicial judgments are the most valuable attitudes for effective intercultural interaction. Ethnocentrism is "the judgment of an unfamiliar practice by the standards and norms familiar to one's own group or culture" (Brislin, 1981). The major adaptive personal traits Brislin identifies as important for intercultural communication are strength of personality, intelligence, tolerance, social relations skills, recognition of potential for benefit, and task orientation. Important social skills that he advocates are knowledge of subject and language, positive orientation to opportunities, effective communication skills, and the ability to use personal traits to complete tasks (Chen Guo-Ming & Starosta, 2008, p.220).

The intercultural communicator approach emphasizes the view that successful intercultural interaction centers on communication processes among people from different cultures. According to this approach, it means that to be interculturally competent, an individual must be able to establish interpersonal relationships by understanding others through the effective exchange of verbal and nonverbal behaviors (Hall, 1959; 1966; 1976). Further, the cultural identity approach assumes that communication competence is a dynamic, emergent process where interactants can improve the quality of their experience through the recognition of the existence of each other's cultural identities (Collier, 1989; 1994; Cupach & Imamori, 1993). Thus, interculturally competent persons must know how to negotiate and respect the meanings of cultural symbols and norms during their interactions (Colliers & Thomas, 1988). Additionally, Ward and Searle (1991) have found that cultural identity significantly affects adaptation to new culture.

All the approaches described provide useful information and perspectives from which to study and understand intercultural communication competence. However, Chen Guo-Ming and Starosta (2008) claim that these approaches fail to give a holistic picture that can reflect the 'global civic culture'. As we encounter greater cultural diversity, more study of intercultural communication competence becomes increasingly important. Communicators from different cultures can only understand each other through investigating effective intercultural strategies demonstrated by interactants themselves in a globalized world. In order to deepen our understanding of intercultural competence, there is a necessity for all of us to learn more about ourselves and members of cultures other than our own. Furthermore, if we perceive the balance of power as an issue for intercultural communication among communicators from different backgrounds and take an interest in a critical perspective, we might be able to propose an approach that helps promote a more positive cooperative world.

METHOD

Goal

This paper is based on a study to examine whether participants demonstrate certain intercultural communicative competence and communications strategies in order to accommodate and cooperate with each other in an intercultural setting. By discovering some of the communicative competence and communication strategies employed by participants in this study through discourse analysis, it can illustrate how those strategies can minimize the asymmetry of power relations among communicators from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and promote more collaborative work to solve intercultural communication problems. In this paper, I analyze some examples of communication strategies used by participants.

The overall study is based on analysis of transcribed data (meetings and interviews) and ethnographic observations. The data for analysis came from an intercultural context of staff meetings among colleagues within a research institution in Japan. This particular institution was selected as a setting for data collection because it has a long history of employing workers from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. According to one of the workers in the institution, some workers experienced a tension among senior scientists from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Thus, this particular setting is a valuable place for evaluating whether there is a power imbalance among workers from different backgrounds. Furthermore, this setting offers the opportunity to investigate whether workers from different backgrounds employ and demonstrate certain aspects of intercultural competence and communication strategies in an intercultural setting. The analysis of the examples provided in the paper helps provide some insights for managing the imbalance of the power relations that could arise due to the insufficient employment of certain communication strategies.

The researcher audio-recorded naturally occurring conversations in three staff meetings mainly conducted in English. Two of the meetings were transcribed and analyzed using discourse analysis and an ethnographic approach.

Participants

Background information about the participants is summarized in Table 1. They were told that their privacy and anonymity would be protected. Throughout this study, pseudonyms will be used, and for sensitive information or wording that could potentially compromise their anonymity, I will use “xxx”.

The members of the department are L1 speakers of English, Japanese and Chinese. Although the English proficiency levels of the participants were not tested, three of the L2 English speakers, including the two junior Japanese scientists, Koji and Yusuke, and one Taiwanese junior scientist, Lin, all lived and studied at a university in the U.S. for several years and speak English fluently. ‘Fluent’ as used here means that speakers can carry out daily conversation and communicate their thoughts in English with little difficulty. However, Koji and Yusuke seem to have difficulty in expressing their opinions when the topics are related to scientific knowledge in the workplace, while Lin seems to have less difficulty in expressing them in her L2. Lin lived in the U.S. for more than twenty years; Koji and Yusuke lived there for less than eight years. Lin’s English proficiency level seems to be higher than those of the Japanese junior scientists. It was assumed that the two Japanese junior scientists were approximately equal. However, the senior scientist, Yamamoto, has much more limited English ability; he visited the U.S. only once for a short period of time to conduct his

TABLE 1. Participants' Backgrounds

Nationality (Pseudonym*)	Gender	Age	Degree	Job title	Years/ RC*	L1
American (Gary)	Male	58	PhD	Section Chief /Senior Scientist	10	English
American (Don)	Male	55	PhD	Former Section Chief /Senior Scientist	21	English
Taiwanese (Lin)	Female	44	PhD	Junior Scientist	6	Chinese/English (English is L2)
Japanese (Kakita)	Female	n/a	BA	Admin. Assistant	20	Japanese
Japanese (Yamamoto)	Male	60	PhD	Senior Scientist	29	Japanese
Japanese (Koji)	Male	41	PhD	Junior Scientist	5	Japanese
Japanese (Yusuke)	Male	41	PhD	Junior Scientist	2	Japanese

* Last names (Kakita and Yamamoto, both pseudonyms) instead of first names were used for senior Japanese participants in order to highlight generational difference
* RC means research center and n/a means not applicable.

research, and his English level is lower compared to three other non-native speakers of English in the department. He appeared to experience great difficulty in understanding what American senior scientists were saying and hardly made any comments in English.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Here, I analyze communication strategies (CSs) used by certain participants during the meetings. In order to do this, the way that participants from different cultural backgrounds compensate for breakdowns and reduce their power relations needs to be examined.

While inadequate language proficiency could cause some communication breakdowns and unbalanced power relations in interaction, the use of CSs, such as code switching, appeals for assistance, and clarification requests, can help communicators facilitate effective communication in collaboration. This means that, even with limited linguistic competence, communicators from different cultural backgrounds can still have a smoother interaction and more balanced power relations through the use of CSs.

First, a code-switching strategy is discussed since speakers try to use this strategy to solve problems by expanding their communicative resources. Extract 1 shows an example of how Gary and Koji use code switching.

Extract 1

1. Japanese Administrator: *Ohanami wa nashi?* (so, there is no *hanami*?)
2. Gary: I don't know. I am not a big believer in this *jisyuku* business. I am *wagamama*, (selfish), but haha.

3. Koji: What's the word for *jisyuku?* Self-control or self-restraint?

4. Gary: To me, self-restraint is the dictionary definition, but I think it's more like self-denial or asceticism, Haha. Like monks, monastic, you know monks that deny themselves the worldly pleasures, but…

Code-switching is an achievement strategy proposed by Færch and Kasper (1983). In communication where foreign languages are involved "there always exists the possibility of switching from L2 to either L1 or another language" (Færch and Kasper, 1983, p.46). In addition to the use of code-switching, Koji also uses literal translation, which is considered to be an interlingual transfer (combination of linguistic features from the interlanguage and the first language). As displayed in this extract, Gary in utterance 2 attempts to use two Japanese words, *jisyuku* (self-restraint) and *wagamama* (selfish) in order to reduce a linguistic gap by expanding his communicative resource, which is his Japanese knowledge.

Gary might have tried to compensate for the intercultural communication gap by utilizing the function of code-switching as his CS to compensate for a linguistic gap. However, because the Japanese term *jisyuku* used by Gary has a different meaning from Koji's definition in this context, it appears that they are experiencing a communicative mismatch despite the use of code-switching as a strategy. Koji decides to signal Gary that he needs assistance and makes use of the cooperative communication strategy of appealing. This move by Koji can be regarded as an appeal for assistance because he consults Gary to clarify the meaning of the word '*jisyuku'*.

The next extract (extract 2) shows an example of interaction by Gary and Koji who demonstrate the use of CSs to promote mutual collaboration.

Extract 2

1. Gary: Really, we need to think about a person who will be good to be invited…so, can anybody think of a name? Coz I need to send something back to Dr. X.

2. Koji: Is there any requirement to include a Japanese presenter?

3. Gary: I think for balance, it's important to have someone from Japan on that, adding to the three majors. Well, there will be four main presenters, so there will also be a person who would be a certain discussant, a summarizer, haha. Probably someone from here or...I will probably do it unless, unless we get someone else, but I would really like to find someone Japanese.

4. Koji: What is the session title, by the way?

5. Gary: XXX. How about Dr. Y?

6. Koji: I will probably ask him.

7. Gary: Maybe just ask him sort of informally. Ask him if he would be interested…if he has suggestions or…that would be the best approach. Well, would it be best for you to contact him or for me to contact him? First, initially…Okay?

8. Koji: By tomorrow?

9. Gary: Yeah, if possible. Well, I'll go back and look and see what Dr. X required.

As displayed in this interaction by Gary and Koji, communication both in terms of equality of contribution by the participants and effectiveness is observed through their use of CSs. For instance, an acceptance phase starts with Koji's first move in utterance 2 that gives evidence that he understood what was meant by Gary. Koji understands that Gary is requesting to have an invited speaker, and Koji confirms whether Gary is interested in having a Japanese speaker by asking "Is there any requirement to include a Japanese presenter?". This process indicates that both Gary and Koji think they have a mutual belief that Koji understood what Gary meant to add to their common ground.

This type of approach is described in collaborative theory suggested by Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs (1986), and Wilkes-Gibbs (1997). In this theory, they consider conversation in any language as "a collaborative process of coordinating individual beliefs into mutual ones; therefore, both participants discover and extend the boundaries of common ground in every turn" (Clark & Wilkes-Gibbs, 1986). This process is called the grounding process.

Regarding this grounding process, Fujio (2011) explains that the "basic unit in grounding is the contribution, that is an action or utterance by the participants to update their common ground" (p.46). A contribution is "not necessarily a syntactical unit such as a grammatical sentence, but is rather an emergent structure that develops through collective action" (p.46). Further, the grounding contribution is divided into a presentation phase and an acceptance phase. In the acceptance phase, for example, speaker A presents an utterance for speaker B to consider, and in the acceptance phase, both speaker A and B "try to establish that they have a satisfactory mutual interpretation of the action" (Wilkes-Gibbs, 1997, p.240). For instance, in extract 8, Gary presents an utterance "so, can anybody think of a name?..." (utterance 1). Then, Koji gives an acceptance phase in utterance 2 saying "is there any requirement to include a Japanese speaker?", which indicates his satisfactory interpretation.

According to Wilkes-Gibbs, "the grounding process can be recursive when an initial presentation by speaker A does not work and a sign of non-understanding is shown by B in the following acceptance phase" (1997, p.242). In that case, Wilkes-Gibbs continues that "the initial presentation has to be refashioned until both participants reached the mutually satisfactory point" (p.242). The example of the simplest grounding process called 'elementary' is shown in utterance 6 by Koji. When Gary gives an initial presentation in turn 5 saying "how about Dr. Y?" suggesting Dr. Y as a possible invited speaker, Koji immediately answers saying that "I will probably ask him", indicating his understanding of Gary's request and accepting it. Then, in turn 4, Koji shows a sign of topic shift and asks Gary to refashion his initial presentation. Gary receives Koji's sign of clarification or confirmation request by answering "XXX" then refashions his presentation saying "How about Dr. Y?" in turn 5. Since Koji then accepts Gary's request by saying "I will probably ask him" in turn 6, it indicates that both participants eventually reached a mutually satisfactory point.

In utterance 7, Gary carefully asks Koji whether it is better for Koji to contact Dr. Y or for Gary to contact him directly. Gary asks "first, initially Okay?" which is regarded as a restatement. By repeating the word 'first" and 'initially' which have similar meanings, this strategy of repetition is regarded as restatement in the taxonomy of CSs. Furthermore, Gary puts 'Okay?' at the end of his utterance in order to negotiate his communication breakdown with Koji. This is also a strategy used by Gary who attempts to minimize Koji's effort to overcome a linguistic problem. Then, interestingly in utterance 8, Koji does not directly answer Gary's question, but instead he shifts his topic and asks whether the contact needs to be taken by 'tomorrow'.

In some cases, a non-native speaker stops his/her acceptance phase with the first move by answering yes or no in L2 communication. For instance, NS participants often no longer convey their understanding, and do not extend the common ground. However, Koji shows the sign of his understanding of Gary's request and implies that he (Koji) will make a contact by confirming the deadline of the contact with Dr. Y. Then in line 9, Gary agrees and answers Koji's confirmation request by saying "yeah, if possible". As can be seen throughout this interaction by Gary and Koji, they communicated in a flexible manner and stayed sensitive to the on-going text by showing collaborative efforts.

The example demonstrates that successful intercultural communication could be considered as the situation in which both L1 and L2 participants try collaboratively to understand adequately and effectively. Because participants try to have fewer breakdowns, they resort to some CSs which can help to prevent them. Specific CSs such as clarification requests or confirmation checks were employed by the participants in the meeting in order to facilitate the interlocutor's understanding in their presentation phase. Furthermore, some CSs such as code-switching and appeals for assistance were employed strategically in order to facilitate mutual understanding. These showed that, from the viewpoint of a principle of mutual responsibility and a principle of least effort in collaboration proposed by Wilkes-Gibbs, such CSs are effective intercultural communication tools used in order to balance unequal power relations among communicators from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

To illustrate other CSs used by participants in the meeting, extract 10 demonstrates how Koji and a Japanese administrator use a topic avoidance strategy and message abandonment proposed by Tarone (1983). It is a refusal to enter into or continue a discourse within a particular field or topic due to a feeling of total linguistic inadequacy (Corder, 1978). In topic avoidance, "the learner simply tries not to talk about the topic or a concept that he or she is not familiar with", and in message abandonment, "the learner begins to talk about a concept but is unable to continue and stops in mid-utterance" (Tarone, 1983, pp.62-63).

Extract 3

1. Gary:	Is there, is there anything in the, in the news, *sakura zensen no?* [seasonal indicator for cherry blossom season across Japan]
2. Japanese admin:	No, maybe *ano* [well]…we can…
3. Gary:	(2.0 of silence)
4. Koji:	*Jisyuku* [self-restraint].
5. Gary:	(2.0 of silence) Oh, no one is gonna have *hanami* this year, you think? (sounds surprised)
6. Koji:	Probably fewer[than…
7. Gary:	[Fewer?
8. Koji:	(3.0 of silence)
9. Don:	Oh, because of the disaster, yeah.

As seen in the interaction above, Gary as an L1 speaker seems to assume that his use of code-switching, '*sakura zensen no'*, would minimize the linguistic balance for the NNS. However, the Japanese administrator cannot easily convey her messages because her linguistic resources do not permit her to express them

successfully. In the course of this interaction, the administrator seems to find herself faced in this situation in turn 2. Instead of trying to convey her message using the resources available to her, the administrator chooses to end her turn and avoid taking a risk of communicating. This type of strategy is called 'topic avoidance strategy'.

A less extreme form of topic avoidance that Koji uses is 'message abandonment' employed by Koji in turn 6. Koji at least tries to answer Gary's question by replying "probably fewer than…" but gives up conveying his message in the middle of his turn. Although Koji first employed the message abandonment strategy by showing his attempt to utilize his linguistic resources available, he then switches to a topic avoidance strategy by not saying anything in turn 8. Gary employs a confirmation check by repeating Koji's word "fewer?" in turn 6 to find out what Koji meant. However, Koji decides to be silent and not to reply in order to avoid further communicative misunderstanding or communication breakdown.

Koji's use of an abandonment strategy was not completely successful because he simply gave up and did not attempt to expand his resources to realize his communicative intentions. It is likely that Koji used this strategy because he wanted to avoid making errors due to his linguistic inadequacy. However, Don demonstrates his intercultural competence by showing his understanding and interpretation of what Koji intended to say. Don expressed his assumption of the *tsunami* disaster being the reason why there are fewer people who wanted to have an *ohanami* party this year. In this case, Don resorted to a risk-taking strategy by guessing Koji's intended message and expressing it.

While Koji decided to signal that he was experiencing a communication problem by abandoning the topic, Don sensed that Koji needed assistance and made use of the cooperative communication strategy. In this kind of communicative situation where one of the communicators has a linguistic disadvantage, the communicators from different backgrounds can change the distribution of roles in such a way that the communicative task is reduced for the linguistically disadvantaged communicator.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have documented and analyzed some of the communication strategies used in an intercultural setting at an institute in Japan. I have explored how participants demonstrated intercultural communication strategies such as code-switching, appeals for assistance, topic avoidance and message abandonment in meeting interaction.

In the broader context of the overall study, the notions of power relations and interactional dominance among scientists from different cultural backgrounds in department meetings have been explored. Results revealed that interactional dominance by some participants manifested itself culturally and linguistically in the meetings, with some participants demonstrating interactional dominance. However, speakers with intercultural competence possess the ability to negotiate cultural meanings and to execute effective communication behaviors in a specific environment by fulfilling their own communication goals.

As observed in the collaborative approach used by Gary and Koji in extract 3, successful intercultural communication by L1 and L2 speakers is considered to be the situation in which both participants attempt to understand adequately and effectively. It means that the participants' efforts can be minimized and made economical by having fewer breakdowns and recovering from them quickly. In intercultural communication, because participants cannot utilize their shared knowledge and communication practices as they can do so in

purely L1 communication, they need to use CSs more frequently in order to have a smoother interaction and more balanced power relations. This paper has illustrated how some of those CSs are used.

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ABSTRACT

Exploring Intercultural Competence at Meetings in a Multi-cultural Workplace in Japan

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Communicators from diverse backgrounds tend to have culture-specific assumptions, perceptions, expectations and practices, as well as varying levels of proficiency in the primary language of communication. Such factors may lead to an imbalance of power relations among intercultural communicators in the workplace. The research on which this paper is based on aims to explore the experiences of participants with respect to their perceptions and construction of their cultural identities and demonstration of their intercultural competence. The paper examines some aspects of how participants actually demonstrate intercultural communication competence by examining their use of communication strategies. It contributes to the wider research goals of exploring how affective factors such as intercultural sensitivity, empathy, open-mindedness, and nonjudgmental attitudes can help reduce the power asymmetry among multicultural communicators in the workplace.

要　約

多様文化が存在する日本の職場での会議における異文化間コミュニケーション能力の探究

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多様な文化背景を持つコミュニケーター達は，文化特有の前提，認識，期待，行動様式を持っている傾向があるだけでなく，第 1 言語の習熟度が異なるという傾向もある。

そのような要因は，職場の異文化間コミュニケーションにおける力関係の不均衡につながる可能性がある。本稿が基にしている研究は，参加者の文化的アイデンティティの認識と構築，さらに彼らがいかに異文化間コミュニケーション能力を実証するのかを探究する事を目的としている。本稿は，参加者がどのようにコミュニケーション戦略を使用しているかを調べる事によって，いかに彼らが実際に，異文化間コミュニケーション能力を実証するかについて，いくつかの側面を検証する。異文化間の感受性，共感性，率直さ，断定的な判断を回避する態度などの感情に関わる要因が，多文化の背景を持つコミュニケーター達がいる職場での力関係の不均衡をいかに軽減する手助けとなるのかを探究する，幅広い研究目標に資する。