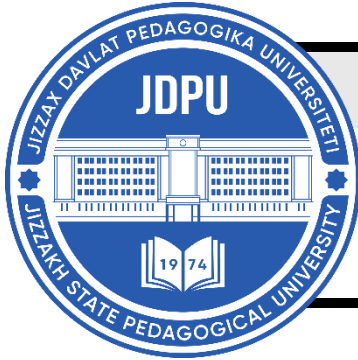


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INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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ABOUT ARTICLE

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Abstract: As one of the dimensions of intercultural communication competence, intercultural sensitivity has shown significant impact on different culture-related variables. Among them, ethnocentrism and communication apprehension in the intercultural communication context remains unexplored. This study attempts to explore the relationship, if any, among the variables ethnocentrism, intercultural communication apprehension, and intercultural sensitivity.

INTRODUCTION

The survey research method was used to collect data from students at a mid-sized university in the northeastern area of the United States. The results of Pearson product-moment correlations and stepwise regression analyses confirm the negative relationship between intercultural sensitivity and the two variables. Directions for future research in this line of study are discussed. The importance of intercultural sensitivity has been emphasized by scholars from a variety of disciplines including Communication Studies, Education, and Psychology. Most have concluded that intercultural sensitivity is required for successful and productive communication between people from different cultural backgrounds. As Chen indicated, due to the rapid development of communication and transportation technology, globalization has brought together people of diverse cultures, ethnicities, geographies, and religions in every aspect of contemporary human life. Being sensitive to cultural differences becomes a critical ability to decrease ethnocentrism and parochialism and for being competent in intercultural or multicultural interactions. The intent of this study is to explore the relationship among the variables of intercultural sensitivity, ethnocentrism, and intercultural communication apprehension.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Intercultural sensitivity can be defined as “an individual’s ability to develop emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promotes appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural communication” The concept was treated as one of the dimensions of intercultural communication competence. Intercultural communication competence comprises three aspects: cognitive, affective, and behavioral abilities; the cognitive ability is represented by intercultural awareness, the affective ability by intercultural sensitivity, and the behavioral ability by intercultural effectiveness or adroitness. According to Bennett intercultural sensitivity is a developmental process, in which individuals are able to transform themselves from the ethnocentric stage to ethno relative stage. There are six stages involved in this transformational process. First, in the denial stage, the persons deny the existence of cultural differences; second, in the defense stage, the persons attempt to defend their own world views by facing the perceived threat; third, in the minimization stage, the persons protect their core values by concealing differences under the cover of cultural similarities; fourth, in the acceptance stage, the persons begin to recognize and accept cultural differences in both cognitive and behavioral levels; fifth, in the adaptation stage, the persons develop sensitive and empathic skills to adapt to cultural differences and move into the bicultural or multicultural level; and finally, in the integration stage, the persons are able to establish an ethno relative identity and enjoy the cultural differences. Thus, interculturally-sensitive persons have the ability to project and receive positive emotional responses before, during, and after interactions, which in turn leads to a higher degree of satisfaction and helps people achieve an adequate social orientation that enables them to understand their own and their counterparts’ feelings and behaviors. The positive emotional responses produced by intercultural sensitivity inevitably demonstrate an individual’s willingness to not only acknowledge and recognize, but also to respect and appreciate cultural differences during intercultural interaction. In other words, the acquirement of intercultural sensitivity refers to the absence of ethnocentrism and parochialism, which is a critical component for fostering successful global citizenship on both individual and organizational levels. Chen and Starosta (2000) contended that intercultural sensitivity is one of the essential factors for intercultural communication consists of five abilities, including interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness, that taken together form the dimensions of intercultural sensitivity. Chen and Starosta’s (2000) study indicated that individuals with high intercultural sensitivity tend to be more attentive, more able to perceive socio-interpersonal relationships in order to adjust their behaviors, to show high self-esteem and self-monitoring, more empathic, and more effective in intercultural interaction. The research findings of intercultural sensitivity indicate that the concept is very likely related to the other two communication traits (ethnocentrism and intercultural communication apprehension) which are central to understanding

personal motivation and behavior in the process of intercultural communication. The purpose of this study then is to explore the potential impact of intercultural sensitivity on these two concepts.

The DMIS stages (positions) are construed both in terms of basic perceptual structures vis a vis otherness and in terms of certain “issues” regarding cultural difference that tend to be related to each of the stages. The names of the stages refer to the issues, while the description of the experience of each stage refers to its perceptual structure. The first three stages of Denial, Defense, and Minimization are Ethnocentric; they refer to issues that are associated with experiencing one’s own culture as more “central to reality.” The last three stages of Acceptance, Adaptation, and Integration are Ethnorelative; they refer to issues associated with experiencing all cultures as alternative ways of organizing reality. Movement through the stages is not inevitable; it depends on the need to become more competent in communicating outside one’s primary social context. When that need is established, it is addressed by building more complex perceptual structures that can resolve the increasingly complex issues of dealing with cultural difference.

The DMIS is a culture-general model; when more complex perceptual structures are established for any culture, they apply to all cultures. For instance, greater perceptual sensitivity towards a different national culture group allows more sensitivity towards a different generational or sexual orientation group, assuming that those groups are also defined in cultural terms. Additionally, movement through the stages tends to be one-way; people do not easily become more ethnocentric after having developed ethnorelative perceptual structures. However, people can rather easily retreat from one ethnocentric stage to an earlier one, particularly from Minimization to Defense. In addition to its use as an individual diagnostic, the DMIS can be interpreted at an organizational level. More complex organizational structures are parallels to more complex personal perceptual structures. Greater intercultural sensitivity in an organization means that more complex structures are allowing cultural difference to be perceived more fully. The resulting “climate” regarding cultural difference carries the potential for better resolution of the issues associated with multicultural workforces and global operations.

The default condition of DMIS is the denial of cultural difference – the failure to perceive the existence or the relevance of culturally different others. Perceptual categories for otherness are not elaborate enough to allow discriminations among different kinds of others, who may be perceived vaguely as “foreigners” or “minorities” or not perceived at all. The constructs available for perceiving one’s own culture are far more complex than those available for other cultures, so people experience themselves as more “real” than others – even to the point that others may not seem fully human. People are disinterested or perhaps even hostilely dismissive of intercultural communication. In organizations, Denial is a condition wherein there are no structures (policies and procedures) to recognize and deal with cultural diversity. The issue experienced as Denial is created when people

who prefer stability (sameness) are forced by some circumstance to become aware of others (differentness). This occurs when, for instance, significant numbers of refugees or immigrants enter a community, or when people must face cultural differences in a changing workforce or globalized organization. Initially, the sameness pole is exaggerated while the differentness pole is suppressed; one's self and compatriots are perceived as complex compared to the simplicity of others. Resolution of the contradiction involves beginning to perceive others in more specific and complex ways. Personally, this occurs when others are personified through media or personal contact. Organizationally, resolution of Denial occurs when difference is acknowledged by procedures such as multiple-language forms or incorporating visual diversity into corporate publications.

When the resolution of Denial issues allows it, people can move into the experience of defense against cultural difference. The perceptual structure of this stage is a dichotomous categorization of "us and them," where others are perceived more fully than in Denial but also in highly stereotyped ways. People at this stage tend to be critical of other cultures and apt to blame cultural difference for general ills of society; they experience "us" as superior and "them" as inferior. A variation of Defense is reversal, where people switch poles so that "them" are superior and "us" are inferior. People in this form tend to simplistically romanticize or exotify another culture while being more complexly critical of their own culture. In international contexts, the informal term for reversal is "going native." In domestic contexts, the term "false ally" may refer to a dominant-culture member in reversal who takes on the cause of "oppression" without much experience or understanding. An organization indicates Defense by rhetoric that exalts the superiority of its national cultural roots and its current organizational culture. Occasionally an organization shows reversal by supporting activities for non-dominant others based on simplistic stereotypes (e.g. shopping trips for the assumedly female spouses of conferencing executives, when a) the spouses might not all be female, and b) even if they are female they might not fit the stereotype and could resent having it applied). The contradiction experienced as Defense occurs when "us" and "them" are forced into contact. The greater visibility and exaggerated stereotypes of others generate an experience of threat, fueling redlining, exclusive membership, focusing on power differences (such as privilege or oppression) supports the polarized Defense or reversal experiences. Conversely, resolution of Defense is accomplished by focusing on commonalities— equal humanity, shared values, etc. In organizations, Defense is routinely resolved by team-building exercises that stress mutual dependence and define differences as in-group variations of personality and style.

The resolution of "us and them" allows the move to the minimization of cultural difference. As the term implies, cultural differences that were initially defined in Defense are now minimized in favor of the assumedly more important similarities between self and others. Those similarities are based on the familiar elements of one's own cultural worldview; people assume that their own

experiences are shared by others, or that certain basic values and beliefs transcend cultural boundaries and thus apply to everyone (whether they know it or not). The stressing of cross-cultural similarity generates “tolerance,” wherein superficial cultural differences are perceived as variations on the shared universal themes of humanity. However, Minimization obscures deep cultural differences both for individuals and for organizations. At this stage, organizations tend to exaggerate the benefits of unbiased equal opportunity, thus masking the continued operation of dominant culture privilege. Confrontation with these deeper differences may cause people to retreat to the earlier ethnocentric stage of Defense. The Minimization issue for individuals is their desire to project similarity on a wider world and the stubborn resistance of that world to losing its real difference. This means that the more contact people seek out with others in the name of shared values, the more likely it is that they will be forced to confront significant cultural differences. Something similar happens in organizations, where an overstressing of “unity” yields too much uniformity, which forces the organization to decentralize and focus on its diversity, sometimes with the result of divisiveness. In both the individual and organizational cases, resolution of the issue occurs when similarity and difference, unity and diversity, are put into dialectical form: assuming similarity allows us to appreciate differences, and unity provides focus for diversity.

Movement out of the ethnocentric condition of Minimization allows cultural difference to be organized into categories that are potentially as complex as one’s own. In other words, people become conscious of themselves and others in cultural contexts that are equal in complexity but different in form. The acceptance of cultural difference does not mean agreement – cultural difference may be judged negatively – but the judgment is not ethnocentric in the sense that it is not automatically based on deviation from one’s own cultural position. For the same reason that an oenophile wants to learn more about wine or a bibliophile wants to finish the novel, people at Acceptance are curious about cultures and cultural differences. But their limited knowledge of other cultures and their nascent perceptual flexibility does not allow them to easily adapt their behavior to different cultural contexts. In organizations, the rhetoric and support structure for “diversity and inclusion” exists at this point of development, but the incorporation of intercultural sensitivity as a criterion for global or multicultural leadership is not yet established. The challenge (issue) of Acceptance is the need to reconcile cultural relativity with ethicality. People at this stage want to be respectful of other cultures, and for that reason they may adopt the naïve and paralytic position of “it’s not bad or good, it’s just different.” However, all behavior demands that judgments be made (including doing nothing), and the demand is to find a basis of judgment that is not ethnocentric in either Defense (superiority) or Minimization (universalist) terms. One such system that can be applied in both personal and organizational contexts is William Perry’s Ethical Scheme. After resolving the ethnocentric ethical positions of dualism and

multiplicity, the Scheme demands that decision-makers engage contextual relativism – an understanding of “goodness in context” – before they make an ethical commitment.

Resolving the issue of ethicality allows the move to adaptation to cultural difference. The perceptual mechanism is that of “perspective taking” or empathy. This is a kind of context-shifting, assumedly enabled by a neurological executive function, that allows one to experience the world “as if” one were participating in a different culture. This imaginative participation generates “feelings of appropriateness” that guide the generation of authentic behavior in the alternative culture. The ultimate example of this shift in cultural terms is biculturalism, a mirror of bilingualism. In either case, the outcome of the context shift is the competent enactment of alternative behavior that is appropriate to the different context. Organizations at this point of development have policies and procedures that are intentionally flexible enough to work without undue cultural imposition in a range of cultural contexts. The issue of Adaptation is authenticity. If people can shift among several cultural contexts, in which contexts do their true identities reside? The resolution of this dilemma lies in the extension of the definition of identity into a more dynamic container – one that can contain a wider repertoire of ways of being in the world. At an organizational level, Adaptation is the essence of “inclusion” of both global and domestic diversity into organizational processes.

The resolution of authentic identity allows for the sustainable integration of cultural difference into communication. In this integrated condition, communication can shift from in-context to between context states, allowing for the meta-coordination of meaning and action that defines intercultural communication. On a personal level, Integration is experienced as a kind of developmental liminality, where one’s experience of self is expanded to include the movement in and out of different cultural worldviews. Cultural liminality can be used to construct cultural bridges and to conduct sophisticated cross-cultural mediation. Organizations at Integration encourage the construction of third-culture positions based on mutual adaptation in multicultural work groups, with the anticipation that third culture solutions generate added value.

The systematic challenging to the late- Intermediate language learner at way in which the authors have dealt with the issue of the ethno relative Acceptance stage of the intercultural development of intercultural competence is commendable development. This can be done by selecting topics such as stages are very scientifically defined and as “complex value analysis, cultural comparison and methodically arranged. The definitions of the different contrast, cognitive, cultural and communication styles ethnocentric and ethno relative stages and the interaction etc.” Here, the writers say that the characteristics of the people at these stages are very challenge for the learner is a concern about cultural believable. However, this scientific clarity is both strength relativity as it relates to moral relativity. Thus, well as weakness of the whole method. Perhaps it is also task of the language teacher here is to make the student perfect and clear-cut to be put into practice. The reason

more aware of the relative moral and cultural values of the being that human psyche and its reactions and target culture independent of the same value system in adaptations to different phenomenon are as varied as her own culture. This suggestion can be quite valuable there are human beings on the earth. Therefore, any effort but its application is very demanding of the teacher at categorizing it would prove self-defeating. It requires the teacher herself to be in a position where Liddicoat et al. argue that the linear nature of she can look at the value system of the two cultures in an Bennett's developmental model of intercultural sensitivity objective non-committal manner. The suggestions for this assumes a 'progressive, scalar phenomenon' which may level require a teacher to be fully aware of the various not be the case at lower levels of abstraction and shorter ethical and moral complexities of both the cultures time periods than those assumed in the model. At the Adaptation stage, where we can find the criticize the model for failing to adequately link early- Advanced language learners, the writers suggest interculturality and language. Liddicoat also find "risk- taking skills, problem solving skills, interaction that the mapping of the model on to levels of proficiency, management, social adaptability and empathy. All these as displayed is deficient, because it assumes activities are challenges to the learner. In fact, at this level no prior starting point of exposure to cultural difference. The process, we would expect students to become more. Moreover, the model assumes, as a starting point, a less self-reliant in the area of the development of monocultural learner. In fact, in multicultural societies intercultural competence. The task of the teacher here is such as India, learners usually enter the language to challenge the students more and more and through this classroom with a variety of pluralistic cultural and gently push them to the next stage of Integration linguistic starting points.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, a student at this stage would explore the target language learning will be reconnecting them with a culture at her own. A student at the adaptation stage, heritage culture after living in the host country for some time, can explore Another problem with this model lies with the culture of that country on her own in different assumption that the different stages of DMIS can be situations and move more and more towards the perfectly paralleled with the different levels given in Integration stage even without the help of any formal ACTFL.

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