Research in Intercultural Communication Competence: Past Perspectives and Future

Directions

Lily A. Arasaratnam

Department of International Communication

Macquarie University

Dr. Lily Arasaratnam is a lecturer in intercultural communication, at Macquarie University, Sydney Australia. Her publications address intercultural contact-seeking behaviour and intercultural competence and her current research initiatives include developing an instrument to evaluate intercultural communication competence amongst culturally diverse participants and exploring the concept of cultural identity.

Abstract

This article addresses past research in intercultural communication competence (ICC), with the purpose of highlighting some gaps that need to be addressed in future research. Some frequently used theoretical models in ICC are reviewed, as are some culture-general approaches to empirical research in ICC. It is recommended that research in ICC in the future should incorporate multiple cultural perspectives and take into consideration that theoretical frameworks and taxonomies that were used in the past may not necessarily be relevant in the current climate of elevated migration and globalization.

Research in Intercultural Communication Competence: Past Perspectives and Future

Directions

Research in intercultural communication competence (ICC) is of academic and

pragmatic interest to many due to the relevance of the subject in today's culturally

diverse society. The purpose of this article is to highlight some of the research in ICC in

the past, to address gaps in the research and to make recommendations for future

research.

Looking at past literature, Collier (1989) puts forth three key issues on which

researchers in ICC need to focus: the definition of culture/intercultural communication,

the validity and consistency of the researcher's assumptions, and the researcher's choice

of theoretical perspective. Ruben (1989) further highlights the importance of considering

different facets of intercultural competence (such as relational competence, information-

transfer, compliance-gaining) in conceptualizing competence and raises the question of

whether competence should be studied from the perspective of the sender, the receiver, or

the cultural context. Even if one can overcome the hurdles involved in conceptualizing

ICC, how can this phenomenon be measured without facing the problems that arise with

relying on self-reports, interpretation biases, or inter-rater reliability? Researchers of ICC

continue to face these challenges.

*Past Approaches to Research in ICC*

Ruben (1976) identified seven dimensions of intercultural competence, namely,

display of respect, interaction posture, orientation to knowledge, empathy, self-oriented

role behavior, interaction management, and tolerance for ambiguity, in one of the early

attempts to conceptualize ICC (Ruben, 1977, 1978; Ruben & Kealey, 1979). Even though

these variables point to certain behaviors that are perceived favorably in intercultural situations, this line of research has not been continued to further investigate precisely how these dimensions are behaviorally enacted (Martin, 1993).

Another early approach to ICC is the social network approach (Kim, 1986; Smith, 1999; Yum, 1988). This addresses the role of one's personal network in enhancing one's competence in communicating with culturally different others. Kim (1986) argues that the greater the (cultural) heterogeneity in one's personal network the better he/she is at communicating with out-group members. Kim also asserts that the stronger a person's ties with an out-group member (culturally different other) the greater his/her out-group communication competence (i.e. ICC). In addition to these early approaches, other theories of intercultural communication (such as the systems theory, AUM theory, and the identity negotiation theory to name a few) have emerged and endured the test of time in many ways.

One of the most widely used theories in intercultural communication is the Anxiety/Uncertainty Management theory (AUM) by Gudykunst (Gudykunst, 1993, 1995; Stephan, Stephan, & Gudykunst, 1999). The AUM theory is based on the premise that a basic cause for effective communication between "strangers" (people who do not belong to the same in-group) is anxiety and uncertainty management. Gudykunst (1993) extends Berger and Calabrese's (1975) uncertainty reduction theory to intercultural communication and argues that because intercultural encounters are novel situations, this means that there are high levels of anxiety and uncertainty associated with them. He further argues that a person's effective communication with strangers is influenced by his/her ability to be mindful of their own behavior because being mindful regulates

anxiety/uncertainty management. In this approach, "effective communication refers to minimizing misunderstanding" (Gudykunst, 1993, p. 34). AUM theory is based on the following metatheoretical assumptions: 1) names and concepts are socio-cultural constructs that create subjective reality and intersubjectivity among people of a group who share these constructs results in what they understand as objective reality 2) the interpretation and observation of communication provides data for testing theories, and meaning is constructed in discourse 3) communication is shaped by other members of one's culture, and the situational and environmental context.

Yoshitake (2002) offers three major criticisms of the AUM theory. First, the focus of AUM theory is limited to effective communication. Yoshitake argues that there are instances where attributing the closest meaning to a message is not only impossible but also unnecessary. This argument is based on the reasoning that reducing effective communication to minimizing misunderstanding implies a linear view of communication (consisting of a sender, message, and a receiver) that is not necessarily representative of reality. Second, Yoshitake points out that by relying on mindfulness as a key element of uncertainty/anxiety management, AUM theory heavily relies on consciousness. This does not account for situations where emotional decisions (that are not necessarily rational) are made. The third criticism of the theory is that AUM theory has a Western bias. Yoshitake argues that AUM theory reflects cultural values that are typical of America and that these values are imposed on other cultures by extending the theory to intercultural situations. It must be noted that bias from a certain cultural perspective is a common flaw in ICC research. This matter will be addressed further at a later point.

Kim, who has done extensive research in the area of cross-cultural adaptation (Kim, 1991; 1995; 2001; Kim & Ruben, 1988), views ICC from a systems-theory perspective. She argues that general systems-theory is an appropriate lens to view ICC through because of its content free nature. She also identifies the importance of distinguishing between cultural competence and ICC. Just because one is competent in a particular cultural context does not necessarily imply ICC. So from Kim's point of view ICC is an internal capacity within each individual. Kim (1991) recognizes adaptability, "the capacity of an individual's internal psychic system to alter its existing attributes and structures to accommodate the demands of the environment" (p. 268), as an important component of ICC. Each individual, being an open system, has the goal of adapting to his/her environment. She goes further to explain that in an intercultural interaction a person's adaptability is displayed in his/her ability to accommodate different ways of new cultures, the ability to be versatile in unfamiliar cultural situations. Kim recognizes three dimensions of ICC as explained in terms of adaptability: the cognitive dimension (discerning meaning), the affective dimension (emotions involved with willingness to accommodate different cultural ways), and the operational dimension (behavioral flexibility and resourcefulness in an intercultural interaction).

Another theoretical approach used frequently in ICC literature is identity negotiation (Ting-Toomey, 1993). Ting-Toomey defines ICC as "the effective identity negotiation process between two or more interactants in a novel communication episode" (p. 73). Novelty, in turn, is characterized as a situation that contains "both unpredictability and challenge" (p. 73), and identity is defined as, "the mosaic sense of self-identification that incorporates the interplay of human, cultural, social, and personal

images as consciously or unconsciously experienced and enacted by the individual" (p. 74). Even though the identity negotiation model does not empirically define how effective identity negotiation is behaviorally enacted, it does provide a valuable framework for understanding the internal processes that the self experiences in an intercultural situation.

Another model that merits recognition is Spitzberg's (1997) integrative model of ICC that represents three levels of analysis: 1) the individual system (the individual's characteristics that contribute to competence in interactions), 2) the episodic system (factors that contribute to perceived competence in a particular interaction/context), and 3) the relational system (the characteristics of an individual that contribute to competence in relationships in general). Motivation (to communicate competently), knowledge (of how to communicate competently), and skills (behavioral enactment of knowledge) are identified as components of the individual system. Spitzberg claims that as each of these components increase, so does competence in communication. Spitzberg outlines his theory with propositions for each one of the three systems. These propositions are testable (if each variable is operationalized), and if they are empirically validated this promises to be a useful model of ICC.

Fox (1997) presents another theoretical model where "authentic" intercultural communication is possible. Fox explains that authentic communication "occurs when those involved are acting with the intention of reaching an understanding" (p. 89). Fox offers her criticism of some of Kim's and Gudykunst's work discussed earlier, saying that their approaches only take into account one side of the communication process, namely that of the individual that is experiencing the process. In other words, she argues that

these perspectives do not see intercultural communication for the two-way process that it is. Fox also points out that it is necessary to acknowledge the power dynamics that are at play in any cultural context in order to truly understand intercultural communication. The three-tier model of attempted intercultural communication has the following levels: Level 1 = Effective (successful) communication, Level 2 = Miscommunication ("mismatch of understanding"), and Level 3 = Systemically distorted communication (distortion of messages that arise from imbalances in power or ambiguous intentions). According to Fox, an individual views the world through lenses that are dictated by one's culture and worldview. The recognition of the existence of these "filters," Fox argues, paves the way to successful intercultural communication. Unfortunately, the three-tier model does not present a way of improving ICC because it requires a change in the existing power structure. Even if it changes, the prior power structure may merely be replaced by another. Therefore, even though Fox's model is helpful for understanding the role of power dynamics in intercultural communication, it does not offer solutions.

*Toward Culture-General Approaches to ICC*

The theoretical approaches that have been discussed so far reveal that research in the past has been mostly based on intercultural theories that were formulated from one cultural perspective. This is not to say that the researcher is not entitled to formulate a theory based on empirical observations and past research. However, a theory of intercultural communication that is constructed in this manner is limited in its explanatory ability because our perceptions are processed through our own socio-cultures filters and therefore a researcher's observations are subject to his/her own cultural predisposition. One has to, therefore, make every effort to ensure that a model of ICC is

not culturally biased, if the claims of that model are to be extended to more than one culture. The most appropriate way to ensure this is to incorporate multiple cultural perspectives in the very construction of the model (van de Vijver & Leung, 1997; Arasaratnam, 2007). There are some studies that employ specific methodological techniques to incorporate multiple cultural perspectives in the design. Examples of such studies are discussed in the following section.

*Empirical Examples of Culture-General Approaches*

In a study involving first generation Asian-Indian immigrants and Euro Americans in an organizational environment, Driskill and Downs (1995) investigated the differences in understanding of intercultural rules in these two groups of participants.  In this two-part study, the researchers first conducted in-depth interviews with participants and used the results to develop some scenarios that involved topics like time management, roles, duties, decision-making, and supervision. The researchers were particularly interested in discovering the rules of competence associated with these topics. The four scenarios that were developed from the first stage of the study were used as part of a survey in the second stage. Results from this study revealed that the intercultural communication rules which were identified in the case of each of the situational contexts (discussed in the scenarios) were geared towards socializing the immigrants into the dominant culture. What is interesting about this study is the two-step process used in the method. By designing the survey instrument based on the variables that emerged from the participants' interview responses, the researchers ensured that the scenarios were both relevant to and representative of the participants' everyday interactions in this intercultural corporate setting.

Another study that is worth discussing is one conducted by Dillon and McKenzie (1998), which investigated the influence of ethnicity on participants' self-reported perceptions of communication competence (defined as effective and appropriate communication), among other variables. Ethnicity was the independent variable, and the dependent variables were, approach to communication (willingness to communicate and readiness to listen), avoidance of communication (communication apprehension, receiver apprehension), and communication competence (measured using the Communicative Adaptability Scale). Data were collected using a survey instrument that consisted of scales to measure each variable. Results from the self-reports revealed that there were ethnic differences in the way communication competence was perceived. This further emphasizes the importance of developing studies that are based on culture-general theories that accommodate cultural variations in perceptions of communication competence.

An alternative theoretical lens to what is usually used in intercultural research was used by Knutson, Komolsevin, Chatiketu, and Smith (2003) in a study that involved participants in Thailand and United States. The researchers administered a Likert-type instrument that contained measures of rhetorical sensitivity to student participants in California and Bangkok (the instrument was administered in the participants' native languages). The results revealed that the American participants displayed higher levels of rhetorical sensitivity (continually evaluating the predispositions of others) and noble self ("A person who has a self-schema that emphasizes consistency above all else." Trenholm & Jenson, 2000, p.212) compared to participants in Thailand, while the Thai participants displayed higher levels of rhetorical reflection (rhetorical reflectors change their

presentation of self in each new situation because they do not have a consistent schema of self) compared to the Americans. One of the (tentative) conclusions at which the authors arrive is that noble self behavior could hinder ICC. As ICC was not one of the variables included in this study, this observation is not conclusive. However, this study points to a possible avenue for future research in ICC through the lens of rhetorical theory.

Arasaratnam and Doerfel (2005) offer another example of a culture-general approach to ICC research. In a study involving 37 participants who represented 15 countries, the authors asked the participants to describe ICC from each one's own perspective and used semantic network analysis to identify dominant themes in these descriptions. Five variables emerged from this analysis, and later Arasaratnam (2006) constructed a model of ICC based on these five variables (empathy, positive attitude towards people from other cultures, ability to listen, experience/training in intercultural communication, motivation to interact with people from other cultures), a model that is one of the few of its kind in existence, as it was built using a culture-general approach. This development is promising; however, the model is yet to be widely tested.

*Future Directions in ICC Research*

In their meta-analysis of research in ICC, Bradford, Allen and Beisser (2000) address past research in ICC in a cohesive manner, with the purpose of bringing clarity to conceptual approaches. The authors suggest that intercultural effectiveness and intercultural competence have often been operationalized as the same thing in past research, and so the findings from such studies can be viewed in a consolidated way. This type of analysis is helpful for setting up the pace of future research in ICC. As apparent from the brief review of literature in ICC research presented in this manuscript, there are

varied approaches to studying ICC, most of which fail to incorporate multiple cultural perspectives. The nature and frequency of intercultural communication has changed since some of the formative ideas about ICC were written in the 80s and 90s. Migration patterns and accessibility of global travel are such that it is becoming increasingly difficult for one to pin-point one's own cultural identity/affiliation. Given this, how does one identify an intercultural exchange? Perhaps it would be helpful to start thinking of intercultural communication in terms of cultural distance and its effects on message construction/interpretation instead of thinking in terms of national/ethnic boundaries or even in terms of cultural taxonomies (such as Hofstede's dimensions of culture, for example) for that matter. It is also necessary to incorporate a culture-general approach to instrument-development and study-design in intercultural research (Arasaratnam, 2007).

*Conclusion*

Past approaches to research in ICC and the conceptual challenges in studying this construct have been addressed in this discussion. It is clear that future research needs to adopt culture-general approaches to studying ICC not only because the results from such studies will be more versatile in their utility, but also because the increasing diversity within national groups points to the fact that we can no longer use simplistic ways of defining cultural boundaries. Given this, it is also beneficial to readdress precisely what we mean by intercultural communication. It is also important to consider how the advent of new technologies have influenced intercultural communication in a generation to which communicating with someone across the globe is mostly routine. It is time to take what has been accomplished in the past to the next level of innovative intercultural communication research.

References

Arasaratnam, L. A. (2006). Further testing of a new model of intercultural

communication competence. *Communication Research Reports, 23*, 93 - 99.

Arasaratnam, L. A. (2007). Empirical research in intercultural communication

competence: A review and recommendation. *Australian Journal of*

*Communication, 34*, 105-117.

Arasaratnam, L. A., & Doerfel, M. L. (2005). Intercultural communication competence:

Identifying key components from multicultural perspectives. *International*

*Journal of Intercultural Relations, 29*, 137-163.

Berger, C. R., & Calabrese, R. (1975). Some explorations in initial interactions and

beyond: Toward a developmental theory of interpersonal communication. *Human*

*Communication Research, 1*, 99-112.

Bradford, L., Allen, M., & Beisser, K. R. (2000). Meta-analysis of intercultural

communication competence research. *World Communication, 29*, 28-51.

Collier, M. J. (1989). Cultural and intercultural communication competence: Current

approaches and directions for future research. *International Journal of*

*Intercultural Relations, 13*, 287-302.

Dillon, R. K., & McKenzie, N. J. (1998). The influence of ethnicity on listening,

communication competence, approach, and avoidance. *International Journal of*

*Listening, 12*, 106-121.

Driskill, G. W., & Downs, C. W. (1995). Hidden differences in competent

communication: A case study of an organization with Euro-Americans and first

generation immigrants from India. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 19*, 505-522.

Fox, C. (1997). The authenticity of intercultural communication. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 21*, 85-103.

Gudykunst, W. B. (1993). Toward a theory of effective interpersonal and intergroup communication: An anxiety/uncertainty management (AUM) perspective. In R. L. Wiseman & J. Koester (Eds.), *Intercultural communication competence* (pp. 33-71). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Gudykunst, W. B. (1995). Anxiety/uncertainty management (AUM) theory. In R. L. Wiseman (Ed.), *Intercultural communication theory* (pp. 8-58). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Kim, Y. Y. (1986). Understanding the social structure of intergroup communication. In W. B. Gudykunst (Ed.), *Intergroup communication* (pp. 86-95). London: Edward Arnold.

Kim, Y. Y. (1991). Intercultural communication competence: A systems-theoretical view. In S. Ting-Toomey & F. Korzenny (Eds.), *Cross-cultural interpersonal communication* (pp. 259-275). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Kim, Y. Y. (1995). Cross-cultural adaptation: An integrative theory. In R. L. Wiseman (Ed.), *Intercultural communication theory* (pp. 170-193). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Kim, Y. Y. (2001). *Becoming intercultural: An integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Kim, Y. Y., & Ruben, B. D. (1988). Intercultural transformation: A systems theory. In *Theories in intercultural communication* (pp. 299-321). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Knutson, T. J., Komolsevin, R., Chatiketu, P., & Smith, V. R. (2003). A cross-cultural comparison of Thai and US American rhetorical sensitivity: implications for intercultural communication effectiveness. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 27*, 63-78.

Martin, J. N. (1993). Intercultural communication competence: A review. In R. L. Wiseman & J. Koester (Eds.), *Intercultural communication competence* (pp. 16-29). Newbury Park, CA: Sage. Ruben, B. D. (1976). Assessing communication competency for intercultural adaptation. *Group & Organization Studies, 1*, 334-354.

Ruben, B. D. (1977). Guidelines for cross-cultural communication effectiveness. *Group & Organization Studies, 2*, 470-479.

Ruben, B. D. (1978). Human communication and cross-cultural effectiveness. *Intercultural & International Communication Annual, 4*, 95-105.

Ruben, B. D. (1989). The study of cross-cultural competence: Traditions and contemporary issues. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 13*, 229-240.

Ruben, B. D., & Kealey, D. J. (1979). Behavioral assessment of communication competency and the prediction of cross-cultural adaptation. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 3*, 15-47.

Smith, L. R. (1999). Intercultural network theory: A cross-cultural paradigmatic approach to acculturation. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 23*, 629-658.

Spitzberg, B. H. (1997). A model of intercultural communication competence. In L. A.

   Samovar & R. E. Porter (Eds.), *Intercultural communication: A reader* (pp. 379-

   391). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Stephan, W. G., Stephan, C. W., & Gudykunst, W. B. (1999). Anxiety in intergroup

   relations: A comparison of anxiety/uncertainty management theory and integrated

   threat theory. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 23*, 613-628.

Ting-Tommey, S. (1993). Communicative resourcefulness: An identity negotiation

   theory. In R. L. Wiseman & J. Koester (Eds.), *Intercultural communication*

   *competence* (pp. 72-111). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

   Trenholm, S., & Jensen, A. (2000). *Interpersonal communication*. Belmont, CA:

      Wadsworth.

van de Vijver, F., & Leung, K. (1997). *Methods and data analysis for cross-cultural*

   *research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Yoshitake, M. (2002). Anxiety/uncertainty management (AUM) theory: A critical

   examination of an intercultural communication theory. *Intercultural*

   *Communication Studies, 11*, 177-193.

Yum, J. O. (1988). Network theory in intercultural communication. In Y. Y. Kim & W.

   B. Gudykunst (Eds.), *Theories in intercultural communication* (pp. 239-258).

   Newbury Park, CA: Sage.