COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH
FOR INTER-ASIAN COMMUNICATION

Trevor SARGENT

INTRODUCTION

English language teaching to non-native speakers is generally classified in two ways (Celce-Murcia, 1991). First of all there is Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) which refers to teaching English to learners — often immigrants and students — in a country where English is the native language. An example would be teaching Vietnamese immigrants English in the United States. Secondly, there is Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) which refers to teaching English to non-native speakers in a country where another language is the native language. An example would be teaching Japanese university students English in Japan. Learners in the former case have a great deal of support in their language learning from the immediate community. This is lacking for learners in the latter case. Nevertheless, in both cases learners are faced with learning a language other than their native language, and thus there are many similarities. As a result, both TESL and TEFL are often subsumed under the one title of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL).

TESOL these days involves more than language teaching. It is also concerned with the ability to *use* the language. That is, it is concerned with teaching skills in communicating with the language — usually referred to as communication skills — as well as knowledge about the language. Obviously knowledge of the language and skill in commuincating with it are related to each other. However, it is possible for someone with only limited knowledge of a language to be quite proficient at communicating and vice versa. Thus a generic term to describe the net result — the combination of linguistic knowledge and skill in communicating — has emerged. This is called *communicative competence* (Savignon, 1983).

Essentially, the communication skills associated with communicative competence in English are the kinds of skills that proficient communicators use. That is, in many ways these skills are descriptions of how the better communicators communicate. However, these skills are not necessarily acquired along with one's native language, and similar to learning public speaking skills, they may need to be

consciously learned and practiced like other skills such as driving a car or swimming. Nowadays, then, it is almost inevitable that learning at least some of these communication skills goes hand in hand with learning English for non-native speakers. They are becoming almost synonymous. In fact, the goal of most second or foreign language programs is for learners to become communicatively competent in the target language rather than simply 'learn the language' (Nunan, 1989).

This development has occurred mostly in TESL contexts such as England and the United States or in TEFL contexts in Europe. Indeed the traditional centers of English language learning have been England, Europe and North America. Here, learners have been mostly preparing to communicate with either native speakers of English, or other Europeans. That is, non-native speakers have been learning English for communicating with Britons, Americans, Canadians etc., or for communicating with other non-native Europeans such as Germans, French or Norwegians. The communication skills that have been taken for granted as automatically associated with communicating in English are, naturally, based on Western styles of communication. Hence, the fields of TESOL and communicative competence have traditionally and historically had a heavily Western orientation.

However, of course, English is much more international than that—it is also common in international communication in Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa as well. And it has been in some of these areas that concerns have been expressed about the role of a Western communication style in using English among non-Westerners. In Western Europe the natural connection between the English language and Western culture is taken for granted. However, is it absolutely necessary to use a Western style of communication when communicating in English—especially when the participants are non-native and non-Western?

Previously, when the goal of language programs was simply to learn the language, this was not an issue. Yet with the progress and development of research into communicative competence, the teaching of English has come to include an understanding of Western culture and Western communication skills as well. This is still clearly appropriate—if not essential—for communication with native speakers of English, yet for communication between non-Western non-native speakers — amongst Asians for example—in English, such appropriateness cannot realistically be taken for granted.

Now, with the development of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), there has been greater emphasis placed on how learners of English will eventually be using English, and preparing them for just that (Hutchinson, & Waters, 1987). For university students in Japan, there is evidence to suggest that they will be required to communicate more through written than oral English (JACET, 1990). However, there has been a growing consensus among educators here, that too little attention has been placed on oral communication skills in English, and thus there have been new curriculums developed for

upgrading the level of oral English education in schools and universities (Goold, Madeley, & Carter, 1993; Carter, Goold, & Madeley, 1993; Nozawa, 1992). In addition, other educators have pointed out that students are more likely, in the future, to be speaking English with people from Japan's neighboring Asian countries than with native speakers (Anderson, 1993).

The question about the suitability of a Western style of communication for inter-Asian communication in English assumes, of course, that there is such a thing as an 'Asian style of communication.' Or, to put it another way, that among different Asian cultures there are sufficient similarities in communication styles — which are also sufficiently different from Western styles — to make it worthwhile and meaningful to create such a distinction. To date there is little conclusive evidence to demonstrate that this is indeed the case, although some educators in Japan are expressing the need to research and investigate Japanese and Asian communication styles and making suggestions about what such styles might or might not look like (Miyahara, 1992). In any event, a clearer understanding of Asian communication styles is necessary before any concrete progress can be made toward the possibility of better preparing language learners in Asia for the role of communicating with other Asian neighbors in a language that is mutually foreign — English.

This paper will briefly outline the four major components of communicative competence as they stand at present as a description of how the better native speaking communicators communicate in English, before examining two components in particular — sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence as these two, when taken together, represent the basic components of communication skills. It will be shown how these two aspects of communicative competence in English are closely identified with Western culture. Furthermore, this paper will evaluate their appropriateness in Asia in general and in Japan in particular. This will be done from the perspective of the teaching context of Japanese students studying English at the university level.

A. COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

In general, most researchers and practitioners agree on four areas of proficiency that are needed in order to communicate with competence (Canale, & Swain, 1980; Savignon, 1983). They are grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. These four types of competency cannot be considered to be entirely independent of each other, yet it has been argued that it is possible to gain proficiency in different ones at different times (Tarone, & Yule, 1987).

Grammatical competence, as its name suggests, refers to knowledge of the linguistic aspects of the language. This primarily refers to the ability to *use* the language accurately and fluently, rather than the ability to *explain* the rules of the language. Discourse competence refers to the ability to elucidate meaning from the *connections* between sentences or utterances, as opposed to simply understanding the meaning of isolated sentences. These connections are usually implied from the context. While grammatical competence comes under research in the field of linguistics, discourse competence is an interdisciplinary field of inquiry which can be studied from such viewpoints as linguistics, literary criticism, psychology, sociology, philosophy and communication studies.

Sociolinguistic competence is also an interdisciplinary field of inquiry which looks at the social aspects of language use. Put in its simplest form, it refers to the *appropriateness* of speech. Finally there is strategic competence, which refers to *effectiveness*. While sociolinguistic competence looks at the ability to say the right thing at the right time, strategic competence looks at how well one is able to send and receive messages in communication. Yet, it goes beyond being a skill, and is often referred to as an attitude as well. This field is also the domain of many interrelated disciplines.

1. Sociolinguistic Competence

What is appropriate in any given language, is something that is acquired, usually without conscious awareness, during the socialization process in childhood. Native speakers of English may not be able to make explicit the rules of appropriateness, just as they are unable to be explicit about the grammatical rules of the language itself. However, they are able to use the rules of appropriateness just as well as they are able to use the rules of the language.

Yet, there is not one and only one appropriate way of speaking in English—even within one country such as America. What is appropriate in a black community is usually not appropriate in a white community and vice versa. If a white American were to try and imitate the 'jive' that is common amongst black people, in a black community, this would most likely be perceived as a derogatory mimic—a put-down—and could easily provoke a hostile reaction (Savignon, 1983). Similarly, for a non-native speaker, it is not necessary to attempt to copy native speaker appropriateness in minute detail. Indeed it could be counterproductive to communication. Native speakers often expect non-native speakers to be somewhat unfamiliar with these norms and make allowances for that. However, if a non-native speaker displayed awareness of some norms and not others, this could easily lead to confusion.

Appropriateness is not only about what to say and how to say it in any given situation, it is also about

what *not* to say at times. Indeed, it is probably more appropriate to maintain one's own distinctive role of non-native speaker. This is probably all the more true for communication between native speakers and non-native speakers who are from cultures which are relatively more 'distant' from each other — such as between Japanese and Americans. And of course, the corollary would be that when communicating with others from a culture that is 'closer' to one's own — such as between Japanese and Chinese — what is appropriate may be much clearer for the participants (Anderson, 1993; Thompson, 1987).

Ultimately, the issue of appropriateness cannot be separated from effectiveness, so after the next section on strategic competence, this issue will be raised again in the discussion on the relevance of communicative competence in Asia.

2. Strategic Competence

Just as nobody has a perfect or complete grasp of all aspects of the grammar of a language, nobody uses the language perfectly either. Native speakers employ a variety of strategies to compensate for linguistic deficiencies, and these can be very helpful to the second language learner as well. As more research is done on what constitutes effective use of the language, ways become apparent for native speakers to improve their own competence as well (Katz, & Lawyer, 1992; Knapp, & Miller, 1985; Knapp, & Vangelisti, 1992; Lange, & Jakubowski, 1976). Strategic competence has sometimes been referred to as survival or coping skills — what people do when they can't think of the right word, or need extra time to think, or think of a better way to say something they have just said (Savignon, 1983). Clearly, there is more to effective communication than that.

The most specific information on communication skills has — not surprisingly — emerged from the particular needs of such specialized areas as conflict resolution and negotiation (Fisher, & Ury, 1983; Gordon, 1992; Katz, & Lawyer, 1992; Maddux, 1988; Post, & Bennett, 1994). The communication process required to reach agreement, often involves specialized ways of sending and receiving messages. In these situations, sending messages is often referred to as assertiveness and self-disclosure. Assertiveness refers to the ability to stand up for one's own personal rights without violating other people's rights (Lange, & Jakubowski, 1976). Self-disclosure is closely related to this, and involves the ability to express one's personal views explicitly, directly and honestly. Self-disclosure carries with it the expectation that one's own views are important and relevant and that such views are to be taken seriously and respected. Thus, self-disclosure also conveys a sense of trust, and is often reciprocated on the part of the other. When that happens, trust is enhanced.
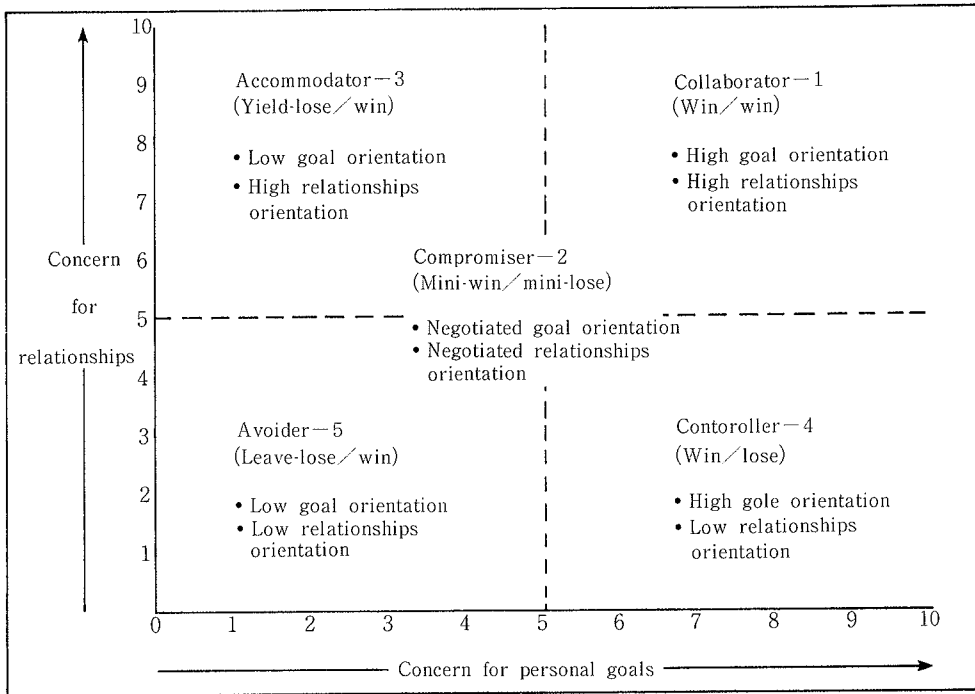
Diagram 1   Two-dimensional model of conflict. (Based on Robert R. Blake and Jane S. Mouton, *Corporate Excellence Through GRID Organization Development* **[Houston, Texas: Gulf Publishing Company, 1971], p. 11.)**

On the other hand, the specialized receiving of messages involves more than comprehending the literal meaning of the message, it also involves the ability to understand what the speaker intended to comm-unicate — a listening skill akin to reading-between-the-lines. Thus, while listening, it is sometimes necessary to send feedback to check and confirm one's understanding. This is known as active listening (Gordon, 1974; Sargent, 1990, 1993; Wajnryb, 1989).

One of the most important aspects of active listening is the attitude underlying its effective use — empathy (Savignon, 1983). This is why communicative competence is so related to attitude. Empathy is not a skill which can be simply learned and practiced. It is rather the ability to genuinely place oneself in the other's shoes and see things from that person's perspective. This requires a genuine interest in that person's affairs and implies a concern for that person's well being as well as one's own. People who are able to empathize with others are better at communicating with them too.

Thus, self-disclosure and empathy are two sides of the same coin. Only those who have had the experience of empathizing with others can trust that their own self-disclosure will be received with such an attitude. And only those who have experienced having their disclosure met with empathy, are

prepared for the self-disclosure of others.

There are, however, other effective ways of resolving differences as can be seen in diagram 1.

This suggests that aggression can also be effectively employed to bring about acquiescence either through yielding or avoidance. Aggression is typified by the willingness to violate others' rights in order to get one's own way. Yielding and avoiding are two ways of trying to cope with aggression.

B. COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN ASIA

According to Barnlund (1989), Japanese can be expected to be, more likely, avoiders or accommodators and, perhaps—though rarely—collaborators as well. On the other hand, he predicts that Americans will more readily opt for competition and compromise, and again, possibly choose collaboration, though less often. If this is true, then this points to significantly different communication styles between Americans and Japanese.

When the notions of effectiveness and appropriateness are considered together, it can be seen that in normal polite society in the West, it is inappropriate to show aggression in order to get one's own way at the expense of others. By the same token, yielding and avoiding are seen with equal distaste—usually associated with weakness. By contrast, assertiveness and empathy are seen as wholly compatible with Western liberal democratic values.

This does not mean that aggression does not exist. Nor does it mean that in all circles, aggression is seen as inappropriate. Underlying highly touted examples of 'success'and fulfillment of the 'American Dream' are countless examples of very effective and highly rewarded aggression. Indeed it is often seen in business circles as not only a virtue, but also a necessary condition for success. It is also widely associated with strength.

As Barnlund (1989) notes, Japanese are far more averse to open conflict than Americans. Goldman (1994) also points out that Japanese communicators are less likely to use confrontational strategies, and more likely to be patient and receiver∕listener-centered than their American counterparts in negotiation. Tezuka (1993) supports these findings and along with Miyahara (1992) emphasizes the significant role of empathy for communication among Japanese.

One immediate conclusion it seems fairly safe to draw, is that other Westerners will more closely resemble Americans than Japanese, and that other Asians will more closely resemble Japanese than Americans. This suggests that inter-Asian communication will be marked by far less competition, aggression or even assertiveness than inter-Western communication and at least as much, if not more

displays of empathy. In other words, Asians communicating with other Asians in English could be expected to have much less use for skills in aggression or even assertiveness, yet a great deal of need for ways to communicate emapthically. Indeed, Tezuka (1993) makes the case that the expectation of Japanese for a sense of oneness in communication with others, tends to discourage them from intercultural contact, and empathy can play a significant role in reversing this trend.

However, there is a still larger issue involved. The very assumption behind this model is that it is possible to demonstrate various styles of communication by contrasting concern for personal goals with concern for relationships. For example, controllers (competitors) are able to get their own way while damaging or even destroying the relationship. Although this may be true in the West, it is often somewhat self-defeating in Japan.

Of course, Japan and the West are not diametrically opposed, and many differences are basically differences in degree, more than kind. However, the use of a model that contrasts concern for personal goals with relational goals seems to be far less suitable and therefore much less revealing in Asia than in the West. This can be seen from a recent example in Japanese politics. Soon after Hata Tsutomu replaced Hosokawa Morihiro as prime minister, Ozawa Ichiro, co-leader of the Shinseito party, sought to enhance the power of his bloc in the coalition government by establishing the "Kaishin" parliamentary group. The Social Democratic Party of Japan (SDPJ) responded by leaving the coalition, thus creating a minority coalition government that severely weakened Ozawa's power base and effectively defeated his original purpose.

It could be argued from the Western point of view of the earlier model, that Ozawa's style is that of a controller — that he is more interested in his own goals and less interested in his relationships. However, this disregard for relational goals undermined his efforts to gain his own goals. It is worth noting that such a blunder only highlights Ozawa's lack of empathy in being able to anticipate how strongly the SDPJ would react to his move to establish "Kaishin" demonstrating that not all Japanese or Asians necessarily have a highly developed sense of empathy.

What this one example suggests, is that the whole model itself is inadequate for analyzing communication styles in Japan, and therefore most probably, Asia. In short, while it is clearly possible to distinguish between concern for one's own goals and concern for relational goals in the West, there is not such a clear distinction in Japan. Indeed there is considerable evidence that one is only able to pursue one's personal goals through careful attention and cultivation of one's relationships (Barnlund, 1975; Condon, 1984; Hall, & Hall, 1987).

The main point here is that not only is it obvious that Western and Japanese communication styles are

very different, but also, those differences are not yet clearly understood because models suitable to Western styles of communication have been used for trying to understand Japanese styles of communication. Although these Western models allow for a comparison, the comparison is distorted because the Western models fail to represent the Japanese styles as clearly as they represent Western styles. In order to understand Japanese styles of communication, Japanese models must be developed. While this will certainly make comparisons more difficult, it might encourage researchers to stop placing unwarranted confidence in the comparisons before them at present. In other words, although current comparisons between Western and Japanese styles of communication may be clearly expressed, such comparisons are highly suspect given the fact that the common ground for the comparison is highly suitable for representing Western styles, yet ill-suited to representing Japanese styles.

Inevitably, this points to comparisons between Japan and the West as becoming more complex in order to become more accurate. However, the major concern of this paper is with inter-Asian communication, and thus it may be possible to develop Asian models of communication which can appropriately and accurately represent the various national styles of communication well enough to allow for meaningful and enlightening comparisons within Asia. Such a development could allow for the development of an Asian model of communicative competence in English for inter-Asian communication.

C. CONCLUSION

This paper has looked at the use of English for inter-Asian communication from the viewpoint of the current theoretical framework of communicative competence. Clearly, this framework is insufficient to guide our understanding of what would constitute communicative competence in English between Asians. Many studies have looked at Japanese-American relations from almost every perspective conceivable, though mostly with a Western orientation. Only now is this one-sided approach being held responsible for the distortions it inevitably creates (Goldman, 1994). Distortions arising from the international application of Japanese models have also been noted (Kato, 1993). One study which looked at non-native communication between Asians and Mexicans still focused on the East-West aspect of international communication (Tarone, & Yule, 1987). Another study compared the styles of making requests between Japanese and Koreans, though the material was presented to the two groups in their respective native languages (Miyahara, & Kim, 1993). To date there do not seem to be any studies which look exclusively at East-East communication in English. In order to develop an Asian model of communicative competence in English, it will be necessary to first of all research and develop a model

that is capable of addressing the issue of Asian communication styles.

This may not be as straightforward as it sounds. Most of the research, hypothesizing and theory development in communicative competence has taken place in the West. It is quite possible that many Western models have been utilized in the East simply because these models are the only models available at present. Miyahara (1992) points out that the lack of suitable terms in the Japanese language for this kind of investigation is both a symptom and a cause of the ongoing problem. Not only linguistically, but also culturally, there seem to be few Japanese equivalents for the concepts so closely linked to communicative competence in the West.

However, there is even more to the issue than that.   Inter-Asian communincation is also inter-cultural communication. Western models of inter-cultural communication have also been found to be wanting when applied to East-West communication, and will thus be just as, if not more lacking when applied to East-East communication.

Inter-Asian communication is also international and this also raises the issue of international English. This issue looks at how it is decided who should be the final authority on what is acceptable and what is unacceptable English. Usually, this is decided by the host community. However, English has moved beyond the boundaries of its native speech communities. It truly 'belongs'to the international community now. Thus the international host community has the privelege and responsibility to develop the English language to better serve this global function, while preserving it's integrity and internal consistency in order to maintain it's ability to continue to fulfill this same role.

In order to better prepare Asian non-native learners of English for communication with other Asians as well as others in the world who choose to communicate in English, these issues will need to be addressed in greater depth and detail.

REFERENCE LIST

Anderson, F.E. (1993). The enigma of the college classroom: Nails that don't stick up. In *A handbook for teaching English at Japanese colleges and universities. ed.* P. Wadden. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 101-110.

Barnlund, D. (1973). *Public and private self in Japan and the United States.* Tokyo: Simul Press.

Barnlund, D. (1989). *Communicative styles of Japanese and Americans: Images and realities.* Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Blake, R.R., & J.S. Mouton. (1971). *Corporate excellence through GRID organization development.* Houston: Gulf Publishing.

Canale, M. & M. Swain. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. In *Applied Linguistics.* 1, 1-47.

Carter, N., R. Goold, & C. Madeley. (1993). The new Mombusho guidelines, part two. In *The Language Teacher.* 27 (11),3-7.

Celce-Murcia, M. (1991). *Teaching English as a second or foreign language.* Boston: Heinle and Heinle.

Condon, J.C. (1984). *With respect to the Japanese.* Yarmouth MA: Intercultural Press.

Fisher, R., & W. Ury. (1983). *Getting to yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in.* New York: Penguin.

Goldman, A. (1994). The centrality of "Ningensei" to Japanese negotiating and interpersonal relationships: Implications for U.S.-Japanese communication. In *International Journal of Intercultural Relations.* 18 (1), 29-54.

Goold, R., C. Madeley, & N. Carter. (1993). The new Mombusho guidelines. In *The Language Teacher.* 27 (6), 3-5.

Gordon, T. (1974). *Teacher effectiveness training.* New York: Random House.

Gordon, T. (1992). *No-lose conflict resolution training: Participant workbook.* Solana Beach: Effectiveness Training Inc.

Hall, E.T., & M. Reed Hall. (1987). *Hidden differences: Doing business with the Japanese.* New York: Doubleday.

Hutchinson, T., & A. Waters. (1987). *English for specific purposes: A learning centered approach.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

JACET (1990). *General survey of English language teaching at colleges and universities in Japan: College graduates' views.* Tokyo: Keio University.

Kato, J. (1993). Perspectives on the study of international comparison-Beyond "Japanese Model"theories-. In *Intercultural Communication Studies.* 6, 87-103.

Katz, N.H. & J.W. Lawyer. (1985). *Communication and conflict resolution skills.* Dubuque, IO: Kendall Hunt.

Knapp, M.L., & G.R. Miller. (1985). *Handbook of interpersonal communication.* Beverly Hills: Sage.

Knapp, M.L., & A.L. Vangelisti. (1992). *Interpersonal communication and human relationships.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Lange, A.J., & P. Jakubowski. (1976). *Responsible assertive behavior.* Champaign, IL: Research Press.

Maddux, R.B. (1988). *Successful negotiation.* Los Altos, CA: Crisp Publications.

Miyahara, A. (1992). Cross-cultural views on interpersonal communication competence: A preliminary study proposal. In *Human Communication Studies.* 20, 129-143.

Miyahara, A., & M. Kim (1993). Requesting styles among "Collectivist" cultures: A comparison between Japanese and Koreans. In *Intercultural Communication Studies.* 6, 104-128.

Nozawa, S. (1992). Expert wants stress on communicative skills. *The Daily Yomiuri.* 16 April, Tokyo.

Nunan, D. (1989). *Designing tasks for the communicative classroom.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Post, F.R., & R.J. Bennett. (1994). Use of the collaborative collective bargaining process in labor negotiations. In *The International Journal of Conflict Management.* 5 (1), 34-61.

Sargent, T. (1990). Communication is more than just talk. In *Yashiro Gakuin Daigaku Kiyo.* 36, 19-34.

Sargent, T. (1992). Conflict resolution in the communicative classroom. In *The Language Teacher.* 27 (5), 25-26.

Savignon, S.J. (1983). *Communicative competence: Theory and classroom practice.* Reading MA: Addison-Wesley.

Tarone, E., & G. Yule (1987). Communication strategies in East-West interactions. In *Discourse across cultures: Strategies in world Englishes.* ed. L.E. Smith,49-65. New York: Prentice Hall.

Tezuka, C. (1993). Communication among Japanese from the perspective of Amae and its implications for their intercultural encounters. In *Intercultural Communication Studies.* 6, 21-44.

Wajnryb, R. (1989). Active listening: An effective strategy in language learning. In *The Language Teacher.* 13 (7), 13-14.