Foreign Language Learning and Cross-Cultural Preparedness

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Introduction

Learning foreign languages has long been associated with learning the respective cultures that are associated with them as well. The terms "language" and "culture" are often used to refer to separate entities, yet, phenomenologically, they are inextricably intertwined. Most education programs designed to train foreign language teachers include a component on the cultural aspects of the target language society. This is in recognition of the vital role that cultural factors play in the overall development of communicative competence by foreign language learners in the target language. Research findings in such areas as cross-cultural adjustment, however, show how vital cross-cultural preparedness is for successful cross-cultural interaction as well. Yet, the diverse nature of this area and the extent of its coverage raise questions over the degree to which language programs alone — even with a target culture component — can be expected to adequately prepare learners for the reality and complexity of successful cross-cultural interaction.

Last century bore witness to a steady increase in the amount of contact between people from different cultures, and as we head into this new century this trend appears set to continue. The relevance of issues related to cross-cultural interaction is, therefore, only likely to increase in the foreseeable future. In Japan there have been expressions of concern about a certain lack of—and therefore apparent need for—"internationalization," especially in educational settings. Discussions that have taken place under this umbrella term have not always shown signs of either cohesion or collective comprehension. The term "internationalization" has been used in so many different contexts and in so many different ways that it has not proven useful to describe a commonly agreed upon or specific phenomenon. In fact, the term has taken on certain political overtones as a result of its frequent use in ideologically-charged circumstances. Not surprisingly, formal studies in cross-cultural issues have tended to avoid such a general term, and instead have operationalized more specifically defined terms such as cross-cultural adjustment.

It should be noted, however, that the term "internationalization" did not emerge from a vacuum, and that interest in preparedness for cross-cultural interaction is widespread in many parts of the world. Japan is certainly no exception in this regard.

The purpose of this article is to review research in areas related to such preparedness, in order to better consider the relevance of cross-cultural preparedness for foreign language learners and the extent to which courses dedicated to foreign language learning can be expected to take such developments into account.

Dunnett, Dubin and Lezberg (1990), as well as Platt (1989) offer useful suggestions on how to take an intercultural perspective in an English as a foreign language (EFL) or English as a second language

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(ESL) classroom. The first article, however, focuses more on the ESL context than the EFL context, such as Japan. In Japan, the lack of a target culture context makes the classroom itself more culturally loaded (Brown, 1994). In order to ask questions about what steps foreign language teachers in Japan should be expected to take in relation to cross-cultural preparedness, if indeed they should take any, an examination of relevant research findings in such related areas as acculturation and cross-cultural adaptation needs to be made first. After all, "attempts to "solve" the problem of cultural adaptation appear to have generally sidetracked or superseded efforts to understand the "problem" itself" (Anderson, 1994, p. 298). Examples of this can be seen in the way discussions and activities in this general area have at times taken place — even with the best of intentions — on the basis of opinions and hearsay rather than empirical evidence. At times, this results in ideologically-driven prescriptive remedies being advanced to solve a "problem" that has been defined largely by the popular imagination. Thus, although this article is written with the eventual best interests of foreign language learners in mind, it is primarily concerned with the research literature that can provide an empirical basis for better understanding key issues related to preparedness for cross-cultural interaction on the basis of what has been discovered about cross-cultural adjustment, which can, in turn, provide a suitable foundation for informed discussion of classroom issues.

This review is not intended to be exhaustive, but will be representative of the literature in this area. First of all this will look at two of the main sources of research in this general area—the acculturation literature and the expatriation literature. Secondly, a brief historical overview of recent trends in research in this general area will serve as a backdrop for outlining some of the more relevant consequences of the literature for foreign language instruction. It should be pointed out, however, that this review is restricted to English language articles, with all the attendant limitations and biases that come with that (see Segall et al., 1999, p. 225, on the limitations of Western-dominated research in cross-cultural psychology, and Goldman, 1994, on the limitations of using Western-developed models of communication in Japan).

Acculturation and Expatriation

There are several different research traditions that deal with the general area of adapting to and interacting within another culture, two of the largest being acculturation and expatriation. The acculturation literature, which looks at "the psychological adaptations made by individuals when they move between cultures" emerges largely from cross-cultural psychology, which also traditionally focuses on "the comparative examination of psychological similarities and differences across broad ranges of cultures" (Berry, 1990, p. 232). The expatriation literature on the other hand, emerges primarily from such fields as international business management and organizational leadership — especially of multinational organizations. The acculturation literature takes a broader perspective in that it includes many kinds of cross-cultural contact. In contrast, the expatriation literature, focuses more narrowly on the phenomenon of, usually, company managers being sent overseas, largely to a subsidiary, for certain periods of time. The focus of this literature can be seen in the way it is often marked by introductions that point out how much time and money organizations lose when such managers "fail" in their over-

seas assignment and return home early, and often describe experimental attempts to identify the key causes of these failures and then suggest possible remedies.

While the acculturation literature is wide open, dealing with any and all cultures, the expatriation literature in effect is largely limited to those developed countries which have large enough economies to support companies with overseas subsidiaries. This review is biased toward the expatriation literature primarily because it focuses on one of the predominant ways in which many Japanese encounter other cultures outside Japan. Even within the English language expatriation literature, it should be noted, there are a significant number of studies that focus on Japanese nationals as expatriates abroad (Black, 1990; Nicholson & Imaizumi, 1993; Schneider & Asakawa, 1995; Stening & Hammer, 1992). The acculturation and expatriate literature bases actually come from divergent academic traditions and although they are beginning to inform each other and some cross-referencing between them is taking place, they retain their quite distinct research agendas.

Some Historical Trends

Although cross-cultural contact goes back to the beginnings of human societies, it has only recently become a subject of systematic investigation. Some of the work done in the late 1800s and first part of the 1900s still has a major influence on thinking in the field; however, the introduction of the Peace Corps in the US in the early 1960s provides a convenient point of departure.

Some volunteers began to return to the US experiencing certain difficulties, and were often diagnosed as suffering from "culture shock." This term had just been coined reminiscent of the shellshocked soldiers who had returned from World War II, and thus the phenomenon was looked at primarily from a psycho-medical standpoint. Volunteers were seen as having a certain condition that needed to be treated in order for them to be cured.

Along with the notion of culture shock, was the U-curve hypothesis (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Sojourners supposedly experience their greatest difficulties, culture shock, at the bottom of the U, after an initial honeymoon period in the new culture, and prior to eventually recovering their equilibrium — the two high points of the U. This observation was the basis of the W — curve hypothesis as well, which added the difficulties and then recovery that are associated with repatriation (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Research results have been mixed, but have mostly failed to support either theory beyond a superficial description of mood levels associated with extended overseas travel (Black & Mendenhall, 1991; Kealey, 1989; Ward et al., 1998).

At about the same time, it was thought that certain personality traits might render some people "immune" from culture shock and a number of studies were launched to investigate. Some studies also tried to identify the particular personality characteristics that might be responsible. This initial effort did not meet with much success, and the idea of personality determinants was more or less shelved for a while.

As a result, focus moved away from internal personal issues to external environmental factors. The particular sites that volunteers were sent to were examined and compared for clues as to why some people found their experiences unbearable, while others did not. This approach bore some fruit, for

example, in being able to show that relative culture distance does seem to be salient in terms of the degree of overseas "success" that could be predicted. Eventually, personal and environmental factors were combined into an interactionist approach, which looked at the particular nature of the target site and tried to match that to certain individual traits. It has been found for example that while one personality characteristic, extroversion, showed a positive correlation with sojourner adjustment in some studies, it showed a negative correlation in others (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). This strongly suggests that those who score high on extroversion in personality tests are likely to adjust well to some cultures, but not others. One of the better known of the approaches that sought to take this into account is the contingency approach advanced by Tung (1981, 1998). She suggested that the selection of particular expatriates, along with their particular training, be made contingent upon certain characteristics of the target site.

Following that, a number of approaches have been developed, each reflecting a different way of envisioning what goes on at the core of the experience of living in a new culture. For example, Gudykunst (1998) and a number of different colleagues have focused on uncertainty reduction as a principal challenge for sojourners in foreign cultures. Another approach, advanced by Osland (1995), utilized the journey taken by mythical heroes as outlined by Campbell (1968) as a metaphor for seeing the experience as one of fundamental personal transformation. Bennett (1993) describes a different developmental process, from ethnocentricity to ethnorelativism. One highly influential approach looks at the experience primarily as a social learning experience, often utilizing Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, even though it is not primarily cross-cultural at all (Black & Mendenhall, 1991).

Not surprisingly, there have also been suggestions that too much is often made of the culture dimension (Acton & Walker de Felix, 1990; Anderson, 1994). Life everywhere constantly presents new and sometimes unique circumstances and situations that individuals learn to adjust to (or not) and living in a foreign culture is just another instance of this widespread human experience. People have to adjust to working with other people who have different personalities, and as cultures represent a kind of group personality (Hofstede, 1984, 1997) the challenge of adjusting to people from different cultural backgrounds is not particularly unusual. Such a view suggests focusing on the dynamics that are involved in the process of human adjustment itself.

At the same time, the value of simply spending some time "hanging out" in another culture as a means of getting prepared for subsequent more meaningful interaction, should not be under-estimated, and has become standard practice in at least one multi-national corporation (Rhinesmith, 1996). Indeed, as discussed below, if the initiative to do so is personal it may be even more effective. However, in and of itself this can be inefficient, if not inadequate, over the long term as shown by the limitations found in the so-called "contact hypothesis" (Brewer, 1996).

Recently, much of the expatriate research has coalesced around frameworks and models that usually include the three basic phases of, pre-departure selection and training, in-post mentoring and adjustment, and then repatriation.

Relevant Findings in the Literature and Their Consequences

First of all, there is some lack of uniformity in the literature. Reviews have found conflicting and even contradictory results (Thomas, 1998). Also, serious questions have been raised about the limitations of the current "linear" paradigm under which most research in the behavioral sciences has been conducted (Mendenhall & Macomber, 1997), and calls have been made to utilize a non-linear paradigm that is seen as more amenable to dealing with complexity. It is interesting to note that Larsen-Freeman (1997) did some exploratory work in applying this paradigm to second language acquisition.

Secondly, the plethora of personal traits and attributes that have been found to be associated with cross-cultural effectiveness has become so large as to be unwieldy (Deller, 1997; Kealey, 1989). Indeed, Ones and Viswesvaran (1997) outline over 100 criteria—some of which are repeated—from the 37 studies they review. Ironically, this does actually support two other related findings. On the one hand, this supports the notion that declaring personality variables to be not relevant may have been premature, as indeed some people do seem to be more pre-disposed for cross-cultural effectiveness than others (Black, Morrison, & Gregersen, 1999; Ones & Viswesvaran, 1997; Rhinesmith, 1996). On the other hand, the efficacy of training in general seems to have been well and truly overstated (Mendenhall & Macomber, 1997), although it is those people who are more pre-disposed toward cross-cultural effectiveness that are usually better able to take advantage of training (Black, Gregersen, Mendenhall, & Stroh, 1999; Black, Morrison, & Gregersen, 1999).

Thirdly, it is now widely accepted that there are both psychological and sociocultural dimensions of acculturation and adjustment (Aycan, 1997; Selmer, 1999; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001; Ward & Kennedy, 1994). Psychological adjustment focuses on the well-being of the sojourner, while sociocultural adjustment deals with the behavioral skills associated with effective interaction with locals in the host culture. Considering the findings expressed above, this suggests that for intending expatriates, selection should probably focus more on psychological suitability, and training on developing the sociocultural skills of those who are found to be suited to cross-cultural contact.

A fourth point is that strategic planning for international operations in multi-national corporations currently far outstrips the availability of people with a sufficiently developed "global mindset" capable of carrying out those plans. This applies to both onshore and offshore aspects of the operations (Rhinesmith, 1996; Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1990; Black, Morrison, & Gregersen, 1999). While the acculturation literature has focused on such dimensions as integration, assimilation, separation and marginalization to understand people from one culture living with people from another (Berry, 1990), the expatriate literature is beginning to investigate the idea of people being able to develop a "global mindset" that is not necessarily culture specific. Researchers are currently in the process of trying to determine what attributes identify those people who have the greatest pre-disposition to develop such a mindset and are currently looking at a cluster of characteristics, namely, perspective, character, and savvy which appear to be linked to a single core characteristic — inquisitiveness (Black, Morrison & Gregersen, 1999).

Somewhat independent of mainstream expatriate research, which is dominated by research in the US, Europe and Asia, a significant new development has been reported in terms of the effects of self-

initiated sojourns — a fifth point. Within the field of career research, such sojourns have been identified as an overseas experience (OE), as opposed to the more traditional expatriate assignment (EA). An OE is marked by personal initiative in both choosing to undertake a sojourn overseas and planning it. This is somewhat characteristic of how many New Zealanders and Australians end up venturing overseas, (Inkson, Arthur, Pringle, & Barry, 1997). EA refers to the more common practice of organizations sending people overseas and is characteristic of how many North Americans end up working overseas. Here, the initiative and planning lie primarily with the organization. Most of the expatriate literature looks primarily at the prototypical EA, and there is evidence that a relative lack of initiative on the part of EA sojourners has been a factor that has contributed to a number of them not adjusting well to living overseas and in many cases, premature repatriation (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001).

The research by Inkson et al. (1997) shows that when there is a degree of preparation and planning involved, the effects of OE sojourns can impact on individual careers even more than EAs. This poses a question about a possible link between the initiative involved in an OE and the kind of inquisitiveness that is associated with the development of a global mindset — a proposition this author is currently investigating. Anecdotal evidence supports this contention in the form of the recruitment policies of such multi-national corporations as Colgate-Palmolive where there is a deliberate attempt to recruit young graduates who have gone overseas for an extended period of time for work/cultural experience and often learn a foreign language as well, in order to boost the numbers of those who can be drawn on for future — possibly international — leadership roles (Black, Morrison, & Gregersen, 1999).

Finally, neither the acculturation nor the expatriate literature focuses a great deal of attention on foreign language ability, and the research that does has offered conflicting results at times (Thomas, 1998). However, some interesting discoveries have been made — especially for foreign language teachers and learners. A number of studies have shown a significant relationship between local language fluency and such things as psychological well-being, adjustment and general satisfaction (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Yet, many of these studies have focused on English as a foreign language, and this pattern is not necessarily repeated for other languages. According to Ward et al. (2001) one researcher "reported that increased fluency in Japanese was associated with decreased satisfaction in foreign students in Japan" (p. 90). This researcher attributed this finding to heightened expectations of bilingual foreigners for friendship. Foreign language ability has also been shown to be associated with greater stress, (Shaffer, Harrison, & Gilley, 1999) and an integrationist approach to living overseas which necessarily involves local language fluency has been found to be associated with lowered psychological adjustment (Ward & Kennedy, 1994).

One of the most commonly expressed explanations for this negative correlation between local language ability and cross-cultural adjustment is that being actively engaged in a foreign culture is apparently more demanding both psychologically and socioculturally than simply observing it from the sidelines. In many foreign language contexts it is those expatriates with some degree of foreign language ability who have to engage in more cross-cultural interaction than those without such foreign language ability and this in itself can be stress-inducing. The expatriates without foreign language ability often confine themselves to pockets of similar expatriates and thus experience less need for psychological adjustment to the host culture. In some instances, it is the expatriates with foreign language ability

who end up in between the locals and the non-fluent expatriates. They may even have to do some negotiating between these two groups and end up not really identifying with either, and actually being viewed with some degree of suspicion by both groups as well. It should be pointed out, of course, that this is hardly a recommendation for not learning the local foreign language as generally this provides greater personal returns as well. This can take the form of personal insights into another culture and experiencing cross-cultural interaction and adjustment first-hand. Indeed, such experiences could be the precursor to the development of the kind of global mindset discussed above. However, this research clearly demonstrates that it is difficult to generalize from one particular local language in one particular setting to another local language and setting. In fact, the circumstances in different cultural environments may be virtually opposite.

Issues for Foreign Language Instruction

One of the pressing needs for English and other foreign languages in Japan is for international communication. That does not have to take place outside Japan, although in many instances it will. In either instance, there are compelling reasons for foreign language teachers to wish to help their students prepare for such cross-cultural interaction along with their foreign language development. Within reason, there is a fairly broad scope of such preparation that foreign language teachers in Japan can undertake, Brown's admonition that learning a foreign language can be "almost simple when compared to the complexity of catching on to a seemingly never-ending list of pragmatic constraints" notwithstanding (1994, p. 231).

Thus, it is also important to recognize that there are certain limitations that need to be kept in mind. For example, it is now clear that some people are more pre-disposed toward cross-cultural interaction than others. This raises questions, for example, about the appropriateness of focusing on cross-cultural competence in, for example, large compulsory language courses. Also, clearly there is no substitute for the learning that takes place when in direct contact with another culture, and this raises questions about what can be hoped to be achieved in any foreign language classroom. In addition, the learning that takes place within the target culture often involves the crucial step of in-post mentoring over a fairly extended period of time that covers not only sociocultural skills, but also increased self-awareness and psychological development.

Foreign language teachers who are interested in incorporating aspects of cross−cultural preparedness into their language classes, have to make a realistic assessment of the resources they have available, and what are readily accessible, as well as those resources — such as specific training in certain areas for themselves—that they would like to acquire. Many of these resources might not be immediately accessible to many language teachers; yet, even for novice teachers, there are still some important resources that are immediately available.

Just as many organizations engage in certain pre-departure training activities, some similar activities can also take place in the foreign language classroom. Hofstede (1997) points out that although cultures display a lot of variety, "there is a structure in this variety which can serve as a basis for mutual understanding" (p. 4). The structure he refers to has dimensions upon which different cultures can be

compared, such as, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism and masculinity. With this in mind, Ferraro (1998) points out that with experience it is possible to become reasonably well oriented in a new culture quite quickly by focusing on such dimensions and locating the target culture on them. This suggests a highly accessible departure point for language teachers — showing on these dimensions where different cultures are located relative to one another, and what one can expect as a result. Some of the better known such frameworks are Hofstede's (1984, 1997) and Schell and Solomon's (1997). Although Trompenaars' (1993) framework is also very well known, Hofstede (1996) reports that it suffers from certain shortcomings that raise significant questions over its validity.

However the experience at the core of cross-cultural interaction is envisaged — i.e. overcoming culture shock, reducing uncertainty, becoming ethnorelative, advancing social learning, undergoing personal transformation or developing a global mindset—an enormous amount of groundwork and development would be needed if preparation for such an experience is expected to be taught in a foreign language classroom. Therefore, the greatest usefulness of these various approaches for foreign language teachers probably lies in the direction they point, and thus the direction that classroom learning can aim toward. While, for example, the development of a global mindset is a considerable undertaking that seems to depend as much on pre-disposition as opportunity and experience, there is no reason why learners can not be made aware of developments in this area, and given some sort of opportunity to objectively reflect on their own potential in this regard.

A brief overview of the field of cross-cultural adaptation could also alert learners to the kinds of experiences they are likely to encounter should they venture abroad for any extended period of time. Although it would be premature to try and offer the kind of mentoring that can take place during sojourns, it could be instructive for learners to be made aware of at least some of the kinds of internal and external challenges they might likely face. One valuable resource in this regard could be the expatriate paradoxes that Osland (1995) made such effective use of in her investigation. These draw attention to apparent contradictions that are often associated with the expatriate experience. For example, living overseas for a while can allow sojourners to be able to feel at ease anywhere, while at the same time feeling like they actually belong nowhere. Or, with extended overseas experience sojourners often develop a more "worldminded" viewpoint, and yet at the same time become much clearer about and sure of their own personal value system and view on life. Not only do these paradoxes alert would-be sojourners to some of the specific issues they are likely to face, they also raise awareness of the kinds of disconcerting ambiguities that sojourners often encounter.

Conclusion

These studies collectively indicate that developments in cross-cultural adjustment point toward the need for cross-cultural preparation to be an integral part of any program that includes target language and target culture instruction and intends to prepare learners for some degree of cross-cultural interaction. Instruction in cross-cultural preparation presupposes both theoretical and experiential components, and integration between them. Not only would this kind of instruction offer an essential component to any program designed for international preparedness, but also its presence would allow foreign

language teachers to resist the ever-present expectation to be able to meet all the cross-cultural preparation needs of their foreign language learners. Instead, they would be able to focus on the already sufficiently demanding task of imparting the foreign language, in the knowledge that their learners' cross-cultural preparation needs were being met through instruction dedicated primarily to that purpose.

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