Intercultural Competence and Intercultural Education:

Reflection and Expectation

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Abstract

This essay is a critical analysis of the current intercultural education, aimed at locating the problems and suggesting possible solutions. Based on a comprehensive investigation of the extant intercultural theories and conceptualizations of intercultural competence, I find two problems with intercultural education: 1) the intercultural education has been inappropriately reduced to individuals, that is, whether the intercultural communication can be successful is solely attributed to individual competence; 2) the intercultural education has been ignoring (consciously or unconsciously) the power relations embedded in intercultural communication.

To address these problems, given that there is inherent power difference in intercultural encounters, I suggest that it is urgent for scholars and educators to acknowledge the existence of power in intercultural communication and to perceive intercultural communication in the context of social power. As a consequence, the education of intercultural communication needs a new direction. I argue that critical pedagogy can help intercultural education go beyond the cultivation of individual competence and deal with the social power relations in the context of intercultural communication. At the end, I invite scholars to be reflexive on theorizing intercultural communication. After all, theories determine the direction of education and practices.
Intercultural Competence and Intercultural Education: Reflection and Expectation

Introduction

Martin and Nakayama (2004) note that power is historically and inevitably embodied in intercultural communication. They state, “[p]ower is also the legacy, the remnants of the history that leave cultural groups in particular positions. We are not equal in our intercultural encounter, nor can we ever be equal” (p. 123). Indeed, power as “control over the distribution of desired resources by virtue of one’s structural given position in a social organization” (Forte, 1998, p.30) exists everywhere and at every level of intercultural communication. Having a glance at the current intercultural communications, we can see that as part of globalized competition, mass human migration, endless local conflicts and hostility, and even our daily life, intercultural communication never takes place in a power vacuum. Actually in the above areas, social injustice, inequalities, and differentiation are the order of the day. Unfortunately, power has been a muted issue in research, education/training, and practices of intercultural communication. Reviewing literature on these topics, the issue of power has seldom been touched upon. Gudykunst (2002) points out that the issue of power has not been incorporated in many theories of intercultural communication constructed to date. In fact, to some extent, the academic research, education/training, and practices of intercultural communication are reinforcing the dynamic of power, instead of diminishing it. I can draw on my own experience as a trainee of intercultural communication to support my viewpoint.

When I knew that I had an opportunity to have my Master’s program in the United States, I registered for a course named “Cultivation of Intercultural Competence”. This course was designed for persons who were going to English-speaking countries (mainly the UK and the
USA) to work or to study. I was studying very hard because my trainer told me that my success in another country is enormously subject to my “intercultural competence”. In every class, whenever the trainer got an opportunity, she emphasized the importance of intercultural competence. She said this competence is essential not only to our successful intercultural communication but also to “successful accommodation into the mainstream culture.” I asked, “What is the mainstream culture?” My trainer answered, “The mainstream culture, in the USA, mainly refers to white middle-class culture.” My trainer’s instruction was highly informative and as I mentioned above, I studied very hard. Thus, I learned a plenty about the culture of white middle-class. Whether I am knowledgeable about the culture of the mainstream culture is a criterion for my intercultural competence. However, my trainer said only having knowledge is not enough. I also needed to learn how to apply the knowledge to reality, that is, to adjust my communication behaviors and styles to have myself “accommodated” into this culture.

I believe my story will not surprise intercultural scholars and educators because the course I had is not a unique one. Since the 1960s, scholars and educators/trainers of intercultural communication have been calling for adaptation, assimilation, and accommodation. Intercultural competence, as the key to adaptation, has been the ultimate goal of the whole system of intercultural education, training, and advising. For decades this system has tended to give precedence to knowledge of the target culture, which is translated into intercultural competence. Individuals’ intercultural competence determines whether there will be successful intercultural communication. To think reversely, any breakdown of intercultural communication should be attributed to individuals’ incompetence. That is, it is
individuals’ disabilities in language and cultural knowledge that leads to the failed communication.

Moreover, when talking about cultures based on nation-states, scholars have tended to generalize the culture of one group, in most cases, the culture of the mainstream group to represent the whole national culture. For example, in my intercultural communication class, the white middle-class culture is perceived to be American culture. For another example, when I was teaching Chinese culture, I found that people basically use the culture of the Han group to represent Chinese culture. China in fact is composed of fifty six ethnic groups. Han is only one of them, although as the dominant one, it is often perceived to be the majority group while other groups are labeled as the minority. Guilherme (2002) points out a cause of this trend may be that critical awareness is quite obvious when people are dealing with their home culture but is less evident when it concerns foreign culture teaching or learning. This situation has problems at two levels. First, assuming that the sojourners should adapt themselves to the target culture jeopardizes their identities and consequently suppresses the diversity by eliminating the difference of the two cultures. Second, it suppresses the cultural diversity within target cultures by muting the non-mainstream cultures.

To sum up, through reflecting on my lived experience and the past and current situation of the intercultural communication education, I find two problems: 1) the intercultural education has been inappropriately reduced to individuals, that is, whether the intercultural communication can be successful is solely attributed to individual competence; 2) the intercultural education has been ignoring (consciously or unconsciously) the power relations embedded in intercultural communication. In this paper, I discuss and analyze these two
problems drawing on intercultural theories, practices of intercultural education, and
definitions of intercultural competence. I suggest that we perceive intercultural
communication in the context of social power. So consequently, we need a new direction—a
critical direction to address what kind of intercultural competence and what kind of
intercultural education we need so as not to buttress the social and cultural/intercultural
inequality. In this sense, education of intercultural communication should go beyond the
cultivation of individual competence to reflect on its mission and pay attention to the power
relation in the context of intercultural communication.

Critical Analysis of Intercultural Communication Theories

Since intercultural theories function as frameworks for education, they determine the
direction of intercultural education and training. Therefore, I allot the first part of discussion
to some substantive intercultural theories that aspire to explain or predict intercultural
communication education and conceptualizations of intercultural competence.

Gudykunst (2002) summarizes fifteen theories and divides them into five categories:
theories focusing on effective outcomes, theories focusing on accommodation and adaptation,
theories focusing on communication networks, and theories focusing on acculturation and
adjustment. Among these fifteen intercultural theories, Orbe’s (1998) co-cultural theory
seems to be the only one that addresses the power and inequality in intercultural encounters.
Gudykunst (2002) confesses that most of the existing theories do not touch upon power factors.
More unfortunately, those theories that function as theoretical foundations for intercultural
education have been overlooking the power issue; that is, they have put much weight on
individual level and ignored the two cultures’ difference in power, for example, Kim’s (1995,
Kim’s (1995, 2001) cross-cultural adaptation theory results from her twenty-five-year research on immigrants to the USA. Ting-Toomey’s (2005) identity negotiation theory is originated from the face-negotiation theory. Kim’s theory attempts to explain and predict immigrants’ (to the USA) process of adapting themselves to the host culture. Ting-Toomey’s theory assumes that individuals from minority groups need to obtain culture–sensitive knowledge and competent identity-based communication skills. In this way, they can have the feeling of being understood, being respected, and being affirmatively valued when communicating with individuals from majority groups, that is, the larger culture in Ting-Toomey’s term. Maybe these two theories are comparatively scientific to explain a certain processes of intercultural communication; however, I question their assumptions. Both theories assume that individuals who are not from the mainstream culture or the host culture should adapt themselves to the mainstream or host culture. In this sense, the culture difference is suppressed, diversity is not adequately respected, and the individuals from the non-mainstream groups are oppressed because they lose their cultural evidence in the process of the so-called adaptation.

Cupach and Imahori (1993) generalize the interpersonal competence to intercultural communication and propose the identity management theory. According to them, interpersonal communication competence includes the ability to negotiate mutually acceptable identities in interaction. Cupach and Imahori believe that this applies to the context of intercultural communication as well. However, I argue that intercultural
communication cannot be merely viewed as an interpersonal communication occurring in an intercultural context. It is a social act in terms of people acting with each other and so upon the cultures they represent.

Gudykunst’s (2002) summary of theories of intercultural communication can be considered comprehensive, but it does not cover Casmir’s (1999) theory of third cultural building. Third cultural building, according to Casmir, is “the construction of a mutually beneficial interactive environment in which individuals from two different cultures can function in a way beneficial to all involved” (p.92). It is a dialogical process by which a third culture or a betweenness representing mutuality can be understood, supported, and defended. This theory emphasizes mutuality which can only be reached by both parts' adjustments. In this sense, this theory is more progressive than Ting-Toomey’s (2005), Kim’s (1995, 2001), and other scholars’ theories. However, it is still restricted to the individual level. Thus, I doubt the possibility of this “mutually beneficial interactive environment.” What can individuals do to facilitate this mutuality if a power difference exists between two cultures? Mutuality can never be reached between unequal groups.

To sum up, most intercultural communication theories to date are still circumscribed to the level of individuals. Arguably, this is one of the reasons why structural issues, such as power, have been absent in intercultural theories and education. According to Gudykunst (2002), all intercultural theories were born in the USA. That is, these theories were created by more powerful and more dominant groups. Maybe this can account for the oversight of power in construction of theories and educational practices in intercultural communication from another perspective. Thinking of this oversight, I argue that intercultural scholars’
ignorance of cultural inequality and power in their construction of theories is misleading for intercultural education and conceptualizations of intercultural competence.

Analysis of Conceptualizations of Intercultural Competence

For decades, the cultivation of intercultural competence has been the ultimate goal of education and training of intercultural communication. The term intercultural communication competence was proposed by researchers interested in overseas technological assistants and Peace Corps volunteers in the 1950s and the 1960s (e.g., Gardener, 1962; Hoselitz, 1954). Since then, scholars have conceptualized intercultural competence from a variety of perspectives. Unfortunately, almost all definitions circumscribe intercultural competence to personal skills and abilities.

Plenty of scholars lay emphasis on the appropriateness and effectiveness. This seems to be a main trend to define intercultural competence. For example, Spitzberg (2000) theorizes intercultural communication competence as “an impression that behavior is appropriate and effective in a given context” (p. 375). Martin and Nakayama (2004) define intercultural communication competence as “the ability to behave effectively and appropriately in interacting across cultures” (p.G-6). For Bennett and Bennett (2004), intercultural communication competence is “the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural context” (p.149).

Meanwhile, quite a few scholars highlight individuals’ psychological adjustment. For example, Kim (1991) states that intercultural communication competence is the “[o]verall internal capacity of an individual to manage key challenging features of intercultural communication: namely, cultural differences and familiarity, intergroup posture, and the

First, it required an individual to unfold and expand the personal characteristics, including flexibility, sensitivity, open-mindedness, and motivation to promote creativity, learning, and innovation in the process of communication among cultural diversities. Second, it requires the cognitive ability to map one’s own and other cultures. The acquisition of this cultural knowledge functions to reduce situational ambiguity and uncertainty in dialoguing with people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Finally, it requires a set of behavior skills, including language ability, behavioral flexibility, interaction management, identity maintenance, and relationship cultivation, to adjust oneself to the changes of new patterns of interaction among cultural diversities. (pp.7-8)

This definition sounds more comprehensive because it touches upon individuals’ multiple abilities constituting intercultural competence including cognitive, behavioral, and personal. Wiseman (2002) makes a similar attempt to summarize a variety of abilities constituting intercultural competence. He conceptualizes intercultural competence in three categories: knowledge, motivation, and skills. Starosta and Chen’s and Wiseman’s conceptualizations look more complete on surface but in fact they do not go further than previous conceptualizations because they still focus on individual abilities. Thus, no matter from what perspective, we read that most conceptualizations propose that intercultural
communication means some certain skills/abilities acquired by individuals. According to Klyukanov (2005), intercultural communication competence enables successful intercultural communication. But can merely acquiring composite personal abilities guarantee successful intercultural communication? My answer is “NO.” Intercultural communication may take place between individual persons, but it cannot be simply considered as interpersonal communication between two persons from different cultures. Intercultural communication is a social act. In intercultural interactions, people are not only understanding each other, but also acting with and upon each other. That is, they do not act individually, but interactively and then socially. Thus, if intercultural communication is a social activity, its meaning cannot be reduced to individuals. Moreover, social activity is power-bound, thus, intercultural communication never takes place in a power vacuum. As Martin and Nakayama (2004) point out, “[p]ower is also the legacy, the remnants of the history that leave cultural groups in particular positions. We are not equal in our intercultural encounter, nor can we ever be equal” (p. 123).

To review definitions of intercultural competence to date, most of them are circumscribed to personal skills/abilities and none of them touch upon the social structural factors. Thus, with this individual-skills/abilities-oriented intercultural communication competence as the ultimate goal, intercultural training/education inevitably leads to the oversight of the structural power. Moreover, many definitions focus on appropriateness and effectiveness. As to how to evaluate the intercultural communication as effective and appropriate or not, I find that the inventories or instruments constructed so far are mainly based on the rules or norms of the host and dominant cultures. That is to say, the criterion for
appropriateness and effectiveness is set up by groups who are holding power over other groups. Thus, the current research on intercultural competence, to some extent, has buttressed the structural power and scholars and educators have broadened the imbalance between the East and West, the North and South, males and females, and the majority and the minority. They become another brick in the wall to consolidate the dominant or mainstream power when they perhaps do not mean to.

Reconceptualize Intercultural Communication Competence: An Attempt

Given the above argument, it is not appropriate or fair to reduce intercultural communication to the individual level and to overlook the power factors. Thus, the extant conceptualizations of intercultural competence need to break through and go beyond the individual reductionism and to recruit the power factors, which deserve to be visible in research and education of intercultural communication.

I do not mean to subvert the term intercultural communication competence. In fact, the extant conceptualizations are still applied. Nevertheless, instead of limiting it to individual abilities, I would rather consider intercultural competence as an epistemology or a philosophy. It is related with how to view diversity, difference, and (in)equality in society, and how to perceive intercultural communication as a whole. Besides skills and abilities, intercultural competence also needs to include ethics, standpoint, courage, worldview, and hope. Intercultural communication competence should be a hope for justice and equality, courage for transformation, and respect and even desire for diversity. It should also means a capability of critical comprehension and interpretation of cultural difference so as not to make it a facility of domination, exclusion, or alienation. In short, intercultural communication
Intercultural competence should incorporate critical awareness which is aimed at social transformation. To foster these new competencies in people, intercultural scholars and educators need new vision and direction.

New/Critical Directions for Intercultural Education

The mission of intercultural training/education, according to Chen and Starosta (2004), is to broaden and expand the thinking of the close-minded by eliminating the filters about other cultures. “Intercultural education/training can equip individuals with a mental ability to scan the environment in a broad perspective and always consciously expect cultural impacts so that personal goals can be achieved in a harmonious way” (p.9). I agree with Chen and Starosta that other cultures should be evident in intercultural communication. However, to my disappointment, Chen and Starosta are also circumscribing the mission of intercultural education to cultivation of personal abilities. The mission of intercultural education/training should go beyond the individuals’ level to deal with issues in social structure. That is, the mission of intercultural education/training is much more than equipping individuals with certain abilities and the purpose of intercultural communication is not only to achieve personal goals. I also doubt that under the circumstance of cultural inequality, can other cultures have their due evidence in intercultural communication and can personal goal be achieved in a harmonious way?

Some scholars have already realized this defect existing in intercultural education/training. Pusch (2004) criticizes that the intercultural training has focused too much on individuals’ competence: “The field [intercultural training] has focused more on individual competence than on systems and their transformation and that these two dimensions await a
fuller negotiation” (p.31). With regard to the future direction of intercultural education, he suggests that we put intercultural training in the context of globalization. He argues that in this globalized context, the intercultural education should be broadened to prepare people to live in global, multi-cultural society. Although Pusch realizes where the problem lies, he fails to suggest a distinct direction for intercultural education.

Dixon (Hill, Dixon, & Goss, 2000) goes further than Pusch by arguing that critical and cultural issue merit sizable consideration in intercultural classrooms. According to Dixon, intercultural communication is complex. One of the goals of intercultural communication should be to help students understand the complexity of intercultural relations. To achieve this goal, educators need to increase students’ cultural-awareness as cultural participants. Dixon also points out “[I]f we privilege one perspective over another, then we are restricting our potential for understanding diversity” (p.191).

In what follows, I discuss a new direction, that is, a critical direction we need for the intercultural education and the urgency of involving critical pedagogy in intercultural education.

**Critical Pedagogy**

The widely recognized forefather of critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire(1970), states that teachers cannot be neutral because they are always providing students with their own reading of both the word and the world, and teachers must realize and acknowledge this. Therefore, teachers are not only delivering or imparting knowledge; they actually are constructing knowledge as well. Critical pedagogy is an alternative allowing educators to function as transformative agents deconstructing and replacing traditional pedagogy with more
progressive approaches to teaching and conducting research (Hendrix, Jackson, & Warren, 2003). In addition, critical pedagogy focuses on education as a whole, rather than education as a series of curricula, teaching-student interactions, academic plans of study, or institutional goals. To go further, instead of treating individuals as automatons, critical pedagogy perceives individuals as social actors. Everyone is not only performing the culture but also is responsible for constructing the culture in which he or she is living. Therefore, students or trainees of intercultural communication, in this sense, are functioning as creators of the orders or relations of the involved cultural groups.

Giroux another great critical pedagogy scholar proposes two terms language of critique and language of possibility. The critical pedagogy aims at blending these two together in education (cited in Guilherme, 2006). Language of critique involves a deconstructive view on social reality and a challenge to fixed interpretative frames. It calls for teachers and students to construe their cultural identity and realize the Others’ identity. Also, language of critique demands teachers and students to question their roles as citizens in the society. Language of possibility then urges to explore the alternatives to engage social change. To merge a language of critique and a language of possibility means to investigate the problems in our society and to explore the potential for improvement. Thus, the purpose of critical pedagogy is social transformation. It ultimately aims at setting things right that history may have made wrong.

Incorporating Critical Pedagogy into Intercultural Education

Some scholars (e.g., Deturk, 2001; Guiherme, 2003; Shi-Xu, 2001) realizing the absence of critical factors in intercultural education/training, suggest to draws on critical pedagogy to
deal with this deficiency. Guilherme (e.g., 2002, 2003, 2006) has written voluminously on this issue. Guilherme (2003) states intercultural communication is never neutral, therefore, it needs critical pedagogy, which can deal with radical concerns and the abuse of power in intercultural context. The combination of critical pedagogy and intercultural education/training makes it possible to perceive an individual’s self and other culture, and the intercultural interaction critically. Some scholars (e.g., Shi-Xu, 2001) also criticize that in the field of intercultural training/education, there is little scholarship addressing it as a whole system.

Giroux in an interview with Guilherme (2006) also discusses the necessity of introducing the critical paradigm into the intercultural competency:

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\text{[I]ntercultural competencies}^{1}\text{ must be connected to the central dynamics of power as a way of engaging differences and exclusions so as to understand their formation as part of a historical process of struggle and negotiation. In this instance, such competencies further more than understanding and awareness; they also serve as modes of critical understanding in which dialogue and interpretation are connected to modes of intervention in which cultural differences can be viewed as an asset rather than a threat to democracy (pp.172-173).}
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While some scholars are advocating critical pedagogy in intercultural education, several scholars question this approach. Thus, whether to integrate critical pedagogy with intercultural education is still controversial. I read, however, that some scholars’ doubts are not about the necessity of critical pedagogy. In fact, their main concerns are about its

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1 Giroux uses competency. Some scholars use competence. Competency and competence are interchangeable.
applicability in intercultural classrooms (e.g., Ball 2000). Critical pedagogy advocates have already started to address how to recruit critical pedagogy into the intercultural classroom (e.g., Deturk, 2001; Marri, 2005; Shi-Xu, 2001). Many scholars touch upon the significance of acknowledgement of social power. This may be the first step to apply critical pedagogy to intercultural communication. Giroux and McLaren (2001, cited in Jokikoko 2005) states that to acknowledge group difference has been considered essential for educational equality and justice as it seems that cultural diversity entails unequal educational opportunities and outcomes.

Deturk (2001) suggest that instructors should address oppression and social power dynamic at individual, group, and societal level. Students need to be shown that acknowledgement of social power is a prerequisite for realistic intercultural encounters. Shi-Xu (2001) also urges that intercultural theorists, educators cease overlooking the dynamics of power because on in this way, can we stop legitimating, consolidating, and perpetuating the existing hegemony in intercultural communication. Shi-Xu specifically suggest feminist paradigm for intercultural communication. I want to add that it is also crucial to have students realize that they, as cultural participants or social actors, are responsible for construction of power relations of cultural groups.

Conclusion

It is time to conclude. Let me recap what I have done here and its implication for future dialogues on intercultural studies and pedagogy. In this essay I explore the current intercultural theories and conceptualizations of intercultural competence because these two direct the education and training of intercultural communication. Addressing the oversight of
structural power in the field of intercultural communication, I propose that we need to transcend the individual skills or abilities to reconceptualize intercultural competence as an epistemology or philosophy, that is, to conceptualize this term in the context of social power; thus, we need to integrate critical awareness. To investigate how to incorporate the critical factors into intercultural education, I suggest the marriage of intercultural communication and critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy can provide guidelines to understand intercultural communication as politics, that is, to disclose the power difference embedded in it. Also, it enables educators and scholars to go beyond the individual interaction to address the intercultural education as a whole system. Nonetheless, I am still afraid that my exploration in this essay may raise more questions than it has answered.

Limitation, Suggestions and Expectations

In this essay, I make an attempt to reconceptualize intercultural competence. However, I just have offered a rough direction here. Therefore, future scholarship probably can go more specific about the new definition of intercultural competence. With regard to incorporating critical pedagogy into intercultural education, I stop at the acknowledgement of existence of power in intercultural encounters. It is urgent for scholars and educators to investigate the specific approaches. Thus, I would rather consider this essay as an invitation. I would like to invite scholars to be reflexive on intercultural studies and education from both theoretical and practical perspectives. Maybe under the current circumstance, the retheorizing intercultural communication merits priority. Fassett and Warren (2007) note that research is pedagogy and pedagogy is also research. Thus, maybe to guide the intercultural education into a critical paradigm, we need to start with (re)theorizing. Speaking of retheorizing, I especially want to
nudge scholars who are not in the United States to construct theories. Gudukunst (2002) points out that so far all intercultural theories were born in the USA. This inevitably has muted voices from other perspectives.

Starosta and Chen (2005) suggest that thus far the field of intercultural communication has faced a critical turn and a shift paradigm. Based on my reading on both intercultural studies and critical studies, I find that critical studies has started to pay attention to intercultural communication, but intercultural communication seems not ready to welcome critical studies. Thus, I would like to invite intercultural scholars to (re)think and reflect on the paradigm of their own field.

Many people assert that a competent intercultural communication should be a process to eliminate differentiation and enhance mutual understanding. Is it realistic to consider mutual understanding as the goal of intercultural communication? If so, how to reach this goal with the existence of power difference between cultural groups? How to reach mutual understanding yet at the same time have diversity and difference respected?

Maybe these questions are too tricky to answer thus far, but as intercultural scholars and educators, we can still do something immediately. Miller (1992) shows how social structures uphold the privileges and worldview of dominant groups, or those who have the most social power. These groups perpetuate their power in part through daily communication that universalizes their experience. Viewpoints of minority and subordinate groups are muted in a number of ways. This is exactly what intercultural studies, education, and advising has been doing. If it will take sometime to figure out answers to questions I raised in the last paragraph, at least, we can stop doing what Miller shows right now and we need to stop it right now.
References


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