The Effects of Language Competence and Self-regulatory Focus on Intercultural Communication Apprehension: Comparing Japan, China and America

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Abstract: This study examined the intercultural communication apprehension of university students in Japan and China, and its relationship with language competence, and self-regulation, comparing the two to those in America. A total of 614 students from Japan (*N*=216), China (*N*=215), and America (*N*=183) completed the questionnaire online. Our findings demonstrated that Japanese and Chinese students were higher in intercultural communication apprehension and prevention focus, while Americans were higher in promotion focus. As predicted, apart from the English language ability, self-regulatory focus explained the intercultural communication anxiety of Japanese and Chinese students. The impact of language competence on intercultural communication apprehension was mediated by promotion focus. The findings uncovered some important motivational factors with potential for mitigating the intercultural communication apprehension of students in East Asian cultures.

Keywords: Promotion focus, prevention focus, language competence, intercultural communication apprehension

1. Introduction

English as a global language, has the strongest ethnolinguistic vitality of any language, and non-English speakers may be prone to feeling obligated to yield their native language to English, even if they are in their own country and the English speaker is a visitor. Japanese and Chinese students have been reported to be particularly prone to experiencing anxiety when they must speak in English, for fear of being not fluent in English (Dong, 2018; Jalleh, et al., 2021). One reason for this is that Japanese and Chinese worry about losing their own and others' face, by appearing to be an incompetent communicator, and inconveniencing the listener who will be burdened by trying to figure out what they are saying. A number of studies have recommended that strategies, such as cultivating respect toward other cultures, offering active intercultural experiences, decreasing ethnocentric attitudes, and mitigating fear of negative evaluation would alleviate intercultural communication apprehension (Alici & Kaya, 2022; Chen, 2010). Although these studies have

investigated the psychological processes behind intercultural communication apprehension, self-regulatory focus as a motivational factor has yet to receive due attention by researchers in this area. Self-regulatory focus refers to our needs to promote ourselves or to avoid negative evaluations of ourselves from others (Higgins, 1997). Promotion focus entails active recognition seeking for one's virtues, through self-enhancement in presenting one's self to the other. On the other hand, prevention focus is about avoiding negative evaluations of one's self by others. Self-regulatory focus, then, presents a promising framework for understanding the process behind how some people tend to shy away from interacting with those of other cultures. In this study, the relationships among language competence, intercultural communication apprehension, and self-regulatory focus (promotion and prevention) will be questioned.

2. Literature review

2.1 Intercultural Communication Apprehension

Communication apprehension (CA) is defined by McCroskey (1977) as "…an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (p.78). CA could form a barrier that stops the development of students' communication skills and communication satisfaction (Neuliep, 2012), which may partly be caused by low self-esteem (Campero-Oliart et al., 2020). A survey conducted by R. H. Bruskin Associates in 1973 demonstrated that people fear public speaking more than death, catastrophic illness, or anything else (Dwyer & Davidson, 2012). Also, CA has been proven to be commonly shared across various countries and cultures (Howe & Cionea, 2021).

In the context of communicating to others of a different culture, intercultural communication apprehension is conceptualized as the fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated interaction with people from different groups, especially cultural, ethnic and racial (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997). This anxiety is detrimental to people's competence as intercultural communicators, causing them to avoid or withdraw from situations in which they would be interacting with outgroups. Our study focuses on Japan and China, where international students engage in special education programs exclusive to themselves, separating them from domestic students, and in some cases, international residences precluding local students are offered. The two groups typically have few opportunities to take courses together, form mutual friendships, and live together. For this reason, domestic students in Japan and China lack intercultural communication experience, and consequently, may be more apprehensive and reluctant to interact with their international cohorts, leading to them thinking that they are inept at intercultural communication (Jalleh et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2011). English education in Japan and China had traditionally placed less emphasis on speaking skills, and this trend still lives on, resulting in students less prepared for talking and listening than reading and writing. This shortcoming of language education has been reflected in the TOEFL scores of the two countries, both in their 70's for the average year 2022 scores (Nath, 2023). The implication is that, the less their English speaking skills, the more their anxiety in intercultural situations, and the less likely they are to actively mingle with foreigners. Conversely, higher levels of anxiety reflect lower levels of English language proficiency (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021). Anxiety, then, is related to fear of being negatively evaluated while conversing with others (Lockley, 2013).

People may also experience anxiety due to the lack of knowledge about other cultures, hence, unfamiliarity, dissimilarity, or uncertainty can lead to intercultural communication apprehension (Neuliep, 2012). Moreover, there is a connection between intercultural communication apprehension, intercultural sensitivity, and ethnocentrism (Bhargava & Panicker, 2021). Intercultural communication apprehension has also been shown to inhibit uncertainty reduction, and to impede

motivation toward intercultural interaction (Lin & Rancer, 2003; Neuliep, 2012; Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997). Hence, intercultural communication apprehension is an obstacle to effective intercultural communication, communication satisfaction, and cultural adaptation (Neuliep, 2012).

Research conducted by Ma and Hample (2008) compared Chinese students studying in the US, US students studying abroad, and US students studying in the US on intercultural communication apprehension. Results demonstrated that higher levels of face uncertainty and the probability of losing face predicted intercultural communication apprehension in all three samples. In conjunction with this, face negotiation theory claims that communication in all cultures is based on maintaining and negotiating face, with individualistic cultures prioritizing self-oriented face-work, while collectivistic cultures accentuate other-oriented face-work (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). For this reason, culture can also play a role here, especially in a foreign language learning situation. Ogawa (1999) did research about face maintenance among Japanese, Chinese, and Americans. Results indicated that the Chinese reported the highest level of other-face maintenance than Japanese and Americans, while the Japanese reported the highest level of self-face maintenance (Ogawa, 1999). Japanese and Chinese have been noted for their face consciousness, i.e., fearing loss of face for being incompetent, including their communication performance with internationals. Finally, intercultural communication studies involving Asian students, by and large, have focused on these students studying in Western countries, that is, as sojourners, while Asians as hosts to internationals have been relatively ignored, and this warrants special attention.

2.2 Language Competence

McCroskey and McCroskey (1988) defined communication competence as the ability to pass along or give information by talking or writing. Recent research has operationalized communication competence as self-perceived communication competence (SPCC), which Lockley (2013) applied to the foreign language learning context. In this study, we follow Lockley, and refer to language competence as how an individual perceives his/her competence to communicate in English, the language most likely to be used toward a foreign national in Japan or China.

Intercultural communication often entails the use of a non-native language for adjusting to the needs of the international interactant. Coupland et al. (1991) proposed that in cross-cultural interaction, individuals must decide which language they should speak. In most cases, English, the lingua franca, is the natural choice of medium. The English language is characterized by strong ethnolinguistic vitality, hence non-English speakers are obliged to surrender their native language, and switch to English whenever they encounter a foreigner. Indeed, in the context of Japan and China, native students feel compelled to speak English with their international student counterparts, whilst they feel much anxiety in using this foreign language.

According to the report released by the Educational Testing Service in 2018, TOEFL speaking scores of Japanese and Chinese students were respectively 17 and 19, while the global mean is 20.5. Another report released by Education First (EF, 2022) indicated that the average English proficiency scores are 475 in Japan and 498 in Mainland China, lower than Hong Kong (561) and South Korea (537). These scores would be situated in the second-lowest tier on a scale of five (very high, high, moderate, low, and very low). Most students in Japan and China cannot speak English fluently, as English education in these countries is geared more toward admissions exams than communicative competence, which may reflect on their difficulty in communicating with internationals. In particular, Shimamura (2011) noted that Japanese students self-evaluate their English speaking ability to be the poorest among the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing).

The lack of confidence in speaking English can act as a barrier toward actively seeking contact with internationals, hence engaging in intercultural communication. Intercultural communication apprehension has been implicated in inhibiting students' communication willingness and second language learning (Peng, 2012; Yashima, 2009), especially in East Asia. According to Amoah and

Yeboah (2021), students in Japan and China are very sensitive to others' evaluations; consequently, they may feel uncomfortable when they must interact with people from other countries or cultures for their feeling of a lack of English language competence. In our study, we refer to language competence as self-perceived competence in the English language.

2.3 Self-regulatory Focus

Self-regulation is the process in which people seek to connect themselves (i.e., their behaviours and self-conceptions) with appropriate goals or standards. Higgins's (1997) Regulatory Focus Theory (RFT) examined the relationship between the motivation of a person and how they go about achieving their goals. Two distinct motivational orientations were proposed by Higgins (1997, 1998) that determine how people approach desired outcomes, and avoid undesired outcomes. Individuals with promotion orientation are concerned with advancement, growth, and accomplishment, and prefer an eager approach to attain their goals; in contrast, individuals with prevention orientation concentrate on safety, security, and responsibility, and prefer avoidance approach for goal attainment (Higgins, 1997).

In terms of individualism-collectivism, individualists emphasize achievement and focus on maximizing potential gains, while, collectivists have the primary goal of security, and are likely to focus on avoiding loss (Lalwani et al., 2009). Anker and Lee (2001) found that individualists revealed more promotion focus than collectivists, and collectivists demonstrated more prevention focus than individualists. This study features regulation focus as a motivational variable, setting the sight on its implications for the relationship between regulatory focus and intercultural communication apprehension. Students with promotion regulatory focus are highly motivated to communicate frequently, and tend to have lower levels of intercultural communication apprehension, while students with prevention regulatory focus are motivated to communicate less so as to cover up for their anxiety. Therefore, both promotion and prevention foci serve as motivations, one geared toward seeking active interaction with others, the other toward avoiding interactions so as not to lose face. From this, we surmise that American students are more promotion focused, more apt to approach and appeal to others, hence having less intercultural communication apprehension, while Japanese and Chinese students are more prevention focused, and have greater intercultural communication apprehension for fear of losing their face at their incompetence in speaking in English.

Loss of face is a dire concern for many East Asian students, who tend to have lower self-motivation, with more concern for negative evaluation from others (Ansari, 2015). For this reason, they are more apt to be cautious in approaching others, so as to avoid an embarrassing situation, or one in which they may lose confidence (Ananda & Hastini, 2023). McCroskey (1977) noted that people with higher levels of anxiety would avoid communication to avert fear or anxiety. This does not mean that a person will never engage in oral communication, but rather, s/he will choose to do so less frequently than those without such anxiety. To this effect, intercultural uncertainty adds to their feeling of anxiety, and in the case of this context, is intercultural communication apprehension (Neuliep, 2012). Yashima (2009), in devising her international posture model, found that Japanese students with higher levels of English competence were more confident, and are more willing to communicate. Thus, with the ability to master the English language, East Asian students will be more geared toward engaging in intercultural interactions, have less intercultural communication apprehension, and tend to be more promotion-focused. Conversely, those with lower levels of LC will likely shy away from such interactions, so as to avoid feeling incompetent, hence they will tend to be prevention-focused.

Although numerous studies have been conducted to test factors impacting intercultural communication apprehension, Regulatory Focus Theory (Higgins et al., 2001) has yet to be applied in the intercultural communication context. Therefore, the overall goal of this study was to elaborate

on the effect of regulatory focus along with other factors, which could impede intercultural communication apprehension when college students in Japan and China engage in intercultural interaction. The hypothesized model is depicted in Figure 1. Given the above discussion, we formulated the following hypotheses (see Figure 1):

H1. Japanese and Chinese students' intercultural communication apprehension is significantly higher than Americans'.

H2. American students are promotion focused, while Japanese and Chinese students are prevention focused.

H3a. Language competence negatively predicts intercultural communication apprehension.

H3b. Language competence positively predicts self-regulatory focus.

H3c. Promotion focus negatively predicts intercultural communication apprehension, and prevention focus positively predicts intercultural communication apprehension.

H4. Self-regulatory focus mediates the relationship between language competence and intercultural communication apprehension.
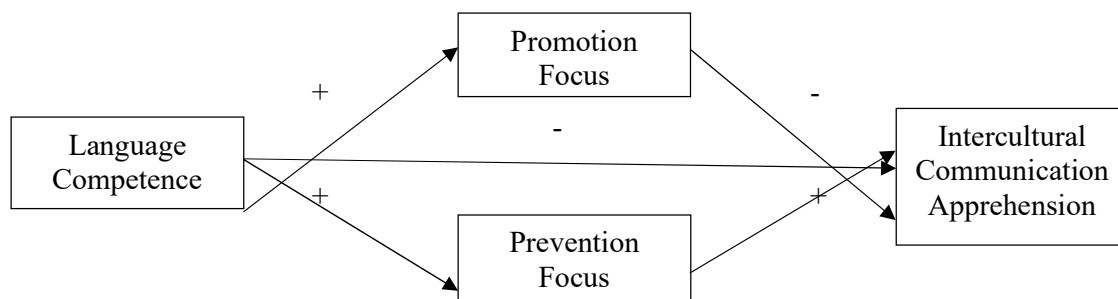
Figure 1. The Hypothesized Model of This Study

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants and Procedures

A total of 614 undergraduate students (252 men, 360 women, 2 unknown) with an average age of 19.44 (SD_{age} = 2.46, ranging from 18 to 33) from universities in Japan, China, and America participated in this study. The Japanese data was collected from 216 participants (M_{age} = 18.86, SD = 1.24, range from 18 to 29) with the gender composition consisting of 98 men, 117 women, and 1 unknown. The Chinese data was collected from 215 participants (M_{age} = 18.77, SD = 1.49, range from 18 to 25) with a gender composition consisting of 88 men and 127 women. The American data was collected from 183 participants (M_{age} = 20.91, SD = 3.57, range from 18 to 33) with the gender composition consisting of 66 men, 116 women, and 1 unknown.

International students were excluded from the analyses, since they would not be representative of their respective samples. All Japanese and Chinese participants identified their nationality with their respective country. American participants consisted of Hispanic or Latino/a 38.75%, Asian/Asian American 30%, White/Caucasian 23.75%, Black/African American 3.13%, and Others 4.38%. The questionnaire was administered in the respective official language of each country (i.e., Japanese, Chinese, and English). Appropriate ethical clearance was received and participants were

recruited through convenience sampling. A thorough introduction to the study, explanation of the procedures, and a consent form were addressed and distributed at the very beginning of the research, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality of the responses to the questionnaires to all participants involved. Participants received course credit for their full response.

3.2 Measurements

A scale adapted from the Self-Perceived Communication Competence scale (SPCC) was used to measure Japanese and Chinese students' perceptions of their ability in speaking English (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988). The SPCC is a 12-item five-point Likert type scale. In the original scale, respondents evaluated their degree of competence from 0% (incompetent) to 100% (competent) in each setting. Higher SPCC scores indicated higher self-perceived communication competence toward basic communication contexts and receivers. The scale was reported to have high reliability of α = 0.92, and good construct validity (Lu & Hsu, 2008). The modified version of the SPCC added two words, "in English" to the end of each item to measure English competence (Hsu & Huang, 2017). Also, the response categories were modified into a five-point Likert-type scales: "very easy," "easy," "neutral," "difficult," and "very difficult." The reliability was α = 0.91 in Hsu and Huang's study. All the 12 items in the SPCC scale were included in the Willingness to Communicate (WTC) scale (McCroskey, 1992). WTC had already been translated into Japanese and Chinese (Kobayashi, 2008). SPCC scenarios read "Please indicate how competent you believe you are in communicating within each of the situations described below", and the items consisted of those such as "presenting a talk to a group of strangers in English". The reliabilities of Japan and China were α = .94 and α = .95 respectively.

Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (RFQ) measured one's personal history of fulfilling personal aspirations (promotion pride), and of meeting parental expectations (prevention pride), and we used the one developed by Higgins et al. (2001). RFQ comprised a total of 11 items (six items for promotion focus and five items for prevention focus) on a five-point scale from 1 (never/ certainly false) to 5 (always/ certainly true). The RFQ had been translated to Chinese (Yao et al., 2008), as well as Japanese (Matsuoka et al., 2021; Yamagami, 2008). Shepperd et al. (2016) reported reliability for this scale to be α = .53 for promotion focus and α = .60 for prevention focus, which are low, and in addition, low inter-item correlations with each subscale were also found. Hence, we anticipated in our study that the reliability of the RFQ would also be low in our study, considering .60 to be acceptable (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021; Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). The RFQ, by the way, had been reported to have similarly low reliability in Japan (Matsuoka et al., 2021; Yamagami, 2008). The factor analysis of the RFQ in our study showed poor loadings, and we were compelled to omit one item from the prevention-focus subscale according to the method suggested by Kim and Mueller (1978). The internal consistency reliabilities for promotion focus were Japan α = .70, China α = .55, and America α = .57; and for prevention focus were Japan α = .64, China α = .62, and America α = .73. The final scores for each subscale were averaged to form composite scores. Higher scores reflected higher levels of promotion focus and prevention.

Personal Report of Intercultural Communication Apprehension (PRICA) was developed to provide an instrument that could measure intercultural communication apprehension of university students (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997). The PRICA measure was a 14-item five-point Likert type scale consisting of self-report instrument from 1(strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Scores on the PRICA ranged from 14 to 70. Scores below 32 indicated "low" apprehension, while a score above 52 indicated a "high" anxiety. Scores ranging from 32 to 52 were considered "moderate" intercultural communication apprehension. The internal consistency reported for PRICA was above 0.90. The Chinese version of the PRICA had been tested by Zhao (2016), with reported reliability of α = 0.89. The PRICA had also been translated and tested in Japan (Chapman & Clenton, 2016). In

our study, the internal consistency reliabilities for PRICA were Japan α = .90, China α = .89, and America α = .93.

4. Results

We conducted confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) through multigroup simultaneous structural equation (SEM) to see if the theoretical structure for each scale of language competence (one factor), intercultural communication apprehension (one factor), and self-regulatory focus (two factors) would be appropriate and same for all three countries. First, the CFA for the one-factor solution yielded goodness-of-fit indices that were adequate (GFI = .90, CFI = .94, TLI= .92, RMSEA= .07, χ^2 (100) = 329.05) for language competence. Second, for intercultural communication apprehension, the one-factor solution demonstrated adequate fit (GFI =.89, CFI =.93, TLI=.92, RMSEA=.05, χ^2 (221) =510.35). Third, the CFA model fit for self-regulatory focus revealed poor goodness-of-fit indices. Therefore, we conducted a pancultural exploratory factor analysis to determine weak items. Item five was omitted as it was low and dual loading. The new CFA was conducted demonstrating adequate fit (GFI = .93, CFI = .88, TLI = .88, RMSEA = .04, χ^2 (132) = 249.48). The resulting structure consisted of two factors: promotion and prevention foci. Descriptive information of all variables and Pearson's coefficients of correlations between variables are presented in Table 1.

   We used MANOVA to minimize Type I error, and to test if it would be appropriate, we first conducted Bartlett's test of sphericity, which revealed χ^2 (3) = 102.69, p < .000. The results showed significant cultural differences across scales. To test the difference in intercultural communication apprehension among the three cultures, we conducted analysis of variance (ANOVA). There was a significant effect of culture on intercultural communication apprehension, F (2, 611) = 321.41, p < .001. Post hoc comparisons by the Tukey HSD test indicated that Japanese students had a higher level of anxiety than Chinese, as well as Americans. In addition, Chinese students' apprehension was significantly higher than Americans. Therefore, H1 was confirmed. One-way MANOVA was conducted to test the effect of country on each of promotion and prevention foci. There was a statistically significant difference in self-regulatory focus based on the cultural background of students, F (4, 1220) = 11.14, p < .001; Wilk's λ = .93, partial η^2 = .04. Furthermore, there were significant effects of culture on promotion focus (F (2, 611) = 10.78, p < .0005, partial η^2 = .03) and prevention focus (F (2, 611) = 8.12, p < .0005, partial η^2 = .03). A post hoc Tukey test showed that Japanese and Chinese students differed significantly with Americans on both promotion and prevention foci at p < .05. No significant differences were found between Japanese and Chinese. American students were promotion-focused, whereas Japanese and Chinese were prevention-focused. H2 was proved.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Variable Inter-correlations

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	Cronbach's α
1. Language Competence							
Japan	2.27	0.73	-				.93
China	3.17	0.81	-				.95
2. Promotion Focus							
Japan	3.31	0.56	.24**	-			.70
China	3.25	0.46	.13	-			.55
America	3.48	0.52	-	-			.57
3. Prevention Focus							

Japan	3.42	0.65	.01	.22*	-		.64
China	3.48	0.56	.07	.27**	-		.62
America	3.23	0.69	-	.03	-		.73
4. ICA							
Japan	3.75	0.62	-.49**	-.25**	.02	-	.90
China	2.98	0.55	-.28**	-.43**	-.02	-	.89
America	2.21	0.66	-	-.45**	.06	-	.93

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$. *ICA=Intercultural Communication Apprehension.*

A simple linear multiple regression was performed to predict students' intercultural communication apprehension based on their language competence, by combining both Japanese and Chinese $F (1, 429) = 191.55$, $p < .001$, with an R^2 of .31. Language competence contributed significantly to intercultural communication apprehension ($\beta = -.56$, $p < .001$). H3a was supported. Regressions were also conducted to predict students' self-regulatory focus based on their language competence, revealing a significant equation for promotion focus $F (1, 429) = 7.20$, $p < .01$, with an R^2 of .01, and $\beta = .13$, $p < .01$. However, the regression equation was not significant for prevention focus $F (1, 429) = 1.34$, $p = .25$, with an R^2 of .00, with a low $\beta = .06$, $p = .25$. Therefore, H3b was only partially proved.

Multiple regressions were also carried out to see if promotion and prevention foci predict students' intercultural communication apprehension. We combined Japan and China, since they were non-English speaking countries, and conducted the regressions separately from the Americans, who were native English speakers. The Japan-China regression was significant $F (2, 428) = 13.43$, $p < .001$, R^2 of .05, with promotion focus negatively predicting intercultural communication apprehension ($\beta = -.25$, $p < .001$), and prevention focus falling short ($\beta = .04$, $p = .474$). For the Americans, the regression was significant $F (2, 180) = 24.25$, $p < .001$, with promotion focus negatively predicting intercultural communication apprehension ($\beta = -.46$, $p < .001$), and prevention focus not ($\beta = .07$, $p = .32$). H3c, then, was partially supported.

In order to determine if the effect of language competence on intercultural communication apprehension would be more significant than the indirect effects via the mediation effects of promotion focus and prevention focus, we conducted mediation analyses by using an SPSS macro named PROCESS. Language competence was entered as the independent variable, while promotion focus and prevention focus were added as the mediating variables. Figure 2 shows the mediation analysis for intercultural communication apprehension. The total effect of language competence on intercultural communication apprehension was significant ($\beta = -.44$, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI [-.50, -.37]). The direct effect of language competence on promotion focus was significant ($\beta = -.42$, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI [-.48, -.36]). The indirect effect of language competence on intercultural communication apprehension was significant via promotion focus ($\beta = -.02$, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI [-.05, -.01]), but not via prevention focus ($\beta = .00$, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI [-.00, .01]). Thus, the effect of language competence on intercultural communication apprehension was mediated by promotion focus only (see Figure 2). H4 was partially proved.
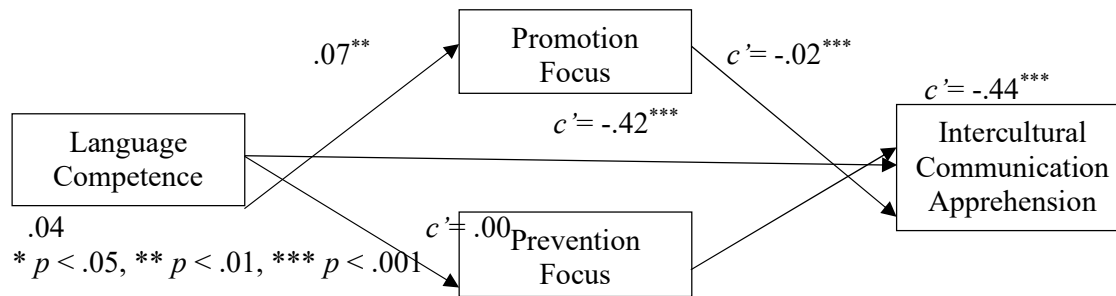
Figure 2. The Effects of Language Competence on Intercultural Communication Apprehension Mediated by Self-regulatory Focus (Promotion and Prevention Foci)

5. Discussion

5.1 General Discussion

This study investigated Japanese and Chinese university students' language competence, and explored the cultural differences in self-regulatory focus and intercultural communication apprehension. The primary goal of this study was to explore why Japanese and Chinese university students have higher intercultural communication apprehension compared to Americans, and to determine whether language competence and self-regulatory focus would be the cause for it. The findings demonstrated cultural differences in self-regulatory focus and intercultural communication apprehension, and the path of the predictors also differed across cultures.

First, Japanese students had the highest level of intercultural communication apprehension among the three countries, while Chinese students' level was higher than Americans'. These results were consistent with previous research that indicated cross-cultural differences in anxiety while communicating with others (Neuliep et al., 2003; Sallinen-Kuparinen et al., 1991), especially when the target communicators were of a different culture (Lu & Hsu, 2008). Conversely, those living in a very culturally diverse country, would find communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds is a given, while for Japanese and Chinese, such would be considered novel. For the latter two, then, intercultural encounters are met with high anxiety (Neuliep, 2012). Furthermore, Americans benefit from communication education within schools which was introduced in the late 1970's in America (McCroskey, 2009), giving them an advantage of being exposed to classroom practice of communication skills, in particular speaking skills. Therefore, American students are better prepared in communicating with others than Japanese and Chinese, and their practical experience in dealing with people from other countries or cultures in daily life adds to their advantage. Meanwhile, in cultures where modesty is a virtue, such as China and Japan, individuals have a habit of understating their abilities when doing self-assessment (Gennaka, 2021; Zhong et al., 2008). As for the difference between Japan and China on intercultural communication apprehension, the average TOEFL speaking score shows a two-point gap between the two, which may account for the Japanese being more apprehensive in speaking to international people, which entails having to speak in English. Shimamura (2011) also found that speaking was evaluated lowest of the four English skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) by Japanese students.

Second, Japanese and Chinese students were more prevention focus oriented, while American students favoured promotion. Lockwood et al. (2005) examined the self-regulatory focus of Euro-Canadians and Asian-Canadians and found that the latter were more prevention-focused than the former. To this effect, Heine and Ruby (2010) noted that in self-presentation, Asians tend to self-deprecate, whereas Westerners prefer to self-enhance. Therefore, it stands to reason that individuals from collectivistic, traditional, and hierarchical cultures (e.g., China) lean more toward

prevention-focus, and those from individualistic, liberal, and egalitarian cultures (e.g., America) are more promotion-focused (Kurman & Hui, 2011; Anker & Lee, 2001). We confirmed these findings in our study, as the Americans were more promotion focused than Japanese and Chinese, while the latter two were more prevention focused than Americans.

Third, we found that Japanese and Chinese students were more promotion focused and less anxious in intercultural communication, albeit for those with higher English proficiency. Furthermore, those who are less anxious toward intercultural interaction prefer promotion focus. With reference to this, Dong (2018) indicated that Chinese students majoring in English or engaged in speaking English outside of the classroom have lower levels of intercultural communication apprehension compared with students who do not. Perhaps confidence in English reduces the face threat imposed by having to speak in a non-native tongue. According to face-negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998), collectivists stress not only their own face, but have other face concerns as well, leading to mutual-face protection, hence students tend to speak less in an intercultural interaction if they lack confidence in their English speaking skills (Kasap, 2019; McCroskey, 1977), avoiding embarrassment as well as avoiding putting the other person in an awkward situation in which s/he must bear the burden of trying to make sense of the poorly stated utterances. Psychological theories have long recognized that people need growth and security strategies to be maximally effective (Bowlby, 1973; Scholer et al., 2019). However, the concerns of one strategy may predominate over the other in a given moment because of chronic or situational differences in accessibility (Scholer et al., 2019). For instance, people can maintain safety by deflating positive self-evaluations or by boosting eagerness through inflation of positive self-evaluations (Scholer et al., 2014). Generally speaking, self-effacing and modesty construe vital social norms in East Asian cultures, including Japan and China, but those with higher language competence have more self-confidence in engaging with others, and are better equipped to promote themselves. The more their eagerness for success, the higher their motivation to engage in intercultural communication proactively to gain acceptance by others.

Fourth, we found there was a mediating effect of promotion focus on the relationship between language competence and intercultural communication apprehension. Language competence negatively affected intercultural communication apprehension through promotion focus, suggesting that students' growth orientation motivation can explain how English ability affects their communication behaviours and tendencies. However, prevention focus was not a significant mediator for intercultural communication apprehension, implying that students' security oriented motivation does not boost language proficiency's effect on their anxiety. These results shed light on the underlying psychological mechanism that enables language competence to influence intercultural communication apprehension through self-regulatory focus. Promotion focus is based on internal motivation, and is guided by the "ideal self", while the prevention focus, on the other hand, is based on norms defined by their "ought self" (Higgins, 1998). Our study demonstrated that students' competence in English may facilitate their motivations by activating the internal needs of ideal self, and that this further shapes their performance in terms of intercultural interaction. Intercultural communication apprehension has been widely researched as an important factor in impeding students' academic and social achievement. Our findings offer a new perspective to intercultural communication apprehension, suggesting that English competence is related to promotion focus based motivation, leading to decreased anxiety in the intercultural communication context.

5.2 Limitations

Two major limitations of this study could be addressed in future research. First, this study included a large sample from public universities in each country. In particular, we collected Japanese and Chinese data in the central part of Japan and China and American data in Southern California. Thus, the results may not generalize to the large population. Second, we used the regulatory focus

questionnaire to test university students' promotion and prevention foci. It did not yield an ideal reliability with participants in three countries. Therefore, there is a need for better measure selection and data collection methods in future studies about cross-cultural comparison.

5.3 Implications and Future Directions

Numerous studies have been conducted to inquire about what affects intercultural communication apprehension; however, we found little addressing the issues of self-regulatory focus. This study provides new insight into the underlying psychological mechanism (self-regulatory focus) for intercultural communication apprehension. We believe this study can contribute to English language teaching and communication training in Japan and China, as it cannot bypass internal and external motivation. Our findings suggest that reducing anxiety and apprehension of students enables them to speak more actively toward non-compatriots without fear of losing face and negative evaluation. Foreign language education, thus, should enhance students' interest in international affairs, reduce anxiety toward foreigners, and build confidence in communication (Yashima, 2009). Future research about intercultural communication apprehension should consider the comprehensive intercultural competence of university students and probe into the underlying reasons for the promotion focus and prevention focus strategies preference of Japanese and Chinese students.

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