

Adjusting to Cultural Differences: The Intercultural Adaptation Model

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Abstract

This paper presents an Intercultural Adaptation Model (IAM) which focuses specifically on illustrating the process of communicative adjustment during initial cross-cultural interactions. More specifically, this project is concerned with demonstrating how persons may or may not achieve understanding during initial intercultural encounters. Additionally, the IAM illustrates how individuals' previous intercultural experience(s) may help or hinder their adaptive efforts when interacting with a person from a different culture. The limitations and implications of the model are also discussed.

Researchers interested in cross-cultural adaptation have examined the psychological phases people go through when entering a foreign culture, the traits that contribute to adjustment in a new culture, and the process of becoming an intercultural or bi-cultural individual (Black & Gregersen, 1991; Furnham, 1988; Kim & Ruben, 1988; Nwanko & Onwumehili, 1991; Searle & Ward, 1990). Most of this research addresses the issue of adaptation from the perspective of long term adjustment to cultural differences (Asuncion-Lande, 1980; Freedman, 1986; James, 1992; Kohls, 1984; Oberg, 1960). For example, Kim and Ruben (1988) argue that a person goes through a process of stress and adaptation that leads to growth in intercultural communication skills over time. Kim and Ruben contend that most persons in most situations adapt to the stress of cultural differences.

One exception to this longitudinal approach is the work on Communication Adaptation Theory (Coupland, Coupland, Giles, & Henwood, 1988; Gallois, Franklyn-Stokes, Giles, & Coupland, 1988; Giles & Coupland, 1991; Giles, Mulac, Bradac, & Johnson, 1987; Street & Giles, 1982). Research on Communication Adaptation Theory (CAT) examines the way individuals attune their communication behavior while interacting with others. In terms of intercultural communication, CAT has been used to explain why two people adjust their communication style toward or away from each other during cross-cultural interactions. In cross-cultural encounters, CAT suggests that convergence is used to improve communication clarity and comprehension. It is argued that "interpretability strategies" such as simplifying syntax, decreasing the diversity of vocabulary, and changing pitch and loudness, are used to improve clarity.

Another approach to cross-cultural adaptation looks at communication failure between intercultural interactants. Miscommunication between native and non-native speakers occurs frequently (Gass & Varonis, 1991; Gumperz & Tannen, 1979; Varonis & Gass, 1985). Gumperz and Tannen (1979) argue that cross-cultural interactions are more difficult to enact because

persons have relatively dissimilar language histories. For this reason, Berger and diBattista predicted that if persons believe that their conversational partner is a non-native speaker of their language, then they are more likely to adapt their message earlier in the interaction rather than later (1993, p. 223). When persons adapt their messages, Berger and diBattista hypothesize that they will first alter lower level elements of their messages such as speech rate and vocal intensity instead of more abstract message elements that deal with the organization and structure of the message content. This prediction is called the hierarchy hypothesis. Contrary to their reasoning, however, the results of their study showed that this type of adaptation did not occur during initial interactions between persons of different races. In other words, individuals did not adapt their messages based solely on the initial appearance of their conversational partner. One of the specific aims of this paper is to provide an explanation for why persons may not adapt during initial cross-cultural interactions.

The general purpose of this paper is to provide a communication based model for adaptation which is aimed at filling the void in previous adaptation research by addressing three issues that warrant further explication. First, Kim and Ruben's model suggests that "most individuals in most circumstances" adapt to the stress of intercultural experiences (1988, p. 313). The model presented here explains how communication interactions between intercultural partners may fail due to negative experience and subsequent inappropriate adaptation. Second, CAT suggests that interpretability strategies are used to improve clarity and comprehension, but does not explain exactly how this process occurs, especially during initial interactions. The model presented here also shows how the process of adaptation in cross-cultural interactions is goal driven and how experience affects the use and effectiveness of interpretability strategies. Lastly, Berger and diBattista's (1993) research on the hierarchy hypothesis suggests that individuals do not adapt based on the initial appearance of their conversational partner. As Berger and diBattista argue, however, this finding may be a function of their research procedure rather than an indication that adaptation does not occur based solely on initial appearance. Consistent with Gumperz and Tannen's (1979) work, and Berger and diBattista's original hypothesis, the model presented here suggests that adaptation will increase if people perceive that the person they will be interacting with is from a culture different from their own.

To provide a framework for this paper, we present an overview of the literature discussed above and conceptual definitions for the terms associated with the Intercultural Adaptation Model (IAM). Following this definition of terms and assumptions, the IAM is presented.

A Brief Review of the Literature on Adaptation

Longitudinal Approach. The longitudinal approach to adaptation generally suggests that there are stages that an individual goes through when adjusting to another culture. Culture shock, the "W" curve, and Kim and Ruben's (1988) systems theory of intercultural transformation each address various psychological stages an individual undergoes when immersed in a different culture over a long period of time. These approaches do not suggest that an individual adjusts behavior upon initial exposure to cultural differences. Instead, an individual experiences stress or difficulty based on extended exposure to new ways of doing things. These approaches predict that, over time, the person will learn and become accustomed to the ways of the new culture and thus will "adapt" to cultural differences.

Communication Accommodation Theory. At the level of interaction, Communication

Accommodation Theory (CAT) focuses on the attuning of communication behavior by a speaker to a conversation partner. CAT suggests that speakers use strategies of convergence or divergence to signal their attitudes toward each other. Convergence involves changing linguistic and/or paralinguistic behaviors, such as language, dialect, tone of voice, and so on, to be more similar to a conversation partner. According to CAT, a person converges to seek approval, enhance comprehension, or to show solidarity with their conversation partner. The more a speaker converges to their partner, the more favorably the person is likely to be evaluated by the listener. Conversely, divergence is used by a person to emphasize differences with their partner. Adjustment of communication behavior is based on the perception that an individual has of the conversation partner's communicative behavior.

In intercultural encounters, attention to the communication behaviors of the conversation partner involves attending to the perceptions of the other's "interpretive competence" or the partner's ability to understand. Concern for the other's ability to understand should result in the use of "interpretability strategies." These strategies include modifying the complexity of speech such as: decreasing diversity of vocabulary or simplifying syntax, as in "foreigner talk"; increasing clarity by changing pitch, loudness, or tempo; or selecting appropriate conversational topics which stay in "familiar areas" for the other person (Gallois *et al.*, 1988).

The Hierarchy Hypothesis. The hierarchy hypothesis suggests that when individuals fail to reach communication goals, they will tend to choose the least cognitively demanding option available to them. For example, one of the simplest ways to attempt to rectify a misunderstanding is simply to repeat what has been said previously. Repetition does not require major alterations in content or syntax. It is assumed that alterations of content and syntax require more abstract and complex alterations. It is also assumed that message features such as vocal intensity and speech rate do not require as much cognitive resources as changes in syntax and content. Consistent with this reasoning, Berger and diBattista (1993) found that when initial messages were not understood, the subsequent repeated message showed significant increases in vocal intensity and reductions in speech rate.

In cross-cultural communication, Berger and diBattista argue that if persons believe that they will be interacting with an individual who is a non-native speaker of their language, they may be more likely to adapt their messages early in the interaction. In other words, persons may project that a non-native conversation partner is more likely to misunderstand and therefore adapt a message before a misunderstanding actually occurs during conversation. Consistent with this reasoning, Gumperz and Tannen (1979) argue that cross-cultural interactions are more difficult to engage in than homophilous interactions because participants lack a common language or shared knowledge. Therefore, as shared knowledge increases, miscommunication is likely to decrease.

The results of Berger and diBattista's study, however, are inconsistent with this reasoning. They found that persons did not alter their messages when delivering directions during an initial interaction with a conversational partner that appeared "foreign." As Berger and diBattista argue, this inconsistency can be explained by the research procedure. In their study, participants were not told that their conversational partner might be foreign. "Foreignness" was manipulated by using Asian confederates. A better test of this hypothesis would be to have some persons aware that they will be interacting with a non-native speaker of English, and another group who does not know the language history of their potential conversation partner. Under these conditions, persons aware

that they will be interacting with a non-native speaker of English should adapt their message earlier than those who do not know the language history of their conversational partner. In other words, persons who are aware of the dissimilar language history of their partner should perceive that person to be relatively “foreign.”

The next section describes the Intercultural Adaptation Model, which aims to fill the void of the approaches described above by explaining why persons may or may not adapt during initial cross-cultural interactions.

Conceptual Definitions

Intercultural Adaptation. We define intercultural adaptation as the process through which persons in cross-cultural interactions change their communicative behavior to facilitate understanding. Put another way, intercultural adaptation refers to the adjustment of communicative behavior to decrease the probability of being misunderstood when speaking with someone from a different culture. For our purposes, understanding occurs when individuals can interpret messages such that the communicative goals of interactants are attained. We assume that the process of intercultural adaptation is goal driven. That is, we assume that individuals are interacting to accomplish some relational or instrumental goal. Goals are mental representations of a desirable end state(s) or outcome(s). Put another way, goals can be conceptualized as representations of potential end states that an individual desires to attain or maintain (Dillard, 1990; Hobbs & Evans, 1980; Klinger, 1985).

Cross-Cultural Encounters. Similar to Ellingsworth (1988), we define a cross-cultural encounter as one composed of two individuals who enact significantly different communicative behavior based on social norms that derive from groups which possess unique sets of values and beliefs (cultures). We contend that intercultural adaptation is a particular type of communicative adjustment that occurs in cross-cultural encounters. We acknowledge that adaptation can occur in conversations between persons of the same culture. For instance, one North American conversing with another North American can facilitate understanding by adjusting his or her communicative behavior in response to perceived miscommunication. However, adaptation that occurs between persons of different cultural backgrounds is likely to require more severe or extreme adjustment to reduce miscommunication than adaptation in conversations between individuals of similar cultures. Put differently, adaptation in conversations between persons from different cultures is likely to require more effort than adaptation between individuals from the same culture (Gumperz & Tannen, 1979). For example, persons of different cultural backgrounds may resort to overly animated gestures to compensate for their inability to procure understanding through verbal communication. Conversely, persons of the same culture may only need to repeat a particular message to bring about understanding. Thus, adaptation may be differentiated from intercultural adaptation by the severity of adjustment needed to achieve understanding. To give readers a basic understanding of the Intercultural Adaptation Model (IAM), an overview will be given first, followed by an explication of the model.

Development of the Intercultural Adaptation Model

Overview of the IAM. The model proposed here, called the Intercultural Adaptation Model (IAM), focuses specifically on people’s perceptions during first utterances (Time 1) and subsequent responses (Time 2) that occur during initial cross-cultural encounters. Although the model may have broader implications, it describes the adaptation process during first encounters

between interactants. The model explains how persons may fail to adapt effectively during cross-cultural interactions. The IAM argues that positive and negative experiences with intercultural adaptation influence the success or failure of current adaptive efforts. In particular, the model explains how during initial interactions adaptive strategies are a function of experience and how experience then either facilitates or hinders communication clarity. Finally, the model shows how increased cultural differences are likely to result in miscommunication and, thus, in misunderstanding. For this reason, the more cultural differences that exist between interactants, the more likely adaptation is to occur. In situations when either cultural differences are perceived prior to the interaction or misunderstandings are manifested during the conversation, experience plays a central role in the adaptive process. Positive experiences are likely to result in effective adaptation, and negative experiences are likely to result in ineffective adaptation or withdrawal from the interaction.

The Process of Intercultural Adaptation

Perceptions During First Utterances (Time 1). The process of intercultural adaptation begins when one individual perceives that their current or potential conversational partner is foreign or does not understand their communication during conversation. Thus, we assume that if there is no perception of foreignness which may contribute to present or potential misunderstanding, then adaptation is not likely to occur. For instance, if persons are told that they will be interacting with a person from another culture, then they are more likely to adapt their message initially. Under these conditions, persons aware that they will be interacting with someone from a different culture are likely to adapt their message earlier than those who do not know the cultural identity of their conversational partner. For example, persons who are aware of a dissimilar language history with their partner should perceive that person to be relatively “foreign” and adapt their message early in the interaction.

Manifestations of early adaptive efforts may not be limited solely to interactions where persons are told of their partner’s cultural identity before the interaction. As Ellingsworth (1988) argues, in approximately thirty to sixty seconds, one person may perceive foreignness in another based on the other person’s voice quality, skin color, and nonverbal cues. If individuals believe that they are interacting with a person who is foreign, they may be more likely to perceive that they share significantly limited knowledge with this person, including language history, which will likely result in miscommunication. As Gumperz and Tannen (1979) have argued, potential misunderstandings are more likely to occur when interactants lack shared knowledge. Therefore, if persons share relatively small amounts of knowledge, there should be an increase in miscommunication. Increases in miscommunication are likely to result in greater misunderstanding.

Proposition 1: . As perceived foreignness increases, perceptions of shared knowledge decrease.

Proposition 2: As shared knowledge decreases, the probability of miscommunication increases.

Proposition 3: As miscommunication increases, understanding decreases.

[See Figure 1 on the next page]

[Image not available online. For image, contact ICS editor.]

The Role of Experience (Time 2). After an individual assesses whether or not their initial message has been understood, it is likely that they draw on previous experience to execute their current adaptive efforts. Knowledge about effective adaptation takes two forms: actual experience and vicarious experience. Actual experience refers to an individual's recollection(s) of previous cross-cultural encounters with persons who have difficulty comprehending initial messages. Actual

experience can be either positive or negative. Similar to actual experience, vicarious experience can be either positive or negative. In other words, persons may have heard or seen another individual attain or fail to attain understanding in encounters with persons from different cultures. Vicarious experiences are important because speakers are likely to rely on such information if they have little or no actual experiences from which to draw.

For our purposes, negative experience means failure at achieving understanding. Conversely, positive experience means success at achieving understanding. For instance, in previous encounters with Indian and Colombian individuals, Person A (a North American) adjusts by speaking slowly to these individuals. After adjusting, Person A is able to get the Indian and Colombian individuals to comprehend the intended message. Consequently, in a future encounter with a person perceived to be from another culture, Person A speaks slowly because he or she attributes previous success in cross-cultural encounters to such behavior. In this example, Person A uses previous positive experiences to adjust his or her communication in an interaction with a person perceived to be from another culture.

Consistent with this reasoning, Stephan and Stephan (1992) found that US students who had positive experiences during a brief stay in Morocco reported decreased levels of anxiety when interacting with intercultural partners. Research examining the relationship between anxiety and social performance demonstrates that as anxiety increases effective social performance decreases (Cappella, 1985; Segrin, 1992; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). The results of this research as well as Stephan and Stephan's study, lead to the expectation that positive experiences in cross-cultural interactions lead to low anxiety and that low anxiety should lead to effective social performance in such encounters.

Proposition 4: When experiences with adaptation are positive, effective adaptation increases.

When persons adapt effectively, they draw on previously successful behaviors and thus are more likely to reduce miscommunication than those persons who are unable to adapt effectively. When people recall behaviors that have been effective in the past, they are better at accomplishing their relational goals than people who have no behavior to recall or recall ineffective behavior. In this way, effective adaptation is a consequence of positive experience, and should lead to a reduction in miscommunication. This reduction in miscommunication should result in reduced misunderstanding.

Proposition 5: As effective adaptation increases, miscommunication decreases.

Proposition 6: As miscommunication decreases, understanding increases.

Negative Experience. There are also instances when negative experience may affect adaptation in cross-cultural interactions. Negative experience refers to the recollection of previous cross-cultural encounters where understanding was not achieved. Both actual and vicarious experience in cross-cultural interactions may be negative. Negative experience is likely to result in

uncertainty and apprehension about engaging in subsequent cross-cultural encounters. For example, Stephan and Stephan (1992) found that US students who had negative experiences during a brief stay in Morocco reported increased levels of anxiety when interacting with intercultural partners. Furthermore, apprehensive and uncertain individuals are likely to view future cross-cultural encounters negatively. For instance, Douglas (1991) demonstrates that social actors who experience high global uncertainty during initial encounters tend to define initial interactions in negative terms, and thereby, tend to avoid such encounters. Specifically, Douglas argues that "persons high in global uncertainty may strategically avoid situations [i.e., initial encounters] in which they anticipate performing poorly" (1991, p. 381).

The tendency of uncertain individuals to avoid initial encounters because of negative affect or negative anticipations concerning their performance is consistent with other research which suggests that negative feeling states decrease attraction toward others and result in more negative conceptions of others (Gouaux, 1971; Griffitt, 1970; Veitch & Griffitt, 1976). Additionally, persons' negative affect has been positively associated with their predictions that unpleasant events will occur (Johnson & Tversky, 1983). Understandably, highly uncertain individuals who view interactions with strangers in a negative fashion avoid such interactions because they attribute unpleasant affect and outcomes to such encounters. Avoidance and negative affect toward initial encounters, may also cause uncertain individuals to be highly apprehensive during actual interactions with strangers, and thereby "enact acquaintanceship episodes inexpertly" (Douglas, 1991, p. 355). In terms of cross-cultural interactions, then, we would expect negative experience to have a limiting effect on individuals' ability to adapt and achieve understanding.

Proposition 7: When experiences with adaptation are negative, effective adaptation decreases.

When persons adapt ineffectively, they draw from either limited or previously unsuccessful knowledge about adaptation, and thus are less likely to reduce miscommunication than those persons who are able to adapt effectively. When people recall behaviors that have been ineffective in the past, they are less able to accomplish their relational goals than people who are able to recall effective behavior. In this way, ineffective adaptation is a consequence of negative experience, and should lead to an increase in miscommunication. This increase in miscommunication should result in increased misunderstanding.

Proposition 8: As effective adaptation decreases, miscommunication increases.

Proposition 9: As miscommunication increases, understanding decreases.

Conclusion

The IAM builds on previous approaches in three ways: a) by explaining how individuals may fail during their attempts at cross-cultural adaptation; b) by showing how experience is central to the execution of adaptive strategies; c) by describing how individuals may adapt based solely on perceived foreignness of their conversational partner. This last point (c) warrants further clarification, since Berger and diBattista's attempt to manipulate "perceived foreignness" did not produce significant results of message adaptation. In this situation, subjects were paired with an Asian partner as opposed to a Caucasian partner as a manipulation of "foreignness". Yet it does not necessarily follow that a person who is Asian will be perceived as a non-native speaker of English, especially in California and other parts of the United States, where Asians are frequently native speakers of English. Given a different context, however, foreignness (non-native) is more

likely to be perceived. For example, if a subject met an Asian person in an Asian country or in a predominantly non-native English speaking community within the United States, then the subject would be more likely to perceive the Asian person as foreign and adapt his or her message initially.

Understanding how individuals may fail during their attempts at adaptation is useful because it is unlikely that all persons succeed in adapting. The model presented here shows how persons may fail during their adaptive efforts and thereby increases our understanding of what happens when adaptive efforts are unsuccessful. In particular, the model argues that experience plays a central role in adaptive success or failure. Successful adaptive efforts are more likely to result when persons can draw on positive adaptive experiences. Conversely, failure is most likely to occur when persons have only negative experiences from which to draw. This failure may result in persons withdrawing from the current interaction and eventually isolating themselves from intercultural encounters altogether.

Showing how experience is central to the execution of adaptive strategies presents a more complete description of when adaptive strategies are likely to be executed during initial interactions. Specifically, the IAM argues that the relationship between perceived understanding and effective adaptation is moderated by experience. In other words, positive or negative experiences with particular adaptive strategies affects the likelihood of effective adaptation in the future. Those strategies which were previously effective at improving clarity and comprehension will likely result in effective adaptive efforts. Conversely, those strategies which were previously ineffective at improving clarity and comprehension will likely result in ineffective adaptive efforts. The continued use of these ineffective strategies is likely to result in withdrawal from the current interaction and eventual avoidance of cross-cultural encounters completely.

Implications and Limitations of the Model

The Intercultural Adaptation Model (IAM) describes how one person adjusts their communication with persons perceived to be from a different culture based on previous experiences. The model describes the adaptation process during initial cross-cultural encounters between individuals. Even though the IAM may be useful for describing cross-cultural interactions at other times, the model was not designed to address those specific relational factors (i.e., intimacy) which may impact cross-cultural interactions between persons who already know each other.

The IAM is also limited because we assume that the process of intercultural adaptation is goal driven. We acknowledge that persons may interact with others in cross-cultural encounters and not have the intent to adapt and achieve understanding. In these situations, persons may achieve understanding haphazardly or not at all. We believe, however, that these instances represent the minority of cross-cultural interactions, and thus are not central to the study of communication between persons of different cultures.

The IAM predicts that individuals who adapt their communication effectively in cross-cultural encounters are more likely to engage in cross-cultural encounters in the future and are less likely to isolate themselves from future intercultural encounters. This prediction is significantly different from those proposed in longitudinal models of intercultural adaptation. Unlike longitudinal models, the IAM does not predict that persons will necessarily become cross-cultural individuals over time. Instead, the IAM is open to the possibility that inexperienced persons or

those with disempowering negative experiences may never adapt effectively and thus never become proficient cross-cultural communicators. Specifically, the IAM predicts that individuals who have had positive experiences should be better adapters than those persons who have not had positive experiences. In this way, the IAM posits that experience plays a central role in the process of cross-cultural adaptation. The challenge for future research in this area is to determine if the ideas presented in the IAM are consistent with the behavior of cross-cultural adapters.

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