

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: TRENDS, PROBLEMS, AND PROSPECTS*

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For the seventh biennial conference in Louisville, Kentucky (USA), the directors asked Dr. Brooks Hill, a former President of IAICS, to develop a program regarding trends in intercultural communication. The primary motivation for this arrangement was to stimulate discussion of our organization's future at the presidential reception and dinner immediately following the program. To share in the preparation for this challenge, Hill requested the assistance of two colleagues who represent different, yet complementary, perspectives to his own: Dr. Lynda Dixon addressed the study of interethnic or co-cultural communication and relations. Dr. Blaine Goss discussed second language learning in terms of communication skills acquisition and development. In conclusion, Hill offered a more general commentary about selected methodological and substantive concerns facing our membership. What follows is a brief restatement of these perspectives and a projective conclusion about implications for the future of IAICS.

Co-Cultural Communication

From its origins the study of intercultural communication has tended to emphasize the interaction between representatives of national cultures. The growing world concern for internationalization and globalization certainly justifies this trend. This emphasis has become increasingly insufficient, however, since a major obstacle to peace and harmony throughout the world is poor ethnic relations within nations. This realization and the pressures to protect human rights and opportunities have led the systematic study of intercultural communication to expand its concern for relations between and among various groups within cultures.

For many years, the simplest reference to these internal, minority groupings was "subcultures," because the groups were in many regards subordinate to the overarching supra-ordinate national culture. Unfortunately, this terminology suggested inferiority for some "subordinate" groups regardless of their relative importance. Questions of socio-economic power, inferior-superior relations, and equal opportunities produced pressures, if not social movements, to create greater concern for the rights and opportunities of all people. This pressure impelled a

reassessment of how our terminology might be contributing to the unfairness and inequities. Thus emerged an alternative reference to "co-cultural" relations that could more objectively engage real circumstances, but could do so from a posture of presumed mutual respect, rather than a posture of imposed, and sometimes acquiesced, subordination. (Orbe, 1996, and Shuter, 1990)

Consistent with this new perspective, Dixon argued for the expansion of co-cultural considerations in our course work about intercultural communication and the more effective use of this altered perspective to enhance effective relations among all groups within a culture, regardless of the bases of their groupings. She did this by suggesting some alterations in our research agenda, in our coursework, and in our conceptions of the future. Before recounting her position, we should note an interesting confirmation of her position that appeared several months after our Louisville conference. Mr. Pascal Zachary, a frequent contributor to the *Wall Street Journal*, published a book entitled *The Global Me* in which he correlated respected diversity within a nation with national and international socio-economic success. Whether one completely agrees or not with his central premise, the position he takes should motivate all of us to follow Dixon's advice and reexamine our approach to relations among groups within our national cultures.

After discussing the terminology problem, Dixon proposed that intercultural communication research should increase its emphasis on co-cultural study. Consistent with Hill's position (1997) in his presidential address at our sixth biennial conference in Tempe, AZ, USA, we should acknowledge the major importance of addressing interethnic relations, the relative neglect of these concerns in language and communication studies, and the social consequences of continued neglect. Recent surveys of our literature reinforce Dixon's arguments and suggest how our research has effectively served to suppress cultural variability within a monolithic conception of one's national culture. Through pluralistic theoretical perspectives and their varied research methodologies, researchers can study more effectively the variability within cultures as reflected in co-cultural relations. This expanded view should incorporate our past success while embracing other possibilities, such as rhetoric, semiotics, and ethnography, to provide alternative perspectives that can enlighten and expand, rather than narrow and suppress, our progress in the study of cultural relations.

Dixon then turned her attention to our pedagogical practices. Critical social and cultural issues should emerge for explicit consideration in our intercultural communication classrooms. In some way or another, we need to help our students understand the complexity of intercultural relations. To achieve this general goal she emphasized the need to help students increase their self-awareness as cultural participants, understand the cultural expectations they hold for others, and respond to the significance of context in the communication interaction. Learning about variations within one's own culture can lead to better awareness of self, of the differences of others, and of context as a layered set of influences that create the

conditions for relations among people. In other words, we can help our students learn that we live in a laboratory of intercultural interaction, and with improved sensitivity, awareness, and skills we can become more effective intercultural persons for an increasingly diverse world.

Dixon's final consideration was the indictment of a prominent Western perspective that so strongly influences the study of intercultural communication. She examined the dominance of a male Euro-American perspective that blinds us to other viable alternatives within higher education in the USA. What we have created is a somewhat hegemonic and monolithic approach that constrains not only our efforts to treat co-cultures fairly, but also restrains our efforts to deal effectively with other national cultures. If we privilege one perspective over another, then we are restricting our potential for understanding diversity. The extension of this position does not necessarily mean extreme cultural relativism in which everyone is right, but means instead that the full expression of alternative voices can help us better compare and assess our collective alternatives. Her message is clear and simple: suppression of differences is an invitation for narrow mindedness. To succeed in a complex world we must address our own differences more effectively. To suppress any of them will only delay inevitable and counterproductive conflicts.

ESL and Communication Proficiency

Through special opportunities with universities in Japan and the USA, Goss has had several opportunities to examine English instruction in Japan from a communication perspective. His position goes beyond the obvious level of second language acquisition to consider language learning more broadly as communication skills development. How often those of us who teach languages become so captured by the code system itself that we forget or neglect the reasons why we are teaching the language? What Goss discovered was some exciting pedagogical techniques drawn from his own work in communication instruction that could enhance the instruction of English. He provided a detailed illustration of one set of communication principles involved in foreign language instruction.

The cluster of communication principles he used involved the three levels of listening comprehension: recognition, paraphrasing, and implication. The following exercise showed how this approach could be easily included in language instruction:

Sample Dialogue:

Mother: "How are your violin lessons coming along?"

Yuka: "So far, so good."

Level 1. Recognition:

What did Yuka say when her mother asked, "How are your violin lessons coming along?"

a. very well, thank you

b. I don't know

- c. so far, so good
- d. I can't remember

Level 2. Paraphrasing:

Another way to say the answer that Yuka gave would be:

- a. it's too far to walk
- b. things are fine
- c. it is far from good
- d. I really can't tell

Level 3. Implication:

Yuka's answer indicates that she is:

- a. satisfied with the lessons
- b. unhappy with them
- c. unsure about the questions asked
- d. concerned that her progress is slow

As this illustration confirmed, listening effectively involves recognition of an idea or chunk of information, the use of paraphrasing to double check the adequacy of what one recognized, and the understanding of implications for the subsequent behavior of the people interacting. From many such exercises of dialogue analysis, not only would a student improve language facility, but would also refine listening and other communication skills.

His discussion of this simple illustration acknowledged how language instruction can be managed as an end in itself or as an instrumental code for enhanced communication effectiveness. As Goss observed, this complementary approach can provide a practical context for internalizing what we learn about language. He used this presentation to accentuate more broadly how the work of linguistics, language instruction, and communication study ultimately become integrated as we pull our collective knowledge together for maximum effectiveness of intercultural communication.

Selected Concerns from our Conferences and Journal

In the final part of the plenary session, Hill selected some concerns he has noted from our conference programs and his work on the editorial board of our journal. He grouped these into two general categories: methodological and substantive. Being familiar with the positions of his two collaborators on this program, he also attempted to integrate their ideas into his own position.

Breadth and diversity are the cornerstones and most distinctive features of IAICS, as we have from its inception tried to pull together people from many disciplines and interests into a single organization dedicated to the improvement of cultural understanding and intercultural relations. Anyone who hears our convention programs and reads our journal should be excited by the diversity of our subject and the methods of our research. Examination of these materials will not only generate excitement, but also some concerns.

Hill offered four reactions to our methods of research: First, the rigor of our methods and the quality of our critical assessments are sometimes weak. We need to establish and present more explicit criteria for research quality, and then meet them; this will reveal our commitment to high standards and provide a better basis for comparing and integrating our studies with those of others. Second, we sometimes neglect theoretical and conceptual concerns. Whenever we can make our theoretical framework explicit we should do so. We should never forget that knowledge is cumulative, and the building blocks are clear concepts. Here again, more explicit treatment of our theoretical foundations and conceptual clarity will facilitate comparison and integration of our work with that of others. Third, we tend to be excessively anecdotal, sometimes relying too much on the idiosyncratic. Greater attention to the two preceding concerns should correct this tendency. Finally, we are sometimes overly cynical in our work with far more attention to deconstruction, rather than to something more constructive. Essentially, Hill argued how we need to restore a more critical attitude about our methods with greater precision, carefulness, thoroughness, and rigor in our approach to research and its report.

Regarding the substance of our work, Hill applauded the increased integration of perspectives and how we are filling the gaps created by more rigid academic compartmentalization. Despite these achievements, his reviews of our programs and submissions reveal three serious concerns: First, we infrequently address real social problems, escaping instead into the cleanliness of academic scholarship. We need to use what we know to help us understand and possibly resolve social concerns. As noted in his presidential address (1997), we can certainly help with our understanding of ethnic or co-cultural problems within our own national cultures. Second, we tend to separate international and intercultural concerns. Granted these two areas emerged within different traditions and sets of issues, but the realities of our current world strongly encourage us to bring them back together. In our consideration of these interrelated problems we are not filling the gap effectively. Third, especially those of us from the developed nations are ignoring the downside of technological innovation. We cannot and should not permit our economic advantages to worsen the distance between peoples around the world. We must not ignore the subtle ways that technology can seductively generate counterproductive ethnocentrism. Overall, these concerns reinforce a serious need to remember a major concern of IAICS: to increase the applicability of our work to genuine improvement of the human condition for all peoples.

Conclusion

The three different contributors to this plenary session identified trends in the development and application of intercultural communication theory and research. Within these three complementary perspectives significant problems and prospects were discussed. The primary goal was to help IAICS members to formulate more

interdependent agenda for future study. As we reflect in this summary of that session, several procedural implications for our organization emerge: IAICS can provide a direction for solutions to real social problems. Alone we may be "voices in the wilderness," but together we comprise a set of influential teachers and scholars who can potentially impact our world. Within this sort of mission statement, we must continually work to bring the diverse perspectives together to confront the overwhelming variability of cultures and challenges of intercultural relations. For our organization this means that we will need even more effective communication among our members. To this end we are initiating a new website, improving access to our journal, and facilitating the maximum use of its articles. We will further create a news and notes section of both our website and journal to encourage greater familiarity among our membership and more collaborative, interdependent research. Our conferences provide us an opportunity to renew our commitments and expand our potential to address the problems we confront. At each of our biennial conferences we have grown and advanced our collective cause. When we next convene in Hong Kong, we will push the ideas and challenges of our seventh conference in Louisville even further. Dixon, Goss, and Hill are strongly committed to success with IAICS that can exceed a narrow academic vision. This plenary session served as an invitation to join them in this challenge.

**Edited version of a plenary session presented at the seventh biennial conference of the International Association for Intercultural Communication Studies, Louisville, KY, USA, July 30, 1999.*

References and Notes

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