

## Intercultural Communication and Identity --- How Do They Affect Second Language Teaching?

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**Abstract.** Due to imperative needs of English studying, such as globalization, internationalization, advances in transportation and communication technologies, ethics and personal growth and responsibility, etc, it is rather important for people with these needs to know about intercultural communication as well as identity. The aim of knowing intercultural communication is to reduce the impediments within communication to achieve a smooth conversation. Similar to intercultural communication, identity is also difficult to define because it is multi-layered and multifaced. The teaching of second language involves more knowledge about culture and the identity of the other speaker. To improve the communication, a method is presented, including explanation, collection, implementation and feedback. The ultimate goal is to motivate learners and practice their linguistic and intercultural skills.

**Keywords.** Intercultural communication; Identity; Second language teaching

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### 1. Intercultural communication

The literal meaning of “intercultural communication” refers to the communication between different cultures. However, it is not easy to have a precise definition of intercultural communication. Because this term is related to a wide range of fields, such as psychology, education, sociology and others. An all-in-one definition that fits all the fields and purposes seems nearly impossible (Baker, 2015, p. 72).

Yet there are many scholars have their own theory regarding intercultural communication, for example, the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), Discourse Approach, Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory (CCAT) and the Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory (AUMT). All these theories are helpful for the understanding of intercultural communication.

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) entails a predication and explanation of the adjustments that individuals must make to have a successful communication (Gallois et al, 2007). That is, speakers should accommodate their conversion contents to adapt to the communication. This theory focuses on the connections between different languages, identities and groups.

The “Discourse Approach” proposed by Scollon and Scollon suggests that it is an approach investigating communications among all walks of lives, including different genders, groups and generations (Scollon and Scollon, 1995). This theory shows that there exists a certain discourse system which is being used by different discourse communities when they communicate with others or other groups. It indicates that the communication between different group is particularly complex.

Besides, Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory (CCAT) which is proposed by Kim (2001) is a theory based on the understanding of the impediments that immigrants or others might encounter when they have intercultural communication. This theory is used to highlight the multiple aspects that immigrants or newcomers will confront with when they enter an unfamiliar culture. The theory suggests that those people can copy and imitate to psychologically adjust into the new environment. Her theory mainly emphasizes on what an individual can do to fit in a new culture.

In addition, the Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory (AUMT) that is proposed by William Gudykunst. This theory focuses on the interactions between cultural in-groups and strangers. To be more specifically, it defines that if normal people want to adjust to another culture and communicate effectively, they should try to reduce their anxiety and uncertainty (Gudykunst, 1995).

Based on the theories mentioned above, a broad definition of intercultural communication can be described as a study that explores how to get rid of the complexity within the communication and to effectively communicate with people from different cultural groups.

## **2. Identity**

### **2.1. Definition**

Similar to intercultural communication, identity is also a vague and abstract term which can also be used among various contexts and for different purposes. To put this term in a simple way, it can be described as “who one is” (Lu, 2009, p. 29). From this perspective, identity focuses on “self”. However, Lu then defined this term as “constructed and communicated within the discourse as ideological power play in the social world”. That is to say the identity is built in the interaction with social world, instead of just focusing “self”. Baker also defined identity as a socially interconnected system people get involved into, and the nexus of social groups that people can identify with.

Wenger (1998) states that the process of constructing an identity consists of evaluating the significance of a member in social communities. In her theory, identity is a “pivot” between the social and the individual. On the one hand, identity is something that quite unique for everyone. It is what distinguish people from the others. On the other hand, identity also implies the connection or a relationship that a social group share in common. That is to say, identity cannot be assumed as only concerns with individual or social.

### **2.2. Nature of identity: multi-layered and multifaceted**

There is a general view that identity is a complex entity, because identity is dynamic and fluid. So, it is a highly necessary to combine different identities that are from different groups or communities. An issue about whether the identity is a singular or a plural is still under debate. In order to find out the nature of the identity, Parekh (2008) takes an identity as a singular, while there are also other approaches that take the identity as a plural. For example, Sen (2006) takes the identity as a plural. The plural identity means that people from different groups or contexts have different identities. The plurality of the identity can show the characteristic, multiple layers, of people’s identity. In other words, people with one identity can have various meanings at the same time. Different meanings vary in according to different contexts. As in a different situation, people may encounter different people and issues. Those varying contexts and results can construct the “multilayered identity”.

Even though there are some scholars take identity as singular, “the uniqueness of individuals lies in their blend of multiple social and personal identities” (Meyerhoff, 1996).

Still, the uniqueness of various roles of each individual, such as, mothers, fathers, students, teachers, can associate with various social groups. Then these roles can form various social identities. That is the method that individuals construct social identifies, which is based on the social or cultural relevance between groups, for instance, occupation, gender, hobbies, nationality, and age. Due to this, social identity is sure considered as multifaceted and dynamic.

### **2.3. Categories**

#### **2.3.1. Social identity**

Social identity is related to the characteristics of one person known within a group or community and distinguish he/she from other groups or communities. These characteristics are markers that ascribe what the person is from the view of others. To be more specifically, this means that these characteristics allocate people of the same kind in the same group, because they share the same attributes.

Thus, social identity is first taken as a part of a “self-concept”, which can draw her/his significance within social groups. Social psychologist Mead (1934) suggested that there is a “social component” within in the term that is derived from a variety of social collectives. For example, family, school, company, fan club, and so forth. These all take one individual as part of their group.

### 2.3.2. *Self-identity*

The complexity of identity decides that self-identity is also not easy to define. Self-identity (or personal identity) refers to the distinct uniqueness of the individual and the relationship with the surroundings (Hillmann,1994). Specifically, this term is about how unique and what makes this uniqueness of an individual in the society, but it is not about how an individual feel, rather the inner nature of themselves. Besides, it exists in the past, present and the future. This term contains both the adopted attitudes of others and the individuals answer to the expectations of the others.

## 2.4. *Different conceptualizations*

Generally, the different view in terms of culture and identity can be divided as “essentialist” and “non-essentialist” (Lu, 2009, p. 29). The essentialists believe in a “universal essence, homogeneity and unity in a particular culture”; while on the contrary, the non-essentialists hold the opinion that identity “focuses on the complexity of culture as a fluid, creative social force” (Holliday, *et al.* 2004:2).

### 2.4.1. *Essentialist*

The study of essentialism is shown to have different dimensions. One is that “a social a social category is natural and has a sharp boundary, necessary features, immutability and historical invariance” (Kripke, 1980). The essentialists believe that it is not easy to change or alter the nature of a category, which means one’s identity will always stay the same as it is defined. The whole reason regarding to this is the existing of an intrinsic nature beneath the characteristics of each category. The essentialists always hold a belief that the boundaries between different categories are clear and independent. The distinctive features are exactly the inherent properties.

The other dimension corresponds to the view that “a social category has an underlying, inherent basis, and is homogeneous, inductively potent and identity-determining”. This one means that a category is together due to the inside commonalities, which also echoes of Allport (1954), that the members of a category should stay precisely alike and identical for their nature underneath the surface are the same. To some extent, the essentialists believe the category is natural. It is related to an opinion that the category can always provide a lot of information for its members whether already inside or still outside the invisible boundary. So, basically, the category determines identities and inside nature is what kind of person he/she is.

Next is the view of Grossberg (1996), all kind of identities that are established by “a common origin or a common structure of experience or both” contain some inherent and vitally important contents. These contents strive for competition against the already existing construction of in identity by replacing the negative impressions with positive ones. Besides, they are also in favour of finding the “authentic” and “original” content of the identity. Concisely, the essentialists fight for a kind of identity through providing an integrated and unique identity.

### 2.4.2. *Stereotypes and Prejudice*

In the process of intercultural communication, the essentialist model may create two barriers which are stereotype and prejudice.

### 2.4.3. Stereotypes

In terms of stereotype, there is a broadly recognized idea that it is a categorization process of instantiation regarding to three factors, social, cultural and cognitive factor (Tajfel, 1981).

In a general view, the categorization process means that one cannot distinguish a person or a group from others unless some differences are observed. As for Tajfel, this is a process by which “categories become coherently separable and clear through the detection and accentuation of relevant similarities and differences”.

From the social factor, stereotype is a “fixed and over-generalized” belief or traits towards a specific category of social groups (Cardwell, 1996). This factor mainly focuses on the socialization and contact experiences that fostered them. For instance, if a physically attractive employee in a company receives positive feedback from her/his supervisor, it is highly possible that others would assume the employee gets the positive feedback out of his/her appearance, whether it is the truth or not. Similarity, people would assume it is much easier for the beautiful ones to achieve higher performance than those who might look not that visually appealing.

From the cultural factor, it means that inaccurate, ethnocentric, and dysfunctional concept towards other people based on who they are, where they're from, or the language they speak without getting to know them individually. This factor mainly focuses on the historical origins. For example, assuming that Asians are super intelligent, especially good at math; British people are very conservative; women are bad drivers; African Americans are extremely good at running; Americans are quite wasteful;

From the cognitive factor, Brown (1995) defined it as the “expression of negative effect, or the display of hostile or discriminatory behaviour towards members of a group because of their membership to that group”. It means that one person will make a negative or positive judgement toward a person or group because their relationship with this certain person or group. This kind of stereotype is a kind of “self-categorization’ due to inter group relations.

### 2.4.4. Prejudice

The term prejudice is connected with some unreasonable doubt and abomination towards a specific kind of group, religion, or race. Typically, the prejudiced people will make false judgements regarding some experiences. The normal targets of the false judgements would be women, homosexual, minority groups and the senior people.

Allport (1954) summarized some features of prejudiced people might hold, which are always treat others, especially the minorities in a way of “rigid, undifferentiated, dichotomous, intolerant of ambiguity, and resistant to modification”. These features are not just the negative attitude towards a person or a group, they are also how those prejudiced people think of the world, a mirror that can reflect their own inner world.

Besides, Allport also indicates that the central constituent of a prejudiced mind is related to the very intrinsic nature of social category. In other words, prejudiced individuals blame the “inherent and identity-determining essence” that shared by a certain group. This theory is also proved by Rothbart and Taylor (1992), they argued that prejudiced people may often treat other social groups as they are “natural kinds”. Those people take others as “immutable and potent sources of inferences” instead of the natural product of culture.

The following examples are some typical prejudiced actions.

1. Female employees may face an invisible ceiling in their career due to their gender;
2. Some landlords will not rent their houses to gay couples;
3. Around the 1940s, colored people in the United States were treated differently due to the colour of their skin.

### 2.4.5. Anti-essentialist

Contrary to the essentialism, the anti-essentialism denies the “fully constituted, separated and distinct” identities (Grossberg 1996). This theory indicates that there is not any “authentic and ordinary” identities that share the universally same origin or experience. The anti-essentialism manifests that identities are relational and incomplete, in process. Its emphasis is on the multiplicity of identities and

differences rather than on a singular identity and on the connections or articulation between the fragments or differences.

Hall (1996) stated that identities are never joint together and they are increasingly being fragmented and fractured in late modern times. Besides, identities are multiply constructed across different and intersecting discourses, practices and positions. In the historical view, they are always changing and transforming.

#### 2.4.6. Identification and power-play

For the anti-essentialist model, it is necessary to start establishing some identification and power-play in the process of an expansive event.

#### 2.4.7. Identification

Hall states that identification is a process of building a concept based on the “common origin or shared characteristics”. The commonalities are shared either between people or an ideal, besides the ending of unity and loyalty. So, basically, it means a psychological process of discovering personality.

#### 2.4.8. Power-play

There is not any official definition of power-play yet. John Stephen (2007) suggested in his book that this term means the dominant culture uses its influence to manipulate other culture with less influence. During the process, the powerful culture might use a violent method to force the surrender of others. A broad example of this might be the super political power, the United States, will sometimes force its followers, Japan, Korean, to agree with its political strategy. Though the follower might not totally agree with what the United States wants. A detailed example could even in a conversation between two people from different countries. For example, an American supervisor talks with a Japanese employee. If the supervisor ignores that the fact that the employee is a non-native speaker of English and forces this employee communicating in the native way. That is another kind of power play in intercultural communication.

Power play corresponds to the anti-essentialism that there is not any universally accepted rules or concepts. Neither a country nor a person is in the right position of forcing others when they do want to do anything.

### 2.5. Problems

Identity, as a modern invention, was born as a problem. Though at different societies, it processes different problems. Bauman (1996) proposed that the problem of identity was how to build identity and keep it firm and sound in modern society, while the problem was keeping away from obsession and opening up to all alternatives.

#### 2.5.1. Modern

According to Kellner (2003), identity is related to society in modernity. From one aspect that the personal identity is often distinguished with “mutual recognition”, which means that one person’s identity is often depended upon other people’s recognition as well as the person’s own confirmation of recognition. Another aspect is that even though the forms of identity in modernity are comparatively significant, they are still restricted to a certain set of roles and criterions. In addition, the modern “self” may always experience anxiety and not certain if the “self” is being the true and always make the right choice. The nature of identity and changeable characteristic of it both make the modern “self” not confident of recognizing the true identity.

Thus, these all aspects attribute to the problems of identity, which are more mobile, multiple and always changing. They also echo the modern problems of identity.

#### 2.5.2. Post-modern

As for the post-modern society, identity turns out to be unpredictable and breakable due to the increasing in step, expansion, and complexity. Because of these situations, the identity during this period is being challenged as being a misbelief and misconception. Coward and Ellis (1977) agreed

upon this opinion and further explained the subjective identity is a construct of language and society which has a fixed identity.

Baudrillard (1983) claimed that post-modern culture manifests the features of being fragmented, unconnected and interrupted, which is because of the “subjective experiences and texts”. As a result, identity is extremely unstable.

### **3. Why identity matters in intercultural communication?**

According to Kim (1995), the development of a person adjusts into a new culture both physically and psychologically can come up with a term “intercultural identity”. In this process, the person will encounter some upsetting cross-cultural experiences. There will be “self-shock” as a new comer and “shake-up” from a new comer Zaharna (1989). In other words, this is a process experiencing and getting culture shock until a new comer of a culture is total used to what she/he is and will be experiencing. During that time, the new comer into the new culture will gradually lose his/her the distinctiveness of the original identity (Kim, 1995). And Alder (1976) believes the intercultural identity is a self-consciousness that places one person in between his/her original culture and the new culture.

### **4. How do they affect second language teaching?**

It is a general idea for teachers that teaching a foreign language is more than just teaching lexical items and grammatical knowledge. The teaching process also involves teaching the culture from the target language as well as the knowledge how to engage with people from this background, which is known as intercultural communicative competence.

The language that is used in the interaction is more than a tool of communication. It is also a marker of the identity that the speaker possesses. The way how the speaker interacts with others reveals his/her social identity. The use of language manifests the ideas and purposes of the speaker as well as a conception of “self”. The communication with second language is also a process of intercultural communication. When two people communicate with each other with a second language, they are encoding ideas. This process is a cultural context that is being interpreted in the context. Besides, they also share their own culture when they communicate.

### **5. Possible method**

To improve the communication skill for speakers with the different culture backgrounds is to improve the intercultural communicative competence. According to Byram’s (1997) model of intercultural competence, it contains of four competence, which are linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and intercultural competence. The standards of successful intercultural communicative competence are: (1) if a person can communicate effectively; (2) if a person can take both his/her own points into considerations when communicating; (3) if a person can understand both cultures.

The following is a practical method for a possible specific problem.

Step 1, explanation

It will be helpful if teachers can include the topics about to teach and raise learners’ awareness of the differences between the new input and the target culture. That is, it is important for learners to be prepared for what they think or talk when they encounter the situation.

Step 2, collection

Next, it will be beneficial for learners to use authentic learning materials to learn. In this way, learners can know what vocabulary and in what kind of contexts native speakers use. This is an imitation stage. Learners begin to work on their knowledge and culture background of the target language. Besides, some communicative tasks will also help practice knowledge and skill.

Step 3. implementation

In addition, some production tasks can help learners integrate the linguistic and cultural knowledge that they have been learning. Teachers can arrange some role plays for learners to act out. During the role plays, they are able to practice being like native speakers and experience using different cultural rules.

#### Step 4, feedback

The last one is the feedback from teachers. Learners have been experienced learning, practicing and producing, and then it is essential for them to be aware of how they are doing on the process. Using a new language and experiencing a new culture are challenging for some people. The process requires them engaging in a new identity. The feedback from teachers can help them recognize some positive and negatives.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper discusses the concept of intercultural communication, identity and their relationship. Besides, it also talks about the influence of identity and intercultural communication on the second language teaching. In the end, a practical teaching method is provided for a process of second language teaching. As mentioned in this essay, intercultural communication is a complex process of achieving productive communication between people from different backgrounds. As for identity, it is a much more complicated term. It relates to social identity and self-identity. To briefly summarize the two kinds of identities, they are being unique and distinguished from others as well as assembling in a group with the members possess the same kind of uniqueness. Additionally, people with different views about culture and identity are divided into the essentialists and the anti-essentialists. The core diverse of them are whether they believe in existing of a universal essence, resemblance and integration in culture or not. Each of them holds their own problems, for example, stereotypes and power play. The influences on second language teaching relates to intercultural communicative competence. It can motivate learners and practice their linguistic and intercultural skills.

For teachers, it has always been a crucial job to teach learners' intercultural communicative competence. The identity and idea exchange that happened in language communication can be both barriers or promoters to teachers. The result depends on teachers' teaching skills towards the development of communicative competence. The four steps mentioned above are playing a key role in promoting learners' communicative competence, but it is yet impossible to be a perfect method.

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