

The Comprehensibility of Intercultural Communication in Expanding Circle

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Abstract: *Researchers stress that in the multicultural, multilingual and multiethnic world order, English as a world language has to face the challenges as diversity and multicultural identities, mutually intelligible international communication, and methodologies for educational purpose. However, there are still limited explorations of detailed research on experiments of learners' communication on the variety of English among the Expanding Circle. The study takes conversations as units to analyze comprehensibility of intercultural communication between Japanese and Chinese students in a collaborative course of internet-based communication synchronously. The research concludes students could reach their comprehensibility by discourse, cooperation and social and linguistic factors, and negotiate for non-understanding and continuation of conversation in context.*

Keywords: *Expanding Circle, Outer Circle, World Englishes, Multicultural*

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Kachru, three Concentric Circles, as the diffusion of English, are Inner Circle, Outer Circle and Expanding Circle (qtd. in Kachru and Smith 4). Much more researches on the Expanding Circle and the Outer Circle English have been done in recent years. Morrison and White have implemented learners' exposure to varieties of English as much as possible so as to prepare them to encounter English as it is actually used in the world (Morrison and White 361–370). So their students are wildly exposed to multicultural English professors and learning materials from the Outer Circle and the Inner Circle. Kobayashi has done a research on Japanese students, as Expanding Circle English learners, who are sent to learn English in the Outer Circle of Singapore (235-248). Rooy has explored the experience of South Korean learners of English from the Expanding Circle, learning English in South Africa from the Outer Circle with the context of attitudinal findings (15–34). Nihalani stresses that in the multicultural, multilingual and multiethnic world order, English as a world language has to face the challenges as diversity and multicultural identities, mutually intelligible international communication, methodologies for educational purpose (242-261). Deterding and Kirkpatrick have fully examined the ELF's features of pronunciations from ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) (391–409). However there are still limited explorations of detailed researches on experiments of learners' communication on the variety of English among the Expanding Circle. And most researches focus on linguistic perspectives, and less researches on cultural or pragmatic perspectives. Berns proposes that experiences of the Expanding Circle learners of English should be taken a prominent position on the research for World Englishes scholars in the new millennium (85-93).

Both China and Japan are “placed” in the expanding circle to use English as a medium of communication. As a matter of fact, Dalian in China has hosted many Japanese companies in Science and Technology. Dalian University of Technology even has signed agreements with some Japanese companies and IBM to train future employees for the demands in Dalian Software Parks and Hi-Tec Zone, where over 500 enterprises including 80% of Japan's outsourcing businesses are hosted. So learners' usage and use of English language is not just as a communicative tool, but as an exploration of “sociolinguistic reality” for their future jobs. It is called by Pakir “Glocal English” (224-235), which has the features of internationally oriented but locally appropriate, actually indigenized English language.

Kachru and Smith propose two types of competence one needs to use language for communication: linguistic and communicative (71). They define linguistic competence “as the knowledge of the rules of usage, i.e. the sound system, the grammatical structures, and the vocabulary.” Communicative competence is defined “as the knowledge of rules of use, i.e. how the symbolic system is utilized to express the intended meaning in real-life situations.” (Kachru and Smith 71).

In order to assess the effective communication, there are three aspects of intelligibility, comprehensibility and interpretability taken into consideration. As Nelson concluded, Intelligibility refers to the recognition of words and utterances we hear or see; comprehensibility to the understanding of the meaning of those words and utterances; and interpretability to the recognition of their intent or purpose. The combination of these components is seen to result in successful communication (Nelson 404). In reality, it is hard to distinguish the three components and their definitions. Sometimes they overlap each other and are often conflated in intercultural communication. The definition of comprehensibility in the study will combine the three together to comprehensibility. That is the sum of linguistic and pragmatic factors. “Comprehensibility is equal to the sum of linguistic and social factors.” (Isaacs & Trofimovich 475– 505).

In the study on linguistic factors, phonology, fluency, lexical richness, grammatical accuracy, and discourse will be measured during the conversations, which is based on the research of Isaacs & Trofimovich (475–505). Phonology here means segmental (pronunciation) and supra-segmental (stress, intonation, tone) features; to explore pragmatic factors, meaning in context, cooperative principle, tolerance, politeness and intercultural competence will be measured for comprehensibility. And the focus of this paper is on pragmatic factors, namely from pragmatic and sociolinguistic perspectives to explore the devices to accomplish effective intercultural communication.

The role of English in Global Literacy is transformed and the nature of English Education is shifted from Native-speaker oriented to Englishes-oriented. In Expanding Circle Englishes, comprehensibility becomes so vital to reach effective communication in variety of English. A collaborative program was set up since 2007 between Dalian University of Technology, China and Waseda University, Japan as a partnership to promote the understanding of different cultures, provide opportunities to gain practical and authentic communication abilities in English use by the students between the two universities. In this collaborative course students took classes twice in a week, totally 12 weeks in a semester. It followed four steps.

Step 1 Comprehensive input by online materials or videos or tutorial

Step 2 Understanding by immediate feedback online or discussions

Step 3 Communication in English synchronously online in small groups

Step 4 Reflection on Communication by Writing

Step 1 and Step 2 were dealt with in Individual Class once in a week, which both parties of teachers helped to achieve the language input and communication skills, it was training on language competence and cultural understandings and communication skills in CourseN@vi System developed by Waseda University.

Step 3 and Step 4 were dealt with in Joint Class once in a week, which two sides of students were communicating cross-culturally and synchronously in Live-On System, then reflection writing submitted after class online with the deadline requirement. Cross-cultural communication and intercultural competence were exercised in the phases.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Participants

Participants in the project were two parties of non-native English students both from China and Japan universities. The ultimate goal of the course was to prepare students for having global perspectives to solve problems in social practice by communicating and to exchange their understanding about culture-related issues in English. The class in 2009 were chosen as samples to do the research, totally 15 Chinese students (second year of non-English majors) and 4

Japanese students (1 third-year English major and 3 third- / or fourth-year non-English majors). English was used as the medium to communicate for educational purposes. The automatic recordings of conversations in computer were based on online Live-on system in the classroom discussions synchronically.

2.2. Procedure

2.2.1. Grouping

Students were divided into 4 subgroups, in each of which there were 4-5 unbalanced numbers of Japanese and Chinese students. And In each subgroup, one student by turn would be a facilitator to keep conversations go smoothly, but not dominate the conversations.

2.2.2. Samples

Any portion of discourse-based conversations lasting at least 4 turns and at most 22 turns was extracted. Each 10 conversations per group were chosen, 4 groups in one culturally related theme conversations, totally 40 conversations. Two independent inter-raters rated comprehensibility of 40 conversations on a 3-scale rating scale of low, medium and high comprehensibility. Then low and high comprehensibility of the conversations by conversation were analyzed and compared to identify and discover devices to reach mutual understanding of meanings in contexts.

2.3. Data Collection

The study mixed both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative study is 3-scale rating for conversations by two independent inter-raters based on the rubrics. The language usage and language use will be measured to test comprehensibility in interaction. The qualitative study is the analysis of transcriptions of the 3-scale comprehensibility according to video recordings of naturally occurring spoken interaction in class communication involving 19 participants of Chinese and Japanese cultural backgrounds.

The recordings were transcribed using a slightly adapted version of the notation system developed by Gail Jefferson (qtd. in Hutchby and Wooffitt 75). Features like pausing, overlap, pronunciation, intonation, accent are all indicated so that the key features of the conversations are preserved. This allows for greater accuracy in the reading of the data.

In the ratings of the construct of comprehensibility, it comprised two main perspectives: linguistic and pragmatic measures. Linguistic measures adopted four categories in Isaacs and Trofimovich's research, which based on Iwashita and colleagues' (475-505) study on L2 oral proficiency because the comprehensibility rating guidelines reflected the most salient criteria. "*Phonology*, which included segmental (like pronunciation) and supra-segmental measures (like stress, intonation, tone); *Fluency*, which involved temporal measures and frequency counts of pauses; *Linguistic resources*, which comprised *Grammatical* and *Lexical* measures. *Discourse*, which captured speakers' storytelling strategies and use of cohesive devices".

In the theories of pragmatics, Kesckes proposes that both linguistic-philosophical line and the social-cultural-interactive line are widely accepted that "meaning is socially constructed, context-dependent, and is therefore the result of cooperation in the course of communication" (129). So besides linguistic factors, pragmatic factors are measured. *Meaning in Context*, which emphasizes pragmatic understanding in contextual intercultural communication; *Cooperation*, which means being socially cooperative and means being expected to eagerly and consciously create understanding, common ground and communication; *Politeness*, which is formulaic language use in context appropriately, and *Social-cultural factors*, which is social and cultural influence on the comprehension of language use, will be measured. The criteria are showed in table 1.

The topic of the conversations was about Life-work Balance—Employment Conditions Survey in Japan and China, which included 25 items. The two independent inter-raters have clear operationalization of comprehensibility in rating scales.

Table1. *Rubric: 3-scale of Comprehensibility*

Scale Factors	Low Comprehensibility	Medium Comprehensibility	High Comprehensibility
Linguistic (phonology, fluency, linguistic resource, discourse)	Non-understanding or Misunderstanding of the Meaning	Partial Understanding of the Meaning	Full Understanding of the Meaning
Pragmatic (meaning in context, cooperation, politeness, social cultural factors)	Non-understanding or Misunderstanding of the Meaning	Partial Understanding of the Meaning	Full Understanding of the Meaning

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

The total time from the four groups of conversations selected at random is 2 hours 14 minutes (respectively 36'12"51; 25'21"16; 29'48"27; and 43'26"19). The Average time for each group analyzed is 33 minutes. The result shows that the order of comprehensibility from the first rater is 2 low, 17 medium, and 21 high; the second rater's order is 3 low, 15 medium and 22 high. The two independent inter-raters overall ratings are reliable. The average rate for low comprehensibility accounts for 6.5%, medium comprehensibility 40%, and high comprehensibility 53.75%. That means students in this cross-cultural communication course mostly could reach comprehensibility, but there are still 6.5% of conversation they misunderstand or non-understand. (See table 2)

Table2. *Results of the two independent raters of 40 conversations*

Rater	Low comprehensibility	Medium comprehensibility	High comprehensibility
1	2	17	21
2	3	15	22
Average	6.5%	40%	53.75%

In total 40 conversations, the most outstanding factors are discourse, cooperation and politeness, which students excelled at cohesive device, consciously creating common ground, and formulaic language use to make conversations smoothly with comprehensibility. The factor of linguistic resource, especially lexical reason becomes obvious. Half of the conversations met the challenge of lexical ability when participants wanted to express themselves accurately and appropriately. Meaning in context took time to make sense, though the barriers of communication were finally overcome. (See table 3). The misunderstanding or non-understanding in conversations was caused by social and cultural factors like CPI (Customer Price Index) and Band 4 English Test (National English Test for College Students, Level 4, China).

Table3. *The Negative Influence of linguistic and pragmatic factors on comprehensibility in 40 conversations*

Factors	Times of Factors Affecting Conversations (total 40)
phonology	14
Fluency	13
Linguistic Resources	21
Discourse	1
Meaning in Context	15
Cooperation	0
Politeness	1
Social Culture	8

Group 1 this group was very cooperative by inviting group members to talk, by giving comments, by giving quick responses. The conversations went smoothly and fluently. Much discourse device was applied to make sentence coherently. And they were good at using technology like looking for map to upload to partner students or using textbox to solve the problem for linguistic resource. So this group reached high comprehensibility 8/10 high comprehensibility by two raters unanimously.

Group 2 featured poor phonology and linguistic resource, but more politeness and negotiation for understanding and explanation to reach comprehensibility. Positive assessment and encouragement like “please continue”, “Thank you” “thank you very much”, “yeah” was the most frequently used formulaic language. “Yeah” is a kind of understanding, a marker of getting the information, a kind of phatic expression in the conversations. Most time this group could reach medium comprehensibility,

Group 3 was good at explanation, substitute sentence structure and lexicon to negotiation and continuation of conversations. They also applied technology to sort out understanding problem by textbox, pictures and map. Most parts of conversation could reach above medium comprehensibility. The engagement time of every member was unbalanced. The lower language proficiency, the more meaning negotiation needed.

Group 4 characterized by markers of finishing one’s talk like “that’s all”, “over”, “thank you” and awareness of culture. They had intercultural competence so that they could convert Chinese RMB to Japanese Yen and they could explain CET-National College English Test to their partner student. Such social cultural factors didn’t become the barrier in their communication because they could establish the grounds for constructing meaning.

3.2. Discussion

The data show that the students in the study could reach most understanding among them, though the negotiation for non-understanding and continuation of conversation in context to reach comprehensibility are the main parts in conversation for low and medium comprehensibility. Both linguistic and socio-cultural factors have certain influence on comprehensibility of intercultural communication. Phonology and discourse, and meaning in context, cooperation, politeness and socio-cultural factors showed really helpful in understanding or comprehensibility.

3.2.1. Phonology

Pronunciation of a name in group 2 made understanding difficult. It took almost two minutes to figure out who the person is because of wrong pronunciation. Though finally it was sorted out by repetition and explanation, it hindered understanding and the dialogue couldn’t go on smoothly as expected. In 14 times phonological problems in 40 conversations, only one became the barrier of communication.

3.2.2. Fluency

Tempo or rate of Interaction online could be appropriate. The short time pause is very necessary and is a kind of device for understanding. It is not an indicator of a limited competence in the language to some degree. Occasional pause could help interlocutors made sense. The English language spoken by a Chinese student in group 4 is saliently clear and effective because of the proper rate and pause. The intercultural communication in Expanding Circle in this study found that speed of language is slower than average based on the quantity of information exchange in groups. One important reason is the communication is computer assisted online, though the technical support guaranteed the line was clear. Occasionally delayed sounds still existed because of internet problem. However, general and overall communication is smooth and clear.

3.2.3. Linguistic Resources

Linguistic resources comprised grammatical and lexical measures. The study shows that the grammatical mistakes in the conversations do not prevent interlocutors from comprehending the interactions, but lexical reason do. If accurate or exact meaning couldn’t be conveyed, it is quite possible not to reach the purpose of communication. So the communication easily fails in effectiveness. The number of linguistic resources is No. 1, 21 times in 40 conversations, the highest in the factors, which is frequently occurred in the study, but it doesn’t become the most negative factor in the conversations. Interlocutors tried approximation to negotiate with each other in the conversations so that the basic purpose of communication was not affected.

3.2.4. Discourse

Cohensive devices are applied appropriately by the group members to make ideas clear, logical and easy to follow. It is vital in discourse-based conversations. The logical and transitional hints

and cohesive means mean order for the conversations: *my first...my second...so I [choose] the status and respect to be my second choice.... and third choice...so I choose this* in the transcriptions (See Transcription 3). The discourse devices are proved to be effective way to make the conversations fluid in the whole process of communication.

3.2.5. *Meaning in Context*

The students in the study meet the challenge which stem from linguistic factors and pragmatic factors, especially the socio-cultural factors in negotiation of understanding and continuation of conversations. But they use the modification method to work out most of the problems by self-repair, other repair or self-correction and other correction. What is the most striking is to establish the common ground for constructing meaning. In addition, they could use textbox or white board to draw or write on it, which assist as a tool in on-going interaction because of online communication.

3.2.6. *Cooperation*

Group 1 is a very good example of cooperation. Cooperation doesn't mean Grice's Maxims in the study, but it means being socially cooperative and means being expected to eagerly and consciously create understanding, common ground and communication. Through quick responses, encouragement, invitations to the conversations, even non-verbal communication, the students are motivated to get engaged in the real communication with different cultures. The enthusiasm and eagerness could be showed from their responsive behaviors and their volunteering to invite or be invited in the conversations. In the study, everyone shows their cooperation in so different interactions.

3.2.7. *Politeness*

In the data analysis, politeness is also brilliant factor in most of the conversations. Some for politeness to save face, some for quick response to comfort to the speaker, some for understanding. And the formulaic language is used appropriately. But there is another phenomena that occasionally phatic language is applied by students (See Appendix III Transcription 7).

3.2.8. *Socio-cultural Factors*

The social-cultural factors are significant in intercultural communication. Two non-understanding conversations are exclusively caused by the reasons. The clarification and negotiation for comprehensibility becomes outstanding when facing the cultural issues. Like Appendix III Transcription 7, CPI (Consumer Price Index) becomes barrier which breaks down the communication. Another example in the study, but not list, is CET Band 6, which is National Chinese College English Test in China. Japanese student feels so hard to make sense what it means. So in the intercultural communication, cultural competence will play a vital role in comprehensibility.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The Intercultural communication between Chinese and Japanese students in this study presents the comprehensibility when they use English as an educational purpose. The findings is 53.75% high comprehensibility and 40% medium comprehensibility could be reached and 6.5% comprehensibility fails. In the medium comprehensibility and low comprehensibility communication, phonology, fluency, linguistic resources, discourse, meaning in context, cooperation, politeness and social culture factors more or less affect effectiveness of the communication. The most influential factors are phonology, social cultural factors, meaning in context, and linguistic resources which are major factors for interlocutors to understand or interpret the meanings at conversational context. The study shows intercultural communication breaks down probably because of one single factor, like phonology or social culture.

In the research or teaching in university, variety of English in Expanding Circle still need to focus on both linguistic and pragmatic perspectives of Standard English though World Englishes exists. Or non or misunderstanding will arise in the intercultural communication. Another issue is pragmatic factors like discourse, cooperation and politeness greatly contribute to high comprehensibility from low or medium comprehensibility.

The limitations of the study is the data of technological problem is not collected and analyzed, which occasionally affects fluency and sound transmission. How the computer-assisted communication affects the intercultural communication should be evaluated further.

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