

# Conceptualizing international students' orientation to intercultural communication

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## Introduction

Identifying ESL(English as a Second Language) teaching/learning as the site of power and contestation, ELT (English Language Teaching) and SLA (Second Language Acquisition) professionals examine the ESL enterprise from the overarching perspective of power: English spread/imperialism (Crystal, 1997; Pennycook, 1994, 1998); 'standard' English (Lippi-Green, 1997; Sridhar & Sridhar, 1992; Sridhar, 1994) and its influences on nonnative speakers of English (Leki, 2001; Norton, 2001), nonnative teachers of English (Braine, 1999; Medges, 1992, 1994) and ethnicity and gender (Goldstein, 1994; Kobayashi, 2002; Kouritzin, 2000; Losey, 1995; McKay & Wong, 1996; Norton, 2000; Pavlenko & Piller, 2001). This brief paper addresses ESL learners from a related yet different perspective of power by shedding light on inter-ethnic relations among international students enrolled in intensive ESL programs, in particular focusing on Japanese and Korean students. The main underpinning of this study is the SLA knowledge that collaborative interaction among students as well as between teachers and students is essential to successful SLA (Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Donato, 1994; Ehrman & Dornyei, 1998; Jacobs & Hall, 2002; Liang, Mohan, & Early, 1998) and the contradictory reality that "Attention to the nature and impact of student-student interaction on classroom learning

has been virtually ignored in much of the classroom-based educational research” (Johnson, 1995, 111).

The linguistically, culturally, and ethnically international population of ESL classrooms in English speaking countries can serve as a significant contributor to expanding students’ views and providing them with the chance to engage in intercultural communication in English. The sheer presence of students from Asia can also play an innovative role in communicating both the diversity and commonalities in Asia to students of various backgrounds. Nonetheless, scant attention has been paid to the sizable group of English learners from overseas, their language learning processes, and degrees of engaging in international communication. Hinenoya (2000), for instance, hypothesizes the effects of ethnocentrism and cultural orientation on Japanese students’ English development, incorporates the notion of groupism in its theoretical framework and examines three types of Japanese ESL students temporarily living in Montreal, Canada: stay-at-home wives of Japanese business men, graduate students, and younger students enrolled in an ESL program. In spite of the study’s initial interest in Japanese students’ groupism, the study failed to examine the participants’ relations with other members.

This conceptual paper purports to isolate some key factors potentially influencing those international students’ communication with one another. The theoretical framework is drawn from Gudykunst and Kim (2003) because the focus of the present study is intercultural communication among nonnative speakers of English of diverse backgrounds. Their concept ‘strangers’, i.e. “anyone entering a relatively unknown or unfamiliar environment under the rubric of *stranger*” and “those relationships where there is a relatively high degree of strangeness and a relatively low degree of familiarity” (24) allow the present study to address international students encountering other new students as strangers to each other whether they are

from the same country sharing the same language or from different countries yet sharing a religion. Gudykunst and Kim (2003) categorized the variables influencing intercultural communication into cultural ones (e.g. Confucian mindset) and the other three: environmental, sociocultural and psychocultural. All the variables are highly interrelated with each other and thus the three-fold categorization to be adopted in this paper (with the cultural component excluded) should be understood as a way to increase effectiveness in conceptual discussions.

## Conceptual perspectives on inter-group factors

### *Environmental factors*

It is readily conceivable that constrained communication with members of the same country in a foreign context restricts exposure to the local language, culture, and people. This issue of grouping as a deterrent for foreign language learning can be intensified in short-term ESL programs in English speaking countries characterized by a high representation of Japanese, Korean and other Asian students. Gudykunst and Kim (2003), conceptualizing ‘the strength of the stranger’s ethnic group’ (371), contends that “The strength of an ethnic group tends to discourage strangers’ development of host communication competence and participation in host social communication processes” (372). This is also plausible within ESL school settings. In the case of Japanese and Korean students in short-term ESL programs in English speaking countries such as Canada, their groupism is highly likely to result from the nature of the situation dominated by those two groups, discouraging their involvement in intercultural communication with international students of different memberships. A scholar studying international students at British universities similarly states:

Without the ability to communicate freely and confidently, it was a great temptation to seek socialization in national groups. If this occurred and friendships were established, it was found that there was less tendency to break into a British group. Hence, as several interviewees explained, provision of opportunities and the ability to seize them did not necessarily equate. (Lewins, 1990, 101)

Furthermore, the factor of length of stay can affect the extent to which ESL students are motivated to communicate with other students. Gudykunst and Kim (2003) argue that “The motivation to adapt depends largely on the degree of permanence of the new residence” and that international students “can reduce their adaptation to the bare minimum as they pursue a degree by confining their social contact to fellow students from the home country” (358). On the other hand, studies both on ESL students (McKay & Wong, 1996) and on immigrant mothers (Goldstein, 1994; Goldstein, 1995; Harvey, 1994; Pavlenko & Piller, 2001) contest ‘the shorter residence, the less adaptation’ argument and substantiate that there are ESL immigrants who opt to constrain their use of English despite the fact that they permanently settle down in English speaking countries and English is the key to better future in their new country. These findings point to the need for examining whether or not international students studying at ESL schools, many of who are bound to go home in a limited period, are affected by their duration of overseas study in terms of degrees of their willingness to experience intercultural communication in English.

### *Sociocultural factors*

Subsumed under sociocultural influences are “our memberships in social

groups, our social identities, and our role relationships on our communication with strangers” (Gudykunst and Kim, 2003, 92). The aforementioned environmental influences, “the strength of an ethnic group” (372) and “perceived (not necessarily real) group differences,” could “lead to the activation of social identities [sociocultural factor]” (314). Ethnic identity, solidarity through L1 (first language) use, and gender identity are included in this subcategory of social identities. Goldstein (1994; 1995) serves as a good research case addressing this issue by observing and interviewing Portuguese women who had newly immigrated to Canada and were working as production-line workers in Toronto. The study revealed that the dynamics of various context-based, social factors affected those women’s orientation to English as a second language and Portuguese as a first language. For example, the function of Portuguese as a symbol of solidarity in the Portuguese community, the strong ties among the ‘sisters’ and the power structure in the workplace were found to impede those women’s commitment to English learning even though they were adequately aware of the status of English in the mainstream society as the most dominant and prestigious language. This is the case in which even though they acknowledge the utmost importance in mastering English, solidarity is prioritized over the learning of English.

In a similar vein, even if one Japanese student happens to be seated in an ESL classroom with only one or two Japanese students, the student’s commitment to intercultural communication with outgroup members during break and after class might be as limited as that of another Japanese student enrolled in a highly Japanese dominant classroom. The rationale for this likelihood is that “language provides an emotional component to ethnic identities (e.g., members of ethnic groups feel closer to each other when speaking ethnic languages than when speaking English” (Gudykunst and Kim, 2003, 107).

### *Psychocultural factors*

Perceived group differences are likely to increase the formation and strength of social identities [sociocultural factor] and stereotypes [psychocultural one], which then influence our communication with strangers. The mechanism is described as below:

The variables included under the psychocultural influences are those involved in the personal ordering process. Personal ordering, you will recall, is the process that gives stability to psychological processes. The variables influencing our communication with strangers include our stereotypes of and attitudes toward (e.g. ethnocentrism and prejudice) strangers' groups. Our stereotypes and attitudes create expectations of how strangers will behave. Our expectations, in turn, influence the way in which we interpret incoming stimuli and the predictions we make about strangers' behavior. (Gudykunst and Kim 2003, 48)

Given the fact that Japanese and Korean students are the majority at many ESL schools in Canada, they are highly likely to have ample opportunities to interact with each other in English. Furthermore, the fact that they are geologically and historically old neighbors and they have many in common in terms of ethnic, cultural, linguistic and racial features is also likely to contribute to their mutual friendship. In fact, the increasing attention to Korea among the mainstream young Japanese corresponds with the preparation for 2002 World Soccer co-hosted by South Korea and Japan and the enforcement of cultural exchange between the Japanese and Korean at various community levels such as schools and local communities. Unfortunately, these historic 'honeymoon' days are not librated from

sociopolitical disputes. The mass media repeatedly document that the unsolved bilateral disputes deter the Japanese and Korean from developing favorable feelings toward their neighboring country and its people.

Those negative perceptions about each other, which are created through a lack of individualized mutual relationships, are likely to generate in Japanese individuals an expectation that Koreans might perceive themselves negatively. It is conceivable then that Japanese and Korean students walk into the classrooms, encounter a large group of people from the geographically close yet emotionally distant country, feel unprepared for initiating communication with them in limited English, and consequently opt to remain in their ethnic group. Furthermore, Japanese individuals might proceed to weight rewards and costs for self-defense in group relations as Gudykunst and Kim (2003) argues that “We may, however, expect that we have something to lose when interacting with strangers since the rewards may be negligible and the costs high” such as by being “looked down on by members of our ingroups” (337).

## Conclusion

The present conceptual study implies that international students' intercultural communication with other students are potentially influenced environmentally (e.g. membership strength, perceived group differences, intergroup conflict), socioculturally (e.g. ethnic identity, first language, gender roles), and psychoculturally (e.g. stereotypes and attitudes toward strangers, behavioral expectations). Our drive for avoidance of communicating with strangers in a foreign language can be activated anytime as long as we lack confidence in speaking the language, perceive some degree of cultural and ethnic differences between ourselves and strangers,

possess negative stereotyping about strangers, witness the strength of our ethnic group, or recognize the short duration of our residence in the environment (Gudykunst and Kim, 2003). These factors affect intricately intertwined ESL students' processes of using and learning English. Given the continued popularity of short-term ESL programs among students from East Asian countries such as Japan, Korea, and China and multicultural dynamics surfacing in the environments, it is vital to examine factors influencing those students' inevitable location both as an individual and a group member so as to seek ways to maximize the time, money, and expectations they invest in and help them walk into the classrooms with a sense of preparedness to develop not only English skills but also intercultural friendship.

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