

Ten Years of Research in Intercultural Communication Competence (2003 – 2013): A Retrospective

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Abstract

This study presents a review of journal articles published in the period of 2003 – 2013 on the subject of intercultural communication competence (N = 70). The articles were identified on the basis of having either “intercultural competence” or “intercultural effectiveness” (or variations thereof) in their title. The articles are divided into broad categories of contextual articles, models, assessment, reflective pieces, and empirical studies that particularly contribute to new knowledge. The resulting discussion identifies the need for including multiple-disciplinary perspectives in research, common findings over the past decade, and the need for more focus on building theory through collaborative projects.

Keywords: *intercultural communication competence, literature review*

Introduction

Research in intercultural communication competence (ICC) has attracted the interest of researchers from a variety of fields in the past few decades. The pragmatic application of ICC in a rapidly diversifying world may be one of many reasons for this interest. Over the years, ICC has appeared in research in many incarnations. Based on a meta-analysis of research on ICC, Bradford, Allen, and Beisser (2000) argue that intercultural communication competence and intercultural communication effectiveness are conceptually equivalent. Wider literature beyond communication studies uses the label “intercultural competence” which Spitzberg and Chagnon (2011) define as, “the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent cognitive, affective, and behavioural orientations to the world” (p. 7). Arasaratnam (2011) describes a competent intercultural communicator as someone who is “conversant in navigating communication in intercultural spaces” (p. viii), defining an intercultural space in turn as, “a symbolic representation of an instance when communication between individuals is affected by cultural differences in a way that would not have been noteworthy in the absence of these differences” (p. viii). These definitions indicate that the relevance of ICC is situated in the presence of noteworthy differences between people, and the extent to which one is able to communicatively engage with these differences effectively and appropriately.

While much can be learnt from reviewing the findings of ICC research over the years, a comprehensive review that includes multidisciplinary findings over multiple decades is a daunting task beyond the scope of a single paper. The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, it is intended to review the findings of research in ICC in the past ten years, thus facilitating a reflection of what has been learnt and where to go from here; and second, it is intended to accomplish the first goal from multidisciplinary perspectives, thus facilitating a broader understanding of ICC beyond a single discipline. To this end, this essay presents an overview of research in ICC, as represented in peer-reviewed journal publications in English, between 2003 and 2013 (note: the 2013 articles included in this review are limited to the ones published at the time when this review was conducted, in August 2013). This overview is not meant to be comprehensive, but rather representative. The approach to data collection reflects this goal.

The Data

Having established the timeframe within which to collect data, selecting the sources from which to collect ICC research from multiple disciplines was more challenging. Hence three major journals which represent multiple disciplinary and global approaches to the topic were selected. First, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* (IJIR), which is the official journal of the International Academy for Intercultural Research, an organisation which embodies interdisciplinary approach to intercultural research. Second, *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research* (JICR), which is a publication of the World Communication Association and showcases intercultural research from the disciplinary perspective of communication. Third, the International Association for Intercultural Education's *Intercultural Education* (IE), a journal which covers a wide range of topics pertaining to intercultural education. As a primary search, based on Bradford et al.'s (2000) observation of conceptual equivalency, articles that contained "intercultural competence" or "intercultural effectiveness" (or minor variations thereof) were identified in these three journals, with publication dates within 2003 – 2013 inclusive. While it is agreed that there may have been other articles on ICC that may not have been identified in this particular search, these articles were chosen on the reasoning that the title is usually descriptive of the key focus of an article. This logic is far from flawless. But it was one way of narrowing down what would have otherwise been a dataset that is far too large to be of practical value. This primary search resulted in 33 articles (IJIR = 17, JICR = 6, IE = 10).

After this, a wider net was cast to include articles from other journals which, while they may not usually have an intercultural focus, may have published the occasional article on ICC. The same key phrase search was used to identify articles on ICC in two relevant databases, namely Communication and Mass Media Complete and Academic Search Premier. This secondary search resulted in 37 articles, published in a wide range of journals representing fields including linguistics, education, psychology, healthcare, and international relations.

The total number of articles generated, therefore, was 70. It must be noted again that these articles were ones that had "intercultural competence" or "intercultural effectiveness" in their title. There are undoubtedly other articles that address research in ICC without these key phrases in the title. However, because the goal of this project is to glean an overview of research in ICC in multiple disciplines, in the past ten years, it is argued that a review of 70 articles from a wide range of peer-reviewed journals will reasonably accomplish this goal.

In an effort to better understand what can be gathered from these 70 articles, the articles were first placed into five general categories, based on an initial review. These categories are as follows: contextual articles (i.e. articles that discuss ICC within specific contexts such as business, ESL education, healthcare, international students, and specific cultural contexts), articles that proposed or discussed models of ICC, articles that discussed assessment of ICC, reflective articles that discussed the status of ICC in current or future research, and empirical studies designed to further our general knowledge and understanding of ICC. For simplification, these categories have been labelled as Context (n = 50), Models (n = 2), Assessment (n = 6), Reflection (n = 6), and Knowledge (n = 6), respectively. Each of these categories will be briefly described in the following sections.

Limitations

Before discussing each of these categories in further detail, some limitations of the present approach must be acknowledged. First, limiting the search to articles that had "intercultural competence" or "intercultural effectiveness" in their titles excludes other articles which may have significant focus on ICC without using those key phrases in the title. However, in any review, certain parameters need to be drawn in order to derive a finite dataset. The title search was the parameter chosen for the present review. Secondly, the search was limited to certain journals and certain databases and publications in English language. Hence the dataset is limited to the articles in English that are published in the journals that are part of the chosen databases. Thirdly, the present discussion is limited to journal articles alone. It must be noted that there are significant contributions to ICC research published within the past decade in other

outlets such as books and conference papers. While it is limiting to review journal publications alone, it is not unreasonable to assume that authors who have written a book chapter or presented a conference paper may also have published a journal article on their findings, as journals are often the outlets for empirical research. Finally, the way in which the articles in this dataset have been categorised could be disputed, as the categories are based on the author's own judgement (and hence another person could arguably come up with different categories). However, the categories are simply presented as a way of describing, rather than defining, the data.

Models of ICC

The primary focus of articles in this dataset is to present a model of ICC, and they both happen to be about the same model (Arasaratnam, 2006; Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2011). The model in question is the Integrated Model of Intercultural Communication Competence (IMICC) which is based on an emic approach to identifying variables that contribute to ICC (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005). One of the studies in the present dataset describes a further test of the IMICC, and the other study tests the model in relation to the role of sensation seeking in ICC. These two studies showcase a new model of ICC and draw connections between ICC and sensation seeking. Further, empathy is presented as a significant contributor to ICC.

Assessment of ICC

Six articles in this dataset focused on assessment or evaluation of ICC. To briefly summarise the articles, Pederson (2010) reports on a study to evaluate the extent to which intercultural effectiveness is developed through study abroad. The Intercultural Development Inventory (Hammer & Bennett, 1998) was used as the primary measure, and the author concludes that pre-departure intercultural training/teaching is an important aspect of helping students to develop intercultural effectiveness through the study abroad experience. Based on the IMICC, Arasaratnam (2009) presents a survey instrument to measure ICC, consisting of cognitive, affective, and behavioural components. This study is only the initial test of this new instrument, and the results generally positive, while the author notes that further testing is necessary before the instrument can be widely implemented. Addressing assessing ICC in the context of foreign language education, Secru (2004) identifies validity, authenticity, reliability, clarity of purpose and impact, and practicality, as key factors of an assessment test. The author explains each of these terms and calls for these factors to be considered in developing tests of ICC. Discussing assessment of ICC in the context of the Process Model of Intercultural Competence, Deardorff (2011) suggests that direct (e.g. critical reflection, e-portfolios) and indirect evidence (e.g. student feedback on learning) need to be considered in assessing ICC as a learning outcome in educational settings. Yu (2012) presents a review of existing assessments methods in ICC and suggests that a multiple-method approach is best when assessing ICC in the field of technical communication. Finally, Holmes and O'Neill (2012) present the PEER model (prepare, engage, evaluate, reflect) as a framework for developing and evaluating ICC. Based on the results of an ethnographic study, the authors suggest that the PEER model is a helpful resource for understanding ICC from the perspective of the Self and Other.

Studies that Further Knowledge of ICC

Six studies fell in the category of studies that further our knowledge of ICC. While an argument could be made that most, if not all, articles in the dataset contribute in some way to furthering our knowledge of ICC, the studies in this category are empirical studies that specifically uncover new knowledge about ICC. Sandage and Jankowski (2013) report that there is a positive relationship between spiritual well-being and ICC through differentiation of self (i.e. self-awareness, relational-awareness, etc.) and observe that examination of personal spirituality could be a beneficial part of intercultural training. Arasaratnam, Banerjee, and Dembek (2010) report that, in the presence of mediating variables such as positive attitude towards people from other cultures and empathy, there is a positive correlation between sensation seeking

and ICC. The authors further note that there is no direct relationship between sensation seeking and ICC. In other words, though high sensation seekers have a propensity to seek intercultural contact, they are not necessarily competent in intercultural communication in the absence of the relevant mediating variables. Based on a study of Australian participants in relation to their attitudes toward indigenous Australians, Nesdale, De Vries Robbe, and Van Oudenhoven (2012) report further evidence that intercultural effectiveness is negatively related to ethnic prejudice. The authors also observe that right-wing authoritarianism and ethnic prejudice are directly related. Based on a study in which participants representing fifteen countries were asked to describe ICC, Arasaratnam and Doerfel (2005) identify empathy, experience, motivation, positive attitude toward other cultures, and listening as key variables that contribute to ICC. The researchers use semantic network analysis to identify these five dominant themes in the responses of the participants and observe that this is one of the few attempts to understand ICC from multiple cultural perspectives. Molinsky et al. (2005) report that the ability to accurately recognise the meaning of nonverbal gestures in a different culture is directly related to intercultural competence. In light of this finding, the researchers further note that, when providing pre-departure training for migrants, training in nonverbal gestures should be emphasised. Finally, Matveev (2004) identifies effective communication skills/abilities, cultural awareness and understanding, open-mindedness and non-judgemental attitude, and personal competence and intelligence as four key components of ICC in an organisational context. These findings were based on interviews with Russian and American participants, thus providing insight into how ICC is viewed from two different cultural perspectives.

ICC in Context

The majority of the studies in the present dataset fell in this category of studies that engage with ICC in a specific context. Describing these in broad categories, the contexts include ICC in ESL or English Language Training (Hismanoglu, 2011; Hwang, 2008; Suntharesan, 2013; Xiaohui & Li, 2011; Younga & Sachdevb, 2011), ICC in the context of foreign language education (Aguilar, 2009; Francis & Jean-Francois, 2010; Helm, 2009; Izaskun, 2008; Magosa & Simopoulosb, 2009; Maloney, 2009; Morell, 2010; Olk, 2009; Planken, Van Hooft, & Korzilius, 2004; Sercu, 2006), ICC in business and professional contexts (Busch, 2009; Euwema & Van Emmerik, 2007; Fitch, 2012; Fraser & Schalley, 2009; Hoskins & Sallah, 2011; Kobayashi & Viswat, 2011; Simkhovych, 2009), pedagogical considerations in regards to ICC teaching and training (Cajander, Daniels, & McDermott, 2012; Ellenwood & Snyders, 2010; Grimminger, 2011; Haber & Getz, 2011; Herfst, Van Oudenhoven, & Timmerman, 2008; Hiller & Woniak, 2009; Stier, 2003; Weigl, 2009; Zhang, 2012; Zhou, 2011), ICC in the context of education and multicultural classrooms (DeJaeghere & Cio, 2009; DeJaeghere & Zhang, 2008; Holmes, 2006; Jokikokko, 2010; Karnyshev & Kostin, 2010; Stier, 2006; Stone, 2006; Zhang, 2012), ICC in the context of study or volunteer abroad (Lough, 2011; Pennington & Wildermuth, 2005; Yamaguchi & Wiseman, 2003; Yashima, 2010), and healthcare (Gibson & Zhong, 2005; Rosenberg et al., 2006). ICC in non-Western contexts (Knutson, 2004; Knutson & Posirisuk, 2006; Knutson et al., 2003; Panggabean, Murniatia, & Tjitra, 2013) were also included in this category because these articles present a unique perspective of ICC, particularly based in a context that is different to what we understand as “Western” (characterised by white/European traditions; economically developed). The studies in this category reflect that the relevance and significance of ICC is being discussed in various contexts, particularly in light of increasing cultural diversity in urban cities. The specifics of some of these studies will be discussed later.

Reflective Articles on ICC

Six articles in the dataset were papers in which the authors have reflected on the status of research in ICC or on theory of ICC. Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2013) reflect on the role of personality factors in contributing to ICC, and note that, when considering intercultural training and assessment, it is necessary to take this into account. Having presented the argument that there is need for clarity of definition of ICC, Rathje (2007) proposes that ICC should be defined in terms of different groups of humans co-creating culture with the goal of understanding and cohesion. Arasaratnam (2007a; 2007b) outlines the challenges of empirical research in ICC and suggests that the future of research in ICC should consider culture-

general approaches. Addressing ICC from the perspective of language education, Lussier (2007) presents a review of theories and models of ICC and proposes that models of language competence should include ICC. Finally, Witteborn (2003) presents a case for an emic approach to research in ICC, proposing that an ethnographic approach to understanding speech in different communities is necessary before culture-general understanding of ICC can be developed.

General Discussion

While this discussion must be prefaced with the limitation that it is based on a very specific search of journal articles, the 70 articles in this dataset do provide a general glimpse of the state of the art of research in ICC in the past decade. The review of these 70 articles from multiple disciplines has raised some observations that are worth noting.

First, it quickly became obvious that there is little or limited cross-referencing in most of the articles. While this observation was made during the course of reviewing the dataset, it was necessary to take additional measures to determine whether there is some merit to it. To this end, the lists of references of the articles published in the latter half of the decade in question (2009 – 2013) were reviewed for the purpose of identifying the extent to which the articles published in the first half of the decade (2003 – 2008 inclusive) were referenced. This method is admittedly limited in that the citations were confined to the present dataset, but it is merely intended as a means to verify the initial observation of limited cross-citation. Of the 43 articles that fell in the period from 2009 – 2013, there were only 9 articles that cited one of the articles from the 2003 – 2008 period; of which 3 articles were instances of self-citation (i.e. the authors citing previous work by one or more of the same authors). Hence, removing instances of self-citation from the count, only 6 of the 43 articles referenced previous research published in the 2003 – 2008 period in the present dataset. Considering all the articles in the present dataset are primarily focused on ICC, this low amount of cross-referencing between articles is surprising. One reason for this could be that often authors focus their research mainly on the discipline in which they are situated. Hence even though there could be rich information about the relevant topic in a different discipline, unless research is widened to include multiple disciplinary perspectives, there is the possibility that researchers are repeating what others have already discovered – instead of building on existing work.

Secondly, on a more encouraging note, there is overlap in findings reported by the studies in the present dataset. For example, Arasaratnam (2006) identifies (cultural) empathy as a key variable that contributes to ICC, in the Integrated Model of ICC (Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2011; Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005). Arasaratnam (2006) used the cultural empathy sub-scale from the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2002) to test the Integrated Model of ICC, and the same sub-scale was used in most of the studies mentioned here in which cultural empathy is noted as a key contributor to ICC. Gibson and Zhong (2005), for example, observe that empathy is an important contributor to ICC in the healthcare context; Nesdale et al. (2012) report that cultural empathy, as a factor of intercultural effectiveness, is inversely related to ethnic prejudice; Herfst et al. (2008) further report a connection between cultural empathy and intercultural effectiveness; finally, based on a study of ICC and conflict behaviours, Euwema and Van Emmerik (2007) observe that cultural empathy is positively related to cooperation, which in turn results in high levels of problem solving. Another overlap in findings is the relationship between cooperation or collaboration and ICC. In addition to Euwema and Van Emmerik's results, others report similar observations. Zhang (2012), for example, notes that collaborative learning facilitates the development of ICC; Yashima (2010) observes that collaborative volunteer experience contributes to further development of ICC; and Helm (2009) identifies telecollaboration as a means of developing ICC through exposure to other cultures in the classroom setting. Further, positive (open) attitude toward people of other cultures has also been identified as a key variable in ICC (Arasaratnam, 2006; Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2010; Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005; Matveen, 2004).

Thirdly, a significant majority of the studies focus on ICC in specific contexts, such as the classroom setting, professional contexts, or country/culture-specific contexts. While these studies are interesting and presumably helpful to those who operate in that specific context, the relative lack of studies that present significant theoretical and methodological advancements in ICC research is discouraging. While this observation is made within the limitations of the present dataset, it is still noteworthy and curious. Given

nearly every article in the dataset has highlighted the importance of ICC in today's culturally diverse communities, it is possible that the significant focus on ICC in specific contexts could be a result of pragmatics rather than a lack of desire to develop theory. To elaborate, academic research is conducted within the pragmatic parameters of time and funding limitations, the need to favour expediency over longitudinal long-term research due to expectations of prolific publication (for promotional or tenure purposes), and geographical limitations, to name a few. Any lack of funding for travel or overseas collaboration is a significant limitation particularly for those who are interested in studying ICC, especially if they are based in a location with limited cultural diversity. Thus, while researchers may be interested in pursuing questions that would significantly increase our understanding of ICC, they may not have the resources or time to accomplish this. "Time" in this instance does not simply refer to busy schedules (which could of course be a factor) but rather the tendency in most academic systems to favour quantity of publications over other criteria. This expectation is conducive for generating projects that are manageable and relatively quick to execute. Contextualised studies generally lend themselves to these limitations. This could be a reason for the large number of contextualised studies in the present dataset.

Conclusions

This article is a review of journal publications on the topic of ICC within the decade of 2003 – 2013. The dataset included articles in ICC from several disciplines. Based on this review, some conclusions can be drawn. First, research in ICC must include multiple disciplinary perspectives. This is necessary not only for richness of insight, but also to ensure that we are progressively building on others' research rather than being limited by publications in our own discipline (as evident in the very low number of cross-referencing in the articles in the present review). While it is encouraging to note that organisations such as the *International Academy for Intercultural Research* are making a deliberate effort to encourage cross-disciplinary dialogue in intercultural research, this can be taken a simple step further by individual researchers, by casting a much wider disciplinary net in their literature searches.

Secondly, it is evident that there is need for research designed to further our understanding of ICC on a much larger scope. For example, Hofstede's (1980; 1984) seminal work on cultural dimensions has inspired a flurry of research since then, and these dimensions continue to be used as frameworks to inform other research. However, that initial study was a significant project on a global scale, arguably necessitating much personnel and resources. We are yet to see a similar study on ICC, not necessarily because of lack of theory (see Spitzberg & Chagnon, 2011, for an extensive review of ICC frameworks), but possibly because of lack of resources. Perhaps one solution is collaboration, the pooling of resources of multiple researchers from multiple geographical and disciplinary perspectives. However, such a collaboration again needs to be facilitated through appropriate infrastructure, such as interdisciplinary organisations that are easily accessible to researchers, regardless of their geographic location. Today's technological facilities present better possibilities for this now than ever before.

Finally, future research in ICC should take on board the findings from the past decade (such as the role of empathy in ICC) and the call for culture-general approaches to understanding ICC. A review such as this is necessary for pausing and taking stock of what has been recently accomplished in ICC research. It is hoped that the present review would not only serve as a resource for researchers, but also a mechanism for generating future research from this base of an interdisciplinary retrospective of the past decade.

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