Understanding Intercultural Competence for Business: Insights from the eChina-UK Programme

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Overview

- Introduction
- What is intercultural competence?
- Research into business discourse
- Insights from the eChina-UK Programme
- The way ahead?

Intercultural Competence

Introduction

A Key Problem:

- The emergence of global companies is less easily matched by the development of 'global people'.

Introduction

Why?

- It's difficult to develop such qualities

- More fundamentally, there is little agreement on what qualities are needed for effective intercultural interaction

Introduction

Aims of this talk

- Critically review conceptualisations of IC competence in different disciplines

- Outline insights from the analysis of business discourse

- Argue for a new approach to conceptualising IC competence

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Terms and Definitions

Definitions of IC Competence

Range of terms used, e.g.:

- *intercultural competence*

- *transcultural communication competence*

- *intercultural effectiveness*

- *intercultural communication competence*

No consistent distinction between these terms

Definitions of IC Competence

- Intercultural competence is the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts.

Bennett and Bennett 2004: 149

Definitions of IC Competence

- Transcultural communication competence (TCC) refers to an integrative theory-practice approach enabling us to mindfully apply the intercultural knowledge we have learned in a sensitive manner. Specifically, it refers to a transformation process connecting intercultural knowledge with competent practice.

Ting-Toomey 1999: 261

Definitions of IC Competence

- We conceive of intercultural communication competence as 'the ability to effectively and appropriately execute communication behaviors to elicit a desired response in a specific environment.' This definition shows that competent persons must not only know how to interact effectively and appropriately with people and environment, but also know how to fulfil their own communication goals using this ability.

Chen and Starosta 1998: 241–2

Conceptualisations of Intercultural Competence

Conceptualisations

Frameworks developed by scholars in:

- Communication Studies (e.g. Chen and Starosta 1998; Gudykunst 1998; Ting-Toomey 1999)

- International Business & Management (e.g. WorldWork (n.d.)

- Foreign Language Education (e.g. Byram 1997; INCA Project)

An Example: Ting-Toomey

Approach to Intercultural Competence

"A wealth of interaction skills that permit individuals to cross cultural boundaries flexibly and adaptively."

Ting-Toomey 1999: 261

An Example: Ting-Toomey

Major Components of "Transcultural Communication Competence"

- Knowledge blocks

- Mindfulness

- Communication Skills

An Example: Ting-Toomey

Transcultural Competence:

Attributes	Abilities
Tolerance for Ambiguity	- To meet new situations with mindfulness
Open-mindedness	- To respond in non-evaluative ways
Flexibility	- To shift frame of reference
Respectfulness	- To show respect & positive regard for others
Adaptability	- To adapt appropriately to particular situations
Sensitivity	- To convey empathy verbally & nonverbally
Creativity	- To engage in divergent thinking

Strengths of Current Conceptualisations

- Emphasise the interconnection between communication & other elements, e.g. knowledge and mindfulness;

- Draw attention to the importance of cultural values & explain how values may influence people's generalised preferences for different communication styles.

Weaknesses of Current Conceptualisations

- With the exception of WorldWork (n.d.), existing frameworks provide very little detail on productive skills;

- Provide few (if any) authentic examples of intercultural language use;

- Take little or no account of the contexts in which communication takes place.

Research into Business Discourse

Business Discourse

Recent review (Spencer-Oatey 2010) of business discourse studies (published 2000 onwards) of authentic interaction revealed that:

• Many of these studies analysed the language used in intercultural business interaction

BUT

Business Discourse

Recent review (Spencer-Oatey 2010) of business discourse studies [contd.]

- None of the studies took an intercultural competency approach;
- None of the studies mentioned any conceptualisations of intercultural competence

Business Discourse

Recent review (Spencer-Oatey 2010) of business discourse studies ([contd.]

- Their foci could often be relevant for our understanding of intercultural competence, but this was not made explicit.

Business Discourse: Research Foci

1. **Choice of language/use of different languages**

e.g. Poncini (2003: 30)

The use of languages other than English can facilitate communication and goal achievement

Business Discourse: Research Foci

1. **Choice of language/use of different languages**

e.g. Du Babcock and Babcock (1996: 159-60)

Expansion of the [expatriate] use of Chinese to business situations [from social situations] carried with it the potential of improved communication but also the potential pitfall of miscommunication and cultural alienation.

Business Discourse: Research Foci

2. Achieving understanding of the message

Many studies (e.g. Marriott 1995; Miller 2008; Rogerson-Revell 2008; Sunaoshi 2005) have examined strategies for achieving understanding. Strategies identified include:

- *Language adjustment (e.g. in speed, syntactic complexity)*

- *Active listening (e.g. summarising of prior information, asking for clarification)*

Business Discourse: Research Foci

2. Achieving understanding of the message

Strategies identified include [contd.]:

- *Attuning (e.g. drawing inferences)*

- *Use of multimodal resources (e.g. gaze, body position and physical objects)*

- *Use of interactional mediators*

Business Discourse: Research Foci

3. Communication Style

Limited work in this area. Li, Zhu & Li (2001) analyse the closing stages of a negotiation meeting. It is one of the few studies of communication style in intercultural business interaction.

More work needed – especially on the dimensions of stylistic variation

Business Discourse: Research Foci

4. **Management of Rapport/Construal of Relationships**

Various studies (e.g. Miller 1995; Poncini 2002; Spencer-Oatey & Xing 1998, 2003, 2004, 2008)

Themes:

- Behaviour and/or language use that gave rise to relational misunderstandings

- Strategies for building rapport [Rare theme]

Current Situation

Current Situation

Communication Studies & International Business & Management Studies

- Propose various Conceptualisations of Intercultural Competence

BUT

- Little detail on communication

- Few (if any) authentic examples of communication

- Mostly decontextualised generalisations

Current Situation

Business Discourse Studies

- Lots of detailed analysis of communication, usually in context

BUT

- No Conceptualising of Intercultural Competence

- Very little work on effective strategies for intercultural interaction

Recent Work from the eChina-UK Programme

eChina-UK Programme

- Set of Sino-British collaborative projects on eLearning in education

- Funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (£4 million) & supported by Chinese Ministry of Education

- Involved British and Chinese universities working in partnership

- 4 initial projects, 3 follow-up projects, with each project having core team of about 16 to 35

eChina-UK Programme

- Phases 1 & 2: British & Chinese universities worked collaboratively on range of eLearning in education projects

  o Phase 1: 2003-2005

  o Phase 2: 2005-2007.

- Phase 3: Global People Project

eChina-UK Programme

Two of HEFCE's Key Goals for the eChina-UK Programme:

- Strengthen collaboration between China and the UK

- Disseminate generic insights on a range of issues, including the benefits & challenges of working interculturally

eChina-UK Programme

Phase 3 (Global People): 2008–2009

Key Aims:

- Draw out learning from the eChina-UK Programme on working interculturally

- Identify generic frameworks and models (i.e. not country specific)

- Develop resources that are of practical value to those working in international projects (especially in HE)

eChina-UK Programme

Phase 3 (Global People): 2008–2009

Procedure:

- Review the literature on intercultural competence and on working across cultures

- Analyse data from the eChina-UK Programme & Projects from an intercultural perspective

- Collect new interview data from eChina-UK project members

Global People Project

Research indicates we could all have benefited from better preparation in:

- Managing across cultures

- Communicating across cultures

- Building relationships across cultures

- Developing qualities for working across cultures

Global People Project

Chinese 23: *"Great differences exist between the working mechanisms in China and in the West. ... Our working procedures, overall circumstances, thinking style and decision-making processes etc. are not all the same."*

Global People Project

English or Chinese?

Chinese 16: *"I think we should show consideration for each other in terms of language. China is now developing very fast; they should know some Chinese to communicate with us. … We have learned a lot of English; it's their turn to learn some basic Chinese, as it's two-way communication. I find it weird that they don't know even a word of Chinese."*

他们应该
学中文

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Centre for Applied Linguistics

Global People Project

Attention to Relationships

British 06*: Whilst it is recognised that building social relationships serves to strengthen developing working relationships, it should likewise be acknowledged that this relies heavily on the willingness of team members to give of their free time, outside the boundaries of any given project. The value of this 'voluntary' input outside formal working time should not be underestimated, nor remain unacknowledged. There is a social dimension to effective team building that should ideally be built into the project.*

Global People Project

Need for Self-Awareness

Brit 17: *Can we step back a bit because we're getting a bit detailed?*

Brit 18: *Am I losing you?*

Ch 20: *Well to me it's a bit too detailed, can you give me an overall picture?*

Global People Project

http://www.globalpeople.org.uk/

- Life cycle model of intercultural partnerships

- Learning process model

- Competency framework

Global People Project

- Intercultural collaborations are delicate balancing acts

- Our Competency Framework was developed to help raise awareness of competencies that facilitate intercultural work

Global People Project

- Identifies four competency clusters
  - Knowledge and Ideas
  - Communication
  - Relationships
  - Personal Qualities and Dispositions
- Explains each competency and discusses why it is important for intercultural effectiveness
- Illustrates each competency with a case study example from the eChina-UK Programme (some of them supported by audio clips)

Case Study Example: Language Adjustment at the start of a meeting

Adjusting one's use of language to the proficiency level of the recipient(s) is vital for effective communication; however, it is sometimes easier said than done. Consider the following interaction that took place at one of our meetings:

Chair: *[…] I'm going to ask everybody to speak very clearly and uh without heavy accents if possible*

Everyone: *Laughter [as the Chair speaks with a Scottish accent]*

Chair:
and we may take some pauses just to make sure everybody uhm uh is keeping up with the conversation cause we can sometimes each of us speak very quickly when we get excited. Uh this afternoon is a chance for us really to explore the research issues ## tell each other what we're doing ## tell each other what we hope to achieve what we're aspiring to ### and it would be wonderful if we could perhaps focus on the use of technology in learning ## if that was of interest to you ##### so what I I'd like to do is I think it would be very helpful for one of our colleagues to volunteer to <as we say in Scotland: start the ball rolling cause we really love football>. Uh I think I think it would be fair to ask one of our colleagues to start the ball rolling and (name of British colleague) if you would like to kick off for us.

This excerpt demonstrates a number of adjustment practices. The Chair clearly shows a high level of awareness of this competency, by asking participants to speak clearly, to avoid accents, to avoid fast speech and to pause regularly in order to ensure that all participants have the chance to follow the conversation. The Chair then goes on to put her insights into practice, speaking slowly and clearly, by pausing regularly (signalled by #) and trying to avoid the use of a heavy Scottish accent. However, only seconds later she speeds up (signalled by < >), falls into a more pronounced Scottish accent, uses an idiomatic expression ('to start the ball rolling') which leaves all but one of the Chinese participants with blank faces, and then goes on to repeat the idiom and to use complex vocabulary ('kick off'), which is unlikely to be understood and could easily have been replaced by a more simple word, such as 'start'
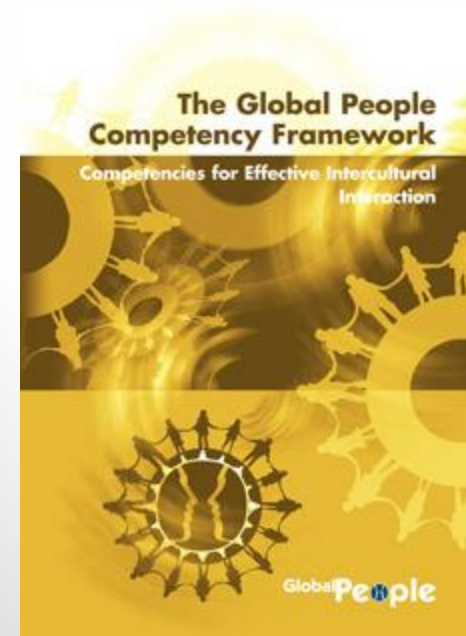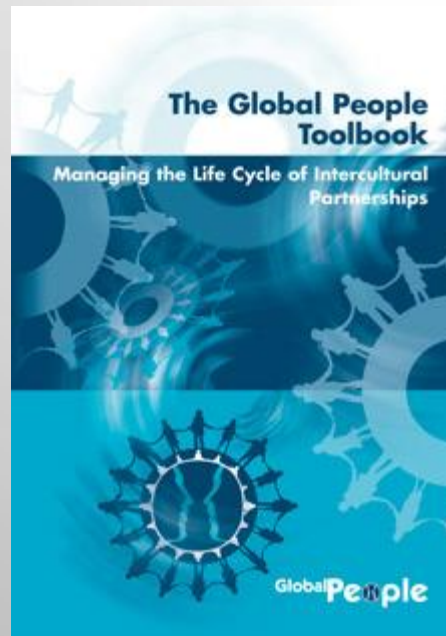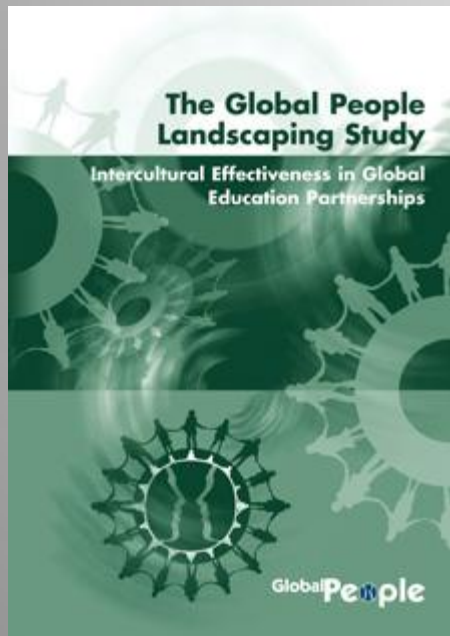
Global People Project

Communication Competency Cluster

- Communication management

- Language learning

- Language adjustment

- Active listening

- Attuning

- Building of shared knowledge & mutual trust
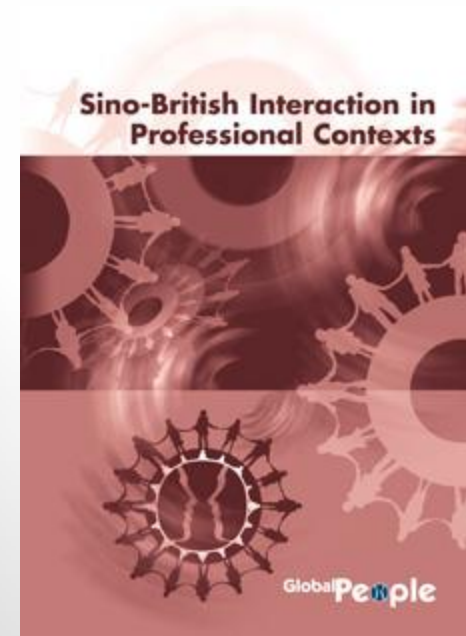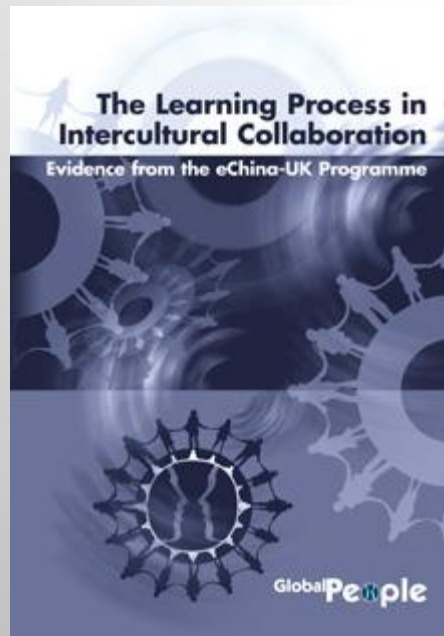
- Stylistic flexibility

Global People Project: Free Publications

The Global People Landscaping Study
Intercultural Effectiveness in Global Education Partnerships

The Global People Toolbook
Managing the Life Cycle of Intercultural Partnerships

The Global People Competency Framework
Competencies for Effective Intercultural Interaction

http://www.globalpeople.org.uk/

Global People Project:
Free Publications

The Learning Process Model for Intercultural Partnerships

GlobalPeople

The Learning Process in Intercultural Collaboration
Evidence from the eChina-UK Programme

GlobalPeople

Sino-British Interaction in Professional Contexts

GlobalPeople

http://www.globalpeople.org.uk/

The Way Ahead

The Way Ahead

We need:

- More research into authentic intercultural interaction in business;

- Greater focus on conceptualising intercultural competence;

- Deeper understanding of the competencies needed for effective intercultural communication

The Way Ahead

Clearer understanding of what we need to aim at in our teaching and development courses.

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Thank You!