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Language Exchange Encounters and Cross-Cultural Uncertainty Management

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Background

Language exchange, a.k.a. tandem language learning, can be defined as "language-based communication between two learners who are native speakers of different languages and who are learning each other's language as a L2" (Cziko, 2004). The history of face to face language exchange goes back to 1968 when French-German youth exchange program has first started (Cziko, 2004). In 1979, the Spanish-German Tandem Partnership was established later transforming into TANDEM networks in Europe that involved 16 different European countries. After the mass adoption of the internet, all of these networks also provided tandem language services on the web serving as a model for the new commercial and non-profit language exchange web sites. Today, the key word "language exchange" returns with more than 4 million hits on Google and there are more than two dozen online language exchange services open to public (e. g., mylanguageexchanage. com., conversation-exchange.com, italki. com, languageexchanges. com, etandem.net. etc.)

Despite the wide popularity of the language exchange portals on the internet, so far, no study has ever analyzed the nature of face to face language exchange meetings that take place after online interactions. Moreover, there's no established view about what constitutes a satisfactory first time language exchange meeting and an ideal language exchange partner. By drawing on Gudykunst's widely accepted uncertainty and ambiguity management theory from the cross-cultural communi-

cation discipline, this paper is aiming to explain the outcome of first time language exchange meetings based on the personal traits of the involved parties and the nature of the communication process. The results would be of specific interest to the intercultural communication scholars who are studying the relationship between language, context and communicating with strangers.

Communicative Differences between Japanese and Foreigners

After reviewing dozens of studies covering on communication patterns in Japan and North America, Gudykunst and Nishida concluded that, despite some similarities, the communication process is fundamentally different in both sides of the Pacific. The authors focused on language, culture and communication dynamics and explained the language differences as follows.

	Japanese	North Americans
Directness	*Indirect (Cautiousness and indirectness needed for harmony, synthetic thinking (focusing on the whole) vs analytic thinking)*	*Direct (subject Centered, analytic thinking (focusing on parts))*
In-group/Out-group Conversation	*Honorifics and different words used for outsiders. Honne vs tatemae, uchi vs. soto*	*No distinctive comm. between out-group members*
Purpose	*Information Transmission (persuasiveness should always be avoided)*	*Persuasion (language can be used to convince others, threats are not unusual)*
Topic Management and Turn taking	*Take turns evenly, use aizuchi.*	*Conversation starter does most of the talk, questions and comments instead of back channeling*
Silence	*Presence of seniors, outsiders, different genders make it hard to talk. Silence has different meanings.*	*Words are used to control situation, silence is not liked*
Competence	*Low confidence in English skills, purpose is instrumental (to get a job)*	*Fluent Japanese speakers are uncommon and usually foreigners are not expected to be proficient in Japanese (the law of inverse returns)*

Summarized from Gudykunst & Nishida, 1994

Theoretical Framework

A typical language exchange involves two strangers from different cultures meeting for the first time in a host country that might cause some communication problems. Therefore, Gudykunst's (1985) cross-cultural anxiety/uncertainty management theory which relates to interactions with strangers can explain the consequence of the initial language exchange meetings. First introduced by Berger and Calabresse (1975) and then developed by Gudykunst (1985), this theory provides valuable insights into communication between in- and out-group members by predicting strangers' behavior and reducing miscommunication. The axioms of the theory can be summarized into one sentence as liking among strangers is positively affected by nonverbal communication, intimacy, shared networks, self disclosure and similarity while negatively influenced by dissimilarity and interrogation. Gudykunst and his colleagues successfully applied the theory to Japanese and Caucasian relationships in Hawaii (1987) and in-out group interactions in Japan and the USA (1987). The authors noted that the theory mostly holds true but cultural factors (such as masculinity and collectivism) and ethno-linguistic characteristics also contribute to the relationships between strangers.

Methodology

As a first step, popular language exchange web sites were identified according to the number of daily visits on Alexa.com. Only the top two websites (mylanguageexchange.com and conversationexchange.com) were selected to solicit participation in the study. Invitations were sent out with a link to the online survey to 500 members on mylanguageexchange.com and 100 members on conversationexchnage.com (via convenience sampling: the most recent members who logged in last 30 days). Additionally, the information about this study was posted on the page of Mixi's language exchange group. There was no incentive to participate in the survey and the response rate was about 10%.

The data was collected in November, 2009 via a password protected online survey website. The questionnaire was in Japanese and all of the

participants listed Japanese as their mother tongue. There were a total of 64 participants residing in 6 different countries (Japan, 39; United States, 12; Canada, 6; United Kingdom, 3; Australia, 3; New Zealand, 1). The age of the participants ranged between 18 and 65 and the majority were females (85%). Although this can be seen as gender bias in data collection, it was observed that most Japanese who created online profiles to find English speaking language exchange partners were females.

Measurements for similarity, interrogation, nonverbal communication and ethnic identification were borrowed from Gudykunst's past studies (1985, 1987a, 1987b).

Findings

A series of confirmatory factor analyses and structural equation modeling (Arbuckle, 2006) were conducted to test the relationship between liking and previously identified independent variables namely similarity, effective non-verbal communication, interrogation and ethnic identification. Although the model was somewhat significant (acceptable RMSEA, IFI values) the path coefficients for ethnic identification and similarity seemed to be insignificant. Additionally, **readers should not that 35 is a very low sample size for SEM or any multivariate analysis with several independent variables.** Hence, these results should be taken very cautiously.

Table I: Model Fit

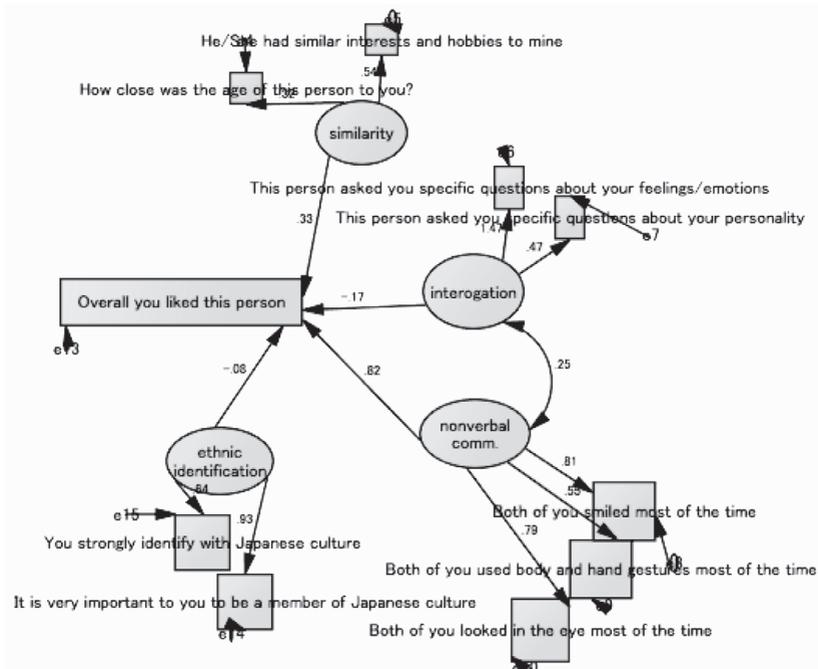| モ　デ　ル	IFI	RMSEA	NFI	CFI	CMIN/DF
モデル番号1	.910	.077	.731	.889	1.371

Figure I: Final Structural Equation Model (CMIN/DF=1.37, RMSEA=.077)

Table II: Path Coefficients

		推定値	標準誤差	検定統計量	確率	ラベル
var530	← Similarity	1.000				
var510	← Similarity	.456	.534	.854	.393	
var558	← Interrogation	1.000				
var559	← Interrogation	3.186	3.343	.953	.341	
var560	← Nonverbal	1.000				
var561	← Nonverbal	.736	.228	3.225	.001	
var651	← E. Identification	1.000				
var652	← E. Identification	1.689	2.828	.597	.550	
var562	← Nonverbal	1.012	.203	4.976	***	
Satisfaction	← Similarity	.715	.900	.795	.427	
Satisfaction	← Interrogation	-.362	.196	-1.848	.065	
Satisfaction	← Nonverbal	1.555	.343	4.537	***	
Satisfaction	← E. Identification	-.178	.257	-.693	.488	

Results and Conclusions

This study has investigated the impressions formed during first-time language encounters between Japanese and English speakers. The data provided a clear support to Gudykunst's cross-cultural uncertainty management theory which predicts that similarity and effective nonverbal communication positively impact liking of strangers whereas interrogation and strong ethnic identification hinder meaningful relationship development in the process. Additionally, it was found that the perceived "respect" is the best predictor of initial satisfaction with a language exchange partner.

   Some other notable findings to emerge from this study were the importance nonverbal communication and attractiveness. According to our model, nonverbal communication –smiling, eye contact and use of gestures– had the highest path coefficient leading to satisfaction way higher than the effects of similarity and openness to different cultures. In the same vein, it was found that the attractiveness of the language partner is as important as his/her verbal communication skills. These findings suggest that body language can play a crucial role during conversations with strangers, which is often underestimated or goes unnoticed by EFL learners.

Discussions

People who study foreign languages by and large focus on grammar or vocabulary ignoring pragmatic implications of the language. Similarly, language teachers also tend to overlook cultural and contextual factors when preparing class materials. However, this study clearly demonstrates that nonverbal aspects of EFL conversations could be a determining factor when it comes to relationship building with foreigners. Educating young learners about the importance of nonverbal communication, especially smiling, eye contact, hand gestures and mutual respect would greatly help them gain cross-cultural competence.

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Appendix I Correlations between "*Overall you liked this person*" and Personality items

	Correlation Coefficient	Significance
He/She was respectful to you	0.75	p>.05
He/She was an attractive person	0.73	p>.05
Both of you smiled most of the time	0.72	p>.05
Looked at each other in the eye most of the time	0.63	p>.05
He/She often smiled during the conversation	0.62	p>.05
He/She seemed like a psychologically normal person	0.62	p>.05
He/She seemed like having an extrovert personality	0.54	p>.05
He/She seemed like a positive thinking person	0.53	p>.05
This person mostly understood how you felt at that time	0.47	p>.05
This person mostly understood the meaning of what you were saying	0.46	p>.05
You mostly understood what this person was saying	0.40	p>.05
This person asked you specific questions about your personality	0.36	p>.05
He/She had similar interests and hobbies to yours	0.34	p>.05
He/She seemed like capable of answering all of your questions	0.34	p>.05
You mostly understood what this person felt at that time	0.28	p>.05
Both of you used body and hand gestures most of the time	0.21	p>.05
This person asked you specific questions about your feelings/emotions	0.20	p>.05
Did you meet in Japan or overseas	0.12	p>.05
He/She had different purposes except language exchange	-0.05	p>.05
He/She was boring	-0.29	p>.05

N=35