INCA

THE THEORY

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE ASSESSMENT (INCA)

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## INCA THEORY – AN OVERVIEW

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i) TOLERANCE FOR AMBIGUITY

The significance

In interaction with people of other cultures, people often have concrete aims they wish to achieve such as agreeing a contract, and in this case otherness is not only interesting but also a potential barrier. People who are ‘tolerant of ambiguity’ are able to meet this challenge and accept ambiguity, whilst finding a solution – and enjoying the experience of otherness.

Tolerance for ambiguity is the ability to accept ambiguity and lack of clarity and to be able to deal with this constructively.

Since members of foreign cultures show different ways of behaviour, have different standards and have different opinions, a lot of uncertainty and unpredictability emerges for an individual. The person who is acting in such an intercultural situation often does not know which behaviour is expected and how behaviour is evaluated. For instance, the temporal order of action or the division of labour in other cultures differ from those of one’s own culture. Tolerance for ambiguity means to be able to accept such uncertainties and ambiguities, and to find solutions to problems which they might create.

In contrast, persons with a low degree of tolerance for ambiguity experience unstructured and ambiguous situations as unpleasant and threatening. They either try to avoid such situations or to get out of them as soon as possible. If this is impossible, they feel visibly uncomfortable, misinterpret unclear situations and simplify ambiguities. When trying to solve such problems, they often neglect a part of the problem and search for simple solutions. When confronted with contradictory and ambiguous opinions they search for a compromise and prefer a very clear and definite way of proceeding.

Motivation

When persons with a high degree of tolerance for ambiguity are confronted with values, opinions, and ways of behaviour that contradict their own, they consider this situation interesting and a challenge. Persons with tolerance for ambiguity consider ambiguity as something positive and are interested in managing such situations in a constructive way.

Knowledge/skills

They are able to consider several perspectives and opinions when looking at a problem and they are able to find a solution that satisfies all the people involved.
**Behaviour**

They take into account all the differences and the various aims of the partners in a situation and, when appropriate, make them explicit. They are calm in ambiguous situations. They find constructive and satisfactory solutions to complex and ambiguous situations.

**ii) BEHAVIOURAL FLEXIBILITY**

**The significance**

In interaction with people of other cultures, it is not possible to achieve goals effectively without taking into consideration the behaviour considered ‘normal’ in the immediate environment, and the expectations one’s partner has of what ‘good’ behaviour is. It is therefore necessary to be flexible and to a certain degree able to adapt to the immediate environment to achieve co-operation and understanding.

**Behavioural flexibility is the ability to adapt one’s own behaviour to different requirements and situations.**

In their own cultures, people usually know the behaviour that is expected and that is considered appropriate. Usually this would be a small spectrum of possible ways of behaving. When people from different cultures meet, their usual behaviour might not be appropriate for other people who do not react to behaviour in the way expected. Thus it is essential in intercultural situations to be able to expand and adapt one’s own repertoire of behaviour. Persons with intercultural competence thus show the ability to perceive intercultural signals and they are able to use different strategies of behaviour in different situations.

Persons with a high degree of behavioural flexibility are able to use a broad spectrum of behaviour adapted to specific situations. In the same situation they can act in different ways. They perceive even weak signals in situations and are able to adapt their behaviour accordingly. They also take into account how their own behaviour influences others, and are able to take on the types of behaviour of others.

Persons with a low degree of behavioural flexibility always act in the same way, even in situations when they meet persons from other cultures. They are unable to consider different alternatives of action in a situation. They will not deviate from a previously determined behavioural procedure. An inflexible person will not notice the negative effects of their own behaviour on others. Thus they cannot adapt their own behaviour to specific situations or take on types of behaviour from others.
**Motivation**
Having a wide repertoire of behaviour, they are willing to constantly monitor the effects of their own behaviour, and adapt it to the specific requirements of a given situation.

**Knowledge/skill**
They are generally able to apply a number of different types of behaviour in a given situation. They are able to perceive even weak signals of a situation and can adapt their behaviour in appropriate ways.

**Behaviour**
They take on the behaviour of others and use that in intercultural situations if their own behaviour is inappropriate.

### iii) COMMUNICATIVE AWARENESS

**The significance**

Problems in intercultural communication often occur because the communication partners follow different linguistic conventions. People from different cultures associate different meanings with specific terms; they express their intentions in different linguistic forms, they follow different cultural conventions of how a conversation should take place with regard to its content or its structure. The meaning of gestures, mime, volume, pauses, etc. also differs from one culture to the other. This is all exacerbated by the use of foreign languages, when people are often not able to formulate or interpret intentions appropriately in given contexts.

People often do not notice such problems but when they do, they make ‘psychological’ assumptions, and attribute the differences to different character traits, to different ‘cultural mentalities’. A speaker who speaks with a low voice, for instance, is often described as ‘shy’, although he/she may only want to behave in a polite manner or to indicate that the message is very important.

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Communicative awareness is the ability to recognise different linguistic conventions, different foreign language skills and their effects on discourse processes, and to negotiate rules appropriate for intercultural communication.

Communicative Awareness focuses on the following areas:

*Dealing with different communicative conventions*
Communicative awareness is the ability to recognise different communicative conventions and their impact on discourse processes, and to attune to the communicative conventions that seem to govern the behaviour of discourse partners. Based on these assumptions, each person tries to adapt his own discourse behaviour to these conventions or to explain his own conventions and situational preferences to others.

Dealing with the effects of different communicative conventions
Communicative awareness also means assessing the discourse situation and the potential impact of one’s own discourse behaviour in the ongoing intercultural situation. Based on this assessment of how utterances can provoke misunderstandings, partners try to negotiate and agree upon common discourse rules.

Dealing with communicative difficulties
Communicative awareness is also the ability to cope with problems in communication that result from non-native-language skills. This means to adapt to different levels of foreign language competence, e.g. by simplifying utterances, by explaining/avoiding technical terms or by trying for clear articulation.

Furthermore, communicative awareness includes the use of meta-communicative strategies that address the discourse situation, e.g. by mentioning problems of word meaning (‘Maybe I did not understand XX correctly’), speakers’ intentions (‘I promise you…’, ‘What I actually mean…’), discourse conditions (‘I feel that we are running out of time’), by explicitly asking for clarification (‘What do you mean by…’) or by giving feedback (‘If I understand you correctly, by saying that XX you mean YY’?).

Motivation
They are willing to suspend immediate attributions when confronted with different linguistic conventions. They are curious to find out about the meanings and intentions of their communication partners. They are ready to modify given communicative conventions and to behave correspondingly.

Knowledge /skill
They have knowledge of different communicative conventions and levels of foreign language competencies and are able to recognise the impact of these differences on discourse processes. They know how to modify their communicative behaviour by adapting to the behaviour of communication partners or by negotiating appropriate rules for the intercultural situation.

Behaviour
They build and test hypotheses about different communicative conventions and appropriate language levels. They negotiate and agree upon common rules for discourse interaction. They cope with problems that result from non-
native-language skills by adapting to different levels of foreign language competence or by using meta-communicative strategies for clarification.

iv) KNOWLEDGE DISCOVERY

The significance

It is not always possible to predict where and how people will find themselves in an unfamiliar situation, interacting with people of another culture. People cannot always prepare in advance for a new situation. It is thus important to have the skills of finding out new knowledge and integrating it with what one already knows. People need especially to know how to discover practical information, and also how to observe how people of other cultures act in accordance with their underlying and often unconscious beliefs, values and behaviours.

The skill of knowledge discovery is the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to act using that knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction

When two or more people interact with each other, either face to face or at a distance, they have certain expectations of each other based on previous knowledge. If they know that they are to meet ‘an English person’, ‘a woman’, or ‘a teenager’, they will use knowledge of that person or of that type – and sometimes it is a stereotype – to anticipate the nature of the interaction and communication. Even when they meet for the first time, and have no previous knowledge of each other, their expectations will form immediately – based for example on the apparent age, gender, ethnicity and social class of the other person. In situations of interaction which are not face to face – reading a letter or e-mail – there are other clues that lead to formation of expectations, sometimes deliberately given but sometimes evident from the paper used, the style of writing etc.

Even if we have been prepared or taught in advance about the people in question, this can never be complete or anticipate all circumstances, and we need to know how to ‘find out’ about others and what they assume to be ‘natural’.

The main difficulty is that other people are not aware of what we need to know. They are not aware for example that some allusions in what they say are recognised by people of their own culture but not shared by us. We need to be aware of what kinds of differences there might be, what the common hindrances to understanding are, and then develop skills of asking appropriate questions. In other words, we need the skills of ‘reading’ the
environment, for example the signs and symbols of the street scene, the
significance of modes of dress, the styles and types of newspaper texts.
Where we cannot read, we have to know how to ask and how to interpret
answers.

When we know in advance that we will be interacting with people in a new
environment, then we can do some prior research, using particular sources of
information, for example travel books, websites, tourist information, even
novels based in the new environment. In this case we need to be able to
differentiate between, for example, information intended for tourism and what
will really help with living and working in a new environment.

Motivation
They have a curiosity to find out about other cultures both in themselves and
in order to be able to interact better with people of other cultural identities

Knowledge/skill
They have the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural
practices and the ability to act using that knowledge under the constraints of
real-time communication and interaction

Behaviour
They use skills of asking questions, interpreting documents to, for example,
elicit from an interlocutor the concepts and values of documents or events,
identify significant references within and across cultures, identify similar and
dissimilar processes of interaction, verbal and non-verbal, and negotiate an
appropriate use of them in specific circumstances, identify and make use of
public and private institutions which facilitate contact with other countries and
cultures.

v) RESPECT FOR OTHERNESS

The significance

The basis of intercultural competence is in the attitudes of the person
interacting with people of another culture. This means a willingness to
relativise one's own values, beliefs and behaviours, not to assume that they
are the only possible and naturally correct ones, and an ability to see how
they might look from an outsider's perspective who has a different set of
values, beliefs and behaviours. This can be called the ability to 'decentre'. If
people do not have this respect for the way other people act and for what they
believe, then there is no basis for successful communication and achievement
of joint objectives.
Respect for otherness is manifested in curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend belief about (the ‘naturalness’ of) one’s own culture and to believe in (the ‘naturalness’ of) other cultures.

Communication is often about creating a shared understanding about a topic, from the weather to the humour of a story, to what action to take next. Successful communication does not necessarily mean agreement or even compromise. Success means that each understands what the other wishes to say as fully as possible. So it is possible for people to understand each other and disagree, and it is also possible for people to agree but not realise that they have misunderstood each other.

Understanding other people from the same language and culture group as oneself is not easy and is perhaps never complete. It is far more difficult when speaking with someone from another culture, i.e. they have:
- a different set of beliefs (what they assume is true e.g. about what is classed as edible and inedible or what is thought polite behaviour);
- a different set of values (what they assume is important in their lives e.g. they value honesty more than politeness, or they consider that older people’s views are more valuable than those of the young);
- and a different set of behaviours (the routine, often unconscious, ways of acting e.g. they always avoid looking older people directly in the eyes or they always keep a fast at a given period in the year – whatever they ‘always’ do, without reflection).

A shared understanding is hindered by this because each starts from a different set of assumptions. Success depends on two things:
- being able to ‘decentre’ from one’s own culture, i.e. become aware of what is usually unconscious;
- being able to take the other person’s perspective, and accepting that their ways also seem ‘natural’ to them.

This requires ‘unlearning’ what seems natural, and this requires a basic attitude of respect for otherness.

Motivation
They are willing to suspend usual assumptions and seek out new knowledge from others in a relationship of equality and, as a consequence, to question their own existing assumptions.

Knowledge/skills
They have knowledge of their own assumptions and those of their society, and the ability to critically assess the logic of a system of beliefs, values and behaviours.

Behaviour
They show interest in the other’s experience and in the daily experience of a range of social groups within a society, and not only that represented in the dominant culture.
They actively seek the other’s perspectives and evaluations of phenomena which are taken for granted in their environment, and take up the other’s perspectives in order to contrast and compare with the dominant views in their own society.

vi) EMPATHY

The significance

Although respect for otherness is a basic condition for successful interaction, it has to be complemented by the skills of taking up another perspective, of being able to grasp the ideas, feelings and intentions of other people. It is possible to accept and respect other people’s beliefs, values and behaviours without grasping the impact this may have on their actions and the way they respond to our beliefs, values and behaviours.

People have to take into consideration in real situations that the same situation is often perceived and evaluated by people from different cultures in very different ways, and they have to be able to show empathy towards people from other cultures by applying the skills of changing perspective and showing real interest in what other people feel and how they perceive situations.

Empathy is the ability to project oneself into another person’s perspective and their opinions, motives, ways of thinking and feelings. Empathic persons are able to relate and respond in appropriate ways to the feelings, preferences and ways of thinking of others.

Empathetic persons have the skills to describe what others feel in certain situations. They observe others carefully, are able to notice emotions that are hardly made explicit and are able to understand them. They are able to see the relationship with their own feelings and thoughts, the similarities and differences, and to analyse the possible effects of different perspectives on the mutual understanding between themselves and their partners. In their own actions, they consider the perspectives of others and avoid hurting them.

People with low degrees of empathy cannot recognise and describe the feelings of other people. They are not interested in how other people think or feel and are thus unable to detect when others don’t feel at ease in a certain situation. They cannot emulate the way others think and how they perceive a situation. They cannot imagine how their own behaviour could impact others,
and thus from time to time they hurt other people’s feelings, and are unsuccessful in intercultural communication.

**Motivation**
They wish to take up other perspectives, to put themselves into the ways of feeling and thinking of other people and to analyse them.

**Knowledge/skills**
They are able to show empathy towards people from foreign cultures with their feelings and thoughts. They show interest in what other people feel and how they perceive situations.

**Behaviour**
They describe what others feel in certain situations. They observe others carefully and recognise emotions that are hardly made explicit, and understand them in their respective contexts. In their own actions, they consider the perspectives of others and avoid hurting them, for example by asking about their feelings, and taking these into consideration in their own actions.

(Michael Byram, on behalf of Torsten Kühlmann, Bernd Müller-Jacquier and colleagues)