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1 Introduction

I believe very strongly that students should always have the right to ask, “What are we studying, and why?” Students should have the right to ask this about the topics being covered in a course (the content), the activities, and the homework. I would argue intercultural communication is a practical topic for everyone in Japan to study (even if they are not English majors), but for English majors, it is a critical and necessary area of study. Readers might not agree with me about this, but I have good reasons for saying it. Since students using this text as part of a class will be spending a lot of time and energy on the ideas included, I would like to take this opportunity early in the text to explain a bit more about what **intercultural communication** (IC) is, and why it is worth our attention.

My goal in introducing the topics in this text is to help you develop competence in communicating with people from other cultures, and to ask you to think about your identity and connection to the world – your home culture(s), and the world we live in – in a more nuanced and sophisticated way. The text is designed to build toward this gradually, introducing some themes early that are revisited toward the end of the book.

You probably have some idea of what the terms intercultural communication and culture mean, and perhaps have studied these topics before. There are also always those who start the year having never heard of IC, and also without a clear idea of what the word culture means (sometimes even thinking they do not have any cultural background to

speak of). This is not a problem. In fact, there is considerable disagreement regarding exactly how to define **culture**, even among experts, so one thing we will talk about later is what this word “culture” itself refers to; however, I would like to offer a simple definition here for IC as a field – enough to get us started. Intercultural communication is the study of interaction between people who have significantly different (cultural) backgrounds, especially when the differences are large enough that they make the people communicating understand a shared situation in quite different ways. Although intercultural communication has been happening throughout human history as humans have encountered different groups, the actual field of study called Intercultural Communication is young (born in the 1950s when the anthropologist Edward Hall coined the term).

A book or course on intercultural communication is usually not primarily a description of a particular foreign country, nor is it necessarily focused on the communication between people of two specific cultures (such as Japan and the USA). Instead, an IC text will primarily be concerned with interaction at a more general level, not necessarily tied to any particular culture. Although an IC text is likely to also include and discuss cross-cultural comparisons, the focus is more likely to be on how these differences affect communication between people with different backgrounds who are trying to communicate. In addition to information about particular cultures, a person with an interest in IC will also want to know more generally what aspects of life – which types of differences – are more likely to be possible causes of problems when interacting with others. IC will also discuss spe-

cific attitudes, reactions, and strategies one could deploy when interacting with someone who does things differently. In other words, cross-cultural comparisons are useful for those who want to understand some differences between two or more cultures (such as their own culture vs. another one). To an interculturalist, though, the focus is on developing a deeper understanding of the range of factors that can become problematic when communicating with others, and on expanding the range of attitudes and behaviors most likely to lead to successful outcomes in this situation.



The goal of this text is not to learn how to survive in one particular culture, but to get a sense of how cultures can vary more generally.

Ultimately, the goal of this text is *not* to teach you how to survive in any one particular culture. Instead, I would like for you to develop a set of mental tools you can use even if you know nothing about the background of the

person you are talking with. If you know a lot about the United States, that information might be of limited use to you when you find yourself talking with someone from Egypt or Ecuador. On the other hand, if you know something about which topic areas in general can be common causes of miscommunication across multiple cultures, and you have some knowledge, attitudes, and strategies applicable regardless of where you might be, then you can potentially be more successful. I should also point out here that

most IC professionals have experience with other cultures, and tend to be very knowledgeable about at least one culture (and often more) in addition to any culture they might call home. Most people who know a lot about IC can probably give you good cross-cultural observations about the cultures they are familiar with. In contrast, a person who has not studied IC but knows a lot about a particular culture may be able to help you understand particular cultural differences with cross-cultural comparisons; however, they might still not know much about troubleshooting communication problems involving others from a wider range of cultural backgrounds.

It is also worth noting before proceeding further that the fields of intercultural communication and cross-cultural comparison are both highly interdisciplinary. Researchers in these fields come from a wide range of backgrounds (linguists, psychologists, anthropologists, health care professionals, etc.), and this can be a double-edged sword. The advantage is that the field is dynamic and includes a wide range of topics and perspectives. Unlike many other fields where practitioners have a common background, at a conference of interculturalists you are likely to meet people from many walks of life where contact across cultures is a given: translators, health care professionals, consultants, businesspeople, trainers, teachers, and cultural adventurers who simply love meeting others who are different from themselves may all show up in the same room. Additionally, it means that interculturalists tend to make use of a number of very different approaches to research. While this keeps things fresh, it can also be a drawback, since the field of IC can sometimes feel

so varied as to appear almost amorphous, with researchers tackling very different problems in a variety of ways. Perhaps this will change as the field matures, but for now, this is the way things are.

To me, it comes down to using insights from theory and research in a variety of fields to improve interaction between people who are very different. I like to use the analogy of engineering. Engineering is the field of applying scientific insights to the solving of practical problems (such as how to make a bridge). I like to think of IC in a similar way – applying what we know of culture and cultural differences to the joys and difficulties of interacting with those who come from a very different background, and using these insights to minimize friction, learn from the process, and enhance outcomes.

The title of this book hints at how we have many things we might think we *know*, but in fact, we *learned* from growing up in a particular community. We simply *forgot* we learned the lessons. Thus, we tend to assume our beliefs and ideas are natural and right. Even though we might know on an abstract level that things are done differently in other lands (even knowing some specific examples, such as whether or not to wear shoes in the house), there is much we simply assume is somehow natural or normal. This book is not an attempt to list the many specific differences we can find around the globe (such as whether grapes should be eaten whole, or without the peel; whether or not corn and tuna are okay as pizza toppings; whether shoes are worn indoors or not). Such differences are easy enough to find out, but are also at a relatively more surface-level of culture. In-

stead, in this text, we will explore deeper elements of culture that might not be as readily noticed, because they function outside of awareness until we have extensive experience abroad. The *things we forgot we learned* in the title includes things like whether or not we think peanut butter is good with celery, but also includes many deeper lessons we tend to regard as common sense and somehow the same across borders, when this may not be a safe assumption to make (in some cultures it would be regarded as bad to borrow money from a friend, whereas in others this might not only be expected behavior, but also a sign of a healthy and deep friendship; in some cultures having children might be seen as a choice, while in others it is more like an obligation).

I said at the beginning of this introduction that I feel IC to be a field worthwhile for everyone – and a necessity for a student of foreign languages. This is because, as a student of a foreign language in Japan, you are likely to eventually find yourself in communication with people of other nationalities. This, by definition, will be intercultural communication – the topics and strategies you learn as a student of IC will be of immediate use to you in this kind of situation. At the same time, IC is not just about national culture differences. When you have two people who have very different values (or who employ different metaphors, references, or systems of meaning) in communication, this is also a kind of IC. Intercultural communication is what happens when the differences are so large that they begin to have an impact on the ability of the people to successfully understand each other. For this reason, those who come from different parts of the same country, even though they share the same na-

tionality, are engaging in IC. The world we live in, where we can cross borders with ease, learn and communicate via the Internet, and where our choices have an impact on people who may be very different from ourselves, is one where intercultural competence may increasingly become a necessity for survival as a species. This is why I believe the field of IC can benefit anyone – it is immensely practical, even if a person never plans to leave their hometown.

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