

In Search of Intercultural Competence

Cultural knowledge is an important aspect of foreign language learning and can facilitate meaningful communication between dominant and subdominant groups of the world. In addition, new innovations, disruptions in technology requires greater communication between members of different cultures. However, the most recent political shifts in the U.S., worsened by a global pandemic (Covid-19) and further aggravated by social unrest, are evidence of historical baggage, worsened by intercultural barriers. The subject of culture is not new to scholarly research. Culture continues to be represented in various contexts and disciplines: sociology, anthropology, psychology, and linguistics.

The frame of reference for this report is sociocultural linguistics. According to Buchhotlz (2005), it is "...the broad interdisciplinary field concerned with the intersection of language, culture, and society." Through the lens of the "interpersonal interview," this report explores the cultural knowledge of one individual. Kvale (2009) found that "the research interview is an interpersonal situation, a conversation between two partners about a theme of mutual interest. In the interview, knowledge is created "inter" the points of view of the interviewer and the interviewee." (p.123). In addition, the interview is based on an ethnographic model. The American Anthropological Association Statement on Ethnography and IRBs¹ offers a working definition of ethnography that refers to three components: researcher, human behavior, and natural setting. The statement discusses ethnography in its role of promoting fieldwork and investigation through the use of individual [interpersonal] interviews. This report aims to explore factors that contribute to intercultural competence, I include chronology and country-specific history, to parallel the themes that emerged from the transcription narrative. The historical background information highlights the social, political, religious, and economic conditions that existed in the interviewees' country of origin.

The Informant

The informant's name will be shielded with the alias, Dr. L. He is a mechanical engineer and Ph.D. professor of engineering at the University of Memphis, where he has taught mechanical engineering for over 30 years. Dr. L was born in Freetown Sierra Leone, West Africa and spent his early childhood and formative years in Sierra Leone. Dr. L. was selected for the interview because of his broad expanse of knowledge in the scientific field, extensive international travel on five continents; and most importantly, teaching and conducting research on three continents: Africa, North America, and Europe.

¹ The organization supports ethical conduct in research.

Background Information

Adequate research from scholarly literature not only informs the methods for the interview but also provides guidance for transcription and data analysis. An overview of literature on intercultural competence is presented here.

There seems to be no single standard for determining how to achieve intercultural competence. However, Hammer (2003) sheds light on research that produced a development model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS). Based on this model, it gives a worldview-orientation of an individual's intercultural behaviors, which can be measured using a tool called the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). The purpose of such a tool is to provide evidence of intercultural encounters that assess an individual's intercultural competence. The question of what should be measured remains unanswered, but the ability to communicate and adapt one's communication across cultures is a well-known descriptor of intercultural competence. "Intercultural communication is communication on the basis of respect for individuals and equality of human rights as the democratic basis for social interaction," Byram et.,al. 2002 p. 4. Hammer (2003) further argues that the more intercultural sensitivity an individual exhibits, the greater the intercultural competence. The Results section of this report is an analysis of Dr. L's social interactions. By comparing the interviewees' experiences and perspectives with the above-cited literature, the analysis reveals whether or not intercultural communication and intercultural sensitivity exist.

Byram and Zarate (2002) emphasize the notion of *savoirs*. These *savoirs* express the characteristics of interculturality, cited in Liddcoat and Scarino (2013). The word *savoir* can be interpreted as knowledge of the self and cultural artifacts, which includes language and culture of a person's indigenous people and country of origin. Language plays a major role in how people shape their own identities, which are also shaped by historical events. There are some difficulties with understanding cultural identity. One suggestion to simplify the complexities, according to Holliday and Kullman (2017), is to closely examine statements that people make about their own culture. Dr. L's statements about the Sierra Leonian culture and cultural artifacts are relevant to interculturality, as noted in the Results section of this report.

Ethnographic Methods

The interview was conducted via telephone on February 28, 2021 and proceeded in two parts, as the informant navigated a detailed story of his intercultural journey. Ideally, two or more interviews are preferable (initial briefing and debriefing) so that questions can be presented, with time to digest initial interview interactions, i.e., get to know the interviewee's body language. Kvale and Brinkman (2009) state that they "do not propose general rules for interviewing." Instead, they provide descriptions of interviewing and suggestions. The priority lies in concentrating on the subject and subject matter, Kezang (2019). With one or multiple interviews, the process requires intense focus on listening. The interview transcription was aided by Otter.ai recording and transcription software.

The dialogue began with his early childhood and continued for over 1.5 hours. The interviewee provided detailed information about personal experiences, opinions, and life lessons. According to Kvale and Brinkman (2009), in seeking to get descriptions of the interviewees “life world,” a sequence of themes emerges and requires investigation to realize subliminal or unconscious actions. I considered Dr. L’s professional experience with research and determined that presenting comprehensive questions would evoke thoughtful responses. Kvale and Brinkman (2009) further indicate that scripting is an important aspect of the interview, as well as the approach that is used. I set the interview stage by giving a brief introduction to define my purpose, checked the sound, and asked the first set of questions. A funnel-shape interview approach: As an interviewer, interested in exploring the cultural attitudes of an individual, who represents a particular community, I began with questions based on a desire to know his cultural story.

In keeping with Kvale and Brinkman (2009), I believe that the funnel-shape interview approach promotes good interview interaction. The editing required two iterations, to remove blank spaces, inaudible words. Dr. L. appears to have an expansive knowledge, based on the extreme attention to details. Thorough responses aided in the analysis process.

Coding and Themes

Taylor, Powell, and Renner (2003) introduce steps in the qualitative analysis process. After completing edits of the transcript, the next step is coding the data to identify patterns and themes. The Atlas.ti workbench tool is a qualitative analysis software program that can handle text and graphics. It is used to organize data for the purpose of categorization and interpretation. Codes are the broadest categories used to answer questions about the quotes used in the transcription. The quotes plus codes and other features of the software (memos, networks, links) generate data used to explore, analyze, and interpret Dr. L’s statements. Taylor et al. (2003) suggests two ways to analyze i.e., preset or emergent categories. I chose preset categories, which allowed me to search for specific themes. Further analysis of the transcript, thematic coding, lead to combining, editing, and deleting initial codes. Thematic coding results in developing narrower emergent themes and new codes.

Results - Analysis

In the context of historical events, Dr. L’s intercultural story unveils deeper meanings about cultural artifacts and identity construction. Thematic coding of the transcript resulted in nineteen codes (see Appendix). These codes represent factors that contributed to and influenced Dr. L’s intercultural competence. Moreover, the thematic codes represent my interpretation of themes that emerged from the transcription narrative.

Byram et al., (2002) suggests that social identities are related to culture. Dr. L's earliest memory of education and religion began with experiences in his secondary school. A belief in the principles of the religious institutions developed not because of its ability to alter customs or change the value system of Sierra Leonians (SL) or other distinct ethnic groups in the region; but because, there was no effort made by the church to convert students nor families. From an emic or culture-specific point of view, Dr. L respects the religious institution as and artifact of origin and identity. Because it did not socialize the various SL ethnic groups by assimilation, implicit in the transcript comments are warm sentiments. Although English language was enforced by the during school hours, this rule facilitated social interactions between teachers and other students. Dr. L reflects fondly on a class of "about 25 students, from all kinds of ethnic backgrounds, speaking all kinds of languages." The English-only rule allowed students and teachers to communicate with each other. He states that by age eight, he was fully aware of the 15 ethnicities that existed in his country. Dr. L. exposure to interculturality leads to cultural awareness Liddoat and Scarino, 2003, which builds intercultural sensitivity.

From a historical or universal etic point of view, the church became a cultural artifact because of Sierra Leone's history of colonization. Although, the transatlantic trade (enslavement of African people) had a negative impact on the country, by historical accounts, Freetown became a center of abolitionist activity. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the British abolitionist [religious community] organized a colony for black loyalists at Freetown.

When Dr. L. reflects on the secondary school, reference is made to artifacts. A very emotional statement about world travel, experience from around the world " I am [have gone] from New Zealand to Norway from Nigeria to the Arctic Circle and go back and forth; for those artifacts that the artifacts of my having attended to CMS Grammar School," (Dr. L. 1:06:38). He goes on to imply that the artifacts are ethereal and exist within him. He treasures the education that he received and boldly proclaims that he ties his pride and patriotism to the CMS Grammar School in Sierra Leone. Dr. L. has no recollection of being treated differently or experiencing cultural distinctions throughout his life as a schoolboy. He offers no further details on the subject of discrimination.

Identity Construction

There are certain markers of territory exhibited throughout Dr. L's transcript, which impact his ability to negotiate identity, interculturality. For example, he shows different sides of his identity, as he expresses thoughts about living, working, and loyalty to other countries and people. Prior to relocating from Africa to the UK, Dr. L. never considered moving to the United States. Given the historical chronology, Sierra Leone, according to Dr. L, came into the concept of nation much later than many developing nations. Dr. L. explains that the Mende are the dominant tribe, then the Temne people. Holliday, Hyde, and Kullman, (2017) found that cultural resources (social and political structures) influence identity construction and direct intercultural encounters.

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Dr. L expresses his appreciation for the U.S.A. However, he does not identify with U.S. citizenship as a cultural artifact. For examples, he sees citizen as a business transaction, “it is a is an administrative convenience, whatever circumstances living in the United States, citizenship will make life easier to operate in and out of the country” Dr. L. 58:19. This statement implies that there is a tendency for people to assume a single definition of citizenship. Dr. L adds that he has not been able to make the transition from being citizenry being an administration convenience to a country that inspires loyalty. It is a cultural difference and could imply a global worldview. “Each change in worldview structure generates new and more sophisticated issues to be resolved in intercultural encounters.” Hammer et al., 2003 p. 423.

Holliday and Kullman (2017) describe a “grammar of culture,” which divides human interactions inhibited by particular social and political structures or facilitated by particular small cultural products. The cultural resources include education, language, religion, tradition. It can also include global position toward oneself and others. The authors also point to the importance of family ancestry, peers, and profession. Dr. L. does not give a lot of description about personal life, but he does reflect on his mother’s illness that occurred while he was in elementary school. Her illness was a major factor in shaping his identity. He also speaks of his father, whom he applauds for his ability to speak up to seven languages and, though not formally educated, he was able to communicate well in and out of diverse environments. His father worked as a researcher for the Sierra Leonian government’s Forestry Department. Dr. L attributes language to the main means of facilitating social interaction.

Dr. L expresses his respect and admiration for The United Kingdom in a vastly different context from that of the United States. As he reflects on his elementary school in the transcript (Page 3), proclaiming that it was ran like a school in the UK. His pride is in the fact that the emphasis was on academic subjects. One can speculate that schools in the U.S. give scholarships for sports, and there are many other social events centered around education that are detached from curricular or scholarly endeavors. After his school’s, Common Entrance Exam,” compulsory for every school age child in the country, “Dr. L. decided that he would live in the UK Underlying historical reasons may have had an effect on Dr. L’s youth and desire to exit Sierra Leone as soon as possible. Mobility increases intercultural encounters.

Sierra Leoneans have been described as "The World's Most Resilient People" Between 1991 and 2001, about 50,000 people were killed in Sierra Leone's civil war. Hundreds of thousands of people were forced from their homes and many became refugees in [Guinea](#) and [Liberia](#).. [History of Sierra Leone - Wikipedia](#)

After earning degrees from the University of Nottingham, working in the UK and other parts of Europe for over 20 years, he returned to Africa, having decided that he wanted to engage in intrastate travel. He worked in Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique before accepting a position to teach Mechanical Engineering at the University of Alabama-Birmingham. Accepting the position in the United States was not by design, Dr. L says that it was “purely coincidental.” His experiences, originating from Sierra Leone West Africa, showing intercultural sensitivity at a young age, embracing difference, personal transcendence through language education. Most

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importantly, he has shown through his vast knowledge of culture the ability to negotiate his identities as an educator and skilled communicator. All are factors emerged from the data as contributing to Dr. L's cultural journey and imparting intercultural competence.

Conclusion

There are some valuable thoughts about the interviewees' cultural journey and the acquisition of intercultural competence. First, Dr. L's life journey thrust him into cultural awareness at a very early age. The circumstances may appear remarkable from my Western and Black American-centric point of view. However, from his perspective, there is nothing remarkable about his cultural journey because the journey continues. "The acquisition of intercultural competence is never complete or perfect." Byram, Gribkova, Starkey, 2002, p. 11.

Dr. L's confidence in communicating across boundaries confirms the need of language teaching to extend beyond the linguistic forms. It should prepare students to acquire new knowledge and cultural discovery. I am interested in furthering my knowledge of my TL culture and learning how to teach interculturally.

Appendix
Thematic Codes Assigned to Transcript Quotations

Name	Grounded	Density
Consenting to globalization	3	3
Constructing identities::English	4	4
Constructing identities::Ph.D.	3	3
Cultural Artifacts_Origins::a Buxton Church	4	4
Cultural Artifacts_Origins::Britt~	1	1
Cultural Artifacts_Origins::Ethnicities~	4	4
Cultural Artifacts_Origins::Freetown Sierra Leone	1	1
Cultural Artifacts_Origins::Muslim~	1	1
Cultural Artifacts_Origins::Sierra	1	1
Cultural Artifacts_Origins::Sierra Leone~	4	4
Cultural Artifacts_Origins::the CMS Grammar School church c...	1	1
Establishing boundaries::Mendes, Fullahs, others~	1	1
Establishing boundaries::UK, US, other countries~	6	6
Influencing other and being~	6	6
Interacting with connections:: Aware of Culture~	2	2
Interacting with connections:: children, adults, others~	2	2
Interacting with connections::Sierra Leone	2	2
Learning Tolerance and satisfying curiosity	3	3
Reacting to Life Events::	5	5

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