

Intercultural Interaction: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Intercultural Communication

By Spencer-Oatey, Helen and Peter Franklin

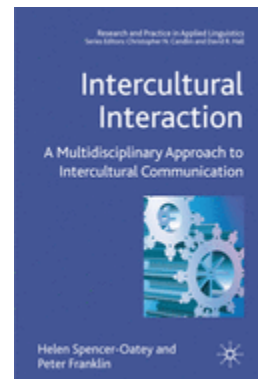
2009. [Palgrave Macmillan](http://www.palgrave.com). 384 pages

Reviewed by George Simons & Katrin Volt at www.diversophy.com

We work together, Kati and George, in the “intercultural business,” creating and delivering learning tools which we hope are of benefit to our customers and to our world. Since forty years separate us and we were born hemispheres apart, it seemed an interesting challenge to jointly read and review this book and attempt to share and compare what emerged in our listening. Moreover this book itself, though thoroughly scholarly, presents the protagonists of research and practice in a kind of dialogue, their voices appearing in highlighted inserts in the context of a well organized treatment. We wrote what follows in the same room but on a common document in Google Docs to experiment communicating with each other and with whomever reads this in a new way.

First question: What's in a name?

George: What do we call what we do as interculturalists? The authors have carefully titled this volume *Intercultural Interaction*, and that is perhaps the best title for where the focus of our work is going. *Intercultural Communication* appears in the subtitle and the book is published in the Research and Practice in Applied Linguistics Series. I note the naming at the outset, as the authors also do, because communication and linguistics are often viewed, at least from the outside, rather narrowly. Adding the adjective “intercultural” to the recipe threatens to restrict it even more, if it were not for the authors' insistence on adding "multidisciplinary." What follows is an assiduous review of the pertinent knowledge about each of the elements in the title from a rich variety of perspectives.



Kati: We aim to be competent intercultural communicators. Language use means switching between cultures and how we use language affects our communication. This means we need to be aware that language and culture are closely tied together. Face issues and rapport management are important in any interaction but more so in the intercultural situation. The concept of intercultural interaction competence is interesting and raises many questions, e.g., can we determine who is competent and who is not? Moreover, in the intercultural or any other communicative situation, is competence a two-way process in that both sides accommodate? The book is part of the Applied Linguistics series and derives some of its content from the field of pragmatics. The authors make the point that intercultural communication is a combination of many fields and applied linguistics seems to be neglected by many. Part of the title refers to the "multidisciplinary approach," used in the book by looking at different categories influencing culture and communication.

Second question: How does this book fit into where we come from? Spencer-Oatey and Franklin “fess u”p as to who they are, what brung 'em, and what turns them on--so should we.

Kati: This book relates to my experience as a foreign language teacher. My MA dissertation, though a small-scale study, looked at cultural awareness in the EFL classroom. Some practitioners manage multicultural situations more effectively than others, but what is the key to this success? How can we grow and develop these skills; can we at all? Communication is an essential component in our daily life, so it makes sense to have the ability to use it well. It makes sense to have a competent intercultural interactant in the coaching or teaching situation who can create dialogue in learners.

George: My “apperceptive mess,” as I like to call it, has a *rote Faden* running through it that keeps me focused and sane. My relevant background for intercultural work was in philosophy, comparative religion and psychology. These ultimately got tied together for me via linguistics and cognitive science. These last convinced me that, far from being data transmission, communicating was about creating our reality, both internal and external, in the context of a relationship with the other. Most recently I found this well put by Dominique Wolton as, “Communication is cohabitation.” This book by Spencer-Oatey and Franklin is in fact a documentation, in the words of the players from various disciplines and walks of life, of the struggle to both use and emerge from our mental categories, to move from abstraction, through pragmatics to who we are for each other and what we are doing together in life, learning competence along the way.

Second question: What did we pay attention to in these pages? Franklin and Spencer-Oatey looked at what scholarship tells us about how culture works, how we productively work with each other as other, how can we measure this ability or at least recognize competence, and what do we have to do to take it further, as well as, finally, how do we study this process.

Kati: To me, the sections on foreign language training and competence in intercultural interaction were particularly interesting. These sections helped me more intelligently ask and answer the question, “What is intercultural competence and what does it take to become a successful communicator in an intercultural situation?”

Since we take communication for granted in our everyday life and use it to achieve what we need, how do we actually go about it and, if we achieve what we want, can we say this is success and hence, that we are competent? Communication has many layers, so for instance, we may say one thing but our body language may send a different message. Perhaps our interactant picks it up, perhaps not. The aim of intercultural interaction competence is the ability to facilitate and handle intercultural situations. Yet our own cultural, including linguistic background can be an obstacle and make us question our own values and preferences in such interactions. Knowledge of one's own culture in terms of communication and how it can impact on others is a necessary step. There is no quick fix recipe but self-analysis (knowledge of our strong and weak areas) and flexibility can help us along the way.

This raises another question, i.e., is the success of intercultural interaction based on one interactant being mindful of the other or both interactants being mindful towards one another? Do we influence the other person just to get what we want and just consider face issues a matter of practicality? The authors ask if cultural fit is desirable or if there is scope for cultural unfit that can provide more interesting experiences.

Most importantly, Franklin and Spencer-Oatey point out the need for discussing the skills needed for entering the intercultural development profession as well as the qualifications of such professionals. This is paramount today when anyone who has resided in a foreign country for some time or has initial qualifications decides to become an interculturalist. They emphasize the need for greater quality and transparency in the field.

I also appreciated the chapter on research areas regarding this topic and I hope to be involved in further intercultural research myself.

George: Reading a book always challenge one's own *confirmation bias*. We seem programmed to seek and find what we are looking for in the words of others, and this has long been noted in diversity work as an obstacle to appreciating difference. What then are the social and neural pathways from information to formation?

Clearly the authors have provided us with an enormous compendium of intercultural and communications research in a digestible way, not just footnoted commentary, but relevant charts and graphs that allow the reader to grasp the import and contributions of scholars and practitioners. This creates the kind of respect we need for what has been done and those who have done it, and makes us realize that we are all standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before, lessening the grip of our own confirmation bias and widening our perspective. While I was familiar with much of the research cited, it was instructive to have it organized and presented in this way.

Third question: What did we hope to find but did not?

Kati: Books are books - they can give us guidance, but the rest is up to us. However, I would have preferred more real life, practical examples and stories, for example how to handle intercultural interaction dilemmas in a multicultural situation.

I agree that at the moment English is the lingua franca and course books in EFL classrooms tend to use UK or US English, although the world's non-native English speakers are in the majority by now. In addition, course books are Western-oriented and so transmit Western values, not so effective in a globalised world. Furthermore, it is likely that non-native speakers will use English with both native and other non-native speakers, so intercultural interaction competence in matters of language becomes even more crucial and essential. Many foreign language teachers tend to focus more on communicative language competence in the target language than intercultural communication competence, but hopefully the latter is becoming more and more popular given the current globalisation trend.

My experience is that the teacher has to come up with appropriate tasks to develop intercultural communication and competence in students. Yes, teachers often have a plan they need to get through and no time for intercultural competence issues. This is challenging - it is about developing skills and attitudes in people, which are resistant to change for a long time. The starting point should be one's own native language and culture to raise awareness and create a cultural bridge for understanding the "why". Unfortunately, I haven't found good EFL course book that would have a wider intercultural interaction competence or awareness embedded in it, not mentioning the appropriate methodology regarding it. Hence, course books can be used as guides only. But where are the tools and best practices? Yes, there are some directions for research, but where else should researchers be looking to exit the boxes we are in?

George: Looks like we both agree. Less jargon and branding would benefit the intercultural field. We seem to be in a cultural environment today where we need a few words or a sound bite to focus attention. Here it is "ICIC." InterCultural Interaction Competence. I see, I see—it has a certain ring to it. Like so many acronyms though, I fear it won't stick, though it is convenient for reading the text. But, I would prefer to watch what people do well, and I hope this is a direction that some of the proposed future research takes, more stories and less abstraction. More indigenous voices, too. The authors have provided us with a readable and functional summary of where we are at and how we got here. How to encourage examination from other cultural thinking patterns and not "globalize" our professions has got to come next.

Fourth Question: Who needs to digest these pages? Whose reading list should include it?

George: Currently I have been conducting a large set of discussions about Competence in the Intercultural Professions. It goes on that list without a doubt. The thoroughness of the perspectives dealt with, the diverse voices that need to be heard. Given the need to move forward, I would also insist on it being a basic textbook in intercultural studies programs a way to know what has been happening in order to make more and different things happen in the field.

Kati: This is useful reading for academics, curriculum developers, educators, interculturalists and researchers. Also, anyone involved in an intercultural situation who thinks that "Oh, but we speak English and we understand each other." Do we, really?

Fifth Question: What's the bottom line?

Kati: A fascinating book for reflecting on intercultural competence and communication as well as providing powerful suggestions for future research.

George: Takes attention and concentration to read, but nonetheless the best book I have seen so far for taking us from where we have been to where we are and where we must be as interculturalists.