



Reading Summary:

What Is a Discourse Approach?

Intercultural Communication

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Contents

Introduction	2
Summary	3
Conclusion	6
References.....	7
Appendices.....	8

Coverpage image depicts a multicultural group of people communicating freely (Free-Photos 2016).

Introduction

In their book chapter “What is a Discourse Approach?” Ron Scollon, Suzanne W. Scollon and Rodney H. Jones believe that the concept of ‘Intercultural Communication’ is often misunderstood in a technology-driven world, due to a lack of a consistent use, and agreed upon meaning for the word ‘culture’; and the problematic but necessary categorisation of individuals into specific groups within society, where ‘cultural groups’ have yet to be defined (Scollon, Scollon & Jones 2012, pp. 2-4).

Their belief is supported by a Young and Sachdev (2011) study “Intercultural communicative competence: exploring English language teachers’ beliefs and practices,” that explored the beliefs and practices of educators from three countries linked to the application of an intercultural communicative competence (ICC) language programme model. Young and Sachdev (2011) found that even though an intercultural approach appeared appropriate, educators were incapable or reluctant to implement the ICC model within a learning environment (see Appendix A).

Other main points surmised in this paper include research issues associated with ‘intercultural communication’, the definition and scope of ‘cultural tools’, the benefits derived from a new approach to research associated with ‘discourse systems’, the distinction between a ‘discourse system’, ‘discourse community’ and a ‘community of practice’, the meaning attributed to, and the equivocation of speech, and how assumptions within dialogue are significant.

Summary

Scollon, Scollon and Jones (2012, p. 3) infer that identifying 'culture' as a race, a geographic location, a sexual-orientation, a specific gender, a generation, a product, a religious-affiliation, or a specific social group is not enough to encapsulate its true scope and meaning. The authors think of 'culture' as an activity that is carried out, something that needs to be embodied based on a set of knowledge and abilities that pertain to a specific group that interacts - one's 'culture' is not a possession (Scollon, Scollon & Jones 2012, p. 3). Consequently, due to this misunderstanding of the meaning of the word 'culture' an individual may be unaware that they are part of a defined 'cultural group' (Scollon, Scollon & Jones 2012, p. 3).

Despite the fact that Scollon, Scollon and Jones (2012, pp. 3 & 4) attempt to avoid defining the word 'culture' throughout their book chapter, they do identify a number of issues that have been encountered in 'intercultural communication' research, namely results being unfairly skewed due to researcher bias, an absence of results that would indicate 'intercultural communication' is a misnomer, and when results are returned that indicate 'intercultural communication' is an issue, based upon a scenario implemented during research that wouldn't truly reflect reality.

The authors state that to carry out an activity, a person needs to have access to a tool, or a cultural set of tools; and 'cultural tools', for example a language, are defined by Scollon, Scollon and Jones (2012, p. 5) as integral generational resources used by a group of individuals to carry out an activity that assists in the classification of a 'cultural group'. In addition, people within 'cultural groups' apply and improve these tools over time, even though not every person within a 'cultural group' may have built up the same set of tools; the authors further stipulate that different sets of tools may be used in a variety of situations, as well as the same set of tools being used in several ways (Scollon, Scollon & Jones 2012, pp. 5 & 7). Scollon, Scollon and Jones (2012, pp. 7 & 8) explains that when two or more tools from the same 'cultural group' manifest, they are grouped together to form a 'cultural toolkit'; according to the authors:

a discourse system is a "cultural toolkit" consisting of four main kinds of things: ideas and beliefs about the world, conventional ways of treating other people, ways of communicating using various kinds of texts, media, and "languages," and methods of learning how to use these other tools.

Scollon, Scollon and Jones (2012, p. 9) suggests that 'discourse systems' research, reveals how and why individuals who belong in different 'culture groups' interact with one another. Furthermore, the authors infer that individuals within wide-ranging

communication 'discourse systems' act in a participatory manner with varying degrees of personal investment, the element of participation associated returning more detailed results than generated by previous research methodologies (Scollon, Scollon & Jones 2012, p. 9). In addition, Scollon, Scollon and Jones (2012, p. 10) explain that an individual may belong to multiple 'discourse systems' at the same time.

It is important to note at this point, that 'discourse systems' are distinct from 'discourse communities' and 'communities of practice', as the latter two usually involve group adherence to a specific tone and set of rites (Scollon, Scollon & Jones 2012, p. 9).

Scollon, Scollon and Jones (2012, p. 10) argues that 'Intercultural communication' between individuals inside different 'discourse systems' has surpassed previous research to include 'discourse systems' associated with an individual's place of work, gender, sexual-orientation, and selected career type. As a result of this research scope expansion, the authors found that 'intercultural communication' involves both an *external* interaction that comprises two or more people, and an *internal* individual reaction to dialogue (Scollon, Scollon & Jones 2012, p. 10).

According to Scollon, Scollon and Jones (2012, p. 10) 'when people communicate they often don't say what they mean, and they often don't mean what they say'. Scollon, Scollon and Jones (2012, pp. 11 & 13) states that when an individual communicates with another in-person, or in-writing, everyone who is part of the discussion will draw on different knowledge sources when constructing their words and sentences. Likewise, depending upon which 'cultural group' the individual belongs to, speech that is equivocal may form part of the discussion, as each party to the discussion is required to interpret the words and sentences, as well as the generic meaning of the words collectively (Scollon, Scollon & Jones 2012, p. 11). It was found that, practice, through trial and error on the part of all individuals involved reduces the extent of uncertainty and confusion in any of the words expressed (Scollon, Scollon & Jones 2012, p. 16). Therefore, the authors offer that equivocal speech can be mitigated by the development of strategies, they also stress that this confusion surrounding speech should not be attributed to insufficient knowledge on the part of an individual (Scollon, Scollon & Jones 2012, p. 14).

The authors suggest that confusion with dialogue comes about because we naturally make assumptions about the exact meaning of what we are told based on the norms of the tools we have developed from our culture (Scollon, Scollon & Jones 2012, p. 14). Moreover, these assumptions that are instantly used when in social situations are predisposed to become permanent thoughts in our minds, in short, they become our cultural 'norms' (Scollon, Scollon & Jones 2012, p. 15). Due to this the chances of a successful dialogue increase when the assumptions that are made about others, and

any limits placed upon speech are known by all individuals involved (Scollon, Scollon & Jones 2012, p. 16).

Scollon, Scollon and Jones (2012, pp. 18-24) provide at the end of the book chapter a pathway to further research and discussion, this information includes an overview of ethnographic research practices and resultant data, the fundamentals for selecting a 'cultural groups' physical location to be studied, a set of discussion questions, as well as a number of highly regarded reference sources pertaining to 'intercultural communication'.

Conclusion

Based upon the various definitions and the real-life anecdotes provided within the Scollon, Scollon and Jones (2012) book chapter I found myself assigning various beliefs, practices and tools that I use daily into distinct 'cultural groups', 'cultural tools' and 'discourse systems'. As an Editor of an alternative eZine, I belong to an alternative media research 'cultural group', which use a number of tools (interview, review, research and computing skills), and a number of 'discourse systems' that pertain to particular research areas, for example Fringe Science, Ufology, the Paranormal, Ancient Origins and the Metaphysical.

In conclusion, the authors believe that the concept of 'Intercultural Communication' being often misunderstood, due to inconsistent use, and a lack of an agreed meaning for the word 'culture'; as well as the problematic but necessary categorisation of individuals into specific groups within society, where 'cultural groups' have yet to be defined appears well reasoned and logical (Scollon, Scollon & Jones 2012, pp. 2-4).

References

Free-Photos 2016, *workplace team business meeting 1245776*, pixabay, 2 August, viewed 1 October 2019, <<https://pixabay.com/photos/workplace-team-business-meeting-1245776/>>.

Scollon, R, Scollon, SW, & Jones, RH 2012, 'What Is a Discourse Approach?', in P Trudgill (ed.), *Intercultural communication a discourse approach*, John Wiley & Sons, Somerset, pp. 1-24.

Young, TJ & Sachdev, I 2011, 'Intercultural communicative competence: exploring English language teachers' beliefs and practices', *Language Awareness*, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 81–98.

Appendices

Appendix A – Intercultural communicative competence: exploring English language teachers' beliefs and practices': Mean priority rankings of curricular areas (maximum = 8)

	Three locations (N = 105)	UK (51)	USA (21)	France (33)
Speaking	7.2	7.1	7.4	7.1
Listening	5.8	5.7	5.2	5.9
Vocabulary	5.6	5.7	5.3	4.9
Grammar	5.1	5.8	5.2	4.0
Reading	3.8	3.6	3.6	4.1
Writing	3.2	3.0	3.1	3.4
ICC	2.5	2.6	2.4	3.3
Spelling	2.2	2.0	2.0	2.3

ICC = Intercultural Communication Competence

*Table 1: ICC: Exploring English Language Educator Beliefs & Practices
Mean Priority Rankings per curricular areas*

Table 1 above highlights the disappointing mean priority ranking of the ICC language programme component assigned by educators in the UK, USA and France, both the study and the table revealed that educators were incapable or reluctant to implement the ICC model within their learning environments (Young & Sachdev 2011).