

Intercultural Communication and Mental Training: How to Manage Anxiety

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how mental imagery training, initially developed for athletes, can be used to manage anxiety for intercultural communication learners. Following a summary of anxiety concepts in both sports and intercultural communication, the components of goal-setting in mental training and participant questionnaires are shown, along with the specific anxiety management techniques. The results of this study show that if we can manage our mental state by means of the training mentioned, we will surely have a great advantage in communicating with others from other cultures effectively and appropriately.

keywords : intercultural communication, mental training, William B. Gudykunst, Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory, mindfulness

Introduction

I would like you to recall your feelings when you talked with people from other countries for the first time, or when you traveled abroad for the first time. You must have had some anxiety or some fear that you could not make yourself understood in English, and that you could not pronounce English words correct. In intercultural communication, it is very difficult to avoid such anxiety and fear. There is no doubt that anxiety like this is an obstacle in interacting with people from other cultures effectively and appropriately.

Gudykunst, a theorist of anxiety/uncertainty management (henceforth, AUM) theory of effective communication, states as follows:

When our anxiety or uncertainty is too high or too low, we cannot communicate effectively. In the 1995 version of the theory¹, I suggested that our minimum and maximum thresholds are catastrophe points. That is, there are drastic changes in communication effectiveness when anxiety or uncertainty drop below our maximum thresholds or rise above our minimum thresholds. (289)

His AUM theory reminds me of athletes who require psychological skills to achieve their goals as well as physical skills. In the case of athletes, they are under extreme tension at the games and experience some anxiety at the competitions. As Gudykunst mentions, communicating effectively requires that our uncertainty and anxiety be between our minimum and maximum, the best performance in sport requires that our anxiety be between our minimum and maximum. Thus, it is very significant for them to control their minds in order to accomplish their goals. To put it another way, they cannot win the game without managing their minds.

I think that there are many similarities between the concept of AUM theory and psychological skills which athletes need. In Japan, a homogeneous state whose culture is collectivistic and high-context, people must train hard and improve their mental skills in order for the best intercultural communicative performance, that is, becoming competent intercultural communicators. According to Cox, Qiu, and Liu, “the use of mental imagery, in conjunction with relaxation procedures, has been shown to be effective in reducing anxiety” (12).

The purpose of this paper is to apply mental imagery training used for athletes to intercultural

communication learners and to make good use of it in order to cultivate intercultural communication competence.

What is Anxiety?

The question may arise whether anxiety in sport is the same as anxiety in intercultural communication. In sport psychology, anxiety is considered as follows:

In these approaches, anxiety is viewed as an emotion triggered by a person's communicative relation with his/her environment. This means that anxiety arises only as a result of expectations or appraisals. Presumably, the individual is not subject to passive instinctive energies that he/she has to avert, but rather to cognitive processes that are associated with an active approach to the environment. Anxiety control is based on cognitive processes, i.e., on processes of decision which lead either to direct actions to control the anxiety-including situation by escaping or modifying the situation (generally by escape or attack), or to intrapsychological processes appropriate to better comprehension of the situation in a new and subjective way. Intrapsychological processes are the actual cognitive forms of anxiety control. (Hackfort & Schwenkmezger, 335)

Gudykunst describes that "the anxiety we experience when we communicate with based on negative expectations" (288). He also considers anxiety as a cognitive phenomenon, suggesting that mindfulness is required to control anxiety and uncertainty, as Langer argues that mindfulness involves "(1) creation of new categories; (2) openness to new information; and (3) awareness of more than one perspectives" (62).

In intercultural communication, the easiest way to avoid anxiety and uncertainty is to withdraw from the communication activity (Samovar

& Porter, 285). Hackfort & Schwenkmezger concur with anxiety in sport psychology. In addition, the concept of mindfulness mentioned before is common to the latter part of quotation on anxiety control in sport psychology. Therefore, it is reasonable to postulate that mental training to conquer anxiety for athletes may be an effective method to improve the mental skills of intercultural communicators. Cox, Qiu and Liu state that "effective imagery in sport is linked not only to relax and to *reduce anxiety* and arousal but also to increase athletic performance" (emphasis added, 12). Given the results of such experiments and date, I think that we can expect the same effect as in sport through the mental training.

To Set a Goal

First, we must set our goals in mental training, which can be divided into final, long-term, middle-term, short-term, and daily goals. Orlick (1986) provides a model for setting goals: "first, imagine what is potentially possible if all your limits are stretched" (6). "Second, set a realistic performance outcome goal based on your competitive history, current skill level, and present motivation for improvement" (6). "The third area in which you should set a goal is probably the least considered yet the most important in terms of life satisfaction: self-acceptance. Set a goal of overall self-acceptance, regardless of performance outcome"(6-7). According to Orlick, these steps enable us not only to consider ourselves, our current level of performance abilities, strengths, and weaknesses, but also to improve our motivation, to extend our limit of skills, and to provide against anxiety. In addition, setting a final goal leads to a long-term goal; setting a long-term goal leads to a middle-term goal; setting a middle-term goal leads to a short-term goal; and setting a short-term goal leads to a daily goal. We do not usually know what to do to accomplish our goals until that we set these

goals mentioned before.

If your final goal as an intercultural communicator, for example, is to be able to interact effectively and appropriately with American people in a foreign-affiliated company in the future, you must improve your knowledge of American culture, speech-style and rules of communication in the United States, not to mention English-language competence, and should have many opportunities to talk with American people directly and to experience life in the United States actually. Although you have many things to accomplish your final goal, you can determine what to do first and what follows through the process of setting your goals. Let us consider what you want to do now and why you want to do this, and then write down your goals using Table 1 as follows:

Table 1. Goal Assessment Form²

1. Dream Goal (long-term) – What is your long-term dream goal? What is potentially possible in the long term if you stretch all your limits?
2. Dream Goal (short-term) – What is your dream goal for this year? What is potentially possible if all your limits are stretched this year?
3. Realistic Performance Goal (this year) – What do you feel is a realistic performance goal that you can achieve this year (based on your present skill level, your potential for improvement, and your current motivation)?
- 4a. Goal of Self-Acceptance – can you make a commitment to accept yourself and to learn from the experience, regardless of whether you achieve your ultimate performance goal this year?
- 4b. If you do not meet your desired performance goal, to what extent will you still

be able to accept yourself as a worthy human being?

complete self-acceptance	0 12 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	complete and full self-rejection
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5. Can you set an on-site goal of best effort (giving everything you have that day) and be satisfied with achieving that single goal?
6. Focused Psychological Goal (this year) – What do you feel is an important goal for you to focus on this year in terms of your psychological preparation or mental control?
7. Daily Goal – (A) Set a personal goal for tomorrow's training session. Write down one thing you would like to do, accomplish, or approach with a special focus or intensity. (B) Can you set a personal goal before going to each training session this year?

Since Table 1 is originally created for athletes, it may not be easy for intercultural communication learners to complete these questions. They may not be accustomed to doing exercises for intercultural communication every day, which is precisely why some have questions about what is the training for communication every day. Whether they are conscious or not, intercultural communication learners include English-language learners, and learners of other cultures, languages, society, history, and economy. Once we have analyzed our goals we have many exercises to accomplish our final goals.

**The Way to Manage Anxiety:
Changing Our Perspective and
Understanding Others' Perspective**

According to Orlick (1990), "it is strictly internal; in fact, anxiety does not exist outside your head. Certain situations may tend to make

you anxious, but you are not *required* to become anxious in these situations. Situations are not anxious, people are” (34). Thus, Orlick affirms that we can manage anxiety on our own. It is not the people around us but we that are able to control our minds at every situation. We must change our perspectives in order to control our minds and manage anxiety. What is very important is to have or maintain a positive perspective and talk to ourselves in a constructive way; “I can do this; I can direct my own thoughts and focus; I can control my reactions” (Orlick, 36). This leads us to “enter more situations in control, even situations that caused anxiety or performance problems” (Orlick, 37). In other words, we will not become competent communicators without gaining control of our mental state, being strong persons mentally.

Moreover Orlick (1990) states that “your energy and goals are best served when you focus on things within your potential control. Your thoughts are within your control. Your thoughts direct your focus, beliefs, and performance” (38). The concept of “focus” mentioned above is similar to the concept of “mindfulness” which is an important element of AUM theory. Mindfulness is considered a key element in reducing anxiety and uncertainty, which leads to effective outcomes of intercultural communication. While the target of focus is more intrinsic, the target of mindfulness is more extensive; not only our own mind and behavior, but also those of others with whom we interact.

Ting-Toomey states that mindfulness is “being aware of our own and others’ behavior in the situation, and paying focused attention to the process of communication taking place between us and dissimilar others” (6). Further, in my own previous study, I have outlined the importance of mindfulness in intercultural communication competence.³

As I mentioned before, Gudykunst considers mindfulness an important element to manage anxiety and uncertainty because mindfulness

involves “(1) creation of new categories; (2) openness to new information; and (3) awareness of more than one perspectives” (62). These components are all interrelated and lead us to be “receptive to changes in an ongoing situation” (Gudykunst, 304). Thus, the more focused and mindful, the better and more effectively we can manage our mind. Complete Table 2 to check your focus level.

Table 2. Focus Control Rating Scale⁴

1. I can avoid becoming too nervous or too uptight at communication events.

the statement is completely false	1	2	3	4	5	the statement is completely true
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2. I get so absorbed in the performance (or experience) that everything else disappears.

the statement is completely false	1	2	3	4	5	the statement is completely true
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3. I can maintain or quickly regain a high level of focus control at practice.

the statement is completely false	1	2	3	4	5	the statement is completely true
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4. I can maintain or quickly regain a high level of focus control at communication activity.

the statement is completely false	1	2	3	4	5	the statement is completely true
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5. I have inner confidence or a feeling of “I can do it.”

the statement is completely false	1	2	3	4	5	the statement is completely true
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6. I take criticism well and learn from it.

the statement is completely false	1	2	3	4	5	the statement is completely true
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7. I can handle failure in the process of communication.

the statement is completely false	1	2	3	4	5	the statement is completely true
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8. I can stay motivated when I don't interact with others effectively and appropriately.

the statement is completely false 1 2 3 4 5 the statement is completely true

9. I can maintain focus totally in the present, living in the here and now.

the statement is completely false 1 2 3 4 5 the statement is completely true

10. I can quickly regain my focus on the present performance even after an error.

the statement is completely false 1 2 3 4 5 the statement is completely true

How is your focus level? How is your mindfulness level? If your level is low, the method below is effective.

Managing Anxiety through Mental Imagery

There are some methods to gain control of our mental state. One is mental imagery, which is recommended in sport psychology. Orlick (1990) describes that “mental imagery gives you a chance to deal effectively with a problem or event in your head before you confront it in real life. If a problem does arise, you are better able to handle it or cope with it” (65). Mental imagery is the cognitive process of preparing for the behavioral and effective outcomes of a problem or event.

Try to imagine the situation in which you meet with a native-English speaker in the United State. What you do first? What you say first? What does the person look like? How you feel when you talk to him/her? How does he/she respond to your question? How you feel for his/her response? How will you behave interacting with him/her? How do you feel if he/she smiles at you? How do you feel and what you do if you cannot make yourself understood? so on. Let us try to imagine using Table 3.

Table 3. Mental Imagery Question⁵

1. In preparing for your all-time best performance, how much mental imagery did you do?

none 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 an extensive amount

much less than normal 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 much more than normal

2. About how many times did you “see” or “feel” yourself running through your event (or parts of it) in imagery?

3. When you use mental imagery, what do you see or feel? Do you “see” an image, “feel” a sensation, or both “see” and “feel”?

4. If you use imagery to “see” yourself run through your performance skills, do you see yourself from outside (as if watching a video) or from the inside (as if you are actually inside yourself performing)?

inside view 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 video view half-and-half

5. How clear are your images?

very unclear 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 crystal clear

6. How strong are the feelings or sensations associated with your imagery?

no feeling 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 strong feeling

7. When you try to imagine yourself doing something or feeling something, is it easy or difficult for you to control the “feeling” or picture?

very difficult 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 very easy

8. Comments?

Not only imagining but also practicing the conversation or presentation is effective. For “the more vivid and complete the feeling, and the more effectively you perform within that image, the greater your chances of replicating this image in the real situation” (Orlick, 1990,

71).

We can learn, review, and familiarize ourselves with the patterns and styles of communication, monitoring our behaviors and the behavior of others, comfortable distance during talking, mindful listening, new methods, new information and so on of communication through mental imagery. In addition, good feelings which we have through mental imagery will encourage our motivation to interact with people from other cultures and to learn intercultural communication, language, and culture. Bad feelings, that is, anxiety which we can manage through mental imagery helps us to recognize “our explanations for why we experience anxiety” (Gudykunst, 305). According to Greenland and Brown (2000), “our strategies for coping with anxiety may depend on our explanations” (as cited in Gudykunst, 305).

Mental imagery is considered a good method for both athletes and communication learners because “imagery is an exercise in concentration. You must create and control the images in your mind” (Orlick, 1990, 71). Needless to say, concentration enables us to be mindful in the process of intercultural communication.

What is most important in mental imagery is to create a vivid image of the actual event so we are capable of dealing with perceived anxiety. We need to do and repeat this training daily until we can cognitively see the clear image, feel the self-created image, and recall the image at any time and place. In order to control the mental image, it is necessary to manage the mental state and anxiety.

Conclusion

As I mentioned above, both athletes and intercultural communicators experience tension and anxiety in performing their respective sets of activities. The tension and anxiety which they have differ in degree but not in kind. It is important for them to not only reduce anxiety

but also to manage it in order for the best performance. There is no doubt that the release from anxiety is the outcome we want; rather, the best and effective performance through the release from anxiety is the effective outcome desired.

Setting a goal, changing a perspective, and mental trainings which are based on the concept of “focus” and “mindfulness” are aimed at cultivating ourselves because we can change nothing besides ourselves. We cannot change the setting where intercultural communication happens, people who are engaged in this process, or the time when this happens. Even though we want people from other cultures to be adapted to our culture and speech style to interact with effectively and appropriately, or we expect people from other countries to speak our own native language, there is only a remote possibility. Although it is not easy for us to change our perspective, we do not have to take a dim view of this. It is we intercultural communicators can change, control, and improve the process of communication. If we can manage our mental state by means of the training mentioned, we will surely have a great advantage in communicating with others from other cultures effectively and appropriately.

This paper is limited because of the lack of actual cases I need to support my conclusion. In spite of this limitation, I believe that my study can contribute improving intercultural communication competence. And I will show the effect of applying mental training to intercultural communication in my next paper.

Notes

1 To understand how the anxiety / uncertainty management (AUM) theory was developed by Gudykunst, read William B. Gudykunst, “An Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory of Effective Communication: Making the Mesh of the Net Finer.”

- William B. Gudykunst, ed. *Theorizing About Intercultural Communication*. CA : Saga Publications, Inc., (2005, 281-322).
- 2 This form is based on the form made by Orlick (1986, 180).
- 3 As usual, the components of intercultural communication competence are divided into three categories: knowledge, motivation, skills. We should regard mindfulness not as the base or the element to effect the process of reducing anxiety and uncertainty but as the fourth component which is equal with the other three elements. What is important for intercultural communicators is how well-balanced they can attain indispensable elements for intercultural communication competence and how they can be penetrated with mindfulness to interact with other people effectively and appropriately at any settings.
- 4 This form is based on the form made by Orlick (1990, 42-43).
- 5 This form is based on the form made by Orlick (1986, 199-200).
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