

## **Understanding the Psychological Traits Affecting Functioning in Foreign Cultures and Performance in Foreign Languages: Application of the Kozai Group's Global Competencies Index**

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### **Abstract**

This ground-breaking empirical study involving the application of Kozai Group's Global Competency Index (GCI) with 86 Chinese Students in Japan elucidates the importance of certain personality traits that modulate ability to succeed in business and other goal-oriented activities in foreign cultures and success in performing in oral performance in foreign languages. Fourteen of the 16 GCI dimensions were strong predictors of oral/aural performance in Japanese among the 86 Chinese subjects. The results indicate that the vast majority of the personality traits represented by the GCI, which have been validated in terms of enabling successful cultural adaptation for optimal performance in global business, also facilitate oral/aural performance in foreign languages.

Adaptation to foreign cultures and acquisition of proficiency in foreign languages often prove to be key factors in determining the degree of success in a foreign assignment or long-term cross-cultural business relationship. Kozai Groups GCI has been widely used as a predictor of ability to function in foreign cultures and is especially applicable to screening candidates for long-term assignments abroad. This empirical study demonstrates that the same psychological traits that facilitate cultural adaptation also facilitate performance in foreign languages. This knowledge can form the basis for introspection and training programs for improving cross-cultural competences and cross-cultural communication. The key to understanding the reasons behind the sentiment of the statement "I am just not good at speaking foreign languages" and how to overcome this state of mind is provided.

## **Introduction**

For more than 36 years I have been travelling, study, working and living abroad acquiring new languages at increasingly higher speeds and efficiency to the point that presently I learn a new language every 12 to 18 months on average. In the process of acquiring more than 20 languages for conversation and more than 30 for basic comprehension, I have developed an understanding of the explicit and implicit factors that facilitate the acquisition of foreign languages by observing myself and others. I have always noted that assimilation of a foreign culture in terms of acceptance (not feeling awkward or estranged when functioning in a foreign culture) takes the study of a foreign language beyond meta-linguistic knowledge (conceptual understanding of semantics, grammatical rules, syntax, phonology, etc.) to the level of acquisition enabling a native-like fluency in the target language. In other words, in such a state, it does not feel unnatural to participate in the culture and speak the language. There is no feeling of being a traitor to one's identity associated with one's mother tongue and the culture of one's upbringing. Thus, I hypothesize that the psychological traits that facilitate successful cultural adaptation while working or studying in a foreign culture also facilitate acquiring a foreign language in the terms of high level performance, defined as approximating a native speaker in oral communication.

## **Previous research on cultural adaptation and foreign language acquisition**

Social, psychological, and affective (SPA) factors are important determinants of success or failure in foreign language acquisition (Brown, 1980; Schumann, 1975; Taylor, 1974). Since psychological and affective factors also play an important role in determining success or failure in adapting to and functioning in a foreign cultural environment, many of the SPA factors related to SLA also explain individual differences in cultural adaptation. Schumann's (1986) acculturation model predicts that learners will acquire a target language to the degree they acculturate to the target language group. Schumann (1986: 379) stated: "I also propose that any learner can be placed on a continuum that ranges from social and psychological distance to social psychological proximity with speakers of the target language, and that the learner will acquire the second language only to the degree that he acculturates."

Larsen-Freeman & Long (1991) argue that Schumann did not specify the combinations and levels of social and psychological factors that predict language outcomes, nor did he explain how these factors affect the rate of attainment. This remark shows the excessive demands of strict empiricism, expecting definitiveness where it may not be available. The experiment presented in this research serves to partially address this concern, however, it must be understood that there is no one single recipe for successful foreign language acquisition. The experiment in this research does not attempt to quantitatively verify Schumann's Acculturation Model, but the results do demonstrate that the spirit of the model is very insightful and that any model attempting to explain individual differences will be made more robust by incorporating these culture-language related factors.

According to Dörnyei (2005), inconclusive results in the literature concerning the relationship between psychological traits (personality variables) or SPA and SLA have been partly due to methodological limitations or inconsistencies. The main issues concerning reliable and meaningful results are that: (1) the dependent variable

– measures of individual differences in FLA, and (2) the independent variable(s) – measures of psychological traits (such as personality, attitudes, motivation, etc.) – and (3) the theoretical constructs tying together the measured independent variables.

The dependent variable SLA or foreign language acquisition (FLA) has often been language achievement in terms of academic success in foreign language study measured by such criteria as test scores, grade point average, final degree results, and course-specific evaluations. All these are very indirect measurements of performance in the target language and would not capture the finer points of individual difference in oral/aural performance compared to native speakers of the target language, such as communication competence, accent, pronunciation, naturalness of speech, etcetera. Some studies (e.g. Naiman et al., 1978) that only examined criterion measured from written language found no relationships between these and extraversion-introversion.

There are also problems with consistency: akin to the proverbial comparison of apples and oranges. The issue in this case is whether or not the foreign language learners are sufficiently similar in terms of their relevant background factors (those that would affect FLA performance but are not psychological traits or SPA). More reliable results for the dependent variable under consideration may be obtained by using subjects who have reached a predefined high-level threshold in FLA attainment, such as becoming a student at a university where the target language (TL) is the language of instruction for non-language-related courses, share the same mother tongue, and are controlled for other potentially significant demographic variables. As demonstrated in the analysis of the subjects' demographics in this paper, these factors have been sufficiently considered and accounted for.

As for the independent variables, the approach of this study is to examine factors that have been proven to account for individual differences in successful cultural adaptation. This approach addresses the need for more complex theoretical constructs. MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, and Noels (1998) offer the Willingness to Communicate (WTC) model in which personality comprises an important part of the construct, with four further layers of variables conceptualized between personality traits and communicative behaviour (Dörnyei, 2005:23). However, there is still a need to follow a theoretical construct that takes into consideration that actively functioning in a foreign language usually takes place in a foreign cultural environment. Thus, we must explore which psychological factors facilitate both cultural adaptation and foreign language acquisition.

### **Measuring psychological traits facilitating cultural adaptation**

After reviewing most of the questionnaires that are used to predict people's ability to function effectively in cross-cultural environments, Kozai Group's Global Competencies Index (GCI) was chosen as the most appropriate instrument based on my expertise and experience in the field of cross-cultural management. The Kozai Group kindly agreed to cooperate by offering the free use and analysis of the GCI in the experiment. Thus, the Kozai Group's GCI was employed as a validated instrument for measuring psychological traits affecting cultural adaptation (associated with effective behavior in a cross-cultural environment) to obtain rankings for the experimental subjects in 16 competencies to explore if relatively higher scores

correspond with higher oral/aural performance in a foreign language. The 16 competencies of the GCI are associated with effective intercultural behavior and dynamic global managerial skill acquisition and are grouped under three factors: *Perception Management*, which deals with learning effectively and includes: (1) Nonjudgmentalness, (2) Inquisitiveness, (3) Tolerance for Ambiguity, (4) Cosmopolitanism, and (5) Interest Flexibility; *Relationship Management*, which focuses on managing relationships effectively and is comprised of (6) Relationship Interest, (7) Interpersonal Engagement, (8) Emotional Sensitivity, (9) Self Awareness, and (10) Social Flexibility; and *Self Management*, which explores managing the self in challenging situations and is composed of (11) Optimism, (12) Self Confidence, (13) Self-Identity, (14) Emotional Resilience, (15) Non-Stress Tendency, and (16) Stress Management.

### **Experimental methods**

The GCI was administered to 86 Chinese students studying at Kyushu Sangyo University, where Japanese is the main medium of instruction. These scores functioned as the independent variables. In order to measure the dependent variable, foreign language ability, the 86 subjects participated in videotaped seven-minute semi-structured interviews with a Japanese native speaker who interviewed each of the 86 subjects. Six native speakers of Japanese, with graduate degrees in various fields and ranging in age for 24 to 62, ranked the subjects independently (no consultation with one another) over a period of one month. The evaluation criterion was “how closely the Chinese students sounded like a Japanese native speaker.” The judges were instructed to force-rank the participants’ performance on a 1 (the lowest) to 5 (the highest) Likert scale assigning 18 participants with the score of 5, and the remaining four groups of participants (17 in each group) with rankings of 4, 3, 2, or 1 ( $18+17+17+17+17=86$ ).

To reduce inter-rater variation the highest value and lowest value were discarded leaving 4 scores. The reliability of the measurement for “Japanese Ability” when using all 86 subjects was 0.594 in terms of average standard deviation as an indication of inter-rate variability, indicating high relatively inter-rater agreement. The reliability of the measurement for “Japanese Ability” when using sub-groups Top 17 and Bottom 17 was 0.315. The average rating of the Top 17 is 4.705 while that of the Bottom 17 was 1.617, yielding an average difference between the two groups of 3.08 in terms of their “Japanese Ability” ratings.

### **Demographics of subjects**

Detailed demographic information about the subjects that might potentially account for differences among the subjects in oral/aural performance (factors other than those measured by the GCI) was gathered and analyzed. The analysis revealed that among all the demographic-related questions, there were only two questions demonstrated a positive significant association with foreign language ability outcomes. Both these questions were related to motivation for learning Japanese.

The mean age of all 86 subjects was 24.31 with a range of 19 to 32 years of age. There was no significant correlation between age and “Japanese Ability” as measured in the experiment ( $N = 34/86$  Pearson Correlation: 0.116/0.089, Sig. 2-tailed:

0.512/0.415).

In light of the so-called “Critical or Sensitive Period” hypothesis, “Age Started to Study a Foreign Language” (ASSFL) was investigated. The variable ASSFL was created by re-coding the ages: age 9 and below = 4, age 10 ~13 = 3, age 14~17 = 2, and age 19 and above = 1. There is no correlation between the recoded variable and “Japanese Ability” (N = 34/86 Pearson Correlation: -0.018/-0.100, Sig. 2-tailed: 0.919/0.359).

As for gender, there were 30 male subjects (34.9%) and 56 female subjects (65.1%). There was no significant relationship between gender and “Japanese Ability” (N = 34/86 Pearson Correlation: -0.124/-0.045, Sig. 2-tailed: 0.484/0.678). If there were a correlation then a negative number would mean that being male may be an advantage, since Male = 1 and Female = 2.

The relationship between “age came to Japan” and “Japanese Ability” was also explored. There was no significant relationship between “age when came to Japan” and “Japanese Ability” (N = 34/86 Pearson Correlation: 0.089/0.116, Sig. 2-tailed: 0.415/0.512). However, on average the Top 17 came to Japan at a later age than the Bottom 17.

“Months residing in Japan” at the time of the experiment was also recorded and analyzed. There was no significant correlation between “Months residing in Japan” with “Japanese Ability” (N = 34/86 Pearson Correlation: 0.076/0.111, Sig. 2-tailed: 0.668/0.308). The lack of a significant correlation between “Months residing in Japan” and “Japanese Ability” coincides with my expectations. Almost all the subjects have been in Japan for at least 2 years. This is sufficient time for adept language learners to acquire a high level of Japanese, given sufficient motivation. Length of residence tends to decrease in importance as time passes and 2 out of the 7 longest residents (all subjects included) are in the Bottom 17.

The “number of countries visited for at least one week besides Japan” was also noted. The overall majority of the subjects (88.4%) have not been to a foreign country other than Japan. Three of the 10 people who have visited a foreign country besides Japan are in the Top 17 and one is in the Bottom 17 in terms of “Japanese Ability.” Furthermore, only one subject had lived in another foreign country besides Japan (Russia) and that subject lived there for six months. This subject is not in the Top 17 in terms of Japanese Ability.”

The number of languages spoken by the subjects was also analyzed. Though the correlations between “Japanese Ability” and “Numbers of Languages Spoken” are only significant at 0.112 (88%) for the Top/Bottom 17 and 0.074 (92%) for all subjects, in general, the author has experienced that learning languages gets easier as the number of languages spoken increases. One reason for the lack of a significant correlation may be the fact that all the subjects obviously spoke at least 2 languages (Chinese and Japanese) and the number of subjects who spoke 3 languages was only about 25% of the total number of subjects. Note that 35.3% of the Top 17 spoke 3 languages compared to only 1.2% of the total 86 subjects.

The “number of months spent studying in a Japanese language school in Japan” was also investigated. There is not significant correlation among all subjects between months spent studying at a Japanese Language School in Japan with “Japanese Ability” (Pearson Correlations: -0.172, Sig. 2-tailed: 0.112); note that though it is not statistically significant, it is slightly negative. Ironically, overall the subjects in the Top 17 have spent less time in a Japanese Language School in Japan than the subjects in the Bottom 17. This observation suggests autonomous and self-directed language learning may be a factor in determining the degree of success.

A number of questions concerning the students’ motivation were included in the questionnaire. Among these questions, two demonstrated a significant relationship: “I wanted to learn Japanese in order to study at a Japanese University” (N = 34/86 Pearson Correlation: 0.407/0.220, Sig. 2-tailed: 0.017/0.042) and “I wanted to learn Japanese because I like to learn foreign languages” (N = 34/86 Pearson Correlation: 0.444/0.291, Sig. 2-tailed: 0.009/0.007). In addition, ANOVA analysis for the Top/Bottom 17 yielded an F of 10.419 and an F of 2.992 for all 86 subjects. It is interesting to note that enjoying learning foreign languages had the highest significance among all the motivational factors investigated.

The number of hours the subjects watched TV programs in Japanese during their first year in Japan was also noted and analyzed in relation to differences in measured oral/aural Japanese performance. The main difference between the Top 17 compared to the Bottom 17 and all 86 subjects is that the percentage for zero hours and one hour is about half of the other two groups while the percentage for two hours is about double. In considering these results, keep in mind that watching TV in a foreign language, the target language, is challenging and requires persistence and strong motivation to learn. However, this factor was not significantly correlated with “Japanese Ability” (N = 34/86 Pearson Correlation: 0.202/0.174, Sig. 2-tailed: 0.253/0.110).

The self-reported ability in Japanese of the subjects was also analyzed. There is no significant correlation between the subjects’ self-reported “Japanese Ability” when they first came to Japan and their present measured “Japanese Ability” (N = 34/86 Pearson Correlation: - 0.010/0.0051, Sig. 2-tailed: 0.956/0.664).

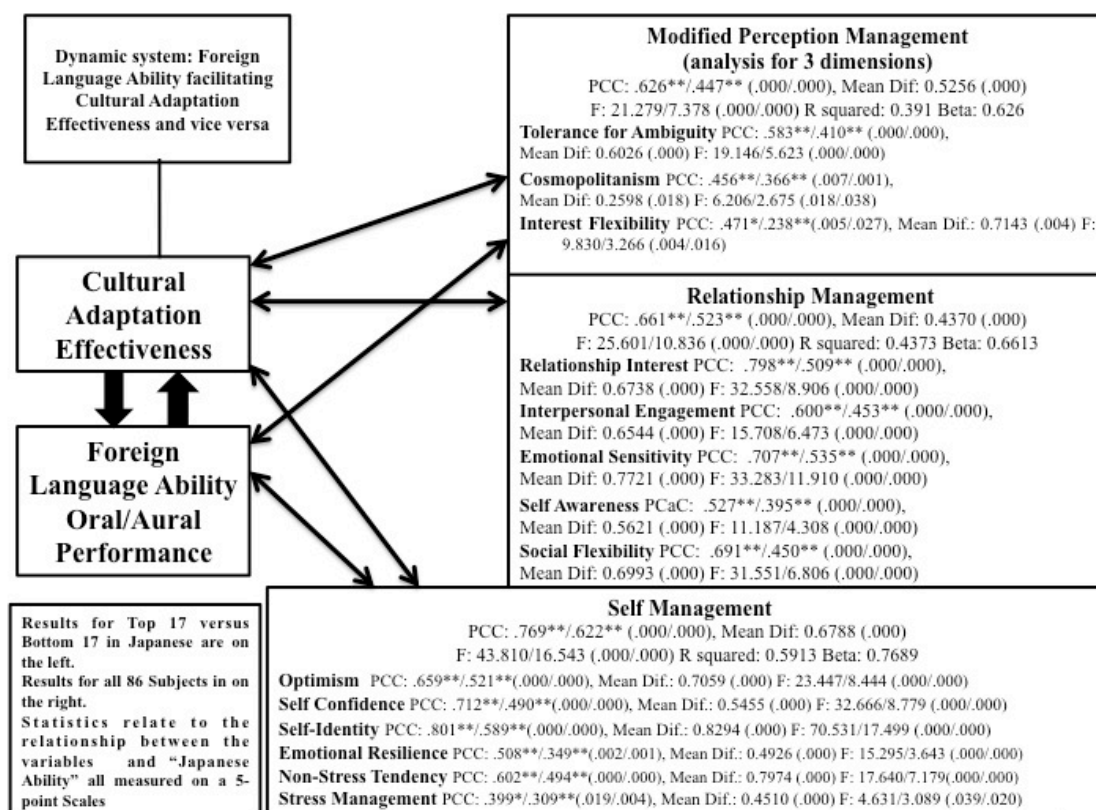
### **Results of the experiment and model**

The results clearly indicate that the GCI as a whole is a very powerful predictor of oral/aural performance in foreign languages. First, the analysis of variance of the GCI scores yielded an F Value of 51.648 (Sig.: = 0.000) for the Top 17 versus the Bottom 17 and an F Value of 16.967 (Sig.: = 0.000) for all five groups. There is a highly significant positive correlation between Overall Global Competency scores and “Japanese Ability” in the case of the Top 17 versus the Bottom 17 (0.779, sig.: 0.000) as well as for all 86 subjects (0.624, sig.: 0.000). Furthermore, the Top 17 subgroup mean score for the Overall Global Competency (3.4687, std. dev.: 0.2812) is significantly greater (0.6412 std. error: 0.0892) than that of the Bottom 17 (2.8275, std. dev.: 0.2248).

Thus, it is clear that the GCI provides an excellent basis for a model for factors facilitating both cultural adaptation and foreign language acquisition in terms of

oral/aural performance. After examining the results of ANOVA, correlations, and differences in the means between the Top 17 and the Bottom 17 for all of the 16 individual competencies that comprise the GCI, two competencies belonging to the *Perception Management* factor, Nonjudgmentalness and Inquisitiveness, were excluded from the model due to a lack of significant results. The resulting model with the ANOVA, correlations, mean differences are given in Figure 1. The results of the regression analysis for each of the three factors (*Perception Management*, *Relationship Management*, and *Self Management*) are also provided.

**Figure 1: Model for Factors Facilitating both Cultural Adaptation and Oral/Aural Performance in Foreign Languages**



**Self-Management factor**

Among the three GCI factors, the *Self Management* dimension had the strongest association with foreign language ability. Mendenhall & Oddou (1985) concluded that a domain of variables existed in the cross-cultural adjustment literature that could be categorized as including “activities and attributes that serve to strengthen the expatriate’s self-esteem, self-confidence, and mental hygiene (p. 40).” They labeled this domain, the *Self-Oriented* dimension of intercultural effectiveness. Subsequent reviews of both the global leadership and the expatriate literature support the validity of this dimension as an important contributor to intercultural effectiveness. The *Self Management* dimension takes into account people’s strength of identity and their ability to effectively manage their emotions and stress. To be successful in intercultural situations, it is critical that people have a clear sense of themselves and a

clear understanding of their fundamental values. To be effective in a global context, people must be able to understand, change and adapt appropriately to the foreign work and intercultural environment, yet at the same time, they must also have a stable sense of self in order to remain mentally and emotionally healthy (cited from Kozai Group document).

The competencies that comprise the *Self Management* factor are also important attributes in foreign language acquisition, in particular Self-Identity, which plays an important role in the development of the ability and willingness to mimic native speaker speech patterns, accents, and rhythm. In fact, Self-Identity was the strongest predictor of foreign language ability among all competencies. Language acquisition is also a process of identity construction and how a person sees himself/herself in relation to the language being acquired and to the speakers of that language along with their culture. Wegner (2000: 239) stated, "As identity is not an abstract idea or label, such as a title, and ethnic category, or a personality trait. It is a lived experience of belonging (or not belonging). A strong identity involves deep connections with others through shared histories and experiences, reciprocity, affection, and mutual commitments."

The development of a strong core identity is a critical factor in gaining from the transformative process of acquiring a foreign language and relating to the culture in which it is embedded. My own personal journey in learning languages as well as discussion with others has made me aware of the importance of the transformational experience brought on by the process of acquiring a new language. This transformational experience has been described in various ways in the SLA literature as well.

In "Never Quite a Native Speaker: Accent and Identity in L2 and L1", Nicole Marx (2002) states:

The desire to learn a new language can sometimes be an overwhelming influence on an individual's life. Even where the 'ultimate' acquisition of a foreign language is not essential for survival in a new cultural milieu, participation of any form in the culture and the intentional acquisition of a new linguistic identity can result in a 'seismic mental shift' (Hoffman, 1989:105) in a language learner's understanding and interpretation of the world around him. This is especially pertinent in the case of immigrants and other language learners who are immersed in the new language and culture and who intend to remain in that culture, at least for a significant amount of time."

### ***Relationship Management factor***

The *Relationship Management* dimension had the second strongest association with foreign language ability. In their review of the research, Mendenhall & Oddou (1985: 41) concluded that a dimension was warranted that encompassed "the ability to develop long-lasting friendships with host-nationals," due to the fact that this ability "emerged as an important factor in successful overseas adjustment (Abe & Wiseman, 1983; Brein & David, 1971, 1973; Hammer, et. al., 1978; Harris, 1973; Hawes & Kealey, 1981; Ratiu, 1983), accounting for large portions of the variance in the factor analytic studies studying adjustment (Hammer, et. al., 1978; Harris, 1973)." The



ability to create and maintain relationships with individuals in cross-cultural/global settings was found to be a key competency domain. The *GCI* dimension of *Relationship Management* assesses people's orientation toward the importance of relationships in general; how aware they are of others and their interaction styles, values, etc., and the level of awareness they have of themselves and their impact on others. Relationships also become a source of information to help people understand other cultures and may also be a source of social support. The development of positive relationships is a critical aspect of effective intercultural job performance (Harrison & Shaffer, 2005; Mol et. al., 2005). (Cited from Kozai Group Document)

In language acquisition no man is an island and thus the factors comprising the *GCI Relationship Management* domain can play an important role in the foreign language process. Though it is true that language does function as a system of cognitive representation and manipulation within the human mind, most would argue that an equally important role is the social function as a means for communication. In the case of FLA the social aspect is almost always the central goal (rather than the desire to think in a foreign language). The desire to communicate and establish relationships with native speakers of the target language may serve as motivation for learning and facilitate conditions for acquisition.

### ***Perception Management* factor**

The *GCI* dimension of *Perception Management* examines how people cognitively approach cultural differences. It assesses people's mental flexibility when confronted with cultural differences, their tendency to make rapid judgments about those differences, their ability to manage their perceptions when confronted with situations that differ from what they expect and, finally, it also assesses people's innate interest in, and curiosity about, other cultures. In sum, our perceptions of people who are different from us will ultimately affect what and how we think about them, and very importantly, our behavior toward them (cited from Kozai Group document).

The *GCI* dimension of *Perception Management* also appears to be related to how people cognitively approach a foreign language. People's mental flexibility when confronted with cultural differences also has parallels in their mental flexibility when confronted with different language constructs in relation to syntax, morphology, phonology, etc. Learners' ability to manage their perceptions when confronted with situations that differ from what they expect may be related to how they react when confronting differences between their mother tongue and the language they are seeking to acquire. Interest in, and curiosity about, other cultures is often a trait of people who are enthusiastic about acquiring foreign languages. Actually, such a curiosity is often one of the main motivations for acquiring the foreign language. In sum, our perceptions of people, their language and culture will ultimately affect the degree of motivation we have to acquire the language and interact with them.

### **Conclusion**

The hypothesis that the psychological traits that facilitate cultural adaption and the ability to function in foreign cultures also facilitate foreign language acquisition, particularly in terms of oral/aural performance, has been supported by the results of

this study. This experiment has overcome weaknesses of past studies in terms of having a more accurate measurement of language acquisition by focusing on oral/aural performance of subjects who have all attained a level high enough to allow them to study in the target language. Additionally, multiple demographic and related factors, other than those in the GCI that might account for differences in oral/aural performance were also analyzed and shown not to be significant in the case of this group of subjects. Thus, it is not only possible to use Kozai Group's GCI to screen candidates for cross-cultural assignments in terms of predicting the probability of being able to function well in a cross-cultural environment, but also to predict their success in oral/aural performance in foreign languages if they seek to learn the language in question. This makes the GCI an important tool in the selection and training process when ability in the language of the host county is required.

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