The influence of intercultural communication on cross-cultural adjustment and work attitudes: Foreign workers in South Korea

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The influence of intercultural communication on cross-cultural adjustment and work attitudes: Foreign workers in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

Integrating intercultural communication and cross-cultural adjustment research, this study examines the impact of host country language proficiency, English use in the workplace, communication styles, conflict styles, and social interaction frequency with host country nationals (HCNs) on general, work, and interaction adjustment, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions of 125 foreign workers in South Korea. While host country language proficiency and social interaction frequency with HCNs had a more positive influence on general and interaction adjustment facets, English use in the workplace, congruent communication and conflict styles were more relevant to work adjustment and work attitudes.

1. Introduction

Despite the abundant and increasing research on intercultural communication and cross-cultural adjustment, we know surprisingly little about the influence of intercultural communication on foreign workers’ cross-cultural adjustment and work attitudes. The lack of research linking inter-cultural communication to work and non-work adjustment facets can be attributed to different conceptual and empirical focus in intercultural communication and management disciplines. That is, communication researchers focusing often on intercultural communication competencies with student subjects have not taken into account work adjustment and work attitudes (e.g., Nishida, 1985; Oguri & Gudykunst, 2002). While management researchers have taken into account both work and non-work related adjustment facets, their studies, at best, are limited to one aspect of intercultural communication – host country language proficiency (see Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, & Luk, 2005, for a literature review). Traditionally, management researchers have not even taken into account host country language proficiency, expecting the cultural distance index (Kogut & Singh, 1988) to capture all relevant aspects of intercultural interactions. The cultural distance index is an aggregate measure of Hofstede’s (1980) national culture dimensions of uncertainty avoidance, individuality, power distance, and masculinity.

While the cultural distance index explains a substantial portion of the variance in cross-cultural adjustment (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005), intercultural communication in work and non-work settings is a complex, nested phenomenon subject to individual and firm-level differences. For example, intercultural communication competence (ICC) theories suggest that individual communication competencies influence intercultural communication encounters and interaction adjustment (e.g., Kim, 2001; Martin & Hammer, 1989; Ruben & Kealey, 1979). Also, cultural fit theory implies that foreign workers whose communication styles are consistent with the host country’s culture are likely to experience a high level of

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cross-cultural adjustment (Ward & Chang, 1997). Socioanalytic theory, in turn, is based on the assumption that situations create social expectations and that foreign workers tend to comply with those expectations if that compliance is consistent with their attitudes (Hogan & Shelton, 1998). Firm-level differences may also exist because cross-cultural adjustment has been described as the dynamic interaction between the individual and the environment (Kim, 2001) and because home-country nationals’ foreign-language proficiency varies across countries and firms (e.g., Peltokorpi, 2007a). Existing theories and intercultural communication research suggest that the cultural distance index and proficiency in the host country’s language alone may not fully capture the complexities of intercultural communication.

The present study, by examining the effects of intercultural communication on foreign workers’ cross-cultural adjustment and work attitudes in South Korea (hereafter “Korea”), contributes to the cross-cultural adjustment literature in four ways. First, we draw on ICC, cultural fit, and socioanalytic frameworks for an interaction-based account of cross-cultural adjustment. This approach shifts the focus from the country-level cultural distance to actual communication-based intercultural interactions. Second, we divide intercultural communication into five dimensions – host country language proficiency, social interactions with home country nationals (HCNs), communication styles, conflict styles, and English use in the workplace – to examine their influence on foreign workers’ work, general, and interaction adjustment; job satisfaction; and turnover intentions. Among these dimensions, only the language proficiency (e.g., Selmer, 2006) and social interactions with HCNs (Jun, Lee, & Gentry, 1997) have been addressed in cross-cultural adjustment research. Third, an increasing number of foreign workers have been classified as self-initiated expatriates (SIEs), that is, individuals who make their own decision to work abroad (Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009). However, despite the growing number of SIEs, few studies have focused on SIEs (Froese, 2011). The present study focuses on English-language teachers because, despite a sharp increase in the number of English-language teachers in East Asia, few studies have focused on them. For example, there are more than 30,000 foreigners teaching English in Korea, whereas there are only 7000 corporate expatriates (Korea Immigration Office, 2010). Finally, by examining cross-cultural adjustment in Korea, we respond to the call for extending this line of research to a wider range of countries (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005).

This study was conducted in Korea for several reasons. First, Korea is culturally and linguistically very different from English-speaking Anglo-Saxon countries (Hofstede, 1980; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004), providing a challenging environment for English-language teachers and an interesting context for the present investigation. For example, Korea’s homogeneous culture is characterized by vertical collectivism and high-context communication styles (Park, Hwang, & Harrison, 1996; Yun, 1988). In vertical collectivistic cultures, “people submit to the authorities of the in-group and are willing to sacrifice for their in-group” (Triandis, 2001, p. 910). High-context communication, in turn, takes place when “most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message” (Hall, 1976, p. 79). By contrast, language teachers whose native language is English are typically from individualistic cultures (Hofstede, 1980; House et al., 2004) and exhibit low-context communication styles (Hall, 1976). In individualistic cultures, “people are autonomous and independent from their in-groups; they give priority to their personal goals over the goals of their in-groups” (Triandis, 2001, p. 909). Low-context communication occurs when “the mass of information is vested in the explicit code” (Hall, 1976, p. 70). Such differences in culture and communication style are expected to influence foreign workers’ cross-cultural adjustment and work attitudes.

In addition, the grammar and syntax of the Korean language are very different from those of the English language. For example, the low general English language proficiency in Korea and the unique writing style (hangul) of the Korean language can influence foreign workers’ cross-cultural adjustment. In 2010, the average Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) score for Korea (81 out of a total of 120 points) was substantially lower than that for several countries in Europe, including Denmark (99) and Germany (97) (TOEFL, 2011). Indeed, culture- and communication-related problems are shown to have negative effects on American expatriates’ cross-cultural adjustment, interpersonal relations, and task performance in Korea (Park et al., 1996). In addition, although Korea’s economy ranks 15th in the world and 4th in Asia, surprisingly few studies have focused on foreign workers in Korea. One possible reason for this may be the small number of foreigners living and working in Korea. However, the last decade has witnessed a sharp increase in this number from approximately 100,000 in 2000 to more than 1 million in 2010 (Korea Immigration Office, 2010), making the present study one of the pioneering studies of foreign workers in Korea.

The rest of this study is organized as follows: Section 2 provides a review of research on cross-cultural adjustment and intercultural communication and draws on ICC, cultural fit, and socioanalytic frameworks for foreign workers’ intercultural communication and cross-cultural adjustment. Section 3 develops a set of hypotheses that link intercultural communication to cross-cultural adjustment and work-related outcomes. Section 4 presents the sample, control variables, measures, and statistical procedures, and Section 5 concludes by discussing the findings, implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature review

Cross-cultural adjustment refers to an individual’s psychological comfort with different aspects of a foreign environment (Black, 1988). Cross-cultural adjustment is often conceptualized as a multifaceted construct with three interrelated facets. In acculturation research (Searle & Ward, 1990), the facets of psychological, socio-cultural, and work adjustment are identified. In expatriate research (Black, 1988), three relatively similar facets of adjustment to the general environment, work, and interaction with HCNs are proposed. General adjustment is the degree of psychological comfort regarding the host culture’s
environment, such as the climate, food, health care, housing conditions, and shopping. Work adjustment is the degree of comfort regarding different expectations, performance standards, and work values. Interaction adjustment is the degree of comfort associated with interacting with HCNs inside and outside of work. In contrast to intercultural communication researchers, management researchers have taken into account work adjustment and numerous other job-related factors, such as expatriate job satisfaction and turnover intentions (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005). Job satisfaction is “a positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job or job experiences” (Locke, 1976, p. 1300). Turnover intentions or withdrawal cognition “include plans to search for other employment, general thoughts or consideration of quitting, and intentions to quit, with the latter component being the strongest” (Shaffer & Harrison, 1998, p. 89).

Due to the different disciplinary focus, communication and management researchers have provided complementary accounts of intercultural communication in cross-cultural adjustment. For example, communication researchers have shown that English-speaking and listening skills (Nishida, 1985) and convergent communication styles (Oguri & Gudykunst, 2002) had a positive impact on East Asian students’ interaction adjustment in the U.S. Although the cultural distance index (Kogut & Singh, 1988) in management research has traditionally been expected to capture most (if not all) of the relevant aspects of intercultural interactions, recent studies have shown that expatriates’ host country language proficiency have a positive influence on interaction adjustment (Selmer, 2006; Peltokorpi, 2008), work adjustment (Selmer, 2006; Takeuchi, Yun, & Russell, 2002), and general adjustment (Selmer, 2006) in several countries. A low level of language proficiency is shown to have a negative influence on expatriates’ job satisfaction (Parker & McEvoy, 1993) and intentions to complete their overseas assignments (Shaffer, Harrison, & Gilley, 1999). Taken together, communication and management researchers have provided complementary accounts of intercultural communication on cross-cultural adjustment and work attitudes. That is, communication researchers have typically ignored the work-related dimensions of cross-cultural adjustment, and management researchers have tended to ignore the effect of intercultural communication on cross-cultural adjustment or measured it through the cultural distance index or proficiency in the host country’s language. Drawing on ICC, cultural fit, and socioanalytic frameworks, the present study combines these interrelated fields by providing an interaction-based account of the effects of intercultural communication on cross-cultural adjustment and work attitudes.

ICC theories use three interrelated components (knowledge, motivation, and skills) to describe an individual’s ability to detect and use divergent communication styles (e.g., Kim, 2001; Martin & Hammer, 1989; Ruben & Kealey, 1979). First, individuals’ host country language proficiency provides sufficient skills for communicating with HCNs. Second, individuals must be capable of detecting and adapting to different communication styles. In addition, they must be motivated to interact with HCNs, and when necessary, they need to adopt HCNs’ communication styles. Together, these three components facilitate intercultural communication and cross-cultural adjustment. Cultural fit theory, in turn, maintains that the cultural fit between a foreign worker’s behavior and the host country’s culture facilitates the worker’s cross-cultural adjustment (Ward & Chang, 1997). This fit can be fostered by similarities in self-construal between foreign workers and HCNs (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Cultural fit theory suggests that foreign workers whose intercultural communication styles are consistent with the host country’s culture are likely to experience a high level of cross-cultural adjustment. Finally, socioanalytic theory posits that situations create social expectations and that foreign workers are likely to comply with those expectations if that compliance is consistent with their attitudes (e.g., Hogan & Shelton, 1998). Their compliance is motivated by three basic human needs: (1) the need to be accepted and liked (getting along), (2) the need for status and power (getting ahead), and (3) the need for predictability and order (finding meaning). In contrast to cultural fit theory, socioanalytic theory implies that foreign workers are able to adapt their behavior to comply with the expectations in a different cultural context.

In summary, these theories suggest that intercultural interactions taking place largely through communication are crucial determinants of cross-cultural adjustment and work attitudes. Drawing on this theoretical rationale, this study takes into account the impact of foreign workers’ host country language proficiency, communication styles, conflict styles, and social interactions with HCNs on their general, work, and interaction adjustment, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions. In addition to their intercultural communication skills and competencies, ICC theories (Kim, 2001) and research (Du-Babcock & Babcock, 1996; Peltokorpi, 2007a) suggest that English use in the workplace can facilitate foreign workers’ work adjustment and attitudes. For example, interview studies in Taiwan and Japan have suggested that English use in the workplace can induce expatriates to reach their work-related goals and facilitate their job satisfaction (Du-Babcock & Babcock, 1996; Peltokorpi, 2007a). In the following section, we develop a set of hypotheses about the influence of intercultural communication on cross-cultural adjustment and work attitudes.

3. Hypotheses

3.1. Host country language proficiency

Foreign workers are shown to face language barriers when interacting with HCNs inside and outside the workplace in China (Selmer, 2006) and Japan (Peltokorpi, 2008). In Korea, foreign workers from Western countries are expected to face communication difficulties because of differences in alphabets, grammar, and language syntax, among others. For example, research shows that American expatriates with low Korean language skills felt alienated and treated HCNs with suspicion and mistrust in the workplace (Park et al., 1996). Studies in Japan also describe how expatriates with insufficient proficiency in the host country’s language were intentionally/unintentionally excluded from communication networks because of people’s natural tendency to interact in their native languages (Froese, 2010; Peltokorpi, 2007a).
Low host country language proficiency is further shown to have a negative influence on expatriates’ job satisfaction (Stepina, Perrewé, & Hassell, 1991) and work adjustment (Selmer, 2006). Insufficient language proficiency can consequently act as a natural barrier to intercultural communication and information flows in the workplace and have a negative influence on foreign workers’ work-related adjustment. By contrast, a high level of proficiency in the host country’s language can enable expatriates to adopt appropriate work values and behave appropriately in the workplace (Takeuchi et al., 2002). ICC theories further maintain that proficiency in the host country’s language facilitates intercultural communication (Kim, 2001; Martin & Hammer, 1989; Ruben & Kealey, 1979). This can explain why host country language proficiency is found to have a positive influence on expatriates’ work adjustment in the U.S. (Takeuchi et al., 2002) and China (Selmer, 2006).

Host country language proficiency has been shown to facilitate interactions with HCNs outside the workplace and general adjustment to the host country (Peltokorpi, 2008; Selmer, 2006; Takeuchi et al., 2002). For example, this proficiency can induce and foster expatriates’ daily interactions with HCNs and help them to understand the local culture (Froese, 2010; Takeuchi et al., 2002). This increased understanding of the host country’s culture enables foreign workers to get along and interact more effectively with HCNs. Thus, the more proficient the foreign worker is in the host country’s language, the easier it is to enjoy various aspects of his or her life in the host country. For example, it would be more enjoyable for foreign workers to be able to read the menus and order food; obtain information; or ask for directions (Takeuchi et al., 2002). From the socioanalytic perspective (Hogan & Shelton, 1998), proficiency in the host country’s language facilitates foreign workers’ cross-cultural adjustment through the need to get along with HCNs and find meaning in cultural differences. By contrast, a low level of proficiency can limit a foreign worker’s social interactions in Korea to other foreigners or to a small number of Koreans who are proficient enough in English or some shared language (Park et al., 1996). Anxiety/uncertainty management theory maintains that limited proficiency in the host country’s language can reduce foreign workers’ motivation to interact with HCNs (Gudykunst, 1986). In support, low host country language proficiency is found to have a negative impact on expatriates’ general and interaction adjustment in China (Selmer, 2006) and Japan (Peltokorpi, 2008). In this regard, we propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypotheses 1a–e.** Host country language proficiency has a positive influence on foreign workers’ (a) work adjustment, (b) interaction adjustment, (c) general adjustment, and (d) job satisfaction and a negative influence on their (e) turnover intentions.

### 3.2. English use in the workplace

Researchers have recently started to emphasize the importance of a shared (working) language as a facilitator of communication, learning, mutual understanding, and collective identity in foreign subsidiaries (Du-Babcock & Babcock, 1996; Peltokorpi, 2007a, 2010; Van der Born & Peltokorpi, 2010). For example, HCN workers proficient in English are shown to act as important language linking pins between expatriates and local staff in Taiwan (Du-Babcock & Babcock, 1996) and Japan (Peltokorpi, 2007a). In addition to providing useful task information and linking expatriates with HCNs, these studies suggest that communication in English has a positive influence on expatriates’ work adjustment. For example, studies in Nordic subsidiaries in Japan suggest that HCN employees proficient in English facilitate expatriates’ job satisfaction (Peltokorpi, 2007a, 2010). From the socioanalytic perspective (Hogan & Shelton, 1998), English use in the workplace can satisfy foreign workers’ need to get ahead, get along, and find meaning. Furthermore, it can facilitate their work-related adjustment through more efficient socialization, which can help them to better understand the organizational culture and task roles and provide increased access to organizational information. In this regard, we propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypotheses 2a–c.** English use in the workplace has a positive influence on foreign workers’ (a) work adjustment and (b) job satisfaction and a negative influence on their (c) turnover intentions.

### 3.3. Communication styles

While a lack of a shared language acts as a natural communication barrier (Du-Babcock & Babcock, 1996), divergent communication styles tend to exacerbate differences in intercultural encounters (Hall, 1976). Because of differences in communication styles, foreign workers from low-context Western countries are likely to (at least initially) misunderstand HCNs’ messages in high-context cultures in East Asia (Hall, 1976). In contrast to individualistic cultures in Western countries, which typically have low-context communication styles, collectivistic cultures in East Asia tend to show high-context communication styles (Hall, 1976). In high-context cultures, most of the meaning is implicit and words convey only a small part of the message (Pekerti & Thomas, 2003). Thus, the receiver must fill in the gap using his or her existing knowledge of the speaker or by employing other contextual cues. Previous studies have provided evidence that individuals in collectivistic cultures are more likely to be indirect and employ high-context communication methods than those in individualistic cultures (Holtgraves, 1997; Ting-Toomey et al., 1991). In addition, a cross-cultural study found substantial differences in apology use between American and Korean students with respect to their desire, obligation, intentions to apologize, and perceptions of normative apology use (Guan, Park, & Lee, 2009).

Although the continuum of high/low-context communication styles helps to determine country-level differences, individuals vary in their language use and verbal/non-verbal interaction styles across cultures (Hara & Kim, 2004). ICC theories
suggest that individuals have different capabilities to adapt their communication styles to new cultural environments (Ruben & Kealey, 1979). Given that individuals tend to prefer communication styles that are similar to their own and that Koreans have indirect, high-context communication styles (Holtgraves, 1997), foreign workers with indirect, high-context communication styles are likely to be successful in their interactions with HCNs both inside and outside the workplace. For example, such workers are more likely to pay attention to status cues in the interaction context than those with low-context communication styles (Holtgraves, 1997; Ting-Toomey, 1988). By contrast, foreign workers with direct communication styles are not likely to pay attention to contextual cues and can thus be considered as “rude” and “pushy” by HCNs, who typically prefer indirect communication styles (Hara & Kim, 2004). Thus, foreign workers with indirect communication styles may be more likely to show cross-cultural adjustment and job satisfaction and less likely to show turnover intentions than those with direct communication styles. In this regard, we propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypotheses 3a–e.** Indirect communication styles have a positive influence on foreign workers' (a) work adjustment, (b) interaction adjustment, (c) general adjustment, and (d) job satisfaction and a negative influence on their (e) turnover intentions.

### 3.4 Conflict styles

Conflict styles provide an overall picture of a person’s communication orientation toward conflict (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003). Conflict styles are subject to individual-level variations. For example, Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998) argued that individuals with highly independent self-construal consider themselves as unique and distinctive from others and have competing and dominating conflict styles. By contrast, individuals with interdependent self-construal tend to fit in with others; act appropriately; consider others’ face by helping them to maintain their public dignity, respect, and status; promote others’ goals; and value relational collaboration (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). Such individuals withhold negative feedback or provide it in a subtle manner to maintain group harmony and save face. While all individuals have a dominant conflict style, they can change their conflict styles according to specific situations (Leung, 1987; Peltokorpi, 2007b). From the socio-analytic perspective (Hogan & Shelton, 1998), individuals are motivated to change their conflict styles to get ahead and get along with HCNs.

Conflict styles are also argued to be subject to country-level cultural differences because people in individualistic countries tend to use direct conflict strategies to maintain in-group harmony, whereas those in collectivistic countries tend to use conflict avoidance strategies (Leung, 1987; Miyahara, Kim, Shin, & Yoon, 1998; Ting-Toomey et al., 1991). For example, the Korean word inha combines the idea of people with that of harmony. Because of differences in conflict styles, when individuals with different cultural backgrounds interact, they are likely to face some complications and misunderstandings beyond the usual tension (Leung, 1987). Given that Koreans tend to prefer in-group harmony and conflict avoidance (Miyahara et al., 1998), foreign workers with direct, competing conflict styles can be regarded by HCNs to be selfish and disharmonious. Thus, foreign workers with competing conflict styles may less likely to show cross-cultural adjustment and job satisfaction and more likely to show turnover intentions than those with harmony-seeking conflict styles. By contrast, foreign workers who are willing and able to adapt their conflict styles to Korean norms may be likely to show cross-cultural adjustment and positive work attitudes. In this regard, we propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypotheses 4a–e.** Competing conflict styles have a negative influence on foreign workers' (a) work adjustment, (b) interaction adjustment, (c) general adjustment, and (d) job satisfaction and a positive influence on their (e) turnover intentions.

### 3.5 Social interactions with HCNs

Although social interactions with HCNs can be a source of positive as well as negative experiences, expatriate and intercultural communication scholars propose that frequent social interactions with HCNs facilitate cross-cultural adjustment for two reasons. First, frequent social interactions with HCNs signal that expatriates are motivated to participate in the host country’s society and culture. Thus, motivation for and positive attitudes toward interactions with HCNs are important aspects of successful intercultural communication (Martin & Hammer, 1989) and cross-cultural adjustment (Takeuchi et al., 2002). For example, social interactions enable expatriates to create more positive perceptions and gain support from HCNs. From the socio-analytic perspective (Hogan & Shelton, 1998), foreign workers are motivated to interact with HCNs to get along, find meaning, and get ahead. By contrast, foreign workers who have mostly negative experiences tend to have negative attitudes toward and avoid interactions with HCNs, which is unfortunate in that foreign workers who are willing to participate in social interactions are likely to correct their negative attitudes and stereotypes about HCNs and obtain a new cultural perspective to better manage various obstacles in the host country (Jun et al., 1997).

Second, frequent interactions with HCNs can facilitate cross-cultural adjustment through information acquisition and learning. For example, such interactions can help foreign workers to learn various aspects of their host country by observing and participating (Anderson, 1994; Begley, 2003; Jun et al., 1997) and to obtain valuable insights and knowledge such as intercultural communication rules, nonverbal communication techniques, and appropriate manners and customs through their communication (Begley, 2003). Thus, foreign workers’ practical communication experience through frequent interactions with HCNs can help them to achieve an overall understanding and effective adjustment (Begley, 2003). In addition, interactions with HCNs can enable foreign workers to improve their proficiency in the host country’s language. Further, increased
knowledge through such interactions can help reduce uncertainties and anxieties both inside and outside the workplace. Similarly, frequent interactions with HCNs may facilitate cross-cultural adjustment and minimize turnover intentions (Shaffer et al., 1999). In this regard, we propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypotheses 5a–e.** Frequent social interactions with HCNs have a positive influence on foreign workers’ (a) work adjustment, (b) interaction adjustment, (c) general adjustment, and (d) job satisfaction and a negative influence on their (e) turnover intentions.

4. **Methods**

4.1. **Data collection and the sample**

The data were collected from English-language teachers in universities, elementary and middle schools, and private language institutions in the greater Seoul area. The teachers identified through email addresses on university/school/institution websites were invited to participate in an online survey. The others were sent a questionnaire with a prepaid return envelope. Among the 436 questionnaires distributed through the online survey, 104 (24%) were returned, and among the 65 questionnaires sent by regular mail, 21 (32%) were returned. There were no significant demographic differences between online and offline participants.

The sample included teachers from various English-speaking countries. A majority of the participants were from the U.S. (n = 56), followed by Canada (n = 31), the U.K. (n = 11), and New Zealand (n = 11). Most were relatively young (mean age = 36.02, SD = 8.05), male (82%), and married (62%). On average, they lived in Korea and worked at the current organization for 60.3 (SD = 42.9) and 23.9 (SD = 25.7) months, respectively.

4.2. **Measures**

4.2.1. **Dependent variables**

Cross-cultural adjustment was measured using Black’s (1988) 14-item, 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not adjusted at all) to 7 (very well adjusted). The internal reliability was as follows: general adjustment (α = 0.80), interaction adjustment (α = 0.90), and work adjustment (α = 0.80). Job satisfaction was measured using West, Nicholson, & Rees’s (1987) 4-item, 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) (α = 0.88). Turnover intentions were measured using Zhang, George, and Chan’s (2006) 3-item, 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) (α = 0.86).

4.2.2. **Independent variables**

Host country language proficiency was measured using Selmer’s (2006) 6-item, 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (very low) to 7 (very high) (α = 0.90). A sample item is “I cannot manage a conversation in the local language (reverse coded)”. Based on an extensive literature review, Blanche and Merino (1989) concluded that the self-assessment of language proficiency can be as accurate as any standardized testing instrument. English use in the workplace was measured by a 5-item, 7-point Likert-type scale (see Appendix 1; α = 0.82) ranging from 1 (a low level of English use) to 7 (a high level of English use). The indirect communication style was measured using a shortened version of Holtgrave’s (1997) 4-item, 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not really) to 7 (very much) (see Appendix 2, α = 0.70). The competing conflict style was measured using Schwartz’s (1992) 10-item, 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not important) to 7 (very important) (α = 0.81). Social interactions with HCNs were measured using Jun et al.’s (1997) 5-item, 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (very rarely) to 5 (very often) (α = 0.88).

4.2.3. **Control variables**

Because several additional factors have been shown to influence cross-cultural adjustment and work attitudes (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005), six control variables were used to rule out alternative explanations for the hypotheses. First, expatriates’ age may influence findings: Older expatriates are more likely to be satisfied with their lives and work in foreign countries than younger ones because of the attrition effect (Van Oudenhoven, Mol, & Van der Zee, 2003). The participants’ age was measured in years. Second, expatriates’ gender can influence findings: female expatriates are more likely to adjust to foreign countries and form social relationships with HCNs than their male counterparts because of their minority status and interpersonal skills (Parker & McEvoy, 1993). The participant’s gender was dummy coded (0 = female, 1 = male). In addition, the participant’s nationality was dummy coded (1 = American, 0 = other nationalities). Given the possible spillover effects of the spouse’s adjustment to the expatriate’s work and non-work outcomes (Black, 1988), marital status was dummy coded (0 = not married, 1 = married). Because the length of stay in the host country and tenure can influence cross-cultural adjustment (Black & Mendenhall, 1991), the participant’s length of stay in Korea and tenure were measured in months.
Table 1
Means, standard deviations, and correlations for study variables.

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<tr>
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<td>−0.06</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
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<td>0.06</td>
<td>−0.11</td>
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<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.38</td>
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<td>−0.18</td>
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<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Turnover intentions</td>
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<td>0.08</td>
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<td>−0.15</td>
<td>−0.17</td>
<td>0.00</td>
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<td>−0.29</td>
<td>−0.15</td>
<td>−0.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < 0.05.
** p < 0.01.
5. Results

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlations for the study variables. As expected, work adjustment, interaction adjustment, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions were significantly correlated with most communication variables, providing preliminary support for the hypotheses.

To test the hypotheses, we considered five 2-step linear regression models. In the first step, we entered the control variables. In the second step, we entered the control variables and the independent variables. Table 2 shows the results of the regression analyses for the three facets of cross-cultural adjustment, and Table 3 shows the results for work attitudes. Although the control variables had relatively little predictive power, the addition of the independent variables increased the explained variance by 19–38% for the various cross-cultural adjustment facets (Table 2), 27% for job satisfaction (Table 3, Model 1b), and 16% for turnover (Table 3, Model 1b).

Table 2
Regression results for communication and cross-cultural adjustment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Work adjustment</th>
<th></th>
<th>General adjustment</th>
<th></th>
<th>Interaction adjustment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1a</td>
<td>Model 1b</td>
<td>Model 2a</td>
<td>Model 2b</td>
<td>Model 3a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control variables</td>
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</tr>
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<td>0.19*</td>
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<td>Length in host country</td>
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<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.20®</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tenure</td>
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<td>0.04</td>
<td>−0.07</td>
<td>−0.06</td>
<td>−0.09</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independent variables</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.33***</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Indirect communication</td>
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<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.08</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competing conflict style</td>
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<td>0.17*</td>
<td>−0.09</td>
<td></td>
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<td>0.48**</td>
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<td>0.10</td>
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<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
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<td>−0.01</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.05</td>
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<tr>
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<td>$\Delta F$</td>
<td>2.80*</td>
<td>5.63****</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>6.11***</td>
<td>1.88®</td>
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</table>

† $p<0.10$.
** $p<0.05$.
*** $p<0.01$.
**** $p<0.001$.

Table 3
Regression results for communication and work attitudes.

<table>
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<tr>
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<tbody>
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<td>Model 1a</td>
<td>Model 1b</td>
<td>Model 2a</td>
<td>Model 2b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control variables</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
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<td>−0.11</td>
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<td>0.14</td>
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<td>−0.11</td>
</tr>
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<td>−0.02</td>
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<td>0.13</td>
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<td>Independent variables</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language proficiency</td>
<td>0.03</td>
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<td>0.15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English use in the workplace</td>
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<td></td>
<td>−0.19†</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect communication</td>
<td>0.25**</td>
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<td>−0.17†</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competing conflict style</td>
<td>−0.13</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.21†</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social interactions</td>
<td>0.21*</td>
<td></td>
<td>−0.12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
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<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.09</td>
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<tr>
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<td>4.21**</td>
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† $p<0.10$.
** $p<0.05$.
*** $p<0.01$.
**** $p<0.001$. 

Table 4
Canonical correlations and within-cell regression results.

<table>
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</table>

Independent variables:
1. Language proficiency
2. English use in the workplace
3. Indirect communication style
4. Competing conflict style
5. Social interactions

The results provide general support for the hypotheses in that each of the independent variables had a statistically significant influence on the dependent variables. More specifically, proficiency in the host country’s language had a positive influence on work adjustment ($\beta = 0.27, p < 0.05$) and interaction adjustment ($\beta = 0.33, p < 0.001$), providing support for Hypotheses 1a and 1c. Further, English use in the workplace had a positive influence on work adjustment ($\beta = 0.25, p < 0.05$) and job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.31, p < 0.001$) and a negative influence on turnover intentions ($\beta = −0.19, p < 0.05$), providing support for Hypotheses 2a–c. The indirect communication style had a positive influence on job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.25, p < 0.05$), providing support for Hypothesis 3d. The competing conflict style had a positive influence on turnover intentions ($\beta = 0.21, p < 0.05$), providing support for Hypothesis 4e. The frequency of social interactions with HCNs had a positive influence on general adjustment ($\beta = 0.48, p < 0.001$), interaction adjustment ($\beta = 0.45, p < 0.001$), and job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.21, p < 0.05$) providing support for Hypotheses 5b–d.

Given the somewhat high correlations among the three adjustment facets, we conducted a canonical analysis to examine the relationships between the independent variables and the three facets of cross-cultural adjustment. The canonical correlation was 0.69 ($p < 0.001$), indicating that the independent variables explained 48% (0.69$^2$) of the variance in cross-cultural adjustment. Table 4 shows the raw canonical coefficients for the first function and the within-cell regression results. The high $r$-values for proficiency in the host country’s language ($r = 0.25$), social interactions with HCNs ($r = −0.82$), and interaction adjustment ($−0.56$) suggest that these variables contributed most to the relationship between intercultural communication and cross-cultural adjustment. The results of the within-cell regression based on the canonical analysis are generally consistent with the earlier findings from the separate linear regression analyses. Proficiency in the host country’s language ($\beta = −0.14, p < 0.05$) and English use in the workplace ($\beta = 0.22, p < 0.01$) were significant predictors of work adjustment. Although the competing conflicting style was only marginally significant in the separate regression analyses, it was significant at the 5% level in the within-cell regression analysis. Further, proficiency in the host country’s language ($\beta = −0.27, p < 0.001$) and social interactions with HCNs ($\beta = 0.92, p < 0.001$) were significant predictors of interaction adjustment.

6. Discussion

The results indicate that the five dimensions of intercultural communication predicted a large portion of the variance in the participants’ cross-cultural adjustment and work attitudes. Although all the participants were from Anglo-Saxon countries, which generally have similar country-level cultural values (Hofstede, 1980; House et al., 2004), they showed different communication and conflict styles. The participants who showed communication and conflict styles that were consistent with Korean culture were likely to show a high level of job satisfaction and a low level of turnover intentions, providing indirect support for cultural fit theory (Ward & Chang, 1997) and socioanalytic theory (Hogan & Shelton, 1998). The length of stay in Korea had little effect on cross-cultural adjustment and work-related outcomes, suggesting that indirect conflict and communication styles may be naturally occurring innate capabilities that do not put a noticeable cognitive strain on foreign workers.

Consistent with the hypotheses and previous expatriate research (Peltokorpi, 2008; Selmer, 2006; Takeuchi et al., 2002), the participants’ proficiency in the Korean language had a positive effect on interaction and work adjustment. However, their language proficiency had no significant effect on their general adjustment, which may be due to the existence of English-language services targeting foreigners in Seoul. Previous studies with organizational expatriates and SIEs in Japan (Froese & Peltokorpi, 2011; Peltokorpi, 2008) also show that proficiency in the host country’s language had no significant effect on job satisfaction. For English-language teachers, their proficiency in the host country’s language may not influence their job satisfaction and turnover intentions because their main task is to teach English. Indeed, several language institutions in Korea have policies requiring English-language teachers to communicate with students and colleagues in English. In such a work environment, the management expects teachers to be satisfied with their work. However, the significant effect of
English use in the workplace on job satisfaction and turnover intentions suggests that, without adequate contextual support, such policies can be a source of friction. Limited English-language skills of local staff and the limited amount of information available in English can frustrate foreign teachers.

Indirect communication and conflict styles had no effect on interaction adjustment but had a positive influence on job satisfaction and a negative influence on turnover intentions. These relationships can be explained in part by the surface-level and deep-level differences framework from diversity research (Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998). Surface-level differences (e.g., gender) are easily visible, whereas deep-level differences (e.g., personality traits) are more subtle and become gradually recognizable through personal interactions. Foreign workers’ daily interactions with HCNs are likely to be surface-level activities. In such loose, infrequent interactions, differences in indirect communication and conflict styles are not likely to be visible and thus problematic. In this regard, Van Vienen, De Pater, Kristof-Brown, & Johnson (2004) suggested that surface-level differences may have no effect on general adjustment. However, foreign workers can have more frequent interactions with HCNs in the workplace. Differences in communication styles and conflict styles, which can be considered as deep-level differences, can lead to job dissatisfaction and intentions to leave the organization.

Consistent with the hypotheses and previous research (Jun et al., 1997), frequent social interactions with HCNs had a positive influence on the participants’ general adjustment, interaction adjustment, and job satisfaction. This indicates that the participants who had frequent interactions with HCNs were likely to have positive attitudes toward HCNs and more learning opportunities to better understand cultural differences (Begley, 2003; Jun et al., 1997). This would enable foreign workers to establish and maintain better communicative interactions with HCNs, facilitating cross-cultural adjustment and job satisfaction. These results may be subject to reverse causality, that is, the participants who had positive attitudes toward HCNs were likely to have frequent intercultural interactions and thus experience cross-cultural adjustment. Culturally adjusted expatriates have been found to interact frequently with HCNs (Jun et al., 1997). Regardless of the direction of causality, frequent interactions with HCNs are likely to enable foreign workers to establish more permanent social networks and have more stability in their daily lives in foreign countries.

This study’s participants worked for language institutions under local contracts. Thus, some of the findings may be influenced in that organizational practices and HCN colleagues in local organizations may be less accommodating toward foreign workers than those in local subsidiaries of foreign firms. In contrast to the English-language teachers in this study, corporate expatriates often work in more globalized and multilingual work environments and receive better organizational support (Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009). In the present study, limited English use in the workplace reduced job satisfaction and increased turnover intentions. Individual differences in foreign workers’ behavioral adjustment to the host country’s cultural norms may be important for their efforts to integrate into the local workforce. Differences in conflict and communication styles may lead to misunderstandings and conflicts in the workplace, leaving foreign workers dissatisfied with their jobs and willing to consider leaving their organizations. Such conflicts may be less severe in multinational enterprises, which frequently circulate their employees through their international subsidiary network, because such firms are likely to select local employees whose values are consistent with theirs and because those employees are likely to be familiar with and accommodating toward expatriates.

6.1. Practical implications

The results have four practical implications. First, proficiency in the host country’s language is likely to facilitate foreign workers’ adjustment to the host country both inside and outside the workplace. Thus (potential) expatriates should improve their language proficiency by enrolling in appropriate language programs. Second, local organizations employing foreign workers should pay more attention to HCNs’ proficiency in English, particularly when recruiting and training employees. Third, for a better workplace environment, local organizations should provide both foreign and local employees with appropriate training to make them understand and appreciate the differences in conflict and indirect communication styles. If such training is not provided, foreign workers should learn such cultural differences and be more open-minded about intercultural communication and interactions. Fourth, because frequent social interactions can reduce uncertainties and provide learning opportunities, foreign workers should interact as much as possible with HCNs. Organizations can facilitate such interactions by initiating leisure activities that both expatriates and HCNs can enjoy.

6.2. Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study has some limitations. First, we collected all the measures via self-reports, which can artificially strengthen some relationships. Thus, to minimize potential problems, we assigned the items for the three adjustment facets in random order, as indicated in previous research (Black, 1988; Froese & Peltokorpi, 2011; Selmer, 2006). In addition, we assessed the demographic and control variables and placed the self-rated criterion measure at the end of the survey to reduce self-generated validity (Feldman & Lynch, 1988). In this regard, future research should ask HCNs to assess the level of foreign workers’ cross-cultural adjustment. Further, future research should collect data on communication from foreign workers and their colleagues, friends, interaction partners to provide a better understanding of the interaction-based nature of their communication. Such dyadic assessments should provide further evidence for the cultural fit hypothesis.

Second, cross-cultural adjustment is as a learning process that varies over time (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005). In the present study, the results of the regression analyses controlling for the participants’ living experience in Korea indicate that
those who lived in Korea longer were better adjusted in terms of general and interaction adjustment and showed a lower level of turnover intentions. In this regard, longitudinal studies should provide a better understanding of how individual differences influence work attitudes over time.

Finally, the relatively small sample confined to a Korean context raises the question of whether the findings can be generalized to broader samples of foreign workers in other countries. Given the difficulties in learning the host country’s language and similarities in cultural values, the results may be similar for some countries in East Asia, including China, Taiwan, and Japan. However, future research should test these relationships for other countries, particularly those outside Asia.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A. Appendix 1

Items for English use in the workplace were measured using a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1(strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) ($\alpha = 0.82$):

1. My Korean colleagues speak English well.
2. People in the administrative office speak English well.
3. Most people in my organization can communicate well in English.
4. Relevant information is available in English.
5. I can conduct all of my office matters in English.

Appendix B. Appendix 2

Items for indirectness were measured using a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not really) to 7 (very much) ($\alpha = 0.70$):

1. In most conversations that I observe or take part in, I find that the most important meanings are often below the surface.
2. I often look below the surface of a person’s remark to determine what they really mean.
3. My remarks often have more than one meaning.
4. People have to spend some time thinking about my remarks to understand my real meaning.

References


