**Teaching Intercultural Communication in Undergraduate Business and Management Studies: Theoretical Considerations and Practical Approaches**

Introduction

This paper is a continuation of a case study that has been published in 2016 by one of the present authors and two of her colleagues from RIT Croatia, namely Milena Kužnin and Rebecca Charry Roje. The issue addressed in their paper dealt with the necessity of fostering intercultural competence among undergraduate students in business and management studies. It was based on a qualitative survey that measured students’ self-reported competencies in four categories: motivation, strategy, knowledge and behavior.

The results showed that the surveyed students possessed higher competencies in the areas of motivation and strategy. However, they reported that they felt less confident when it comes to knowing about foreign cultures, for example, their values, religious beliefs, legal and economic system. The results also showed that students acknowledged they didn’t know how to behave in intercultural situations or, more specifically, how to adjust to verbal and nonverbal signals in conversations. Although this area of competency was not further defined in the survey, it may be deduced that it includes some specific forms of verbal and non-verbal communication that are related to various intercultural situations, such as greeting customs, table manners and overall etiquette. All of these forms of expression belong to a specific kind of “language” that has to be learned if we are to survive in a multicultural environment. In this context, complete illiteracy may result in mistakes that could have tremendously negative consequences and could bring an end to any meaningful and successful communication. Indeed, contrary to when we are confronted to such situations in our own culture, if we fail to avoid mistakes, it is even more unlikely that we will know how to amend them.

The purpose of our paper is therefore to present specific strategies to improve students’ intercultural competencies in the two categories where a lack of competencies and/or skills has been already identified in the previous research,, namely those dealing respectively with knowledge and behavior. These strategies have been developed in the context of the evaluation requirements of a course on intercultural communication delivered in the Fall semester of Academic Year 2018/2019, at the Dubrovnik campus of RIT Croatia. Based on the case study just alluded to, assignments have been designed not only to teach about intercultural communication, but also to provide opportunities to practice some specific skills as well as develop the awareness necessary for that type of communication. It is also to be noted that this course has been co-taught by the present authors. As such, since it involves two teachers with different academic and cultural backgrounds, it may be considered as a concrete example of intercultural communication that has been done live in the classroom for the students to witness and assess.

Before looking at the class assignments as means of improving specific intercultural competencies, the authors will introduce learning principles on which these assignments are based as well as some theoretical considerations about the notion of communication. These considerations are not meant to be exhaustive. They will only make explicit the presuppositions underlying the area of expertise of the authors/teachers and, consequently, the pedagogical approaches they are likely to favor and the types of learning objectives they are best suited to fulfill.

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION?

“If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.” (Trevor Noah, *Born A Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood*). In recent years there has been a growing interest in the cultural dimension of foreign language education and/or second language acquisition and all educators in this field have already started to actively promote the acquisition of intercultural competence in their learners together with the acquisition of other language skills such as reading, writing, listening and speaking. Since the area of expertise of the first author is SLA (Second Language Acquisition) and FLT (Foreign Language Teaching) it is safe to assume that the role of cross-cultural awareness has already become acknowledged in the teaching of second/foreign languages, but the question how this concept should be delivered in class nevertheless remains to be a topic of many scientific papers nowadays. It is obvious that the assessment of the contribution of cultural awareness in a foreign language and/or second language teaching is somewhat doubtful, since it becomes clear that it is hard to even try to achieve foreign/second language ability without recognizing the need to grow cultural awareness of the country at the same time.

In his work “An Introduction to the Study of Language “(1914), one of the fathers of American structural linguistics, Leonard Bloomfield said that “The totality of utterances that can be made in a speech community is the language of that speech community”. On the other hand, Alfred Louis Kroeber, a famous cultural anthropologist from the United States said that culture started when speech became available, and from that beginning, the enrichment of either of them helped each other’s development as well (The Nature of Culture, 1987). It is clear that the relationship between language and culture is a quite homologous, yet, a very complex one, and their co-existence is already acknowledged and visible to everyone.

According to an Italian philosopher, Ferruccio Rossi Landi, if culture is seen as a consequence of the interactions of humans, the acts of communication between those humans are, can be interpreted as cultural manifestations within a specific community. In his work, that was focused on philosophy, semiotics and linguistics, he also acknowledged the fact that a speech community is made up of all messages that are exchanged within that community in a certain language which needs to be understood by the entire community/society. He further specified that young children learn both, their language and their culture from the society they were born in, and while they are learning, they are also developing their cognitive abilities as well.

The importance of the relationship between language and culture is further confirmed by the principle of linguistic relativity, which declares quite solemnly that the way people think of the world around them is influenced directly and inevitably by the language that the people use to discuss that world another anthropologist, Edward Sapir stated that the language habits of specific groups of people actually built the real world). In the analysis of this principle, it becomes clear that every society sees the world in different terms and/or has a different notion of the world, therefore, in order to speak one language, a person also understands the culture of the people who speak the language, and, vice versa, knowing another culture, means also knowing and/or understanding nuances of a particular language. The purpose of (intercultural) communication, therefore, is to serve as a “tool” to make people more aware of the different interpretations and representations of the world itself.

If a culture may be compared to a language to learn and master, it also shares a lot of features with the study of religions and philosophies. Indeed, such study always tries to find an intimate connection between religious beliefs and practices, on the one hand, and the various secular elements that constitute a culture, namely, all forms of arts, science and technology, customs and popular wisdom, etc., on the other hand. From this perspective, the study of religions allows us to have an insight into a usually complex network of presuppositions and assumptions underlying the ways a culture shapes itself and even evolves overtime. Although it does not provide concrete answers as to why a specific culture is what it is, it nevertheless helps us formulate the right questions that enable a person, who is immersed in a new cultural environment, to find these concrete and practical answers.

As such, the study of religions, which is the specialty of the second author of this paper, confirms one of the concluding remarks of the aforementioned case study which says that: “a holistic approach to teaching intercultural competence […] can be an effective tool for the education of young people which can ultimately successfully prepare them for their professional careers and help them face a globalized future.” Such a holistic approach is exactly what the study of religions may provide us with: a vision of an entire culture that helps us identify its main centers of influence. It is through an awareness of these centers that we are able to act in an efficient way and, most importantly, to be creative in our responses to unpredictable situations without making irreparable mistakes.

TWO LEARNING PRINCIPLES

1: *Never have students learn two new things at the same time.*

This first principle is based on the idea that a message which is to be communicated consists of two parts: its content and its container. By content we mean the meaning that is to be shared. It is because it can be shared that it is objective—in the sense of an object being passed from one mind to another—and that it aspires to some sort of universality, that is, it seeks to be accepted by the greatest number of people possible.

However, despite its objectivity and universality, a message relies on a messenger or a container to be carried and conveyed. That container is relative to the predispositions or the subjectivity of a group of people or even a single individual. In other words, a container, which here includes a specific set of symbols as well as the skills to arrange them in a meaningful way, is always relative to a social environment or a culture. In the case of a verbal message, these skills usually refer to our knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and syntax, while in the case of nonverbal communication we include hand gestures, facial expressions, bodily posture, tone of voice, etc., without forgetting all the social rituals necessary to initiate the process of communication and, most importantly, to keep it going until it should be terminated, thus making this the last stage of the process of communication similar to a closure in a business transaction, which is also culturally determined.

The distinction between the content and the container of a message is crucial in education. Indeed, when we are communicating, we are subsidiarily aware of the container or the means to convey a message while having a focal awareness of its content, that is, the meaning of the message. Or, in other words, we cannot pay attention to *what* we want to say while being at the same time fully aware of *how* to say it. This experience of confusion or conflicting awareness is often experienced by learners of foreign languages. The moment they become obsessed with whether they are using the right words or rules of grammar, they lose sight of the meaning they are trying to transmit. Anyone who has not had this experience should try to walk while intensively thinking about their walking. They will almost certainly come to a standstill and students of new cultures often find themselves in the same situation.

Thus, the first principle enjoins us, as teachers of intercultural communication, to introduce a topic, which involves the acquisition of new skills, by dividing it into two components that will be taught separately and alternatively. In practice this means that either the students are acquiring a new skill to impart a relatively familiar content or, inversely, they deliver entirely new content while using already acquired skills.

2: *We should be aware of the distinction between person-oriented teaching and task-oriented teaching.*

The second principle is also important for the teaching of intercultural communication. When looking at the material to be covered, it is simply impossible to include all of it in one-semester course, especially not to the course that is delivered to freshmen and offered in their first year of study. It may even be quite difficult to have an entire program dedicated to this topic as we will never be in a position to anticipate all the situations students are likely to find themselves, if they happen to pursue a career involving contacts and communication at the international level, which, especially in hospitality field, seems to be a prerequisite for any successful and meaningful business relationship. Therefore, it seems to be obvious that based on the amount of the material related to this class and this topic that instructors cannot teach all what is to be known about every culture of the world, not even about the major ones, and we, as instructors, are compelled, “not to give a fish to our students, but to show them how to fish”. This is where the distinction between person-oriented teaching and task-oriented teaching becomes rather convenient.

Task-oriented teaching, as the expression itself implies, focuses on the accomplishment of a specific task. In this context, the role of the instructor/teacher is to show the various steps necessary to complete it. Students are, so to speak, led by the hand, so that they learn what required solutions for given problems are. Obviously, this approach, which is appropriate for teaching skills that are adapted to well-defined and stable situations, for example, as we find in engineering or medicine, has hardly its place in a general education course like that of intercultural communication. What is needed instead is an approach that aims at developing the autonomy and the resourcefulness of our students in any given foreign environment, that is, a person-oriented teaching approach.

Contrary to the previous approach which usually runs quite smoothly and where students are expected to memorize and practice the steps of a solution to be mastered, the person-oriented teaching approach always involves an experience of crisis. This crisis comes from the fact that students are confronted to problems that they have not yet learned how to solve. To put it succinctly, the first approach presents the solution before tackling a problem, while the second one inverse the equation by presenting the problem before the solution.

In the context, the role of the instructor/ teacher is no longer to be a guide, but rather someone who presents the right “dosage” or level of crisis to engage the students in finding their own original solutions to a given problem. This is a difficult role to fulfill, as it involves not only the various cognitive predispositions of the students, but also their emotional or affective states of mind. Cognitive predispositions refer here to what they perceive as a level of difficulty, that is, whether a problem is too easy or too difficult, and the students’ affective states of mind are connected to their emotional responses to a situation of crisis. For some students, having to answer a simple question in front of the class is already a painful experience they would rather avoid at all cost. Such students may respond negatively to assignments tailored on the person-oriented teaching approach.

Despite its difficulty, this approach is still the most appropriate for a course on intercultural communication. Moreover, as most situations involving this type of communication will always present themselves as experiences of crisis, from simple rituals of greeting foreign guests who function under different sets of assumptions regarding, for example, bodily contact and personal space, to the culture shock related to living in another country; the approach is in itself a prelude to these situations. It is also possible to introduce the shock of having to improvise new solutions by selecting cases that are somehow representative of situations likely to be viewed as challenges. However, in order to make these cases as effective teaching tools, it is important to design them in a way that the students become conscious of the fact that what is ultimately required of them is not to find ready-made recipes, but to develop a proper attitude and/or proper mindset that will predispose them to generate solutions when confronted with such challenges in the “real” world. The “prerequisites” for a proper attitude are open-mindedness, readiness to analyze one’s emotional responses, persistence in finding solutions, or any other trait of character that allows a person to be autonomous, flexible and adaptable.

In short, the assignments that are designed following this second teaching principle are meant to develop a state of mind that will allow our students to survive and perform in intercultural environments. It goes without saying that the cultivation of such a state of mind is accomplished not only through assignments, but throughout all possible opportunities that occur in the classroom, for example, interactions between the instructors/ teachers and the students, small group discussions, group assignments, etc.

ANALYSIS OF ASSIGNMENTS

*Learning Cell: form and content*

The learning cell assignment is designed in such a way to fulfill many learning objectives including, of course, those related to the teaching of intercultural communication. As such, it follows a definite pattern that is convenient for any topic in social sciences and humanities.

This assignment is divided into three parts. In the first part, students are given open questions to reflect on and answer. At this stage, their answers should not be fully elaborated and they are just meant to serve as guidelines to engage in a small-group discussion with their colleagues. That discussion is the second part of the learning cell and it, ideally, occurs a day or two after the students were provided with the questions. Depending on the situation, teachers may choose not to allow students to participate in the discussion if they have not completed the first part. Only a single sheet containing notes, preferably in a bullet-point form, is sufficient for the first part of the assignment. Finally, the third part consists in writing of a short essay in which students elaborate their answers to the questions. This essay should also reflect the in-class exchange of ideas and criticism that occurred during the discussion. Students are first invited to formulate their own opinions, then to present them to their peers, thus being open and welcoming to possible criticism, and, finally, to summarize the ideas/comments/suggestions exchanged and, as the last requirement, synthesize their thoughts in writing. Even though synthesizing is a very important reading skill, it also has a substantial impact on students’ critical thinking skills, since this strategy teaches them to pull together information not only to highlight the important points but also to be able to draw their own conclusions. Among other things, this strategy also focuses on combining and contrasting information and data from different sources in one, unified entity (final paper). Finally, it helps students achieve a new insight into the concept or idea they were discussing and has a definite impact on their ultimate decision how to reach out or, even, what action to perform in a particular (intercultural) situation.

Next, we would like to present examples of the three different types of questions students have to reflect on, discuss with their peers and write about. Learning cell is primarily a problem-solving assignment, even though the range of possibilities that present themselves in terms of questions that may be asked is quite broad. Therefore, any discussion exploring the complexity of a problem should, so to speak, “land on its feet” by proposing a course of action no matter how incomplete it is, or, at least, a clear assessment of what the situation is. From a certain point of view, the time and space allocated to come up with a complete and satisfactory solution are always too short. However, what is important to practice here is the motion or the sequence of actions: 1. the first contact with a problem, 2. the analysis of its component—this is where one is always lacking time—and 3. the formulation of a solution. In the end, what is to be acquired through this assignment is a sense of confidence in being able to come up with solutions for any given problem that might happen even in a real-life situation.

Although the assignments of our intercultural communication class have been designed by taking into consideration the two learning principles discussed earlier, we did not overlook other pedagogical rules that ought to be followed for better results. In fact, some of these rules, for example, the idea that the students’ level of development and engagement depends on the emotional and intellectual climate of the course, have already been alluded to while discussing the role of the instructor/teacher in presenting situations of crisis. Following another important rule which says that students’ prior knowledge can help or hinder learning, we decided to use as a topic of the first learning cell the phenomenon of *globalization*.

Globalization is not a new phenomenon. We only have to think about the expansion of great empires like that of Rome and the Ottoman. However, with the advent of worldwide consumerism of tangible and intangible products, of mass communication including the spread of the Internet and social networks, globalization has taken an unprecedented proportion where all aspects of our lives are affected. Because of this, it is very likely that our students already know about this phenomenon, either because they were exposed to it or because the topic was presented and discussed in other classes, be it at the college level or even in high school. Moreover, the term itself has become today a buzzword that is often used indiscriminately so that it is very difficult to predict what kind of association students will make when presenting it in class.

The purpose of this first learning assignment is, therefore, to bring into focus a general concept by asking the students how globalization is affecting them in their day-to-day lives and, more importantly, how it is likely to influence or determine their intercultural experiences. More specifically, we asked them firstly to identify positive and negative consequences of globalization—that is the critical thinking component of the assignment—and secondly, to tell in what ways we can benefit from it as people confronted to situations involving intercultural communication.

The purpose of the second learning cell assignment was to have students reflect and find solutions to a problem likely to affect anyone who undergoes a prolonged situation of intercultural communication, namely, the experience of *culture shock*. Since many of our students participated in study abroad experiences, lived in a foreign country on account of their parents’ career or even, the very fact that they, as non-Croatian citizens, are studying in Dubrovnik, this assignment sought to be as relevant as possible to what they experienced or were experiencing first-hand. By asking students to become aware of the symptoms of culture shock, by encouraging them to identify its causes and finally, by coming up with solutions to remedy its predominantly negative effects, we hoped to prepare them for future situations. As such, the second learning cell assignment aimed at beginning the process of integrating skills and attitudes that could be applied immediately (some of our students are coming from as far as China, the Gulf states and Ukraine, not to forget our study abroad guests from our main campus in the USA) and, hopefully, in their career as managers or decision makers in an international environment.

The first and the second learning cells introduced a sequence in the critical thinking process regarding various factors involved in intercultural communication. This sequence is the progression from factors over which we have little or no control—this is the case of globalization—to factors like those contributing to culture shock where we can enjoy some degree of autonomy.

The purpose of the third learning cell assignment is therefore to bring this sequence to its final destination by asking students to reflect on the cognitive and affective processes triggered by an encounter with culturally unknown and perhaps threatening situations. More specifically, they had to make a distinction between *generalizations, stereotypes* and *prejudices* with the suggestion that these can be their allies as well as enemies in their attempts to make sense of other people’s cultures and to navigate their ways in unknown or partly known environments. It is indeed in the manner we judge or misjudge people and their cultures that we have maximum autonomy or where we can best cultivate it to our advantage. Needless to say, that this last learning cell assignment is probably the most important in the sequence as it underlies the previous ones as well as it offers the students a tool or helps them cultivate a habit that will be useful in any successful communication even beyond the intercultural context.

*Midterm presentation*

The second type of assignments consisted in a group presentation. Following the first learning principle discussed above, students were given a limited amount of material dealing with cultural characteristics and business practices of various countries. More precisely, they were divided into pairs and were asked to do a short presentation about relevant facts, customs and best practices one should be aware of in order to conduct business with people of the country they were assigned to report on. Each pair of students, which was constituted in a way to maximize diversity (that is, by pairing students from different country or region of Croatia), had to organize their short presentation drawing only from a restricted amount of information that was similar with regard to its themes across all countries to be presented.

Students had to focus on improving their organization and communication skills, without devoting too much time in researching material that is scattered throughout many sources. Students could include material outside what was given to them, for example, a short video or pictures to make their presentation more captivating, but that was not a requirement for the fulfillment of this assignment. We were more interested in the decisions they made as to what they considered important to present as well as the ways they could turn those basic facts dealing with demographics, history and geography into practical information for anyone wishing to do business with the country they were assigned to present.

*Peer evaluation*

This short assignment is meant to complete the midterm presentation by asking students to evaluate one of their peers’ presentations. As such, this assignment tries to fulfill another of the pedagogical rules assumed in its design, namely, the idea that goal-directed practices coupled with targeted feedback enhance the quality of the students’ learning. Thus, in addition to the teachers’ comments and suggestions to improve their presentation skills, students are able to learn from their peers about their strong and weak points. Moreover, it is a well-known fact that the exercise in evaluating their peers’ works allows students to feel more engaged in the overall process, either by self-reflecting on their own performance or by taking the responsibility in making a value judgment about someone else’s completion of a task.

The peer evaluation consisted exclusively in questions dealing with the quality of the presentation, more specifically, whether it was well organized with a clear introduction, its main parts and a conclusion, whether the presenters were speaking distinctly and without mistakes in grammar and vocabulary or, whether the presentation was interesting and, most importantly, whether it delivered relevant information. We could, however, have used this assignment to ask students to give feedback on the process of preparing their own presentation since, as mentioned before; they were paired with someone of another nationality or from another cultural background. This idea came to us after having had to settle some differences between students who had to work together, differences that appeared to be traced to cultural factors. However, because these differences could also be caused by clashes of personality and, consequently, feedback may degenerate in negative criticism, we feel that we have to be very careful in introducing such type of peer evaluation. Notwithstanding its relatively high risk of jeopardizing the social and emotional environment of the class, it may be worth exploring as it brings students at the heart of any experience in intercultural communication.

*Final presentation*

This assignment, which counts as the final exam and usually occurs during the exam week, is an inversion of the midterm presentation. Indeed, assuming that students have acquired or improved their presentation skills, the focus of this assignment is on their ability to research new material and make it relevant considering the main objective of this class. More precisely, students are asked to find a specific topic related to one culture and explore its significance or what is to be learned from it for people to be engaged in intercultural communication. It is to be noted that this assignment fulfills one of the recommendations expressed in the case study mentioned at the beginning of this paper, namely, the necessity to offer students with some knowledge about such specific elements of foreign cultures as their beliefs, their customs, their exclusivities, etc. No matter what students decide to research and present, it should always, as it is the case for the midterm presentation, be made relevant for anyone exposed to a foreign environment.

Although one of the purposes of a course on intercultural communication is to know about other cultures and countries, one should not forget that a greater familiarity about our own culture is often a necessary starting point for the discovery of other worlds. Thus, it was decided that this final presentation should offer to the students the possibility of presenting about their own cultures as well. In this regard, as we have students with hearing disabilities in our class, they expressed their desire to present about deaf culture. Although this culture is not foreign in the usual sense of the word, it nevertheless presents a lot of challenges and even situations of embarrassment for those who are not familiar with it. As such, it meets all the requirements of how we would define a multicultural environment where new skills in communication have to be learned, a new sensitivity has to be cultivated and our worldview expanded.

CONCLUSION

Due to the growth of global business, global usage of technology and the Internet, it can be stated without any doubt that intercultural communication and the understanding of cross-cultural communication have become an asset without which no company today can conduct its business. The understanding of this type of communication implies the real application of the knowledge on how different cultures speak, communicate and, ultimately perceive the world around them. This knowledge has become a “condition sine qua non”, a necessity without which is impossible to conduct a global business. Even though culture is sometimes referred to in literature as the soft side of business, its impact on the structure and organization of the company is tied directly to the interpretation of concepts and structures that are familiar to the company’s owners and, employees and are ultimately accepted by them in the process of the achievement of the organization’s objectives (such as mission and vision). The success of the company is usually measured by the evidence of successful management and successful integration of disparate cultures within a business environment. Whether a company launches global projects and/or initiatives, open plants and/or facilities in a new country, develops marketing campaigns in new countries or expands products and services into new markets, the difference between the profit and loss is almost always the final measuring stick.

In order to help companies to find and hire individuals who can understand and apply the innovation in the understanding of cross-cultural communication, and thus earn the ultimate competitive advantage in the global environment, it becomes essential to incorporate the teaching of intercultural communication in all business and management studies. Effective intercultural communication aims to help eliminating any communication obstacles and it can be achieved through learning about other cultures and/or by the implementation of various communication strategies, such as reflective listening, critical thinking and problem solving skills.

The case study that we referred to in our introduction has already addressed the need to foster intercultural competence among undergraduate students in business and management studies. Since this study has defined the lack of competency in intercultural communication that belongs to the category of motivation and strategy, the authors of this paper aimed to help students develop certain skills to feel more confident in these specific areas and, specifically for this purpose, several assignments were designed and offered in class to students. What has been noticed from in-class observation, is that the afore mentioned assignments have already improved the students’ perceptions and/or competencies in the level of intercultural communication, since students have been introduced to a wider range of specific cultural knowledge and appropriate behaviors and customs, due to the content and requirements of particular assignments.

This paper has primarily taken a qualitative approach in defining and measuring specific educational practices in order to create an effective tool for the students of intercultural communication course to raise their intercultural competence and to prepare them for their professional careers. The observations of the students in-class reactions and the evaluation of their assignments confirm the theory of the authors of the previous case study which states that a holistic approach to teaching intercultural competence through lived experience in an active learning community, through both academic and social activities, within and outside of the classroom, is indeed an effective education tool, but in order to prove its real value the authors nevertheless believe that further research is recommended to confirm and, ultimately, effectively measure these initial observations with recognized instruments for measuring quantitatively intercultural competence, such as the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) or Global Mindset Inventory (GMI).

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