

LIMITS OF LEARNING?
TRAINING IN GENDER ISSUES,
SELF-DISCLOSURE, AND CORRESPONDENCE
IN INTERCULTURAL ENVIRONMENTS

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Abstract

This chapter argues in favour of a training concept “which focuses less on broad constructs like ‘culture’ and more on the everyday concrete actions through which culture is produced” (R. Scollon, S. Scollon, & Jones, 2012, p. XVIII). Today, there are a great number of socio-linguistic studies available which provide empirical evidence of how cultural identities have been constructed through communication and interaction in a variety of contexts. Based on these, practical ways of achieving intercultural competence through training are suggested. For this purpose, three cases used in training courses have been chosen to address the specific issues of written correspondence, self-disclosure, and gender roles. The discussion of these pays particular attention to practical communication in English and addresses the potentials and limitations of intercultural training concepts in general.

Keywords: Intercultural Competence; International English; English as a Lingua Franca; Discourse Strategies; Politeness Conventions; Training Concepts; Gender; Self-Disclosure; Correspondence

Outlining the approach

In 1952 two American anthropologists compiled a list of 164 different definitions of “culture” (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952). Unsurprisingly, there is great diversity in approaches in the intercultural field still today, and classification, perhaps simplification, is necessary in any description or analysis of approaches. With this in mind, we will begin by identifying two general strands manifested in training concepts for intercultural competence. These have been prevalent for many years and should be briefly characterised before introducing a third approach.

The first type of training concept is based on largely cognitive approaches and has been in use since the early 1980’s. Drawing mainly on quantitative culture frameworks provided by Geert Hofstede, Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner, Shalom Schwartz, the GLOBE Study, and others, these training programmes aim to sensitise participants to deeper layers of cultures and values (their own and others’) and prepare them for unexpected and unusual behaviour. Findings of quantitative frameworks have been highly influential in the training sector and may have some justification as they may sensitise participants to cultural diversity where it is perhaps least expected (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009; Ward Bochner & Furnham, 2001) Nevertheless, we share the doubts of others concerning the underlying concept of “national cultures” manifest in the lists of nations on scales of psychological constructs like *uncertainty avoidance*, *assertiveness*, or *mastery*. We cannot accept the proposition that “the culture” of multi-ethnic nations (e.g., Switzerland, China, Spain, India, Hungary, USA, Brazil—in fact, which nation is not multi-ethnic?) can or should be presented using statistical mean measures. We do not see how the knowledge of a country’s position on a scale of this sort can contribute significantly to one’s preparation for effective communication with people from the country. Nor do we see how statistics collected from responses of corporate staff to self-answer questionnaires can be extrapolated to make statements about “national cultures” (Haas, 2007, 2009). We prefer the view that nation states are dynamic systems of numerous macro-, sub-, and micro-cultures, partially overlapping with other cultures and in a constant process of creation and re-creation through the everyday communication and interaction of large groups of individuals. In view of its dynamic and fluid character and its inextricable connection with language, it is this notion of culture which seems most plausible (Street, 1991; Witte, 2011, p. 89-107). Even the authors of quantitative frameworks concede that “real people” may differ from the analysis provided by statistics (e.g. Hofstede,

2005, p. 21). Yet these findings have been perceived and used in many cases to provide stereotypical images connected to psychological constructs of questionable validity (Behrens, 2007; Camerer & Mader, 2011; Haas, 2007; Haas, 2009; Taras-Steel, 2009; Dreyer, 2011; Verluoyten, 2010, p. 180-200). To illustrate our point it may suffice to mention a critical commentary published by the *Harvard Business Review* in 2010 which contrasted three “China Myths” (collectivism, long-term deliberation, and risk aversion) with “China Facts” (individualism, real-time reaction, and risk tolerance) as attested by experienced business people in interviews (Meyer & Yi Shen, 2010).

Personality or performance?

The second group of training concepts focuses on aspects of personality and their development in training. Such concepts draw on a variety of theoretical frameworks such as humanistic psychology, neuro-linguistic programming, or Zen Buddhist traditions (Camerer, 2014; Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009).

The key concepts which have dominated the training market in periodic waves have used terms such as *sensitivity*, *empathy*, *emotional intelligence*, *resilience*, *polycentrism*, and *mindfulness*. It is worth mentioning that all of these terms lack clear definitions and only enjoy to an extremely limited extent the support of relevant sectors of the scientific community (Friedman & Schustack, 2001; Pervin, 2003; D. Schultz & S. Schultz, 2005; Crowne, 2007; Omoniyi & White, 2006).

Nevertheless, some of the communication strategies suggested in this context are general indicators of effective communication and we subscribe to the emphasis given to relationship building and the importance of trust (Spencer-Oatey & Xing, 2000). Developing self-awareness and the ability to question one’s first conclusions are of utmost importance for effective intercultural communication (Byram, 1997). It is a matter of concern, however, whether the underlying concept of “personality” does not divert the focus away from what really counts, that is, practical communication. The notion that an individual’s “personality” is an indicator of that same person’s communicative performance in intercultural encounters ignores the widespread criticism of personality theory found in scholarly literature over the last fifty years (Omoniyi & White, 2006). And to view an individual’s personality as belonging to him/her in a similar way as parts of the body implies taking lesser-known schools of personality theory for granted as self-evident theoretical constructs. No mention is made of the great many differing approaches

which, for example, focus on processes of personality development and its underlying factors. Six points summarised by Omoniyi and White (2006, p. 2) are shared by many contributors to personality theory:

- 1) Personal identity is not fixed;
- 2) Personal identity is constructed within established contexts and may vary from one context to another;
- 3) Contexts are moderated and defined by intervening social variables and are expressed through language;
- 4) Personal identity is salient in every communicative context;
- 5) Personal identity informs social relationships and also the communicative exchanges that characterize them; and
- 6) More than one identity may be articulated in a given context, in which case the management of identities will be dynamic.

Some of the strategies based on an essentially static concept of personality seem to re-enact communication strategies typical for therapeutic contexts. It seems questionable, for example, whether the proactive use of *active listening*, *mirroring*, or similar methods may be appropriate in intercultural encounters or whether the naïve application of such patterns might not even damage relationships. This is particularly critical in corporate environments, where hierarchy and power differences may be crucial for communication. In fact, suggestions like “don’t impose”, “give options”, “be friendly”, “assume your partner is dominant”, “don’t go on record”, “be supportive”, and so on may not be helpful (to say the least) in a great number of intercultural encounters. “The reason for this is that people from different cultures often have not only different ideas about what counts as language, but also different ideas about what counts as imposing, options, friendliness, dominance, supportiveness, and other key concepts...” (Janney & Arndt, 2005). It may seem ironic, but in spite of the fact that so much intercultural communication is conducted in English today, some widely used Anglo-American coaching and training concepts may be ethnocentric and unhelpful in many intercultural encounters.

So where does this leave us? It should be clear that we do not subscribe to essentially cognitive approaches (particularly not if they connect to “national cultures”), as it is only in communicative performance relating to specific circumstances that a person’s intercultural competence can be measured. Nor do we favour concepts focusing on features of personality and the formation of these, for example in the form of “mindful managers”. Naturally, tolerance of ambiguity, behavioural flexibility,

respect for otherness, empathy, etc., are excellent features of character and worthy of possessing. But even the most sensitive, empathic, and resilient person may falter in new environments. That person may, for instance, produce feelings of irritation and annoyance in colleagues or business partners by—unknowingly—applying communication strategies which are unsuitable for the situation. Spencer-Oatey & Xing (2000) provide an excellent example of this. Thus, while both cognitive and personality theory approaches have advantages, their drawbacks prevail in so far as the skills, risks, and particularities of practical communication are disregarded by both. In contrast to these approaches, we suggest that the training of the intercultural appropriate use of language should be a central aim of every intercultural training concept, rather than being treated as a desirable extra. Language is taken to include the non-linguistic and para-linguistic aspects of human communication and is treated as a vital element of all the processes of co-constructing identities, roles, and relationships in which we are involved every day. (Goffman, 1959; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). In the context at hand (i.e., the training and learning of intercultural communicative competence) we subscribe to concepts connected with discourse and text analysis. These approaches stress the need to see language as a dynamic, social interactive phenomenon—whether between speaker and listener, or writer and reader.

[...] meaning is conveyed not by single sentences but by more complex exchanges, in which the participants' beliefs and expectations, the knowledge they share about each other and about the world, and the situation in which they interact, play a crucial part. (Crystal, 1991)

Intercultural discourse in ELF

The global use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) is a crucial issue for the training of intercultural competence. It is widely assumed that more than 80% of international meetings where English is used take place without any native speakers of English being present (Graddol, 2006). Against this background, the English used in international/intercultural encounters is currently being recorded with the help of three computer-based corpora focusing on predominantly European, Asian, and academic use, with each of them containing over one million authentic items (VOICE, ELF in Academic Settings, International Corpus of English). Based on empirical data as provided by these corpora and the research of Smith (1983), Wolf & Polzenhagen (2006), Jenkins (2007), Seidlhofer (2007), Gnutzmann (2007), Kirkpatrick (2010), Kirkpatrick & Sussex (2012), and others have identified something that might be called a *Lingua*

Franca Core, and, among other things, have suggested paying particular attention to basic aspects such as pronunciation. Clearly, unless we manage to understand each other, all intercultural endeavour will be in vain. This is not the place to elaborate on the basic tenets of ELF in general, but to consider certain important aspects of it, as this is the variety of English most often used in intercultural encounters as well as in our approach to intercultural training.

Pragmatics plays a special role in ELF contexts, since it refers to questions of *politeness*. Politeness, understood as a process of establishing trustful relationships through communication and interaction, is the paramount prerequisite of any interculturally appropriate use of English (Hickey & Stewart, 2005; Kádár & Bargiela-Chiappini, 2011; Reiter, 2009; Spencer-Oatey, 2008; Watts, Ide, & Ehlich, 2005). Interestingly, Spencer-Oatey (2000) uses the broader term “rapport management” rather than “politeness” and distinguishes between management of face and the management of social rights. We have adopted this distinction in critical incidents which we use in our training modules and which aim at identifying features of “quality face” and “social identity Face”. As a generic term we nevertheless suggest using “politeness”.

Another consideration regards appropriateness. Even if ELF or International English is the primary language of intercultural communication, and although Anglo-American communication conventions—including politeness—may well be adequate and effective when dealing with people from certain parts of the world, it is equally certain that they will often be inappropriate when communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds—regardless of the fact that the language used by all concerned parties is English.

Against this background, the teaching of intercultural competence cannot be achieved “language-free”, as it is in practical language-based communication that the identities, roles, and relationships of interlocutors are established. (Goffman, 1959). Additionally, the teaching of ELF should be accompanied by the teaching of cultural differences, of practical ways of dealing with “otherness”, and, most of all, of ways of dealing with unexpected and/or difficult situations, behavior, or utterances. For it is politeness—seen as a process of establishing and/or confirming positive relationships—that makes intercultural communication effective, or otherwise (Mader & Camerer, 2012).

To illustrate what this implies for the training of intercultural competence, we suggest looking at three potential *critical incidents* (CIs) which have been used both in intercultural training courses and in train-the-trainer courses. Two of these are connected with face-to-face (oral)

communication, while one addresses issues of written correspondence in intercultural environments. Each of the cases chosen represents a specific type of intercultural misunderstanding and can be supplemented by similar cases. CIs of this type may serve as a starting point for both culture-general and culture-specific discussions in training courses. In most cases these discussions lead to answers combining elements of *knowledge*, *attitude*, and *communicative competence*. These three competencies play a significant role in intercultural empowerment training if serious miscommunication is to be avoided. The use of CIs is a well-established practice in intercultural literature and training. CIs may range from brief descriptions of social episodes, to more sophisticated versions sometimes known as a “culture assimilator”. (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001, pp. 253 ff.; Bolten, 2003, p. 371; Knoll, 2006; Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009, pp. 221 ff.)

In all cases, a misunderstanding or conflict arising from cultural differences is provided, which participants explain in terms of an explicit theoretical model and perhaps re-enact. Although CIs are helpful in many cases, certain drawbacks must not be overlooked, for example the fact that full accounts can never be given and all explanations will probably be guess-work to some extent (Tomalin & Nicks, 2010, p. 12; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001, p. 256-264).

The following three CIs will be discussed with the intention of a) drafting an outline of the aspects involved, b) suggesting potential training goals (e.g. communicative skills), contents, and methods for use in a training concept and c) indicating the limitations of this training concept as well as of intercultural training in general.

The underlying assumptions of all intercultural training should be twofold. Firstly, the focus should be on first, second, or third encounters, since the initial phase of contact is often crucial for the success or failure of relationship-building. Secondly, the explicit intention should be one of developing and/or maintaining a positive and trustful relationship.

Against this background, the following guiding questions may help distinguish culture-specific requirements in each case (Saphiere, Mikk & Devries, 2005):

- How do you show respect to those with whom you are communicating?
- How do you attempt to establish credibility?
- Is it polite to answer a question when you are asked directly?
- Is it best to discuss conflict with the person with whom you disagree?

Business correspondence and trust-building

Intercultural relationship building often begins with (email) correspondence, and it is this initial phase of relationship building that may seriously impact the success or failure of subsequent co-operation. Nevertheless, intercultural correspondence has rarely been a topic of training programmes in the past. This may be due to the assumption that written language adheres to standards more than spoken language. Although this is true to some extent, Anglo-American standard varieties have been tacitly accepted in practically all fields of international business training in English. For instance, a discourse strategy recommended in almost all course books for business correspondence today is summarised with the acronym “KISS” (“keep it short and simple”).

The worksheet given in Figure 1, although not a critical incident as such, provides an example of business correspondence with Chinese business partners and addresses aspects connected with *social identity face*, which Spencer-Oatey defines as the desire to be acknowledged in our social identity roles, as distinguished from *quality face* (i.e., the desire to be evaluated positively in terms of personal qualities) (Spencer-Oatey, 2000, p. 15f.)

Receiving an email of this nature without any intercultural knowledge may lead to confusion and possibly annoyance. An appropriate reaction to a written message of this nature involves the three components of intercultural communicative competence: communicative and linguistic ability, attitudes, and knowledge of cultural differences. Linguistic ability at a certain level is necessary in order to identify the main message, as is knowledge that face-saving strategies are used in different ways in communication in different cultures, and tolerance of “otherness”, when receiving what may seem an unnecessarily verbose way of saying “we want our money!”

Showing respect in most Asian contexts requires active face-work along the lines demonstrated in the “email rated as the most successful one by Chinese business managers” (Zhu, 2005). Polite conventions of Chinese business correspondence are not vanishing at the speed at which China is developing economically. Confirmation of this is given by Kirkpatrick (2010) and Kirkpatrick & Sussex (2012), also by experienced interculturalists working in China known to us.

In view of this, using the “KISS” strategy at the beginning of a business relationship in large parts of Asia might be a first step to failure. In the eyes of Western business people, on the other hand, the “most effective email” may appear even impolite to some, since apparently information had already been obtained from the partner’s bank regarding

the credibility of information provided—an act which might be considered offensive by Western recipients.

3.1 THE MOST EFFECTIVE E-MAIL

In a study of Chinese business correspondence collected in mainland China after 2001, Professor Yunxia Zhu* of Queensland University, Australia, documented politeness patterns, which she identified as typical for Chinese written business communication. The email rated as the most successful one by Chinese business managers is given below. Only the translation of the text is provided here.



ATTN: Mr Wang Jiawei,

How are you?

Happy New Year! Wish you prosperity!

I have recently received Contract AS-6589 signed by your company. Thank you for ordering 60x58 cotton shopping bags. We are extremely grateful to you for your cooperation and support at the beginning of the New Year. In order to guarantee the time of delivery now we are making adequate arrangements to design samples and prepare materials according to your order. You can trust our commitment to collaboration.

At the same time, our company sent over 104,000 cotton bags and the delivery number is CVC/B 98055. We haven't received your payment yet. According to Mr Zhang, the payment of US\$ 35,490 was sent on November 30. However, we consulted with Henan Branch, China Bank and found that no payment had been made by your bank so far. We kindly ask Mr Lian [the addressee*] to help check about this at your earliest convenience because delayed payment may affect directly the carrying out of our sales orders. Please think about the possible further collaboration between you and us. I hope that you can help Mr Zhang sort out this issue.

Thank you for your cooperation! Happy New Year!

Zhen Liangchen (shang)

*X The writer addresses the reader in the 3rd person with the title "Mr. Lian" in order to show respect and politeness.

Discuss with your partner:

- What strikes you as special about Mr. Liangchen's email?
- Which features make Mr. Liangchen's email different to what is often taught in Business English course books today?
- Do you think written politeness conventions in China may have adapted to Anglo-American conventions and be different today?
- Write a reply!**

* Yunxia Zhu (2003). Effective Communication in Chinese Business Fax Writing. In F. Bargioli-Chiappini / M. Gotth (eds.), (2003). Asian Business Discourse(s), p. 114ff.

Figure 1. The most effective email

All this implies being able to write in English with a certain level of communicative competence. Grammatical mistakes are generally unimportant as it is rare that they lead to confusion or misunderstanding, although vocabulary mistakes may be more serious. However, this type of writing in intercultural contexts involves knowledge of cultural conventions which may be transferred into English used internationally and interculturally. Knowledge of diverse concepts of face and face-saving strategies, both for personal and social face, will be useful, as will a certain level of tolerance in accepting what may seem an unnecessarily verbose message. Nonetheless the main task and thus the skill to be acquired is a combination of all these elements and involves replying to the message in a way that does not negatively affect the relationship.

Language required

Learners of business correspondence in (international) English should therefore be familiarised with non-Anglo-American conventions and expectations of their partners in correspondence. The practical training success should be rated with at least two criteria: Firstly the level of linguistic accuracy which allows the correspondent to appear as a competent partner in communication. Perhaps more important, however, is the appropriate use of politeness conventions which—at least to some extent—meet the expectations of the recipient (Camerer, 2014). This is precisely where many intercultural training concepts have failed.

Discourse strategies in ELF

Preparing for intercultural encounters should include knowledge of diverse communication styles and competent judgement as to the appropriate use of these. This implies a great deal of country/culture-specific preparation for what may be encountered. The aspects of face-to-face communication which may be particularly crucial in first and second encounters are the following:

- *Directness*: How straightforwardly am I expected to communicate in a particular situation? Am I expected to say exactly what I want or to “hint” at something in a more indirect manner?
- *Enthusiasm*: How much emotion and energy am I expected to show when communicating. Can I express how I feel, or is it more appropriate to hide my feelings? Is “interrupting” someone considered a positive sign of commitment, or is it a taboo?

- *Formality*: How much deference and respect am I expected to display in my style of communication? Am I expected to show a high level of respect when communicating with someone in a particular situation, or can I be more informal?
- *Assertiveness*: How strongly am I expected or allowed to voice my opinion and advocate my point of view in a particular culture and in a particular situation in that culture? Should I be forthright in expressing myself, or should I work at hiding or sublimating my point of view?
- *Self-promotion*: To what extent can I speak positively about myself in a given cultural situation? Should I actively promote my positive qualifications? If yes, should I do this strongly or in a self-effacing manner?
- *Personal disclosure*: To what extent is it appropriate to reveal personal information about myself to others? Should I be open and forward in expressing details about my life, or is it more appropriate to hide these personal details? (Molinsky, 2013, p. 49f).

The worksheet given in Figure 2 provides an example of differences in the display of emotions and in personal disclosure in a critical encounter between Richard (Danish) and Stefanie (Chinese). Both seem to be unaware of each other's concept of "appropriate" communication in this context, although they have worked together harmoniously for some time. This incident provokes a crisis of trust on both sides and the eventual break-off of contact. In fact, everything seems to go wrong in this episode. Stefanie will have considered how the information was given as inconsiderate and inappropriate. Therefore, the reason given by Richard for his extended absence and the way it was expressed might have appeared to her as untrue. For her, any information of such a serious character touches on levels of personal feeling (in this case grief) and would need to be addressed indirectly or not at all, given the nature of their relationship. Finally, breaking off contact could only be done without explicitly addressing Richard's faux-pas.

Richard, interestingly, distinguishes between the cognitive and emotional aspects of relationship building:

Now, intellectually I was quite aware that people from some Asian cultures hide their nervousness, embarrassment or severe stress with a laugh. I also knew I should have broken my sad news much more gently. After all, Stefanie was a Chinese person raised in the Confucian way: She revered her parents. For her the sudden realization that she could perhaps lose both of them almost at the same time must have come as a terrible shock.

Nevertheless my immediate reaction to her laugh was visceral. I felt as though I had just been hit very hard in the stomach. Even though I understood rationally what had happened I had difficulty relating to Stefanie as I had before the incident.” (Gesteland, 1999, p. 38)

In other words, knowledge about cultural codes “behind” the language used, in this case English as a lingua franca (ELF), is not enough. The use of ELF by both parties (i.e., neither is a native speaker of English) may even mean that culture-bound attitudes, expressed in diverse discourse strategies, are largely concealed from the other participant. What remained concealed in this incident were incompatible views about the time, location, communication, and other circumstances of personal disclosure (e.g., how close the relationship was before the incident) which caused the irreconcilable clash.

Language required

It should therefore be made clear that relying on discourse strategies which are common and usually appropriate in Anglophone countries is not enough. The global use of ELF would require that it be used with intercultural competence. This presents a challenge both for trainers and participants, requiring intercultural knowledge and sensitivity but also, perhaps primarily, meta-communicative skills, something which Farzad Sharifian (2013) refers to as “metacultural competence”.

Metacultural competence... involves an awareness of the need for conceptual negotiation strategies to make communication of cultural conceptualizations smooth and effective... In general... metacultural competence enables interlocutors to communicate and negotiate cultural meanings during the process of intercultural communication. (Sharifian 2013, p. 73ff; see also Müller-Jacquier & Thijs, 2005; Sharifian 2009, p. 242-253; Sharifian, 2012, pp. 310-322; Scollon & Wong Scollon 2001, pp. 76 ff.)

The question often asked of how far one wishes to adapt to one’s partner in communication also applies in this case. Richard would not have felt comfortable hiding the reasons for his absence and possibly his behaviour from Stefanie. He may even have felt that this would seem heartless towards his deceased parents. In his culture, it would seem strange not to mention this highly important occurrence. Stefanie however would probably not have thought that it was at all strange if Richard had not told her and she had found out about his parents’ death from someone else. One way of accommodating both these discourse conventions could

have been for Richard to frame what he was about to tell Stefanie with a phrase such as “I have to tell you that something terrible happened to me ...”, or “I’m afraid to say that I have had a very difficult time recently...”, or “I had some bad news about my parents, who were very dear to me...” and to pace the delivery of the main message so that she had time to adjust to what was coming and possibly control her spontaneous reactions. In fact conventions such as these are common in many such situations, but in this case, may have helped even more to give Stefanie warning of what was to come and avoid this outcome. It is, however, also possible that even these meta-communicative strategies may not have helped at all and that however Richard had conveyed the news, Stefanie’s reaction would have remained the same. Meta-communicative strategies of various natures may be helpful to limit the damage caused by a number of CIs, but are not necessarily the solution in all cases.

To the best of our knowledge, practical meta-communication in English has not been a skill practised in intercultural training courses, nor has it been a subject of Business English courses so far. However, even if meta-communication is applied appropriately, it will not prevent or resolve all misunderstandings. In some so-called *high-context* cultures meta-communication may even be rejected and/or considered inappropriate. (Giminez, 2009).

Yet in the majority of cases, being able to address conventions of communication and perception with the aim of establishing mutual understanding, and doing this without appearing arrogant, ignorant, or in any other way irritating, has proven to be a helpful skill in many intercultural encounters. There is no doubt that such skills need to be practised.

This incident shows again the limitations of IC training in general. It may not be possible, in very serious situations where both personal and moral feelings are involved for everyone to remember to behave in an interculturally appropriate way. In some cases, we may not even want to. It is therefore important to make clear in training courses that critical incidents will always occur and that even a fairly ideal combination of knowledge, attitudes, and communicative skills cannot prevent all misunderstandings from happening.



Self-Disclose: SHOWING GRIEF

Read the incident and think about what has happened. Then discuss the incident with the group, paying particular attention to the questions.

The following incident is reported by Richard Gesteland, a Danish businessman, in his book *Cross-Cultural Business Behavior*: When working in Singapore he decided to learn Mandarin. So he hired Stefanie, a pleasant young woman who had recently immigrated from Taiwan, to tutor him. But due to the unexpected death of both of his parents he was forced to stop the lessons for about a month. It was on a Saturday after he had got back to Singapore that Stefanie dropped by to enquire why he had missed over a month's worth of lessons. Suffering from grief compounded by jet lag and exhaustion, he briefly said that both of his parents had just died. A stricken look flashed across Stefanie's face for just a fraction of a second, and she gasped. Then the young woman suddenly laughed out loud, right in his face, and proceeded to giggle for several seconds. A few weeks later Stefanie stopped coming and Richard had to find a new Mandarin tutor.



Photo: iStockphoto.com

Adapted from: Richard R. Gesteland (1999). *Cross-Cultural Business Behavior, Marketing, Negotiating and Managing Across Cultures*. Copenhagen Business School Press, Copenhagen, P. 37f.

Discuss this incident and your reactions to it.

- a) Can you give any explanations for this incident?
- b) Has anything like this ever happened to you? What has gone wrong here? Can you finish the story? What can Richard say and do?
- c) What can be done to prevent something like this happening again?
- d) What aspects of cultural theory do you find most helpful in understanding this critical incident?
- e) Which of the following do you think has most influence on what has happened – features of personality, knowledge or communicative ability?

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Figure 2. Self-disclosure: Showing grief

Gender issues and ELF

The worksheet in Figure 3 reflects the experience of a high-performance US-American (female) programmer on a professional commission to Tokyo. The account given on this worksheet has been written by the person affected. Episodes of a similar character relating to Japan, South Korea, and others have been recorded also by other authors (Gesteland, 2005, p. 51f.).

A list of issues involved in this CI would probably include the following: gender-based identities, roles, and relationships; cultures involving hierarchy-power-gender; teacher–learner identities, roles, and relationships; questions of seniority; yourself in the eyes of others; ELF use in intercultural encounters; communication conventions; lack of preparation; lack of time, space, and procedures for finding common ground; experience of mutual frustration; show of emotions; failure of intended purpose, etc.

Gender is an aspect which may seriously affect the success or failure of practical intercultural communication. In view of the growing number of intercultural partnerships, both in organisational settings and in personal and/or romantic contexts, gender has become the focus of a great deal of intercultural research over the last twenty years. (Mullany, 2006; Mullany, 2009; Lengel & Martin, 2010; Scollon & Wong Scollon, 2001; R. Scollon, S. W. Scollon, & Jones, 2012; Piller, 2011)

The issues involved begin with controversial questions debated in the West even today, among them:

- The “glass-ceiling”, that is, the invisible yet unbreakable barrier which prevents women from rising to leading positions in organisations, be they political or commercial;
- The “double bind” that women can face if acting in a stereotypically “masculine” manner and the ensuing accusations of being unfeminine and bossy as a result.



Mary McLeod is a highly qualified software engineer working for a global information technology corporation based in California, USA.

Here is her report on what happened to her during an assignment in Japan.

Sensei? No females allowed.

"As project manager and main designer of the software to control an integrated circuits tester, I was the natural choice to travel to Japan to teach a 5 day class to their engineers.

I was told by many of my colleagues who had taught classes in Japan that as teacher or sensei, I would practically be a god in the classroom. They told me the students there respect teachers so much that they would bow to me and be the most polite students I had ever seen. So I arrived in the classroom with high expectations.

I was "greeted" by chaos in the class. My entrance didn't cause even a slight pause in the engineers' casual conversations. Only several minutes later when my host (a male engineer) spoke did the men look up. I was introduced as the teacher.

I began the class and the conversations resumed again as if I didn't exist. I waited for them to stop, tried to get their attention, spoke more loudly, all to no avail. I stopped and formally stated my background and qualifications then presented my business cards individually to each engineer. When my job title clearly showed that I out-ranked each one of them, they became quiet. That lasted nearly 2 hours, until old habits kicked in and the conversations resumed.

During the hands-on labs, they refused to ask me questions. They only asked my host. So he had to tell me the questions, get the answer from me and then tell them. These engineers spoke almost fluent English, so language wasn't the issue.

I learned that the entire division of our company in Japan had a total of 3 women engineers at that time. Women were the secretaries only, so these engineers could not comprehend a female engineer. It was challenging but I kept on teaching.

On the last day, my host gave me the highest compliment: 'Mary, you are a REAL engineer.' But I never got the respect a male sensei would have automatically received."

Discuss with your partner:

- 1. What went wrong in this episode?**
- 2. How could the critical incident have been prevented from happening?**
- 3. What could be done to re-establish a positive relationship between all involved?**

Photo: www.aboulpixel.de

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Figure 3. Sensei? No females allowed

The difficulties involved also include culture-based concepts of gender identities, roles, and relationships, some of which may appear alien to Western women (and men) or even unacceptable to a degree that all attempts to bridge the differences seem to fail. Showing empathy or knowing about cultural differences as such will not suffice in most gender-related cases. Gender issues reflect social situations and processes which directly affect a woman's (and a man's) life everywhere in the world, and it is for this reason that we would address the subject in every intercultural training course. It is true that discussing gender questions may very well create critical incidents of a similar kind even in training environments. Nevertheless, gender-related issues should play a significant role in the preparation for any intercultural encounters whether private or professional. Addressing the following questions may be useful:

- What do I need to know about gender issues in my own environment?
- What are the premises of my own attitude?
- Where and when do I reach my limits in accepting "otherness" in this respect?
- And most of all: What should I be able to do and say in potentially difficult situations?

Dealing with gender related issues has been a sensitive activity at all times, but there is no reason why this should mean continuing to ignore or neglect them.

Addressing gender will often lead to questions of *power* and differences in power, the way power is expressed in different environments (e.g., in a hierarchy), and how such structures manifest themselves in organisational contexts, giving rise to such questions as: To what extent does the study of *corporate culture* contribute to being prepared? What do participants in training courses need to be able to recognise, to say, and to do? This is this field where recent socio-linguistic studies have provided empirical insights which may help to define realistic training goals as well as develop effective training tools. Thanks to the findings of scholars like Ting-Toomey and Chung (2005), Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson, and Planken (2007), Piller (2011), and others, we are encouraged to pay particular attention to circumstances and to what is actually happening between individuals of either sex.

[...] Studies in language and gender in the workplace are now moving away from differences in gender and are concentrating on the effects that

contextual features can have on the communication of men and women at the workplace. Some workplace studies have, for example, demonstrated that men's and women's styles of communication show considerable variation not only between groups (men-women) but also, and more importantly, within gender groups (men-men and women-women) ... Another interesting perspective on language and gender in the workplace has resulted from considering how power roles, real or perceived, operate in workplace communication. Recent studies have revealed a complex situation, sometimes helping to debunk long-standing gender myths. (Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson & Planken, 2007, 21)

Without ignoring globally unresolved issues of social inequality, discrimination, sexism, racism, and such, any intercultural training concept attempting to prepare participants for real life will need to train women and men to develop attitudes and skills to succeed in first, second, and third encounters and establish positive relationships, whatever the gender of the interlocutor.

Language required

In the CI described on the worksheet, it seems that no one had told Mary that her position might be different to that of a man and that the situation might be difficult for her. The Japanese male engineers were equally uninformed and unprepared for an encounter with a female engineer. It may have helped for Mary to address the issue of her gender directly. Starting with the moves she describes may have helped, although this could have felt to Mary like "pulling rank". Knowledge of the facts about male and female roles in Japan would certainly have helped her to expect the situation. Discussing it with a colleague in Japan before travelling there and asking him to clarify the situation may also have helped to defuse it, although again this may have felt to Mary like pandering to what she felt were very stereotypical and undesirable roles for men and women. In cases like this it is not enough just to know the strategies involved, even if this is a step in the right direction. The actual words to be used must be practised as well, to a greater or lesser degree depending on the level of English of the speaker. However, even users of English who are fluent do not always possess appropriate language for dealing with difficult situations. It is precisely these which need to be focussed on in intercultural training courses. What do I say if I want to disagree, criticise, refuse, or reject? And what do I say if I feel confused, embarrassed, or angry?

This CI is of course by no means the most serious example of differences in expectations connected with gender, and ways of preventing or dealing with it are conceivable. There are, however, other situations in which gender expectations may conflict so seriously that a resolution is impossible. These could concern such things as attitudes to whether women should be seen uncovered in public (the burqa/chador issue) or whether they should drive cars. A discussion of such issues, in particular where strongly-held are concerned, may be out of the question and the only “solution” may be to avoid the issue altogether or even to discontinue the relationship. It is in cases of this kind that the limits of training in intercultural competence can be reached (Roay & Oludaja, 2006; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005; Watanabe, 2011).

Knowledge – attitudes – performance

It should be clear that the type of training suggested aims at developing an individual’s communicative competence, that is, a hybrid of knowledge, attitudes, and communication skills (in a specific context) to be acquired over time and through practice. Depending on a variety of factors (such as the other interlocutors, situation, impact of culture, how one feels at a given moment, etc.), it may be necessary to summon up intercultural communicative competence to a varying degree at any given time.

The term “communication skills” refers to the ability to build trustful relationships, rather than to linguistic accuracy. How can it otherwise be possible that international managers frequently succeed in negotiating business deals worth millions although their knowledge of the past participle or conditionals is vague? It may be quite similar with the training of intercultural communication: Language-free intercultural communication is a questionable concept. It is trust-building (using language) that the training of intercultural communication should focus on.

“Attitudes” on the other hand, although unquestionably important, do not imply developing “personality” and experimenting with the assessment of it. There may even be ethical reservations about such procedures. If personality change may be expected at all, this is perhaps only over a certain period of time and as an indirect effect of repeated success (or failure) in intercultural encounters. Participants should be encouraged to ascertain their personal identity in terms of clarifying their values and limitations. “I can’t get out of my skin!” is a realistic observation and worth support by trainers, colleagues, and partners. What can be achieved in training is the mastery of communicative strategies which avoid

judgemental utterances, confrontational strategies, and involvement in controversial discussions. This of course is only possible when no-one feels that they have to take on a completely different personality. Although those who grow up in or feel fully integrated into more than one culture may well feel that they have multiple cultural personalities, this is not necessarily something which can be acquired at will in adults and it is almost certainly not something which can be forced upon participants in training courses or which they are able to force upon themselves. There are however many behavioural and discourse patterns which can be adopted without denying one's own personality and can even be seen as a positive complement. It is precisely training in these which is lacking in many courses in intercultural competence at present and which should become an essential feature of these.

Conclusion

To sum up, three steps provide a training methodology which may help participants deal effectively with a great number of diverse intercultural encounters. (Saphiere, Mikk, & Devries, 2005, p. 5f.; Scollon & Wong Scollon, 2001, pp. 280-285). These include:

- 1) Focus on task, action, and practice;
- 2) Identify the context as fully as possible;
- 3) Ask four basic questions to identify the relevant discourse system:
 - a) How do I show respect to those with whom I am communicating?
 - b) How do I attempt to establish credibility?
 - c) Is it polite to answer a question when I am asked directly?
 - d) Is it best to discuss conflict with the person with whom I disagree?

There is no question that the training of intercultural communication is a complex challenge for all involved. Therefore, perhaps the first thing participants should be made to understand is that the world is complex, the number of potential clashes are unimaginable and unmanageable, and that, consequently, not every intercultural misunderstanding can be avoided, regardless of how well prepared they are. Perhaps the best we can achieve is to reduce the number of misunderstandings of a serious character. So being prepared for the unexpected and having the knowledge, attitudes, and most of all *skills* to establish or maintain positive relationships through

communication and interaction should be the focus. It is precisely this that intercultural training is about.

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