

Developing Intercultural Competence as Part of Professional Qualifications. A Training Experiment

Kaisu Korhonen, PhD
kaisu.korhonen@kajak.fi

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AT WORK

The 10th NIC Symposium on Intercultural Communication

20-22 November 2003, Department of Linguistics, Göteborg University, Sweden

Abstract

The internationalization and globalization of working life sets specific requirements on professional education including professionally integrated foreign language education, the overall goal of which should be intercultural competence.

The paper discusses a training experiment in intercultural communication, especially the *effectiveness* of training in developing the various components of intercultural competence. The training experiment included both a face-to-face tuition period and a self-study period with a *multimedia- and Web-based Culture-General Assimilator* consisting of a number of *critical incidents*. The participants of the experiment were 117 Bachelor of Engineering students at Kajaani Polytechnic, Finland.

Besides assessing the effectiveness of intercultural training, the experiment aimed at mapping out what kind of communicators the students are and would like to be, whether they are motivated to develop their intercultural competence, and what they think about intercultural competence as part of their professional qualifications.

Keywords: component of intercultural competence, assess of effectiveness, the Culture Assimilator, training experiments, professional qualifications.

Introduction

Economic integration and advances in transportation and telecommunication have broken down geographical isolation: The world is more global and mobile than ever before. Globalization is linked by new technology, communication is, for example, intensified via electronic media facilitating trade contacts and international projects.

When companies expand their operations abroad, it means balancing between prospects of growth and the risk associated with operating in unfamiliar markets. Successful companies and employees are those who see cultural diversity as an opportunity, as something that can be learned, managed, and made use of, and who are willing to develop their *intercultural competence* as part of their social and communication competences. The components of *intercultural competence* contain cognition, i.e. knowledge, affect, i.e. attitudes and emotions, and behavior and skills.

In increasingly more Finnish companies the official working language is the so-called *International Business English*, sometimes called *Euro English* or *Global English*. Holden (2002: 222; 228-229; 317) introduces the term *interactive translation* to describe work in which members of multicultural teams negotiate common meanings and understandings. According to Holden, interactive translation requires *participative competence*, in other words, willingness to discuss in a productive way not only in one's native language but in foreign languages as well. Members of multicultural teams often have a varying knowledge of English and use different kinds of accents.

Mobility from and to Finland has been increasing. There are thousands of Finnish sojourners and expatriates working abroad especially in technical expert, business management, and marketing functions. There are also thousands of immigrants who have moved to Finland. A fact is that most Finns have negative attitudes toward immigrants. Immigrants' jobless rate is high: There is not yet confidence required to consider immigrants a resource in working life. It is, however, possible that any Finn one day has a foreign coworker.

Even if there is evidence based on scientific research that today's employees need intercultural competence in their jobs, the term cannot be found in job ads recruiting employees. It seems that employers are not familiar with the term. When requiring behavior and skills important in international and multicultural working life, employers usually refer to knowledge of one or more foreign languages. Occasionally they apply expressions such as communication skills, interpersonal skills, presentation skills, negotiation skills, the ability to work on international projects, and willingness to travel abroad.

Increased mobility, both real and virtual, has intensified Finns' need for successful cultural adaptation and fluent and efficient communication. When compared with many other cultures, Finns' communication style contains some differences. These differences include Finns' tendency to speak only when having something important to say, high tolerance of silence in conversations, and avoidance-based politeness. Depending on the context, Finns' communication style can be strength or weakness. On international assignments, the lack of social and communication skills at home and in the working place seems to be the main reason for failures.

When developing intercultural competence, early challenges and diversified experiences are of major importance. The *knowledge management perspective* presents culture, not as a source of difference and antagonism, but as a form of organizational, company-specific knowledge. This knowledge can be converted into *tacit knowledge*, which both adds value to company activities and is difficult for rivals to copy. (Holden 2002: 71; 75-76)

Developing intercultural competence is a slow, gradual *transformative* learning process (Taylor 1994) consisting of foreign language studies, intercultural training, and hands-on experiences of other cultures and their people. Even if nothing can entirely replace face-to-face tuition and learning, information technology should also be made use of when providing training.

A *Culture Assimilator* (Cushner & Brislin 1996) is a programmed learning package consisting of critical incidents. *Critical incidents* are short descriptions of situations where there is a problem of cultural adaptation, or where there is a problem rising from cultural differences between the interacting parties. In a Culture Assimilator the incidents are equipped with alternative explanations and feedback. Trainees are expected to choose the "best" explanation considering the context. The idea of implementing a Culture Assimilator with computer technology was introduced as early as in the 1960s (Triandis 1995: 183-184; Cushner & Landis 1996: 198).

New Learning Environments

New learning environments are being developed to support and supplement the traditional ones. The term *new learning environment* refers to new pedagogical and educational approaches together with opportunities provided by information technology. A new learning environment aims to promote learning that is continuous, individual, autonomous, and self-directed. It is also independent of the time and place of study. In a new learning environment, trainees are to be able to take *responsibility* for their own learning, while trainers are facilitators supporting the learning process. Many of the elements of the new learning environments are still under experiment.

One of the new learning environments is multimedia. The exact meaning of the term multimedia is vague. Besides referring to a computer-based presentation, the term *multimedia* may refer to a media mix, i.e. text, buttons, bitmap images, photos, animation sequences, video, sound, and special effects. Often when speaking about multimedia, people actually talk about hypermedia. The term *hypermedia* refers to computer-based materials linked by non-linear structures of information. By making use of association, a characteristic of human thinking, it is to make data management less difficult.

Part of hypermedia is hypertext. *Hypertext* is a method to write and read non-linear text, i.e. text with a built-in reference system, or links, in which the user can navigate. Data management can be split into several levels. It is possible to hide *hotwords*, i.e. elements of the media mix, in the text or graphics of the program. When the hotwords and picture elements are clicked, the program moves to another level containing further information about the topic.

In many fields of training and learning it is possible to create real-world problems to be simulated, in other words, practiced and solved with a computer program or application. This holds true to intercultural training, too. As part of the training experiment discussed below, the present author designed and implemented in cooperation with programming experts first a *multimedia-based program*, and later on a *Web-based application*, a Culture-General Assimilator, called *The Same but Different*). The Assimilator is called Culture-General because it discusses culture-general issues such as cultural differences in communication and cultural adaptation in a variety of cultures.

Effectiveness of the Culture Assimilator in Intercultural Training

Of all the approaches developed in intercultural training, the Culture Assimilator method has been exposed to the most intense scrutiny and analysis. According to Albert (1995: 157-158; 164-165), the method

- is research-based (both the development of the instrument and the evaluation of its effectiveness)
- has its theoretical foundation on attribution theory, and
- utilizes psychological principles to increase learning, e.g. trainee involvement, continuous feedback, and self-paced learning.

The Culture Assimilator method is often classified as a *cognitive* technique because it focuses on the acquisition of knowledge or information by the trainee. Albert (ibid), however, argues that the process by which the information is acquired by the trainee is in a sense *experiential* (Kolb 1984): Information is acquired by a trial-and-error process, which simulates the experience of entering a new culture, but without the risks of failure and embarrassment. Albert continues that because the materials in Culture Assimilators also cover the *affect*, i.e. attitudes and emotions, as well as *behaviors* and *skills* of the people involved, the cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of intercultural competence are brought together in the Culture Assimilator method, both in the content of what is learned and the process of learning. Furthermore, the method uses the *behavioral techniques* of feedback and reinforcement. Besides Albert, scholars such as Wight (1995: 130-134), Bennett (1995: 149), Baxter, Ramsey (1996: 211-212), Cushner, and Landis (1996: 185), argue that all the various components of intercultural competence are in one way or another involved in the method.

According to Albert (1995: 157-158), the Culture Assimilator method exposes trainees to a wide variety of situations in the target culture(s), focuses on differences in perceptions and interpretations in behaviors, simulates important aspects of the experience of entering a new culture, e.g. ambiguity and uncertainty, centers on key cultural differences between trainees' own culture and the target culture, and fosters trainees' active involvement.

Cushner and Brislin (1996: 48-51; see also Blake et al. 1996: 169) argue that the Culture Assimilator method has proven to have positive impacts as to the cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of trainees' intercultural competence. They continue that the Culture Assimilator is "of considerable use" in preparing individuals such as exchange students and various professionals for interaction in culturally diverse contexts.

Referring to research (e.g. Albert 1995: 165; Cushner & Brislin 1996: 14; 20; 25; 51; Cushner & Landis 1996: 188; 191-194), the *Culture Assimilator* is supposed to

- develop complex thinking and the ability to make isomorphic attributions, i.e. similar meanings based on perceptions
- impart knowledge of the subjective culture of the target group
- improve knowledge and application of concepts relevant to intercultural communication
- develop the ability to analyze and solve intercultural problems
- reduce ethnocentrism
- help to develop more accurate expectations in intercultural interactions
- decrease the use of negative stereotypes
- increase intercultural sensitivity to cultural diversity
- help to understand host nationals as judged by the hosts themselves
- help to interact more effectively with people from the target culture
- increase enjoyment in interaction with host nationals
- enhance intercultural adjustment
- increase tolerance for everyday stress
- improve task performance on international assignments, and
- decrease the rate of premature returns from international assignments

Triandis (1995: 184) found that when trainees are motivated, the Culture Assimilator method improves their sense of well-being and effectiveness (cf. competence) in the other culture. Albert (1995: 165) refers to "a few minor inconsistencies" and the fact that all of the studies have not documented behavioral changes. Cushner and Landis (1996: 193; 195) state that there is "ample evidence" that changes are produced in trainees but the extent of those changes is still problematic. According to Kealey and Protheroe (1996: 152), the method is cognitive, but aims at some degree of interpersonal skills development.

Because there is controversy in the results of research discussing the effectiveness of the Culture Assimilator method, more empirical research is required. This is what the training experiment discussed below aimed at; in other words, it tested the effectiveness of the Culture-General Assimilator method in developing the intercultural competence of Bachelor of Engineering, or BEng, students as part of their professional qualifications.

Frameworks of the Training Experiments

The training experiment discussed here was implemented by the present author during the year 2000. The *participants* of the training experiment were 117 Bachelor of Engineering, or BEng, students at Kajaani Polytechnic, Finland (n = 117). The students were given a one-credit course in intercultural communication as part of their compulsory English studies. The *face-to-face tuition* period of 24 contact lessons, 45 min each, during three months, was followed by a three weeks' *Web-based self-study* period. For the self-study period a Culture-General Assimilator called *The Same but Different* was designed and implemented as a Web-based application. The main function of the Web-based application

was to test whether self-study provides any added value to the contact lessons, and whether it has any impact on the students' behavior and skills in particular.

In the training experiment the following *approaches* were applied:

- *Content and Language Integrated Learning*, or CLIL (a term used by the European Council), i.e. integration of intercultural communication and English studies
- English as today's *lingua franca*
- *transformative learning* (Taylor 1994) to develop competence
- the *etic*, or culture-general, *approach*, discussing a number of cultures, and
- the *Culture-General Assimilator* (Cushner & Brislin 1996) method.

The *objectives* set on the training experiment were

- first, to assess the *effectiveness* of intercultural training in developing the students' intercultural competence (*summative assessment*),
- secondly, to map out what kind of communicators the students are and would like to be, and whether the students are motivated to develop their intercultural competence (*self- and peer assessment*), and >
- thirdly, what the students think about intercultural training and intercultural competence as part of their professional qualifications (*formative assessment*).

The *measuring instruments* used in the training experiment were five questionnaires with structured and open-ended questions, statements, and critical incidents to be answered, analyzed, and solved by the students. The end results were analyzed by using both quantitative and qualitative research techniques.

End Results of the Training Experiment

The *primary results* of the training experiment were as follows:

- the students' *cognition* as part of their intercultural competence developed considerably; the students learned new concepts and basic theories of intercultural communication
- the students' *affect* as part of their intercultural competence only developed a little; it was proven that transforming people's attitudes more positive toward the foreign is a complicated and time-consuming process
- the students' *behavior* and *skills* as part of their intercultural competence, especially their ability to analyze and solve critical incidents, and consequently intercultural problems, developed a little
- the students accept intercultural competence as an integral and equal part of the professional qualifications needed by Bachelors of Engineering in today's international and multicultural industry and business

On a quantitative scale from 1 to 5, the students' complex thinking and ability to make isomorphic attributions as well as their ability to analyze and solve critical incidents, i.e. intercultural problems, developed from 1 to 2, i.e. from poor to satisfactory.

On a qualitative scale, i.e. according to the students' self-assessment, the students received knowledge about culture-general differences and their behavior and skills considering intercultural adjustment and interaction with foreigners developed a little; one third of the students thought that their attitudes toward the foreign became a little more positive.

The *secondary results* of the training experiment included the following. Most students thought that

- when communicating in Finnish, they have no communication problems
- the main factor preventing them from communicating with foreigners is their insufficient knowledge of foreign languages, especially that of English
- interpreting foreigners' emotions is difficult
- they are unable to solve potential communication with foreigners
- an ideal communicator is clear and fluent, able to communicate with different kinds of people interactively
- they are self-directed adult learners able to take responsibility for their own learning (...but were not in practice, i.e. they did prepare for the face-to-face tuition and they did not reflect on their learning afterwards)
- intercultural training is useful and interesting
- Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is a new and different training and learning method (... although one third of the students had language problems due to their vocational background and less foreign language education compared with the students with the upper secondary school background)
- studying with the Web-based application is serious studying, not edutainment
- the Web-based application is suitable for self-study in particular

Most students were interested in working and studying abroad to develop their nontechnical competence, in other words, language and intercultural skills. In spite of this, the 10-year-old history of Kajaani Polytechnic only knows a few engineering students who have actually made use of the international trainee and student exchange programs provided by the Polytechnic. The main reason for this is likely the good job situation in Finnish industry since the mid 1990s.

Conclusions

Even if intercultural competence is needed at all levels of organizations and even if there is research-based evidence about the benefits of intercultural training, too many companies do not invest in it. The *reasons for not investing* in intercultural training include the assumptions competent international employees are born, not made, a top performer in the home country will be a top performer in another culture as well, training is not effective, there is no time, temporary assignments do not warrant training, trainees' past experiences may have more influence than training, and the foreign work environment is the main determinant of success (Mendenhall & Oddou 1995: 343; Kealey & Protheroe 1996: 142-144).

Intercultural competence should, however, be understood as part of *knowledge management* and company-specific *tacit knowledge*. It should be understood as a tool of *strategic thinking* and *planning*, as a source of *competitive advantage* and *added value*, the development of which should be started as early as possible. Here proactive institutions of higher education, such as polytechnics, have a market niche. Teachers and trainers of foreign languages should also be provided with further training so that they can become *intercultural facilitators* to help their students to become *mediators between cultures* and *social actors*, who are able to engage with other social actors in communication and interaction which is different from those between native speakers (Byram 1997: 21).

Developing intercultural competence is about developing the ability to be effective in life and career in general. In other words, the potential effects of intercultural training include creating more interculturally trained citizens to society. The function of intercultural training is not to attempt to transform trainees' fundamental personalities or basic character, but to add on knowledge and coping techniques, and consequently, to enhance professional skills as well. (Kealey & Protheroe 1996: 147)

The present author argues that intercultural training develops intercultural competence and provides perspective transformation, but the process of transformation is slow and gradual. When developing intercultural competence, a number of training methods should be applied including new technology.

The cognitive learning theory and *constructivism* seem to support the use of multimedia- and Web-based learning, including the self-directed nature of learning. The structure of information in multimedia- and Web-based learning is non-linear and based on associations (cf. human thinking). Consequently, the method supports knowledge construction from people's own experiences, i.e. knowledge acquisition, remembering, understanding, as well as problem solving.

The multimedia- and Web-based Culture-General Assimilator method with critical incidents proved its effectiveness in the present training experiment, when considering the development of the cognitive component of intercultural competence in particular. According to the students' self-assessment, their intercultural adjustment and interaction skills also developed a little and their attitudes toward the foreign became a little more positive, in this order. To be able to state whether the students are really able to apply these skills and attitudes in practice, observation and interviews involving host nationals in the target culture(s) would be required. Blake et al. (1996: 172), however, point out that self-report data has been found to relate at least to successful intercultural adjustment.

To develop intercultural competence, hands-on experiences of other cultures are of major importance. If it is not possible to acquire these experiences on site, the importance of intercultural training, including simulations such as Culture Assimilators with critical incidents, as part of professional education is even more emphasized. This can be called *internationalization at home*.

References

- Albert, R. D. 1995. The Intercultural Sensitizer/Culture Assimilator as a Cross-Cultural Training Method. In Fowler, S. M. & Mumford, M. G. (Eds.) *Intercultural Sourcebook: Cross-Cultural Training Methods*, Vol. 1. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, 157-167.
- Baxter, J. & Ramsey, S. 1996. Improvising Critical Incidents. In Seelye, N. H. (Ed.) *Experiential Activities for Intercultural Learning*, Vol. 1. Yarmouth Maine: Intercultural Press, 211-218.
- Bennett, M. J. 1995. Critical Incidents in an Intercultural Conflict-Resolution Exercise. In Fowler, S. M. & Mumford, M. G. (Eds.) *Intercultural Sourcebook: Cross-Cultural Training Methods*, Vol. 1 Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, 147-156.

Blake, B. F., Heslin, R. & Curtis, S. C. 1996. Measuring Impacts of Cross-Cultural Training. In Landis, D. & Bhakat, R. (Eds.) *Handbook of Intercultural Training*. (2nd ed.) Thousands Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 165-182.

Byram, M. 1997. *Language Teachers, Politics and Cultures*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Cushner, K. & Brislin, R. W. 1996. *Intercultural Interactions. A Practical Guide*. (2nd ed.) Thousands Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Cushner, K. & Landis, D. 1996. The Intercultural Sensitizer. In Landis, D. & Bhakat, R. S. (Eds.) *Handbook of Intercultural Training*. (2nd ed.) Thousands Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 185-202.

Holden, N. J. 2002. *Cross-Cultural Management. A Knowledge Management Perspective*. Prentice Hall.

Kealey, D. J. & Protheroe, D. R. 1996. The Effectiveness of Cross-Cultural Training for Expatriates: An Assessment of the Literature of the Issue. In *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Vol. 20, No. 2. Elsevier Science, 141-165.

Kolb, D. A. 1984. *Experiential Learning. Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Korhonen, K. 2002. *Intercultural Competence as Part of Professional Qualifications. A Training Experiment with Bachelor of Engineering Students*. University of Jyväskylä. Department of Communication. Jyväskylä Studies in Communication 17. Academic Dissertation.

Mendenhall, M. & Oddou, G. 1995. The dimensions of expatriate acculturation: a review. In Jackson, T. (Ed.) *Cross-Cultural Management*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 342-354.

Taylor, E. W. 1994. A Learning Model for Becoming Interculturally Competent. In *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Vol. 18, No. 3. Elsevier Science, 389-408.

Triandis, H. C. 1995. Culture-Specific Assimilators. In Fowler, S. M. & Mumford, M. G. (Eds.) *Intercultural Sourcebook: Cross-Cultural Training Methods*, Vol. 1. Yarmouth, Maine; Intercultural Press, 179-86.

Wight, A. R. 1995. The Critical Incident as a Training Tool. In Fowler, S. M. & Mumford, M. G. (Eds.) *Intercultural Sourcebook: Cross-Cultural Training Methods*, Vol. 1. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, 127-140.