

'You do not just translate your thought into another language - you translate the whole issue into that culture'

Intercultural understanding in the experience world of Finnish technical professionals

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Abstract

The objective of the research was to examine the experience world of professionals in the field of technology as users of foreign languages to illustrate the general meaning structure in the agency of a foreign language user. The theoretical approach here is phenomenological. The fieldwork was carried out through thematic interviews with seven interviewees in a medium-sized Finnish engineering company with international operations. Through a phenomenological method of analysis the individual meaning units were identified. Out of these individual meaning units a common meaning structure that reflected the experiences of all the interviewees was uncovered. Intercultural understanding came out strongly as a significant component in the experience world of the interviewees.

Keywords: *intercultural understanding; foreign language; intercultural education; foreign language education*

Introduction

Vocationally oriented language learning (VOLL) has been examined quite extensively, but most research projects have focused on language as a purely linguistic phenomenon. This study shares the view expressed in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe 2001) where language users are seen as active social agents, members of society conducting tasks that are not solely linguistic in nature.

The objective of this paper was to examine the experience world of Finnish technical professionals as users of foreign languages in the setting of intercultural encounters. This paper is part of a research project where the goal is to illustrate the general meaning structure in the agency of a foreign language user.

In this paper the often employed term *intercultural competence* is replaced by a more multifaceted term *intercultural understanding*, which lacks the mechanical, perfunctory connotations of the earlier term. The findings showed that the interviewees manifested intercultural understanding when seeking to adapt to varying situations through both their cognitive knowledge and operational skills, but also open and positive attitudes towards different cultures. They manifested resistance against stereotypical descriptions of national cultures, but often juxtaposed their own national culture against other cultures examining these critically. Expressions of intercultural understanding came out especially clearly in the data in connection with challenging intercultural encounters. The interviewees would resort to humour as a softening instrument when accounting for some of the most problematic encounters. They would construct their intercultural understanding through a critical reflection on their experiences of intercultural

encounters: actions, thoughts and attitudes. Critical reflection also forms the basis for the development of intercultural understanding.

Methodology

The theoretical approach in this research project is phenomenological with a focus on language and communication from a wider perspective instead of the more restraint perspective provided by linguistics. The objective was not to describe the language used to communicate different purposes, but to focus on the experiences of language users. Hence the phenomenological approach, where the experience world of a person is the focus of interest, was a natural choice for this research, where the researcher was not striving to answer the question: 'How do people use foreign languages at work?' but: 'What is the experience of using a foreign language like?'

The phenomenological researcher strives towards an objective reality through bracketing the Husserlian natural attitude, the attitude that exists without any reflection on it. Husserl introduced as a leitmotiv "to the things themselves" (*Zu den Sachen selbst*), an aspiration to describe the phenomenon in as pure a state as possible: as it was at the moment of experiencing. Thus objectivity in phenomenologically characterised research implies fidelity to the phenomenon that is being examined. Here this phenomenon is the experience world of language users in a professional context.

The fieldwork for this research was carried out in a medium-sized Finnish engineering company with international operations. The author was awarded a grant which enabled a period of two and a half months spent working for the company. During the stay it was possible to choose the interviewees for a pilot study. There were twelve engineers who were chosen based on the fact that they had had experiences of using languages for work and their consent to participate in the project. In the second phase, two years later, seven engineers - three females and four males, were chosen out of the initial twelve interviewees for the final research, and a second round of in-depth thematic interviews was conducted with them.

The process of analysis employed here was further developed by Perttula (2000) from Giorgi's original phenomenological method (1997). In Table 1 the regimen of the two-phase method is described stage by stage as it was realised in this research with the data of each individual interviewee. Table 2 illustrates the respective method raising the level of analysis from an individual level to a general one describing the phenomenon as it reflected all the interviewees' experiences. Thus the method of analysis was comprised of two phases: the individual and the general. In the first phase the objective was through the identification of individual meaning units to uncover the experience as pure as possible, as lived through by the person. Hence phase one resulted in seven individual meaning networks formed through an analysis of the data. Out of these individual meaning networks the analysis proceeded through phase two towards a common meaning structure that reflected the experiences that were common, shared by all the interviewees.

Table 1: Phase one of the phenomenological method of analysis as it was conducted in this project

Stage of the method / Phase 1	Result
1. Reading through the data with a phenomenological attitude: bracketing, reduction.	Researcher arrives at a general sense of the whole
2. Identifying meaning relations in the data and separating them.	Separate meaning relations and a more focused sense of the phenomenon
3. Transforming the meaning relations into the language of the discipline through	Transformed meaning relations that contain the necessary and sufficient essence of each meaning relation revealing the phenomenon more directly

reflection and imaginative variation.	
4. Classifying each transformed meaning relation under a theme.	Thematised individual meaning relations
5. Organising the transformed meaning relations into thematised individual meaning networks.	Seven thematised individual meaning networks
6. Synthesising the individual situated structures of the phenomenon, or individual meaning networks.	Seven descriptions of the individual situated structure of the phenomenon. <i>Individually experienced language use in a professional context</i>

Table 2: Phase two of the phenomenological method of analysis as it was conducted in this project

Stage of the method / Phase 2	Result
7. Transforming the individual meaning networks into proposals of general meaning relation.	Proposals of meaning relation
8. Forming content areas in all individual meaning networks that structure the proposals of meaning relations.	Content areas reflecting proposals of meaning relation
9. Connecting each proposal of meaning relation with a content area.	All proposals of meaning relation address a content area
10. Forming proposals of content area out of each proposal of meaning relation.	Proposals of content area
11. Forming seven proposals for a common network of meanings.	Seven proposals for a common network of meanings
12. Structuring the seven proposals for a common network of meanings into one common network of meanings.	Creation of a common meaning network. <i>A general description of the situated structure of the phenomenon</i>

The experiences of the language users in the study formed a common network of meanings woven around the following key concepts: autonomy of language users, face-to-face interaction, social positioning, female gender in engineering and intercultural understanding. This article examines one of these components to the experiences of language users: intercultural understanding as manifested through the experiences of the interviewees. The article will be part of a doctorate dissertation forming a series of articles that inquire into the experience world of language users as uncovered in the study; each article focusing on one component in the common meaning network.

Defining terminology: Culture – intercultural competence

The concept of culture can refer to a wide range of activities, behaviour, events and structures in people's lives. It also entails varying meanings for different cultures (Matsumoto & Juang 2013:7). Baumeister (2005) identifies culture simply as an information-based system of social coordination, of people living together in order to satisfy their needs. The sociocultural theory and the Vygotskian tradition defines culture as an objective force that infuses social relationships and the historically developed uses of artefacts – including language – in concrete activity (Lantolf & Thorne 2006:1). It is language as well as nonverbal communication that allow human beings to communicate a shared intentionality, which may be at the heart of a social organisation and contribute to the creation of the human culture (Tomasello & Herrmann 2010). In everyday conversations, however, culture as a concept may be seen as a grandiose term that people tend to avoid using. During the interviews the interviewer knowingly avoided mentioning the term. When the participants in the research related to culture it was on their own initiative and often with some reserve, as Jari a little evasively states: *'I guess that's all about that culture-thing if you want to use fancy words; I don't know.'*

Intercultural competence or 'global competence' (Hunter, White, & Godbey 2006), 'cultural intelligence' (Peterson 2004), 'intercultural mindset and skillset' (Bennett & Bennett 2004), as it has been labelled as well, is an elusive term that has been defined over and over again during the last few decades through different researchers and a variety of theoretical models. Parekh creates a setting for intercultural competence in that he (2006:337–338) speaks of a multicultural perspective as an interplay of three complementary insights: the fact that all people are culturally embedded, that all cultural diversity is inescapable and desirable, that an intercultural dialogue is beneficial to all cultures, and finally that all cultures are internally plural and fluid. When a person possesses a multicultural perspective he/she may open up a dialogue between different cultures. In this process an in-between space is created from which one can foster a less culture-bound image of human life and a critical perspective on one's own society at the same time (Parekh 2006:339).

The models that try to illustrate intercultural competence include contextualising the components of intercultural competence (e.g. Ting-Toomey & Kurogi 1998), or they portray the development of intercultural competence as a process (e.g. Deardorff, 2009; Bennett & Bennett 2004; Talib 2005; Talib et al. 2009). Deardorff's Process Model of Intercultural Competence (2009:33) features intercultural competence as a cyclical process, where a person's knowledge, skills and attitudes in intercultural contacts are reflected in his/her desired internal and external outcomes. Deardorff (2011) lists four key components for intercultural competence to be realised: firstly reflection and assessment are crucial to the development of the competence, secondly critical thinking skills need to be adopted, thirdly attitudinal elements such as respect, openness and curiosity serve as a basis for the process of development of the competence, and fourthly there needs to be an ability to see life from the perspective of the other. Talib has examined teachers and the development of intercultural competence with them. Her discoveries were on the same lines with those of Deardorff. She noticed that with teachers intercultural competence gradually evolved from a deeper self-understanding to the adoption of a critical stance towards one's work, incorporating a feeling of social and global responsibility (2005:43). The intercultural sensitivity model by Bennett and Bennett (2004) perceives the development of intercultural competence through experiencing cultural differences and refers to a person's awareness and knowledge, attitudes and values, skills and behaviour when operating in intercultural contexts. Bennett's theory separates the ethnocentric and ethnorelative stages in the development process of intercultural sensitivity.

In this article the process model approach to intercultural learning is used as a springboard when accounting for the manifestations of intercultural understanding that came out in the interviews of the Finnish engineers in this research. The term 'intercultural understanding' is used in this paper instead of 'intercultural competence', to avoid connotations involved with the latter term that echo of a mechanical mastery of skills. The development of intercultural competence in a person, after all, is a reflective, cyclical and gradual process, where one comes through one stage and enters the next one encompassing and editing the information acquired during the earlier stages; it is not a competence that can be mastered and assessed mechanically.

Results and Discussion – The components of intercultural understanding

Downey et al. (2006) have defined intercultural competence in engineering in terms of a) positive attitudes toward ideas and people outside of one's own culture, including an openness to and a willingness to tolerate ambiguity; b) showing an interest toward another culture including the language of this culture; c) interacting with people of another culture at a professional level; d) coping with people who define problems differently and use different engineering and managerial approaches for solving those problems. Grandin and Hedderich (2009) emphasise a globally competent engineer's ability to work in an interdisciplinary mode. Behavioural and interaction skills such as the skills of sharing and transferring information are the skills that are highlighted in today's business life – also in intercultural encounters (Holden 2002; Sercu 2004). Interaction skills was emphasised with the interviewees as Petri testifies in the following:

Petri: You can learn technical issues, but interaction with people, that's difficult. It's all about interaction in the end, anyway, selling, purchasing and negotiating.

The interviewees in the research depicted features from all four aspects of intercultural competence, or understanding, as described by Downey et al (2006). The key elements of intercultural competence as defined by Deardorff (2011) reflection, critical thinking skills, attitudinal elements such as esteem, acceptance and curiosity as well as an ability to see life from the other person's perspective were externalised in the data in this research.

On top of reflection and critical thinking, attitudinal elements and the ability to see things from the perspective of the other, the following components to intercultural understanding were manifested in the accounts of the interviewees: a certain, sometimes inward turned element of humour, effectivity, or dealing with versatile culturally coloured situations in business in the most efficient mode, cultural juxtapositions, resisting stereotypical thinking, or being reflective and analytical about one's attitudes and actions, and a sense of human universal coherence, of seeing what all human beings share together.

The development of intercultural understanding can be illustrated in the form of a DNA-like structure (Figure 1). In this figure the entwined nature of all the coefficients contributing to this cyclical development process of intercultural understanding is depicted as it was manifested in the interviewees' experiences. The development process is seen here as an on-going cycle composed of two salient, permanent components: intercultural encounters of different degrees, and critical reflection. The features that characterized the accounts of the interviewees on their intercultural experiences form the strands in the DNA-like structure of the cycle; These strands may have been expressed more powerfully or in subtler tones with different individuals and at different times, but they were manifested to some degree in the data of all the participants.

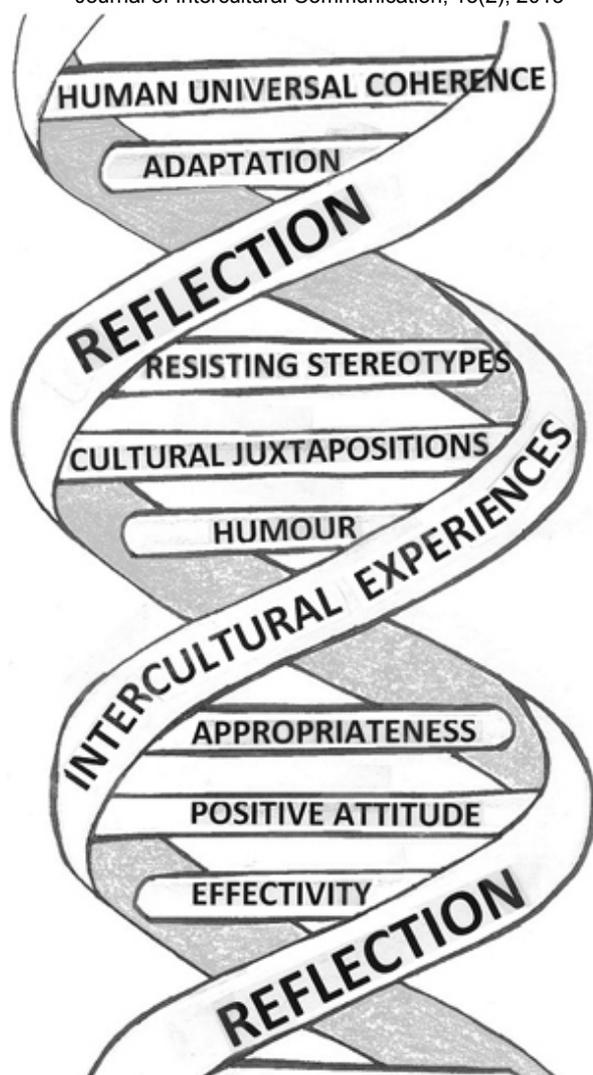


Figure 1 Cyclical development process of intercultural understanding

Humour

In intercultural communication meanings are constantly being negotiated and created in a social process. The existence of humour in this process is universal, but how it is used, where and when, as well as the conditions under which humour can be utilized differ according to cultural, and even individual variables (Raskin 1985; Bell 2007).

Sometimes the interviewees resorted to humour to alleviate negative feelings that they had experienced in connection with culturally offensive behaviour. It facilitated proceeding with the agenda at hand and prevented dwelling on negative issues. Humour thus often emerged as a facilitating factor in intercultural encounters where occasionally different customs and modes of operation clashed.

Petri: I would say that in all other countries they'll give you some-some-some wrong-wrong information to varying degrees there [on delivery times] and- because they would like the delivery to be dispatched [laughter].

Jari: So that there is the same logic as with the British anyway. They do not seem to have any common sense in anything!

Niina: Tell me a bit more, I'm not following you there.

Jari: Well, they keep driving the wrong side of the road and water pipes run on the outer walls of houses, where they get frozen, and shops close at five and... [laughter]

In the following Marja manifests an open, friendly and positive, maybe a bit amused at times, general attitude towards different cultures. She describes how she has experienced situations where she has been forced to tolerate ambiguity caused by culturally deviant business practices, but has been able to operate with people successfully despite this. The humour here may be a token for coping with these sometimes problematic situations. Marja reflects in a neutral manner and at length her experiences of British business practices as compared to the Finnish and the German ones. She admits that the British method of solving problems in negotiations is quite time consuming and heavy for her, but at the same time she identifies this as reflecting the British culture in general:

Marja: And in England I have been, too, and there it is quite strange and heavy the way they carry on discussions. At least with the ones that I have been to, there may have been a large group of participants, but they had not made any preparations at all. ... And they somehow – it feels that it is much more difficult to find a decision maker there. A person who would in the end say how to do things. They just want to call in more and more experts for this. A bit like in Sweden, but it is not as relaxed and smooth as in Sweden.

In a way they immediately hand over the keys to the situation to us. So that we take the lead. And it is as if they feel that it's not in their interest to close things, to settle things--- That they [the British] just philosophize and circle around things. When with the Germans it is in a way easy.

--- But the British are not systematic at all. And you can see this in everything. In their factories and everywhere – so that it is not so clean and tidy there. Somehow there is still this hierarchy, so that they still have foremen there, and people like that. They have many more layers of hierarchy.

Niina: Is it confusing then?

Marja: Yes, somehow confusing. They make things so difficult. Like their own language, which would be so easy in principle, but they make it so complicated themselves [laughter].

Using humour in intercultural interaction is often complex and requires sophisticated linguistic skills. Davies (2003:1381) suggests that successful use of humour primarily involves grasping the joke and prompt reactions when playing within the joking frame. The interviewees recognized the value of humour in creating a pleasant rapport for intercultural encounters, but at the same time confessed that there were often difficulties involved; especially with native speakers.

A significant function of humour lies in its potential to mark in- and out-group identities, and thus it can provide indication as to the status of the speaker (Bell 2007). In the following extract, however, Marja testifies how she has felt humour threatening her status, and how she has experienced problems in grasping the humour in intercultural encounters with native speakers of English. This has resulted in socially awkward and embarrassing situations with both interlocutors:

Marja: What created an embarrassing situation was when I did not know for sure. I thought I had grasped that it was a joke, but since I'm not sure I cannot start laughing [laughter]- And then the other party becomes annoyed, when I did not get his joke! It creates this chain of embarrassment! [laughter]

Appropriateness - clashes in intercultural encounters

Intergroup contacts take place during social episodes such as making a joke during a meeting, or bargaining with a salesperson - intercultural problems may arise if these episodes are constructed differently. In such situations the consequent behaviour exchanges are likely to be perplexing, and difficult for both parties. (Gudykunst & Bond 1997:136). Some researchers have expressed their astonishment over the emphasis on cultural misunderstandings and clashes in the field of intercultural research (e.g. Stier 2010). Others, however, do not interpret intercultural conflicts as inexorably negative, but as neutral, necessary in the process of learning to manage them (Kim 2002).

The findings in this research support this latter interpretation of the role of intercultural conflicts, in that the interviewees did not indicate that the clashes they had experienced would have been especially trying for them. They would rather pursue to adopt an analytical mode of operation towards conflicts trying to find a solution that would alleviate or prevent similar situations in the future. The engineers that were interviewed had daily contacts with people from different cultural settings, and strong reactions to each problematic encounter from their side would probably have been quite arduous.

The interviewees manifested that cultural features characterised decision making in their work significantly, and they had to be taken into account when doing business. The participants often demonstrated analyses of other-perception data in an endeavour towards a neutral assessment of potential conflicting situations when accounting for cultural adaptation. In their accounts the interviewees also depicted situations, where they had been puzzled by having been stranded into an encounter, where they had been looking for the correct tools to be able to solve problems caused by cultural clashes in communication.

In the following Marja reflects upon cultural differences in meeting practices. She also looks for a solution to the friction that these differences sometimes create:

Marja: When a Finn would much rather do so that all these items on the agenda are dealt with first, and only then we can start talking about something else --- But if the conversation keeps digressing so that not even the first decision has been taken and people start talking about football and something... Then you feel that this is not the place for that kind of conversation. But I don't know if we need to get some training – so that we would learn to talk about football a little and then artfully lead the conversation back to the issue at hand.

Appropriateness, effectiveness and adaptation are categorised as intercultural competent conflict management criteria; appropriateness implying that one assess a conflict both through self-perception and other-perception data, or by aspiring to see life from the perspective of the other (Ting-Toomey 2009:115). Hence through successful implementation of other-perception data one would avoid a situation where one would think that one has acted appropriately while the other party thinks the opposite. In the conflicts that the participants described different parties had occasionally differing opinions as to what was considered as appropriate behaviour.

In the following extract Petri reminisces about a complex encounter, where he thought he had adapted to the situation intercultural appropriately. He had acquired other-perception data regarding one of the parties, but unfortunately neglected it for the other party. As a result intercultural problems were externalised from three different perspectives – although unfortunately we can only hear one interpretation of these here. The situation also depicts the problematic nature of information transfer in an intercultural encounter. Here the reserve of the Japanese, the directness and result-orientation of the Finnish and the discreetness of the German culture were expressed in an interplay of misunderstandings:

Petri: I was in Germany with a German colleague. On the other side of the table there were Japanese people – and I do know that much about their culture that they do not say anything, even if they do not understand what you are saying. And – and when for the fifth time I was going through the same thing, the sequence, this German colleague of mine lost it and dragged me out of the room. How could I be so rude that I over and over again started going

over the same point. And I said 'don't you notice that he always says Uh-huh! at a different point. So he has not understood it even now.'

Niina: Yes.

Petri: And-and then we finished the meeting. After six months we had the delivery and they were all wrong, the parts they had to deliver, so he [the Japanese person] had not understood it at all, even then!

In the following Marja critically reflects on a case where intercultural contacts had caused problems within the company. She recalled a serious cultural clash with one of the employees originating from his transfer to the United States. Marja quite acutely acknowledges the significance of cultural aspects in language studies. She tries to find a solution to these intercultural problems and recommends resorting to external cultural expertise in order to prevent these kinds of clashes in the future:

Marja: -it is just one more example on how it does not help you at all if you know the language inside out, but have no clue of how people think about these matters in that country.

Niina: Yes.

Marja: Like there the American President [of the company] did not understand how Finns think about these matters and Tero did not understand how the Americans think. And both just stubbornly stuck to their own.

Marja: --- I think it is a purely Finnish reaction, that:' ok, let's do assembly work then, if that's what you want. I will do it till the end of the world – ' That it becomes, like, that only the Finnish can fall for something like that. That they in a way dig themselves into a hole.

Niina: Right, yes, like going through it like with your teeth clenched. Hmm.

Marja: Yes. And this is- had we used there a exp- like a cultural expert, or someone like that. A company that is regularly involved in projects like this one-

Niina: Uh-huh.

Marja: - when people are sent to the United States. Maybe they would already have drafted the contract in another way. Maybe we would have kept them on for the first six months.

Adaptability and effectivity

In the working life today it has become increasingly important to know how to operate in an intercultural setting. According to Pini Kemppainen (2009:110) operational skills surpass attitudinal and cognitive skills as aspects of intercultural competence in today's business life. Deardorff (2011) defines effectiveness and appropriateness as the external manifestations of intercultural competence. Effectiveness in the accounts of the interviewees was often manifested as desired outcomes in business transactions. The participants also demonstrated a high degree of sensitivity in their strive towards appropriateness when in interaction with people from different cultural backgrounds. The interviewees

confessed that even if hierarchy as a cultural feature was not always visible, it had to be sensed somehow in order to further their business contacts in an appropriate manner.

Petri: I noticed that I did not know it after all. Immediately everyone was on first name basis. That gives you the illusion that it is not hierarchical [the culture]. So I need to stay on my toes.

Intercultural understanding or competence can be defined as a social evaluation of behaviour that is comprised of the two primary criteria of appropriateness: i.e. contextually legitimate and fitting, and effectiveness: i.e. a communicator's ability to reach the desired outcome in a given situation. (Spitzberg 2000:375). This implies that the communicators can identify their objectives, and assess what is needed in order to reach these objectives, that they can predict the other communicators' responses, choose their communication strategies and evaluate the results of the communication (Wiseman 2002:209). These criteria of appropriateness and effectivity often blended together in the interviewees' accounts: if the behaviour was contextually fitting and provided the desired outcome in a certain situation it was also adopted, even if sometimes with reserve.

In the following extract Jari manifests cognitive aspects of his intercultural competence. Jari presents the for him seemingly purposeless peculiarities in the American business culture with an air of amusement. He is willing to accept a contextually legitimate mode of behaviour as a 'culture-thing', where he abides by this code, thus making business contacts easier and smoother for himself:

Jari: --- there [in the United States] they talk a lot, and you always have to have – at least when it comes to technical matters, you need to have 'a plan'. That you immediately need to say what you are to do next. Even if you do not actually know if it is of any use, it just keeps everyone happy 'okay, so tomorrow we will do that.'

Niina: So you need to show that you do have some kind of a plan there?

Jari: Yes, maybe it is also otherwise so that everything needs to at least look good. I have also bumped into situations where the client's computer has broken down and you need to go there just because it looks good to the client; like you are doing something. Even if you know that you cannot do anything; that you need to call in service people from a computer company.

Niina: So it is important just to show yourself?

Jari: Yes, showing yourself in the right place – I guess that is all about that culture-thing if you want to use fancy words, I don't know.

Jari has clearly been reflecting on his encounters with the Americans quite a lot. He has formulated certain modes of behaviour for himself according to the American corporate culture the way he has experienced it. He sees the fallacy there, but abides by these rules in order to make the encounters smoother. Actually he seems to have interpreted this so that everything 'needs to at least look good' even though it may not feel good to him.

In the following Jari accounts for his experiences of communicating with the representatives of two national cultures. Through the descriptions of these encounters it is apparent that these experiences have been significant for him not only at a cognitive level, but at an affective level as well. Having been faced with the stubborn reluctance of an interlocutor to use a common language he must have felt awkward, as can be seen in his choice of words here 'and if you cannot cope with that, so what!'

Jari: --- But what I have tried to say here is that in France I noticed that in a way people just make the decision that they do not speak any English and period! And if you cannot cope with that, so what!

Resisting stereotypes

When people are trying to come to terms with a foreign culture it is inescapable that they resort to developing generalisations and stereotypes (Neuner 2003:46). During the interviews I carefully avoided any mentions to national cultural features. Often, however, the interviewees depicted notions where they had recognised prevailing stereotypical judgements of e.g. national characteristics and took a stance against it. In the following extract Marja wants to oppose the trend that sees anything Swedish as negative. This trend may in part be due to historical reasons and an on-going discussion in the mass media on whether to retain Swedish language studies as obligatory in the national curriculum. Marja, nonetheless, aptly and characterises the Swedish in a positive light, based on her own experiences having conducted work-related projects there on several occasions:

Marja: But the Swedish are terribly jovial and understanding, and somehow easy people – so that they quickly learned to slow down their speech for me. And I think that Sweden is a terribly easy country. I do not understand this hostility towards Sweden that is so common, because the Swedish are actually terribly nice.

Marja: --- Somehow we just imagine that they are big-headed and arrogant and such, but they are not like that at all. They are more like soft and gentle in nature.

Sometimes the interviewees took a stance against stereotypes that could be seen as a reverse manifestation of stereotype threat. Stereotype threat may affect any group of people, e.g. a grandmother fearing any faltering of memory as exposing her as a stereotype aged person (Steele 2004:687). Here the interviewees aspired to avoid being cast as prejudiced. In the following Sampo relates to a situation where he had involuntarily manifested a stereotypical racial stance. He recalls how this incident had deeply affected him in that he had felt a 'sting in his heart', but this incident had also demonstrated to him how easy it is to fall in to stereotypical thought patterns.

Sampo There was this- I remember this blooper from my visits to South Africa. I'm no racist by nature, but it just happened that we went to this electric station. And then there came a dark guy and a light guy, and they were both wearing overalls -

Niina: Yes.

Sampo - electricians. And they like jumped out of a maintenance car. And I was waiting there at the electric station, and naturally I- well the white guy somehow came closer to me and of course I automatically assumed that he was the boss there and started talking to him. And then found out that it was just the other way around. It does not- well, but I did feel this sting in my heart, though it did not create an awkward situation.

Cultural juxtapositions

For as long as people have lived in national states there has existed a concept of national identity that in one way or another is transformed into an element of individual identity (Kaikkonen 2004:76). In all the cases where national characteristics were discussed the interviewees based their interpretations on personal experiences. In most cases there were comparisons with the Finnish national culture which was used as a standard against which the other cultures were reflected. The knowledge that the interviewees had gained could be described not only bearing expressions of declarative knowledge, but often the manifestations of intercultural awareness came in the form of procedural knowledge (Byram 1997:36). The narratives manifested critical cultural awareness (Byram 2001:7), when the interviewees critically

reflected the information acquired about other cultures to their own national culture and professional behaviour. An example of this can be seen in the following extract where Marja perceptively ponders about the business practices in different national cultures:

Niina: Is it different in different cultures?

Marja: Yes, at least where I have been to, it has been. Of course I have mostly visited German speaking countries.---But it is so good for a Finn that Germans operate pretty much with the same logic as Finns, in that they also want to get things settled. But then I have been somewhere like Switzerland where I think it is already clearly different. It is not at all systematic the way they operate. So that there we have to guide things more. But the German, they have their points ready, 'die Punkte', that we have to go through.

Marja: In Finland you can still operate in a different manner. Here we have regular customers and there you can still in a way trust a man's word [laughter].

Marja: We get still pretty often blamed for how awfully blunt our emails are.

Niina: Uh-huh.

Marja: It must be that with a Finn that friendly face is not conveyed. [laughter] In that a Finn will say things a bit curtly and brusquely, but if you can see his friendly face it makes this feel less offensive.

Marja: - so that it does not come across like an order from us, but like, ok, I'm waiting here, would you be so kind and give me an answer and a comment to this— and – something like that is needed there in the end.

Marja: I don't – I do believe that it is just our problem [reluctance to use the telephone]--- we would not like to let people get too close to us. And then when there is the language there as well, then something-. I do not so much- cannot analyse it as such, I have just accepted it, that it is part of being a Finn, that it just is more difficult for us-

Human universal coherence

The concept of 'stranger' is used in interpersonal and intergroup communication as a linking concept representing both nearness and remoteness by being physically present in the situation but also outside as a member of a different group (Gudykunst 1995:9-10). Experiencing the foreign in the form of a language or a culture always also implies a reconsideration of the familiar (Kramsch 2009:5).

In the research the interviewees often conveyed an objective, or transcultural approach to cultural differences. They would endeavour to efface the strange in their intercultural encounters striving to find

something that they shared with the others. They would refer to some common denominators between human beings that rose above any existing differences. This would not, however, come out as minimisation (Bennett & Bennett 2004), where one effaces cultural differences in favour of similarities, and simultaneously trivialises or minimises different cultures.

Marja: Yes, something like a sense of situational awareness is what is needed and something like the skill to read between the lines and the ability to read people's faces. So that even if cultures differ, I believe basically people's reactions are the same everywhere, anyway. In the same way you can see if someone feels offended about something – or nervous or delighted. The signs are almost the same all over.

Petri: --- And pretty-pretty-well a foreigner is accepted when he just tries to use the language. And it's not- it is so that people always try and understand you more than not understand.

The success of an intercultural encounter can be judged either in terms of the effectiveness of exchange of information or in terms of creating or maintaining human relationships (Bruner 1997:32-33). With the interviewees both of these aspects came out: the exchange of information being naturally of more significance because the common external goal and outcome in these circumstances was a successful work-related project.

Intercultural reflection

In Kolb's cycle of experiential learning (1984) experiences, observation and reflection, the formation of abstract concepts and sounding these in novel circumstances follow one another as a continuing spiral. Jerome Bruner highlights the significance of reflection, or 'thinking about thinking' as the principal ingredient in any empowering practice of education. (1996:19). Reflective practice is also seen as a key component in the process of developing one's intercultural competence (e.g. Parekh 2006; Byram, 1997; Latomaa 1996). In Latomaa's theory the development of intercultural competence through a reflective process transpires as a spiral model starting from the level of a naïve approach towards intercultural encounters and progressing to a culturally specific, objective and finally a critical–dialogical level.

The interviewees in the research were often occupied in a critical and dialogical reflective process, constructing their understanding of their encounters from both the perspective of the other and that of their own, so that they could come up with an interpretation of the encounter and a potential solution to it for future encounters. In the following Arja talks about her growth into an interculturally aware person. She has thought about the human condition in general, the 'European' culture that she refers to as excluding the Finnish culture, and about how she constantly remains attentive and sensitive in her contacts with other people:

Arja: ---I have knowingly tried to learn this European culture, like 'hey, how are you? How is the weather?' So that I have noticed that it makes understanding things smoother – during the phone call, when it is like a start there that here it is raining or shining or something.

Arja: I do change my own attitude. And I try to learn – this really is – I think I try to read people a bit too much even. I am terribly sensitive to the kind of nonverbal communication – how people react to things and- I do notice it quite clearly even if I try – I do try to act so that it is equal towards everyone. Even those who treat me like I was air or someone evil, I try and stay above it all.

The interviewees had encountered otherness on a regular basis as part of their everyday working life. In order to make sense of the otherness they had often adopted a deeply reflective practice as Marja testifies

in the following extract, where she ponders about foreign language education in an extremely astute manner outlining the linguistic paradigm of today:

Marja: But all in all- somehow maybe there should be something like teaching people how to understand culture and things like that with the language. Like more powerfully. When a Finn will by nature stick to learning the technique of the language. He will try and learn the words and the grammar-

Niina: Uh-huh.

Marja: - and he may not realise – or internalise the fact that- that – that culture is part of the language.

Niina: Uh-huh.

Marja: That it is not possible to speak it so that the other party feels-feels that it is fluent, before you really know it- all those features that need to be taken into account- that you do not just translate your thought into another language, but- but you translate the whole issue into that culture.

Though the cultural dimension has been part of modern language education for some time now, at least in thinking, if not as part of everyday language education practice the curricula may refer to the significance of intercultural education, but there is still a lack of good practice even today (Byram, et al. 2001:1).

Summary and conclusion

Intercultural learning takes place as a continuous process, where reflection, the ‘thinking about thinking’, together with experienced intercultural encounters form the basis for the intercultural and professional development. This research indicates that intercultural understanding as manifested by the interviewed engineers was composed of critical reflection on intercultural experiences not only as to the other, but also as to the attitudes and actions of the engineers themselves. The participants interpreted the encounters critically in order to develop their intercultural understanding for future encounters. Hence both the intercultural encounters and the reflective process that accompanies these experiences together promote the development of intercultural understanding. This was manifested with the interviewees in a variety of modes varying from a positive attitude towards otherness, to expected internal and external outcomes from intercultural experiences.

Operational and interaction skills were highlighted as salient elements of intercultural understanding by the participants. The interviewees manifested that intercultural understanding significantly characterised their decision making, and that cultural features had to be taken into account when doing business. They also expressed how they adapted their behaviour in business encounters according to different cultural codes. The participants often demonstrated acute analysing of other-perception data in an endeavour to neutrally assess potential conflict situations. They would critically reflect upon the conflict situations trying to look for the correct tools for solving the problems caused by cultural clashes in communication.

The interviewees in this research were interested in other cultures and languages manifesting positive attitudes towards ideas outside of their own culture, including a willingness to tolerate ambiguity. Through intercultural experiences they learned to interact with people from other cultures at a professional level. The interviewees manifested a resistance towards stereotypical thinking, and saw human universal coherence as an underlying denominator in intercultural encounters. The participants would often resort to cultural juxtapositions as a tool in their thinking process. The significance of humour and a general positive attitude in the process of intercultural understanding came out strongly in

the interviews. The interviewees appreciated the significance of cultural aspects in language studies and tried to find solutions to potential intercultural problems such as external cultural expertise in order to be able to prevent potential intercultural clashes.

The implications of this research show that intercultural understanding is a salient component in professional expertise that engineering graduates will have to face upon entering the job market today. When planning courses in vocationally oriented language education the significance of intercultural understanding in the present day working life needs to be accounted for. Thus developing the students' intercultural understanding should already be a natural element in language education today, but it should be emphasised even more according to the findings in this research. In the words of Marja: 'You do not just translate your thought into another language - you translate the whole issue into that culture.'

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