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THE EFFECT OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE ON INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Abstract:

Intercultural competence is a relatively new term and may be more relevant than ever due to the growing number of misunderstandings and miscommunication during intercultural interactions. Experts generally point out that it is the existence of intercultural competence which facilitates intercultural communication. The purpose of the present paper is to discuss the effect of intercultural competence on intercultural communication. Therefore the paper reviews the most relevant literature of the topic, and emphasizes the consequences of the lack of intercultural competence on intercultural communication with the help of some case studies collected among Hungarian businesspeople working with partners with different cultural backgrounds. Finally, the paper draws conclusions about the effect of intercultural competence on intercultural communication.

Keywords:

intercultural competence, intercultural communication, misunderstandings, critical incidents

JEL Classification: J24, F23, A13

1 Introduction

The last decade has seen an increased research interest in intercultural communication and intercultural competence. Although the topic is not new, intercultural competence is a relatively new term and may be more relevant than ever due to the growing number of misunderstandings and miscommunication during intercultural interactions. The authors investigating the topic in general point out that it is the existence of intercultural competence which facilitates intercultural communication. They (e.g. Bennett, Bennett, 2001; Matveev, Nelson, 2004; Deardorff, 2006) also created several models about how to develop intercultural competence so that the barriers to intercultural communication could be avoided.

Consequently, there is a vast amount of investigations into intercultural competence, its elements, as well as its effect on intercultural communication (e.g. Deardorff, 2006; Fantini, Tirmizi, 2006; Rathje, 2007; Jokikokko, 2010; Beamer, 1992; Ablonczy-Mihályka, 2015; Tompos, 2015; Szőke, Tompos, Ablonczy-Mihályka, 2017; Nádai, 2017). The present paper introduces and discusses the effect of intercultural competence on intercultural communication. First it reviews the most relevant literature of the topic and then it emphasizes the consequences of the lack of intercultural competence on intercultural communication with the help of some case studies collected among Hungarian businesspeople working with partners with different cultural backgrounds. Last but not least, it draws some conclusions about the effect of intercultural competence on intercultural communication.

2 Review of literature

In the 20th century the American social psychologist, Gardner (1962) raised the question to what degree it is actually possible for an expert from one culture to communicate with, to get through to persons of another culture (quoted by Rathje, 2007, p. 254). He responded with a specific hypothesis that is nowadays defined as intercultural competence. However, considering that intercultural competence is a relatively new term and that there has been no agreement on its definition, the paper discusses some relevant definitions. According to these, intercultural competence is:

- *“a complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself”* (Fantini, Tirmizi, 2006, p. 12);
- *“the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes”* (Deardorff, 2004, pp. 247-248);

- *“the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts”* (Bennett, Bennett, 2001, p. 6);
- *“related to the ability to handle (manage) the challenges of communication with people from different cultural backgrounds”* (Draghici, 2015, p. 64).

Based on the above definitions it can be said that intercultural competence is none other than the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with others having different cultural backgrounds. Some authors (e.g. Garamvölgyi, Rudnák, 2015; Némethová, 2015) also emphasize that effective work between different cultures is highly influenced by intercultural competence and cultural intelligence. This also indicates that intercultural competence is not negligible for effective and successful intercultural communication. It is also proved by the fact that in many of the studies on intercultural competence, as Jokikokko (2010) points out, the focus relies on intercultural communication, and one main conclusion is that in the lack of intercultural competence, intercultural communication can easily lead to misunderstandings and the breaking of relationships. Consequently, the effect of intercultural competence on intercultural communication is obvious.

Scholars agree that intercultural competence involves a lot more than mastering a foreign language or understanding non-verbal communication (Jokikokko, 2010). One of the most important elements of intercultural competence is intercultural communication competence which, according to Matveev (2002), includes four dimensions: interpersonal skills, team effectiveness, cultural uncertainty, and cultural empathy. These dimensions involve abilities with the help of which one is able to recognize cultural differences in communication and interaction as well as to assess the values and communication styles of others, and thus it is easier to avoid or solve miscommunication and misunderstandings. Beamer (1992) introduced a model for acquiring and learning intercultural communication competence and developing intercultural communication. The aim of the model is to learn intercultural communication competence to have the ability to encode and decode meanings in matches that correspond to the meanings held in the communicating partner's repository. To reach this aim, the following five levels are necessary:

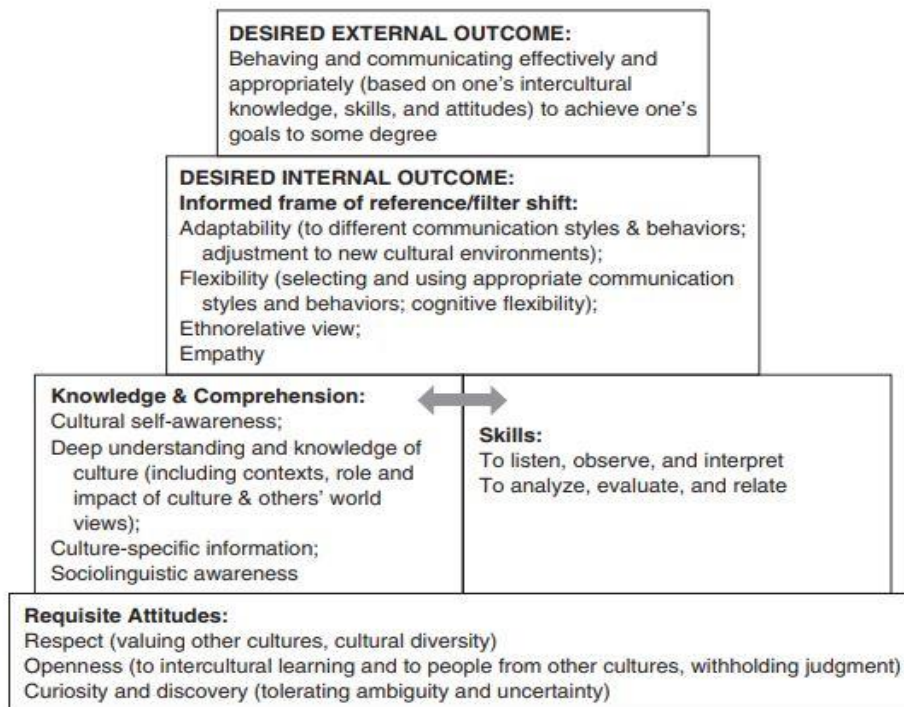
- acknowledging diversity;
- organizing information according to stereotypes;
- questioning the stereotypes;
- analyzing communication episodes;
- generating “other culture” messages.

According to Beamer (1992), cultural stereotypes are among the most important barriers to effective intercultural communication, and this is the reason why she presented five categories of questions to challenge cultural stereotypes, and thus enhance intercultural competence. Náдай (2017) also investigates stereotypes as possible barriers to effective

intercultural business negotiations, however, she emphasizes the positive effects of cultural stereotypes on intercultural communication as well. They both came to the conclusion that through intercultural learning and questioning cultural stereotypes intercultural communication could be more effective and appropriate.

By contrast, a bit different and more complex components are included in the pyramid model of intercultural competence (Figure 1) proposed by Deardorff (2006) who points out that the degree of intercultural competence depends on acquired degree of the underlying components. She (Deardorff, 2006) also states that intercultural competence is higher if one moves from the personal level (attributes) to the interpersonal/interactive level (outcomes). Figure 1 shows that all elements of intercultural competence contribute to some extent to effective and appropriate intercultural communication as the components are primarily related to communication and behavior in intercultural contexts.

Figure 1: The pyramid model of intercultural competence



Source: Deardorff, 2006, p. 254.

Based on the literature review, it can be stated that intercultural competence enables effective intercultural communication which helps eliminate communication obstacles such as misunderstandings because of cultural differences, cultural stereotypes, and language barriers. It can also be argued that everybody needs intercultural competence in today's diverse societies and world (Jokikokko, 2010, p. 13), however, obtaining intercultural competence is a thrilling challenge since nobody is called upon to understand the values of others (Szőke, Tompos, Ablonczy-Mihályka, 2017, p. 125).

3 Purpose, data and methods

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the effect of intercultural competence on intercultural communication as well as to emphasize the consequences of the lack of intercultural competence on intercultural communication with the help of some case studies collected among Hungarian businesspeople working with partners with different cultural backgrounds.

According to top intercultural scholars (Deardorff, 2006), quantitative methods do not seem the best to measure intercultural competence or its effect, but qualitative ones, like case studies and interviews, are the top methods. Therefore, the data (case studies) come from interviews conducted among Hungarian business professionals working and communicating with partners coming from different cultures.

The interviewees were selected by snowball method, so first the interviewees were selected from the author's own network, and then other interviewees were 'snowballed' by the firstly selected ones. However, it was a criterion that only practicing Hungarian businesspeople who often work and communicate in an international environment could be interviewed.

A total of 16 interviews were conducted. The following analysis relies on the responses of 11 male and 5 female interviewees, 43.8% of whom represent the younger generation (between 20 and 35), 37.5% the middle-aged generation (between 36 and 49), and 18.7% the 50+ age category. Each respondent holds at least a bachelor's degree and speaks at least one foreign language (English or German) at least at an intermediate level.

The research was conducted by means of structured interviews, so predetermined questions were asked in a fixed order, yet open questions were also included so that case studies could be collected. To analyze the content of the interviews the methods of meaning coding, meaning condensation and meaning interpretation (Kvale, 1996) were used. Although the interview sheet contained more questions focusing on misunderstandings during intercultural communication, the paper discusses only the responses related to the case studies which illustrate the effect, especially the lack of intercultural competence on intercultural communication.

4 Findings and discussion

The interviewees were asked to mention case studies, namely critical incidents, especially negative ones, so that the consequences of the lack of intercultural competence could be investigated and illustrated. 11 out of the 16 interviewees could mention critical incidents related to intercultural communication and intercultural

competence. 10 out of the 11 critical incidents were negative ones and one was a positive critical incident.

The paper presents only some of the negative critical incidents, but those ones which illustrate well that the misunderstandings and miscommunication were resulted by the lack of intercultural competence. The following selected negative critical incidents were mentioned by Hungarian businesspeople about their foreign partners (mainly Austrians):

- *“In case of a personal meeting, we had agreed orally on the price and every other detail, but later when we sent the order electronically, our partner demanded conditions different from the ones on which we had previously agreed.”*
- *“Once we had to complain about the quality, and even though our complaint was supported by minutes and photos, it was very hard to come to an agreement, and we had to turn to the management.”*
- *“A completely clear agreement was later presented in an absolutely different way by my partner.”*
- *“During the receipt of goods my partner referred to late delivery and was not willing to pay the full amount, despite the delay had been only a few minutes.”*
- *“My partner from an Austrian travel agency expected me to give extra discount for the group travelling with them. He didn’t give any reason for this expectation.”*

One may think that it was the lack of language knowledge which led to miscommunication in the above cases, which would coincide with the research findings of previous studies (e.g. Tompos, Ablonczy-Mihályka, 2017; Tompos, Ablonczy-Mihályka, Kecskés, 2014), namely that Hungarian business professionals tend to attribute miscommunication to factors other than lack of intercultural competence, for example to limited foreign language knowledge. However, in this case the interviewees were also asked to report their own ideas regarding the possible causes of the miscommunication, and they mentioned that it happened because of the different way they behave and conduct business. If this response is compared to the pyramid model of intercultural competence, it can be seen that the interviewees are most likely at the first, personal level of intercultural competence, since they realize the differences in the behavior of their partners, but nothing has been done to deeply understand, know and respect their partners’ culture or either to behave and communicate according to these cultural differences. These findings suggest that their degree of intercultural competence is either very low or zero, which may cause the problems and miscommunication mentioned in the case studies. Had the interviewees known much about their partners’ culture, for example their values, norms, habits, and communication styles, they would have communicated more effectively and appropriately. If the interviewee who had faced the problem of delay, for instance, had known that in many countries/cultures punctuality is considered to be extremely important, he wouldn’t have been surprised at his partner’s complaint about the

few minutes delay, and would have communicated in a more intercultural competent way. Or if the interviewee whose partner did not give any reason for the extra expectation had been aware of that in certain cultures communication is less straightforward and people have to read between the lines, she would have understood the lack of explanation. These results also imply that most of the barriers to communication are culture-related, which again calls for a high degree of intercultural competence. Therefore, it can be stated that the lack of intercultural competence or even the low degree of it has a significant effect on intercultural communication, since 10 interviewees out of 16 mentioned culture-related negative critical incidents caused by their lack or low level of intercultural competence.

Moreover, the research dealt with the consequences of these negative critical incidents. In connection with that, it was found that in two cases the miscommunication turned out to be such a serious problem that it resulted in the breaking of the relationships. Thus, besides its effect on intercultural communication, the lack of intercultural competence may have serious negative consequences on intercultural relations as well.

The overall result of the investigation shows that business professionals inevitably need to be trained with high level intercultural competence so that the culture-related barriers to communication as well as the misunderstandings could be avoided when interacting with people with different cultural backgrounds.

Obviously, the research has its limitations. On the one hand, the sample size is small and the sample is nonrepresentative, which limits generalizations, and on the other hand, the research findings reflect a Hungarian and also a subjective viewpoint of the critical incidents due to the fact that only Hungarian business professionals were interviewed.

5 Conclusion

The paper discussed the effect of intercultural competence on intercultural communication. Having reviewed the literature, the paper introduced a qualitative research the aim of which was to collect case studies among Hungarian businesspeople so that the consequences of the lack of intercultural competence could be examined and illustrated.

The findings of the investigation into the effect of intercultural competence on intercultural communication show that intercultural competence is in its infancy among the interviewed Hungarian businesspeople as it was found that in most cases it was the lack or the low degree of intercultural competence which led to misunderstandings and miscommunication during intercultural communication. The findings also indicate that the barriers to communication are culture-related, thus intercultural competent businesspeople are more likely to avoid miscommunication during their intercultural interactions.

The results in general indicate that Hungarian businesspeople, although being aware of the different behavior of their partners, do not communicate in an interculturally competent way as they do not know deeply the culture of the others, and are not adaptable to different communication styles and behaviors either.

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