Intercultural Training in Business
and Education: the Case of the Danube Region

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Abstract: The goal of this paper is to present practical experience in intercultural training in Bulgaria and to outline the main implications from educational and business training perspectives. The analysis uses Geert Hofstede's cultural orientations to analyze two cases of training practices in education and business in the Danube Region. The cross-cultural training took place in 2017 - an international project for intercultural adult education in Danube countries and a human resource management training in an engineering company. The main research methods are literature review and observation. Results are analysed using the Geert Hofstede theoretical paradigm. Intercultural training is key for successful interpersonal interactions both in mono- and cross-cultural teams. There are recommendations for cross-cultural training design derived from the observation both in business and in education. These results could be used for cross-cultural training and research planning. The recommendations could be in favour of practitioners, business trainers, teachers and researchers with interests in development of cross-cultural competence. Results of this paper shed light on the main characteristics of intercultural training in the Danube Region and could be used as guidance for creating problem-solving practices in business and education, based on cultural values.

Keywords: intercultural communication; cross-cultural training; education; business; human resources

1. Introduction

Geographically, Bulgaria is part of Europe; therefore relations with foreign partners exist with a millennial history. Contemporary business life is characterized by rapid political, economical and demographic changes. As a result, business relations are characterized by intense and complicated dynamics. What is more, by default business is supposed to be effective and efficient, to meet objectives with minimum resources. Keeping in mind that culture differences are invisible, rather unstructured with strong impact, the challenge for business is getting severe to operate in that environment.

Cultural awareness becomes important not only in business, but in everyday life. Migration processes have reached a point of almost every family have a close relative abroad and communicates with representatives of other cultures. Being part of EU,

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also exposes opportunities for mobility of different kind. Thus, importance of cross-cultural competence grows rapidly.

A kind of compass is more that needed and useful to orientate. (Veber, 2017) The idea of the compass is inspired from the fact that it is a device for setting directions but also for our own location. Thus, a concept of "culture" and cross-cultural differences comes in hand. What is more, different areas of cross-cultural training, i.e. International communication is a self-dependent educational field.

Two examples of cross-cultural training are described below. One is business training; the other is training experiment among life-long learners. The conclusions are based on observation method - active acquisition of information from primary source, i.e. conducted trainings.

2. A Brief Overview of Intercultural Training Theory

Numerous cultural training procedures have been developed. Until early 1980s, they were based mainly on empirical impressions. On the other hand, it is proven that intercultural trainings based on theoretical foundation are rather effective, compared to one based on examples and experience only. Culture's Consequences (Hofstede, 1980; sited in Hofstede, Piderson & Hofstede, 2003) provide dimensions for cultural analysis. Actually, there are other concepts as well (Hall, Triandis, Trompenaars, GLOBE Project, etc.), but five dimensional model of Geert Hofstede is may be the most popular one in Europe. Thus, this model is widely imbedded in Intercultural trainings.

Dimensional set is important aspect of training concept. Some of the trainings are focused on one dimension only, with respect to culture comparison (Bhawuk, 1998; sited in Hofstede et al., 2003). However, it doesn't provide the bigger picture, and to some extend reduces the training cognitive value. The reverse trend is observed in business trainings, i.e. to compile dimensions from different models. One should be careful doing it, since dimensions could overlap (correlate). Usually, the trainees are not experienced enough to recognize overlapping at glance, but it could cause further misinterpreting. For short trainings (one - few days) we would recommend to focus on one validated model. In our case it is Geert Hofstede dimensional model.

In its most popular form, Hofstede's concept comprised of five cultural dimensions e.g. Individualism-Collectivism; Uncertainty Avoidance; Power Distance, Masculinity-Femininity and Future Orientation. Geert Hofstede's five-level model is adopted for the following reasons: 1) the dimensions asses values, thus deep enough to provide core understanding; 2) it is the widely used in Bulgaria, thus gives floor for comparisons and personal associations; 3) the five dimensions rather than the six-grade model are intentionally chosen because the object of the training are employees. It is carried out at the workplace but on everyday life. In this sense, the

sixth dimension –Indulgence vs. Restraint is considered as non relevant. The five dimensions are employed to expose the value level of culture (Pencheva, 2018).

3. Cross-cultural Business Training

Intercultural training is based on tree didactic points, i.e. a) understanding culture as a given set of social rules widespread in a particular society; b) cross-cultural dimensions knowledge; c) skills for intercultural interaction.

Following the five cross-cultural dimensions, ten synthetic cultures were adopted in the training. Synthetic cultures represent deliberately enhanced end-states of the five cross-cultural dimensions. (Hofstede et al., 2003) These cultures consist of attitudes, beliefs, positive and negative concepts, norms, rules, self-definitions, values, and others characteristic of the final dimensions of each of Hofstede's five dimensions. In the outline of each synthetic culture are mentioned: the "mania" of each of the ten cultures (for example, people in individualistic culture are completely fascinated by freedom); basic distinctions, golden rules and positive and negative concepts; the most likely stereotypes of outsiders; the expected behavior as a result of stress and so on.

In terms of trading sequence the following progression have been followed: a) training kick off – introduction, objectives of training, diving into topic via group discussion and visual supplements; b) responsiveness exercises creation awareness for "software of mind" using visual supplements and short case studies; c) introducing the concept of culture and cultural sensitivity; d) introducing the barriers for efficient, intercultural communication – small groups exercise, overcoming tips and trick; e) diving into culture concept via onion diagram – multiple examples, group discussion based on popular movies; f) cultural dimensions – introducing dimensions, pointing out multiple examples, including trainees experience; g) intercultural communication exercises, visual supplements, case studies, group discussion; k) training overview, feedback and closing.

Pilot testing of the above mentioned sequence has been conducted in Sofia, Bulgaria, in an engineering company (one of the leaders in the sector), in 2017, for one day, with 16 trainees – first and middle management positions and key officers. The company operates all over the world. The operations in Europe are located in three major countries (including Bulgaria). The trainees group has been diverse in management experience and cross-cultural experience. Some of the trainees possess rich cultural experience, other – none.

As a conclusion and discussion form that conducted training a few things could be pointed out: a) in a mixed group with diverse cultural experience it is very important to do a proper induction in the theme. For example, trainees should experience cultural clash via game, in which they could be feel how common rules work in one

environment and fails in other. Good starting point is using ambiguous visual materials which could be interpreted in various ways. b) It is important for the effectiveness of the training to ask trainees to share their international experience, thoughts, and situations in order, either to link their personal experience with the theoretical concepts, or to provide those who lags such understanding with in-company examples. c) Opening and closing with one and the same thing – story, movie, etc. would be in favor of monitoring the progress of the training. Firstly used as an illustrative example, lastly as a food for cross-cultural analysis.

4. Intercultural Training Experiment among Life-Long Learners

We examined the practical experience acquired in preparing and executing an intercultural training seminar for citizens from four Danube region countries: Croatia, Germany, Romania and Serbia during the Open Doors for Danube Countries for All (ODDA) project (24.-28.07.2017) in Bad Urach, Germany. The goal of the seminar was for the participants to be able to *predict* social norms and behaviours in the Danube region based on the information available from intercultural analysis tools and methodical materials provided by the lecturer.

Our methodical approach is based on the rising necessity for better intercultural training methods in Europe as a whole and the Danube region in particular. In the context of intensive migration processes in and out of the EU, as well as between the member states, traditional training practices like language training or computer skills provide insufficient improvement in communication competences. The key missing factor for success in developing intercultural competence for all ages is a multi-dimensional training approach that combines interactive methods (group discussions and role-play) and inter-thematic tasks when students practise analytical skills.

The seminar was completed in a group of 12 participants from 4 countries – 4 people from Germany, 4 from Romania, 2 from Croatia and 2 from Serbia. Learning targets were to be able to predict social norms and behaviours in the Danube region based on the information from the intercultural analysis tools. To be prepared what to expect from the host country without knowing its official language and its cultural heritage. Work language was English with course duration of 120 minutes. The course was conducted as an interactive presentation including a controlled discussion, lecture section and tasks testing for the new acquired knowledge. Consequence of the seminar was that participants should be capable of making predictions without knowing the local language(s).

The intercultural seminar included the following stages:

1. Watching a videoclip of a social experiment in Bulgaria (15 minutes) – a man loses his wallet in the street and reactions of strangers to the situation are recorded[1]. Participants had to discuss the content of the video from their own national perspective. The task had to introduce them into the concept of cultural differences and how they affect behaviour. Participants successfully identified the differences between their cultures and Bulgarian culture. They spotted correctly both individual characteristics of behaviour together with cultural peculiarities.

2. Theoretical training in the Richard Lewis model of cultural types[2] (30 minutes) – linear-active cultures, reactive cultures and multi-active cultures.
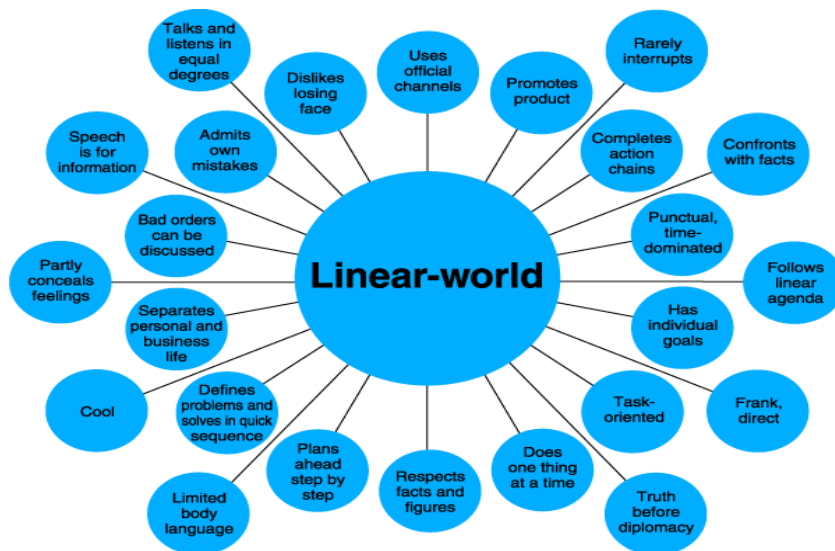
Figure 1. Illustrative chart from the seminar's presentation

Participants expressed curiosity about the concept of cultural classification charts. They easily learned how to distinguish the 3 main types of cultures when given situational examples.

3. Working in teams with information cards (3 teams with 4 cards each) based on intercultural analysis tools like guide.culture-crossing.org and www.crossculture.com, as well as tutor's own materials (40 minutes). Information cards contained the following data: country's name and flag; general information (population number, language (s), etc.); culture and communication (greetings, communication style, eye contact, ideas of time, personal space and touching, gestures, taboos), cultural characteristics according to R. Lewis.

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[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N_blrnJE26k.
[2]https://www.crossculture.com/

The lecturer personally compiled the visuals in the information cards. Main task was easy readability and universally understandable format. Participants were given the opportunity to express their opinion on the content and its reliability. Most shared agreement with the correctness of information, some noticed several discrepancies that needed correction.

Figure 2. Information card for intercultural analysis

1. The main methodical approach is completing a set of tasks in groups. The point was to practice teamwork in an unknown setting between people from different cultures. Students were asked to make mixed groups – each nation had to be presented once in each team. Four teams were grouped. The *first task* was for the teams to compare each set of Danube countries using the upper mentioned communication elements (greetings, communication style, eye contact, ideas of

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time, personal space and touching, gestures, taboos, cultural characteristics according to R. Lewis) and put them into the correct category (*linear-active, reactive and multi-active*). The *second task* was to situate the countries in the Lewis' triangular classification chart. Participants managed to differentiate whether the communication style of a given country was, for example, linear-active, multi-active or reactive, and to position the countries close to the correct placing according to the Lewis chart. Major difficulty was to differentiate between the subtle differences of culture type degrees.
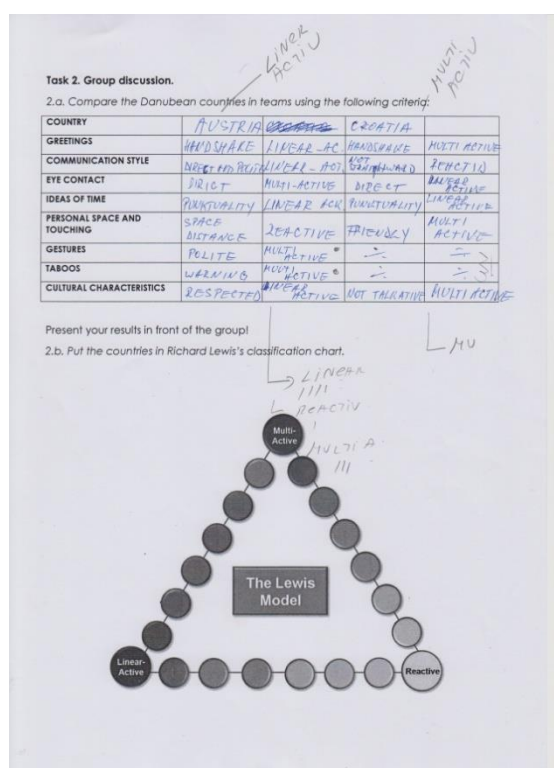

Figure 3. Group tasks of participants

2. Feedback questionnaire was the last component that represents the overall satisfaction with the workshop. Other feedback was necessary for determining the following: the most and least valuable about the workshop; degree of satisfaction with the relevance of participants' workshop contents, quality of teaching materials, quality of teaching methods, workshop venue/facilities, organizational arrangements for and during the event, date and duration of the workshop; what topic(s) or theme(s) they would like to be addressed at the next ODDA intercultural workshop;

additional opinions; optional details (name, country, institution, e-mail). 8 out of 12 participants filled in the questionnaire.

3. Results of feedback:

a. Overall satisfaction – 75% of participants were very satisfied with seminar, 12,5% were somewhat satisfied and 12,5% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

b. The most valuable components of the seminar were the Lewis cultural types, the opportunity to practice team work, as well as accessibility of taught material. 25% of participants were least satisfied with the duration of the lecture component and the lack of access to all information cards for proper classification of countries.

c. Rating the degree of satisfaction with the relevance of participants' workshop contents, quality of teaching materials, quality of teaching methods, workshop venue/facilities, organizational arrangements for and during the event, date and duration of the workshop was not completed by all participants and there is certain variation between answers. Overall, all participants rate the upper components in the range from "Excellent" to "Good".

d. Desired topics for the next ODDA intercultural workshop were cultural differences between people's lives in Danube towns, historical background for cultural differences and how communication is facilitated between countries with different languages. All opinions focused on the practical aspect of intercultural workshop.

Implications of the seminar – we consider that learning through visual interactive materials is best for all age learners. What the author concludes from the feedback and personal impressions of the participants' reactions is that visual sources have to be prepared professionally after detailed research of the meaning of symbols in each Danube culture. Visual representation of the text in cards is also desirable. Overall, simplicity of visualisation would help in better learning. We believe additional work with graphic designers is necessary. Results show that this type of intercultural training needs improvement but also has a lot of potential for future development. Its main advantage is the potential for applicability in various education practices.

5. Conclusions

We believe that intercultural training in the proper setting is suitable for both education and business. In the context of higher migration rates in Europe as well as the increasing foreign workforce, cross-cultural competence is a key factor for successful team management. Discussed results and approaches could be used for creating problem-solving practices in education, business and entrepreneurship.

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