

WORKERS' INTERCULTURAL EXPERIENCES ABROAD AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR TERTIARY EDUCATION

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As a result of globalisation, Hungary's joining the European Union, technological innovations, educational and labour mobility the requirements of employees have changed. The demand of knowing and understanding of other cultures is of crucial importance in order to achieve successful intercultural communication. It is especially vital in the case of the workers at foreign owned and directed companies, and when employees are sent abroad on business. Therefore, the aim of my research was to find out the workers' intercultural experiences and problems abroad. On the basis of the research results, decisions can be made on how intercultural training at Hungarian tertiary level education has to be adjusted to students' work-related needs. The first part of my study focuses on the results of an empirical study carried out at local companies in northern Hungary in winter 2012. The employees filled in the Hungarian online questionnaire, which included questions on business trips and trainings abroad, and the Hungarian workers' personal experiences and conflicts with foreign colleagues abroad. The second part of the paper presents the offered preparation courses at the University of Miskolc, Hungary. Finally the research results are compared with the offered courses, and on the basis of the findings suggestions are made on how to harmonize the results with the everyday work of teaching in order to design an appropriate curriculum and to give students - further employees - a more marketable knowledge and competence.

Keywords: intercultural communication, foreign language teaching, tertiary education

It is quite common nowadays for companies to employ workers brought up and socialized in different countries and cultures. It has also become common for companies to work together within international networks. Multinational companies establish subsidiaries engaged in the research, design, development and manufacture of products in different countries. Employers often send their workers abroad on business or to trainings. The previously mentioned work circumstances require intercultural communication at work. Workers from different cultural backgrounds and

with different mother tongues have to face several differences in their workplaces every day.

Cultural differences mainly result from the differences in the order of values. Life values (e.g. the value of family) have a great effect on our employment and the way we work. The role and importance of family, friends, acquaintances, free time activities, religion, politics significantly influences one's motivation in work and affection for his/her workplace. In different cultures these values have a different order of importance. Therefore the differences in the order of values at the multicultural workplaces result in several problems and conflicts (Borgulya, 2007:52).

Besides the differences in the order of values in different cultures behavioural expectations influence our intercultural interactions, as well. People form their expectations consciously or unconsciously in a given context on the basis of the norms, conventions, principles, legal agreements and protocols that are associated with that context. They develop a sense of what behaviour others should or should not perform, and if the expected behaviour does not occur, they feel annoyed. Behavioural norms are the manifestations of deeply held values (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009:111).

The differences workers come across might result in misunderstandings, problems or even conflicts. "*Successful inter-cultural communication has social and economic consequences for both labour and management, since communication breakdown can lead to interpersonal conflict and a drop in productivity due to time lost in negotiation of meaning*" (Clyne, 1994:211). Therefore the paper aims to show some of the intercultural experiences and problems Hungarian workers had to face abroad.

The aims, methods, setting and subjects of the research

The aim of the empirical study was to find out the workers' intercultural experiences and problems abroad. It was hoped that on the basis of the findings, decisions on teaching materials and practices could be made in order to provide students with more up-to-date or suitable language and cultural knowledge for the job market. The importance of trying to adapt university curricula to the demands of business and industry is to give students – future employees – a more marketable knowledge and competence in the fields of language and intercultural communication.

The results are based on an empirical study, which was carried out at local companies in northern Hungary in winter 2012. To obtain the research data non-probability sampling was chosen. It is used when probability samples are impossible or unfeasible to select. One of the types of non-probability sampling is reliance on available subjects (Babbie, 1986:173-175).

Non-probability sampling is used when probability sampling is difficult to achieve. Its disadvantage is that it does not involve *random* selection. Non-probability sampling may not represent the population well, therefore the sample cannot be considered to be representative of the examined population (Majoros, 2004:102-104).

In the present research non-probability sampling was used firstly because doing research at a company is a difficult task, secondly companies do not allow every worker to take part in a research. Therefore this method seemed to be the most suitable one and the companies decided who could participate in the study.

The method of data collection was the questionnaire. Questionnaires were chosen to be used because they are useful for collecting data from large

groups of subjects, they make large samples feasible. Moreover, they are reliable because questionnaires present all subjects a standardized stimulus (Babbie, 1986:232-233).

The Hungarian questionnaire included questions on the respondents' language knowledge, language use at the workplace, intercultural experiences and problems at the companies in Hungary and abroad on business. The questionnaire contained closed and open-ended questions and Likert scales. However, the present paper only analyses some of the closed and open-ended questions concerning the business trips and trainings abroad (the visited countries, the time spent abroad), and the Hungarian workers' personal experiences and conflicts with foreign colleagues abroad.

Closed questions were used, because they direct the respondents' thoughts, but at the same time it allows the researcher to compare the participants' answers and easy to process them. It is easier and quicker to answer closed questions. The disadvantages are the loss of spontaneity and expressiveness (Oppenheim, 2005:112-114).

Open-ended questions were chosen, because they give freedom to the respondents, let their thoughts roam freely, and free-response questions are expressed spontaneously. They are easy to ask, but difficult to answer them and even more difficult to analyse (Oppenheim 2005:112-113).

As the survey method the self-completion questionnaire was used, where the participants filled out the questionnaire through EvaSys online evaluation system. The participants were selected by the companies themselves. The respondents voluntarily completed the questionnaire and their anonymity was assured.

The study was conducted at 14 local companies in northern Hungary. Among the 14 companies there were 8 small Hungarian owned enterprises and 6 multinational companies out of which two are American owned, one Chinese owned, one English owned, and two German owned.

At the 14 companies 50 workers filled in the questionnaire during their working hours. Table 1 contains further information of the workers in question. We can see that most of the respondents (70%) are female; only a few male workers (30%) filled in the questionnaire. The table shows that a quarter of the participants (26%) are quite young, that is, between 24 and 30 years of age, about half of them (46%) are between 31 and 40 years of age, almost a quarter of them (22%) are middle aged (41-50 years old), and only 6% of the workers are above 51 years old. The table illustrates that 68% of the respondents work as employees at the examined companies, and only some of them are employed as low-level leaders (8%), mid-level leaders (16%), and top-level leaders (8%). We can see that the participants are highly qualified, as more than half of them (56%) acquired a Master's degree, a third of them (32%) got a Bachelor's degree, 8% of them has a PhD, and 1 person finished a secondary grammar school, and another one a secondary technical school.

Table 1. *The subjects of the research*

	number of workers	percentage
GENDER	Female: 35	70%
	Male: 15	30%
AGE	average age: 36.46 years	---
	24-30 years: 13	26%
	31-40 years: 23	46%
	41-50 years: 11	22%
	above 51 years: 3	6%
EMPLOYMENT STATUS	employees: 34	68%
	low-level leaders: 4	8%
	mid-level leaders: 8	16%
	top-level leaders: 4	8%
QUALIFICATION	secondary technical school: 1	2%
	secondary grammar school: 1	2%
	Bachelor's degree: 16	32%
	Master's degree: 28	56%
	PhD: 4	8%

The results of the research

The following section presents the results of the research, the offered preparation courses at Miskolc University and their consequences for tertiary education. The first part shows the countries and times spent on business trips abroad. The second part describes the countries and times visited on trainings abroad. The third part illustrates the work-related experiences and problems of the participants abroad. The fourth part deals with other experiences and problems abroad. The fifth part shows the preparation courses of the University of Miskolc. Finally the results are compared with the offered courses and suggestions are made on how to give students a more marketable knowledge and competence of foreign languages and intercultural communication.

Business trips abroad

A two-third (66%) of the workers has been on a business trip abroad. They have been to 22 different countries, which are the following: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Croatia, England, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Malaysia, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Switzerland, and Turkey. Table 2 shows the frequency of the business trip. We can see that only a few of the participants (6%) go regularly (every month or more often) abroad on business, a few (6%) go 6-10 times a year, half of the them (49%) go 1-5 times a year, a third of them (30%) rarely have this possibility, and 9% of them have been on a business trip only once so far.

Table 2. *How many times have you been on a business trip abroad? (n=33)*

once so far		2-5 times so far		1-5 times a year		6-10 times a year		every month or more often	
3	9%	10	30%	16	49%	2	6%	2	6%

Trainings abroad

A third (34%) of the respondents has taken part in training abroad. They have been to 6 countries, which are the following: Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, England, Germany, the Netherlands. Table 3 illustrates the frequency of trainings abroad. It can be seen that 12% of the workers have taken part in training abroad often (6-10 times a year), 18% of them go 1-5 times a year, a quarter of them (23%) have participated 2-5 times a year, and half of them (47%) have been on a training only once so far.

If we compare the results of business trips and trainings abroad, we can see that more participants have been on a business trip than on training abroad, workers have more frequently travelled abroad on business than on trainings, and the respondents have been to almost four times more countries on business than on trainings abroad.

Table 3. *How many times have you taken part in training abroad? (n=17)*

once so far		2-5 times so far		1-5 times a year		6-10 times a year		every month or more often	
8	47%	4	23%	3	18%	2	12%	0	0%

Work-related experiences and problems

On the basis of the experiences discussed above, a quarter of the participants (24%) had work-related problems when they were abroad. Most of the mentioned problems are connected to language use. The reason for these problems relies in cultural and linguistic differences. Because, if corporate communication involves two workers of different cultural backgrounds with different mother tongues, workers can communicate by using the mother tongue of speaker A, or the mother tongue of speaker B, or they can choose a third language. In the first case speaker A is at an advantage over speaker B both at linguistic and cultural levels; and speaker B is at a disadvantage. In the second case speaker B is at an advantage over speaker A. In the third case both speakers have to face different linguistic and cultural differences and difficulties, because they "...bring their own sociocultural expectations of language to the encounter. Speakers' expectations shape the interpretation of meaning in a variety of ways" (Bowe & Martin, 2007:1). Due to these differences in language usage communication may result in misunderstandings or even conflicts.

As far as language barriers are concerned the workers mentioned three problem areas: comprehension; the speed of speech; and the differences in pronunciation, accents and dialects. The respondents found comprehension problematic. Here is an example from a participant to illustrate this issue: "The foreign partner seemed to have understood what I was saying, but later I found out that he had not." The example shows that Hungarian employees problems due to the lack of comprehension. Besides comprehension problems, the Hungarian workers found the foreign speakers' speech to fast. For example: "It is difficult to follow very fast speech." The example illustrates that the faster communication speed makes comprehension difficult or sometimes even impossible. Moreover, the participants experienced difficulties due to different accent, dialects or pronunciation. Most of them mentioned the accent of Asian people. Here are two examples to illustrate this problem: "The special English accent of the Spanish and the Chinese is difficult for me," said a Hungarian worker. "I have to get used to Asian accent," said another respondent. Besides the accents of the Spanish

and Chinese colleagues the participants had problems understanding their communication partners due to the foreigners' dialects, for example: *"The foreigner spoke a dialect, therefore it was difficult to understand his explanation."* Furthermore, the Hungarian workers found it difficult to understand their foreign partners' pronunciation. Here is an example to support this point: *"It is really difficult to understand the Indian and South-African partners when they speak English."*

If we compare the outcomes of the present study with research studies carried out at Hungarian multinational companies (Bajzát, 2010; Falkné, 2008) we can find some similarities with the present results.

Klára Falkné Bánó did her research among Hungarian managers and their employees, and her findings also proved that language usage is one of the most essential aspects of intercultural communication and in many cases results in intercultural misunderstandings (Falkné, 2008:197).

As we can see the results of these two other studies confirm the outcomes of the present research, because they also prove that language use plays an important role in intercultural communication and miscommunication can lead to misunderstandings, problems or even conflicts.

Besides work-related linguistic problems the participants also experienced some work-related cultural problems due to the differences of life values and behavioural norms. The respondents mentioned that the differences between Hungarian law and the law of other countries caused misunderstanding with their foreign partners. Here are two examples to illustrate this point: *"They [foreign partners] do not understand Hungarian law, therefore they do not really accept it,"* said a worker. Another employee faced problems due to the differences in contract rules, for example: *"They [foreign partners] do not deal with the contract rules strictly."* Another area, where the participants experienced differences, which resulted in problems, was the differences of importance and unimportance in a culture. A participant answered the following: *"Due to cultural differences judging the priority of tasks caused problems. What I found unimportant (statistics) was really essential to him [the foreign partner]."*

Other experiences and problems

A fifth of the respondents (20%) experienced other problems while they were abroad on business or taken part in training. However, only two of the participants answered this open-ended question. One of them felt that foreigners, could not put themselves in the Hungarians' shoes, as he said: *"They [foreign partners] cannot always identify themselves with Hungarian mentality."* The other worker mentioned a typical Hungarian complimentary custom, which is not well-known in other countries and cultures: *"It was not very serious, but we had to pay attention to it: the male German colleagues did not let ladies go first, therefore there was a 'collision' at the door every year."*

Preparation courses at the University of Miskolc

The Language Teaching Centre of Miskolc University offers foreign language courses in: English, French, German, Italian, Russian, and Spanish. The courses are available at all the six Faculties and an Institute of the University (Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Law, Faculty of Earth Science and Engineering, Faculty of Materials and Metallurgical Engineering, Faculty of Mechanical Engineering and Information Science, Faculty of Health Care Studies, Bartók Béla Institute of Music). According to the governmental act of 2002 students should have an intermediate-level state-accredited language examination to earn their degrees. Therefore the primary aim of these language courses is to prepare students for the required exam.

Besides the language courses, there is a preparation for working abroad course offered in English and German at all the six Faculties and an Institute of the University. This course is for students whose knowledge of English or German is at intermediate-level. The aim of the course is to prepare students for the linguistic aspects of working in target language countries. The students first learn some general details and the economic systems of the target language countries, and then they acquire the necessary language knowledge to find a suitable job advertisement, to apply for a job, to fill in a self-knowledge test, to write a CV and a cover letter, to sign an employment contract and to find accommodation abroad.

However, intercultural communication courses are only offered at two Faculties (Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Economics) of Miskolc University. These courses are optional, Hungarian ones.

Implications of the findings

As we have seen in the previous section the participants regularly go on business and trainings abroad. Furthermore, they experience difficulties in comprehension; the speed of speech; and understanding different pronunciation, accents and dialects. Therefore, for the aforementioned reasons, we should develop the workers' communication skills. We can do this by reading and or even learning dialogues, and special expressions used in certain situations. We can also develop this skill by doing listening exercises and acting out role plays. To familiarize them with different pronunciation, students should watch video films or films of several kinds with follow-up exercises, and do listening exercises with speakers from different countries and regions of the world.

The results of the research showed that, while visiting several countries on business or trainings, the Hungarian workers experienced several cultural differences and problems. Therefore we need to develop the students' knowledge of other countries and cultures and call their attention to cultural differences. On the theoretical level students should learn, analyse and understand the most well-known cultural models and cultural dimensions. Learning about the order of life values and their importance in different cultures can raise students' cultural awareness and break down cultural prejudices and stereotyped misconceptions.

On the practical level it can be developed by reading, understanding and discussing the texts and dialogues on other cultures from the used textbook(s). It is also important to compare the gained information of other countries and cultures with one's own culture. The teacher's role is to give and also to call the students' attention to the differences.

Besides using textbooks, there is a wide range of materials we can apply as a supplement. For example, we can use texts from history books, guidebooks or travel books, read short stories, recipes, leaflets, newspaper articles and magazines about or from other cultures, analyse and discuss statistics of the target country and compare it with one's own. We can even invite a speaker from his native country and culture and ask him to give a presentation about their traditions and ways of life, and then encourage students to ask questions from him. To supplement the textbook as an instructional tool, we can use pictures and photos, do listening exercises and listen to songs from different countries.

Furthermore, students' knowledge of other cultures can be developed through online or e-mail messages or having discussion forums with people from other countries and cultures and by living and studying abroad. This way, learners not only gain knowledge about other countries and cultures and develop their knowledge of foreign language, but also experience and learn the process of interaction when communicating with people from different cultures.

Conclusion

This paper first presented the aims, methods, setting and subjects of the research. The second part described the results of the empirical study. The paper showed that a two-third of the workers were on a business trip abroad, visiting 22 different countries and a third of the respondents took part in training abroad in 6 different countries. As far as language barriers are concerned the participants mentioned three problem areas: comprehension; the speed of speech; and the differences in pronunciation, accents and dialects. Besides work-related linguistic problems the respondents also experienced some work-related cultural problems due to the differences of life values and behavioural norms. To support the points, examples were given in each section. Furthermore, the study not only presented some cultural clashing points of intercultural communication at work, but also gave suggestions on how to prepare students – further employees – for such situations.

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