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Introducing Interculturality into Corporate Communication University Courses in the Czech Republic and Malaysia – A Comparative Study

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Abstract.

The article focuses on the results of implementing intercultural issues into two subjects of corporate communication at the Faculty of Informatics and Management, the University of Hradec Kralove, the Czech Republic in the school year 2019/2020, and at the Language Academy, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi, Malaysia in the Semester 1, 2019/2020. The topic of interculturality, in all its various facets, has recently become very important due to increased global business trade, and therefore, needs the undivided attention of university curricula makers. Therefore, the tutors of the courses of corporate communication decided to introduce the topic of interculturality into the university curricula so that the participants of the courses would be well informed and trained on current trends in intercultural business communication in the global world that has recently become very diverse and hence intercultural. The article describes the nature of implementing new intercultural business communication trends and particular topics introduced into the courses, and the paper attempts to highlight their importance in university curricula. It is a case study from both Europe and Asia as it brings real-life university scenarios that could prove helpful for other designers and tutors of similar courses, such as business communication, managerial communication, corporate communication, intercultural training courses, etc.

Keywords. intercultural communication; intercultural education; university curricula; corporate communication; business communication; managerial communication; intercultural business communication; applied linguistics; cognitive linguistics

1. Introduction

1.1. *Intercultural business communication as an academic discipline*

Cognitive linguistics with its attempt to describe various linguistic patterns that function as underlying principles of human cognitive categories (such as time, space and distance) stands as a foundation for any intercultural communication. Intercultural communication deals with the transfer of information between two or more cultural areas or two or more people who come from these culturally distant environments [1]. Moreover, intercultural business communication (IBC) adds an aspect of exchange of information for financial benefits and started as an academic discipline in the 1980s in American universities providing the students with new approaches to business and managerial communication. These new trends in business communication studies should equip the participants of the courses with practical do's and

don'ts when doing business across the borders with people from rather different cultural backgrounds [2]. Obviously, in this case, it was the encounter of the USA with Asian countries (Taiwan, Japan, China, Malaysia, etc.) [3]. This situation developed in the course of upcoming decades and a well-established academic discipline emerged in many European universities [4], and the academic endeavor brought several famous scholars connected to the IBC, such as Geert Hofstede and Fons Trompenaars. The new trends of IBC were first introduced and elaborated in Scandinavia and Western Europe, and much later also in central European universities such as the Czech Republic [5]. Nowadays, also several progressive Asian universities have managed to implement some topics of interculturality into their curricula.

The history of the development of the IBC clearly shows the progress of diversity that is closely connected to globalization with which it keeps its pace. The research into IBC has seen a significant increase after the year 2000 and many universities implemented IBC into their curricula, and also many practical training courses for management of companies were established [6]. Despite this urgency, many universities in some regions still lag behind this current trend and are somehow hesitant in implementing IBC into the list of obligatory courses for their undergraduates in business, finance and information and communication technology (ICT) [7].

This paper attempts to describe a recent implementation of IBC in two universities, namely the University of Hradec Kralove, the Czech Republic, and the Universiti Teknologi, Malaysia. These two regions are very distant and will probably face different challenges in implementing IBC into the curriculum, however, the comparison of these two regional approaches can prove useful for revealing a deeper insight into the current global trends of IBC implementation in universities and can, hopefully, bring some inspiration for curricula makers.

1.2. The current situation in teaching intercultural business communication

The global context of international management and business communication conducted through international borders, political alliances and other new global trends towards tighter cooperation have recently led to increased interest in intercultural, cross-cultural and transcultural issues (all these terms can be used interchangeably). First, in the business environment (as early as in the 1980s and 1990s), and second, in the university curricula reflecting modern trends of global business communication and encounters [8]. These changes in the global business environment have speeded up the need to implement interculturality into the university curricula to make the graduates well-equipped for the global culturally diverse markets.

Intercultural communication as a systematic course implemented into the university curricula for the students of finance, business and ICT could be very useful for the successful international encounters that are now becoming more and more important for profitability and business sustainability [9]. Moreover, when we are in the university context, we can see significant importance of various exchange programs both for the students and the teachers – in Europe, the Erasmus exchange program, fostering interculturality and improving intercultural communication on various academic and non-academic levels.

Intercultural communication competence has become a prerequisite, not only in the business context but also needs further investigation and implementation in others, such as political, social and demographic environments [10], mostly in the regions influenced by mass migration (such as Europe) or increased global business activity (such as China).

Moreover, in the context of non-native speakers, studies have found that participants experienced miscommunication in the form of misunderstandings while working together, and the majority of these misunderstandings were due to a difference in cultural norms, styles and

values [11]. Therefore, if a misunderstanding can happen among people from the same culture, there is a high probability that misunderstandings can occur among people from different cultures. Thus, there is a need to expose students to cultural variations so that they can be better communicators in such an environment where there is a high exposure to diversity and where the need for enhanced communication practices will be useful or even necessary.

1.3. The need for introducing IBC into university curricula

The question of why IBC is important in universities for the students of business, ICT, and management studies is nowadays already answered, and therefore, many universities take it for granted that the course of IBC has already been introduced into their curricula. However, other universities in many European and Asian countries still lag behind current global trends and do not realize the importance of the course. The students are thus deprived of being exposed to global diversity, and their communication strategies in such an environment are merely based on intuition, which could possibly work but needs much more effort, and the method of learning from communication mistakes is not necessarily the best.

Introducing the IBC course into the university curricula has proved to be very pragmatic because it equips the students with basic communication strategies that can optimize information transfer in the globalized world or at least in a diversified environment [5]. Many people from one culture come into contact with people from other cultures, and this encounter brings, almost inevitably, cultural clashes and misunderstandings. IBC can, therefore, be an elegant and very practical tool that will enable the users of it to overcome the obstacles of diversity in an easier way.

This paper summarizes the afore-described attempts, i.e. implementing IBC into university curricula, namely in two geographically very distant universities, even from two continents (i.e. central Europe and south-east Asia). It presents that the course design can be relatively wide, however, stressing the interculturality context, IBC will enhance global business communication and possibly will improve communication strategies leading to increased profitability and sustainability.

Diversity in the globalized world brings many advantages and disadvantages such as this diverse structure of the courses, however, any attempt to bring the topic of intercultural communication will probably always bring fruitful results and will be positively evaluated by the participants of the course in the near future when they have to stand face to face with diversity challenges in the global business environment. Understanding this topic will also necessarily become crucial for sustainability and competitiveness at the beginning of the 21st century despite the current trends of on-shoring and near-shoring which are underway.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. IBC at the Faculty of Informatics and Management at the University of Hradec Kralove, Czech Republic

IBC was implemented into the curriculum of the Faculty of Informatics and Management of the University of Hradec Kralove (FIM UHK) as early as in the academic year 2010/2011. The subject was called Intercultural Business Communication in Global Environment (**IBCGE**). The idea behind this new subject was to provide the students of both business, finance and ICT with a clear communication strategy for their intercultural encounters they will face when they graduate from the university and will start their career, possibly in the global business environment in various multinational enterprises doing business in central Europe. In the academic year 2019/2020, the course was transformed into a Corporate Communication

(CorpC) course comprising business, managerial, intercultural and pure corporate communication.

Both courses are intended both for the Czech students and also for the international students who come to study at the FIM UHK. Each academic year, the course has more than fifty participants from various countries such as the Czech Republic, China, Taiwan, Mexico, and basically all European Union countries. The course lasts one semester, with one lecture and one seminar (i.e. 45+45 minutes) a week, finalized with an exam. The students are required to prepare a presentation on the given topic of IBC and also submit a research paper summarizing their findings in the literature on IBC. The structure of the IBCGE was as follows in Table 1.

Table 1. IBCGE lecture topics

Lecture topic
1. Communication and culture
2. Studying intercultural communication
3. Cultural influences on context: The business setting
4. Intercultural communication in an evolving business context
5. Becoming competent: Improving intercultural communication
6. The global manager's environment
7. Managing interdependence
8. The cultural context of global management
9. Cross-cultural negotiations and decision making
10. Implementing strategy for international and global operations
11. Global alliances and strategy implementation
12. Global human resources management

The structure of the course clearly shows the practical topics were combined with the theoretical background. It started with basic ideas connected to the theory of communication and basic ideas about the cultural foundation of human communication. Further on, it developed into more practical utilization of communication studies in business communication, particularly in global business communication. During the semester, it slowly developed into managerial communication in the global business environment so that the students became more aware of the current trends of global business communication. The course was finalized by the topic of global human resources which deals more with internal communication issues in the global environment.

The need to upgrade the courses a few years ago led to a creation of a new course (academic year 2019/2020) with the title CorpC, bringing new ideas and more current information from the research of IBC. The course is not purely focused on IBC, but it rather brings the topics of IBC and merges them with important issues connected to

1. *Business communication* (i.e. communication focusing on financial profitability),
2. *Managerial communication* (i.e. communication focusing on dealing with people in teams),
3. *Internal communication* (i.e. communication used in internal company processes), and finally,

4. *Corporate* communication (i.e. communication utilized in large corporations to lead people).

The structure of the newly established course of CorpC is described in Table 2.

Table 2. The CorpC lecture topics

The main topic of the lecture	Subtopics
1) The global manager's environment	a) Assessing the environment: political, economic, legal, technological b) Managing interdependence: social responsibility and ethics
2) The cultural context of global management	a) Understanding the role of culture b) Communicating across cultures
3) Managing cross-cultural communication: developing cultural sensitivity in corporate communication	
4) Cross-cultural negotiations and decision making	a) The negotiation process b) Understanding negotiations styles c) Successful negotiations around the world d) Managing the negotiation process and conflict resolution e) Decision-making process
5) Socio-cultural forces in international business	
6) Communicating at work - internal corporate communication	a) The process of communication in the workplace b) Communicating in organizations c) Improving the flow of information in organizations
7) Corporate communication foundations	a) Communicating in teams b) Meeting skills, presentation skills, c) Developing team effectiveness through corporate communication d) Planning and participating in productive meetings
8) Corporate correspondence	a) Preparing to write business messages b) Routine letters and emails c) Persuasive and sales messages
9) Corporate reports and proposals	a) Report planning and research b) Report planning and presentation
10) Employment communication	a) Speaking skills for competent employment communication b) Communication standards deployment
11) Communication in management	a) Decision-making process b) Process of stimulation c) Process of organization and

	implementation d) Control process
12) Setting an efficient internal communication strategy	

The new course (CorpC), when compared with the previous one (IBCGE), is much wider and attempts to implement the topic of interculturality through all disciplines of business, managerial and corporate communication. Unlike in its predecessor, the topic of interculturality is more implicit and connected closely to related fields of communication. Therefore, the students will not have a feeling they are studying interculturality as a new subject, but rather will see that the topic of interculturality is intertwined into various practical topics they face in business communication every day.

2.2. IBC at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

IBC ideas were introduced in the course of Corporate Communication and the Emerging Media (CCAEM) which is not an obligatory course offered in the MA program in Language and Communication in Digital Culture (MLCDC) at Language Academy, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). MLCDC is a new MA program with its first batch of students graduated in April 2019. It is now enrolling its fourth batch while its second batch of students was graduating by the end of April 2020.

The CCAEM course introduces the effective use of oral and written communication skills to suit various corporate communication situations. At the same time, the course also examines the use of emerging media in corporate communication. Thus, one of the topics covered is international corporate communication where aspects of intercultural communication are introduced and emphasized. Intercultural communication is generally defined as the study of communication between different groups and different cultures and it looks at how culture affects communication. Thus, the CCAEM course looks at the interaction between people from different cultural backgrounds using language demonstrating the knowledge and understanding of the different cultures. The structure of the CCAEM course is summarized in the following Table 3.

Table 3. CCAEM topics

The main topic of the lecture	Subtopics
Introduction to Communication	Communication theory Organizational Communication Theory Intercultural communication
Organizational Communication	Strategic and business communication Managing organizational communication
Crisis communication Media relations Processes	Communicating in the time of crisis Handling the media
Human and public relations Integrated marketing communication	Stakeholder communication, managing corporate communication Image, Branding, managing branding
Emerging media communication	Social media, email, smartphones Channel and messages email, smartphones and social media
Effective Communication and Leadership	Charisma and public speaking skills

	Effective business writing skills
International Corporate Communication	Corporate Communication and international considerations e.g. Cultural, political and legal factors that impact business correspondence on a global level.
Intercultural business/ corporate communication	Managing crisis communication and branding
Seminar	Analysing crisis communication and global branding
Case study	Project Report and Presentation

The topics were introduced in weekly lectures through slides and videos (if applicable). The students were briefed about the topics and relevant issues or current intercultural issues were highlighted by the tutor. Further discussions were used to clarify the ideas of interculturality and were considered to be very useful by the students. The interaction in the classroom was part of the learning process and students were expected to participate as much as possible. The tasks were assigned, and the various activities were required to be carried out so that the students had to work in pairs as well as to work in groups. There was also an individual assignment given in the second half of the semester which was necessary for students to complete in order to obtain credits for participation in the course.

The students enrolling in the course were made up of mostly local students with a few international students, and thus, the mix composition allows for a cross-cultural or intercultural interaction to take place. The lecturer highlighted the importance for both local and international students to share insights from their culture with regard to the topic covered on the day.

3. Results

These are the results of the two universities presenting the details of the implementation of the topic of interculturality into the curricula. The students were researched by the means of qualitative satisfaction survey through Google Forms after the end of the courses so that the tutors could obtain some feedback and ideas for the improvement from the participants of the courses.

3.1. CorpC at the FIM UHK

The students' satisfaction with the course was expressed by a satisfaction survey conducted at the end of the semester through an online Google Forms survey. The general satisfaction with the course was expected as it brings fresh ideas regarding business development in the global world and the students are generally eager to have fresh information about the current issues. They know that to succeed in the global competitive environment, it is important not only to use cutting edge technology but also be well-equipped with communication strategies that enable us to communicate more efficiently.

More important were the findings regarding their increased awareness of the interculturality topic and its importance in the current managerial communication. This part of the questionnaire was crucial, and it focused on the course participants' awareness of the topic before the course and after it. The most positively evaluated part of the course was its current background and the real-life scenarios from the diversity of the business world. The students were not very much interested in the theory of IBC as we know from traditional textbooks on IBC and managerial communication, but they preferred as much practical approach as possible. This is very important for the curricula makers as the curricula of IBC cannot tend to be too

theoretical, but they should rather bring current and hands-on issues of business and managerial communication which can easily be utilized in the global business world.

3.2. IBC at the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

To enable the students to experience aspects of international business communication at the workplace, a case study was assigned where they were expected to present the solutions to the business case. This was a group work and thus, students were able to discuss, argue and negotiate their ideas, opinions and agree on the solution to the case. They worked in groups of 3 and 4 students depending on the class size. The groups were assigned different cases from the real world and their solutions should be discussed in relation to IBC or corporate communication. For the group presentation, students were required to present using PowerPoint presentations and they could also have other media to complement their presentation, such as a video. Assessments were conducted based on their oral delivery, content and visual aids used.

The feedback from students at the end of the course were encouraging for the tutor when they stated that the course content and class assignments managed to upgrade their technical competence and knowledge of the subject matter. These are some of their reactions:

Excerpt 1: You did well on giving us assignments that we could call a practical way to understand more about this subject.

Excerpt 2: The various assignments and presentations we made, I can confidently say, helped me to be able to make an effective presentation without worries.

Excerpt 3: I can confidently say that this course has helped me so much by preparing me for an entry into the corporate world.

The components of the course and the assessments carried out in the course in the form of a written assignment, case study presentation and group discussion were seen as very relevant in building students' confidence as reflected in the above feedback from students. The group discussions they had to conduct in order to solve the case study had given them motivation because students were excited to learn about what has been recently going on in the real business world. Thus, researching and discussing authentic cases in the case studies have raised students' awareness of real issues in their field of study.

4. Discussion

Students need to be able to relate what they learned in the classroom with the real-life issues and having cognitive competence means they know how to communicate in the given context. Xu et al. [12] reported that cognitive competence refers to people having communication skills and professional knowledge of international trade and any business communication course should incorporate those skills in the curriculum. Jingzi et al. [13] suggest that language competence and non-language competence in business and cross-cultural communication are important to ensure successful IBC and those competencies should be given emphasis in IBC subjects. They also suggested that aspects of culture, business communication and language must be incorporated into the teaching of IBC.

Other universities have also incorporated some aspects of intercultural communication in business communication and corporate communication. At the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Intercultural Communication in Business is offered as a subject to develop students' awareness and understanding of the issues surrounding intercultural communication in the context of business and professional communication in Hong Kong. The students are expected to complete a few tasks which are written assignment, case study presentation, and case study portfolio [14]. Those tasks are used to assess students' performance in the class. Therefore, the

use of case study and case study presentation by students is one of the ways to develop students' communicative competence in the intercultural business and professional contexts.

There are also many voices that intercultural education is necessary not only in the business context but also in general teacher training [15] and intercultural competence has become a valued predisposition, again, not only in the managerial environment [16]. Several authors have brought many other ideas regarding new methodology in intercultural education such as flipped learning (FL) [17] or personal learning environments (PLE) [18] and these strategies could be utilized in the IBC course as well. And generally, we can observe an increased interest in the topic of interculturality as a way to enhance our ability to be more cooperative in the global environment [19] and a way to make our dialogue at an intercultural level more efficient [20, 21].

5. Conclusion

The recommendations for curricula makers, based on our experience after the implementation of IBC into our courses, are as follows:

- The theoretical part should be reduced to the absolute minimum necessary to understand the topic.
- The history of IBC, which usually takes a lot of part of the IBC courses, should be reduced, again, only bare-bones necessary to understand the topic should be presented.
- Hands-on experiences and real-life examples should be introduced into class as much as possible.

There are many issues connected to intercultural business communication that should not be neglected as superfluous but ought to be considered when preparing any course of IBC, such as politeness strategies in business [22, 9] because they are crucial in the intercultural context of the global business environment.

Obviously, there are certain limitations of the findings which are based on the fact that the paper focuses only on two regions, i.e. the Czech Republic and Malaysia, however, due to the fact that these two regions are very different from a political, economic, cultural, religious and geographical point of view, but it still brings new ideas and could be an inspiration for curricula makers who want to implement IBC in any of its forms into the university curricula.

There are also further research possibilities that should be initiated by this paper which is only an attempt to describe the situation when implementing new intercultural topics into university curricula. Further research could focus on possible changes in intercultural communication caused by antiglobalization trends in younger generations manifested by, for example, an increased interest in near-shoring, minimalism (essentialism) in the modern lifestyle of the younger generation, etc. Further research is also needed into the cooperation of the industrial and business sectors with universities so that IBC does not become an obsolete list of ideas to be followed but stays a lively and inspiring trajectory of human communication.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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