INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND GLOBAL INTEGRATION

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Summary

This paper seeks to explore the different ways in which teachers can effectively teach intercultural communication in tertiary education. Most often when we theorise about intercultural communication, we think of individuals from two different countries such as the United Kingdom and Slovakia communicating with each other and progressing to look for complexities in their communication as a consequence of their contrasting nationalities. All intercultural encounters incorporate communication between individuals who, rather than belonging to only one culture, belong to a diverse array of different cultures at the same time. Some of these cultures they share with the people they are talking to, and some of them do not. And some of these cultural variations and affinities will influence the way they communicate, and some of them will be totally insignificant.

Keywords
intercultural communication, discourse systems, cultural competences, interdiscourse communication.

Összefoglalás

A tanulmány elsősorban az interkulturális kommunikáció területén történö változásokat vizsgálja. Az interkulturális kommunikáció során felbukkanó nehezségek nem csupán földrajzi különbségeknek köszönhetők. A tanulmány különös figyelmet szentel az interdiszkurziv kommunikáció vizsgálatának.

Kulcsszavak
interkulturális kommunikáció, diszkurzus, kulturális kompetencia, interdiszkurzív kommunikáció.

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Globalisation and Interconnectedness

The importance of national borders has been greatly reduced in an era characterised by international joint ventures, mergers, licensing agreements, foreign capital investment, and offshore production. These events have resulted in increased economic interdependencies among nations. Developed and developing nations are now tied directly to an international system of economic interdependence, and most countries have at least one asset within their borders that is needed by another country.

In the pursuit of political alliances, or commercial trade, cultural differences have become more often recognised and accommodated. Societies have been interwoven into a complex fabric of interdependent economic, technological, political, and social relationships. This interdependency is a salient characteristic of the world that we live in, and the future promises even greater interconnectivity, requiring increased cultural knowledge and language abilities.

This interconnectedness, which constitutes the core of globalisation, is the product of the ongoing integration of the world economy. These considerable changes inevitably create an environment where doing business requires people from different cultures to work together. This particular intercultural contact has created a need for knowledge and understanding of how to conduct business in a manner that accommodates different cultural rules. In this new milieu, knowledge of cultural differences and intercultural cooperation are important for long-term success. Communication across cultural boundaries is difficult. Differences in customs, behaviour, and values result in problems that can be managed only through effective intercultural communication and interaction.

Globalisation represents both opportunities and challenges to groups of individuals. In order to develop these opportunities, individuals must rise to the challenge of serving as global players. Global players must forge a transcultural vision that is not bound by a national definition. Mindful intercultural understanding can easily eliminate frictions that exist within and between diverse groups of individuals. There are numerous pragmatic reasons for acquiring intercultural skills. We offer one reason here: global diversity trends. Global players need to understand the global political, cultural, and economic environment. Without accurate knowledge of the economic, political and social culture, intercultural communicators cannot adequately formulate their interpretation on diverse standpoints.

Intercultural Communication: A Culture-sensitive Approach

This paper attempts to introduce a complementary, culture-sensitive approach within the study of intercultural communication which aims to bridge the gap between diverse economic and political cultures in the era of global integration. This new methodological approach is intended to ensure the acquisition and mediation of effective intercultural skills as a new objective in modern language learning and teaching processes and brings about a new concept of intercultural learning which is up-to-date and tailored to the development of effective intercultural skills. This culture-sensitive approach regards cultural differences as potential barriers in mindful intercultural interactions. In order to gain an overall intercultural competence, students need to become aware of the embedded systems within separate cultures. An embedded system is an interdependent set of components that constitutes the entire culture. Culture is influenced by both macro-level and micro-level components in a given environment. On a macro-level, individuals are programmed into a cultural milieu via the educational system, religious, political, and socio-economic systems. On a micro-level, individuals are surrounded by people who subscribe to similar ideologies, values, norms, and expectations.

This Intercultural Communication course attempts to engage students in a lifelong learning process of culture-universal and culture-specific knowledge with the aim of enabling

them to acquire in-depth knowledge, heightened mindfulness, and intercultural skills and apply them to a diverse range of situations. Without culture-sensitive knowledge, students cannot become aware of the implicit culture-specific meanings which are used to evaluate behaviours in an intercultural context. The course presented here explores the key concepts of culture, intercultural communication, intercultural communication competence, and draws attention to discourse systems which facilitate students' understanding of cultural differences in versatile socio-economic encounters.

Culture is a learned system of meaning transmitted through a natural language and other symbols. Through the systems of meaning, groups of people adapt to their environment and structure interpersonal activities. Cultural systems represent a diverse pool of knowledge, or a partially shared cluster of norms, or symbolically created realities. Culture is defined here in a broadly anthropological or sociological framework as a complex frame of reference that consists of patterns of traditions, beliefs, values, norms, symbols, and meanings that are shared, to varying degrees, by interacting members of a community.

Intercultural communication is defined as a symbolic exchange process whereby individuals from two or more different cultural systems negotiate shared meanings in an interactive situation. Intercultural communication competence is simply behaviour that is appropriate and effective in a given context. Intercultural communication competence is further defined as the overall internal capability of an individual to manage key challenging features of intercultural communication: cultural differences and unfamiliarity; inter-group posture; and the accompanying experiences of stress. Five components of competence influence the individual's ability to interact effectively and appropriately in a different cultural system: motivation to communicate; an appropriate pool of knowledge; appropriate communication skills; sensitivity; and character.

Culture is also seen as an instrument for thinking. It is regarded as a technique of separating individuals into groups in accordance with some aspect of these individuals which enables us to understand certain facts about them and how they are different from or similar to other individuals. While this definition seems rather unobjectionable, it really foreshadows the most problematic aspect of this notion of culture: when we separate individuals, where do we draw a line? We might be willing to apply geographical boundaries to divide people up, to talk about the French, the British or the Slovaks. Putting all the people in Slovakia, however, into one category might disguise the fact that people in the northern part of Slovakia eat different food than people in the southern part, or that older people in Slovakia, who may have been alive before the Second World War, are likely to have different ideas about life than their grandchildren who are growing up in a rapidly progressing consumer economy. It might also hide the similarities people living in Slovakia might have with people living in France or the United Kingdom.

This is the cardinal inconvenience with culture; while it enhances us to focus on certain aspects of individuals, it can misrepresent other elements or conceal them from our view altogether. The desire to separate individuals into groups can lead either to lumping, i.e. thinking that all of the individuals who belong to one culture are the same, or binarism, i.e. thinking that individuals are different just because they belong to different cultures. Culture is something that we do. And the way we that we do it might be different at different times and in different circumstances. To declare that "culture is something that we do" has some significance for the study of intercultural communication. It means that if we want to understand intercultural communication we should not focus so much on the individuals and attempt to understand them based on the culture they belong to.

Usually when we think of intercultural communication, we think of people from two different countries such as the United Kingdom or Slovakia communicating with each other and proceeding to search for problems in their communication as a result of their different

nationalities. In our Intercultural Communication course we have set aside, not as unimportant but rather as not directly relevant, aspects of cultural differences that are not directly involved in social interactions between members of different groups. Our focus is on social interactions, on how they develop an internal logic of their own, and how people read those social interactions in making decisions and in taking actions.

Our concern is to analyse situations in which members of different groups are in social interaction with each other and the interpretive processes they must apply to understand each other in those situations which are the common situations of intercultural communication. In many situations some aspects of the so-called cultural difference are of no relevance at all whereas other aspects that might be thought extremely minor assume central importance. As an example of this, it might be the case that religious belief is of central cultural and personal importance to two businesspeople as individuals and as members of their home socio-cultural groups. Yet in a business meeting, this might never be a factor in successful communication. Intercultural communication should refer to communication when members of different groups are directly engaged with each other. The emphasis is on individuals in social interaction with each other, not upon independently conceived differences between them.

Discourse Systems in Intercultural Communication

We use discourse systems instead of cultural systems as our solution to the problem we pointed out with the concept of culture. Instead of talking about communication across cultures we talk about communication across discourse systems or interdiscourse communication. A discourse system consists of four main components: ideas and beliefs about the world, conventional ways of treating other people, ways of communicating using various forms of text, media, and languages, and methods of learning how to use these other tools. Individuals participate in many different discourse systems, i.e. they are members of a particular corporate group, a professional or occupational group, a generation, a gender, a region, and an ethnicity all associated with different discourse systems.

The notion of discourse systems gets us away from thinking about cultures in a deterministic way. Like cultures, discourse systems are tools that we use to help us understand something about how people interact with one another and why. We think that this tool provides us a lot more flexibility and analytical power than a lot of other traditional ideas of culture. For one thing it gets us away from the idea that intercultural communication always has something to do with people from different countries.

The purpose of any intercultural communication course is to come to understand the inferential processes by which individuals communicate their meanings and by which communication counterparts interpret what is said, i.e. to comprehend the functional uses of language in social contexts. The purpose is to come to understand how the language we use is based on the social environment in which we use that language. In a globally integrated world, systems of discourse form a self-contained system of communication with a shared language, with particular ways in which individuals learn what they need to know to become participants, with a particular ideological position, and with quite specific forms of interpersonal relationships among participants in these groups.

The problem we have been trying to understand throughout our Intercultural Communication course is how an individual manages to cope with the complexities of the various different discourse systems in which he or she participates. When a university graduate takes a position in an international corporation, there are various ways in which this individual goes about learning his way through the new forms of discourse as he becomes socialised to his new work environment. The interrelated and interdependent components of this discourse system include four components which are characteristic to any discourse system. The assumptions that make up the ideology of the new corporation are expressed in

the forms of discourse the company makes use of, in the expectations individuals have about how certain people are to be treated, and in the processes the corporation has in place for the training and induction of new employees. The forms of discourse are designed to construct certain kinds of relationships. The social relationships reinforce and reproduce certain identities, patterns of communication, and assumptions about what is good or bad.

For professional intercultural communicators, the Utilitarian discourse system has become the system which is taken for granted as the natural way to communicate among those who work in fields related to business or government. In the Utilitarian discourse system progress is the goal of society; the free and equal individual is the basis of society; humans are defined as rational, economic entities; technology and invention are the sources of societal wealth; creative, inventive individuals are the most valuable for society. The predominating ideology of the Utilitarian discourse system is one of individualism and egalitarianism. Despite the egalitarian face system, communication within the institutions of the Utilitarian discourse system is almost always hierarchical. Virtually all institutions have an organisational chart which shows the hierarchy of position, power, and decision making. Despite the more recent emphasis on flatter hierarchies, managers and leaders of an organisation will retain control over operations and the overall direction of the organisation.

One of the main discourse systems competing with the Utilitarian discourse system is the Confucian discourse system. As Asian nations become increasingly dominant players in the global economy, which is firmly based on Utilitarian principles, the points to contrast between these two major discourse systems have become more and more evident. Economic development in the Confucian sense has less to do with the material advancement of the society and more to do with learning and moral cultivation, which leads to the realisation of the human potential of which the ancestors are held up as exemplars. The focus for the realisation of such potential is not the free, equal individual, as in the Utilitarian formulation, but rather the individual as he exists in a web of social relationships. Obviously, the self-interested, economically minded individuals of a Utilitarian society would not be regarded favourably in this system in which individuals are counted on not to pursue their own interests, but rather to subvert their interests in the interest of the group.

The Utilitarian discourse system, while it may dominate in business, government, or organisational affairs, does not occupy the entire field of discourse. In intercultural communication we need to look at different systems of discourse used across ethnic lines, across generational lines, between genders, and between corporate, professional, and affinity groups. The crucial point is to realise that all (intercultural) communication arises among discourse systems. We speak simultaneously as men or women, as older or younger members of a group, as professionals or locals. We cannot say anything without positioning ourselves within several discourse systems.

Successful intercultural communication in a globally integrated world relies on two factors: increasing shared knowledge and dealing with miscommunication. Pragmatic effectiveness in intercultural communication means participating as fully as possible in the discourse systems of those with whom one is wishing to communicate. Interactional sensitivity means being conscious of the ways in which one's own miscommunications may be perceived and also accepting the fact that one is never likely to be considered a full member of most of the discourse systems in which one will participate.

Research on intercultural communication has revealed that most miscommunication does not arise through mispronunciations or through poor uses of grammar, which are perceived as important aspects of language learning. The major sources of miscommunication in intercultural contexts lie in differences in patterns of discourse. Research has also indicated that intercultural miscommunication and even hostility arise when diverse groups fail to interpret the intentions of the other group as a result of misinterpreting discourse conventions.

Careful attention to communication at the level of discourse analysis leads to effective intercultural/interdiscourse communication.

Communication with culturally different individuals is frequently associated with adverse emotional responses leading to feelings of awkwardness and anxiety. The root of this problem is that language is fundamentally ambiguous. The ambiguity of language is not the result of poor learning. The ambiguity of language means that language can never fully express our meanings. What does it mean for intercultural communication? Communication works better the more the participants share assumptions and knowledge about the world. Where two people have very similar histories, backgrounds, and experiences, their communication works fairly easily because the inferences they make about what the other person means will be based on common experience and knowledge. The ambiguous nature of language is one major source of difficulties in intercultural communication. Where any two people differ in their discourse systems because they are of different genders, different ages, different ethnic group, different educational backgrounds, different parts of the same city, different income or occupational groups, different personal histories, they will find it more difficult to draw inferences about what the other persons mean. Successful communication is based on sharing as much as possible the assumptions we make about what the others mean.

Conclusion
No individual incorporates all of the characteristics of the group, and every individual in any discourse system is only a partial or peripheral participant. Individuals are all synchronously attendants of diversified discourse systems. Comparisons between groups of individuals should always take into consideration more than a single dimension of contrast. Ideological statements function as obstacles to successful communication. They obscure the obvious differences and similarities that exist between the individuals in a social interaction. The goal of an Intercultural Communication course should focus on the analyses of a wide range of discourse systems which influence intercultural/interdiscourse communication. The main objective of intercultural or interdiscourse analysis should not involve only a description of discourse systems; it should focus on individuals dealing with particular tasks and then to examine, without presupposing, the role of culture and of discourse systems in those social interactions. No description of a discourse system should involve the description of groups of individuals. The description should introduce a system of discourse in which all sorts of people around the world participate, some more fully and others more peripherally.

Literature

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