Individual Orientations Towards Intercultural Differences on The Basis of a Study Conducted Among The Polish Students of English Philology

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Abstract: The aim of the present paper is to show how the Polish students of English Philology changed their orientations towards intercultural differences as a result of intercultural encounters they experienced and instruction in intercultural development offered to them. With increased levels of intercultural communication, their competence in intercultural relations magnified. As assumed, the students' initial emotional desire to acknowledge, appreciate, and accept cultural differences occurred to be weak. However, with the intercultural development, the levels of intercultural sensitivity being a component of intercultural competence, rose significantly. In effect the students were able to recognize certain values and pick up on verbal and non-verbal signals typical of other cultures allowing for further empathy being developed and adjusting to different scripts of communication. For the purpose of observing the varying levels of intercultural sensitivity and subsequently intercultural competence, the author decided to design a ranking questionnaire as a research instrument. It consisted of a series of statements marked by the respondents with numbers 1-5 to indicate the degree to which they agree or disagree with them. It was designed for comparative analysis of their responses. The interpretation of the collected data involved searching for relations between the investigated variables. Through careful examination of the questionnaire and its collected data, the author managed to notice a meaningful change in the attitudes, values and skills exhibited by his students in terms of their intercultural identities.

Key words: intercultural communication competence, intercultural sensitivity, intercultural differences, English Philology

Research objectives

Answering an increasing need for developing intercultural communication competence at a continually growing number of speakers, the aim of the present paper is to measure the level of intercultural communication sensitivity of the students of English Philology at State Higher School of Vocational Education at Krosno.

Following the findings of other researchers (Bennett, 1986, 1993; Chen and Starosta, 2000; Fritz and Moellenberg, 2002), three basic assumptions have been made to meet the objective. Firstly, it has been assumed that the role of extra-linguistic determinants of intercultural communication competence tend to be even more important than of the verbal language in a communication success of intercultural communicators, which accounts for the research being focused on their investigation. Secondly, intercultural sensitivity has been assigned the role of its essential non-verbal component and skill determining a proper development of other communication skills. Thirdly, building upon the research of Milton Bennett (1986) speakers' cognitive orientation towards cultural differences and thus their education tailored to their needs greatly account for intercultural development.

The decision to examine intercultural sensitivity as the main dimension of intercultural communication competence is mostly grounded in the research of Milton Bennett (1986, 1993), Guo-Ming Chen and William J. Starosta (2000) and Wolfgang Fritz and Antje Moellenberg (2002). Milton Bennett (1993:107) considers intercultural sensitivity as the main variable accounting for a communication success of intercultural communicators. He understands it as the ability to be aware of other cultures and to accept the differences resulting from them. Based on his observations that if individuals are taught how to confront cultural differences by becoming more sophisticated and sensitive to them, they may predict at least some of them and diminish their misunderstandings and failures.

Also, for Chen and Starosta (2000:124) intercultural sensitivity is a basic dimension of intercultural communication competence. It is a person's ability to understand similarities and differences of other cultures, which embraces their emotional desire to acknowledge, appreciate, and accept cultural differences, their multiple perspectives on an event or behaviour, their recognition of own cultural values and those of others as well as their empathy and ability to adjust to different ways of communicating (Chen and Starosta, 2000: 155).

In a more recent approach to intercultural sensitivity Wolfgang Fritz and Antje Moellenberg (2002) have concurrently isolated intercultural awareness and intercultural adroitness as equal and additional constituents of intercultural communication competence. Intercultural awareness is the cognitive dimension of intercultural communication competence, intercultural adroitness acts as a behavioural aspect, and ultimately intercultural sensitivity performs the role of affective aspect of intercultural communication competence.

Profile of respondents and available methods

The research sample consisted of the students of Year 3 of English Philology at State Higher School of Vocational Education at Krosno. The mission of the school is to educate students at the level of three-year long Bachelor programmes. Most of them start work as teachers of English in primary and secondary schools where they are the only language models for their learners to follow. It should be also mentioned that the students are not very mobile, which is of importance when their intercultural communication competence is concerned. Hence, the value of the course in intercultural communication, which is included in the study programme and the responsibility of the school to prepare them well for their future professional is of immense importance.

The research methods widely used to measure intercultural sensitivity such as self-reflection, participant observation, qualitative interviews and questionnaires were borrowed from social sciences, ethnography and anthropology. To enhance their advantages and reduce their drawbacks, they tend to be combined together to allow for more objective and reliable results whose validity could thus be generalized. All of the above methods have been used for the purpose of the present research.

Self-reflection preceded other methods and served to approach conceptually cross-cultural communication competence, formulate basic assumptions, working hypothesis as well as research questions which were used later in the questionnaire and interviews. It was made used of during the research to analyze the empirical data and draw conclusions. Its role was important in seeking for explanations of the results obtained by means of the questionnaire and interviews. Participant observation was used all the time because the author of the investigation lectures in the Department of English. His work allowed him to observe his students in a natural way, which facilitated him to check his assumptions, formulate and reformulate the research questions and also get explanations of the communication behaviours of his students and their experience as intercultural communicators.

The type of questionnaire used for the purpose of the present investigation serves to measure intercultural sensitivity of the students of English Philology. The same sample of students (50 altogether) were involved completing the questionnaire consisting of ten pairs of questions, all of which refer to various behavioural aspects of intercultural communication. The respondents were asked to allocate to each statement a number from 1 to 5 to indicate the degree to which they agree or disagree with it – where 5 meant a strong agreement and 1 a strong disagreement respectively. The interpretation of the collected data involved searching for relations between the investigated variables. A statistical analysis allowed for obtaining quantitative results which made their qualitative interpretation more objective and reliable.

Measuring intercultural sensitivity of the students of English Philology

The choice of respondents was based on a random selection of students of Year 3 of English Philology. The research was conducted directly in the written form at two separate stages. The first stage was carried out before the commencement of the course in intercultural communication in December 2009 and the second stage after it was over when the students had managed to get their credits in June 2010. The questionnaire was administered twice to the same sample of students in order

to learn about the evolution of their skills and attitudes as a result of their participation in the course. Among them, 33 were female and 17 were male. 34 participants marked towns/cities respectively as their place of residence and only 16 of them showed villages. The average age of the sample was 21.96. The total number of answers obtained in the present investigation reached 2000, 1000 responses per each stage of the questionnaire administration.

The questionnaire is a result of a pilot study. It was conducted before the course in intercultural communication and its purpose was to identify all the problematic areas for students regarding their communication. The pilot study consisted of participant observation and interviews. Based on the outcomes of both methods the author came to the conclusion that for his students communication in a foreign language means mastering the four language skills and grammatical accuracy. As a matter of fact the approach implies mastering purely linguistic skills and developing linguistic communication competence. The students did not possess any awareness of how communication is dependent on non-linguistic factors, such as culture. The conclusion was a sound piece of evidence that the choice of non-linguistic dimensions of intercultural communication competence as the research area was a good decision.

The statements were as follows:

1. I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures.
2. I think people from other cultures are narrow-minded.

3. I am quite sure of myself when interacting with people from different cultures.
4. I find it very hard to talk in front of people from different cultures.

5. I always know what to say when interacting with people from different cultures.
6. I can be sociable when interacting with people from different cultures.

7. I don't like to be with people from different cultures.
8. I respect the values of people from different cultures.

9. I get upset easily when interacting with people from different cultures.
10. I feel confident when interacting with people from different cultures.

11. I tend to wait before forming an impression of culturally-distinct counterparts.
12. I often get discouraged when I am with people from different cultures.

13. I am open-minded to people from different cultures.
14. I am very observant when interacting with people from different cultures.

15. I respect the ways people from different cultures behave.
16. I try to obtain as much information as possible when interacting with people from different cultures.

17. I would not accept the opinions of people from different cultures.
18. I think my culture is better than other cultures.

19. I often show my culturally-distinct counterpart my understanding through verbal or non-verbal cues.
20. I have a feeling of enjoyment towards differences between my culturally-distinct counterpart and me.

As already stated each of the statements refers to knowledge, skills or attitudes which should be mastered by intercultural communicators in the process of developing their intercultural sensitivity. Their specific value for assessing their role in intercultural communication sensitivity and also intercultural communication competence is shown by means of a content analysis of each statement.

As for the interviews which followed the questionnaire stage of the research, they helped the author clarify and complete the information provided by the students by means of the questionnaire and get some additional knowledge which was either not evident or even absent from the respondents' answers. The number of students who participated in the interviews was smaller as only 31 respondents decided to take part in them. They were mainly women (26), which also confirms the

gender composition of the group of students of Year 3 in the Department of English with a conspicuous prevalence of women.

The levels of intercultural communication competence of the students of English Philology before and after the course

The empirical material gathered by means of the questionnaire before the course in intercultural communication and after its completion was divided into two groups. The first group embraced the data implying the respondents' positive attitudes and skills and the second one included their negative repertoire. Generally speaking, the positive orientation towards interlocutors with different cultural backgrounds implied open, tolerant and friendly attitudes, ability to deal with stress, taking risk, a recognition of opinion diversity, a necessity to build relationships. It also included a conviction about equality of cultures and a need to work towards understanding among them. Out of the twenty statements from the questionnaire, statements 1, 5, 6, 8, 10, 13, 15, 16, 19 and 20 positively assess the respondents. The second group of statements refer to contradictory intercultural communicator's features and remain in opposition with the first group. They imply the respondents' disrespectful assertiveness and aggression. A few of them indicate negative attitudes, such as hostility, ambiguity within a society, low tolerance of differences and new situations and a lack or low acceptance of all sorts of otherness. These statements are 2, 3, 4, 7, 9, 11, 12, 14, 17 and 18. The analysis of the empirical data considered the following statistical phenomena: mean (average value), standard deviation, median, lower and upper quartiles. The average value is indispensable as it indicates how strong or weak a particular trait or dimension is. It points out how much variation there is from the average. A low standard deviation indicates that the data points tend to be very close to the mean, whereas a high standard deviation indicates that it is spread out over a large range of values. Standard deviation is a widely used measure of variability or dispersion. In the present study the deviation is crucial as it gives further implications regarding the types of answers obtained from the students for a subsequent analysis. Also, the median is crucial as it is a dividing value of the data which is either located in the upper or lower halves. The upper half cuts off the highest 25% of data and is referred to as the upper quartile. Similarly, the lowest 25% of the cut off data is usually related to as the lower quartile. The significance of quartiles is enormous as they direct our attention to the middle value of the collected data and let us look at the skills the students have already developed (values in the upper quartile) as well as those, which need to be developed (values in the lower quartile) as a result of their participation in the course in intercultural communication.

Before the respondents attended the course, in the first group of positive statements the results they scored ranged from the highest mean of 4.50 for statement 8 to the lowest one of 2.82 for statement 5. The disparity shows that some abilities and attitudes have been better developed than others and identifies the skills which need to be improved. The above-mentioned highest average proves that the students of English Philology highly respect the values of people from other cultures and display openness, lack of prejudice, tolerance and willingness, which consequently indicates low uncertainty avoidance and low power distance. Statement 1 as the next one, which has received the highest score of 4.38, is similar in a sense to the previous one since the students confirmed in it their willingness for interactions with people from different cultures. In statement 13 the students also acknowledged their open-mindedness to strangers by achieving the average value of 4.30. The statement proves that their openness and willingness for contacts have been enhanced and their respect for otherness will probably be fostered soon. They also show a lot of understanding towards foreign cultures, which is evidenced by statement 15 as the average value obtained in the questionnaire equaled 4.24. All the scored values also strongly confirm their ethnorelative attitudes. In statement 16 they see the urge to obtain as much information as possible about their interlocutors during interactions. With the average value of 4.20 they exemplify their tendency to develop curiosity and lack of prejudice, which is reinforced by the score for statement 6. It is high and amounts to 4.10. It reveals the students' propensity to be sociable when interacting with people from different cultures. Although in statement 20 the students reconfirmed their feelings of openness and enjoyment towards cultural differences between themselves and their culturally-distinct counterparts the mean of 3.62 suggests that they should work towards developing it in the future. The mean achieved for statement 19 which refers to their ability to use effectively either verbal or non-verbal cues is 3.50. It thus indicates that they should focus on improving it. A rather low mean of 3.44 was achieved for statement 10, which points out the respondents' level of confidence in intercultural encounters. The attitude is very important because it makes the interactors move from ethnocentrism towards ethnorelativism and thus deals directly with intercultural sensitivity. The aforementioned lowest value of all the positive

statements received for statement 5 (only 2.82) stresses the students' lack of proper knowledge of how to behave or react in an intercultural exchange.

The biggest change in the values obtained after the administration of the questionnaire has been noticed in statement 5 by 1.6, in statement 10 by 1.22, in statement 19 by 1.2, and in statement 20 by 1.16 respectively. Fluctuations in estimates by over 1 point, when the marking range maximum value is 5 and the highest scores received in Stage 1 – 4.5 in statement 8 and in Stage 2 – 4.84 in statement 6, signify an indisputable intensification of certain intercultural traits and attitudes. All the four statements, for which the highest increase in value has been noted, confirm the author's hypothesis that the students awareness, understanding and respect of otherness grew stronger, because by re-assigning higher values to the statements they showed a meaningful rise in their positive attitudes demonstrated by their interaction engagement and enjoyment (statements 5, 10, 19 and 20). This can consequently imply that since the statements have been earlier categorized as those displaying low uncertainty avoidance and low power distance, the author might presume that the students' levels of tolerance for certain diversities must have significantly risen. Additionally, their support for equality among societies has been stressed and enhanced. The values for the remaining statements are below 1 point and oscillate between 0.22 (statement 8) and 0.74 (statement 6). Although being relatively lower when compared to the others, they prove a major change in the attitudes of the students of the English Department as they indicate their respect for cultural differences and show their interaction attentiveness at the same time. The students have gained the skills to adapt their behaviour more easily and effectively by intentionally changing their communication style. In addition, their confidence in interaction has grown stronger and their willingness to be more sociable is another feature, which has heightened notably.

Table 1. Students' positive attitudes towards cross-cultural differences
(before and after the course administration)

Questionnaire Statements	Stage	Mean	Standard Deviation	Lower Quartile	Median	Upper Quartile
8 I respect the values of people from different cultures.	1	4.50	0.79	4	5	5
	2	4.72	0.67	5	5	5
1 I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures.	1	4.38	0.64	4	4	5
	2	4.76	0.43	4.75	5	5
13 I am open-minded to people from different cultures.	1	4.30	0.71	4	4	5
	2	4.76	0.43	4.75	5	5
15 I respect the ways people from different cultures behave.	1	4.24	0.82	4	4	5
	2	4.80	0.40	5	5	5
16 I try to obtain as much information as possible when interacting with people from different cultures.	1	4.20	0.78	4	4	5
	2	4.78	0.42	5	5	5
6 I can be sociable when interacting with people from different cultures.	1	4.10	0.58	4	4	4
	2	4.84	0.37	5	5	5
20 I have a feeling of enjoyment towards differences between my culturally-distinct counterpart and me.	1	3.62	0.67	3	4	4
	2	4.78	0.42	5	5	5
19 I often show my culturally-distinct counterpart my understanding through verbal or non-verbal cues.	1	3.50	0.68	3	3	4
	2	4.70	0.46	4	5	5
10	1	3.44	0.67	3	3	4

	Stage	Mean	Standard Deviation	Lower Quartile	Median	Upper Quartile
I feel confident when interacting with people from different cultures.	2	4.66	0.48	4	5	5
5 I always know what to say when interacting with people from different cultures.	1	2.82	0.77	2	3	3
	2	4.62	0.49	4	5	5

The second group of investigated statements describes rather suspicious attitudes or even negative feelings shared by the students of English Philology towards intercultural differences. Some statements best characterize those individuals, who refuse all interaction with other cultures and have no interest in discovering cultural differences. That is why, the students, who exhibit such traits may also act aggressively during intercultural situations. Others can also wrongly evaluate foreign cultures to be inferior to their own culture and will constantly criticize the behaviour or thoughts of foreigners. The highest mean (4.24) of all the statements comprised by Table 2 was obtained for statement 14, which, in fact, may be viewed as neutral, because it does not reveal any enjoyment or respect towards intercultural differences on the part of the students. The same happens to statement 3 where mere confidence of the speaker without any engagement in intercultural encounters is manifested. It was valued with the average of 3.52. What is also noticeable among the students is the fact that some of them when faced with otherness become very observant. They tend to wait before they form an impression of culturally-distinct counterparts as it is demonstrated in statement 11, for which the mean equaled 3.42. The next common feature is the students' timidity, being explicitly exposed by statement 4 with the mean of 2.84. Statements 12 and 9, with the mean values of 2.28 and 2.16 respectively, are the two examples demonstrating the students' uneasiness, discomfort and discouragement in intercultural situations. The successive four statements: 18, 17, 7 and 2 confirm high power distance and high uncertainty avoidance, which are typical masculine features. Moreover, by judging other cultures negatively and putting their own culture in the focus and as being superior (statements 18 and 17), the students are showing their prejudice and stereotyping. Their bad attitudes and emotions are intensified in statements 7 and 2 exemplifying even their hostile behaviour. The average values obtained for the statements are as follows: 1.72, 1.60, 1.58 and 1.48 proving that the traits are not very strong, however they exist among some students.

Table 2. Students' neutral or negative attitudes towards cross-cultural differences (before and after the course administration)

Questionnaire Statements	Stage	Mean	Standard Deviation	Lower Quartile	Median	Upper Quartile
14 I am very observant when interacting with people from different cultures.	1	4.24	0.69	4	4	5
	2	4.86	0.35	5	5	5
3 I am quite sure of myself when interacting with people from different cultures.	1	3.52	0.84	3	3	4
	2	4.70	0.46	4	5	5
11 I tend to wait before forming an impression of culturally-distinct counterparts.	1	3.42	0.84	3	4	4
	2	4.70	0.58	4	5	5
4 I find it very hard to talk in front of people from different cultures.	1	2.84	0.84	2	3	3
	2	1.46	0.54	1	1	2
12 I often get discouraged when I am with people from different cultures.	1	2.28	0.88	2	2	3
	2	1.44	0.50	1	1	2
9 I get upset easily when interacting with people from different cultures.	1	2.16	0.93	2	2	2
	2	4.80	0.40	5	5	5
18 I think my culture is better than other cultures.	1	1.72	0.95	1	1	2
	2	1.40	0.49	1	1	2
17 I would not accept the opinions of people from different cultures.	1	1.60	0.61	1	2	2
	2	1.48	0.50	1	1	2

7 I don't like to be with people from different cultures.	1	1.58	0.67	1	1	2
	2	1.58	0.70	1	2	2
2 I think people from other cultures are narrow-minded.	1	1.48	0.71	1	1	2
	2	1.38	0.49	1	1	2

When examining the value changes for the negatively-oriented group of statements, it becomes noticeable that there exists a correlation between the two groups of analyzed statements. Since the statements were paired on the basis of positive and negative traits expressed each time, but they were still dispersed throughout the questionnaire, all the respondents could objectify their answers more specifically and had to think of a proper quality or skill twice. This phenomenon is reflected in the statistical data of the present study where a sudden fall in value for the negative group of statements can be perceived and a value rise for the positive set of statements respectively. The highest decline by 1.38 has been reported for statement 4, which obtained 2.84 during the first administration of the test and after the course in intercultural communication it dropped to 1.46. It may be stated similarly that the students' openness towards intercultural differences has expanded. As a result of that definitely stereotyping and prejudices have become less common. Another vital shift in the magnitude of values is noticeable in statement 12 with a drop of 0.84 when comparing the estimates for stages 1 and 2. Both statements express more willingness on the part of the respondents regarding their enjoyment and respect of other cultures.

The conclusion which can be drawn clearly demonstrates that the students have improved in all the categories. The results of the course in intercultural communication had a positive impact on their attitudes and skills. The course allowed for an improvement of those skills, which the students had acquired informally before the commencement of the course as well as those, which used to be hardly noticeable, or did not exist at all. The positively-oriented values towards intercultural encounters have increased in strength, and those negatively-oriented at the initial stage have lowered in size. To be more specific, it seems vital to point out that the students of English Philology can comprehend cultural differences better and even accommodate to them. Although some of them showed their initial tendency to withdraw from intercultural encounters, their disinterest towards them, or even avoidance of interaction, it must be highlighted that most of the problematic issues, after a period of transition, have been successfully resolved.

Individual orientations towards intercultural differences

The collected data extracted from the questionnaire allows us to analyze the students' individual orientations towards cultural differences. A clear evolution of their intercultural sensitivity and an improved cultural profile of intercultural communicators could be noticed.

As revealed by both a quantitative and a qualitative analysis of the choices of the positively and negatively oriented statements, ethnocentrism seems to be the dominating characteristics of the students' profile before their participation in the course. Consequently, they displayed their initial denial, disinterest and avoidance of intercultural situations, or interactions with culturally-distinct counterparts. Referring to the knowledge gained from the interviews, some students even tried to alienate themselves from their own intercultural experiences, either because they were uncomfortable with a complex multicultural identity, or because they could not manage to deal with intercultural perspectives. They also admitted to lack intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes, which in turn accounts for their reactions overridden with fear, uncertainty, low self-esteem, low self-confidence and high risk avoidance.

Furthermore, the interviews confirmed that most students are not placed in the privileged position in any way. They admitted that due to their economic situation they do not have many chances to exploit foreign cultures. Only a few have had an opportunity to visit other countries within the Erasmus Exchange Programme. The Internet and the media seem to be the sole sources of intercultural information, which provides them with mediated experience of multiculturalism. Their contacts with Erasmus students were limited, which marked their concept of multiculturalism and impoverished its experience. Consequently, their inability to see and exploit the cultural richness around them prevents them from developing intercultural sensitivity. The mutual correlation between intercultural communication sensitivity and experience of multiculturalism is very strong and resembles a vicious

circle. Considering the environmental as well as psychological constraints, the majority of students demonstrated some difficulty in recognizing patterns of cultural difference in their own and other cultures. They could hardly adapt to and accept intercultural otherness by moving from a one-dimensional to multi-dimensional reality and shifting their prospective behaviour into other cultural contexts.

A shift towards enthorelativism and consequently a positive change in the intercultural communication sensitivity could be observed after the course was over. They have developed more self-confidence by stressing universal values of all cultures, which is typical of the minimization stage in the process of acquiring intercultural communication competence. When interviewed they claimed the importance of commonalities and similarities among cultures. They also assumed that although cultures differ across the globe certain cultural values, typical for Polish students, can be also found among their culturally-distinct interlocutors. Showing a strong commitment to the idea that people from other cultures are basically alike, they viewed the world in terms of common needs, interests and goals as well as values, norms, beliefs and practices. At the same time they were able to recognize basic patterns of cultural difference. Although their emerging ethnorelative attitude stemmed from generalizations and use of unsophisticated cognitive schemata it showed the beginning of a positive evolution. The big change was seen in their declarations that they are interested in interacting with culturally different people, which is enjoyable and enriching. A transitional change in the students' cultural identification with an acceptance of multicultural identity existing in today's worldviews among many young people could also be noticed.

A positive change in the cultural profile of the respondents should serve as the most efficient motivation to make them continue towards the development of their intercultural communication competence becoming at the same time more effective in interpersonal contacts across cultures.

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