

Harri Mäkinen

### **THE IMPORTANCE AND TEACHING OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION**

The above mentioned Finnish newspaper headlines report diversely and widely about Finland's internationalization. Both worldwide and locally, major changes have transformed the world into a global village. From the perspective of intercultural communication, the following events and changes are crucial. Improvements in transportation technology have made it easier, faster and cheaper to travel around the world. Developments in communication technology allow us to have an online connection with almost all parts of the world. News spread around more rapidly than ever before.

Internationalization of the economy has increased our dependency on other parts of the world. Changes in international economy – no matter good or bad – have almost immediate effect on our everyday lives. Memberships in international associations, various international commitments and multinational companies further increase international cooperation. Internationalization has also been affected by ever increasing migration. Phenomenons like natural disasters, wars and poverty push people away from their original living environments. On the other hand, better and safer living conditions of the industrialized countries – and their labor shortage – attract people.

In a contemporary globalized world – and as a subject to be taught – intercultural communication is more topical and important than ever before. In our everyday lives, we face more and more people with various cultural backgrounds.

As a result, in our everyday lives – and also in working life – we need a new kind of sensitivity and competences in order to communicate and understand each other.

The development of Finnish social policy and also the work practices in the social field have always followed the changes of the Finnish society. This is also true today, when internationality is among the most significant factors shaping the functional environment of the social field. In the working life, more and more workers meet individuals and families – as customers or fellow workers – with unfamiliar cultural backgrounds. To be able to offer students the knowledge and skills the internationalized and multicultural working life requires, educational institutes have been forced to take this globalizing development into consideration. In Kymenlaakso University of Applied Sciences' (KyUAS) Social Care Department, increased internationality can be seen in deepened cooperation between foreign universities and units of social care. It has also caused more intense student and teacher exchange. In addition, our degree programme and most of the courses in it, emphasize international and multicultural aspects.

This article is based on authors' experiences as a teacher of intercultural cooperation and as a departments' international coordinator. Primarily, article has been written to teachers. Main objective is to awake readers' interest in intercultural communication and to give ideas for teaching it. Article concentrates in examining the basics of intercultural communication. At first, reasons will be given to convince the reader of the necessity and topicality of the subject. Secondly, the basic concepts – culture and communication – will be shortly described. Thirdly, communicational differences are examined in relation to cultural differences. Stumbling blocks of intercultural communication are also handled. Finally, article tries to draw a picture about a culturally sensitive worker and tries to encourage teachers.

### **Why Intercultural Communication?**

As a subject, intercultural communication is more topical and important than ever before. In our everyday lives – including working life – we meet more and more people with unfamiliar cultural backgrounds. At the same time we face more and more strange and unknown habits and phenomenon. This is already true in the service sector – not forgetting social and health care services. In such a working life we need cultural sensitivity, including theoretical knowledge and capability to meet and communicate despite language problems, conflicting views or difficult life situations.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, research results show that officials – who for example meet foreigners as customers – lack sensitivity and multicultural skills. More precisely, they lack language skills and knowledge about foreign customers special needs. These officials also complain about the inadequacy of their former education

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<sup>1</sup> Rätty 2002: 8.

in relation to various cultural practices and value and norm systems behind them. Furthermore, they wish to be more familiar with foreign religions.<sup>2</sup>

The main goal of teaching and learning the basics of intercultural communication is to answer these multicultural challenges. It is essential that we learn to understand the meaning of intercultural communication in an international and globalized world. Knowledge and skills of international communication allow us to observe and analyze communicational situations. In addition – and most importantly – it enables us to see our own culture based assumptions and to understand more widely and deeply, how various cultural backgrounds can be seen – and how they influence – in communicational situations.

Becoming more conscious about our own culture based assumptions, enables us to recognize our own prejudices and understand different aspects than our own. Keeping our own culture at arms' length, helps us to face behavior and attitudes, which are still strange and unfamiliar to us. Insufficient ability to reflect our own cultural structures can lead to uncertainty, tension and misunderstandings in situations where we meet representatives of other cultures.

Communication skills need to be understood in their broadest sense when we think about them from the intercultural point of view. Knowledge of languages – structures, pronunciation and terminology – provides us a tool for communication, but this is not enough. In addition, if we really want to understand the “others”, we need to know their communication styles (habits of social interaction, nonverbal language), their culture (general characteristics, history, religion) and we also need a right kind of attitude (genuineness, openness, friendliness). Mainly from the attitude comes the will to understand the “other”.

The importance of intercultural communication comes clearly out from the fact that it emphasizes the interactional and communicational nature of those situations where people with different cultural backgrounds meet. In fact, entire cultures don't meet each other, but individual representatives of them do.

Of course, we have to admit, that knowing the basics of intercultural communication is not the answer to all questions we face in multicultural situations. Still, it helps us be more realistic and more prepared concerning the multiple challenges of these situations. This already reduces misunderstandings. From social fields' point of view, these skills are desperately needed especially in those basic services, which newcomers (for example immigrants) firstly use in their new home countries.

## **Culture as a Frame and as a Way of Life**

Definition of culture is problematic and challenging, because of concepts' multiplicity. It is important to make a difference between narrow and broad definitions of the concept. From a narrow point of view culture is usually defined as high culture.

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<sup>2</sup> Pitkänen 1999: 109–113.

These definitions emphasize cultural products, famous achievements and characters in arts and sciences. This is an important part of culture, but only a small part of the whole. From intercultural communications' point of view, it is more useful to see and define culture as a way of life of a group of people. This way of life includes behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols which that group of people accept and pass along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next. Culture has also been defined as "communities' personality".<sup>3</sup>

Räty defines culture as a frame through which we examine the world.<sup>4</sup> This definition emphasizes cultures' role in the processes where we give meaning to our observations. Culture influences the way we see the world and what kind of meanings we give to our observations. These aspects are useful concerning intercultural communication, because they emphasize cultures' total presence in our everyday lives and they create the basis for us to understand our own culture based assumptions.

Six characteristics of culture are of special importance to intercultural communication: culture is learned, transmissible, dynamic, selective and ethnocentric and the facets of culture are interrelated.<sup>5</sup> Cultures' dynamics enables us to separate its' surface structure (language, food, clothing, manners etc.) from its' deep structure (values, norms, beliefs, attitudes etc.). Surface structure is more open to changes and also easier for outsiders to adopt. On the contrary, deep structure seems to resist change, and by nature, it is very hard for outsiders to adopt. This separation gives us an opportunity to examine the relation between these two parts of culture. In this relation, the surface seems to reflect the deep structure. This is an important finding concerning intercultural communication.

National cultures are an excellent example of the choices that are made in each and every culture. We choose quite carefully the achievements, historical events, celebrities etc. that we want to pass over to next generations. Usually we pick up things we value and that we are proud of. These choices can be seen on the pages of history books as well as on the shelves of museums. From intercultural communications point of view, it is important to notice, that when we make such choices, we also build up boundaries between "we" and "the others".

The relationship between the dominant culture and subcultures needs to be taken into account. National cultures are once again a workable aspect. National cultures seem to include certain characteristics which are common to all members of that nationality. On the other hand, it can be said that inside the frames of a certain national culture, there are zillion ways of being, for instance, Finnish. Such subcultures can be divided according to ethnicity, social classes, professions, age, residence etc. In consequence, the basic skills of intercultural communication are also needed inside the national borders. Added to this, we always

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<sup>3</sup> Alitolppa-Niitamo 1994: 18.

<sup>4</sup> Räty 2002: 42.

<sup>5</sup> Porter, Samovar 1997: 13.

have to keep in mind the importance of knowing one another's backgrounds in order to understand each other better.

### **Communication With and Without Words**

Communication can be defined in various ways depending on what kind of communication model we want to emphasize. We can either emphasize the transfer of messages or information or the production of meanings.<sup>6</sup> Often, communication is defined as the production of community.<sup>7</sup> Porter & Samovar define communication as a dynamic transactional behavior-affecting process in which people behave intentionally to induce or elicit a particular response from another person.<sup>8</sup>

From the perspective of intercultural communication it is essential to emphasize the interactive nature of communication. It is also useful to take communication to pieces and examine its ingredients: behavioral source, encoding, message, channel, responder, decoding, response and feedback. By doing so, we get a clearer picture of the interactive nature of communication and we will be able to see the contact surface on which the cultural backgrounds influence.

In addition to the ingredients, several characteristics help us to understand how communication actually works. Characteristics include the facts that communication is dynamic, interactive and irreversible and it always takes place in a physical and social context.<sup>9</sup> Dynamics underline the constantly changing nature of communication and the fact that we are always under the influence of other people's behavior and messages. Furthermore, communication always takes place in a context, which affects all parties of communication.

Separation and examination of verbal and nonverbal communication makes it possible to concretize the scale and multiplicity of especially the nonverbal part of communication. This is of great importance, for instance, from the European point of view, because most of our communication relies on the verbal side. Nonverbal communication includes: nonverbal elements of voice (tone, volume, intonation, rhythm and speed), gestures, facial expressions, body movements, physical appearance and clothing, eye contact, touch, use of space, distance and moments of silence.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Fiske 1992.

<sup>7</sup> Kunelius 1998: 11–12.

<sup>8</sup> Porter, Samovar 1997: 10.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*: 11.

<sup>10</sup> Salo-Lee, Malmberg, Halinoja 1998: 36–55.

## Communicational Differences

There are cultural differences in both verbal and nonverbal communication. In verbal communication, language differences, various communication styles and for instance different conceptions of small talk bring out intercultural challenges. Terminology, pronunciation and language structures are the most common sources of language problems. On the other hand, misunderstandings are very often connected to social meanings and impressions, which may have several different meanings depending on the context. Fortunately, language problems are usually something that we are expecting and we can quite easily prepare ourselves to meet them.

Communication styles differ enormously from one culture to the other. Added to this, there are usually features from several different communication styles in one specific culture. Focal dimensions concerning the variety of communication styles are; direct communication – indirect communication, verbose style – exact style and result oriented communication – process oriented communication.<sup>11</sup> How directly people express themselves, how many words are used, how colorful those words are, how a certain point is discussed – these are concrete examples of how communication styles differ from each other. Differences are so remarkable, that they unavoidably cause uncertainty and misunderstandings. Where “a tight-lipped speaker” is considered as impolite and rude, a “verbal virtuoso” is considered as an unreliable chatterer.

Small talk is often present in communicational situations. Functions of small talk – opening and ending the conversation, taking care of social relations, reducing uncertainty – are emphasized differently in various cultures. Culturally, it is also not the same what are the suitable topics or with whom we can actually start chatting.<sup>12</sup> Misunderstandings may occur, even if we try to stay in non-political and neutral topics.

Nonverbal part of communication is learned – and most of it unconsciously – in ones’ own cultural surroundings. From intercultural perspective, this is the fact that causes difficulties in understanding one another. Because we are not so conscious about our own nonverbal messages, it is even more challenging to recognize, analyze and interpret messages sent by others. To sum up, communicational misunderstandings are usually connected to nonverbal messages.

Basic feelings are usually expressed by same facial expression from one culture to the other. Therefore, we can count on, that a sad, angry or a surprised person looks the same wherever we go. On the other hand, there are remarkable cultural differences in what feelings you can show and when. Extremes can be found between the western style, where we are encouraged to show our feelings and Asian cultures, where it is common that feelings and thoughts should be hidden.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*: 30–41.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*: 44–45.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*: 58–68.

Gestures are also a problematic issue. Familiar and safe gestures can turn out to mean the complete opposite – even something rude and insulting – in another culture. Dressing codes vary remarkably in different cultures. What part of the human body can be revealed and what should be kept out of sight – is the crucial question. Eye-contact can cause problems too. In western world, it is usually a sign of honesty and reliability and important in itself. In other parts of the world, it can be insulting and impolite to have a straight eye contact.<sup>14</sup>

How, when and who can we touch are the essential questions connected to cultural differences of touching. Cultural differences can also be found if we examine how people position themselves – in a certain space – in relation to other people or how close you can go to other people. Meanings of different tones are basically the same worldwide, but there are remarkable cultural differences in rhythm and speed of speech and in the use of intonation and pauses.<sup>15</sup>

### **Cultural Differences**

Behind the differences in cultures' surface structure, more fundamental differences of cultures value basis – so called cultures' deep structure – can be found. In 1980's, Geert Hofstede examined cultural and value differences in over 50 countries. He studied a survey data about the values of people who worked in the local subsidiaries of one large multinational corporation, IBM. He found out four dimensions according to which cultural similarities and differences can be explained and understood. These dimensions are; collectivism versus individualism, power distance (from small to large), femininity versus masculinity and uncertainty avoidance (from weak to strong).<sup>16</sup>

Collectivism – individualism dimension focuses on the degree to which a society reinforces individual or collective achievements and interpersonal relationships. In individual cultures individual rights are dominant. Individuals tend to form relationships with large numbers of people but the relationships remain weak. In collective cultures, ties between individuals are very strong and the family is given more weight. In such cultures members lean towards collective responsibility.<sup>17</sup>

Power distance dimension relates to the degree of equality and inequality between people. Culture with large power distance both accepts and perpetuates inequalities between people. On the contrary, in cultures with small power distance equality is seen as a collective aim of the society and upward mobility is common.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*: 58–68.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> Hofstede, Hofstede 2005, 22–23.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*: 74–106.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*: 41–66.

Femininity – masculinity dimension pertains to the degree cultures reinforce the traditional masculine work role model of male achievement, control and power. Masculine cultures experience a higher degree of gender differentiation whereas in feminine cultures females are treated equally to males in all aspects of the society.<sup>19</sup>

Uncertainty avoidance dimension concerns the level of acceptance for uncertainty and ambiguity in a certain culture. In cultures of strong uncertainty avoidance, societies are rule-orientated and follow well defined and established laws, regulations and controls. On the contrary, cultures of weak uncertainty avoidance have more tolerance towards variety and experimentation. They are also less rule-orientated and willing to accept change and take risks.<sup>20</sup>

Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner developed a model of culture with seven dimensions. Most of this model is similar to Hofstede's but two of the dimensions bring out completely new aspects. These dimensions highlight two questions: how we manage time and how we relate to nature. Concept of time dimension poses the following question: do we think time from futures' perspective or do we see it as a mixture of the past, present and future. Differences in concept of time can also cause problems concerning punctuality. Attitudes to the nature also vary from one extreme to the other. Do we try to control the nature or do we let it control ourselves – these are the central questions.<sup>21</sup>

The above mentioned models are useful from the viewpoint of intercultural communication. As important as precise and detailed information of a certain culture, is the understanding of how different cultures could be examined, evaluated and compared. Above mentioned dimensions are of great help in this process.

### **Stumbling Blocks of Intercultural Communication**

What are the most common problems in intercultural communication? According to Barna majority of the problems are caused by the fact that we presuppose too much similarity and neglect cultural differences. Of course, cultural differences must not be overemphasized, but they have to be taken into consideration. Lack of a common language and inability to recognize and understand nonverbal messages cause difficulties. Prejudices and stereotypic thinking create problems of their own kind. Overgeneralization can lead us so far that we lose the individual with his/her personal characteristics. Ethnocentric attitude makes us evaluate others and that can be problematic, because the result of this evaluation is always the same – our way is the right way. It is also common that meeting people with different cultural backgrounds is so new and frightening to us that chances for normal interaction disappear because of too much anxiety and stress.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*: 118–156.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*: 164–197.

<sup>21</sup> Trompenaars, Hampden-Turner 2009: 120–155.

<sup>22</sup> Barna 1997: 370–378.

## **Towards a Culturally Sensitive Helper**

From the viewpoint of the social field, assimilation of the basic knowledge and skills of intercultural communication can be seen as steps towards a culturally sensitive and culturally more conscious helper. According to Alitolppa-Niitamo culturally sensitive helper is aware of how cultural factors influence his/her thinking, behavior and ideas of right and wrong. Culturally sensitive helper is also aware that other peoples thinking, behavior, and ideas may be based on completely different views of the world and different cultural attitudes and norms.<sup>23</sup>

Culturally sensitive helper is aware that his/her education and professional field are also based on culture based assumptions – starting from values and norms. In addition, culturally sensitive helper is flexible and open and understands the meaning of equal treatment in customer work.<sup>24</sup>

Culturally sensitive helper is a professional in communication. He/she is sensitive to cultural differences in communication and tries to send and receive verbal and nonverbal messages precisely and in culturally correct way. Furthermore, he/she is aware of culturally suitable topics.<sup>25</sup>

Culturally sensitive helper possesses information concerning foreign cultures. He/she knows the history of a certain ethnic group, their cultural values, norms and their way of life. Added to this, he/she is interested in foreign cultures and is eager to learn more.<sup>26</sup>

Culturally sensitive helper is not color blind. He/she won't become distressed in front of difference and does not consider it as a deviation. Culturally sensitive helper accepts difference and values and respects it. He/she sees other cultures as valuable as his/her own. Additionally, culturally sensitive helper understands the sociopolitical situation of minorities and is also aware of discrimination and racism.<sup>27</sup>

## **How to Teach Intercultural Communication?**

Teacher should see this subject as an expedition towards the unknown. Stable lectures and teacher-centered teaching styles are out of the question. Teacher needs openness and flexibility and has to tolerate uncertainty. Teacher should have own international and multicultural experiences and needs to be enthusiastic – as always – about intercultural questions.

Equipped with these characteristics, teacher is ready to start the expedition with the students. During the journey, teacher has to ask questions, encourage di-

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<sup>23</sup> Alitolppa-Niitamo 1994: 168–169.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem.*

scussion – and most importantly – stop and wonder everything that comes across together *with* the students. The comparison of theoretical knowledge and personal experiences intensify the learning process. Don't be afraid of all the questions that may arise! In this case, they are valuable than the answers. Teachers' role as a guide and a mentor is strongly emphasized. To sum up – and as a motto for teachers – ask questions, encourage consideration and discussion, utilize experiences!

As a subject, intercultural communication makes it possible to utilize the whole multiplicity of assignments and demonstrations. Written assignments, handling cultural differences, and diaries of learning experiences fit in perfectly. For its part, communication encourages teacher to use interactive demonstrations.

The most important thing for students' enthusiasm and motivation is to justify and explain the topicality and importance of the subject. The most important contents are the concepts of culture and communication. They create the basis for examining cultural differences. Examination of these differences and their reflection on the ones of communication enables us to piece together the relationship between cultures surface and deeper structures.

Discussion and analysis of the above mentioned topics makes it possible – for everyone of us – to recognize our own culture based assumptions and this is the most important step towards the understanding of others. This creates the basis for cultural sensitivity.

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