

Travelling as an Intercultural Tool: Theoretical and Practical Aspects

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Abstract

Intercultural education and international business communication are tightly connected in the 21st century. “Bridging the culture gap”, to quote the title of a book in the field (Carté and Fox), seems to be the most important process for the business persons spending most of their time abroad, the teacher or the student in a multicultural environment, the employer or the employee of a multinational corporation.

Simply travelling on business or for leisure can be either a challenge if not equipped with the right tools or an encounter with fruitful results. In a development focused manner, this paper aims to present theoretical and practical aspects related to intercultural communication, starting from research in the field but more concerned with personal experiences and the lessons learned as a result of living in global environments.

Keywords

culture (shock), intercultural competence, intercultural communication, travelling, U-curve model.

“Travelling as an Intercultural Tool: Theoretical and Practical Aspects” is a development focused paper based on theory and research, but inspired by practice and personal experiences. I would like to begin from my true belief that language skills and adaptation to multicultural environments are the keys to survival in the global environments that surround us, to successful international careers, and to a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world we live in.

As a Foreign Language Teacher, with a background in Humanities, a keen interest in business English, literature and arts, and a passion for travelling, I have often encountered the concepts: intercultural, cross-cultural, multicultural, ethnic mosaic or melting pot. I was exposed to them either as a student or researcher, or as an individual travelling to or studying in various foreign countries in Europe. This paper aims to start from the theoretical explanations of the experts in order to interpret them from a personal perspective.

One of the most basic questions we need to ask when referring to interculturality is what **culture** means. As Geert Hofstede, the famous interculturalist suggests, when asked what culture is, the answer depends on who

you are³¹. Farmers think of cultivating plants or breeding animals (considering the common root of the words “culture” and “cultivate”), teachers think of education, artists think of “Culture with the capital C such as literature, art, music, theatre, museums and architecture” (Nunez, Nunez Mahdi, Pompa, 2014: 16). However, **intercultural competence**, a requirement of contemporary education, deals with “culture with the little c” and all the things that we are familiar with (Nunez, Nunez Mahdi, Pompa, 2014: 16) and with the layers of an onion, suggested metaphorically by Edgar Schein: artefacts of culture, norms and values and basic assumptions (Edgar Schein qtd. in Nunez, Nunez Mahdi, Pompa, 2014: 14). Other notable cultural definitions should be mentioned here:

Culture is the way in which a group of people solves problems and reconciles dilemmas. (Edgar Schein qtd. in Trompenaars 1998: 6)

Culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others. (Hofstede 2010: 6)

The obvious reason for connecting travelling to intercultural competence is that people’s first contact with another culture takes place during various trips, be it on business or for leisure. The culture shock that one can experience while adapting to a new country, where they spend a longer period of time is already a well-known and thoroughly demonstrated notion (and will also be referred to below). What I would like to argue in my paper is that even short holidays abroad can have a huge impact on the individual’s mental framework and on their worldviews.

I have always believed that intercultural competence is a recent concept, an invention of the modern world. However, as Hofstede remarks in a conference on Culture in business education³², the concept is much older than we would expect. He considers that one of the first signs of cultural awareness is the 4th century saying: *When in Rome, do as the Romans do*, which is still used nowadays. Secondly, Hofstede refers to another often quoted statement which comes from France. *Vérité en deçà des Pyrénées, erreur au delà* (What holds true on one side of the Pyrenees may be false on the other) became famous in the 17th century due to Blaise Pascal, but it was one century earlier that Michel de Montaigne had already formulated something similar. Inspired by a work edited by the European Council (coordinated by Antonio Perotti), the Romanian professor Constantin Cucuș

³¹Professor Geert Hofstede on Culture in Business Education:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UnOtik-mymM> via
<http://siegmundaudiovisueel.nl/educational/> (Accessed April 14, 2015)

³² *Ibidem*

suggests that the intercultural approach is neither a new science, nor a new subject matter, but a new method, incorporating psychology, anthropology, social sciences, politics, culture and history (Cucoş 2000: 3). Thus, we can infer that **intercultural communication** is a person's ability to show tolerance and display a multicultural perspective in the process of exchanging meaning, accepting diversity, learning and participating, cohabitating with others and avoiding stereotypes and biases. In other words, "[y]ou are interculturally sensitive if you are able to look at different cultures from their cultural frame-of-reference, rather than from yours" (Nunez, Nunez Mahdi, Pompa, 2014: 107).

What better lessons than exposing oneself to other people's cultures! My own theory that I want to demonstrate here is that travelling can be one of the most valuable, effective and entertaining intercultural tools that we could resort to. I can agree with Hofstede that "tourism represents the most superficial form of intercultural encounter", but on the other hand, it is "the starting point for more fundamental intercultural encounters" (Hofstede 2010: 392). Even if tourists choose five-star resorts for their vacation destination, limiting their discovery of the new culture, the trip itself still produces considerable effects on the traveller's personality and motivates them to further discover the language, history, and Culture of the country they have visited.

In the "Introduction" of the book entitled *Identity and Intercultural Exchange in Travel and Tourism*, Anthony David Barker starts from the analysis of a few classical travel writing pieces which offer an interesting perspective on travelling. Based on the diaries of Samuel Johnson and James Boswell, the editor makes the difference between being "concerned with looking 'about us'" and "what is going on within us" while travelling (Barker 2015: xiv). It is acknowledged by other experts that international sojourns change people as individuals, their perspective on the world and on other cultures. My own impressions are the starting point for some of the subsequent observations and I could say that two trips abroad in particular marked my personality and adulthood, my first trip abroad to Germany, 2001 and the tour of Europe in 2004. The third one was a longer stay in the United Kingdom between October 2009 and May 2010.

In 2000, my sister left Romania to study at the Music Academy in Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany. The following year, I spent almost two months with her during the summer holiday. Based on Janet and Milton Bennett's intercultural sensitivity model (2002), Nunez and Nunez Mahdi and Popma discuss a 6 stage-process that people experience when faced with different cultures. However, to a certain extent, my case seems to contradict even the theorists. I was really not in denial when I arrived in Germany. Instead, I knew almost nothing about the German culture at the time, I could not utter any German word and I surely did not

know anything about cultural differences. I was simply ignorant! But I did notice the outer layer of the cultural onion, “the concrete, observable things like language, food or dress” (Trompenaars 1998: 6), the “explicit products” (21). Green grass and colourful flowers in the windows impressed me the most; I took numerous photos of the beautifully preserved facades of each and every *Weinstube* I encountered; I was quite appalled by the first punkers I had ever seen in my life. Generally speaking, I was defending my own culture, I could not consider the German culture inferior to the Romanian one, but for sure it looked threatening to me: their difficult language compared to the musical Romanian, and some people’s reluctance to speak English, such as the guide of a cathedral who must have spoken foreign languages. For sure, some of the norms and values were quite explicit and strange to my mind, such as their eating habits: salad should be the first course, not the side dish! It took a while to become “aware of cultural differences, but mainly of superficial ones” (Nunez, Nunez Mahdi, Pompa, 2014: 113) which represents the minimisation stage. Nevertheless, I had not replaced the Romanian glasses yet, so I used the same lenses to see the other culture.

Although it is not an excuse, my ethnocentric approach was determined by the language barriers which impeded my understanding. From this perspective, a shocking event that I witnessed there was the broadcast of the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre. My sister was living in a student dormitory at the time and working during the summer vacation. I mostly stayed at home in the mornings and cooked in the shared kitchen of the seventh floor. On the 11th of September, I watched some terrifying images on TV, I could realise it was about the U.S.A., but the news was in German, and my innocent and peaceful Romanian mentality made me think of a fictional creation, maybe a movie. The other students in the kitchen were Asians and could barely speak English, so misunderstandings arose from both culture and language, but mainly from the latter, actually, the lack of a common language to facilitate communication. My mental framework was limited to the stereotypes about American films, while reality was beyond my understanding. As of everybody else’s!

In defence of my theory on travelling, the journey with the greatest outcomes for my personal intercultural communication competence was a European Interrail Tour which lasted three weeks in 2004. I realise now the truth of the words: “We are not just where we go and what we see; we are also who and what we take with us and what we bring home” (Barker 2015: xvii). I was a young teacher and my sister, my travelling companion, was still studying in Germany and on our trip, we took with us our Romanian origins and our openness towards Europe’s multicultural perspective. Carefully planned in advance, our train journey took us to 7 countries (Hungary, Austria, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands,

France, and Switzerland) and 11 cities (Budapest, Vienna, Köln, Düsseldorf, Brussels, Amsterdam, Freiburg, Paris, Luzern, Basel, and Munich). We stayed with friends in Budapest, Amsterdam and Luzern and became part of their typical life in the respective homes and communities. We visited a traditional village near Amsterdam and travelled in time by witnessing the making of traditional crafts. We stayed in a hostel in Paris, ate baguette and travelled by the famous *metropolitain*. We swam in the Rhein in Switzerland and drank *Weissbier* for the first time. We experienced life in the seven countries in its numerous layers: social, cultural, culinary, linguistic, etc.

Interestingly, paraphrasing an article in *The Globe and Mail* about Canadian travellers' habit of displaying the maple leaf on their luggage, my sister and I travelled incognito, unintentionally, passing as Italians or Spaniards due to our language and looks. I reckon this is the best way to "blend in", an anonymous and "open-minded individual", "not stick[ing] out as a foreigner", "accepting new customs and allowing a culture to become a mirror, reflecting a new self back to you" (Besant 2015). Being permeable "to new influences that you are travelling to experience" (Besant 2015), what I brought back was a complete reconstruction of the self. I returned home a totally new person and what could be noticed at individual level, can be demonstrated by theories (discussed below)! In addition, the trip created a special bonding between two sisters who were living apart at the time and who have lived in different countries for 16 years now.

In a world where barriers are gradually disappearing and cultures are more and more globalised, we should discover how to gain a multicultural approach. I strongly believe that this should be a mandatory preparation stage for any journey, or, as in my case, it should be considered thoroughly in retrospect. With my present knowledge and information, I can state now that the above mentioned trips taught me how to acknowledge and accept other cultures and how to see their customs and traditions through their eyes and not mine.

In order to scientifically demonstrate the above mentioned personal perceptions, I would like to resort to Guo-Ming Chen's article from 1990, "Intercultural communication competence: Some perspectives of research", where he discussed various perspectives on intercultural communication and communicative competence, identifying their commonalities and theorising **intercultural communication competence** (ICC). Some of his observations were barely formulated in 1990, and were in a very initial phase, based on older articles and observations. But some of his views have been subsequently developed and they also match my experiences and confirm the importance that each of us should give to culturally preparing a trip abroad.

To start with, he defines intercultural communication competence as a process that "examines human communication but also investigates interaction

between people and the environment in which they sojourn” (Chen 1990: 5). According to Chen (and previous analysts that he makes reference to), the following components of ICC should be researched: “personality strength”, “communication skills”, “psychological adjustment” and “cultural awareness” (Chen 1990: 15).

Each individual’s personality traits are the product of a certain culture and those that affect ICC are “self-concept”, “self-disclosure”, “self monitoring” and “relaxation” (Chen 1990: 15). The way a person perceives himself or herself is essential for communication, considering the optimistic outlook or the extroverted personality that Chen mentions in connection to ICC: “Individuals with high positive self-concept are more likely to be competent in intercultural communication than are individuals with low positive self-concept” (Chen 1990: 16). I confess I am a person with a moderate self-esteem, but I have always felt good in my shoes and confident among people, being an extrovert person.

The second personality trait, “self-disclosure refers to willingness of the individuals to openly and appropriately reveal information about themselves to their counterparts” (Chen 1990: 17), which facilitates communication at international level, those possessing this feature being more competent interculturalists.

Based on previous research, Chen argues that the third personality characteristic, “self-monitoring”, enables the possessors “to adapt their behavior to different situations and to present themselves in interaction” (Chen 1990: 18). This is connected to “social relaxation” which helps the individual adapt to the new culture without anxiety. Making a parallelism with the stage theory of Culture Shock, I would interpret this relaxation and lack of anxiety as a way of avoiding the second stage of crisis and frustration that people generally feel. When a person sojourning in a different country starts noticing the different behaviours and values, they might feel insecure and “intercultural communication stumbling blocks” (Chen 1990: 19) intervene. Thus, the solution to be competent in intercultural communication is a high level of social relaxation.

As far as the communication skills are concerned, the second major component of ICC, Chen refers to verbal and nonverbal behaviours “that lead individuals to be effective in interaction”, including here “message skills”, “behavioral flexibility”, “interaction management”, and “social skills” (Chen 1990: 20).

Firstly, as I was hinting at above, the message skills refer to the ability of understanding the host language which was advertised by Noam Chomsky ever since 1965. For Chomsky, Chen paraphrases, “linguistic competence ... pertains to the knowledge of rules underlying the use of language” (Chen 1990: 20).

Obviously, language, as common denominator, is the best communication facilitator, the reverse being also true, its absence leading to no communication between the speakers. This is again a theoretical confirmation of what I first lived in Germany without being aware of. However, Chen adds two more skills to this category, “descriptiveness”, knowing how to give feedback instead of judging the others’ behaviour and “supportiveness”, knowing how to be a good communicator, resorting to “head nod, eye contact, facial expression and physical proximity” (Chen 1990: 21). We have to remark that Chen wrote his article in 1990 and some of his ideas were breakthroughs at the time, considering that by 2016, the role of body language has been widely acknowledged as an essential element of communication.

Moving on to “behavioral flexibility”, we can notice already that what Chen proposes is a very psychological approach previously analysed by other authors. Their ideas are worth remembering irrespective of the culture of the interlocutors, as they can be valuable at personal level under any circumstances. What they understand by this concept is the ability to adapt to various types of information and consequently react properly. This is connected to “interaction management”, where speakers innately and by means of practice feel when to take turns, when to initiate or terminate a conversation, thus “handl[ing] the procedural aspects of structuring and maintaining a conversation” (Spitzberg & Cupach qtd. in Chen 1990: 22).

When it comes to Chen’s last two components “psychological adjustment” and “cultural awareness”, I should make a remark. My analysis of Chen’s theories is meant to provide recommendations to tourists planning to travel overseas, matching at the same time my own tourist impressions with a theoretical framework. Although handling the culture shock is crucial to ICC, it has already been demonstrated that only people who live abroad for longer periods of time are exposed to the U-curve hypothesis. Therefore, I will relate these last two aspects to one of my other crucial trips, an eight-month experience abroad, relying this time on other theoreticians’ views.

Better prepared and able “to move between multiple frames-of-reference, without losing [my] identity” (Nunez, Nunez Mahdi, Pompa, 2014: 107), I underwent the final cultural training: I lived abroad for eight continuous months and yes, I admit, I could not avoid fully living the **culture shock**. The **U-Curve model** was published as early as 1955 by Sverre Lysgaard (“Adjustment in a foreign society: Norwegian Fulbright grantees visiting the United States”, *International Social Science Bulletin*, Volume 7) and further discussed by many, for instance Geert Hofstede. We can identify four stages of the acculturation curve, whose names might differ from one interculturalist to the other: honeymoon/

euphoria, crisis/ culture shock, recovery/ acculturation, adjustment & mastery/ stable state.

When I reached Birmingham, United Kingdom, a dream was coming true: being in the United Kingdom and moreover, becoming part of the academia as a Visiting Research Associate of the Department of American and Canadian Studies, University of Birmingham was already a mind-blowing experience, therefore euphoria, excitement and fascination were words of the day. I had studied so much about the British language, culture and civilisation that I was enthralled to discover these for real, outside the realm of the printed paper. I reckon I was comparing my knowledge of Britain to Britain itself, rather than Romania to Britain. During the second stage, I realised that the people and the places did not match my expectations: not all Britons were ladies and gentlemen in their behaviour, young people were very talkative and keen on drinking, in a very Balkan style, the streets were not as clean as in Germany and sometimes even Romania seemed cleaner, it did not rain that much (at least during those eight months), etc. Again I was experiencing things in my own way, as Romania was not a term of comparison, Britain was simply disappointing me or better said, was revealing its true nature (not fictional) to me. I did not reject the new culture, I did not adjust either. I knew that I was there for set period of time, I did not want to become one of them, but I wanted to make the most of it. I (re)discovered the pleasures of reading in a huge library, I visited incredible places in England, I made friends from cultures that I had not encountered before (Great Britain, Nigeria, Syria, Mauritius Islands, Iraq, Iran) and I tried to learn their social and cultural norms. The language and the daily activities within the campus (communicating with students and professors, interacting with the administrative personnel of the department, library, cafeteria, etc) facilitated my potential integration. However, my mind was not set to adapt, to “go native”, “to become more Roman than the Romans” (Hofstede 2010: 385). In my case, becoming biculturally adapted was not an aim because I did not have any plans to leave Romania and adopt the British cultural model. As it has been argued by more recent research results, the U-Curve model cannot apply to every traveller and the psychological mood is an important factor that can change the degree of adjustment. Although this time (compared to my previous travelling occasions) I might say I possessed the “ability to deal with situations such as frustration, stress, alienation and ambiguity caused by the host culture” (Chen 1990: 27) and I was aware of the “variety in the host culture that affects how people think and behave” (28), I simply did not want to become part of the new culture, as I knew it was just a temporary situation.

I would now like to conclude my comments by reiterating the association between travelling and intercultural communication competence that is worth

looking into more in depth. One's simple presence in an international context marks the beginning of a shift of perspective: discovering new cultures, customs, and languages, but above all discovering oneself. Most of the international or Erasmus exchange students or the multinational corporation executives acknowledge that while studying or working in a multicultural environment they "have learned as much about their own culture as they have about other cultures" (*The New Math of Multicultural Workgroups*: 9). I appreciate that this kind of perception can be extrapolated to any journey abroad, to almost any individual and to any instance of intercultural communication. Sharing my ideas, I will use a fellow researcher's ending remarks:

In the process of intercultural communication, tourists from different cultural backgrounds express their cultural identities, perceptions, all coming to surface as a result of interaction ... thus contributing to [the tourist's] cultural and spiritual development. (Albu 2015: 12).

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