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Teaching Intercultural Negotiation and Communication Skills: An International Experiment

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Abstract

This paper reports on the initial phase of an international teaching experiment involving the use of videoconferencing for the teaching of intercultural business communication and negotiation skills. The experiment has the following aims: (a) to give insight into how students from different cultures operate in nearly identical situations, (b) to give students exposure to intercultural communication through videoconferencing, (c) to allow students to assess videoconferencing as a tool for international business communication, and (d) to develop intercultural case studies.

The paper provides project background and rationale and describes lead up activities involving groups of students in Helsinki, Finland, and Lugano, Switzerland. As part of the initial phase leading to videoconferencing, students in both settings used an identical case as the basis of a meeting, which was videotaped. The paper also discusses the video performance of the two groups, pointing out similarities and differences in student approaches. Finally, it outlines plans for the future and discusses the prospect of extending participation to involve other interested institutions.

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This is a slightly revised version of an unpublished paper presented at the Association for Business Communication 1998 Annual Convention held in San Antonio,

Texas. One of the aims of the conference presentation was to invite participants to join a network of institutions interested in becoming “videoconferencing partners.” At the time of the presentation, an actual videoconference had not yet been scheduled, hence the focus on background, preparations and videotaped meetings and negotiations. Since then, a videoconference has been held between students at the Helsinki School of Economics and Business Administration and students at the University of Lugano (using off-campus facilities at the Swiss Center for Scientific Computing, Manno). This event took place in April 1999 and is the subject of a working paper in progress (Charles and Poncini, forthcoming).

Introduction - Project Rationale

Why Do Training in International Communication Skills?

More and more people are using English as a common language to communicate in the global business arena. The role of English as a “lingua franca” represents a major reason for providing training in international communication skills. For many business school students around the world, English may be a second, or third, or even fourth language. As part of their business education, these non-native speakers of English (NNSs) must be prepared to use English in their future business careers in an international context, with business people of varying English language skills, both native and non-native speakers. Firth (1995, p. 256) has observed that participants in “lingua franca” business encounters in English engage in interactional work that can fill this kind of talk “with orderly and ‘normal’ characteristics,” despite use of the language that may be at times nonstandard. Training in communication skills allows students to practice and develop their strategies for interacting in such business settings.

Because of the nature of lingua franca interactions – participants are from different cultural and national backgrounds - training provided in this area also involves intercultural communication training. The language might be “smuggled in,” or conversely, intercultural issues may be included in a business communication component of a language course.

Another reason for providing training in international communication skills relates to the needs perceived by users of English themselves. Learners of English for business purposes often consider negotiations, meetings and presentations as priorities

when asked about their communication needs. Native speakers of English (NSs) are also - concerned about negotiations and meetings. A variety of books and teaching methods aiming to teach negotiation skills reflect this need (see, for example, Hall, 1993, for an academic and intellectual perspective and Fisher and Ury, 1981, for a business-oriented perspective. McRae, 1998, represents an approach involving self-analysis and observation to acquire negotiation skills (Charles, 1998a)). Although native speakers of English may have a solid command of the language, they, too, need to be aware of certain aspects of communicating internationally. This is especially the case for business students who may not have had the chance to use and refine their communication skills in a “real” international business context.

Finally, awareness of cultural issues and their effect on communication and the business relationship is increasing (see Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris, 1997, for a review of cross-cultural comparative research and intercultural research. The availability of numerous popular books for the business reader, for example Mole, 1995, and Lewis, 1996, also reflects this awareness). This growing need for intercultural awareness in business can be met by specialized training.

Why Use Video Sessions as an Interim Step?

Videotaping and videoconferencing are, of course, two different things, with very different methodologies and motivations. The ultimate aim of this project is to do videoconferencing; the videotaped sessions described in this paper are part of the project in progress.

Using such video sessions as an interim step towards the use of videoconferencing has many benefits. They allow students and instructors to focus on all aspects of communication, including body language and not just spoken language. This could allow, for example, someone to compensate for possibly inadequate language skills by utilizing other communicative resources. The same concern with verbal and nonverbal communication could hold for NSs.

In addition, video recording allows significant useful feedback and an opportunity for self-evaluation. Students may become more aware of their individual strengths and weaknesses, and develop strategies accordingly.

Finally, the videos themselves are good purely “for the record” and provide data for research. It is interesting to analyze how students actually cope, what strategies they use when faced with a problem, and so on.

Why Use Videoconferencing as a Learning Activity?

Using videoconferencing to teach intercultural negotiation and communication skills is in a sense videotaping taken one step further. In real life, students will speak with members of other cultures and will have to interpret what speakers want to say, even when there are difficulties related to language. They must therefore adopt strategies on the spot. In this respect, a videoconference provides more real life communication challenges.

Student motivation rises with such real life challenges. Preparation, for example, is carried out in view of a concrete event, to take place in a context much wider than that of the classroom. Students can also be involved in setting up the sessions. On the other

hand, if there are course constraints, specific preparation for the session might not matter; the event can be a “shock.”

In addition, videoconferencing in itself enhances the learning process. It provides exposure to culturally different communication styles and in particular negotiation styles, and different ways of speaking English. Students are able to practice their ability to negotiate meanings. A videoconference brings fresh communication and negotiation partners into the classroom.

Furthermore, videoconferencing is a developing technology, with increasing numbers of companies using videoconferencing facilities to conduct business. This is one of the main reasons Hildebrandt (1995) provides for using videoconferencing in the business curriculum (she also lists learning objectives related to improving business communication skills and the ability to perform self-assessments, in addition to those objectives related to the technology itself).

A specific example of videoconferencing in use involves a large European-based paper mill, which has a regular Monday morning video/computer conferencing session among managers in various European countries. Participants sit in their own offices, in different countries, but they see each other and chat through an internal video network. The meeting is conducted in English, yet all except the British manager are non-native speakers of English.

This is the future communication scenario for which we want to prepare our students. By actually participating in a videoconference, students are able to assess firsthand how this new technology can be used as a tool for international business communication. They will be able to experience the advantages and limits of this medium and be better able to appreciate the technological improvements underway.

Student Groups– Organizational Aspects

The main characteristics of the two student groups can be summarized in terms of year of study, cultural or national background, English-language proficiency, class groups and preparation.

Students at the Helsinki School of Economics and Business Administration were seniors or in the MBA program. There were Finnish (Finnish/ Swedish speaking) as well as international students. The course focused on negotiation skills, and class attendance was mandatory, with large groups of about 30 students attending classes. The English-language proficiency of students was upper intermediate / advanced.

Students at the University of Lugano were first-year students taking an English course designed for economics and business students. They were from Switzerland (Italian, French or German-speaking), Italy and other countries. Class attendance was not mandatory, and class groups were small, with about 8 - 10 students attending sessions. The English-language proficiency of students was intermediate.

The Lugano groups did slightly more preparatory work, in view of the fact the students had not had much exposure to meetings and negotiations in the earlier part of the course. Before using the “Training Centre Case,” they conducted meetings based on a simpler case set in a local context. In addition, the Lugano students participated in a meeting session during the class prior to the one in which the actual video was made. As this session was also videotaped, they had a kind of practice session.

One important aspect of project activities is that the student groups can differ; indeed, this makes the project interesting, without compromising it. It is like working with “real life” groups, which do not generally go through identical programs.

The video sessions and preparation can also be a useful interim step for other institutions interested in joining the network of “videoconferencing partners,” especially when these institutions must still address organizational aspects related to the use of videoconferencing. These include academic calendars and course schedules. It may be difficult to find overlapping time slots for courses, so it may be necessary to plan well in advance – from a semester to even a year ahead. Once contacts have been established however, and the schedule and special needs discussed, this experience generally becomes easier and more feasible.

Time zone differences must also be considered, especially if American institutions join with the intent of videoconferencing with European institutions, for example. However, wide margins may be available: even in normal circumstances the Helsinki School of Economics and Business Administration offers teaching between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m.

Another issue relates to the compatibility of technical equipment for videoconferencing. In most cases, an institution’s technical staff can be involved in communication between the institutions regarding equipment compatibility or technical aspects of videoconferencing.

Looking more specifically at the video sessions discussed in this paper, both a professional set up as well as an amateur set-up are adequate for creating a positive learning experience, though each has advantages and limits. For example, Helsinki has professional equipment, sound and excellent camera handling, but the room layout was

not flexible enough for the group to sit around a meeting table. The less professional set-up of Lugano provided this flexibility, with the instructor filming in the classroom, but a desk mike would have been better than the ‘incorporated mike’ that was used while filming. (A tip for those using a less professional set-up: remember to close all windows before starting, especially if lawn mowers are in season!)

In any case, videotaping is good practice for videoconferencing and also provides a wide range of follow-up activities.

Preparation for Video Sessions

The lead up to the video sessions can be adapted to each group’s specific needs. The Lugano students were studying English with a focus on economics and business. As part of the Business Communication module, special material on meetings and negotiations was used in class, with particular attention given to audience analysis. Students first practiced their negotiation skills in connection with a specially written case concerning student interest in extending library hours, increasing photocopy facilities and changing university parking regulations. One of the aims of first using a more familiar context was to allow the students to get accustomed to working together in groups (or delegations) to design their communication strategy around whichever of the three issues they felt worthy of attention. It also allowed them to analyze a concrete audience. For example, “the other side” (TOS) was the administration, but the students had to decide whether (and how) to enlist the support of one of the professors as part of their strategy. In addition, a short practice session was videotaped to allow students to get used to the idea

of simulating a meeting that would be taped (as well as allowing the instructor to practice with the camera).

Helsinki ended up slightly adapting the case for their specific purposes. This was acceptable, as the actual videoconferencing was not involved.

Using Cases / The “Training Centre Case”

The benefits of using cases in a learning environment are widely recognized (see Easton, 1992, for a discussion of the case method and skills developed, as well as learning problems associated with cases). If cases are too detailed, however, the student focus is on “mastering” the detailed information and context presented in the case. If instead the case is fairly simple, yet sophisticated in terms of situation and issues, it will provide a context in which negotiation skills can be applied. The phases of the negotiation process are thus more “natural.”

The “Management Training Centre Case,” by Mirjaliisa Charles and Tuija Nikko (1998) involves an EU project to build and run an International Management Training Centre (this case is summarized in Appendix 1). Students form “delegations” that have arrived at Rovaniemi, Finland, for an initial meeting on non-technical issues. The case outlines issues that need to be decided on during the meeting. Students are instructed to decide on the country (or delegation) they will represent and then work out their position concerning issues. The version of the case used in Lugano included brief background information for each delegation, identified as A, B, and C, concerning the general preferences of their group. This included, for example, whether group members were all happy with the location or whether they preferred a certain style or decor.

At each institution, the sessions were videotaped during classes. The follow-up to the Lugano sessions consisted of a class discussion and a written description of the student's perceptions of this activity. In Helsinki, students completed a written self-assessment after the sessions.

Student Approaches

This section presents some observations of student approaches and performance during the sessions. It also indicates some similarities and differences in the approaches of the Helsinki and the Lugano students. Observing student approaches during the session can allow the instructor to tailor learning activities to the group at hand.

In the initial practice session, which lasted under 10 minutes, Lugano students skipped small talk, introductions and reference to any kind of agenda. At the main videotaped session students first engaged in small talk, mainly concerning the trip, the cold weather and the good food. This was followed by the host ("Finnish") delegation's presentation on Lapland and Finland in general. There was no mention of an agenda or references to the direction of the meeting. The leader of the host delegation acted as chair, while others introduced topics, mainly in the form of questions.

Concerning the presentation on Lapland and Finland, this was neither required nor suggested. In Lugano, student groups had to do some research on the site of the Training Centre, and the host group (or "Finnish" delegation) chose to start with a presentation. One wonders whether perhaps being non-Finns, they felt it necessary to provide such information. A general impression regarding the Lugano group is that during the first "practice" session students showed little awareness of audience and context, especially in

view of the lack of small talk or personal introductions at the start. The host group “jumped into” the presentation, without introducing the speaker.

Similarities in student approaches consisted of the lack of an explicit agenda and the focus on certain topics or issues, in particular the seasonal opening of the Centre, the food that would be served there and the disadvantages of its location in Lapland.

The main differences in students’ approaches could be seen when similar topics discussed by the two groups raised different “objections” on each side. For example, concerning food, the group in Helsinki representing France considered French food a “must,” with local food not worthy of consideration. In Lugano, the group representing France complimented the hosts on Finnish food, and during the meeting, the leader of the host group agreed on international cuisine as the best choice for the Centre. Although all members of the Helsinki and Lugano groups representing France were not actually French, the character of both groups in their respective meetings was that of a delegation representing a particular country or culture. This representation was handled differently by each group when food was an issue.

Concerning the seasonal opening and location of the Centre, delegations of Helsinki students questioned the hosts, feeling that the Centre should not be open in the summer. The Swedish group at the Helsinki meeting opposed a summer opening because of insects, and the group representing France felt courses should not be offered during the traditional vacation period in their country. The Lugano students, on the other hand, told the host delegation that the Centre should be open in summer only, because of the cold weather and “transport problem” in winter.

Although a detailed discourse analysis was not performed, an observation of disagreements during repeated video viewing seems to indicate that the Helsinki students

were more direct in objecting, while the Lugano students used questions to disagree or set forth opposing views. The Lugano students also showed more instances of immediate agreement. These differences can not necessarily be linked to cultural differences, as preparation for the sessions and student background and experience differs. In any event, viewers' perceptions of the Lugano students are that they continued being "polite guests" and "polite hosts" even later in the negotiations. The transcribed extract in Appendix 2 includes a negative comment on the location, with the student bringing up the point and the head of the "Finnish" delegation both polite.

The Lugano video also shows a greater use "we" compared to Helsinki students' use of "I." This might be due to the group work required as meeting preparation, although one Lugano student does use "I" as self-reference to give an opinion. One difference between the Lugano and Helsinki groups in terms of topic choice relates to the issue of staff. For the Lugano group, the nationality and language of the Centre's staff was discussed at length and included concerns about proportion of local staff and Finns to other Europeans and other international staff.

Concluding Comments

Limited data as well as different preparation and background make it difficult to link student performances to cultural differences. In any event, it is very difficult to attribute causality to cultural factors, be they national or organizational cultures. Still, it is worth bearing this aspect in mind. Raising issues connected to intercultural communication and interactions can be an interesting and useful exercise for students during class. Such issues include the avoidance of conversational overlap in favor of

“one-at-a-time” speaking, perceptions of aggressiveness or accommodation, topic choice and stereotypes.

Students, for example, could view the videotaped performance of another group, from a different culture, as a basis for a discussion on cultural stereotypes, characteristics, and so on. Perceptions of a group’s own performance compared to another can also be worthy of discussion. For example, the Lugano group could be perceived as more cooperative and less willing to pursue an issue by directly disagreeing. If so, can this be linked to cultural differences, age, experience of the group and the lead-up to the project that included group work and research on Lapland and Finland? Or could it be the nature of the courses themselves? Even without videoconferencing, students from different countries could give feedback on each other’s performance and at the same time increase their awareness of the negotiation process.

The instructor could also identify a specific aspect of student performance, for example, in the case of the Lugano students, the lack of small talk. The instructor might modify or incorporate a learning activity that develops students’ ability to engage in small talk prior to a meeting and makes them more aware of their own individual language needs as well as the role of small talk at business events. Similarly, the issue of considering and communicating an agenda – whether the agenda is set or to be negotiated – can also be linked to language needs and awareness of the role of the agenda at a business meeting.

Future Plans in Our Institutions

The Helsinki School of Economics and Business Administration will continue to have extensive intercultural communication and negotiation training courses and will continue to use and develop cases, while aiming to find partners in institutions interesting in engaging in similar activities.

At the University of Lugano, intercultural awareness is included as a theme in courses for both economics and communication students. In the Faculty of Economics, discussions are underway concerning the addition of a third semester of English-language study that is entirely dedicated to business communication (at the moment business communication skills are taught in a shorter module in a year-long course). In the Faculty of Communication Sciences, a semester module on professional communication skills is being integrated into the English-language course for communication students.

We are also in the process of extending participation in this project, whether through swapping experiences, preparing and carrying out a videoconference, developing teaching methodology and gathering data for research. There are numerous areas in which cooperating teachers could “swap tips.” This could also be an added benefit of working together on such a project.

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Appendix 1

SUMMARY

The Management Training Centre Case

Mirjaliisa Charles, Tuija Nikko

This case involves an EU project to build and run an International Management Training Centre. Students form “delegations” that have arrived at Rovaniemi, Finland, for an initial meeting on non-technical issues. These delegations, consisting of representatives of National Tourist Boards, consultants, and government representatives, are to tour Lappish sites after the meeting.

The issues that need to be decided on during the meeting are:

1. The required physical characteristics of the site chose (i.e. town, countryside)
2. Basic requirements that the Training Centre would have to fulfill in order for it to become a place where representatives of different countries would like to come and feel at home. This includes aspects like overall course organization, leisure activities, cuisine, physical features of the building, including interior decoration.

Students are instructed to decide on their delegation (the country they will represent) and then work out their position concerning issues. In the case used in Lugano, delegations were given background information on the general characteristics of their delegation: whether to be unhappy with the idea of locating the Centre in Lapland, or whether to feel that the Centre should reflect a neutral and culture free international style.

Appendix 2
Student Group and Extract, University of Lugano
(for reference while viewing the video extract)

Delegation A (Representing France, left to right, around table)

1. Gabriele, Italian and Swiss (Education in Italian and German, has lived in Zurich for 8 years)
2. Christian, Italian (from Varese, Italy, near the Italian-Swiss border)

Delegation B (Representing Finland/Lapland, the “Host Group”)

3. Francesco, Swiss (from Ticino – Italian-speaking Swiss canton)
4. Andrea, Swiss (from Ticino – Italian-speaking Swiss canton)

Delegation C (Representing Italy)

5. Christian, Italian (from Sondrio, Italy – borders with a Swiss Canton in which Italian, German and Romansh are spoken))
6. Cinzia, Italian (from Milan, Italy)

Transcriptions and Video Extract

The part of the video to be viewed starts with unit no. 3 on the transcription below. Francesco, leader of the Finnish delegation, has finished answering Christian P.’s question about nationality of staff (European / International/ Finnish). Francesco then asks the group their opinion on staff nationality.

U.	Speaker	Transcription - Lugano Students
1.	Francesco (Fin)	(...) What is your opinion about this?
2.	Christian (I)	Yes, we think it’s important to have different people from different country in the Centre in order to do the possibility and the service to have the possibility to uh meet other- other people from Europe or other parts of the world. And do you think to open the Centre all the year or only in the summer or winter?
3.	Francesco (Fin)	No. Our idea is just during the- the summer season and we think just the spring and summer. (six seconds silence)
4.	Gabriele (Fr)	This Centre, from point of view is that we want the Centre reflects a natural cultural free and international style. It’s also your idea or not?
5.	Francesco	Yes we are agree with that. And you are agree also? (He looks at Cinzia and Christian P.)
6.	Christian	Yes

	(I), Cinzia (I)	
7.	Gabriele (Fr)	Because I think a multicultural Centre – training Centre – it must be very modern, flexible, and Rovaniemi, I think, it’s not enough in the middle of Europe. Rovaniemi it’s very north, top of Europe. It’s not a difficulty for the other people to reach this place?
8.	Francesco	Yes. It is a big problem for our solution, our solution. But we think that you will see also that (...) not in the middle of Europe is not a problem. (...) other region much more. We think that the possibility to visit the Centre in the region for example the north, also is a good solution to develop this region because Lapland has not any (...) and we want to develop Rovaniemi and boost the local economy. That’s our idea. I agree that Lapland is not in the Centre but our idea is not only the Centre of Europe but also the regions can have the possibility to develop and to grow... (Christian P. nods head in agreement/understanding)

Example of Problem and Strategy Used

1.	Cinzia (I)	What is your idea about the cuisine? (she pronounces it “KWEE-zene”; the others don’t seem to understand and look at each other. The group has just finished talking about government financing, so this question represents a new topic; meaning can not be drawn from context.)
2.	Francesco (Fin)	About the?
3.	Cinzia (I)	Cuisine (same pronunciation: “KWEE-zene” The others till don’t understand; they look at Christian, the other Italian. Someone says “cucina,” Italian for food, cooking, cuisine)
4.	Francesco (Fin)	International.

In this case, mutual understanding was reached when someone contributed a word in a language familiar to the participants. This kind of “code-switching” or “joint production” has been observed in international business meetings in which participants come from a variety of countries. Another way of dealing with a situation in which the group or audience does not understand is for the speaker to reword or rephrase. In this case, Cinzia could have used the simpler word, for example, “food,” “cooking” or even “restaurant service” or “eating” instead of repeating the same word.

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"Teaching Intercultural Negotiation and Communication Skills: An International Experiment"

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