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APPROACHES TO INTERCULTURAL TRAINING IN THE DANUBE REGION

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***Abstract:** The paper examines the practical experience of the author in preparing and executing an intercultural training seminar for citizens from the Danube region countries (Croatia, Germany, Romania and Serbia). The goal of the seminar was for the participants to be able to predict social norms and behaviours in the Danube region based on the information from intercultural analysis tools (guide.culture-crossing.org, <https://www.crossculture.com/latest-news/the-lewis-model-dimensions-of-behaviour/>). Results show that this type of intercultural training needs improvement but also has a lot of potential for future development. Its main advantage is the potential for applicability in various education practices.*

***Keywords:** intercultural communication, Danube, the Lewis model of cultural types, linear-active culture, reactive culture, multi-active culture*

INTRODUCTION

There has been a rising necessity for better intercultural training approaches in Europe as a whole and the Danube region in particular. In the context of intensive migration processes in and out of the EU, as well as between the member states, traditional approaches (language training, computer skills) in improving language and communication competences are not sufficient. Combining different approaches into interactive and inter-thematic tasks during such trainings presents better results for students of all ages. Memorising and practising the new material happens more easily for learners. The paper presents the results of a mock seminar completed during the Open Doors for Danube Countries for All (ODDA) project (24.-28.07.2017) in Bad Urach, Germany, where project participants from 4 Danube countries had to take part in theoretical training and practical task completion. The goal was to simulate a real-world experience for participants and a real classroom feedback for the tutor. This way it improves the teaching methods and materials for future training.

EXPOSITION

The seminar was completed within a group of 12 participants from 4 countries – 4 people from Germany, 4 from Romania, 2 from Croatia and 2 from Serbia. Learning targets were to be able to predict social norms and behaviours in the Danube region based on the information from the intercultural analysis tools. To be prepared what to expect from the host country without knowing its official language and its cultural heritage. Work language was English with course duration of 120 minutes. The course was conducted as an interactive presentation including a controlled discussion, lecture section and tasks testing for the new acquired knowledge. Consequence of the seminar was that participants should be capable of making predictions without knowing the local language(s).

The intercultural seminar included the following stages:

1. Watching a video clip of a social experiment in Bulgaria (15 minutes) – a man loses his wallet in the street and reactions of strangers to the situation are recorded¹. Participants had to

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N_blnJE26k

discuss the content of the video from their own national perspective. The task had to introduce them into the concept of cultural differences and how they affect behaviour. Participants successfully identified the differences between their cultures and Bulgarian culture. They spotted correctly both individual characteristics of behaviour together with cultural peculiarities.

2. Theoretical training in the Richard Lewis model of cultural types¹ (30 minutes) – linear-active cultures, reactive cultures and multi-active cultures.

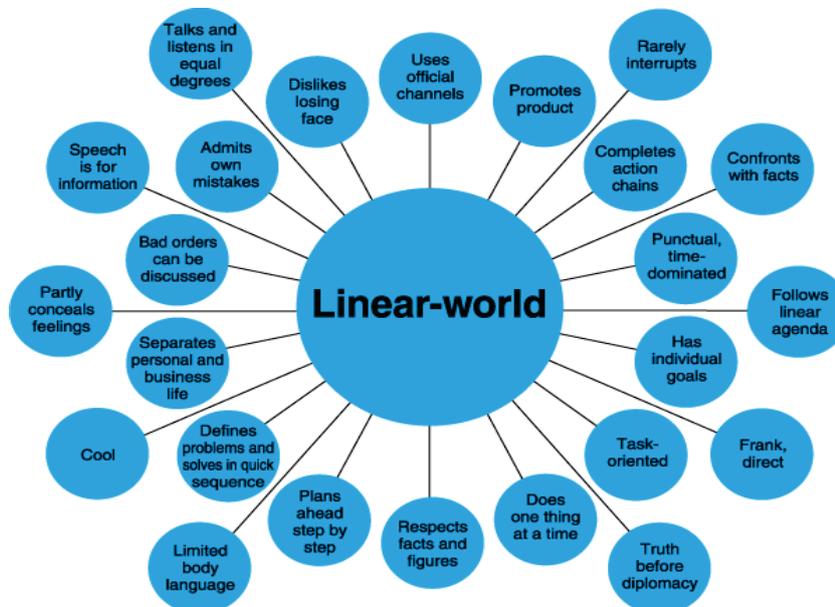


Figure 1. Illustrative chart from the seminar's presentation

Participants expressed curiosity about the concept of cultural classification charts. They easily learned how to distinguish the 3 main types of cultures when given situational examples.

3. Working in teams with information cards (3 teams with 4 cards each) based on intercultural analysis tools like guide.culture-crossing.org and www.crossculture.com, as well as tutor's own materials (40 minutes). Information cards contained the following data:

- (1) Country's name and flag.
- (2) General information (population number, language (s), etc.)
- (3) Culture and communication:
 - a. Greetings
 - b. Communication style
 - c. Eye contact
 - d. Ideas of time
 - e. Personal space and touching
 - f. Gestures
 - g. Taboos
 - h. Cultural characteristics according to R. Lewis

The author personally compiled the visuals in the information cards aiming at easy readability and universally understandable format. Participants were given the opportunity to express their opinion on the content and its reliability. Most shared agreement with the correctness of information, some noticed several discrepancies that needed correction.

¹ <https://www.crossculture.com/>

	AUSTRIA	<p>LANGUAGE: German (official nationwide), Slovene (official in Carinthia), Croatian (official in Burgenland), Hungarian (official in Burgenland)</p> <p>MAJOR RELIGION: Roman Catholic 73.6%, Protestant 4.7%, Muslim 4.2%, other 3.5%, unspecified 2%, none 12%</p> <p>MAJOR ETHNIC GROUPS: Austrians 91.1%, former Yugoslavs 4% (includes Croats, Slovenes, Serbs, and Bosniaks), Turks 1.6%, German 0.9%, other 2.4%</p>
	GREETINGS	A handshake during first meeting. A kiss on the cheek and a light hug between friends/family.
	COMMUNICATION STYLE	Direct and polite. People are reserved during initial conversations. Honesty is highly valued.
	EYE CONTACT	Direct – it is a sign of respect and interest .
	IDEAS OF TIME	Completing all tasks one after the other . Punctuality is very important both in business and in private life. Public transport is always on time, friend & family meetings are held according to planned schedules.
	PERSONAL SPACE AND TOUCHING	People communicate standing at least at an arm's length of each other . Private spaces are highly valued. Friends & family often hold hands and hug.
	GESTURES	When invited to someone's home for a meal, it's customary to bring a small gift, like a bouquet of flowers, a box of chocolates, or a bottle of wine .
	TABOOS	WARNING!!! Screwing the forefinger into the temple of the head is a rude gesture that means "You're crazy!" .
	CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS	Linear-active culture: result-oriented, highly organized people, they're focused on planning and analyzing objectively. Privacy and punctuality are to be respected.

Figure 2. Information card for intercultural analysis

4. Completing a set of tasks in groups. The first task was for the teams to compare each set of Danube countries using the upper mentioned communication elements (greetings, communication style, eye contact, ideas of time, personal space and touching, gestures, taboos, cultural characteristics according to R. Lewis) and put them into the correct category (linear-active, reactive and multi-active). The second task was to situate the countries in the Lewis' triangular classification chart. Participants managed to differentiate whether the communication style of a given country was, for example, linear-active, multi-active or reactive, and to situate the countries close to the correct position according to the Lewis chart. Major difficulty was to differentiate between subtle differences of culture type degrees.

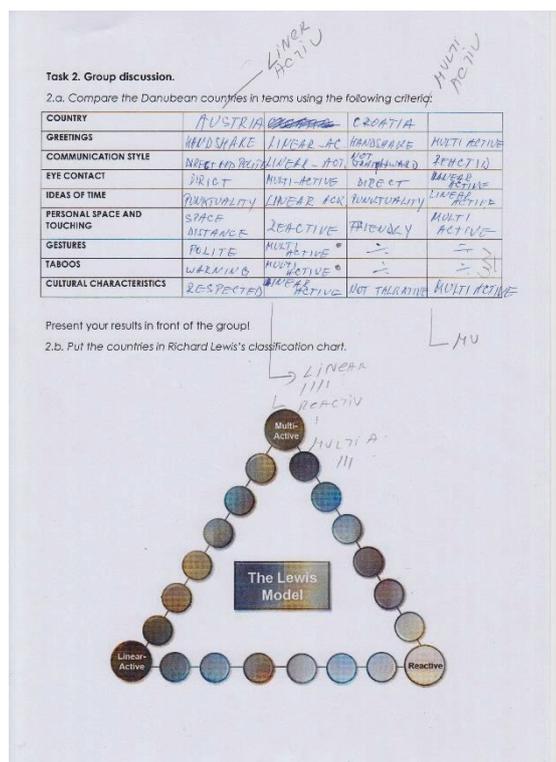


Figure 3. Group tasks of participants

5. Feedback questionnaire was the last component that represents the overall satisfaction with the workshop. Other feedback was necessary for determining the following: the most and least valuable about the workshop; degree of satisfaction with the relevance of participants' workshop contents, quality of teaching materials, quality of teaching methods, workshop venue/facilities, organizational arrangements for and during the event, date and duration of the workshop; what topic(s) or theme(s) they would like to be addressed at the next ODDA intercultural workshop; additional opinions; optional details (name, country, institution, e-mail). 8 out of 12 participants filled in the questionnaire.

(1) Results of feedback:

- Overall satisfaction – 75% of participants were very satisfied with seminar, 12.5% were somewhat satisfied and 12.5% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

- The most valuable components of the seminar were the Lewis cultural types, the opportunity to practice team work, as well as accessibility of taught material. 25% of participants were least satisfied with the duration of the lecture component and the lack of access to all information cards for proper classification of countries.

- Rating the degree of satisfaction with the relevance of participants' workshop contents, quality of teaching materials, quality of teaching methods, workshop venue/facilities, organizational arrangements for and during the event, date and duration of the workshop was not completed by all participants and there is certain variation between answers. Overall, all participants rate the components in the range from "Excellent" to "Good".

- Desired topics for the next ODDA intercultural workshop were cultural differences between people's lives in Danube towns, historical background for cultural differences and how communication is facilitated between countries with different languages. All opinions focused on the practical aspect of the intercultural workshop.

(2) Implications of the seminar – we consider that learning through visual interactive materials is best for all age learners. What the author concludes from the feedback and personal impressions of the participants' reactions is that visual sources have to be prepared professionally

after detailed research of the meaning of symbols in each Danube culture. Visual representation of the text in cards is also desirable. Overall, simplicity of visualisation would help in better learning. We believe additional work with graphic designers is necessary.

CONCLUSION

We can summarize that there is potential to develop intercultural training courses with interactive methods based on visual information sources. The goal for the learner is to be able to predict culturally based behaviour solely through using such information materials. Our intention is to develop these approaches for future courses in intercultural training for all learners from the Danube region.

REFERENCES

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