7 Teaching intercultural competencies at the University of Debrecen

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Abstract

The education of intercultural competencies and the related skills are at the forefront of teaching at Debrecen University. The teaching materials are based on the work of esteemed authors like Hofstede, Hall, and Trompenaars. However, new cultural and social realities evolve, and educators of intercultural communication need to be responsive to these changes. The article discusses recent surveys carried out by the Budapest College of Communication, Business, and Arts in Budapest in 2004-2012 and SCOPE Intercultural Communication Services LLC (of which the first author is a member) in 2007-2017 on the transformation of the typical features in Hungarian culture, using Hofstede's (1983) original four indices and some additional ones developed by Hall and Hall (1990) and Smith, Dugan, and Trompenaars (1996). The study compares these findings with Hofstede's (1983) corresponding results on Hungary. The authors have found significant differences between the two sets of results and attempted to identify the underlying causes. The paper emphasises the significance of these new findings in raising intercultural awareness in Hungary and Europe in the global framework, and use them as a basis for teaching intercultural competencies through language learning for students.

Keywords: Hofstede, Hungarian survey, cultural differences, underlying causes, intercultural awareness.

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1.   Introduction

As with globalisation, the spread of multinational companies and the enormous development of information technology can lead to a new trend in employers' requirements, and formal education and foreign language teaching have an important role in improving intercultural competencies. These competencies can be learned and activated in the classroom and can be improved at the workplace. According to Fantini and Tirmizi's (2006) definition, intercultural competence refers to complex capabilities which are needed to be able to communicate effectively and appropriately when we interact with people culturally and linguistically different from us. Intercultural skills and competencies are present in a new European Union initiative whose aim is to help communication across Europe when it comes to working, learning, and training between different nations (European Commission, 2017). European Skills, Competencies, Qualifications, and Occupations is a multilingual classification system for European qualifications, occupations skills, and competencies.

When teaching intercultural competencies, the first step is help students explore and gain comfort with their own cultural identity. This will help them become open to explore other cultures different than their own and leads to gaining intercultural competency. The authors took the deliberate decision to outline Hofstede's (1983) model, identify his rankings on Hungary, and carry out a new survey in the specific circumstances of Hungarian culture, which yielded somewhat different results about four decades later. The study seeks to explore the potential underlying reasons behind the two sets of findings and provides a plausible explanation for the discrepancies. Throughout its history, Hungary has almost always been a kind of buffer state and a battlefield between east and west over the centuries of European history (Molnár, 2001). This role of Hungary aroused the authors' interest in establishing new understandings of Hungarian mentality, thinking, and awareness of its specific cultural features. Hungarian culture may be characterised by a unique integration of eastern and western cultures, e.g. the Ottoman rule of 150 years (16th and 17th centuries), or the Habsburg dominance of 230 years and the impact of the French enlightenment in the 18th century, to mention two particular examples from recent times. The

results of these influences can be summarised as follows according to Hungarian psychologist Margot Honti: Hungarians are typically receptive to cultural influences, they show readiness to learn new methods and technologies, they show passive resistance against oppression, and always find out how they can cunningly overcome problems in whatever circumstances (in Falkné Bánó, 2002, p. 64). Hungarians are usually considered to be pessimistic but seem to have a brilliant sense of humour, which translates into sarcasm and smart jokes. The present situation of Hungary is similarly characterised by multiple external influences such as the process of globalisation, the changes of the world economy, and the conflicting policies of European and global powers. Several authors have attempted to explore the typical Hungarian mentality and mindset. Honti claims that "Hungarians have lost self-esteem on the outside, but this nation is very, very proud in its depths" (cited in Falkné Bánó, 2002, p. 64). Another expert on the subject, László Honti further notes that "[a] lack of outward aggressiveness or assertiveness is coupled with a deep inner sense of pride and national identity" (cited in Falkné Bánó, 2002, p. 64). This context lends itself to fast changes and transformations as to how Hungarians react, behave, and think these days. The 2017 survey carried out by SCOPE Intercultural Communication Services LLC that will be discussed below used the somewhat modified and updated version of Hofstede's (2010) survey.

2.   The concept of culture: Hofstede's (2011) model

First, the word *culture* was "used by [the] ancient Roman orator Cicero and he used it for the cultivation of the soul. Culture can be defined broadly, and it can affect many aspects of human life" (Lázár, 2017, p. 93). Alternatively, culture can be defined in a narrow sense referring to civilisation. Culture can be learned, and it is not the same as human nature or an individual's personality. Hofstede's (2011) definition of culture is: "[c]ulture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" (p. 3). Culture manifests itself in symbols, heroes, rituals, and values, and practices at different levels. In their book, Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010) identified different layers of culture. Among these layers there is a

national level according to one's country which implies that cultures may vary from country to country.

Hofstede (1983) had the opportunity to study the data collected at the subsidiaries in several countries of a large multinational company called International Business Machines (IBM). The respondents were matched groups of employees in seven occupational categories. The questionnaires were designed as a management tool and developed through open-ended pilot interviews (Hofstede, 2006). It is from this study that Hofstede (2006) found the following dimensions of cultures: power distance, collectivism versus individualism, femininity versus masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance. These four dimensions gave the model of differences among national cultures. To these four dimensions, two other dimensions were added later: long- versus short-term orientation and indulgence versus restraint (Hofstede et al., 2010). Long- versus short-term orientation correlates with some family values, school results, business and environmental values, and economic growth regarding national scores (Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). In Hofstede's (1983) model, each country is positioned on each empirically verifiable dimension in relation to other countries. In 2001, Van Oudenhoven examined the validity of Hofstede's (1983) classification of national cultures, and in his research, he found that the results considerably support Hofstede's (1983) four dimensions. Beugelsdijk, Maseland, and Van Hoorn (2015) examined how country scores have changed over time in Hofstede's (1983) dimensions. Bakir, Blodgett, Vitell, and Rose (2015) attempted to refine Hofstede's (1983) scales to be able to measure the culture's effect on marketing concepts.

Hofstede's (1983) scores have been used for many years in cultural research and in cross-cultural studies (Brewer & Venaik, 2011, 2012). The dimensions have been used in university courses and cross-cultural training programmes all over the world (Hofstede, 2010). Hofstede's (2010) model has proven to be a useful tool in global marketing and advertising. Cultural values play an important role in defining consumers' personalities. Companies with global brands want consumers to attribute the same brand personalities all over the world, but in fact, they can be influenced by their personal preferences. In different cultures,

different interpersonal communication styles are interpreted in advertising. Hofstede's (2010) model can help companies understand differences in consumer behaviour across cultures (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2010).

Corey, Fok, and Payne (2014) examined cross-cultural differences in the cultural values and conflict handling styles, and they found that national origin and cultural values were decisive in two dimensions: individualism and long-term orientation.

Cultural differences can influence the perspective of whether a project is considered a success and the following dimensions are core "in valuing project success criteria: power distance, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, […] and long-term orientation" (Koops et al., 2015, p. 119). Altaf (2011) used Hofstede's (1983) four dimensions to assess how organisational culture can influence organisational effectiveness and his results showed that power distance has a negative impact on it, while collectivism has a positive impact.

For multinational companies, it is inevitable to improve their performance by the selection of the best composition of international and intercultural working groups. In a culturally diverse group, harmonising the behaviour and the actions of the individuals helps to achieve more effective performances, and national cultures of the individuals play a significant role. Small power distance, focus on short-term orientation, and indulgence influence task performance positively (Henning, 2016).

Organisational culture differences are composed of different elements compared to national cultural differences and can be defined at three levels: national, occupational, and organisational levels (Hofstede, Neuijen, Ohayv, & Sanders, 1990). They state that "[n]ational cultures and organisational cultures are phenomena of different orders: using the term 'cultures' for both is, in fact, somewhat misleading" (Hofstede et al., 1990, p. 313).

If companies want to change their culture, they can try to take some measures like enforcing a different company language, hiring or firing employees, or

changing career advancement policies. Organisations should self-organise into these new patterns, and its realisation leads to cultural changes (Hofstede, 2015).

With his work, Hofstede (1980) could achieve the goal of making managers sensitive to cultural differences and providing a better basis for comparisons between cultures and organisations (Kieser, 1994).

3.   The research

Survey 1. The Budapest College of Communication, Business, and Arts in Budapest carried out its Intercultural Awareness surveys in 2004-2012 with the participation of its student groups from all years and majors, typically with up to 60 students per group. The total number of respondents was 1,013. The College and Scope LLC have had regular cooperation in research activities on multicultural issues since 2009. With their kind permission, the authors could use their findings for analysis and comparison with the Scope results.

Survey 2. Scope LLC and the authors drew up a broader questionnaire on 'cultural dimensions' based on Hofstede's (1983) original one and supplemented it with four well-known dimensions: high context versus low context (Hall & Hall, 1990), long- versus short-term orientation (Hofstede et al., 1990), monochronic versus polychronic (Hall & Hall, 1990), and universalism versus particularism (Smith et al., 1996) in their research studies to adapt it to the Hungarian society.

One of the main activities of SCOPE LLC is the provision of training courses on intercultural sensitivity for companies, universities, and businesses. Scope LLC has surveyed 4,665 respondents in Hungary (students, training participants, company leaders, and staff members) usually 10-15 participants per training group in 2006-2017 (Scope, 2017). As noted above, the survey used by Scope is based on the original questionnaire by Hofstede (1983), but some more dimensions were added as well as some related questions indispensable for getting a special picture of the behavioural patterns of 21st century societies.

The first five sections of the survey include questions about an imaginary, ideal country and social community (I feel the best where…), whereas the other two sections are about actual life situations and individual preferences. A scale of one to five was used for the evaluation of responses and averages were calculated (Figure 1).

Figure 1.   Intercultural Awareness survey 2004-2012, Budapest College of Communication, Business, and Arts in Budapest versus Intercultural sensitivity survey results (Scope, 2017, reproduced with kind permissions from Scope)
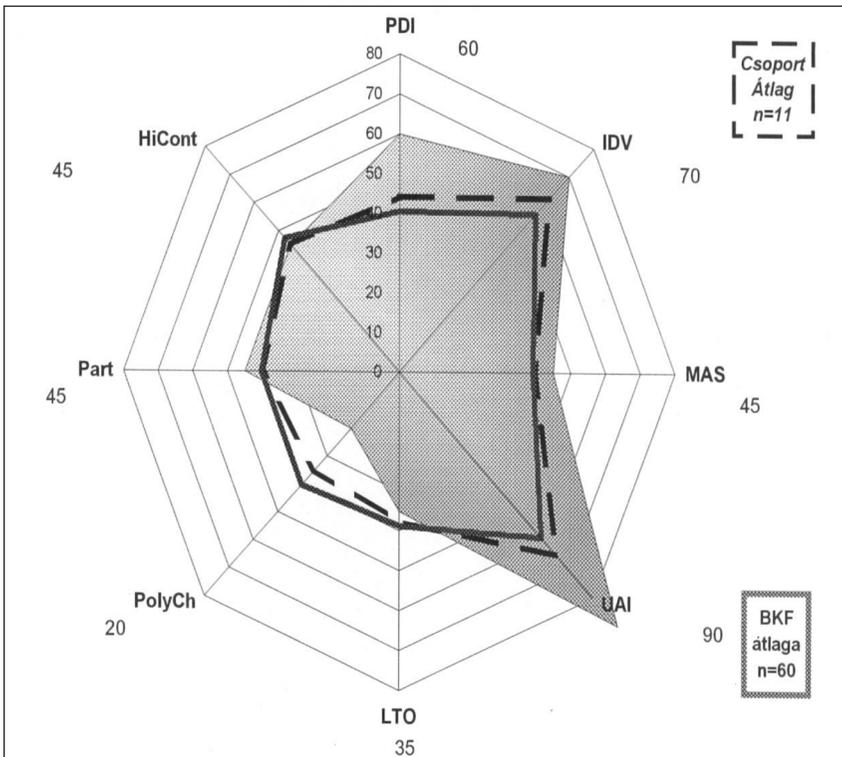
The continuous black line indicates the results obtained from questionnaires completed by the students of the Budapest University of Communication

and Business, the broken line the average of the surveyed group, whereas the grey patch refers to Hofstede's (1983) original findings. These figures were constructed to illustrate the deviations in the case of each of Hofstede's (1983) dimensions. The figure explicitly illustrates the changes that took place over the past four decades.

4.   Results

The following section of the paper will present only the dimensions where differences were perceived between the Hofstede (1983) and the Scope (2017) survey findings.

Our findings indicated that power distance results were 46 in the original Hofstede (1983) results, and the Scope (2017) findings showed 44, i.e. slightly lower scores. It means that hierarchy is retained by Hungarians for convenience only, and that it has become slightly, but still only slightly, less relevant for people. It also implies that superiors have become more accessible, control is disliked, and communication has become a bit more direct and participative.

Collectivism versus individualism scored 80 points in the 1970s, by now it has dropped to 60 points according to the recent Scope (2017) findings. In other words, Hofstede (1983) found that Hungarians were massively individualistic; our social network was loosely-knit and working relations were mostly contract-based. The new results refer to development in this dimension: Hungarians seem to have become more closely knit, they place greater emphasis on common than individual interest, and working relations have become necessary from the individual perspective (friendship, self-realisation) as well.

Femininity versus masculinity scores for Hungary were 88, and now this figure seems to be merely 40 points, a massive decrease (Scope, 2017). This plunge reveals that Hungarians are much less driven by competition, achievement, and success, equality between men and women is evolving, young husbands tend to share household and childcare chores, and women fulfil leader positions.

Hungarian uncertainty avoidance scored 82 four decades ago, and it now it has reduced to 58 according to Scope (2017) results. It indicates that Hungarians' preferences to avoid uncertainty seems to have vanished; they tend to embrace new global challenges and opportunities (e.g. working abroad and participation in dual degree programmes). However, they still need rules, but not orders imposed on them, as they are eager to work precisely and punctually.

The final dimension, long- versus short-term orientation, shows a similarly substantial fall from 58 to 41. It suggests that their link with the past, which used to be extremely strong due to historical reasons, have been softened by now. Instead of being pessimistic about our past, we focus on the present and plan for the future. We transform our traditions quickly to adjust to the present conditions, but they still have the propensity to save and invest.

5.   Conclusions

In summary, the paper argued that teaching intercultural competencies for university students is one of the crucial goals at the Institute of Economic Technical Languages and Communication, Debrecen University. We emphasise the significance of students gaining a better understanding of their own cultural identity to be able to develop intercultural skills. The paper presented a new survey on changes in Hungarian culture.

Set against Hofstede's original findings in 1967-1973, the survey results by Scope (2017) suggest the following; due to historical reasons, adaptability and receptiveness have always been typical of Hungarians, and awareness of these skills is growing among the population as there is a recognition that this is the key to survival and progress (Kósa, 1999). The propensity to change in Hungarian people has also become a driver since Hofstede (1983) first carried out his survey. Finally, the inner strength of the nation to renew itself is not a new phenomenon: it could be observed in challenging moments in history and can be traced back to several centuries, for example during the invasion by the Ottomans, Habsburgs, and Soviets (Molnár, 2001).

In developing the curriculum for the classes, our main aim is to foster the inclusion of improving intercultural skills in language teaching and the demonstration of intercultural competencies in classroom settings. If students lack the ability to perceive difference and similarity between their own culture and other cultures, they will not be able to develop intercultural competencies. Consequently, educators at the Institute of Economic Technical Languages and Communication provide trainings and lectures in the following topics to develop and enhance their intercultural skills: change management, emotional control, the study of facial expressions – based on research by Ekman and Friesen (2003) – and assertivity.

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