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GERMAN-AMERICAN INTER-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AT THE WORKPLACE: A SURVEY

BACKGROUND

Business language faculty in the United States are facing an increased demand for cross-cultural communication components in their courses. This is due to the fact that more and more students are studying a foreign language with a specific career goal in the global economy in mind. Larger numbers of students are combining foreign language study with a variety of fields, particularly engineering and business administration. With the increase in undergraduate dual degree programs, these students can expect to work abroad, either as interns during their undergraduate program or often as employees of a multinational company.¹ How can instructors most effectively prepare these students for the tremendous challenge of working in a foreign company, where not only the language barrier may pose a problem, but where they will be faced with many workplace-related cultural differences?

In the case of Business German, instructors who are eager to address this issue face a double dilemma. Although the scope and the quality of instructional materials has grown by leaps and bounds in the last ten years, the difficult and multi-faceted subject of intercultural differences, with a few notable exceptions, receives only sparse treatment.² Secondly, as humanists, these instructors may have had the opportunity to visit a German company for a few hours, but they generally have not been able to spend an extended period of time in the foreign business setting and really get a first-hand, in-depth look at the environment in which their students will have to function. Instructors therefore often lack the knowl-

¹For further information on the changing rationale for foreign language study and on dual degree programs see: Grandin, Einbeck, and Reinhart.

²For a listing of instructional materials which address the issue of cross-cultural differences see Appendix.

edge base from which they can develop teaching units on the topic of cross-cultural differences.

In order to gain a better understanding of what workplace-related differences, particularly cultural differences, Americans commonly encounter when working in Germany, a small group of US employees, who had recently returned from an assignment in Germany, were interviewed.

SUBJECTS AND METHOD

The interviews were conducted by telephone and recorded for later analysis. The eight subjects, four males and four females, were all employed by German-American companies in the US, working in Rhode Island, Connecticut, North Carolina, and South Carolina. All of them had spent a minimum of four months continuously working at a German company in Germany.

Having stated the purpose of the study, namely to find out possible workplace-related, cultural differences, the interviewer first asked the subjects to provide some professional and personal background information. Four of the employees were engineers, three were research chemists, and one was a draftsman. When asked about their age at the time they worked in Germany, the subjects responded as follows: five were between age 25–29, three were between 30–34. The length of their stay in Germany was as follows: one of the respondents each stayed four and five months respectively, four of them stayed six months, one person eleven months and one person one and a half years. Most of the employees' overseas assignment was in large companies, with the following distribution: more than 25,000 employees (5), 5,000–10,000 (2), less than 1,000 (1).

The employees were also asked to rate their proficiency in German on the day of their arrival in the country. Six described their skills as "Weak-Low Intermediate." These six had studied German at the college level for 2–3 years. In addition, three of these employees had taken an evening German language course in the months before their departure. Two of the interviewees felt they had a solid intermediate-level proficiency by the time they left for Germany. Of these, one had taken German in high school for four years and received intensive company language training, the other had received one year of individual instruction prior to the departure. In order to further assess their level of preparedness, the interviewees were also asked if they "received any kind of orientation about working and living in Germany before or after arrival." Having been provided with the

descriptors “extensive,” “some,” and “none,” only one person labeled the orientation extensive, six had received some orientation, and one person had received none.

In the final background question, the interviewees were asked, if they had any contacts with Germans, either on a professional or personal level prior to their departure. Four reported frequent contacts by telephone and fax with counterparts in Germany, and some had met their German counterparts when they had visited the U.S. The remaining four reported minimal or no contact. All reported contacts were on a professional level.

In the main part of the interview, an effort was made to have respondents speak freely about their experiences. In order to avoid bias toward certain cross-cultural issues by immediately asking about such issues, the interviewer opened the main part of the interview with the following open-ended question: “In your experience, how does working in Germany differ from working in the US? What, if any, difficulties did you encounter in adjusting to the German workplace?” In the event that an interviewee would provide only minimal information, the interviewer had prepared a checklist of issues to be raised, including the general office atmosphere, receptiveness of Germans toward non-native speakers, daily routine, formality vs. informality, and the language barrier. Only in a few cases did interviewees need to be prompted with items from the checklist. Each interview concluded with the following question “what advice would you give to a co-worker who is about to go on a similar overseas assignment?”

RESULTS

In the analysis of the responses to the open-ended question, five major areas of differences arose in comparing the German with the American workplace: structured environment, social interaction, formality vs. informality, receptiveness toward the non-native speaker, and the language barrier.

Structured Environment

Overall, the interviewees reported much more defined roles and a more structured and layered working environment in Germany. Edward T. Hall, in his classic *Hidden Differences: How to Communicate with the Germans*, calls this aspect ‘compartmentalization.’ For example, the three research chemists in this survey who worked at a large chemical corporation in the *Rhein-Main* area, unanimously reported that in the US, Ph.D.

chemists do a considerable amount of their laboratory work themselves, even if they have technicians who normally perform this kind of work. They reported that in Germany, a Ph.D. chemist works almost exclusively in the office, rarely in the laboratory. One person emphasized that technicians are expected to perform duties assigned by the chemists and are not really encouraged to take initiatives. She was impressed with the technicians' skills and noted at the same time, that—compared to the US—they had little opportunity for advancement.

Observing and respecting areas of command was also noted by an industrial engineer at a large electronics firm in northern Bavaria. At the home base in South Carolina, when an engineer needs to address a particular problem on the production floor he or she would go directly to the employee at the machine and discuss the problem. In Germany, in the words of this engineer,

if you want to go down to the production floor, you have to go see the *Meister* because he is the boss in that area. Even being an engineer, you don't have the authority to walk into "his" department, without speaking to him first.

Not only in terms of areas of command, but also in terms of the daily routine, many of the respondents noticed more structure. Another engineer noted that at his plant, not only the blue-collar workers, but also the professionals, including the top-management, clocked in every morning. He also noted that even the engineers took a fixed fifteen minute break in the morning, unlike at his home plant in the US where this would be completely flexible. Another aspect of how time is structured was the issue of overtime. Most of the salaried employees in the US reported that they frequently work overtime at their home-base in the US. "At the German plant, everybody goes home on time. No overtime, including the boss," noted one of the chemists.

Several interviewees observed a more regimented approval process, which would take considerably longer than in comparable situations in the US. One person thought, that the result of the higher degree of structure was that "things are a whole lot more efficient over there."

Social Interaction

"People have a tendency to keep to themselves a lot more," was the opening statement of one of the engineers. He mentioned the following example. At his plant in southern Germany, the engineers would take the

above-mentioned mid-morning break (*Brotzeit*) at a fixed time every day. Much to his surprise, most people would read their newspaper during this time. "They did not use these fifteen minutes to say 'What did you do on the weekend?' or 'How are things going'? People were more focused on work; there was not a lot of joking or interaction in the office at all." As with this person, most respondents reported less social interaction at work. They reported this as an observation, without any value statement. Only one person mentioned the much cited issue of the closed doors in Germany versus the open doors in the US. This particular interviewee considered it an advantage to have the office door closed and work with fewer distractions.

Formality vs. Informality

All the respondents noted that overall the interaction with the other employees was more formal than in the US. While the respondents were primarily addressed with *Sie* and the last name, the use of the formal address was by no means exclusive. They reported that in their immediate peer group, usually consisting of three to six fellow employees, the familiar *Du* address was used, provided everybody was of approximately the same age. *Du* was not used outside this peer group, not with a superior or older employees. To one person, a chemist in a managerial position, the need to be able to use both forms of address came as a surprise.

Throughout my language training and particularly by my tutor in Germany, who had lived in the country all her life, I was told, I would be using *Sie* in the company exclusively, never, ever the informal address. Consequently, I studied the *Du* form very little. Within the first week of my arrival at the German plant, I began working with a group of six chemists, who all knew each other well, were in the same age group and addressed each other with *Du*. I quickly needed to learn a verb form which I had neglected.

Receptiveness toward Non-native Speakers

All the interviewees were asked how they would characterize the receptiveness by their German co-workers toward themselves as non-native speakers. All but one thought they were 'well' or 'very well' received and felt no problem as Americans in that particular working environment. They stated that fellow employees generally were understanding concerning the language problem. Four of the eight respondents stressed how

much their co-workers appreciated that they were making an effort to speak German. The following quotes illustrate this point: “After I got through my standard apology about my lack of proficiency in German, everybody was thrilled that I spoke their language.” Another person stated: “If you are an American who is making an attempt to speak their language, you are already half-way there.”

The one respondent who characterized her colleagues’ receptiveness as ‘mixed,’ was a female engineer in a large company in Germany. In contrast to the other participants in the survey, her immediate peer group consisted of older colleagues. When asked how she, a non-native speaker, was received, she did not at first comment about the language aspect. Instead, she noted how unaccustomed her German colleagues were to dealing with a woman in a field traditionally dominated by males.

They were surprised, very surprised that I was an engineer. There were no women in those kinds of positions at that plant. Their preconceptions of American women were rather negative. Not only was I an engineer, I could also speak their language. It took the better part of my six months at the plant to feel accepted.

The Language Barrier

Three interviewees had worked in southern Germany. Unanimously, they stressed that the local dialect by far was the biggest obstacle. “At first I was totally lost with even the most simple things,” commented an engineer who had worked in Bamberg. “*Schwäbisch* was the hardest thing to tune my ears to,” reported a draftsman who worked for one and a half years in Tuttlingen. While acknowledging that it is difficult to prepare learners for a specific dialect, these respondents wished they had been exposed not only to standard German, but to some regional varieties as well.

Almost all respondents mentioned that they found it very difficult to speak German on the telephone. Whenever possible, especially in the case of in-house communication, they preferred personal communication over the telephone. They found that in a face-to-face conversation, they could use supporting materials, such as documents and visuals to better illustrate their point.

Several other issues were brought up by the respondents. One person stated that too much of his listening training had been done at an artificially slow pace, rather than at a normal pace. Two of the engineers pro-

vided diametrically opposed views on the role of grammar in their own language training. In their statements, their different learning styles emerged. Both had received grammar-driven instruction in high school or college. One of the respondents called it “invaluable” and believed he did not achieve his level of proficiency “by mimicking.” The other respondent viewed his grammar-driven training more as a barrier to communication. He stated that he found himself stopping often in the course of communication and thinking about forms and rules.

Misconceptions about the extent of language training necessary to succeed in an overseas assignment abound in the business world. It is not uncommon that employees take special “crash courses” and shortly thereafter are expected to function adequately in the foreign workplace. One of the frequently asked questions is how much language training is necessary to succeed. In this study’s sample, most interviewees had the equivalent of at least three years of college German, one person had taken only two years. All of the eight respondents described their stay in Germany as successful.

It is only logical that the initial phase of the overseas work assignment is a period of adjustment to a radically different environment. Naturally, the lower the language proficiency, the longer this adjustment will take. Just how long it might take was illustrated by the young engineer in the survey who had received the most extensive language training of all respondents. He had taken German in high school for four years, for one year prior to his departure he had received four hours a week of classroom instruction at the company and for the first four weeks of his stay in Germany he received twenty hours of instruction a week at a commercial language school. He stated:

Even though my German skills were probably better than any other American’s that I know, I still feel my skills weren’t good enough. You are not capable of performing your job as necessary at least the first three months. That bothered me. It took me that long to be comfortable. Depending on language skills, the first three to six months, most Americans aren’t that capable to do their job effectively.

His comments point to the frequently unrealistic expectations that US-based management and the employees themselves often have about the length of their adjustment period.

DEVELOPMENT OF INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

As was stated earlier, the development of genuine cross-cultural communication components for the German-American context is in its infancy. The topic of formality vs. informality is addressed in some of the materials, other topics such as the structured environment and social interaction are dealt with less frequently. If the desired outcome of a cross-cultural component is not merely passive recognition of some of these issues, but a specified degree of mastery, effective teaching materials need to be case-based and authentic. A good starting point would be the development of culture assimilators as outlined by Seelye (1984; Appendix A).

A culture assimilator is a programmed technique providing the student with a number of episodes of target culture behavior. Each episode describes a "critical incident" of cross-cultural interaction that is usually a common occurrence in which an American and a host national interact, a situation the American finds puzzling, conflicting, or which he or she is likely to misinterpret. Given sufficient knowledge of the target culture the situation can be clearly interpreted. After reading the episode, the student chooses the correct response from four plausible explanations of the behavior described in the episode. The student is then provided with feedback that, if there was an error in choice, redirects the student and asks him/her to make another selection.

Culture assimilators can be adapted to various classroom situations. They can serve as the basis for social interaction-focused teaching of culture. They are particularly valuable because they actively involve the student with a cross-cultural problem. These instructional units could be video-based and would certainly be most effective as interactive video modules.

CONCLUSION

This project sought to provide instructors of Business German with a broader knowledge base of the language- and culture-related issues their students will face at the German workplace. The sample of this study was small and further study is needed to verify the findings. Due to its small scope, the project was able to highlight only a few key issues that hopefully will find their way into the curricular materials. A solid and comprehensive language training, including being able to handle a variety of social situations and some exposure to regional variations, remain the

crucial element in adequately preparing students. It is, however, equally important to prepare the future interns and employees for the cultural differences, such as the structured working environment and the reduced social interaction at the workplace. A key to adequate preparation may be the ability to teach students how to best cope with the inevitable differences they will encounter. In the interviews, no one summarized this better than the respondent who worked the longest period abroad, one and a half years. His answer to the question what advice he would give to another person in a similar situation applies to any intercultural situation and deserves to conclude this article:

Expect differences, but don't compare. Don't make constant comparisons with home. There will be differences. Accept them and make the best of it. Working abroad is a worthwhile experience. If you constantly find fault with the way things are done over there, you can be unhappy. People are different around the world. Get some solid language training and don't drag America with you. Don't place a value on the different things you see. They are neither better nor worse. They are merely different.

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APPENDIX A INFORMATION ON CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION ISSUES

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APPENDIX B
INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS WITH A
CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPONENT

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