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A CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISON OF GERMAN AND AMERICAN GRADUATE BUSINESS STUDENTS

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on results of a comparative assessment of MBA students at highly ranked business schools in Germany and the USA. The results from a demographic and attitude questionnaire, and the results from a reading and writing assessment are discussed, and areas of significant variation between the German and American students are highlighted. Striking differences were found in several areas, even though the German and American students were similar with respect to educational level and professional goals. Since international MBAs like these students will ultimately work with each other in the global business community, I propose that understanding these differences is vital to enhancing communication, cultural sensitivity and teamwork—the very skills desired by global employers (Bikson and Law 1994; Black 1999).

It is suggested that education and training (*Bildung*, in German) were the most influential factors in the variations, and to illustrate this, the differences between Germany and the US in (1) school training in reading writing, and (2) in post-secondary expectations and admissions criteria of the business schools are described. It is hoped that these results can contribute to broader discussions of how best to facilitate students' development of communication and cross-cultural skills in business language courses as well as in business courses.

INTRODUCTION

This article reports on results of a comparative assessment of MBA students in Germany and the USA, results which were part of a larger study that examined cross-cultural issues, reading comprehension, and business education.¹ This report focuses on differences found between German and Ameri-

¹ Combining my research interests in cross-cultural issues, business language, and applied linguistics, I conducted a larger study that compared MBA students in Germany and America at highly ranked business schools. The study looked at, among

can MBA students from a demographic and attitude questionnaire, and the striking differences found in reading and writing styles as well as educational background. The comparisons between the two groups of students revealed similarities in educational focus and professional goals, and yet also revealed significant differences with regard to attitudes toward the other language, time spent with current events and media, and approaches to reading and processing current events texts. Since international MBAs like these students will ultimately work with each other in the global business community, I propose that understanding these differences is vital to enhancing communication, cultural sensitivity, and teamwork—key skills desired by global employers.

Inspiration for this research came from teaching business German and from my interests in global business cultures, particularly differences between European and American business cultures. Furthermore, reading in several books on cross-cultural understanding (Black et al. 1999; Marx 1999), I noted that the American global business community had several complaints. First, it lamented a lack of employees who could function successfully when placed into different cultures. In addition, it lamented that academia does not better train students in “real-world skills,” identified to be *communication, cultural sensitivity, and teamwork* (Bikson and Law 1994; KPMG 1999). All students are at the university to prepare for their futures, and they will all encounter people, situations, and information from other cultures, especially those students currently in MBA programs with goals of working internationally. A better understanding of these students and their backgrounds can, in turn, shed light upon why they may succeed or fail at cross-cultural encounters in the global business world.

CROSS-CULTURAL

The terms *cross-cultural understanding* and *cross-cultural misunderstanding* are widely used for all kinds of cognitive and emotional dissonances between people from different backgrounds. Although the terms themselves

other things, reading comprehension, analytical styles, and attitudes toward foreign language and the other culture. Statistical analyses of subjects' written summaries, qualitative analyses of inferences, and other results from that larger study will be discussed elsewhere by the author. For more detailed discussion, see: Borst, S. (2004). *Context and Comprehension: a Cross-Cultural Comparison of Germans and Americans Reading Authentic Texts* (dissertation).

may be overused, the concepts behind them—involving mutual respect and understanding—are central in educational policy and most professions. Underscoring the significance of “cross-cultural” is the fact that even in their mission statements most universities refer to multiculturalism, diverse backgrounds, and globalization:

The University of Texas system seeks . . . to provide superior, accessible, affordable instruction and learning opportunities to undergraduate, graduate, and professional school students from a wide range of social, ethnic, cultural, and economic backgrounds, thereby preparing educated, productive citizens who can meet the rigorous challenges of an increasingly diverse society and an ever-changing global community. (<http://www.utsystem.edu/news/mission.htm>; *University of Texas System Mission*)

In other words, preparing students to be “cross-cultural” has become an ultimate goal of postsecondary education, both in the USA and in Germany.

GERMANY AND THE USA

The hundreds of German businesses in the USA and the millions of dollars in commerce between the two countries bear witness to the extensive collaboration between Americans and Germans. When colleagues plan to work with each other and collaborate in business and politics, it is essential and beneficial to learn *how different* a new colleague’s background and education may be. Data from studies like this one may help identify and illuminate the differences between German and American cultures, even providing information for development of business training and education. Business schools’ international programs, for example, are growing exponentially and are requiring that their courses have more and more emphasis on students’ future roles in a multi-cultural society.

READING AND WRITING

Reading is an activity central to academia and most professions. People spend hours each day reading texts: textbooks, articles, news, business reports, business plans, memos, letters, e-mail, and research. Business schools value and evaluate communication skills as evidenced by increases in business communication courses. MBA programs even *require* good reading and writing skills, as evidenced even by the exam required for admission—the GMAT. The GMAT contains a battery of reading comprehension questions as well as two written essays: an analysis of an issue and an analysis of an argument.

Very little comparative research has been conducted with Europeans and Americans. This project sought to add to culture-specific research that looks at differences in how students spend their time with media and texts and finding out how they read and understand texts from each other's cultures. In order to see how they process authentic texts that were relevant to their daily life and career, the students were asked to read two articles about business-related current events, and write summaries of these articles (a table outlining the texts' topics can be found in Appendix B). Stark differences emerged in the German and American students' approaches to these tasks.

PROFILES OF GERMAN AND AMERICAN MBA STUDENTS

Table 1 shows a comparison of several items from the profiling questionnaire (excerpt from the questionnaire can be found in Appendix A). All German participants were German citizens enrolled at the European School of Business (ESB) in Reutlingen, Germany, and all American participants were US citizens enrolled at McCombs School of Business at University of Texas at Austin (UT). All participants reported that they would pursue some sort of professional career in business, management, international management, marketing, or finance. The data from the questionnaire confirmed that the two groups had similar levels of education, fields of study, and professional goals. The German group had a higher percentage of women, 38%, vs. 21% women for the US group, and the American group reported a higher average age (29 vs. 23). Both groups reported spending many hours per week (25–30 hours) with media, which included the Internet, newspapers, journals, and television. However, Americans reported spending more total time per week (5 hours or 20% more on average) with media, and Americans reported 50% more time on average with the Internet (12 hours per week for US students, 8 hours for Germans).

Both Americans and Germans rated "learning about other cultures" (4.6 average on a Likert scale from 1–5) highly important for their future careers. Predictably, all German students rated learning English as highly important (4.8 average) while only some Americans rated learning German as valuable (neutral 3.0 average for the whole US group). The most likely explanation is that English has the current status as global "language of business," whereas German might be seen as useful only if one works within the EU. Interestingly, the German and American groups reported the same high degree of international travel in general (93% and 91%), and to the other country in particular (62% and 60%).

TABLE 1. PROFILES

Questionnaire Items	42 Germans	44 Americans
Male/Female ratio	26/16 38% Female	35/9 21% Female
Major field of study	Business	Business
Age (mean)	23	29
Stated interest in international business	100%	100%
Foreign language knowledge (number of students)	100% English 10 French, few other	5 Spanish, 7 German
Self-reported level of the comparison country's language, on a self-reported scale of 1–5	4.094 (mean) English knowledge	6 participants = self-reported level 1 German, 1 participant = level 4 German
Students' report of total time spent with media (mean hours)	25 hours/week total 8 hours Internet	30 hours/week total 12 hours Internet
Learning foreign language viewed as important for career; rated on scale of 1–5	4.7 (average)	4.1 (average)
Speaking the other language in particular (English or German) viewed as important; scale of 1–5	4.8 (average)	3.0 (average)
Cultural awareness viewed as important, on a scale of 1–5	4.6 (average)	4.6 (average)
Had they traveled in any other countries	39 of 42 (93%)— Yes	40 of 44, (91%)— Yes
Had they traveled to the other country in particular (the USA or Germany)	26 of 42 (62%)— Yes	24 of 44 (60%) — Yes

DISCUSSION OF DIFFERENCES IN STUDENTS' PROFILES

An examination of the two business schools' admissions criteria, curricula, and missions may further enlighten some of the above similarities and dif-

ferences between the two groups of students. Rankings show both schools to be well-respected, highly ranked, desired business schools in their respective countries. McCombs School of Business at UT is ranked #13 worldwide, and several of its MBA programs are consistently ranked in the top five in the US (see, for example, *US News*). The entrance requirements for McCombs business school are high, with an average GMAT score of 680 (out of 800 possible; 680 is 95–98 percentile) for the entering class. As a comparison, Texas Tech's average GMAT scores were 580, and Harvard average scores were 680. Since 1995, the ESB in Reutlingen has often been ranked #1 in Germany by several business journals. Although ESB does not require a GMAT-type score, its stated admission requirements are demanding. In addition, ESB requires a high level of English knowledge and a personal admissions interview.

The American students were all part of the standard four semester UT MBA program, and were in their second or fourth semester. They were all taking the same 27-hour core of classes during the first three semesters of study (Statistics, Financial Accounting, Information Technology, Microeconomics, Operations, Finance, Marketing, Macroeconomics). They chose electives for the remaining five classes, often International Management or Entrepreneurship. Up to 90% of the graduates expected to have job offers upon graduation.

The German students were also all in the second or fourth semester of their program at the ESB Reutlingen. As with the American students, they can choose to specialize in different fields. If they choose international management it is typical for them to spend two years at ESB Reutlingen, and one or two years abroad in the country of their specialization. As reported on the school Web site, 80% of the graduates would have job offers upon completion of their degrees.

A basic examination of the core curriculum of the two schools reveals that they include similar course topics including accounting, marketing, management, and finance. However, one notable difference is ESB's focus on English. Applicants must have high English proficiency just to enter the program, and English is encouraged throughout the curriculum as the "language of business." The University of Texas, on the other hand, requires foreign language knowledge only if the students specifically enroll in an "international-track" MBA program. Each year, several dozen students choose the Spanish-language track, for which UT is well-known, but only a handful of students choose a European-based dual-track degree.

COMPARISON OF READING AND WRITING STYLES

To expand on the issue of time spent with different media and to find out how these students read and comprehend information they read, participants were asked to read two articles on current events in their native language, and write summaries of these articles. Each participant read the two authentic articles, one published in Germany and one published in America. There were four articles used in the study, and the topics were border politics (Poland/Germany and Mexico/US) and environmental issues (Kyoto protocol, and US and EU stances). After reading each article students wrote a summary of the content—recalling everything they remembered.

Analysis of the written summaries revealed significant differences in style and approaches used by Germans and Americans. Table 2 shows a comparison of prominent style elements from the students' summaries. Since participants did not receive any instruction on how to organize or structure their writing, these findings reflect their normal practices of note-taking, summarizing or writing about a text.

The average word count of each summary was recorded and each was categorized as either "bullet" or "prose" style. For these purposes, bullet style meant that participants wrote using bullet points, or lists of phrases or fragments to recall text content. Prose style meant that participants' summaries were written in a narrative form with complete sentences. Of the American-written summaries, 26 of 88 (30%) used a bulleted style. In the German group, only 10 of 84 (12%) used a bulleted style, and even most of these contained full sentences.

Differences in average word count and ranges were also significant, with the Germans' average word count much higher for each text. Specifically, Americans' summaries ranged from 60 to 385 words, while Germans' summaries ranged from 199 to 550 words. Thus, the German students averaged 62% more words than the Americans. A fraction of this difference may be attributable to the German language itself, i.e., that German language requires more words to express the same content, but the remainder must be attributed to other factors.

TABLE 2. WRITING STYLE OF SUMMARIES

Americans		Germans	
Style of Writing— Bullet vs. Prose	Average Word Count	Style of Writing— Bullet vs. Prose	Average Word Count
26 bullet, 62 prose	151 range 60–385	10 bullet, 74 prose	245 range 199–550

The amount of time each student spent reading each text was also recorded. Again, no time limit was prescribed, so the reading times reflect students' actual task-based reading habits. Table 3 shows the average reading times for each text, in minutes and seconds. Text 1 and 2 were the longer texts, ranging from 660 to 785 words, while Texts 3 and 4 ranged from 260 to 305 words. The Germans spent longer reading each text, with the greatest reading time differences occurring with the two texts published in the United States (Texts 2 and 3). Germans spent approximately two minutes longer than the Americans reading those two texts.

TABLE 3. AVERAGE READING TIMES, IN MINUTES/SECONDS

	American Students	German Students
Article 1 (published in Germany)	5' 10"	5' 53"
Article 2 (published in US)	3' 47"	5' 57"
Article 3 (published in US)	2' 56"	4' 48"
Article 4 (published in Germany)	2' 45"	3' 32"

DISCUSSION OF DIFFERENCES IN READING AND WRITING

Two main factors may contribute to the differences in reading and writing styles. The contrasts between the groups point first to differences in school training in writing, and second, to differences in post-secondary expectations and admissions criteria that have an impact on cognitive style. Extensive training in various types of essay logic and essay writing has traditionally been an important, prescribed component of the curricula at the German *Gymnasium* (high school). All German participants would have attended this type of school. Although the high school experience in the United States also includes writing essays and summaries, there exists a wide range of emphases and pedagogies among different states and school districts. The participants in this study were not told how to write their summary, so they naturally chose whatever form they felt was appropriate for the given situation. The German participants consistently chose a similar, relatively dense prose style, writing on average 60% more than their American counterparts.

Differences in exposure to, and practice in, extensive essay writing might account for the American students' range of styles and their use of bullets

and phrases, rather than the full, explicitly connected sentences favored by the Germans. With regard to rhetorical structure, German participants also tended to organize their summary sequentially in the same order as the original text, whereas American participants used less sequential organization. These differences between the two groups might conceivably be attributable to pedagogical differences in general education at the secondary level.

The sensitivity of the German participants to structure and cohesion of texts may result from the way they are trained to deal with texts throughout their education, often beginning in elementary school. The main form of text summary taught throughout Germany is the *Inhaltsangabe*. German students are required to write (and taught how to write) *Inhaltsangaben* and *Précis* regularly and consistently during their schooling. *Inhaltsangabe* is basically a summary of a text, but with a specific, clear form that is similar throughout the German system. Students learn exactly what to include in this summary, how to build it, what kind of language and perspective to use, and they practice this over and over. The *Inhaltsangabe* must provide an objective, concise, complete report of the facts, in chronologically correct order.² The body of this summary should also include goals, reasons, and connections of characters or people in the text. The end of the *Inhaltsangabe* often includes a synthesizing statement about the text's main intention—the *Aussage*—where the student may offer his/her personal position or perspective. The *Inhaltsangabe* practices both the basic skills of reporting the salient text content, as well as higher-order cognitive skills of analysis and synthesis. Although American high school students are also required to read texts and to summarize, these exercises are not as standardized or embedded throughout the curriculum.³

² The characteristics of *Inhaltsangaben* come from the following Web sites, as well as from personal discussion with German teachers and students:

<http://www.bernhardkeller.de/Lernhilfen/Checkliste/Kommaregeln/Merkmale/merkmale.htm>

http://www.teachsam.de/deutsch/d_schreibf/schr_schule/txtwied/inh/inh_merkm0.htm

³ The German subjects' written summaries were, in general, consistently more comprehensive and precise than the American subjects—however, in my opinion, the two most comprehensive and insightful summaries in the entire study were written by Americans who *synthesized* styles and analyses. These two participants used bullet points *and* prose, correct chronological order, made correct inferences, offered an opinion and gave supporting evidence.

The other possible influence of different post-secondary educational emphases in the two countries could be their impact on the participants’ respective cognitive approaches. Differences in knowledge demands and expectations between German and American business schools could have contributed to recall performance. An examination of the missions (published online) for both ESB Reutlingen and UT MBA programs reveals distinct differences in the criteria each has for their two student bodies, attributable in part to curricular focus. The table below lists several statements found in the Web sites of the schools. Statements 2, 3, and 4 were made by both schools, statement 1 was only made by UT, and statement 4 was only made by ESB.

TABLE 4. STATEMENTS FROM THE WEB SITES OF THE TWO BUSINESS SCHOOLS

Stated in On-line MBA Program Description	UT	ESB
1. Seek cultural diversity in student body	Yes	No
2. Real world, hands on research	Yes	Yes
3. Strong record of job placement	Yes	Yes
4. Character- building as part of curriculum	No	Yes
5. Prepare students for international jobs	Yes	Yes

The most notable difference between the two schools may be the significance of leadership and responsibility as stated qualifications for *entrance* into the program (UT), versus being an integral developmental goal throughout the curriculum (ESB-Reutlingen). The importance of these personal characteristics is interesting because this objective suggests a “people” orientation, one emphasizing managerial, negotiating strengths. Whereas the UT program expects its applicants already to exhibit leadership by having several years of job experience, the ESB program sees developing such leadership as an important goal of the program itself, not as a prerequisite for admission. Furthermore, while ESB focuses more on character-building and leadership skills, the UT program also emphasizes training in developing mathematical projections proven profitable in the business culture in the United States.

These expectations and program goals relate not only to possible differences in the business schools’ curricula, but indicate other factors that could influence differences in writing style and recall. ESB applicants in general

are younger than those at UT, and have less job experience. The American participants have, in general, been away from academia longer and have had more work experience. The German participants generally come straight from another university, with less work experience. Because the American students have been working professionally outside of academia longer, they have likely practiced a more diverse range of abbreviated writing and reporting styles in their jobs. Simply on the basis of past business experience, the American students might exhibit shorter, more bullet-style summaries (similar to a PowerPoint presentation) when asked to write what they retained from a text. These curricular differences—namely, emphasis on character and management at ESB compared to a focus on analytical and statistical acumen at UT—may well result in different student bodies with different cognitive focuses.

IMPLICATIONS FOR BUSINESS EDUCATION

Cultural understanding and communication are two of the most important skills a professional must cultivate (Black 1999; Marx 1999). Appropriately, business schools “design their coursework within a *training* mindset to prepare students for future employment” (Kelm 2003). Most MBA programs in the US and in Germany have incorporated cultural/intercultural components into their core curriculum and into specific courses. Several international marketing and management courses required for the International-track MBA at UT, for example, have titles that refer to “culture” or “cross-cultural.”

Business language courses and business courses can regularly include training such as the reading exercise described here. Students can read and summarize authentic business and nonbusiness-related texts produced by another culture, and then practice communicating with each other, analyzing differences in each others’ interpretations as a group. Repeated practice in summarizing content with accuracy and then discussing differences in approaches to these tasks could be steps toward *noticing* and understanding how people from other cultures communicate and analyze information.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The findings suggest that differences in education—or *Bildung*—as a component of cultural background were the most influential factor in the differences found between these German and American students. Because this project included students obtaining degrees in business, it may shed light on current assumptions about the relative similarities or differences within the

global business community. In this sense, this project should contribute to broader discussions of how best to facilitate students' development of cross-cultural and communication skills that are so vital in life beyond the university (Bikson and Law 1994; Black et al. 1999).

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APPENDIX

A. QUESTIONNAIRE (EXCERPT FROM THE AMERICAN VERSION)

Name _____

E-mail _____ Tel. _____

Are you willing to answer a few follow-up questions via e-mail or telephone at some later date?

Please check: Yes _____ No _____

All of your responses will be kept completely confidential. Thank you for your participation.

Please complete the following information:

Male/Female

Age _____

Major _____ Year in school /Degrees completed _____

GPA _____

Current degree sought _____

Where were you born _____

Country of your citizenship _____

What is your own first language/mother tongue _____

What other languages do you speak, and how long in years?

In your opinion, what is the level of your German ability? (Circle one):

None to a few words	Survival/necessary phrases	Basic conversation	More fluent conversing	Near- native
1	2	3	4	5

Have you ever traveled or lived in a German-speaking country?

Yes (if yes—when and how long in months) _____ No _____

If Yes to the above, please also circle the best description of your time in Germany:

- Study Abroad
- Military (circle either you or your parents)
- Work
- Travel, fun
- Other (please specify) _____

If you have traveled to a German-speaking country, how much of your time was spent directly interacting with Germans.

0–20% 20–40% 40–60% 60–80% 80–100%

Have you traveled or lived in any other countries? Where and how long, in months?

Please describe the amount of time (in hours) spent per week with German or European material, and what type.

	HOURS:	CIRCLE or FILL IN
Reading	_____	books, magazine, newspaper _____
Internet	_____	
Writing	_____	personal letters, business, e-mail _____
Speaking	_____	with friends, business, family _____
Listening	_____	radio, TV, Internet, music _____

How many hours per week do you spend with media in general (any/all languages including English)?

TV	_____	Radio	_____
Magazines	_____	Newspapers	_____
Internet	_____	Other	_____

What are your professional goals?

Please read the following statements and circle from 1–5 what best describes your reaction:

Reading German can be an important skill for my career.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Agree	Strongly agree

Speaking German can be an important skill for my career.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Agree	Strongly agree

Learning (a) foreign language(s) is important for my career.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Agree	Strongly agree

I would like to learn about the culture and language of the countries I visit.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Agree	Strongly agree

B. THE TEXTS

Table A shows a summary of the texts' origin, topic, and length. Texts 1 and 2 dealt with border politics. The main topic of Text 1, published in Germany, was Poland/Germany. The main topic of Text 2, published in the United States, was Mexico/US. Texts 3 and 4 dealt with environmental issues. Text 3 was published in the United States, and Text 4 was published in Germany.

TABLE A. THE TEXTS

Text	Topic	Origin	Words	Units
1 De	Poland–eastern	Germany	659	84
1 Eng	Germany border issues		785	84
2 De	USA–Mexico border		692	76
2 Eng	issues	USA	687	76
3 De	Environmental issues—		295	45
3 Eng	Bush & USA stance	USA	305	45
4 De	Environmental issues—	Germany	260	42
4 Eng	Wallström & EU stance		305	42