

# Local Cultures in English: Intercultural Communication in an International Educational Context

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**Abstract** This paper presents a Polish-Ukrainian educational project. Its outcome is a volume including texts focused on Ukrainian and Polish cultures accompanied by intercultural tasks. The aim of this paper is to reflect on the process of conceptualization, writing and editing of the volume. In particular, initial assumptions of the project are identified and juxtaposed with their later modifications. One of the main assumed goals of the project, co-construction of the common knowledge in the community of practice through the use English as a lingua franca, is discussed from the perspective of the underlying values of the partners' cultures. Some misunderstandings between the project partners are reflected upon. Those misunderstandings are interpreted in the light of Geert Hofstede's (1991) model of intercultural dimensions and differences and similarities in the national indices of intercultural dimensions between Ukrainians and Poles, such as power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty tolerance versus uncertainty avoidance, long-term versus short-term orientation and low context versus high context. The author concludes her paper by formulating the claim that the project has contributed to an increased intra- and intercultural awareness of its participants and that the main benefit of the project was in the process of negotiating with each other the participants' local cultures and their underlying values.

## 1 Introduction

The goal of this paper is to present intercultural communication in an international educational project, partly in the light of Geert Hofstede's (1991) model of intercultural dimensions. Examples of intercultural communication and miscommunication are derived from a Polish-Ukrainian project based on the present author's

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personal experience as a co-editor of the project volume. The volume, being a collection of papers, readings and projects is the outcome of cooperation between two English University Departments: a Polish one and a Ukrainian one. The intended readers of the book are users of English interested in the Ukrainian and Polish cultures.

In 2009 staff members from both English Departments decided to write and compile a collection of texts in English with accompanying intercultural tasks. Our aim was to enable users of English in our countries, the population of which has greatly expanded since English has been recognized by educational authorities as a European lingua franca, to familiarize themselves with each other, with some aspects of our cultures, as well as with some contemporary social problems in our countries. We also believed that our volume could be interesting to users of English in other countries. It was assumed that the medium of English as a language of international communication would make our prospective readers perceive their own and other cultures in an intercultural perspective and, as a result, would contribute to raising their intercultural awareness and tolerance of otherness.

According to Mikułowski-Pomorski (2007, p. 75), *intercultural communication* can be analyzed from two points of view:

- (1) as a knowledge about participants of different nations and cultures taking part in the process of communication; such an approach is also called *cross-cultural communication studies*;
- (2) as the process of such communication, referred to as *intercultural communication studies*.

Taking this division into consideration, our project belongs to the category of cross-cultural studies since it provides the readers with cultural knowledge about Ukraine and Poland, while this paper is an intercultural study since it attempts to describe the process of communication between Ukrainian and Polish authors and editors.

## 2 Intercultural Communication

The anthropologist Edward Hall in his famous book about non-verbal communication *The Silent Language* (Hall 1969) described some basic differences between national cultures and lay foundations for the study of *intercultural communication*. One of the best known models of intercultural competence, proposed by Michael Byram (1997), places intercultural communication skills in its focus together with a knowledge of another culture and positive attitudes towards the process of communicating with its members. Referring to the title of Edward Hall's book, it can be indeed claimed that communication skills in the process of intercultural communication depend heavily on the knowledge and awareness of the silent language of values inherent in a given culture.

In Geert Hofstede's (1991) model of cultural dimensions (as cited in Mikułowski-Pomorski 2007, p. 325), different national cultures are based on deeply ingrained, historically transmitted values. Such values are at the background of different nations' behaviors and attitudes. They underlie deeply entrenched beliefs, which are developed in childhood and are mostly subconscious. *Power distance* is one of the dimensions. Some national cultures consider power as an inherent main part of the social order, while others believe that people are equal and do not place much value on authority. Other cultural dimensions, according to Hofstede's (1991) categorization, are *individualism* versus *collectivism*, *masculinity* versus *femininity*, *uncertainty tolerance* versus *uncertainty avoidance* and *long-term* versus *short-term orientation*. In more individualistic cultures, individual human beings are valued more highly than a social group they belong to; the opposite is true in more collectivistic cultures. In more masculine cultures, ambition is valued and gender roles are clearly delineated, while in more feminine cultures, keeping a low profile is considered a greater value than showing off and gender roles tend to overlap. Cultures that put more value on uncertainty tolerance are those where virtue is more valued than truth, whereas in the cultures which believe that objective truth is attainable, people tend to value more uncertainty avoidance. Finally, national cultures differ in time orientation, since some cultures value long-term goals and long-term planning, while others are more focused on the present moment and, consequently, are short-term oriented.

Additionally, Hofstede divided cultures into *high* and *low contexts* ones. In low context cultures, messages are conveyed explicitly, whereas in high context cultures they are assumed to be known to the community and, in consequence, they are conveyed implicitly. Hofstede's (1991) model and its practical application in terms of national indices of cultural dimensions has become extremely popular nowadays, especially in business intercultural communication, where special training workshops are conducted to educate and train employees from one culture how to behave appropriately in communicating with the representatives of another culture.

### **3 Intercultural Communication in a Polish-Ukrainian Educational Project**

In communicating with the representatives of the partner's culture, Polish and Ukrainian participants of the project were supposed, first, to create (or select) messages (texts with tasks) which referred to their national cultures, secondly, to successfully interact via face-to-face and e-mail communication in order to negotiate the final shape of the proposed volume. The tacit assumption underlying the project was that common knowledge would be co-constructed and that we would be able to build up a common *community of practice* (Wenger 1998) on the basis of the common language of communication—English as a *lingua franca*.

Our volume was originally proposed as an intercultural Polish and Ukrainian project written in English by academic teachers of both English Departments.

In the Ukrainian English Department, the writing tasks were assigned to volunteering staff members, who compiled texts on the topics which were jointly selected by them. In the Polish English Department, however, staff members were not willing to participate in the part of the project involving the compilation of texts on Polish culture accompanied by intercultural questions and tasks. In consequence, a group of MA students was involved in an information and communication technology (ICT) mediated intercultural project, in which they cooperated with a group of MA students from the Ukrainian English Department. Finally, it was agreed that our volume would include texts with questions and tasks compiled by Ukrainian academics, and projects with questions and tasks, based partly on Ukrainian students' questions, written by Polish and international MA students.

The range of the selected topics in the compiled texts reflected the Ukrainian authors' approach to their culture and our common understanding expressed explicitly at the beginning of the project that considering a turbulent Ukrainian-Polish past history, we should not discuss topics in which Ukrainian and Polish opinions would be very different. We agreed that we should not include in our volume texts that are nationally biased and that we should aim as much as possible at the objectivity of the presented facts. However, it was not long after the commencement of our project that the Polish editors of the volume found that except for quality reports, all the other selected texts were somehow nationally or culturally colored, either presenting an ideal picture of Ukraine for tourists, or, by contrast, being overcritical of some aspects of its reality. In the Polish part of the volume, the projects showed that our three international students (a Canadian, an American and an Irish student) must have exerted a great influence on their Polish friends and that they dominated some topic choices. Their views must have been informed by their experiences at home and in Poland and by stereotyped opinions about Polish people held in their native countries, which in itself was an interesting intercultural perspective.

It was in the practical part of the volume, consisting of readings and projects, where the aforementioned national and cultural biases could be observed. By contrast, the first theoretical chapters of the volume, consisting of authorial texts written by Ukrainian and Polish academic authors, provide a balanced discussion of the underpinnings of intercultural communication and intercultural competence, where, among other aspects, the authors focus on the role of cultural self-awareness and knowledge of one's own culture and the role of English as a *lingua franca* in the development of intercultural competence. According to Aleksandrowicz-Pędich (2009, p. 24), "[a]n essential component of intercultural activities is intracultural dialogue. Intercultural studies enhance intracultural perceptions of one's own culture, a better understanding of one's own culture and its diverse patterns". Paradoxically, the theoretical principles of intercultural communication were, at least partly, disregarded in some of the practical chapters, in which their Ukrainian, Polish and international authors did not seem to possess enough intra- and intercultural awareness, that is, a critical attitude towards one's own or another culture they described and analyzed.

In the final amended versions of the practical chapters, the following topics were dealt with by the Ukrainian authors: folk and modern Ukrainian literature, Ukrainian customs and traditions, gender roles in Ukraine, recreational and forced

mobility in Ukraine, new social initiatives in Ukraine, European standards in Ukrainian education and students' life in Ukraine. The Polish and international authors researched the following topics: Polish beliefs and attitudes towards other religions, Polish attitudes towards Jews, Polish standards of politeness and problems in academic dishonesty in Poland.

From our present perspective, when the volume is ready to be published, I believe that it was assumed that building up a community of practice between the international and intercultural academics and students of our English Departments could be reached on the basis of some common experiences ("we are Europeans", "we live in neighbor countries", "we have survived communism", etc.), an awareness of some different experiences ("the Poles are mostly Roman Catholics", "Ukrainians are mostly Greek Catholics or Orthodox"; "Poland is in the European Union while Ukraine is not", "communism lasted much longer and was much more traumatic in Ukraine than in Poland", etc.), and, what seemed to be most important, our efforts, which were considered to be of relevance to all of us, to have a common publication, which was treated as a unifying goal, although, admittedly, its final shape was not quite clear at the beginning of the project.

There are a couple of questions to be raised. A question arises, for example, to what extent the project participants were aware of the target audiences and the messages they intentionally or unintentionally conveyed. The Polish editors of the volume faced this challenging issue during the editing stage in a difficult process of negotiating opinions and attitudes towards one's own and the other party's local values and beliefs.

As far as the compiled texts with tasks are concerned, the intended readers' values and cultural awareness should have been taken into consideration by the Ukrainian authors. However, it seems that the majority of them did not think about it while preparing their texts. Their own knowledge and values seemed to be guiding principles for them. It is also hard to judge if in the amended versions the authors acquired a sufficient distance from their own cultures and awareness of other cultures. For instance, the authors of the text on a traditional Ukrainian wedding asked questions about marriage ceremonies in other cultures, but they did not include a question about reasons why couples renege on a marriage ceremony or indeed a marriage contract at all, which is a common trend in European countries. It seems that at first, the authors selected texts without any particular readers in mind, or addressing only the readers familiar with their own culture. Such a limitation is clearly seen, for example, in a task following a Ukrainian text on the national craft of embroidery<sup>1</sup> requiring the readers from different cultures to interpret symbols in their cultures' embroidered items, as if assuming that embroidery must be as popular in other cultures as it is in Ukraine. In the texts adapted from

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<sup>1</sup> Embroidery is one of the main folk arts in Ukraine. Embroidered items, e.g. embroidered towels (*rushnyky*) are used for ceremonial and decorative purposes.

published materials, the Ukrainian authors did not seem to pay attention to different genres, since no tasks focused on the text genre, the narrator's tone and point of view were included in the tasks sections either of popular texts about their country (taken from publications advertising Ukraine), newspaper articles or more serious quality reports.

As far as the projects part is concerned, Polish and international students attending MA courses were supposed to research the topics that were of interest to Ukrainian students and to present their own balanced answers. We realized later that some of the areas that the authors had embarked upon exceeded their research capacity. Additionally, our students, some of them being foreigners to Polish culture, apparently did not realize the thin ice of cultural issues upon which that were treading (e.g. religious beliefs in Poland and Polish people's attitude towards other religions, anti-Semitism in Poland, Polish students' dishonesty). Generally, all students' texts required numerous revisions. We had to make their authors aware of the limited scope of their research and the necessity to express less biased opinions. The authors were persuaded to partly modify their sometimes untrue, controversial or biased opinions on religious beliefs of Polish people, their alleged anti-Semitism and dishonesty of Polish students.

E-mail messages exchanged at the initial stage of the project between Ukrainian and Polish editors of the volume indicate that a threat of future misunderstandings could have existed from the beginning of the project implementation. One of the most characteristic features of those initial exchanges is their vagueness and the use of polite conventional expressions instead of direct and concrete language of two parties setting up a contract to publish a book. It seems as if the intercultural editors did not like to commit themselves too early or they assumed that the other party was fully aware of all the requirements of the project, which was not the case.

When the first compiled texts with tasks were circulated, the Polish editors became aware that there were two aspects that necessarily needed amendment on the Ukrainian part in order to make the volume publishable and to keep its proposed intercultural character. The first apparent miscommunication was concerned with copyrights. We were aware that the book published in English in Poland, a European Union country, could become much more accessible to the intended readers than the same book published in Ukraine. The Ukrainian partners insisted on the volume publication in Poland since, from their perspective, such a publication was considered more prestigious than one published in Ukraine, which was understandable to us. However, the Ukrainian authors did not realize at first that the publication of the volume in Poland would be linked with their following international copyright laws. Apparently, Ukrainian authors in general do not follow copyright laws in internal publications intended for students. The necessity of obtaining permissions to use copyright materials and the necessity of inserting references to other authors' works in the compiled texts and in the bibliographies

seemed to be the main problematic issue in our volume, which was not satisfactorily resolved even by the end of the project in spite of numerous detailed guidelines we sent to the Ukrainian partners.<sup>2</sup>

The other important miscommunication at the initial stage of the project was due to the lack of explicitness on the Polish part with regard to the intended readers of the proposed book. The Polish co-editors contemplated a wider readership than English Department undergraduates and we did not expect our volume to focus primarily on English language teaching. At the beginning of the project, we failed to be explicit about it with our Ukrainian partners, who had in mind as the intended readers mainly their own students, and who, consequently, accompanied the compiled texts by a great number of reading and listening comprehension tasks in order to develop students' receptive English skills. At a later stage of the project, this misunderstanding was fully clarified and the redundant comprehension tasks were removed from the volume.

We also assumed at the initial stages of our project that English as our language of communication can help us co-construct our identities as *intercultural users of English as a lingua franca*. We hoped that by describing in English our own cultures to readers from other cultures, we could acquire intracultural awareness, that is, a more critical attitude towards our own cultures, leading to raised awareness of cultural diversity and tolerance of other cultures. We realized later that the use of English as a lingua franca at the level of messages is not sufficient to build up a community of practice. In intercultural and international communication we have to patiently clarify our messages and to check if our interlocutors get them across. But even using clarifications seems insufficient. In order to build up an intercultural community of practice, we need to become aware of the underlying values of our partners' cultures. We do not have to adopt them but we have to acknowledge them.

#### **4 Polish-Ukrainian Misunderstandings in the Light of Hofstede's Model**

Let us try to account for some of the described misunderstandings in communication between Polish and Ukrainian partners in the light of Geert Hofstede's (1991) model of cultural dimensions. Obviously, misunderstandings between representatives of different nations and cultures may also result from their individual personality features and the following interpretation of some of the Ukrainian-Polish misunderstandings along the lines of a general model of differences between national cultural characteristics is only one of the possible interpretations. However,

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<sup>2</sup> The question of not following international copyright laws by some academic and/or national communities and, consequently, committing intentional or unintentional plagiarism, does not seem to be shameful any longer. This author heard a panelist from a country aspiring to become a EU member stating openly at an international conference that plagiarism is a common practice at her university.

the cultural dimensions described above seem to be good theoretical models to account for the misunderstandings.

*Power distance* is higher in Ukraine than in Poland. At the same time, Ukrainians are more *collectivistic* than Poles. These two differences in the relative value of authority and individual responsibility may account for the initial willingness with which Ukrainian academic teachers undertook their collaborative tasks, in particular being aware that the project would be carried out under the auspices of their university authorities, while Polish academic teachers were reluctant to do so. An additional reason for the Ukrainian authors' greater readiness to compile cultural texts could be a higher prestige in Ukraine than in Poland of the project and a possibility of publishing the Ukrainian-Polish volume in the European Union.

Ukrainians tend to *avoid uncertainty* to a greater degree than Poles, who are more likely to *tolerate uncertainty*. Ukrainian authors may have avoided uncertainty by designing well known comprehension tasks, whereas Polish and international student authors (from the countries where uncertainty tolerance is even higher than in Poland) were ready to embark on innovative and quite vague research projects.

Both Ukrainian and Polish cultures are characterized by a high index of *masculinity* and rather *short-term orientation*. Those similar characteristics may have helped both sides in pursuing their tasks in order to achieve their ambitious goals but they may have also interfered in their smooth cooperation since neither side wished to be patronized by the other. As far as time orientation is concerned, probably both Ukrainian and Polish editors did not initially plan their whole cooperation in detail, being satisfied with short-term goals. They may have relied on their own editing experience, which was not explicitly explained to the other party.

Explicitness is a characteristic feature of *low context* cultures, whereas both Ukrainian and Polish cultures are rather *high context* ones. In high context cultures, it is not necessary to be explicit because the context is rich and self-explanatory. In intercultural communication, contextual assumptions may become confusing and misleading, something that is self-explanatory in one culture may be a puzzle in another culture. An additional reason for misunderstandings between the Polish and Ukrainian partners may have been avoiding by the Ukrainians any discussion in the volume on the process of negotiation, including controversial issues, while the Polish editors were willing to describe such a process in detail in order to make the volume more attractive for readers from other countries.

One of the texts in our volume focusing on Polish students' alleged dishonesty is particularly interesting from an intercultural point of view because the process of its conceptualization, researching, writing and editing reflects different value systems in three different cultures: American/Canadian, Polish and Ukrainian. The text was written by an American, a Canadian and two Polish authors. The international students belonged to the group of Polish authors of the projects. They were clearly responsible for the choice of the topic and the conceptualization of the project, being apparently shocked by what they read and probably heard about Polish students' cheating and plagiarizing. The authors started their paper with a quote from a British journal about Polish moral standards concerning cheating during



exams, which, as they wrote, was for them an incentive to devote their research to academic dishonesty in Poland.

The authors designed a questionnaire on cheating and plagiarizing practices and their moral weight in the eyes of the respondents and distributed it among their fellow students. In the conclusion they wrote that the results of the survey, in which more than half of the respondents admitted that they had cheated on a test during their academic career, were not surprising for them. What was surprising for the authors was the finding that only a few students admitted to committing plagiarism. It was not quite clear who was responsible for that comment, the Polish students or the American/Canadian ones. The American/Canadian approach to cheating was demonstrated in calling it a *crime* rather than an *offence*. What we received as the Polish editors of the volume was a piece of student research but without any intercultural reflections. Those were supplied by the Ukrainian editor who read the text. He advised the Polish editors to remove the text from the final edition of the volume on the grounds that the students were not professional researchers and the results may not have been reliable.

The misunderstanding with the 'dishonesty' paper reflects very different approaches of American/Canadians and Poles/Ukrainians to school and academic cheating. A crime in one culture is no doubt a minor offence in another. More individualistic, according to Hofstede's (1991) cultural dimensions model, American and Canadian cultures put stress on individual responsibility, competitiveness and individual interests, whereas more collectivistic Polish and Ukrainian cultures value more group interests, cooperativeness and group support. In such cultures, reporting on another student who cheats is socially unacceptable. Additionally in Poland, having a relatively low power distance index in comparison with Ukraine, students feel solidarity with one another and they do not comply with the authority of the teacher who forbids cheating.

The negative response of our Ukrainian colleague to the paper seems to stem from another cultural difference between Poles and Ukrainians, which may be traced to lower uncertainty avoidance in Poland and higher in Ukraine. Poles are more likely to accept indefinite and incomplete tasks, while Ukrainians seem to prefer very clearly delineated ones. The Ukrainian editor was first of all concerned with the reliability of the research results, he stressed the fragmentary character of the research and the lack of professional preparation of the authors. All those reservations were much less important for the Polish side.

## 5 Conclusion

As has been said before, the assumed goal of the project may be described as co-construction of the common knowledge in the community of practice. The Ukrainian-Polish community of practice was assumed to be built through the use of English as a lingua franca and both partners' efforts leading to a common outcome of the project—a published volume including theoretical chapters on intercultural

communication and intercultural competence, as well as texts on Ukrainian and Polish culture accompanied by intercultural questions and tasks.

Later we became aware that the use of English as a lingua franca at the level of messages is not sufficient to build up a community of practice. It seems that in order to build up such a community, intercultural project participants should become aware of the underlying values of their own and their partners' cultures.

Our project has certainly contributed to such a growing awareness of its participants. The main misunderstandings have been at least partly clarified and in particular the editors of the volume have become aware of the reasons behind those misunderstandings. Finally, we have managed to edit our common volume. The added value of our cooperation seems to be our more realistic approach to intercultural communication and conscious reflection on our own and other cultures.

What facilitated our challenging task was our knowledge and skills in using written and oral English, admittedly not always error-free, our academic expertise in writing and editing academic papers, a collaborative and longitudinal character of our project, and negotiating the content and form of our volume throughout the whole process of writing and editing it. The main merit of our project seems to be in the process of negotiating our local cultures and their underlying values with each other, attempting to create an *academic community of practice* of English language users, while placing own national cultures in focus for others to get familiar with and to compare them with their cultures. We hope that future readers of our volume will get some insight into our own as well as their own cultures.

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