

A Longitudinal study on intercultural awareness and Foreign Language acquisition in the Netherlands

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Abstract

In a longitudinal study we assessed the effect of a four-year International Business Communication program at a university in the Netherlands on students' intercultural awareness and foreign language acquisition. In pre-test and post-test a measurement instrument featuring everyday (monocultural and intercultural) dialogues involving business associates was used to assess intercultural awareness in a group of 39 students. In addition, self-assessments of students' mastery of foreign language and interest in other cultures were collected on both occasions. The results indicate that students' mastery of the foreign languages English and Spanish had increased. However, there was little evidence to indicate an effect of the teaching program on the development of students' intercultural awareness.

Keywords: effect study, intercultural communicative competence, intercultural awareness, foreign language acquisition

To monitor the effect of education in Business Communication, teaching programs should be evaluated periodically by collecting students' comments on specific courses or by conducting longitudinal research in which attitudes, competences and skills acquired over time are tested at various stages in a program. In this paper we outline our experiences with a longitudinal study on the effects of the International Business Communication program at Radboud University Nijmegen in the Netherlands on the development of students' intercultural awareness and foreign language acquisition.

1. Effects of teaching programs

To contextualize our study and illustrate previous outcomes we first discuss a number of longitudinal studies on the effect of business communication and intercultural communication programs. Our intention is to present a frame of reference only, and we refer the reader to Black and Mendenhall (1990) and Gannon and Poon (1997) for a more elaborate discussion of studies in this vein.

Zhao and Alexander (2004) investigated the impact of a compulsory business communication course on business major students' skill development and performance outcomes. Their findings showed an increase in students' perceptions (short and long term) of skills and performance in a number of areas such as communication skills, problem-solving and working in teams, as a direct result of the course. For all areas studied Zhao and Alexander found that the long-term effects were less strong than the short-term effects.

Based on their review of existing studies Black and Mendenhall (1990: 133) conclude that cross-cultural training seems "effective in developing important skills, in facilitating cross-cultural adjustment, and in enhancing job performance". However, the results of self-assessment research on the effectiveness of intercultural communication programs (Gudykunst 1979; Stephan 1985 in Metzger, Olaniran, & Futoran 1995) have been mixed. Gudykunst found that participation in intercultural communication workshops enhanced friendship formation but did not change intercultural attitudes, and although Stephan described positive changes in students due to various intercultural teaching methods, reduced prejudice was not among them. Gannon and Poon (1997) showed no differences between cross-cultural training approaches in relation to students' cultural awareness, but all students showed a higher level of awareness after training, regardless of the approach used. Metzger et al. (1995) found that teaching methods affected students' intercultural communication outcomes over time, but note that their results are problematic.

In a publication on promoting intercultural communicative competence through contextualized foreign language courses (Planken, Van Hooft & Korzilius 2004) it is suggested that a big challenge lies in evaluating the effect of such an integrative and participative approach. Organizations require employees that are intercultural competent (Griffith 2002), and Business Communication teachers need to be able to assess whether courses contribute to making students become effective business communicators. To this end we conducted a study that used an instrument (questionnaire) to measure the development, over time, of intercultural awareness in (supposedly) individualistic students participating in a four-year International Business Communication program. In our study intercultural awareness was regarded as an essential phase of intercultural communicative competence (cf. Byram 1997; Hofstede 2001).

2. Intercultural Communicative Competence and Intercultural Awareness

The literature presents various approaches to (the learning of) intercultural communicative competence (e.g. Beamer 1992; Bennett 1986; Bolten 1993; Byram 1997). All assume a developmental path from no or very little competence to full-fledged intercultural communicative competence. Like these authors, we too have assumed that developing intercultural awareness is an essential, *prerequisite*, stage for developing intercultural communicative competence and becoming an intercultural competent communicator. Based on various authors (e.g. Byram 1997; Matsumoto 2000) we adopted this working definition of intercultural awareness:

Intercultural awareness is the ability to empathize and to decentre. More specifically, in a communication situation, it is the ability to take on the perspective(s) of (a) conversational partner(s) from another culture or with another nationality, and of their cultural background(s), and thus, to be able to understand and take into consideration interlocutors' different perspective(s) simultaneously.

Although we realize that our working definition of intercultural awareness may be perceived as reflecting a reductionist view of such a complex concept as intercultural communicative competence, it was purposely stipulative because we felt it was necessary to delineate the scope of the study. Nevertheless, the definition does take into account the individual, episodic and relational components that Spitzberg (1997) regards as central to intercultural communicative competence and which embody letting go of one's own culture and taking on the other's perspective (i.e. moving from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism). All these elements should be represented if a person is to be regarded as intercultural aware.

The core component of our instrument, adapted from the questionnaire developed by Singelis and Brown (1995) to measure if there is variation in the perception of respondents regarding monocultural versus intercultural communication, aimed to measure intercultural awareness and required respondents to evaluate the importance and impact of three communication behavior dimensions as determinants of the failure or success of interpersonal communication. On the basis of four scenarios (two monocultural and two intercultural) describing exchanges between business associates (see Method) we measured three dimensions, "sender-receiver orientation", "reliance on context" and "attribution of context" that have been frequently associated with the individualistic-collectivist perspective of culture and with low-high context communication styles (Hall & Hall, 1990). In this way, we intended to track whether a change would take place over time in the response of the participants, that is, if an attitude shift would be manifested in the course of students' degree program on these three dimensions with respect to their judgement of the monocultural and intercultural dialogues.

The first communication dimension, 'sender-receiver orientation' or responsibility for misunderstanding, is strongly linked to the high versus low context dimension of culture (Hall & Hall 1990). In individualistic cultures there is said to be a greater emphasis on the skills and strategies of the speaker to communicate effectively, while in collectivistic cultures the responsibility for the effectiveness of communication is jointly placed, with the receiver of the message as well as the speaker. In the latter case, indirectness is more commonly used to convey messages, and listening and interpretation by the receiver are regarded as highly important. As a result, in situations where miscommunication arises, the sender tends to be regarded as being 'at fault' in individualistic cultures, whereas in collectivistic cultures, the receiver is regarded as being partly responsible as well.

The second dimension, 'reliance on context' or 'meaning' refers to the degree to which encoded information, verbal or non-verbal, is deduced from the context and the situation (Hall & Hall 1990). Essentially, low versus high context communication constitutes the process of assigning meaning to the degree in which social context plays a role in a given communication situation. In high context communication the information needed to interpret a message is in the context, as when silence is interpreted as disagreement. The receiver must consider the intentions of the sender; the meaning cannot only be drawn from the code, or an explicit part of the message. In contrast, in low context communication, most information is encoded in the explicit part of the message. High context communication is considered to be characteristic for collectivistic cultures whereas low context communication is dominant in individualistic cultures.

The third dimension, 'attribution to context', refers to the degree to which communication behavior can be conditioned by the context; in other words, it refers to the degree in which the social context influences the perception, interpretation and behavior, regarding communication, on the interlocutors' part. Attribution to context would seem to be linked to the individualism-collectivism dimension of culture and more specifically to how individuals describe themselves in relation to others. Individualistic people tend to use context-independent, available and abstract information to describe themselves (e.g. in terms of character traits and knowledge). In contrast, collectivistic people tend to describe themselves in terms of contextual information, such as their relationship with others, types of situations, or types of activities (e.g. Bond & Cheung 1983).

We adopted these three dimensions for our instrument as they are widely acknowledged in the literature as differing across cultures, and as fundamental to understanding cultural communication differences (e.g. Brislin 2000) and by extension to the development of students' intercultural awareness and eventual intercultural communicative competence. Furthermore, they are regarded as strong contributors to intercultural communication difficulties (e.g. Gudykunst 1999; Hofstede 2001). In addition, as business communication teachers we think that it is very important that students being confronted with communication situations show that they can differentiate between these dimensions and thus, that they are aware of the potential for miscommunication. More specifically, within the context of the present study, we feel that it is important that students adjust their reactions to situations where the interlocutor(s) they interact with either do(es) or do(es) not share the same cultural background. Our pedagogical aim, then, is that students, after following the Business Communication degree program, show intercultural awareness, i.e. show that they are able to differentiate between communication dimensions in both intercultural and monocultural situations (see below).

Of course, we acknowledge that there is likely to be variation between individuals within a culture on the three communication dimensions, and the individualism-collectivism dimension that underlies them. In our study therefore, and in contrast to studies that have used the individualism-collectivism dichotomy to account for behavior at the level of groups (e.g. Hofstede 2001; Matsumoto & Yoo 2006), we used these dimensions to try and account for perceptions at the individual level. Essentially, we wanted to gain insight into the perspective students took in evaluating personal interaction, and into the effect culture had on their individual interpretation of the monocultural and intercultural scenarios they were presented with in our instrument.

Foreign language acquisition, time spent abroad, confidence, and interest in other cultures

There appear to be other variables that relate to the development of intercultural awareness and thus eventual intercultural communicative competence. Following Byram (1997) and Schnitzer (1995) we posit that foreign language acquisition and exposure to foreign language communication are essential in promoting intercultural awareness. Indeed, publications by the Council of Europe (2002) and Van Ek and Trim (1991) have emphasized that there is a positive relationship between foreign language acquisition and intercultural awareness, and there seems to be consensus that foreign language learning should centre on the (intercultural) communicative competence needs of learners and contextualized foreign language use (Hymes 1972; Long 2000), for example in countries or domains in which the foreign language is used. Some researchers (e.g. Carlson & Widaman 1988) have noted that even a short stay overseas produces changes in attitudes of university students towards foreigners and other cultures.

Given the potential for a link between foreign language learning 'in context' (Pavlenko & Lantolf 2000) and developing intercultural awareness, we incorporated self-assessment questions in our instrument on the following topics: competence in foreign languages, time spent abroad, interest in other cultures, and confidence when visiting a country whose language is not the respondent's. As 'uncertainty' plays such a central role in Gudykunst's theory on effective communication (1998), it seemed highly relevant to incorporate these latter two topics.

3. Effect of the International Business Communication program at Radboud University Nijmegen

We used a pre-test post-test design to compare a group of students following the International Business Communication program at Radboud University. At the time of the investigation (September 2000 to August 2004), the compulsory BC Master program at the Arts faculty of the Radboud University Nijmegen consisted of four components: management and organizational communication, intercultural organizational communication, communication research and methodology, and a foreign business language (English, French, German or Spanish). Where possible an effort was made to integrate, horizontally on a year-by-year basis, and vertically throughout the program, the course content of the first three components into the foreign business language component, in an attempt to create foreign language teaching content, in so-called communication 'tasks', that would be framed in relevant business-related contexts, so-called 'business projects' (or case study assignments), which centered around themes linked to the business, theoretical, research and (inter)cultural knowledge that students were internalizing simultaneously in the other components (see also Planken et al. 2004).

At the start of their first year, students chose one of the four foreign business languages. At the end of their first year (100% compulsory courses), students opted for one of two three-year specializations: culture and communication in organizations, or international business communication. In both specializations, students continued to follow courses in their foreign business language, although the international business program comprised a larger foreign business language component than the culture and communication in organizations program (25% versus 15% of the total three-year program). In their final year, all students wrote an individual MA thesis on a research topic relating specifically to their chosen specialization.

In all, 75% of the four-year program (either specialization) consisted of compulsory courses geared to the specialization, while students could choose from a wide variety of elective courses (25% of courses), both within and outside the Arts faculty, in the final three years of the MA program. Overall, the four-year program consisted of 240 ECTS credits, which converts to a workload of 6720 hours (1680 hours each year; including lectures and seminars). Courses within the program were taught in two formats, as either lectures or seminars. In the seminars, students (in groups of maximally 15) were expected to actively participate during classes in practical (communication) activities relating to their main coursework. In the foreign business language courses, for example, such activities involved authentic business materials and business cases, which allowed instructors to zone in on various contextual factors (including 'culture') that can influence interpersonal business communication in the target culture, as well as across cultures, the assumption being that a learning environment involving participation in relevant business and intercultural communication events is more likely to promote intercultural learning at all stages, including the initial sensitizing stages, than a 'traditional' environment that focuses primarily on helping students to use fundamental cognitive processes to internalize knowledge (e.g. Gass 1997). In this view, experience and participation should be offered as part of a longitudinal process that is reinforced throughout a program, and not just in a single course or courses at the beginning. It is for this reason too, that students within the program are encouraged to spend a semester abroad in the target culture in their second or third year, either

through one of the academic exchange programs such as Erasmus or Socrates, or via a work placement in a company. Each year, over 50% of our students do so. As we were interested in whether, over time, our program as a whole, and the 'contextualized' foreign language learning approach (cf. Pavlenko & Lantolf 2000) in particular, had an effect on students' intercultural awareness on the one hand, and their foreign language learning on the other, we decided to embark on a longitudinal study. Furthermore, given the fact that one of the learning objectives of the business communication degree program as a whole is for graduates to be able to function as interculturally competent members of the international business community, the instrument we developed to determine the effect of the program on students' development of intercultural awareness over time (see also Method), required respondents to evaluate the three communication dimensions outlined above with respect to four communication scenarios reflecting the type of (business) communication situations graduates would be expected to be able to cope with adequately upon graduation.

4. Hypotheses

We assumed that, as learners develop intercultural awareness, they become sensitive to the potential influence a conversational partner's cultural background can have in a communication situation. Therefore, as a manifestation of intercultural learning we expected that after following an International Business Communication program students would have higher scores on the three communication dimensions for the intercultural situations in the questionnaire, corresponding to a collectivistic perspective. In contrast, for the monocultural situations, corresponding to their own, predominantly individualistic, culture, we did not expect a shift in perspective. We also assumed that, after following the International Business Communication program, students would have acquired a greater degree of foreign language competence, greater confidence in visiting other countries and greater interest in other cultures. These considerations generated two hypotheses. Students following the International Business Communication program were expected to display over time:

H1: a *shift* in perspective on the three communication behavior dimensions in *intercultural* situations: sender-receiver orientation, meaning, and attribution to context; and *no shift* in perspective on these dimensions in *monocultural* situations;

H2: an *increase* in self-assessment of foreign language acquisition, confidence, and interest in other cultures.

5. Method

Design, participants and procedure

The study used a longitudinal design with pre-test halfway through the students' first year (2000-2001) and post-test in 2003-2004 (towards the end of their final, MA year). All students but one had the Dutch nationality. In pre-test 85 students participated, in post-test 74; 39 students took part on both occasions. With 39 subjects participating in pre-test and post-test, the number of participants was sufficiently large to produce statistical power. More specifically, the chances of obtaining no significant effect whereas there is such an effect in actuality was .14. The majority of the students was female ($n = 37$; 95%). Mean age in pre-test was 19.00 (min. = 18; max. = 25; SD = 1.41) and in post-test 21.92 (min. = 21; max. = 28; SD = 1.50). Students were asked to participate on a voluntary basis during their first year and again towards the end of their final (MA) year. The questionnaires were filled in during a class meeting or at home. Students were instructed not to reread questions they had already answered. Anonymity and confidentiality with regard to the information supplied were guaranteed. On both occasions, it took respondents 15 to 30 minutes on average to complete the questionnaire.

5.2. Questionnaire

Communication dimensions

As we explained above, we created four scenarios, basically descriptions of dialogues, involving two people in an interaction in a business-related context. In all four situations, one of them asks a favor to the other, for example, to help finish a presentation for a customer; in the development and at the end of all four dialogues it is not clear that the favor would be honored. We translated and adapted the scenarios to make them recognizable to respondents as everyday communication situations involving work colleagues. They could thus be regarded as business-related contexts that students might well encounter after graduation.

A short written instruction introduced the scenarios (in pairs of two) to all the respondents "Below, we have described two separate situations, each time involving different people. Read the descriptions of the situations and answer the questions". Each scenario describes the people, i.e. the two conversational partners, the setting in which the encounter takes place and provides a dialogue in which one speaker asks a favor of the other (see Appendix 1 for an example). The description of the people manipulates the relationship of the interlocutors; in all situations they are relatively new acquaintances. This description also sets up a reason for the request in the dialogue, for example in Appendix 1 Robin has bought a new house and hopes that Kaoru, who owns a large car, wants to help him move. The names chosen for the interactants in the situations were gender-neutral. From the description of the situations it was clear that 1 and 2 were intercultural, involving speakers with different cultural backgrounds, and 3 and 4 were monocultural, involving speakers with the same cultural background. The setting was manipulated in that it was either private (situations 1 and 3), or public in that other people were present (situations 2 and 4). The dialogues were as similar as possible. Each contained a direct request and a response. All dialogues ended with the same explicit encoding of acknowledgement of the final message, namely 'That's great!'

Six questions or statements to assess the respondent's perception of the dialogues followed each situation. These items operationalize the three communication dimensions discussed above. As Appendix 1 shows, questions 1 and 4 comprise the variable 'sender-receiver orientation' (henceforth 'Sender-Receiver'), statements 2 and 5 measure 'Meaning', and statements 3 and 6 measure 'attribution to context' (henceforth 'Attribution'). With respect to the first dimension, respondents were asked to assess the relative responsibility of the two interactants should a misunderstanding result from the dialogue, on a seven-point scale with the names of the sender and receiver at each end. For Meaning and Attribution the seven-point scales were anchored by completely disagree and completely agree. In order to enlarge the reliability of the measurement we used two statements for each communication dimension in each situation (cf. Nunally 1976).

Cronbach's alphas for the communication dimensions (four scenarios times two items yielding eight items per dimension) indicated good reliabilities: .90 for Sender-Receiver, .88 for Meaning, and .84 for Attribution (measured in post-test; comparable Cronbach's alphas emerged in pre-test). Cronbach's alphas for items overall was .85.

After recoding statement 6 in each situation, composite means were calculated for the communication dimensions, separately and together, for both the intercultural and the monocultural situations. According to the line of reasoning we assumed that low scores indicate an individualistic perspective and high scores a collectivistic viewpoint. Next, difference scores between post-test and pre-test scores were computed. Continuing this line of argument, we supposed that a positive difference score indicated a shift over time toward the collectivistic perspective while a negative difference score indicated a shift over time towards the individualistic perspective. As a demonstration of the development of intercultural awareness in the students following an International Business Communication program, we expected to find a positive difference over time in intercultural situations whereas we did not anticipate any shift in monocultural situations.

Foreign language acquisition, time spent abroad, confidence, and interest in other cultures

Students in pre-test and post-test were asked to self-assess mastery of English, French, German, and Spanish on seven-point scales ranging from poor to excellent. Foreign language acquisition was computed by calculating difference scores between post-test and pre-test measures. We also asked how many foreign languages the students spoke.

Time spent abroad was assessed by asking students to indicate the number of weeks they had spent overseas on holiday, study leave, or 'other'. Time spent abroad was operationalized by calculating the total time abroad in post-test. Students' confidence when visiting another country was assessed using a seven-point scale with anchors very uncertain and very confident. Finally, interest in other cultures was measured using seven-point scales ranging from not at all to very much. (The questionnaires in pre-test and post-test included additional items that will not be discussed here.) Again, we operationalized confidence and interest in other cultures by calculating difference scores (post-test - pre-test). Positive difference scores indicated an increase over time in the students' confidence and interest in other cultures while a negative difference score indicated a decrease over time in students' scores.

6. Results

Communication dimensions

Table 1 shows the mean scores on the communication dimensions in the intercultural and monocultural situations in pre-test and post-test. The ordering of the mean scores on the communication dimensions on all measurements consistently was: Meaning (lowest rank), Sender-receiver (middle rank), and Attribution (highest rank). In other words, students on the face of it, seemed to have differentiated between the three communication dimensions. However, when checked statistically, this differentiation was not so obvious (on all measurements we used a series of paired-sampled t-tests, and a correction for the number of comparisons, i.e. a Bonferroni correction; due to limitations of space, we have omitted these results). No clear patterns could be identified in the scores on the communication dimensions in either the intercultural or the monocultural situations in pre-test and post-test.

Table 1

Mean scores (standard deviation in brackets) on pre-test, post-test and difference (post-test - pre-test) on communication behavior dimensions in intercultural and monocultural situations

Dimensions	Intercultural situations			Monocultural situations		
	pre-test	post-test	difference	pre-test	post-test	difference
Sender-receiver	3.56 (1.20)	3.56 (1.50)	-0.01 (1.77)	4.08 (1.36)	4.48 (1.31)	+0.40 (1.70)
Meaning	2.78 (1.20)	2.83 (0.98)	+0.05 (1.43)	2.53 (1.27)	2.87 (1.02)	+0.33 (1.45)
Attribution	5.15 (1.17)	5.04 (1.20)	-0.10 (1.38)	5.24 (0.93)	4.40 (1.29)	-0.84* (1.44)
All dimensions	3.83 (0.70)	3.81 (0.76)	-0.02 (0.97)	3.95 (0.78)	3.92 (0.76)	-0.03 (0.96)

Note. Range of pre-test and post-test scores 1-7: individualistic perspective to collectivistic perspective. Ranges of difference scores: a negative difference (-) score indicated a shift over time towards the individualistic perspective; a positive difference (+) score indicated a shift over time toward the collectivistic perspective. Post-test vs. pre-test scores were tested with paired-sampled t-tests. * $t(38) = -3.64, p < .01$.

Table 1 also displays the students' development from pre-test to post-test by showing the means on the difference scores on the communication dimensions. In our line of argument, we supposed that, starting from the individualistic cultural perspective of our students (see Method), a positive difference score indicated a shift over time toward the collectivistic perspective, while a negative difference score indicated a shift over time towards the individualistic perspective. However, Table 1 shows that the difference scores of the three communication dimensions separately, and on the three dimensions together, in the *intercultural* situations were close to zero. Furthermore, the post-test - pre-test differences were not statistically significant. This absence of shift in perspective suggests that the Intercultural Business Communication program had no effect on the perception of the communication dimensions. In addition, it was found that in the *monocultural* situations the difference scores were positive for Sender-receiver and Meaning, negative for Attribution, and close to zero for all dimensions simultaneously. The only difference that was statistically significant here was Attribution (see Table 1) indicating a shift towards the individualistic perspective from pre-test to post-test. This is somewhat surprising, as we did not expect to find a shift of perspective in monocultural situations.

Thus, the difference scores in the assessment of intercultural and monocultural situations in general do not indicate an effect of the International Business Communication program as in the intercultural situations they do not indicate the hypothesized shift from the individualistic ('own culture') perspective in pre-test to a more collectivistic ('other culture') viewpoint in post-test.

Foreign language acquisition, time spent abroad, confidence, and interest in other cultures

The mean number of foreign languages that students spoke was 3.44 (SD = 0.89). On average, students reported spending almost two years of their lives abroad (M = 100 weeks, SD = 122). Table 2 shows the mean self-assessment scores in pre-test and post-test as well as difference scores for foreign languages (English, French, German and Spanish), Confidence and Interest. To test Hypothesis 2, paired-sampled t-tests were used to determine if there had been an increase in scores from pre-test to post-test (results were corroborated by the nonparametric Wilcoxon Signed Rank test). Students reported an increase in their mastery of English and Spanish, but not in French and German or degree of Confidence and Interest.

Table 2

Mean scores (standard deviation in brackets) on students' self-assessment of foreign language acquisition, confidence and interest in pre-test and post-test, and difference (post-test - pre-test).

Variables	Pre-test	Post-test	Difference	Paired-sampled t-test
FL: English	5.58 (0.58)	5.92 (0.56)	+0.35 (0.80)	$t(25) = 2.21, p < .05$
FL: French	3.90 (1.41)	3.35 (1.53)	-0.55 (0.89)	$t(19) = -2.77, p < .05$

FL: German	4.00 (1.41)	3.79 (1.59)	-0.21 (1.18)	t(23) = -0.87, n.s.
FL: Spanish	2.82 (1.99)	4.36 (1.63)	+1.55 (1.04)	t(10) = 4.95, p < .01
Confidence	4.37 (1.28)	4.44 (1.12)	+0.07 (1.21)	t(26) = 0.32, n.s.
Interest	6.13 (0.86)	6.15 (0.90)	+0.03 (0.93)	t(38) = 0.17, n.s.

Note. Ranges of scores 1 - 7; Foreign language (FL): poor to excellent; Confidence: very uncertain to very confident, Interest: not at all to very much. N.s. = not significant

6. Conclusions and discussion

We studied the effects of a four-year International Business Communication program on the development of students' intercultural awareness, mastery of foreign language, confidence in visiting other countries, and interest in other cultures. Basing ourselves on literature on teaching effects, the development of intercultural communicative competence and intercultural awareness, and foreign language learning, and on our own teaching experience, we sought empirical evidence for two hypotheses. First, we expected to find a shift in students' perspective over time with respect to the intercultural communication scenarios in the questionnaire and no (or a less evident) shift, with regard to the monocultural situations. Namely, a shift in the two intercultural situations over time would have been taken to indicate a development in students' intercultural awareness, that is, the ability to modify their judgement, and by extension, as evidence of a shift in awareness with regard to the communication situations. Our findings did not support this hypothesis as we did not find that the students following the International Business Communication program shifted their perspective on the three communication dimensions regarded as fundamental to understanding cultural communication differences (e.g. Brislin 2000; Gudykunst 1998, 1999; Hall & Hall 1990). In the monocultural situations, however, where we did not expect to find a shift in perspective, we found that for one communication dimension, attribution to the context, the perspective shifted (towards the individualistic end of the dimension). With respect to these surprising findings, we speculate that when students are exposed to intercultural teaching, they may gain an initial sense of intercultural awareness but will then revert to an awareness of their own culture and communication patterns, before they can begin to reflect on communication from the perspective of another culture (cf. Byram 1997; Kordes 1991), and to be able to understand and consider different perspectives at the same time.

An explanation for the absence of a hypothesized effect altogether (Hypothesis 1) may be the fact that the students may have found it difficult to assess communication aspects in relation to the situations in the questionnaire. The instrument was translated from Singelis and Brown (1995) and adapted to business-related contexts. Although it was shown to be internally consistent, students may have found it hard -with respect to four very similar scenarios- to assess, for example, who was responsible for potential miscommunication. For example, regarding situation 1, the miscommunication that takes place here might have been too severe for the respondents to possibly indicate who is more to blame: the sender (Robin) or the receiver (Kaoru). Maybe we should have asked for the students' general interpretation of the situation rather than whom to blame. In a similar vein, statements 2 and 5 that measure the cultural dimension Meaning may have caused some problems. A person with higher intercultural awareness may have tended to interpret that the receiver would not be able or be willing to help Robin move. Given Kaoru's (Asian) cultural background, Kaoru would be expected to give obscure excuses reflecting the general (stereotypical) way of saying "no" to the request. Thus this respondent would mark a low score on these statements expressing disagreement to them. Such an indication would be in contrast to our argumentation and expectations that relatively high scores on these statements would have amounted to a development of a greater degree of intercultural awareness. In other words, our line of argumentation may have been too rigid, as it does not account for the interpretation more intercultural aware respondents might assign the situations.

We suspect that the effects of teaching programs are likely to be manifested in less abstract, more tangible variables than intercultural awareness, such as interest in other cultures, open-mindedness, foreign language skills, communication competence, and to tangible variables that are directly related to course content. This seems to be borne out to some extent when we compare Zhao and Alexander (2004), who found short-term effects of teaching on concrete, course-related skills and outcomes, with studies involving relatively opaque and potentially ambiguous (self-assessment) measures of intercultural awareness, cultural attitudes, reduction of prejudice and behavior (e.g. Black & Mendenhall 1990; Gannon & Poon 1997; Gudykunst 1979; Metzger et al. 1995), which generated mixed findings.

Finally, the absence of an effect (Hypothesis 1) may be due to the relatively small number of students in our sample. Although the number of respondents is adequate with regard to the statistical power (see Method and note 1) it is relatively small in comparison to the total number of approximately 150 students that enroll in the International Business Communication program each year. In addition, the number of students in our respondent group was too low to study the impact of a stay abroad.

Hypothesis 2 stated that we expected an increase in foreign language mastery, confidence, and interest in other cultures as an effect of the International Business Communication program. Our findings seem to partially support this hypothesis. We measured an increase in students' self-assessment of mastery of English and Spanish. In part, these findings might offer support for our suggestion that the effects of (intercultural) teaching programs are more likely to be manifested in tangible skills and learning targets. The finding that students did not report a comparable increase in mastery of German and French may be due to the fact that they had taken these foreign languages in high school but not at university (the vast majority of students choose English or Spanish as a foreign business language within the BC program). With respect to German and French, then, they would not have had a chance to reap the potential benefits of the contextualized language learning approach (see earlier).

With regard to students' confidence and interest in other cultures, we did not find empirical support for an increase in their assessments of these aspects. We cannot offer an explanation for the first finding but with respect to the second, the self-assessments in pre-test (a mean of 6 on a seven-point scale) may have constituted a ceiling that could hardly have been improved on in post-test.

In sum, we found only partial evidence for an increase in self-assessed foreign language acquisition in students who followed the International Business Communication program. However, we did not find convincing empirical evidence of an increase in students' intercultural awareness. Because we suspect that abstract variables which are only indirectly related to course content and learning targets are less likely to manifest hypothesized teaching effects (see above), we recommend that future effect studies incorporate measurements of intercultural knowledge that are directly related to curriculum content and targets, and evaluations of students' actual performance on course components relevant to developing intercultural communicative competence (e.g. exam grades). We also recommend incorporating teacher ratings of participants, and qualitative (self-)assessments, such as descriptions of personal experiences with people from other cultures, participative or non-participative observations of interactions between individuals from the same and different cultures, which could provide more insight into the attitude and behavior changes of individual students.

During the four years in which we conducted this research, we experienced considerable difficulty in keeping track of participants. Based on this experience, we strongly recommend that future longitudinal studies take measures to facilitate tracking, e.g. by creating and regularly updating

databases with participants' contact information, actively maintaining contact with participants over time, and introducing individual rather than group-based data collection procedures (e.g. online surveys). Adequate response rates (particularly in post-test) might be promoted further by assigning students credits for participation (cf. Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992).

With regard to possible implications for educational programs at a tertiary level we propose to further intensify the integration of the content of foreign language courses, and knowledge and skills with respect to intercultural and cross-cultural business communication, with the aim of promoting an active participation of students during classes and as a result, a change in attitude (cf. Bolten 1993; Byram 1997; Kordes 1991). Although we found no clear effects indicating a change of attitude in students in our degree course at the time of graduation, we are hopeful that the program, in the long term, imparts our students with a degree of intellectual knowledge and insight that, in combination with their acquired foreign language competence and an inherent interest in other cultures, will enable them to become aware of similarities and differences (in communication) between cultures, and to act on and adapt to them in intercultural communication settings in their future professions.

8. Final reflections

Considering the results of the current study, we must conclude that the degree program did not produce clear effects. Although the students in our study did, in some respects at least, show an increase in foreign language competence in the course of their degree program, they did not manifest a marked change indicating greater intercultural awareness, at least as we defined it. Possibly, our definition of intercultural awareness may have been too rigid to fully capture this complex concept in its entirety. As we mentioned in our introduction, we deliberately formulated a stipulative definition which, by nature, is limited in scope. In addition, although the three dimensions that form the basis of our measurement instrument, Sender-Receiver, Meaning and Attribution (see Method), are widely acknowledged as fundamental to understanding cultural communication differences (Brislin 2000; Singelis & Brown 1995), they clearly do not encompass all relevant aspects. For example, they do not take into account different experiences of estrangement, resentment, understanding and community involved in the process of meeting a person from another culture. Likewise, other important developmental processes relating to students' personal growth from first-years to more mature graduates, ready to go to work as professional business communicators, are not captured in our study, as these are essentially reflective and open to human experience, and thus difficult to take into account in a necessarily restricted experimental setting.

In addition, it should be noted that we do not regard the theoretically important 'individualistic-collectivistic' dichotomy as a normative goal. Thus, we do not claim that it is necessarily better, and in all and any cases better, for students from Western European countries to shift to a collectivistic perspective in their intercultural encounters. In our study we merely wanted to determine whether students, over time, would differentiate in their perception of intercultural situations, that is, whether there would be a shift in attitude over time regarding intercultural situations (in comparison to students' perception of the monocultural situations that functioned as a baseline). We did not expect much change in their perception of the monocultural situations because we assumed that first-years, as a result of their socialization experiences early in life would have already developed a fairly 'fixed' attitude in this respect, an attitude that is not likely to change over four years. In contrast, however, and as a consequence of the degree program being evaluated, we did anticipate a shift in students' perceptions of the intercultural situations, over time.

As business communication teachers we may subjectively assess that our students, in general, are more effective and interculturally aware communicators at the end of their degree program than at the beginning. In our efforts to assess this more objectively in the present study, we did not find many effects of the degree program as a whole on intercultural awareness. Nevertheless, we hope that our approach, findings and discussion will contribute to future research on the evaluation of degree programs (or individual courses), and will contribute especially to studies of intercultural awareness and intercultural communicative competence.

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Appendix 1: Example of (intercultural) communication situation

Moving house

The people

Robin is 26 years old and works for a Communications Consultancy that specializes in global management solutions. She/He has just bought a new house and wants to move in next weekend. She/He could use some extra help to move a number of her/his belongings. She/He hopes that Kaoru, a work colleague who owns a large car, is able to help her/him move house next Saturday.

Kaoru is 27 years old. She/He moved to Europe from Japan two years ago. Kaoru and Robin work in the same department. Sometimes they also work together on the same project. They never meet up socially outside of work.

The Setting

Robin and Kaoru run into each other on the way to have lunch in the company's canteen.

The Dialogue

- Robin: Hi Kaoru. So what are you working on at the moment?
- Kaoru: Oh you know, that Macrosoft project we talked about at last month's meeting. What about you?
- Robin: Big plans! That have nothing to do with work, by the way. I'm in the middle of moving house. And now you mention it, I meant to ask you a favor. I still need to move a few things, such as my stereo, TV, computer, speakers, and I was thinking that maybe you could help me next Saturday.
- Kaoru: Well-
- Robin: You have a bigger car than I have, you see.
- Kaoru: (Silence) My parents are flying in from Japan this week. But I'll see whether I can get away for a few hours to help you out.
- Robin: That's great!

Questions & statements

1.	If there is a misunderstanding because of this conversation, who is more to blame, Robin or Kaoru?	Robin	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	Kaoru
2.	Kaoru communicated that she/he would help Robin move house next Saturday.	Completely disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	Completely agree
3.	The situation had a strong influence on what Kaoru said.	Completely disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	Completely agree

4.	Who is more at fault for any misunderstanding that might result from this conversation, Robin or Kaoru?	Robin	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	Kaoru
5.	Kaoru sent the message that she/he would help Robin.	Completely disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	Completely agree
6.	The situation <i>did not</i> have much influence on what Kaoru said.*	Completely disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	Completely agree

* Scored in the reversed direction.

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