INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE: 5 GOLDEN RULES

COMMUNICATION AND INTERCULTURAL CONFLICT

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COMMUNICATION AND INTERCULTURAL CONFLICT

Communication issues and intercultural conflicts

What is communication?

> **Introduction: what is communication**
>
> - Communication: expression + understanding, and what else?
> - How to listen well (attention, respect, interest)
> - Active listening and providing feedback
> - False listening and the 12 most common "listening barriers" (Comparison; mind reading; rehearsing your response; selective attention; judging; daydreaming, identifying; advising; sparring; being right, derailing, placating).

It is commonly agreed that communication is "1. the imparting or exchanging of information or news; the successful conveying or sharing of ideas and feelings; 2. means of connection between people or places, in particular" (Apple Dictionary 2005, v.). However, for understanding communication on a more profound level it is useful to take a look at the basics of speech act theory and pragmatics.

Linguistics and semiotics divide the creation of meaning (semiosis) into three dimensions: syntax, semantics and pragmatics. Syntax is concerned with the grammatical construction of a phrase or message – it can either be right or wrong. Semantics deals with the meaning of messages independently of grammar: a semantically valid (meaningful) sentence could be grammatically wrong, but still have a meaning; a syntactically correct message might be absurd (not meaningful). Pragmatics focuses on the use of a message: creating, transferring and decoding the message for interaction. Unlike syntax and semantics, pragmatics does not have clear valid / invalid categories, they become evident only in considering the linguistic, social and cultural setting in which the message is transmitted.

This, in fact, is the catch: there is no objective way of knowing whether a message is pragmatically completely correct or not. In any case, determining the effectiveness of communication is not quite as simple as determining whether the syntax of any given message is correct. Thus, judging the appropriateness of a message is only ever up to the people who live that particular situation.

When speaking of communication, the classic (simplified) model of communication is often presented thus (for example, Tinto 2008: 2):
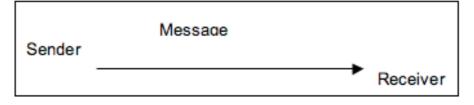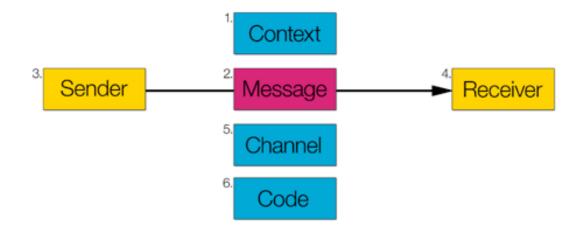
Figure 1 – a simple model of communication

For the present discussion the work of Russian-American linguist Roman Jakobson (1896–1982) can offer a useful insight into various functions present in everyday speech. His understanding of a speech act is significantly more complete as it considers 6 possible factors that can have an impact on the understanding of a message:

Figure 2 - The factors present in a speech act according to R. Jakobson. Graph first presented by http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Jakobson

The Context is both the other enunciations in the same conversation and the physical situation where the exchange takes place – a message might have a different meaning when thought of in relation to something that has bee said before in the same dialogue. The Message is the phrase, enunciation, picture or any other means of conveying information. The Sender is the speaker or addresser, while the Receiver is the listener or addressee. The Channel, or contact, is the way in which the sender and receiver transmit the message: in physical presence face-to-face, on the phone, in written form or otherwise – the possibilities are endless and each presents its own effect on the transmission of a message. The Code is language in everyday conversations, but could also be the Morse code, a drawing or any means of communication that both the sender and receiver could understand. When this is not the case, a translator / interpreter is needed who, for the purposes of communication, should not become an actor in the conversation, but be as

impersonal and accurate in passing on the information as possible[1]. Language can act in various ways according to the relation between these 6 components of a transmission.

When the message is directed to the context (R. Jakobson's referential speech function), the message's aim is to communicate something relative to the world in which one finds himself (scientific and factual enunciations). Enunciations that are

directed towards the world, but are not necessarily true *("the world is an oyster"*), belong to the poetic function.

Messages that are directed towards its addresser / sender (emotive speech function), are meant to express the sender's condition. This does not necessarily have a relation to emotions; an example of sender-centred message could also be a machine that is malfunctioning (which means that it needs repair).

When, however, the message is directed towards the addressee (conative speech function) the message is oriented towards the addressee in order to influence his/her behaviour, such as in the case of imperatives ("Go away." "Come back.").

A message that is only concerned with the contact (phatic speech function) the text is centred on the connection / channel of communication. The aim therefore is to create a connection ("Hello!"), interject ("Er…") or close a connection ("Good bye") or check if the connection is still there ("Hello…?"). This provides feedback and a certainty that a communication channel is working properly. This is also the domain of politeness – a message would be perfectly clear also without phatic enunciations, but would present social complications.

And finally, messages that are concerned with the code of communication or language (metalingual speech function) agree on the code to be used or check the validity of the already existing one ("Do you speak English?"; "What do you mean by "democracy"?"). When the message is concerned only with itself (poetic speech function), it has no other aim but to exist as it is – this is the realm of art and poetry: the message has an end in itself, it has no other function than to exist as it is.

These actors or speech functions are present in any situation of communication. Jakobson's theory was intended for the purposes of morphologic and linguistic analysis of complex texts. However, it can be useful for understanding all the different purposes a simple conversation can have. For example, a message without the phatic function would be recognised as rude. Without paying attention to the code, an agreement of code among interlocutors enables one to specify what is intended by a particular term and speak of matters on a more sophisticated level.

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[1] Since every transmission of a message is a compromise between what the sender intended and what the receiver is able to understand, no translation can ever fill this condition.

In order to communicate effectively, each factor in communication should be taken into account: the context (where are we speaking? Is this the right place and time?); the message (is it clear enough?); the sender (what is it I want to say?); the receiver (how will he be able to understand this? What is his condition? In which way should he be spoken to?); the channel (Should I say this face to face or on the phone?); and the code (Will he understand this terminology? Does he speak English?).

In order for any message to pass, both the sender and receiver should make an effort. This is the main principle of communication according to Paul Grice, the author of one of the most important pragmatic theories of all time: the theory of implicatures. It departs from the assumption that any communication is a result of cooperation and is object to rational rules (Grice 1989: 24 – 31). The main object of interest of Grice's theory is the implicature in conversation.

According to Grice, the meaning of an utterance is not only composed of the literal meaning, but there is always an implied meaning that is much more important. Understanding takes an effort from the listener because he/she has to

deduce the implied meaning from the literal one. This requires ample range of linguistic, cultural and analytic competence from the listener as the meaning of a single utterance can change from one context to another. The listener should know the literal meaning of the utterance; know the object of conversation; know the situation in which the phrase is uttered and know how to deduce implied meanings. Consider the following dialogues:

Maddalena: Do you have a watch?

Alessia: It's half past three.

Maddalena: That cake looks delicious!

Alessia: Here, would you like some?

Maddalena: Are you going away for the weekend?

Alessia: I have to work in the garden.

In each of these cases the meaning of what Alessia says is not exactly an answer to the presented question or affirmation. What she means is implied. Maddalena will understand, but in Alessia's place an artificial intelligence program might respond

yes or no to each of these questions, and it would be right both syntactically and semantically, but not pragmatically.

In order for a conversation to work, all parties agree to follow the principle of cooperation: giving their input in order to take the exchange to its desired outcome: "Contribute what is required by the accepted purpose of the conversation" (Grice 1989:29). Transgressors of this principle – people who don't listen, don't speak or don't leave room for others to offer their input – are considered impolite or disrespectful.

Grice's implicature theory is especially famous for presenting the four maxims of communication that are the basis of cooperative conversation:

Maxim of Quality. Make your contribution true; do not convey what you believe false or unjustified.

Maxim of Quantity. Be as informative as required: not too much nor too little.

Maxim of Relation. Be relevant.

Maxim of Manner. Be perspicuous; so avoid obscurity and ambiguity, and strive for brevity and order (Grice 1989: 30; Merilai 2003: 133).

Implicatures are accepted transgressions from the mentioned maxims of conversation. As a phrase is uttered, the listener will first try to use the literal meaning. If this doesn't make sense, the person will try to look for another interpretation. Pragmatics is mainly concerned with the technical and linguistic obstacles of communication. However, in order to have a complete view of the communication and the possible issues, it is necessary to analyse it also from a psychological point of view.

Communication barriers: checking the progress

McKay, Davis and Fanning (2000: 18) offer some simple self-monitoring tests for identifying possible communication difficulties due to lack of attention or concentration in their "Messages: The Communication Skills Book". They define the factors that inhibit constructive listening and give practical advice on how to become a better listener. This is fundamental to any communication as being able to listen effectively and express oneself in correlation with what is productive in a particular situation is the basis of collaborative communication.

The authors define complete listening as attention resulting from an attitude of respect and sincere interest in the interlocutor: the willingness to understand someone, to enjoy someone, to learn something, to give help or solace. If, at any given time, the listener doesn't have these aims, they are likely to fake listening instead of really hearing what they are being told. These pseudo-listeners offer only superficial attention, given only in exchange for being listened. False listeners are

distracted by one of the 12 "listening barriers" among which any of us are likely to use at least one:

Comparison. The listener is distracted by wondering whether he/she is better, more intelligent or more interesting than the interlocutor. Anything that is said triggers a comparison that brings the listener back to himself with his thoughts.

Mind reading. The listener is distracted by trying to understand what is really behind the words. Thus, instead of listening, he/she will invent hidden opinions that are not directly expressed and might not be truly there.

Rehearsing your response. This very common listening block distracts the listener from all or the latter part of the interlocutor's speech because he is sure he already knows what's coming and knows the answer to it.

Selective attention. The listener is looking for a certain type of information only, letting their mind wander through the rest of the message. For example, having made sure that the speaker is not upset or angry, the rest of the message is ignored.

Judging. The biggest barrier to communication is our natural tendency to judge, to define things as good or bad, or approve or disapprove of what is said. The listener is distracted by making his own conclusions about the speaker's views. After judging these in a certain way, all subsequent communication is analysed in that particular way. That is, if the speaker is once deemed to be stupid, nothing he will say will convince the listener otherwise.

Daydreaming. The listener gets lost in the personal memories brought about by something the speaker has said.

Identifying. Anything the speaker says will remind the listener of something similar he/she has once experienced and needs to recount right away. This urge doesn't leave the listener with enough patience to listen to the whole of the speaker's story before he needs to cut in with his own.

Advising. The listener is ready to cut in with advice as soon as he or she spots a problem or a difficulty, maybe also when the speaker doesn't need any advice.

Sparring. The listener is ready to cut in with an argument as soon as he/she hears something he doesn't agree with. Any one of the speaker's opinions is a challenge, an argument to be overthrown. The speaker will not feel listened to: he will feel challenged.

Being right. The listener is right about everything, so in case of disagreement he will use any means to win. He doesn't accept any challenge or criticism to his views.

Derailing. The listener will change the subject as soon as it becomes boring or uncomfortable. Responding to anything with a joke or changing the subject distracts the listener from what the speaker really wants to say.

Placating. The listener will support the speaker with false signals of attention without really thinking of what is being said. Agreeing to everything ("yes, yes…") and generally saying whatever the speaker seems to want to hear doesn't constitute a mutual conversation. (2000: 16-20)

Each of us uses at least one of these listening barriers from time to time. McKay, Davis and Fanning suggest thinking of each of our common interlocutors – the people we speak to often – in turn and try to identify any barriers we might use while communicating with them. The next step is to find the dominating barrier; check how many times a day it is used; on whom; on which topics. This approach can be used effectively with a group who is ready to analyse their day-to-day behaviour and change it.

Listening well

In order to fully understand and appreciate one's interlocutor, listening should not only be active, but also open and emphatic. The first of these incorporates the others to some degree. Active listening is defined by McKay and others (2000: 25) as: *"The process of giving the speaker non-judgmental responses as a way of checking the accuracy of what you have heard and whether you fully understood the message the speaker was attempting to communicate."* This definition stresses 2 important factors: the responses should be non-judgmental. This refers to open listening: accommodating other's opinions without resistance. This requires one's own beliefs to be taken as necessarily temporary so that they could be changed

whenever necessary. The basis of open listening is to listen to all that the speaker has to say. Only then can any conclusions be made.

There should be a response for checking accuracy of understanding. Apart from being aware of non-verbal messages and noting possible discrepancies between the two, the listener can easily check his conclusions by offering feedback to the speaker and requesting specifications.

The tools suggested by the authors for ensuring active listening are 3 quite straightforward "giving back" techniques:

Paraphrasing – this should always be used when discussing important and potentially conflicting matters. Repeating the idea of the speaker brings focus and

helps avoiding listening barriers. Paraphrasing could be: "What I hear you saying is…" "Do I understand correctly that you meant…" This is not as easy as it seems. We are not used to remember everything to detail on what has been said and learning to paraphrase well might take practice.

Clarifying ("Would you clarify that?") – this is what follows a successful, though perhaps not completely correct paraphrasing – the speaker will clarify the initial idea.

Feedback – after making sure the message has been understood correctly, the listener can communicate his/ her own views on the matter by simply presenting the emotional and intellectual reactions, without argumentation or agreeing. (2000: 24-27)

Empathic Listening is based on the understanding that each of us manage our lives as best we can. This does not imply identifying completely with the interlocutor (that loses the sense of exchange of opinions and ideas), but retracing each action to the personal need of that person.

Effective expression and assertivity

Effective listening skills are important for avoiding misunderstandings, but clear self-expression is just as crucial. According to McKay, Davis and Fanning (2000: 42) there are four categories of expression: facts, thoughts, feelings and wishes. A complete message incorporates all these categories and lets the interlocutor know what one sees, thinks, feels, and needs.

Expressing facts is the language of a scientist: noting only what the minds tell, without any assumptions or opinions (McKay *et al* 2000: 42). This expression is important for noting things as they are without leaving room for argument. This is the point of departure for resolving any misunderstanding.

Thoughts are the conclusions following facts – attempts to synthesise the exact meaning of what is happening, opinions, theories, and values (McKay *et al* 2000: 42). These are always personal and follow the underlying value system and

momentary opinions of each person. These can be object to discussion with someone of another opinion.

Feelings are not facts, values nor opinions. They are an emotional evaluation of the issue and also the most complicated category of communication. We are not used to expressing ourselves when it means exposing our weaknesses (McKay *et al* 2000:

43). Also, we are not used to listen to other people's feelings, especially in a situation of conflict – the feelings cannot be subject to discussion. It is possible to reason with someone about their anger or fear, but managing them is something directly personal and can only really be done by the person itself. However, in order to really let the listener understand the whole picture of the message, feelings are just as important as the facts.

Expressing wishes / needs is the point of departure for anyone who wishes to be considered. There is no way for anyone else to know these if not expressly told, but some people still hope to be understood without any explanation. Wishes are not opinions or judgements. They are similar to stating facts, except they regard directly the most important needs of the speaker that only he / she knows (McKay *et al* 2000: 44). Misunderstandings often derive from needs and requests that haven't been communicated completely enough. This results in two frustrated people: the one who hoped something would be done for him (and it hasn't) and the one who wasn't aware of having to do anything (but is being accused).

Keeping the messages full is the basis of effective communication. Each conclusion should be supported by a fact. Each emotion should be explained by a need. Each opinion should be noted as such (instead of presenting it as fact). Presenting needs without explaining facts, opinions and emotions is not constructive.

Obviously, not every type of communication requires complete messages. Speaking to strangers in everyday functional situations requires us to use only some of the categories of communication (most often that of the facts). Complete communication becomes a requirement in personal relationships and close cooperation.

There are four requirements each message should pass before being uttered:

Have I presented what I believe is fact? Is the source of the fact reliable?

Have I presented my conclusions and opinions clearly?[2]

Have I expressed my feelings without accusing?

Have I expressed my wishes without demanding or giving blame? (McKay et al. 2000: 46)

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[2] McKay et al. also suggest additional checkpoints for communication clarity: not asking questions when the intention is to explain something; keeping the body language in accord with the verbal message; avoiding double (negative + positive) messages; expressing the needs and feelings directly; making a difference between stating a fact and conveying an opinion; talk about one thing at a time without mixing arguments.

Messages that don't conform to these requirements could carry mixed elements, none of which are completely explained. When things are left unsaid it is up to the listener to deduce what is being held back and the speaker has no control over how his gaps are filled – what the listener will think is being left unsaid might be something much more destructive than the actual omission. Creating complete messages requires being sure of one's feelings and the aim. What is it the phrase is supposed to convey? What is the desired outcome? At the same time, it is important to be aware of the other person's state of mind and make sure that it is the appropriate place and time to be coming up with that particular topic.

Communicating messages that consider both the speaker's and the listener's needs is called assertive communication. Assertivity is often placed in perspective through comparison with passive and aggressive behaviours. Passive behaviour considers only the other's needs, leaving one's own needs and emotions unattended. Aggressive behaviour is the direct opposite of passivity, considering only one's own needs and walking over the emotions of everyone else at the same time (McKay et al. 2000: 138). Assertive behaviour takes the best of both, combining attention to the other with attention to oneself. It incorporates all the suggestions offered for effective listening and expression.

Assertive or active listening includes preparation for listening (why am I committed to listen to this person?); then turning one's whole attention to the speaker and clarifying when necessary; and acknowledging (summarising the message and expressing a reaction). This, however, should always be coupled with assertive expression. The idea is to maximize the impact without being perceived as aggressive or overbearing. Effective communicators know how to be persuasive when necessary. There are two principles that help persuading others: timing (knowing when it is worth being assertive and how much time to dedicate to any given situation) and tact (knowing exactly how to express ay given opinion, especially when going against more than one person).

Communication is an extremely important topic in almost any training course aimed to developing transversal competences. There are endless ways and suggestions for pointing out the importance of clear communication, though the pace of everyday life tends to let people sink back into their previous habitual ways of communication. The best way of modifying the participants' behaviour is to offer them an experience rather than written instructions.

The Intercultural Encounter and the conditioning mental structure

Misunderstandings in international settings

- The concept of filters and mental maps for understanding the world (individual / collective)

- The concept of "my way is normal"

- Preparing oneself for misunderstandings:

    - Are they being silly or is there simply something I didn't understand?

    - Are they being silly or don't I have adequate information and judgment and knowledge in this case?

    - Are they being silly or are there equally silly things in my own culture that I prefer not to emphasize?

    - I am right, but could they be right as well?

In order to understand the forces that work between two people that are trying to do their best in communicating with the other, it is important to understand the number of filters through which we see the world. Each of us has a mental map of the world according to which we orientate ourselves best we can. This map depends on personal history and a number of factors, among which culture is one of the definitive ones. These cultural differences in understanding the world, however, become evident only when the person is confronted with a completely different framework. It is not easy to overcome personal differences in order to enable close communication and collaboration, but between persons with a different cultural background this is further complicated due to basic differences in understanding the world.

As already illustrated in previous sections, the transmission of messages depends on a number of factors such as language, the setting of communication and the communication channel (all of which can potentially present an obstacle to the transmission), but also the personal filters of the sender and receiver (speaker and listener).

The maps according to which each of us acts in the world are a means to translate the world for ourselves. At the same time, having a "map" implies that the world is not perceived in its entirety: a map is a reduced and simplified version of reality. Thus, much of the information the world contains goes missing in the process of viewing and translating it, both because of neurological limitations and for reducing our attention field to only that which is immediately relevant to our functioning as humans.

Human beings live in a real world. We do not, however, operate directly or immediately upon that world, but rather we operate with a map or series of maps which we use to guide our behaviour. These maps, or representational systems, necessarily differ from

the territory which they model by the three universal processes of human modelling:
Generalisation, Deletion, Distortion. (Bandler & Grinder 1975)

Between the human's representation of the world and the world as such there are three types of filters (or "pairs of glasses"): the neurological filter, the social filter and the individual one.

The neurological filter is our receptor senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. Each of these senses has its limitations in being able to receive only certain waves of information or only a determined set of differences between the stimuli. For example, human beings are able to distinguish as *sound* only waves between 20 to 20,000 cycles per second. Vibrations under and over these levels undoubtedly exist in the world, but there is no way for a human ear to hear them. Obviously, all the information that we perceive through our senses must be translated by the brain and central nervous system into meaningful signals. However, perceiving every sound, smell and all visual, thermal, tactile stimuli accessible to us in any given situation would leave us coping with a lot of information we don't necessarily need. Thus, in order to make survival possible, our brain filters out most of the information present in the surroundings in order to pass only the most significant parts. For example, perceiving the temperature, in most cases, is only relevant to us for being able to adapt ourselves accordingly – seeking warmer shelter, putting a jacket on, etc – thus as long as it is not too warm or too cold, we don't pay any attention to how many degrees there are exactly. This leaves our mental resources free to deal with other issues.

The social "prescription glasses" are the set of perceived values, taboos, understanding of the world that comes to us by being a part of a certain culture (this includes the influence of subcultures, social class and so on). The most obvious of these filters is the language that teaches us to structure our idea of the world in a certain fashion, attaching the real experiences to a set of words[3]. This filter is common to all of the members of a same linguistic-social community, but different from a culture to another.

Individual filters distinguish each of us from another uniquely.

> *Every human being has a set of experiences which constitute his own personal history and are as unique to him as are his fingerprints […] This third set of filters, the*

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[3] The easiest example of this is the perception of colours that in themselves have an objective optical value. Human beings are able to distinguish 7 500 000 colours in the visible colour spectrum (Boring 1957 *via* Bandler & Grinder 1975), but most Indo-European languages, for example English, have 8 base words for this whole range: white, yellow, orange, red, green, blue, brown, black. Russian, for example, distinguishes in the basic colour list blue (   ) and light blue (   ), thus creating a new category of habitual colour-perception. What a native Russian speaker would describe as two different experiences (I saw a blue skirt and a light-blue skirt) would be for a native English speaker two of the same experience (I saw two blue skirts). We often assume that a name we give to an experience (in this case, colour) is an objective characteristic of the experience rather than the name we have given to this sensation.

individual constraints, constitutes the basis for the profound differences among us as humans and the way we create models of the world. These differences in our models can either be ones that alter our prescriptions (socially given) in a way that enriches our experience and offers us more choices, or ones that impoverish our experience in a way that limits our ability to act effectively (Grinder & Bandler 1975).

Thus, not even identical twins that grow up in the same family wouldn't have exactly the same life history. This is what we call identity; this is why identity is

unique. Each of us has a different map according to which they function in the world. This is why we are all fundamentally different and why it is a remarkable feat if we manage to understand each other completely.

Each person's basis of action is his identity: his way of understanding the world; his way of choosing some of the world's features as parts of his own identity and his way of rejecting everything that doesn't fit the existing configuration. The world and themselves in it makes sense to a person only when all the components that make up their identity fit together into a whole without creating incongruence between the different parts. New social contexts are integrated into the identity, combining and adapting it as necessary (changing opinions on politics will be integrated to the already existing philosophical ideas). However, when new information is encountered that doesn't integrate with what is already present, a conflict occurs that manifests itself through a feeling of frustration and stress.

This discomfort is the potential beginning of a learning experience, especially so in intercultural situations where our perceptions may deceive us and in order to adapt to the situation the only way is to learn new perceptions and temporarily put in doubt some of their underlying values. This type of cultural adaptation is described by Wei-Wen Chang through the concept of schema adjustment (2009). A schema is a term in psychology that has been used from Piaget's works (1929) onwards to describe a structure of knowledge or experiences that people have gained during their lives and use to act in the world. Entering in a new cultural setting (particularly for people who are moving there for a longer period of time) reveals the inadequacy of our schemata, or maps: suddenly we don't recognise meaningful behaviours as such, we don't know why people act in a certain way, and it is all rather confusing. This can constitute a simple cultural misunderstanding or, at worst, an overwhelming culture shock that causes the person to withdraw and start to avoid intercultural encounters. Successful intercultural adaptation cases see this initial culture shock followed by a development of new patterns of behaviour and thinking. Chang described this learning process as schema development that occurs in following steps:

1. schema awareness – the person realizes the existence of their own mental map through unexpected experiences that function as mirrors or triggers for self-analysis;

2. mental tension – the mental map does not provide enough information in order to operate effectively; the people from a different culture seem to act irrationally and that both infuriates and frustrates;

3. mental dialogue – the person asks themselves what is wrong, how to solve the problems and tries to seek help in understanding the other culture.

In the adaptation phase, "significant cultural others" can be an invaluable resource for being able to keep up with all the new stimuli and receive reliable inside feedback for adjusting their behaviour to the local norms. Networking and participative observation are fundamental in gathering new information and joining it all in a comprehensive map of the new culture. Cultural adaptation (also known as integration or adjustment) occurs when the mental schemata can react successfully to most of the stimuli that previously were new and irritating.

Intercultural encounters can bring to learning experiences, but in some cases (as also described by Chang), the stress proves too much for the person to handle and instead of adapting their own schemas to the situation, they withdraw and give up. This is likely connected to how much of a contrast is created between the person's existing schemas and the new information. Alastair White (2008) described learning processes with the help of the following graph: **(insert)**. When faced with an experience slightly outside the person's comfort zone (the area in which all is natural, habitual and familiar), the person might experience discomfort, fear or stress, but if deciding to do so, face the challenge and thus enlarge his comfort zone to include the new experience. However, the farther the situation is from the comfort zone, the more difficult it gets to accept the challenge. The bigger the discomfort and fear the closer the person gets to a panic zone where there is no chance of facing up to the situation and use it as a learning experience. This means two things for the present discussion:

a. the bigger the person's "comfort zone", that is, the more they are used to adapting to new situations, accepting new challenges and integrating new information to their mental schemes, the easier it is for them to face other unknown experiences;

b. when faced with situations that are very far from the person's existing understanding of the world, it is not automatic for it to become a learning experience; it will be a rather severe shock.

As already seen, the learning experience initiates with an internal dialogue: "What is wrong?" The initial and instinctive response to this is that the others are acting irrationally or don't have the right understanding of things. Let's call it, for the sake of simplicity, the "they are stupid" assumption. Elmar Holenstein presents a series of rules for avoiding intercultural misunderstandings, placing them in the framework of hermeneutics and philosophy[4]. These rules, if applied at the right moment, could bring to a fruitful mental dialogue and learning.

- "They are being stupid." – "No, you misunderstood them."

Before assuming that the people who have a different language and culture are being illogical, one should assume they have misunderstood them and try to find more information. The literal meaning of any verb should be taken in relation to its context and function, because as we know from Paul Grice, a phrase's meaning depends on the way in which it is used.

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[4] Holenstein presents a total of 12 rules, complete with historical, philosophical and literature-theoretical references. For the purpose of this discussion, only some of the rules are described (1: the rule of logical rationality; 3: the humanity rule;).

- "They are being stupid." – "No, you are."

A good starting point to understanding others' behaviour would be to doubt the adequacy of one's own judgement and knowledge. After all, in their world, their ways of thinking function perfectly well, so why should that mean that they are wrong? Also, there is probably something else to the situation that enables it all to make sense: for example, if something quite extraordinary is accepted by the

local culture without much fuss, there must be something (not immediately evident to an outsider) that makes it bearable.

- "They accept atrocities!" – "So do you."

It might be that the new culture includes some values or historical episodes that we are not ready to accept under no circumstances (these may include death sentences, euthanasia, minority discrimination etc), there is no reason to give blame; chances are that one will find comparably objectionable events in our own culture (but as it is ours, we are likely not to consider it a constitutive part of our culture). Also, it is likely that there are people in the foreign culture that share your opinion in rejecting the scandalous events.

A self-view of a culture is not altogether reliable without a cross-check from outside, for as Holenstein says: "*It has become apparent that in their own case and in the case of close associates with whom they identify themselves, people tend to overlook behaviours that in their eyes are inferior or which they view as socially proscribed.*"

- "We have good values." – "So do they."

Human rights have been enforced and gained recognition in the West in a certain way. It does not automatically follow that the same legal form applies for all other cultures. However, if looking closely at the religious background and cultural traditions, each culture proves to value behaviour conformable to human rights. The traditional sayings, old stories and fairytales eventually look back to the same kind of values.[5]

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[5] It might be a good idea for the trainer to prepare himself for discussion on this particular point, especially regarding some cultures that are currently under totalitarian regimes or upholding values that are not easily understood in the West. The Muslim treatment of women or methods of jihad may come under discussion: also here it is useful to look back to Zakat, one of the basis of Islam: helping the needy.