

Fostering Cross-Cultural Adaptability through Foreign Language Study



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Introduction

This article examines two cross-cultural adaptability training tools used in multinational corporations and suggests strategies for integrating them into the foreign language (FL) classroom. As the Director of German for Professional Purposes at the University of Texas at Austin, I meet several times a year with members of the international business community whose companies are able to provide our students and graduates with internships and/or entry-level positions. In my meetings with human resource experts, business professionals, and campus job recruiters, I have identified specific skills of interest to the international business community that could be fostered through FL study. Skills that relate to cross-cultural adaptability, for example, such as cognitive and behavioral flexibility, are particularly valued. Students with a high degree of synthetic and analytic thinking skills as they relate to cross-cultural contexts tend to fill an important marketplace niche (see Wright et al., 2001).

An E-mail from a previous student of mine, Deniz, provides a compelling argument for the need for such training. Deniz was born and raised in Turkey. After finishing the ninth grade at a junior high school in Istanbul, she moved to Germany with her family where she completed high school. At the age of 19, Deniz began her undergraduate studies in International Business and German for Professional Purposes at the University of Texas. Her goal was to obtain a position at an international company with subsidiaries in Europe where she might someday be able to use her German and Turkish language skills. Her wish was granted when, several weeks before graduation, she received a position with a large multinational corporation in Houston, Texas. Eighteen months after starting this position, Deniz sent me the following E-mail:

Dear Prof. Wright,

How are you doing? I am enjoying my job in Houston and wanted to tell you about an interesting opportunity that I have just been offered. My company has given me my first assignment abroad and you will never guess where they are sending me: Japan. I am excited and will accept, but why me? Some of my colleagues studied Japanese, but they are sending me. Wish me luck. Sincerely, Deniz

Conversations with human resource experts, published literature and reports on FL related skills as they pertain to the needs of international management, and job descriptions available at our university's placement centers reveal that Deniz's situation is not unique. To train a cadre of cosmopolitan executives, multinational companies tend to vary country assignments as a way to expose managers to different cultures (Hill, 2000). Wal-Mart took this approach as it transformed itself from an American company into a global company (Riering, 2001). In the 1960s and 1970s, companies going international focused on specific national markets, with managers becoming specialists in one particular region (e.g., Canada, the Benelux, Central America, etc.). Today, managers are in a more globally complex environment. Despite Deniz' obvious cultural and linguistic expertise in Germany and Turkey, her company needs someone with global leadership capabilities. Instead of managing exclusively at tradeshows in Germany or Turkey, Deniz is being asked to manage multi-country infrastructures, which is forcing her to face a much broader, more complicated role than she originally anticipated. According to the PricewaterhouseCoopers Annual CEO Survey for 1999, the ability to manage multicultural teams is the most valued attribute of a manager, more so than industry knowledge, company experience, or an advanced degree from a top business school (quoted in Dalton et al., 2002).

Undergraduates interested in entry-level positions are competitive in the global marketplace when they can demonstrate, among other things, cultural adaptability (Dalton et al., 2002). What human resource experts characterize as "cultural adaptability" is the capacity to alter behavior appropriately depending on the cross-cultural context—a skill frequently mentioned as a critical component of competitive performance for entry-level positions (Dalton et al., 2002; Schneider et al., 1997). Knowledge of a company's agenda is a significant factor in the hiring process, but general cognitive skills (e.g., behavioral flexibility) outweigh specialized business knowledge for successful entry-level job placement (Einbeck, 2000; Lenn et al., 2000; Wright et al., 2001). Unfortunately, the link between command of a foreign language and cultural adaptability is not always evident in the business world; that is, business leaders and human resource experts often report skepticism about whether cultural adaptability is fostered

through FL study (Lenn et al., 2000; Moxon et al., 1998; Vande Berg, 1997). As a case in point, Moxon et al. (1998) concluded that, when recruiting for international positions, U.S.-based international businesses value intercultural competence and experience living abroad considerably ahead of FL competence *per se*. Second-language fluency, in and of itself, emerges as one of the weakest predictors of effectiveness in the global marketplace, in the minds of employers and their expert staff (Grandin et al., 1997; Marx, 1999; Wright et al., 2001).

In order to serve students' needs, FL programs as a whole need to address this reality. The *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* (National Standards, 1999) have set that direction (Lange, 1999). What remains to be determined is how our field can articulate FL learning with the needs of the international marketplace. In other words, what can we do so that the international marketplace explicitly links FL competency to a person's ability to adapt and function appropriately in complex, cross-cultural environments?

On Communication and Comparisons

There is a crucial but hidden issue in the adoption of the standards—the Communication and Comparisons standards require a new understanding of what communicative competence entails or means. FL requirements must now diversify communication-based curricula to include tasks that promote one's ability to understand and accept multiple perspectives, recognize that other people may hold assumptions different from one's own, and solicit others' points of view—these are needs of the global business environment that today's FL classroom must address.

By envisioning the study of cultures as promoting insight and increased understanding of the society and cultures of speakers of other languages, and also of the learners' own society and culture and the relationship between the two, the standards urge teachers to create tasks that help students incorporate a broader range of learning goals than just the forms of language. In this framework, students do not simply learn a foreign language, but lay a basis for successful interaction with members of another culture (Wright, 2000). To help students make correct attributions in cross-cultural interactions, they must be equipped to

build bridges between themselves and those whose values and beliefs are potentially different. This requires not only an understanding of how individuals from different cultures interact, but also a meta-awareness² of the skills and behaviors necessary for effective interaction (i.e., the Communication standard), and a more objective view of their own cross-cultural strengths and weaknesses (i.e., the Comparisons standard) such as the ability to adapt to new surroundings and interact with individuals from different backgrounds.

In the sections that follow, I discuss two cross-cultural training tools that have direct application to the goals outlined in the Communication and Comparisons standards: The Cross Cultural Adaptability Inventory or CCAI³ (Kelley et al., 1995a) and BARNGA⁴ (Thiagarajan, 1994). The CCAI is a fifty-item, four-sub-scale instrument designed to develop meta-understanding in the area of cross-cultural adaptability. This training tool works as a bridge to move from a theoretical discussion of culture to first-hand experience with people of different cultural backgrounds.

With the help of cross-cultural training experts, Kelley and Meyers (1995b) developed the CCAI, a fifty-item, self-scoring instrument to provide insight into one's ability to (1) adapt to new situations, (2) interact with people different from oneself, (3) tolerate ambiguity, and (4) maintain a sense of self in new or different surroundings. These skills, which are essential for effective cross-cultural communication and interaction (Dinges, 1983; Paige and Martin, 1996; Flower et al., 1999), form the basis of the CCAI:

1. **Flexibility/Openness:** the ability to adapt to different ways of thinking and behaving that are encountered in cross-cultural experiences.
2. **Perceptual Acuity:** the extent to which a person pays attention to accurately perceive various aspects of the environment.
3. **Emotional Resilience:** the ability to rebound and react positively to new experiences.
4. **Personal Autonomy:** whether a person has an evolved system of values and beliefs and at the same time respects others and their value system.

The inventory's results illustrate which skill is the strongest and weakest for each participant (see Figure 1), and offers recommendations/activities about how one can improve in each area (Appendix A).

Research has indicated that the CCAI appears to have promising discriminant

Figure 1. CCAI Self-Assessment Profile



validity.⁵ For example, one study by George (1991) found that school principals with higher CCAI scores were more heterogeneous with regard to ethnicity, spoke more foreign languages, and had had more cross-cultural training and education. In a study by Wright (2000), beginning students of German who learned about culture via process- and learner-centered activities (such as BARNGA) demonstrated a statistically significant change in cross-cultural adaptability (as measured by the CCAI) compared to an equivalent group of students who learned about culture via an information-acquisition approach.

The results of the CCAI inventory are well suited to the Communication standard in that they help students identify their current strengths and weaknesses within critical skill areas important for effective cross-cultural communication and interaction (goals implied by the Communication standard). The CCAI also works to improve a student's meta-awareness of his/her ability to adapt to new situations, interact with people who are different, tolerate ambiguity, and maintain a sense of self in new or different surroundings (goals implied by the Comparisons standard).

Once CCAI has been completed, there are many activities FL educators can do to help their students develop meta-awareness regarding the CCAI skill areas. For example, BaFa Bafa (2001), An Alien Among Us (1999), as well as A Trip to Mintana (1992) and A Visit with the Amberena (1999) are excellent cross-cultural training exercises, but BARNGA is the most appropriate for FL learning because it so aptly illustrates the results of language difficulties.

Both the CCAI and BARNGA are stand-alone tools designed to help people focus on specific skills related to cross-cultural effectiveness. Neither tool was designed specifically to address the language-learning classroom, but both offer learning activities adaptable to the goals outlined in the Communication and Comparisons standards. Whereas the CCAI can help learners increase meta-awareness regarding the factors and qualities that influence second-language and cross-cultural effectiveness, BARNGA provides an experiential framework for concretizing the idea that language and culture are inextricably linked. In the lesson plan below, I will provide examples of how both tools address culture and language learning, and why they should be used together.

Fostering Cross-cultural Adaptability in the FL Classroom: A Lesson Plan

The lesson plan outlined below requires approximately three 50-minute class periods. The CCAI may be completed and self scored at home or in class. Step one begins after students have answered the questions in the CCAI inventory, and completed the self-assessment profile (Figure 1). Students often have difficulties elucidating the complexities involved in the concept of culture; the aim of beginning step one with the CCAI results in-hand is to help them build the vocabulary they will need to discuss the results of BARNGA, and ultimately to be more aware of various skill-areas vital to becoming cross-culturally adaptable.

Step One: Brainstorming cross-cultural adaptability

To set the stage for discussing the CCAI's skill areas, use an associogram as an advance organizer (Ausubel et al., 1978) to activate background knowledge related to cross-cultural situations. Give small groups of students a sheet of paper containing the term "cross-cultural adaptability." Working in their group, students brainstorm, and write on the sheet of paper as many things they can associate with cross-cultural adaptability. Note: You can also do a modified associogram where learners write their responses on the board. The key is to initiate a discussion on experiences students have had where they had to adapt cross culturally. The discussion of students' associations can last between 10 and fifteen minutes.

Step Two: Connecting the CCAI to language learning

To relate the skill areas of the CCAI to language learning, it is important to have several examples as a way to help students begin offering their own examples. Cross-cultural adaptability can be defined as the ability to evaluate what someone from another culture understands of a given situation in a different culture and how he/she therefore reacts to it (Furstenberg et al., 2001). For example, visiting a friend, accepting a gift, knowing what time to arrive, and how to say thank you are all subject to different interpretations according to a culture's norms. However, I argue that beyond observing the silent language of proxemics (Hall, 1973) and a knowledge of social convention, cultural literacy also involves meta-awareness of the reactions we may have to anything that is new, including the way in which one learns a new language. Thus, the results of the CCAI can add yet another layer to the idea that FL literacy encompasses not only knowledge of lan-

guage itself, but also an understanding of how semantic perspectives differ according to linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The skills assessed through the CCAI can related to language learning as follows:

An Example of Flexibility/Openness. Accepting that one's first language cannot necessarily be used as an organizing principle for learning the target language. Bland et al. (1990) demonstrated in their study using System-D the extent of learners' naive lexical hypothesis (a heuristic held by beginning language students that for every word in their native language there is a one-to-one match in the target language) and its costs in misunderstanding. Moving beyond the naive lexical hypothesis requires flexibility and openness; that is, the willingness to accept that one's first language cannot necessarily be used as a template for understanding other languages.

Perceptual Acuity. This can be related to sociolinguistic subtleties, levels of formality, irony, humor, being able to read between the lines, and being able to discern acceptable behavior.

Emotional Resilience. When one encounters communication breakdowns in classroom, i.e., in a safe environment, this skill helps students recognize that they can overcome interactive mishaps in a new language. It also helps them to recognize that frustration is common, can be repaired, and does not mean that the FL encounter is a failure.

Personal Autonomy. Discussions of "other" behaviors and of the notion that a target culture is not monolithic allow students to recognize that there is more than one acceptable way of doing things. The idea that "when in Rome, do as the Romans do," allows students to recognize that temporarily adapting to different norms or expectations does not result in a permanent loss of self. In order to manage (accept or reject) different expectations, students can be given the skills to express their wishes with the help of speech acts (e.g., polite ways of rejecting or accepting invitations, suggesting alternatives, etc.) and non-verbal behavior.

Step Three: Playing BARNGA

Linguistic and cultural differences exist in more or less subtle forms. There are differences among various professional groups, national groups, religious groups, language groups, and within communities, schools, and families. These differences, however, are often obscured by obvious similarities among the groups; for example, on the surface the words *Freund* and "friend" are acceptable translations, yet their semantic domains are

culturally quite dissimilar. Any English/German dictionary will state that the verb *lieben* is translated as the word "love," and that the expression "How's it going?" is translated into *Wie geht's?* However, from a cultural perspective, *lieben* is not necessarily a translation of "love," and *Wie geht's?* is definitely not a translation of "How's it going?" Even if we tell our students to be careful with direct translations, we need to find opportunities for them to experience analogies that help them articulate that linguistic differences can be due to cultural differences. The simulation game BARNGA (Thiagarajan, 1994) can give students a framework for understanding these linguistic and cultural differences.

In this simulation, groups of participants, seated at different tables, learn to play a simple card game. Unknown to the players, the rules at each table differ slightly from those at the other tables. As a result, a high degree of confusion and frustration may result when the winner and loser from each table moves to the next table to play the subsequent tournament round. Depending on personality and perceptions, participants often have difficulty reconciling their differences and continuing the game.

What participants do not know at the beginning of the five-round tournament is that each table in the room received a different set of rules for the game. Thus, as the winners move around from table to table, players quickly discover that their rule set may or may not apply, and that in order to "win" they will either have to adapt to a new set of rules or try to force their rules upon the other participants. The tournament reflects second-language and cross-cultural interactions: The first two rounds of BARNGA simulate the enculturation process, and a strict gag order, enforced throughout the game, represents language and communication problems. Admittedly, the correspondence between the simulation and a typical cross-cultural interaction is very low. However, participants invariably connect the play of the game to the experience of learning a second language.

The debriefing stage of this game has unlimited possibilities for helping FL students practice the goals outlined in the Comparisons standard and understand their reactions to BARNGA in relation to their FL learning goals. Debriefing includes three phases:

The Analogy Phase—Questions

- What specific real-life situations does BARNGA simulate?
- Have you had any parallel real-life experiences?

- In retrospect, could you have handled the situation differently?
- What will be your next important encounter with groups different from yourself?
- What experiences do you want to have in that encounter?
- What experiences have you had in learning German that relate to this game?
- How might language learning help you to solve similar communication problems in your day-to-day life?

The Cognitive Phase—Asking participants to react to statements

- When you notice a violation of the rule, you tend to attribute it to the ignorance of others.
- If such violations persist, you suspect dishonesty.
- Only later do you entertain the possibility of a different set of rules.

What-if questions

- What if players were forewarned about rule differences and asked to come up with a different version?
- What if one player had some obvious cultural or linguistic difference (e.g., there is only one American player among a group of Germans)?
- What if the players were given different terms for the rules (e.g., Ace means five instead of one)?

The key to BARNGA in the FL classroom is to give students an opportunity to use their own cross-linguistic and cultural experiences to guide the discussion. Most students talk with enthusiasm about how enlightening the simulation is in relation to their understanding of why FL studies are important. The game is clearly not a substitute for studying abroad, but BARNGA and simulations like it can be used throughout FL curricula to reinforce skills described in the Comparisons standard. To foster spiraling, it is important to ensure that syllabi incorporate and expand on the ideas of BARNGA or similar games (see Powers, 1999; Seelye, 1996). To simulate intercultural experience in embracing openness and flexibility (goals implied by the Comparisons standard) BARNGA works to improve students' behavioral techniques for responding appropriately to human differences.

Step Four: Tying it all together

Allow students to brainstorm personal, BARNGA-type experiences that illustrate the CCAI skills. Students should discuss not only these experiences but also rec-

ommendations for resolving cross-cultural miscommunication, or maintaining successful encounters with people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Conclusion

The two cross-cultural adaptability training tools outlined above address the Communication and Comparisons standards by working backward from identified targeted competencies of professional and intercultural frameworks, rather than forward from a language and skills-based curriculum (Allen, 2000). Such activities can help students demonstrate to their prospective employers that because of their FL studies, they possess both language fluency and cross-cultural adaptability. Students need to understand that the two are inextricably connected and need to demonstrate that they are capable of using their language fluency to pragmatic advantage. These skills, as Deniz' case illustrates, are highly valued by international-business employers. By relating FL study with the needs of the international marketplace, we can potentially improve the business world's perception of our field, and arm our students with real-life skills for studying foreign languages. Although this is a long-term goal, human resource experts need to see that entry-level candidates who have studied a foreign language are more likely to possess higher-order synthetic and analytic thinking skills as they relate to relevant cross-cultural situations than candidates who did not study a foreign language. Again, cross-cultural training tools such as the CCAI and BARNGA cannot replace studying or living abroad, but they can lay the foundation for students to develop cross-cultural adaptability as it relates to FL study, study abroad and the international marketplace.

Notes

1. The *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* are part of an overall standards project for U.S. education, attempting to set up a comprehensive framework for the academic, business, personal, recreational and practical benefits of studying foreign languages. The original project was funded in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities (Grant No. R211U30004).
2. This is often defined as having an awareness of awareness, or abstractly as "I think that I think I think." For further reading on meta-cognitive awareness, see O'Mally & Chamot (1990).
3. The CCAI is the result of collaboration between Dr. Colleen Kelley, a human relations consultant specializing in cross-cultural training, and Dr. Judith Meyers, a psychologist with a concentration in assess-

ment and diagnosis. The two established the need for the instrument in 1986 following discussions with other cross-cultural specialists and a thorough search for such an inventory, including an extensive electronic search of the literature on cross-cultural adaptability (Kelley and Meyers 1995b). Their research found that, although major factors involved in cross-cultural adaptability were cited in the literature, most of the materials readily available to researchers or human-resource specialists were culture-specific instruments, not culture-general, and so they were of little use to cross-cultural trainers or cross-cultural consultants. The CCAI was thus developed to rate individuals on their effectiveness cross culturally, not just within a specific culture. The CCAI and its accompanying materials are provided in English. For beginning language students, the materials could be used as is, but for more advanced students the materials need to be translated for target-language use. A Spanish-language version of the CCAI will be available in late 2003.

4. BARNGA is the name of a town in West Africa. The rules and playing materials for BARNGA are available in English, French, and Spanish. For details, visit: <http://www.interculturalpress.com/shop/Simulations.html>
5. Discriminant validity refers to the ability of an instrument to detect differences among groups that have other known differences. For example, if males and females were known to have different cross-cultural experiences, would the CCAI profiles of these groups differ significantly?

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Appendix A

Summary of CCAI ancillary materials (Kelley et al., 1995b)

In addition to the self-assessment instrument, the CCAI includes a *Facilitator's Guide*, a student workbook called the *Cultural Passport to Anywhere*, and the *Action-Planning Guide*, which suggests specific activities for improving the cross-cultural sensibilities measured by the CCAI.

Facilitator's Guide

The *Facilitator's Guide* was designed for a seven-hour workshop, but could be adapted to a series of mini lessons spread out over the course of a few weeks or semester. The activities in it provide guided exploration of definitions of

culture, personal cultural identity, preconceptions about cross-cultural experiences, and the origins of cross-cultural conflict. For example, the overview of the *Facilitator's Guide* discusses time required (seven hours), materials required (CCAI, *Passport*, *Action-Planning Guide*), group size (12-25), special considerations (working with heterogeneous groups), goals (raising awareness of participants' cultural backgrounds, etc.), and a step-by-step process for using the *Passport* and *Action-Planning Guide*.

Cultural Passport to Anywhere

The *Cultural Passport to Anywhere* is a workbook for students that contains provocative questions and structured activities to stimulate participation and insight on the CCAI subscales: Why are there difficulties in cross-cultural interactions? What do you think is the most basic or fundamental cause of difficulties across cultures (page 10)? The *Cultural Passport to Anywhere* serves as a personal record of discoveries and progress made during the training or class sessions, and is designed to draw on areas of strength and to help focus skill development on areas of weakness. The goal is to help students to efficiently and systematically increase their overall cross-cultural effectiveness as defined by the CCAI.

Action-Planning Guide

The *Action-Planning Guide* provides a practical tool that helps support continued improvement and follow-through. That is, it provides individuals with step-by-step directions for helping build a detailed action plan and support system for ongoing development outside the training setting. The Flexibility/Openness section offers, among other ideas, the following suggestion:

Spent time with a wide variety of people. Participate together in activities which you both enjoy. Find appropriate ways to express yourself with them. Concentrate on appreciating and showing respect for others more than on impressing them or "putting on a show" or façade.

As a way to interweave the *Action-Planning Guide* with the CCAI self-assessment profile, each activity in the *Action-Planning Guide* lists the item numbers on the CCAI that correspond to that activity. For example, the suggested activity above corresponds to items 5, 8, 19, and 22 on the CCAI.