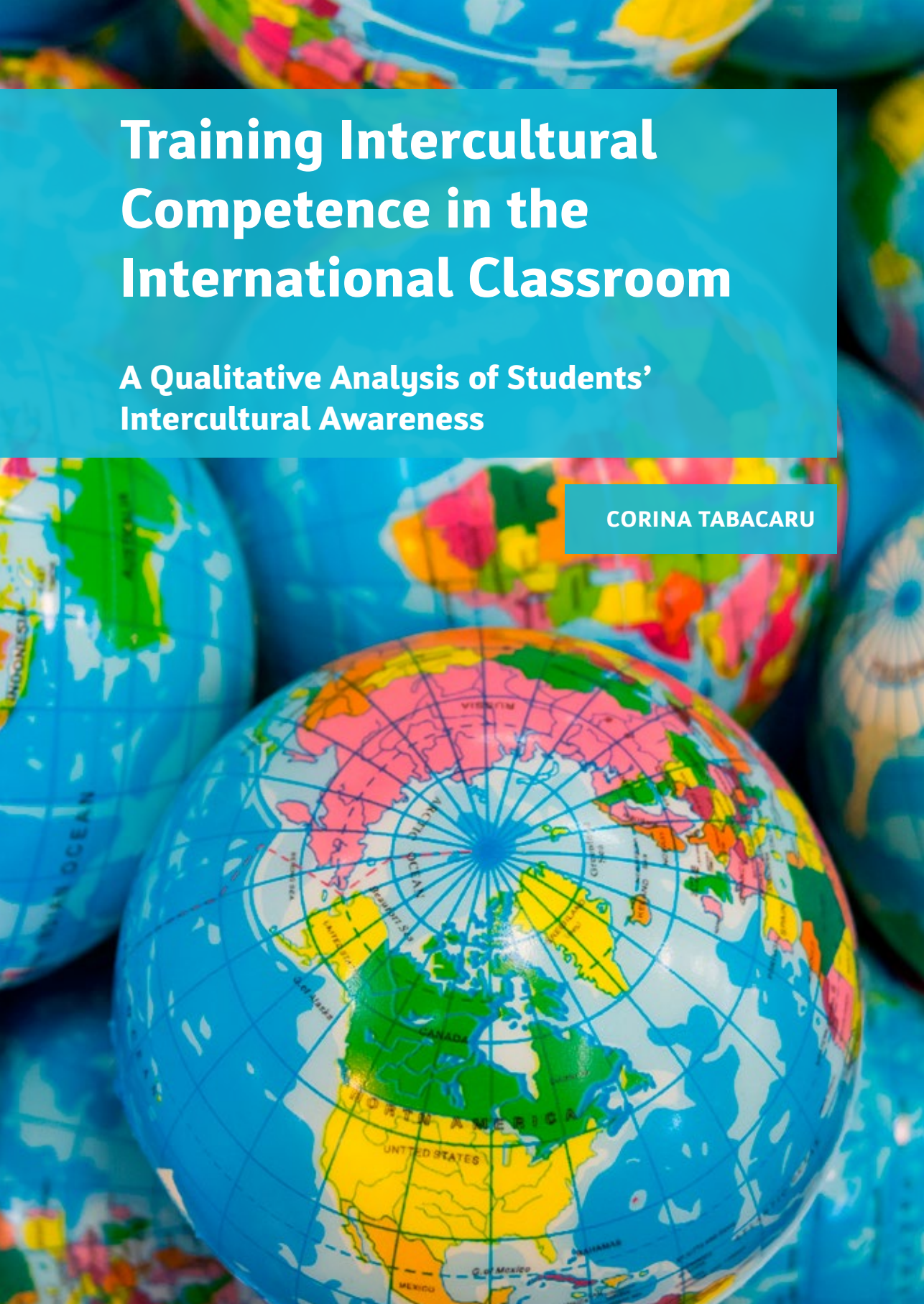# Training Intercultural Competence in the International Classroom

A Qualitative Analysis of Students' Intercultural Awareness

CORINA TABACARU

Summary

The international classroom is presumably a far more effective learning environment for the acquisition of intercultural competence when students receive adequate training to make the most of their intercultural encounters. This paper provides a summary of the intercultural training taught to first-year students of an international programme in The Hague University of Applied Sciences. The purpose of the paper is to investigate how the students respond to this intercultural training as well as what signs of intercultural awareness they show after completing the course. The findings were obtained via qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews, observations and student homework assignments. Overall, students evaluate the training positively. Furthermore, students show some awareness of the necessary ingredients for effective intercultural communication in the international classroom as well as of the challenging nature of this communication due to cultural diversity. Finally, this paper provides recommendations from the facilitators on stimulating intercultural learning in the international classroom.

1. Introduction

It is an auspicious time for internationalising curricula and stimulating global citizenship at The Hague University of Applied Sciences (THUAS). Currently, one of the University's core objectives is to train students to be globally minded professionals with an international and intercultural perspective, interested in worldwide issues and willing to embrace diversity (World Citizens in a Learning Society, 2015). Stimulated by a nationwide initiative, THUAS offers a significant number of international study programmes and internationally themed minors that provide a breeding ground for training and acquiring vital international competences (van Galen et al., 2014). In today's global labour market, competences such as the ability to learn and work in a culturally diverse environment are extremely important (The British Council, 2013).

Within the broader spectrum of international competences, this paper will focus on the intercultural aspect of these competences in the international classroom. The international classroom designates a culturally heterogeneous group of 20 to 30 students enrolled in an international study programme for a whole academic year. Intercultural competences refer to the knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable students to behave effectively and appropriately when interacting with people of different cultures (Deardorff, 2006; see below). Students need to become interculturally competent in order to participate effectively in the international classroom, to work together in culturally diverse project groups and to maximize their learning in view of their future professional career.

1.1 Intercultural competence: a model

The term intercultural competence used in this paper closely follows the theoretical model designed by Deardorff (2006). Designed as a pyramid, this model comprises four interdependent layers. At its foundation lies a respectful, open and curious attitude that entails the willingness to 'withhold judgement and to tolerate uncertainty' (2006:254). Without this openness to other students of different cultural backgrounds and enthusiasm towards diversity, it can be difficult to thrive in the international classroom.

The second level in the model of intercultural competence is embodied by cultural knowledge and skills. 'Cultural knowledge' goes far beyond the culture-specific information that one knows of their own and other cultures. It also entails the ability to deeply understand the impact of culture on our own worldview and the worldview of others. Finally, 'skills' refer to the ability to listen, observe and analyse new cultural situations as well as demonstrate linguistic competence. The necessary skills, solid cultural knowledge and the right attitude will lead to, as Deardorff (2006) points out, the third and fourth layer, namely, the 'desired internal and external outcomes'. The last two layers refer to the ability to adapt to and behave effectively in new cultural contexts. In the international classroom, students with adaptability to different ways of communicating and behaving, with empathy and a flexible mind-set are more likely to communicate and behave appropriately and achieve their goals. Finally, the degree of someone's intercultural competence depends on the extent to which all these four layers of competence have been acquired.

1.2 Communication in the international classroom

Intercultural competence entails the ability for effective communication with people of other cultural backgrounds. Analysing communication in the international classroom can provide insight into the level of intercultural competence that students and teaching staff may possess. This section will focus on some schematic differences that are likely to pose problems in students' communicative interaction.

Research shows that there are many long-term benefits associated with a culturally diverse environment. For instance, Stahl et al. (2010) argue that multicultural groups may produce more creative solutions as they challenge ideas longer and face less risk of groupthink compared to monocultural teams. Furthermore, studying in the international classroom offers ample opportunity to train and develop intercultural communication competence and share cross-cultural knowledge (Belt et al., 2015).

Despite these benefits, communication in culturally diverse groups may often be fraught with misunderstandings or conflicts especially in the short term (Gabb, 2006; Taras & Rowney, 2007). In the international classroom, an obstacle in intercultural communication is the inequality in language proficiency. For instance, many non-native students may find using English as the working language difficult (Taras & Rowney, 2007). Students who feel less comfortable communicating in the working language tend to speak less compared to the more proficient ones. What is more, proficient English speakers tend to speak more during group work sessions and even interrupt less proficient students more. This means that valuable ideas or contributions of less proficient speakers are never heard (Davison & Ward, 1999). Finally, Taras and Rowney(2007) claim that less proficient speakers tend to be perceived by their team members as less knowledgeable of the topic.

Another problem for the intercultural communication may be the degree of (in)directness in the communication style. In very broad terms, Western-European and North-American cultures tend to show more directness in their verbal style than Eastern-European and Asian cultures (Hofstede, 2001). People with a more direct style will appreciate clear and precise communication which is relatively easy to understand. Conversely, speakers with a more indirect style will opt for a more nuanced message that

can be more difficult to decipher for outsiders. This continuum of (in)directness is illustrated in Hall's (1990) model of high and low-context communication. According to this model, all communication takes place within a certain context but the amount of meaning communicated through the context itself differs from culture to culture. Context consists of everything that is not the verbal message, such as, history, social background, relationship, status, time of the day and facial expressions. People with a low-context communication style tend to be more direct, that is, they prefer starting with the main point and ending with details. Conversely, people with a high-context style show a preference for starting with context, which may sound like details to low-context listeners, and address the main point later. While in low-context cultures, communicators need explicit, structured information, in high-context cultures communication is more implicit, more difficult to decipher for an outsider and flows more freely. Given this degree of (in)directness, Taras and Rowney (2007) argue that speakers with different communication styles might face problems when they use their own style as a frame of reference.

The degree of directness can also be reflected in someone's preferred way of disagreeing or giving negative feedback. For instance, Meyer (2014) states that many Western cultures, especially the Dutch, tend to see open confrontation as appropriate and bearing no impact on the relationship. Generally speaking, the Dutch provide negative feedback in a direct or unmitigated way and criticism might be publicly given. At the other end of the spectrum, Meyer places Asian cultures as generally avoiding confrontations and expressing negative messages or criticism in a "diplomatic, subtle" way and only in private (2015:69). This schematic example of cultural differences is meant to illustrate the "cultural distance" in a multicultural group, that is, the degree of unfamiliarity that members of different cultures might experience when interacting with each other (Gabb, 2006). In fact, Volet & Ang (1998) argue that the degree of (un) familiarity can influence and even determine how successful a learning environment is.

To conclude, this section has outlined some of the potential challenges that culture-bound differences in communication styles might bring to the international classroom. These broad, schematic differences mainly between Asian and Western communication styles are deemed to be most relevant in the configuration of our international classroom. It is nevertheless important to clarify that the above-stated differences are generalisations and that we need to recognise the huge variety of individual differences from the likely behaviour of an ethnic group (see 2.1).

1.3 Training in Intercultural competence (TIC)

As stated before, following an international study programme and being part of an international classroom provides ample opportunity for sharing cross-cultural knowledge and intercultural learning. However valuable this intercultural learning may be, it is nevertheless not sufficient to achieve intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2011; Teekens, 2000). Students also need to be able to make sense of the intercultural encounters that they experience. This can be more readily achieved by means of a formal training that facilitates this experiential learning (Swaan, 2014). Hence the initiative of the Research Group International Cooperation to start a pilot 'Training in Intercultural Competence' (TIC) to first-year IBMS group in September-October, 2014.

This training has been designed in accordance with the research-based framework of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006). Furthermore, intercultural competence is developmental in nature, which means that individuals may progress from a more ethnocentric worldview to a more global mind-set (Bennet, 1998). Finally, this competence requires a process of learning; in other words, to develop the ability of handling intercultural incidents effectively and function well in the international classroom, students need to go through several cycles of learning that include actual experience, reflection, conceptualization and experimentation (Gregersen-Hermans & Pusch, 2012). As discussed in the next section, students are stimulated during the training to explore their own cultural background, reflect

on their own intercultural interactions with the help of theoretical tools, discuss case studies of business cross-cultural communication and finally apply the new insights in their day-to-day intercultural academic environment.

After teaching TIC, it is important to investigate its effect on students' level of intercultural competence. In fact, more research is necessary into the impact of formal intercultural training in the international classroom (Belt et al., 2015). Due to limited data, the present paper will not measure the effectiveness of the training. This aim will be within the scope of forthcoming research to be published by the Research Group International Cooperation in collaboration with the research group Citizenship and Diversity later this year. The central question that this forthcoming research will address is: In what way does an intercultural training taught in the environment of an international classroom impact the development of intercultural competences in first-year students at THUAS?

The present paper uses only qualitative data gathered in one international group, namely the test group. As the data from the control group are lacking here, it is not possible to measure the impact of the intercultural training on students' level of intercultural competence acquired as a result of the course. This paper aims to explore the following: *How do students in an international classroom respond to TIC and what signs of intercultural competence awareness can be detected in students after having been thought the course?*

2. Methodology

In her study on assessment methods of intercultural competence, Deardoff (2006) found that it is best to use multiple assessment methods of a "primarily qualitative" nature (2006: 258). The data used in this paper have been collected in one IBMS class, 1G. These data are exclusively qualitative and come from the following methods: observation of classroom interaction during nine different workshops, semi-structured interviews with a sample of ten students, a focus-group evaluation and homework assignments. The data used here are part of a wider body of data collected for the above-mentioned forthcoming study over the course of the academic year 2014-2015.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted by two members[1] of the research group International Cooperation in November and December 2014. Half of the interviews focused on international class-room dynamics and half on acquiring intercultural competences. During the interviews, students were asked about their own opinions and experiences of communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds in and outside of the international classroom. Furthermore, students were asked what they thought about the intercultural training they received and what they learned from it. The interviews were transcribed word-for-word and the transcripts were coded[2] and analysed using a list of codes based on the Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence (Deardorff, 2006: 254; see 1.1). This code list was developed and refined by the research groups International Cooperation and Citizenship and Diversity. More codes were added to capture students' attitudes towards the TIC training and to inves-tigate intercultural group dynamics in the international classroom. In addition, the nine class observa-tions were conducted and analysed by one member of the research group International Cooperation[3] according to the same list of codes based on Deardorff's model.

The homework assignment titled "Intercultural Autobiography" consisted of the following parts: a description of the student's cultural background, a critical reflection on a memorable intercultural experience following a six-step action-research cycle (i.e. experience, describe, interpret, reflect, apply and plan) and a conclusion on the student's intercultural learning so far and the impact of the intercultural training on their academic and/or professional life. In order for students to complete this assignment adequately, guiding questions were provided for each part (Hernández-Sanchez, Tabacaru, & Walenkamp, 2014). Especially the critical reflection, accompanied by the other two parts, can shed light on the student's level of intercultural competence. In total, 16 assignments were received from students; however, very few assignments contained a critical reflection on an intercultural experience.

On 28 October 2014, two focus groups of seven students met separately to evaluate TIC. Each focus group participated in a discussion of approximately 45 minutes, moderated by a member[4] of the International Cooperation Research Group. One moderator was also the trainer of TIC and the mentor of 1G throughout the academic year 2014-2015. A drawback of this double role is that students in a focus group may feel reluctant to express themselves critically about the training. In our case however, when the student responses in the two focus group sessions were compared, the results were similar.

Finally, when discussing double roles, we should mention that the author of this paper also facilitat-ed the TIC course with 1G and mentored this class over the course of the academic year 2014-2015.

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1 J. Walenkamp and J. Belt
2 C. Tabacaru, B. Prins and M.J. van der Velde
3 J. Belt
4 J. Belt and C. Tabacaru

Experiencing the course as a facilitator as well as writing about the experience has its advantages as well as its disadvantages. One important advantage is that the experience of facilitating the course can provide more depth when evaluating the course. One important disadvantage is a certain bias when analysing and interpreting data.

3. TIC – Training Intercultural Competence in the International Classroom

The Training in Intercultural Competence (TIC) started at the beginning of the academic year, on 5 September 2014. The training material was based on a pilot course, PREFLEX[5] (Hernández-Sanchez & Walenkamp, 2012), and further developed and adapted to the IBMS students' needs by three members of the Research Group International Cooperation, namely, J. Walenkamp, M. Hernández Sanchez and C. Tabacaru. The training was taught in seven workshops that were expanded into nine for future use (see TIC trainer guide).

3.1 1G - Composition of an International Class

The international classroom of this study is represented by a first-year IBMS group, 1G, at THUAS. Group 1G started the academic year with twenty-seven students: eleven female and sixteen male students. Six students have a native Dutch background and eight a Dutch immigrant background. Besides the local students, 1G is composed of the following international students: five students from China, two from Indonesia, two from Moldova, one from Finland, one from the UK and one from Greece. Given that almost half of the students come from abroad, it is fair to call 1G an international group.

All students' names in this paper have been anonymized. A list with each student's ethnic background has been included in the Appendix.

3.2 The Course Design

Students' needs should always be at the centre of an intercultural course design. Ideally, students should go through an intake process such as an individual or focus group interview in which their learning needs can be identified well in advance of the actual start of the course. Given that our training started in the first week of the academic year, an intake was not possible to organize. What is more, due to the early start, students might not be very aware of their intercultural learning needs, as this might be the first time they study abroad or in an international classroom. Therefore, the intake was replaced with a self-testing tool to assess our students' level of intercultural competence, administered during the first session of the training (Berardo & Deardorff, 2012). Based on the results, each student formulated a SMART learning goal to be achieved over the course of the training.

The primary objective of the training was 'to equip students with the necessary intercultural knowledge, skills and attitude so they can thrive in the international context of their study as well as later, in an ever globalized and multicultural business environment' (Hernández Sanchez, Tabacaru & Walenkamp, 2015). The purpose of TIC was to train students to acquire intercultural competencies in a goal-conscious and goal-oriented way by means of their intercultural encounters in the international classroom, or, in other words, to guide students in making the most of their international classroom setting. This will in addition facilitate intercultural communication so that students are able to adapt better to an international learning environment. Furthermore, TIC aimed to train students to become

5 Preparation for your Foreign Learning Experience

competent cross-cultural communicators in their future professional career while capitalizing on the learning experiences gained in the intercultural classroom. The first three workshops focused on inter-cultural situations that are more close to the experiential world of the international student, while the last three addressed the cross-cultural communication of the business world. Finally, it is important that all the issues taught in the course are made concrete enough and relevant for the students' day-to-day life or their future career.

Each workshop was designed to meet a more specific learning objective. For instance, in the kick-off session, a lot of attention was given to building trust and creating a positive learning atmosphere among students and facilitators. This session, which took approximately four hours, was built around getting to know one another, creating awareness of the cultural diversity in the classroom by discuss-ing similarities and differences, and defining a personal learning goal in the area of intercultural com-petence. The getting-to-know-one-another activities are also recommended in the literature as a way to stimulate intercultural communication and an overall positive learning environment. Gabb (2006) argues that spending time on such activities that may improve collaborative relationships in the inter-national classroom is important and it must be done 'sensitively' with an emphasis on the academic and professional rather than the psychological benefits.

The second and third workshop focused on different culture-bound communication styles and, respec-tively, on intercultural communication barriers. Through in-class discussion, a self-testing tool and group activities, students were encouraged to explore their own preferred communication style as well as their attitude to cultural communication barriers and how these might affect their interactions with others. Workshop four aimed to illustrate cultural dimensions such as our relationship to group and individual behaviour, our attitude to time, to hierarchy and status as well as elements of non-ver-bal behaviour. It is important for students to understand that these categories should not be seen as absolutes, but as nuanced dimensions that always occur in degrees; they merely give a basic, practi-cal insight of what cultural traits prevail in one culture or another (Hofstede, 2001). It is essential to remind students that one's cultural reference may differ from one's cultural preference. In other words, someone's preferred communicative behaviour may differ from the predicted general behaviour of the cultural environment the person originates from.

While the first four workshops focused on introducing and applying theoretical models and tools, session five and six consisted of applying the learned theory through interactive activities such as role-plays and reflection. Finally, workshop seven was designed as a review session in which the most important theoretical concepts were further trained through activities that addressed both student-re-lated intercultural communication and business-oriented cross-cultural communication. To illustrate, workshop seven together with the first four dealt with case studies about international student life such as study abroad, in-class participation and group work. The last three sessions, including workshop sev-en, consisted of various business case studies meant to explore the communication pitfalls employees may be faced with in a culturally diverse work environment (for the full range of activities, please see the TIC trainer guide; Hernández-Sanchez et al., 2015).

3.2.1 A Sample Activity from the course

As stated in section one and illustrated further in section four, group-work communication can be fraught with intercultural misunderstandings. In IBMS, group work generally entails that four or five students of different cultural backgrounds work closely together on a project, for a common grade. This shared goal and shared responsibility requires intensive communication; in this context, cultural differences might surface and lead to tension or clashes.

To give students more opportunity to manage tense intercultural encounters common to the international classroom and, more specifically to group work processes, we designed the activity below.

Nice or nightmare! Role-play on group work

Your group is behind schedule with an assignment that needs to be submitted in 10 days. Terry is having a conversation with Carla about what needs to happen.

TERRY

You moved to the Netherlands four months ago and feel homesickness and emotional stress. Everything in the Netherlands is so different from your home country; what's more, some of your group mates speak their mother tongue during group work sessions and you feel totally ignored. You find it really hard to address this issue with them. Last time you expressed disappointment about an incident, they did not seem to understand you. You feel there's not much room for your opinion during group discussions and that the work you deliver is always being criticized and turned down by the other group members. You do not feel accepted by the group, especially by Carla. She asked you to meet her in the cafeteria to have a talk.

Nice or nightmare! Role-play on group work

Your group is behind schedule with an assignment that needs to be submitted in 10 days. Terry is having a conversation with Carla about what needs to happen.

CARLA

You express your opinions directly and like to get straight to the point. Planning is your forte and you like assigning tasks and making sure that everyone is on track. You are a perfectionist and lose patience easily when someone delivers work that you think is below standard. You have a hard time communicating your expectations to Terry. Every time you tell him that his work is not good enough, he goes quiet. He always agrees with the group decisions, but then he ends up doing his own thing. Last time, you even took out his part from the assignment and only notified him afterwards. The other group members would like Terry to be more active in the group work, but do not really mind the present situation. You do, and think it's unfair that some members of the group need to do more work. You asked Terry to meet you in the cafeteria to work things out.

In this activity, a group of three students take on the roles of Carla, Terry and the observer. There are in total three rounds of approximately five minutes and each student gets to play each role once. While the task of Carla and Terry is to enact the script above, the observer is assigned to observe what is happening, analyse the situation using the theory of high- and low-context communication and, subsequently, give effective feedback on the interaction. The objective of this activity is to draw attention to a common problem that might occur during group work, that is, (intercultural) miscommunication and to the possibility of solving this problem by behaving adequately, in a culturally competent way.

3.2.2 Some Suggestions from the Facilitators

Facilitating an intercultural training can be a rewarding and challenging experience. In an academic context where students are under constant pressure to perform up to standard, to do homework and meet deadlines, the facilitator may face a tough job to demonstrate to students the importance and relevance of the training to student day-to-day activities. However, relevance of learning material in

the eyes of the students is an essential motivating factor in any programme. The learning material has to build on students' prior experience and knowledge and offer them new perspectives and ideas on how to interact effectively in the international classroom and across cultures. The material should preferably be organized from simple to complex, from concrete to abstract and from known information to new input (Gregersen-Hermans & Pusch, 2012). Furthermore, the programme activities should be varied to keep the students engaged. While performing the activities, Gregersen-Hermans & Pusch (2012) recommend that students will need to switch between listening, discussing, sharing, reflecting or experimenting. From our interviews students expressed a preference for assignments that stimulate interaction with one another (see 3.3). Finally, there should be flexibility in the way each workshop is taught. Therefore, it might be a good idea to avoid a detailed time schedule for each session and to only give the topic, the learning objective and possibly the break times.

With relevance of learning material being the key success factor, the trainer should be able to give concrete advice and tips applicable to student life. However, the trainer should refrain from providing students with ready-made answers, and with permission to culturally essentialise people and see them as the product of their own culture. Preferably, the facilitators should always have concrete examples of their own experiences as a communicator in a culturally diverse environment. The trainer should stimulate students to gain knowledge on possible underlying cultural values and norms, but also to stay close to the facts and suspend judgment while dealing with culturally ambiguous situations. Finally, as stated in the course material, students should pay 'mindful attention' when engaging in intercultural interactions (Thomas & Inkson, 2009).

Intercultural mindfulness entails the ability to pay attention to the context of the interaction such as non-verbal behaviour, social status and vocabulary choice that can help interpret what is happening. Mindfulness also means being aware of our own assumptions, values and emotions through which we understand others as well as putting ourselves in other people's shoes by noticing their assumptions, behaviour and words. Finally, mindfulness reflects the ability to incorporate new categories into our cultural understanding so we can behave appropriately. As Thomas and Inkson (2009) put it, mindfulness is "a mediating step that helps us to link knowledge to skilful practice". Being mindful is not an easy feat, though. What students need to understand is that mindfulness can be difficult, especially at first, but that if practiced more regularly, it can lead to greater flexibility of thought and action. To stimulate mindfulness, we introduced and applied the D(escribe)A(nalyse)E(valuate) model in the course (Nam, 2012). Admittedly, more attention can be paid to practicing intercultural mindfulness throughout the course and there are a variety of activities and concepts designed to this purpose (Nagata, 2004).

Furthermore, mindfulness includes the recognition that, despite our cultural differences, there are many similarities between us and people of a different culture. What's more, even when cultural differences do exist, they do not always matter. Besides diversity, the international classroom is built on a shared culture of common values, norms and rules and students who adapt well, learn to understand and respect this culture. Students' ability to partake in and create this shared culture by influencing one another and recognizing similarities might be just as important as noticing cultural differences. Although Deardorff's model of intercultural competence only focuses on cultural differences to define cultural sensitivity, we believe that the ability to find similarities can lead to a better interaction and collaboration in the international classroom. In fact, previous research shows that some students are convinced that focusing on similarities is better for building relationships (Belt et al., 2015). Therefore, we as facilitators should not only focus on cultural differences, but also pay some attention to the valuable realm of similarities among culturally diverse people.

4. Students' Experience of TIC

In this section we will investigate how students in 1G responded to TIC, based on our data gathered from the focus-group discussion, the interviews and the class observations.

4.1 Evaluation of TIC during the focus group session

On the whole, both focus groups evaluated TIC positively. For instance, students were able to name and explain several theoretical concepts discussed in the previous six sessions such as: the definition of intercultural competence, high- and low-context communication styles, Bennet's model, stereotypes, non-verbal communication, and some cultural dimensions. Students were also able to remember some video fragments vividly, such as Chimamanda Ngozi's TED talk, "The Danger of a Single Story". In addition, they mentioned they liked the games (e.g. 'Barnga' during the kick-off), the role-plays and the group discussions around case studies. They found the half-day kick-off a good opportunity to get to know classmates and one student even added, "That's why we are such a nice group!" Finally, students liked the idea that stereotypes are not necessarily counter-productive to intercultural communication; stereotypes may provide a light-hearted opening to a conversation.

In terms of didactic approach, the students appreciated the short reviews at the beginning of each lesson, the good balance between theory and activities, the course material (i.e. student syllabus and class slides) and the clear explanation and guidance of the teacher. In addition, they liked the fact that TIC is worth 1 ECT that they can use as ECA (Extra-Curricular Activity). Furthermore, some students mentioned that TIC helped them to become more open-minded. Previous to TIC, students found themselves fairly interculturally competent due to the culturally diverse environment some of them grew up in or came into contact with. However, TIC made them more aware of the many cultural differences out there and of the need to deal with them effectively.

A disadvantage of TIC mentioned by several students was the time-consuming aspect. This is an aspect we already anticipated and chose to assign students as little homework as possible. In addition, students would have liked to discuss more business cases on Asia, South-America and developing countries. According to some, a point for improvement in the course would be to incorporate guest lectures of business people with international experience but also presentations given by students and business trips to international companies. Finally, some students mentioned the confusion around a mentoring assignment posted on Blackboard that they initially thought they had to do and later found out they were exempted from, because of TIC. All in all, students found all the information the course covered necessary and useful.

4.2 Evaluation of TIC based on the semi-structured interviews

Compared to the focus-group session, the interviews give us a slightly more nuanced perspective on TIC. Similar with the outcome of the focus group, many students mentioned the different communication styles as a valuable tool to understand intercultural communication in the international classroom and later on, in the business world. Other elements of the course mentioned were: Hofstede's cultural dimensions, the kick-off day improving class dynamics, applying knowledge by means of role-plays and case studies and knowledge about different cultures, especially Asian cultures.

Overall, the ten students interviewed varied in their enthusiasm and appreciation for the TIC course. To illustrate, two out of the three Chinese students interviewed were very positive about the training. Cora found TIC 'the most interesting subject of all' because it was easy to follow, it promoted better understanding of people with a different cultural background and because of the trainer. Jerry called the training 'perfect' because 'we just lack knowledge of intercultural differences', knowledge that

can be applied immediately 'right now with each other'. He also believes that all IBMS groups should follow TIC next year. Furthermore, Gianno and Halima expressed a heightened interest in the subject of intercultural competences; Gianno mentioned that, due to the training, he has become more mindful when involved in intercultural communication. On a slightly less enthusiastic note, Cindy found the course fun and easier than other courses. Due to their previous intercultural experience, Lieve, Aisha and Maya consider themselves fairly competent, albeit intuitive, intercultural communicators. For them, the added value of TIC was the theoretical background provided in the course that enables them to consciously explain and interpret intercultural situations. For Roberto, the added value was learning about the Chinese culture which he knew little about. Jordy found the course improved the class dynamics and provided him with some interesting insights; however, he would rather follow the training next year because of heavy workload in year one. While Aisha shared Jordy's opinion, other students such as Lieve and Jerry found the course useful especially because it took place in the first year. Finally, besides the points for improvement mentioned during the focus group, one student mentioned the need for more material on dealing with intercultural conflicts.

4.3 Recognizing levels of directness in intercultural communication

During the TIC training, special attention was paid to intercultural communication styles. Using Hall's model of 'low- vs. high context' communication, students were encouraged to explore different levels of directness in intercultural communication by means of role-play and case study. In addition, students were asked to assess their own preferred communication style with the help of a self-assessment tool (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003) and to reflect on the skills of adapting one's communication style in an intercultural encounter.

Based on the semi-structured interviews, the students in 1G seemed to remember the conceptual model of high- vs. low-context the most and, consequently use it to reflect on their own and other people's communication style (see 4.3). For instance, Gianno (Turkish-Dutch) described himself as 'low-level context at school' and high-level at home with his family and mentioned the need to make this 'switch' on a daily basis. Lieve noticed that her fellow Chinese students have a more restrained way of communicating, with the exception of Jerry. However, she noticed that even Jerry's outgoing communication style could be described as indirect because he gives a lot of details and context before he states the main point. Halima (Moroccan-Dutch) claimed that she gained more self-awareness through the exercises because she had no idea she 'could be so direct'. Along the same lines, Aisha (Moroccan-Dutch) also mentioned she is low-context due to the influence that Dutch culture had on her (see 3.3). Similarly, Maya was already aware of her direct communication style during her high-school exchange year in Thailand; she already knew that 'European teenagers are different from Asian students'. Her approach was to warn her Thai friends about her direct style and ask them to tell her directly whether they found her 'way of talking disrespectful'. Finally, Cindy found Dutch people more direct; she believes 'they just say the main sentence'. Overall, the semi-structured interviews reveal that the students of 1G seem to be aware of the more direct or indirect style of communication present in the international classroom. In accordance with the literature, many students mention differences in the level of directness between Western-European and Asian students for instance (Ting-Toomey, 2006; Taras & Rowney, 2007).

For the international classroom, this pervasive difference may have deep consequences in class discussions and group work sessions. When making a suggestion or answering a question, Western students are expected to start with the main message upfront and subsequently providing details or justification if necessary. Students with a more indirect communication style may provide contextual information first and then present the core message. As a result, teachers may assume that these students are uncertain, unclear or simply unprepared for class. This difference in expectations when it comes to expressing ideas or formulating answers may be problematic, if not made explicit to students.

Therefore, interculturally competent teaching staff needs to explain the academic expectations and assessment strategies to the students of the international classroom.

4.3.1 A critical incident

This sub-section zoomes in on a critical incident described by Nanna, a student born and raised in the Netherlands by Indonesian parents who immigrated to this country in their twenties. This critical incident depicted an intercultural interaction that stayed in Nanna's mind as a vivid example of a cultural misunderstanding. Nanna wrote about this incident in her intercultural biography (see 2). We chose to fully render the incident in Nanna's exact words below for two reasons; firstly, it is a clear and genuine account of events and secondly, it shows how Nanna managed to make sense of the intercultural interaction with the help of the 'low- and high-context' model learned in TIC.

> *"Before I went to IBMS I knew there were going to be a lot of international students but I never thought I would come across Intercultural difficulties because I thought I was Interculturally competent.*

> *But the first day already, I came across an Intercultural difficulty with my classmate, Juna, who is also Indonesian. Never did I think that we, out of all the students, could have Intercultural difficulties.*

> *We were both looking for the right classroom and we were lost. We searched together for the classroom and sat next to each other. I thought, because of the fact that she's Indonesian, that we'd probably have the same interests. I began talking, asking questions, talking about myself, about the Netherlands, the differences, trying different subjects but she looked very uninterested. She kept playing on her phone while I was waiting until she answered me or asked me any questions.*

> *At the end of that class I felt very upset because she wasn't being social to me and I couldn't understand why she was so uninterested. For quite a few days, I walked around with the thought that she was so mean and arrogant. I just didn't understand what I did wrong. I asked my parents and they explained to me that Indonesian people that are a little above middle class in Indonesia are 'sombong', which means arrogant in Indonesia. For me it didn't feel as a good explanation for why she acted like this.*

> *A week later in class for Intercultural Competence we read a case about a Dutch student on Internship in Jakarta. Ms. Tabacaru asked Alfie and Juna (both Indonesian) what the student did wrong. They said that the Dutch student is arrogant because she talks a lot about herself [...].*

> *It finally hit me, it wasn't her fault, it was mine. I have now learned that 'I' in the eyes of Indonesians was too arrogant and I talked and asked too much. I shouldn't have been so direct and asked all these questions at once. I should have listened more carefully and give her the time to get to know me because she comes from a high-context culture.*

> *That day I realized that I was more low-context than I thought. Having this Intercultural difficulty with someone from the same country as me, really opened my eyes. We are both Indonesians but we have big Intercultural differences. The days after that class I took the time to slowly get to know Juna more. We are now good friends and I'm glad things worked out, with time."*

This intercultural biography was due after the fourth session of the TIC course when all theory was covered. Nanna was further not interviewed and there is no way of knowing whether her assessment of the situation was correct. Whatever the reason Juna reacted in a different way than Nanna had expected, it is important nevertheless that Nadyia was not satisfied with blaming Juna for her own disappointment. What's more, she found a way, with the help of TIC, to make sense of the situation by becoming more sensitive to cultural differences between her own background and Juna's. By showing adaptability to Juna's different communication style and adjusting one's own way of communicating accordingly, Nanna shows clear signs of "desired internal and external outcome".

4.4 Classroom dynamics during the TIC sessions

As the class observations showed, the classroom atmosphere stayed positive throughout the whole training. Overall, students displayed an open and friendly attitude to their classmates and engaged well with the course material. On a few occasions, however, two or three students were noticed to display a lack of readiness to participate in the group activities. Especially in the second and third session, which contained a more prominent theoretical element, students took a less active role on the whole. This changed in the following sessions with the implementation of more activating teaching methods, such as case studies and role-plays. With regard to their seat placement in class, students mostly mingled well in terms of ethnic background and gender. Occasionally, two or three Chinese female students chose to sit together; in addition, on two different occasions, a large group of male students was

noticed to sit together on one side of the room and another smaller group of female students sat next to one another at the back of the classroom. All in all, no pattern of seating preference was discovered.

This ever-changing seating placement of students could be a result of the teacher requesting students to sit next to someone with a different linguistic background. Interestingly, when group assignments were presented, students preferred the teacher to designate the groups. When allocated group tasks, most students worked well together, using English as the working language. An exception was noticed, however, in session four of the training, when groups of four or five students were assigned to study and discuss a cultural dimension. Zooming in on the dynamics of a specific group (Gianno, Cora, Jordy and Lieve), we noticed that all group mates were engaged in discussion during this activity with the exception of Cora. Gianno took a leadership role by asking questions and making notes, Lieve asked for Jordy's support and received it, but none of the three students engaged with Cora who just sat quietly. After a while, Cora whispered something to Gianno who showed support by explaining Cora's input to the others and noting it down. This small incident is interesting because it is symptomatic of a more complex underlying work group dynamics (see 4). As we will see in the next section, there is a significant difference in 1G between overall class dynamics and work group dynamics. To illustrate it with a metaphor from geology, the class dynamics can be compared to the outer layer of plate tectonics, where students, like tectonic plates, are moving peacefully relative to one another. Beneath the surface, however, when it comes to group work dynamics, the pressure and temperature can be very high. As we will argue in the next section, this difficult group-work dynamics could be a symptom of cultural differences present in intercultural communication.

4.5 Concluding remarks

Like any other training, the TIC course should be designed in accordance with students' needs; the topics should be relevant to students' day-to-day life or to their future professional career. Furthermore, the course should include a wide variety of activities, with a significant number of assignments that stimulate interaction among students. Finally, there should be flexibility in the way each workshop is taught.

Based on our data, students found the course useful and the atmosphere during the TIC workshops was positive; by far the most important element of the course that most students named was Hall's model of high- versus low-context communication. During the course we noticed a positive overall classroom dynamics; however, as we will see in the next section, there is a tenser underlying group-work dynamics at play.

5. Exploring Intercultural Competence in the International Classroom- A Qualitative Analysis

This chapter will explore 1G students' views on interculturally competent communication and behaviour in the international classroom. These results are mainly based on semi-structured interviews conducted after completing the TIC training and on a number of class observations during the training sessions. Given that the major part of our data consists of interviews, we expect our findings to shed more light on the students' awareness of what it means to be interculturally competent rather than on their actual level of competence.

5.1 Well–begun is half done: Positive attitude in the international classroom

The first step in building intercultural competence is having an open, respectful and curious attitude towards all members of the international classroom (see 1.1). Based on our observations, the students

in 1G showed an eagerness to interact and a friendly responsiveness to one another from the very first workshop they followed together as a group, at beginning of the academic year.

Furthermore, all students involved in our semi-structured interviews confirmed a positive overall atmosphere they have experienced in 1G. Based on their responses, a good learning environment starts with an open, respectful and curious attitude. For instance, Gianno, a Dutch student of Turkish immigrant background, finds interacting with people from different cultures 'no problem at all [...] if you are a bit open-minded, both parties of course, and show a bit of curiosity'. Similarly, Halima, with her diverse educational and social background, has always found herself open to and very interested in people from other cultures. Living in Rotterdam, her own circle of friends is very diverse as well. As a student of the international classroom, she believes that one of the main reasons for the positive atmosphere in 1G is a respectful attitude (*"elkaar in hun waarde laten")*. She enjoys the feeling of respect she receives from her classmates and finds them very "open-minded". Halima illustrates the respectful open-mindedness of her classmates by means of two satisfying conversations she had with a Dutch student on an excerpt from the Koran and respectively, with a Chinese classmate on the media coverage of Hong-Kong and China relations.

Given their immigrant background, students such as Halima and Gianno have had the opportunity to experience cultural diversity throughout their whole life. As a result, they seem to demonstrate an open, inclusive attitude that makes them fit well in the international classroom. Interestingly, another student of immigrant background, Aisha, called herself a foreigner ('*een buitenlander'*) and apparently made no difference between her own background and the background of her international classmates. In contrast, many Dutch native and international students might have experienced less interaction with people of different cultures prior to their enrolment in IBMS. However, even these students maintained to have had a curiosity and eagerness for intercultural experiences before becoming part of the international classroom. For instance, Jordy, a student from the UK, found it important to learn Spanish and German for his A-levels ("*there's a whole world out there to explore*"). In addition, two Chinese female students, Cora and Cindy emphasized the importance of travelling to foreign countries (*"Europe is a very good idea. You can travel around. Once you travel you will know what a real world is like. It's very helpful for you to build self-value")*. Finally, Lieve, the only Dutch native student interviewed, confessed to have always had a wait-and-see approach when interacting with new people *("iemand die een beetje de kat uit de boom kijkt")*. She confessed to be using this very same approach in 1G. Even though this cannot be considered an intercultural attitude as such, an observant, cautious style of inter- action can be useful, as we will see later in this section, when dealing with behaviour that one cannot immediately understand or classify.

So far, our class observations and interviews conducted over the course of one semester provided us with solid proof of a positive classroom dynamics present in 1G. We believe that this overall dynamics is partly the result of the open, curious and respectful attitude students demonstrate in 1G. As previous- ly stated, a supportive attitude is a first important step in building intercultural competence. We shall now go on to explore the next layers of intercultural competence manifested in 1G.

5.2 'Daring more': Communicative behaviour in the intercultural classroom

Starting a university study programme is a potentially exciting but also challenging process. The new student has to learn to thrive in an environment abundant in new rules, new expectations and new people. An international study programme, on the other hand, adds a new layer of excitement and challenge for the student of the international classroom. This student is immersed into an even more unfamiliar and culturally diverse learning environment where the potential for discovery as well as for misunderstanding and ambiguity becomes greater. That is why, the international classroom may

require a more 'daring' communicative behaviour from the international student. In this part we will focus on the actions students claim to have undertaken or deem necessary in order to facilitate communication and understanding in intercultural encounters.

Firstly, the working language in 1G is English. For all students in 1G but one, English is not their first language. According to the composition of the class, 14 students share Dutch as a native language, one student is native English and the remaining 11 students are native speakers of one of the following languages: Chinese (5), Bahasa Indonesia (2), Romanian (2), Finnish (1) or Greek (1). Given that English is not the first language for the overwhelming majority of the students, speaking it at all times in the classroom comes with a cognitive effort. As follows, the temptation is high to resort to one's mother tongue especially for the Dutch and the Chinese students who are linguistically well represented in the class.

The Dutch students showed a fairly predictable language behaviour. The students interviewed admitted to speaking Dutch when they wanted to explain a difficult concept, or when they wanted to say something quickly even during group work sessions when not all group mates were able to understand them. For Lieve, speaking English was difficult in the beginning and switching back to Dutch, whenever possible, was the 'natural' reaction. Roberto showed pragmatism about his use of Dutch; with his Dutch-speaking classmates he would turn to Dutch, while with a non-Dutch speaker he would use English; with Quentin from the Dutch Antilles, he would speak Spanish. Halima also mentioned having to juggle with three languages on a daily basis: Dutch, Moroccan and English. She found this difficult and admitted to speaking Dutch whenever possible. Inadvertently, she even wrote in Dutch in the common WhatsApp group, which turned out to be a major source of dissatisfaction for Maya. Two other students interviewed mentioned being aware of Maya's irritation but still resorting to their first language from time to time. The exception to this language behaviour seemed to be Gianno. He expressed a love for speaking English and a strong belief that students should use the shared language at all times in the international classroom, especially when there is a non-Dutch speaking person around.

When using English in class, the Chinese students showed a similar behaviour. They found it very difficult to speak English fluently. This sometimes prevented them from making more contact with the other classmates in spite of their intention to do so. For instance, Cindy confessed she's 'a little bit negative' because communicating with other non-Chinese students is so hard; in class, she felt more comfortable to sit next to her Chinese 'friends'. The exception to this reluctant behaviour was Jerry. He expressed an eagerness to speak English, a language that comes naturally to him. Even when a Chinese classmate asked him a question in Chinese, he responded in English when another person who did not understand Chinese happened to be around. Very often, the other Chinese student would stick to Chinese and Jerry would stick to English in the conversation. During the preparatory year, he spoke English all the time and a lot of his Chinese peers did not like that. They would say to him: *"I know you speak English good, but do you have to speak English all the time even to your own people?"* Jerry said not to be too bothered by these remarks. English just 'feels more natural' to him in an international environment.

Indeed, research confirms that using English as a working language in an international programme can be perceived as difficult by many students (Taras & Rowney, 2007). For the vast majority of our students and staff, English is not their native language. Especially in the beginning, being immersed in an English programme can come as a shock to many of our students. Local students have Dutch to fall back on when they want to explain more difficult concepts or when they want to say something more quickly. When the local students represent a majority in the class, then Dutch becomes an informal working language during group work sessions. That can be very confusing for international students who do not only have to face the challenges of communicating in English as a foreign language, but

also experience Dutch as an additional language, present in many interactions during group work. Given that Dutch is a language that few international students will learn to speak beyond a basic level, its use in the international classroom will have to be tolerated to some extent by these international students. If Dutch students are likely to resort to the comfort zone of their mother tongue, so do some international students, as we have seen in the case of the Chinese, who happen to be more strongly represented in class. They too may create linguistic isles in the classroom that can hamper the flow of intercultural communication.

Besides the struggle to use English as a working language in class, the students of 1G also need to make another type of effort to engage in intercultural communication. To illustrate, Halima said one needs to be more 'daring' in an international environment and saw that as a prerequisite to learning (*'if you don't dare, you're not going to learn anything actually'*). She thought that the students who have chosen for IBMS were willing to put in the effort to deal with people of different cultural backgrounds; these students 'just dare more', they took initiative and made the first step to approach others. Similarly, Lieve captured this daring behaviour when describing her interaction with a Chinese female classmate during Math tutoring: *"in the beginning, the Math private lesson with Mady was always strictly Math, it was quite business-like. And then at a certain moment I tried more [...] I tried to have a chat. And then Mady opened up as well. And now it's not only just strictly Math. Now it's friendly chatting ('gezellig'), some Math and afterwards some more chatting and then Math again."* In his turn, Jordy described this intercultural behaviour as a willingness "to participate and understand the different contexts".

Other students in 1G expressed a similar eagerness to understand, as well as to explain their cultural background to others. For instance, when asked why he believed that 1G is the best class, Jerry gave this answer: "*I think intercultural class, that helps a lot. [...] And we try to be more tolerant. Be more patient when you face something that you feel a bit strange. A lot of my classmates try to ask me something about China and I was trying to give as detailed as possible to them [...] We talk a lot about a lot of stuff, about our home town. We just try to give compliments and try to understand [...] even if some, they have their own ideas, they do not like to convince others. They don't try to say you're wrong.*" Similarly, when Gianno received a lot of questions about his Turkish upbringing from his native Dutch classmates in high school, he saw this as an opportunity to explain and inform others about his cultural background. Furthermore, when it comes to understanding, both Roberto and Jordy thought it was necessary to look at the situation from both sides, especially in an argument. While this is not necessarily an intercultural skill as such, understanding an issue from different perspectives in an intercultural setting can be a step in cultivating empathy and an ethnorelative view. Similarly, sharing solicited information about one's cultural background could lead to familiarity, mutual understanding and possibly, stronger relationships in the international classroom.

Besides striving for mutual understanding, some students also mentioned listening and observing, as an effective way to behave in intercultural encounters. For instance, when discussing the rules of working together in groups, Halima considered herself ready for compromise. First, however, she needed to listen to and understand the different position a classmate might have. In his turn, Gianno said he has been listening more to other classmates since he became part of the international classroom and has been trying not to interrupt others. Cindy mentioned an episode when she was observant of the different ways people gave her compliments after her presentation and partly attributed the different reactions to cultural conditioning (*'I did a business presentation. And when I do the presentation, I can see the different behaviour of people from other countries. Some people just cheer for me, some people just smile at me. After I went back to my seat, some people said: Good job.'*).

So far we have discussed the 'desired *external* outcome' of interculturally competent behaviour that students of 1G identify. Based on students' responses in the interviews, we have acknowledged a certain awareness of the challenges that intercultural communication might pose and hence the need for a more 'daring' behaviour on their part. This 'daring' intercultural behaviour entails an effort to speak the shared language and not to resort to a minority language, an effort to understand, to listen, to observe and interpret a situation from both sides. In the following section, we will explore the 'desired *internal* outcome' of being interculturally competent.

5.3 Reflexivity: Creating meaning in intercultural encounters

As mentioned before, due to an added degree of unfamiliarity, intercultural communication can pose more challenges to the international student. This section is meant to explore what happens beneath the surface, the dilemmas and mental work that students of the international classroom face in their encounters with their peers. In the previous section, we have illustrated an entire intercultural incident experienced and critically reflected on by a student. These critical reflections, if completed according to the action-research model, can give insight into how students create meaning in intercultural encounters. However, due to the very limited complete assignments received from students, we are forced to base this subsection on the interview transcripts.

A dilemma that students appeared to face is whether to attribute misunderstanding or 'deviant' behaviour to individual or to cultural differences. For instance, after repeatedly failing to persuade a Chinese classmate to commit to group work, Jordy asked himself: *'But at one point it did cross me: Is this something to do with the intercultural? Is it something we're missing? Is it something I'm missing?'* Jordy's self-query illustrates the dilemma whether to attribute the problematic communication to cultural or to individual differences. Jordy went on to mention other Chinese classmates who did put in the work and added that 'comparing [is] a bit unfair'. In other words, Jordy stated that lack of commitment has little to do with one's cultural background and did not further dwell on his own role in the intercultural communication. This particular incident involving Jordy's work group will be illustrated in more detail in the next section.

Another episode of problematic communication during group work was recounted by Halima. Halima's friend and classmate, Maya confessed her frustration with a group mate, Alfie, to her. According to Halima, the problem between the two arose due to a mismatch between Maya's direct way of communicating her expectations regarding group work commitment and Alfie's friendly unresponsiveness to her. In order to help Maya, Halima enlisted another classmate's help, Samantha to see if Alfie and Maya's problem could be explained from an intercultural perspective. While Maya believed that Alfie's communicative behaviour was a reflection of his personality rather than of his cultural programming, Halima as well as Samantha showed more understanding towards Alfie. They invited Maya to suspend judgment and try to look at the situation objectively before forming an opinion. Halima owned up to being more judgmental in the past but realized that quick judgment is a barrier to understanding (*'It's because I was also like this in the past, I was very quick to judge, while you don't really know what's lying behind.'*). Thus, Maya was encouraged here to consider cultural differences as well when diagnosing the communication problem she had with Alfie.

However, this attribution dilemma takes a different shape in group work than it does in classroom dynamics at large. Faced with 'deviant' communicative behaviour, group mates may be tempted to explain a collaboration problem by blaming the other of incompatible personality or lack of commitment, as we have seen in the case of Maya. On the other hand, classmates outside of the project group who do not have to suffer the consequences of a shared insufficient grade for example, may be more inclined to attribute unfamiliar behaviour to cultural differences. These tendencies noticed in students'

interviews could be explained as follows: when group mates work closely together in a project and there is a lot at stake in terms of academic results, then students are more likely to explain the problem by means of someone else's lack of commitment or low language proficiency or both. Conversely, if the students do not have a vested interest in the matter, then they are likely to name cultural differences as the cause of ineffective group work collaboration. In both scenarios, a tendency to quickly attribute a problem to individual or intercultural differences could be down to insufficient reflexivity on the students' part. In a real-life conflict, the situation is seldom that simple. In a culturally diverse project group, there is obviously accountability on both sides regarding commitment and communication, as well as the presence of individual and cultural differences among students.

An illustration of the complex ramifications of intercultural communication can be found in Gianno's and Aisha's responses. Given their immigrant background, they are used to shifting their cultural frame of reference on a regular basis (Bennet & Bennet, 2002). For instance, Gianno's secondary school teachers mistakenly considered him shy; this is because when a teacher was giving him corrective feedback, he kept quiet, while the teacher expected him to answer back. This silent reaction was due to his upbringing; at home he was not supposed to interrupt when his parents reprimanded him. As an adult, Gianno has successfully managed to 'integrate' the Turkish and the Dutch worldviews into his cultural understanding and to behave accordingly. However, the international classroom has posed new challenges for him. He thought that being enthusiastic and asking lots of questions is always a good approach when interacting with classmates from different parts of the world. Now he understood that not everyone may be comfortable with his enthusiastic overload of questions and forced himself to listen more and interrupt less. When asked by the interviewer whether there was a difference between the Moroccan and the Dutch way of communication, Aisha answered that both communication styles are very direct. After some time however, she cast doubt on her previously made remark and reflected on the deep influence that the Dutch culture has had on her and her environment and on the difficulty to see the Moroccan and Dutch communication styles in a separate light. In the international classroom, she acknowledged the need to 'think twice' before interacting with some of her classmates.

All in all, as we have seen in this section, reflexivity in intercultural communication does not provide students with quick answers to the potential dilemmas they might encounter in intercultural communication. As it emerges from student interviews, reflexivity is the act of thinking about one's own role in the communicative interaction, of tolerating ambiguity while trying to understand the issue from someone else's (cultural) perspective. Clearly, reflexivity is valuable for building intercultural competence and should be stimulated in students (also see mindfulness 3.2.2).

5.4 The Chinese students: problem patterns in the international classroom

The students from China are the largest international student minority group both in IBMS and The Hague University of Applied Sciences. Given the significant number of Chinese students studying at THUAS, it is important to address some of the main problems that the Chinese students are likely to face when adapting to the Dutch tertiary educational system and to the Dutch culture at large. Our assumption is that the wider the cultural and linguistic gap, the more difficult the adaptation process. Therefore, it is presumably more challenging for a Chinese student to thrive in the Dutch academic environment than for other international student minorities with more similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

This adaptation process can demand a significant portion of the Chinese student's energy that might otherwise be channelled into academic work. In fact, previous research has raised awareness to the "precarious position of students from China" in IBMS (Belt et al., 2015). Building on this previous finding, this section will illustrate the results from the semi-structured interviews regarding the situation of Chinese students in the international classroom. The purpose is to illustrate some typical challenges that students from China might face when taking part in academic work and interacting with classmates.

The first challenge is the level of English. As it emerges from the interviews, most Chinese students confess finding English difficult (see 3.2). Moreover, the non-Chinese students are also aware of the struggle that the majority of Chinese students face when communicating in English. This difficulty perceived by both Chinese and non-Chinese students alike is all-pervasive: in class discussions, group work sessions, written assignments and informal interaction. Even if the lower fluency level of most Chinese students in 1G does not seem to have an impact on the overall class dynamics, the impact is deeply felt at a group work level.

As already mentioned, group work entails that students work closely together on the same project and share a common goal. As a result, given the higher stakes, everyone's input and work ethic is more likely to be closely monitored by the other group members. Due to this more intense type of collaboration, the likelihood of communication clashes or conflicts might also increase. This likelihood may become even higher in a culturally diverse group. To illustrate, we focused on the problematic collaboration in one project group consisting of five students with different cultural backgrounds. Four out of the five students, Jordy (UK), Lieve, Gianno and Cora were interviewed and asked about their views on the group-work process and collaboration.

Firstly, all students interviewed signalled the difficult collaboration with Cora, due to her lower English level. Gianno, Lieve and Jordy found Cora's group work contribution below standard. Jordy deemed some of Cora's written work 'completely non-understandable', which led to more work for the other members who had to rewrite Cora's part. Gianno, the group leader, often had the impression that Cora did not grasp what she was supposed to do and often offered to sit next to her and help her better understand the assignment. Lieve also mentioned that the group tried to take into account Cora's lower English level and consequently, assigned her shorter pieces to write. Like Gianno, Lieve tried to explain the assignment requirements to Cora; she provided some examples to help Cora understand the task better. What happened is that Cora noted down those same examples and later submitted them as her part of the assignment.

All group members, including Cora identified a communication problem in the work process. However, only part of this problem appeared to be caused by the difficulty of using English as the shared language. Indeed, other type of difficulties may lie at the root of the signalled communication problem. Lieve said that she 'gets no real contact' with Cora; she does not know what she needs to say to her. Gianno called Cora a 'very quiet girl' who 'rarely says something unless you ask her a question; then she gives a short answer'. Even when tasks were distributed, she kept very quiet.' However, he didn't find her shy; he said that during the group work session she often asked for his help with searching information on the Internet, help which he was glad to provide. In her turn, Cora said she's 'not a quiet person actually' and that 'it really depend[ed] on who' she was with; if she was with friends or someone she 'really likes', she would be 'more active'. She confessed she soon got the impression that she was not very well liked by the people in her project group. Interestingly, she reported to be working well in a second project group consisting of Juna, Gianno and Samantha, because she could 'see they like her'. Although Gianno is a member of both groups, Cora still liked him despite the problems faced with the first group.

In addition, Cora confessed that she was aware she 'did not do well at first' when it came to her group work contribution. Cora's slow start was partly due to the challenges she had to face as an international student. She arrived in the Netherlands one week before the start of the academic year and had to take care of many issues which led to her missing some group work meetings. In addition, she stated never being involved in group work in China and not being familiar with WhatsApp as a communication platform to work in a group. When comparing Dutch to Chinese students, Cora said the following: 'Dutch students are different from Chinese students. Here you just need to pay very much attention to your status. And others will make friends with you. But in China it's not like this. In China, if you're making friends, it depends on if you are a good student. And here they love students who are very, very active in class.' From this excerpt, two elements stand out. Firstly, Cora is aware that high in-class participation is highly desired and encouraged in IBMS; secondly, while it's not entirely clear what she means by 'status', it is something not equivalent to academic performance.

Nevertheless, Cora's major struggle by far involves dealing with some of her group mates' very direct communication style. For instance, one hour before the group presentation was due, Cora was openly forbidden by John and Jordy to present her part on account of her insufficient work. She found the way John (a new member of the group) and Jordy communicated this to her simply 'unacceptable'. Encouraged by her mentor to discuss the matter with her group members, Cora confessed that she did not 'know how to talk with them because they are with four people and I only have myself. And they are very direct.' She said she knew that the best way to solve the problem is to 'tell them [her] situation'. She also suspected they find her 'lazy' while she was convinced communication is 'the big problem'.

All other members however, accused Cora of lack of commitment. For instance, Gianno stated that the weekend before the project deadline was due, Cora decided to go on a trip to Belgium and Luxembourg. He said he was able to see this on her Facebook page. In addition, he mentioned Cora's 'last-minute' way of reacting to group messages on Facebook or WhatsApp and asking whether she could contribute. Concerning the day of the presentation, the group had decided to meet in the morning to go through the slides and prepare together but Cora did not attend the meeting because she had missed the app message. Interestingly, when relating this event, Gianno mentioned an inner conflict; on the one hand, he believed that some group members gave a lot of good reasons for excluding Cora from the final group presentation, on the other hand, he still found it difficult for Cora and the way she was confronted with the situation by John and Jordy just before the presentation. Even if Gianno mentioned Cora's inexperience with WhatsApp as a 'cultural barrier', he clearly joined the others in attributing the problem to her lack of commitment.

Finally, this group work conflict is fairly similar to the one illustrated in the PREFLEX study (Belt et al., 2015). On the one hand, non-Chinese group members accuse the Chinese students of lack of commitment; consequently, they give the Chinese group mates fewer tasks or exclude them altogether from certain activities. On the other hand, the Chinese students claim that they are committed but that they face difficulty with their lower English fluency, with adapting to the new learning environment as well as with the direct communication style of their group members. These intercultural problems illustrated here have been confirmed by previous research (Davidson & Ward, 1999; Taras & Rowney, 2007). As these instances seem to be far from exceptional in IBMS, we believe it is necessary to raise awareness in mentors and project tutors alike about these recurring incidents. Culturally sensitive mentors and group work tutors should explain the reasons for listening to and valuing each contribution with a view to learning from each other, the rules of turn-taking during in-class discussion and the need to express opinions clearly and briefly (Gabb, 2006). As discussed in section 1, expressing opinions and

giving answers in a concise and clear way is related to the predominantly direct communication style preferred in the Netherlands and the Dutch education system. This direct communication style expected in the Netherlands should be made explicit to international students used to different academic expectations.

Admittedly, a number of Chinese international students do succeed in the Dutch tertiary education every year, but we believe this number can be increased if culturally competent tutor and mentor guidance is provided.

5.5 Concluding remarks

This qualitative analysis has shed some light on what student consider interculturally competent behaviour in the international classroom. Firstly, students in 1G are aware of the necessity to have an open and respectful attitude in order to fare well in the international classroom. Secondly, they believe that being part of the international classroom requires the effort to speak the shared language, to understand, to listen, to observe and look at a situation from different perspectives. Thirdly, when dealing with communication problems students experience an attribution dilemma; namely, when talking about their own group work, students are more inclined to attribute these problems to individual differences rather than to cultural differences. On the other hand, when the communication problems do not concern them directly, students are more likely to name cultural differences as the root of the problem. Finally, the collaboration between Chinese students and other students can be sometimes fraught with challenges due to a potentially wider cultural and linguistic gap. Formal cultural trainings such as TIC as well as alert guidance from project tutors and mentors can bridge this gap and equip students better for the international classroom.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

The international classroom is presumably a more effective learning environment when students are trained and guided with a view to building their intercultural competence. Hence, the initiative of the Research Group International Cooperation to provide the TIC course to one IBMS class at the beginning of the academic year 2014-2015, and to attempt assessing its effectiveness.

The first objective of this paper was to investigate how students respond to and evaluate the intercultural training. Overall, students found TIC useful and the atmosphere during the workshops was positive. Especially during activities such as case-study discussions and role-plays, students engaged well with the material and their classmates. The theoretical tool most frequently mentioned both during the interviews and the focus-group session was Hall's model of communication. During the interviews, students used this model to explain different ways of communicating they experienced in and outside of the international classroom. The class observations revealed a positive overall classroom dynamics; however, a more problematic group-work dynamics was brought to light in the semi-structured interviews.

Due to the fact that the major part of our data consisted of student interviews, our findings can hardly shed any light on the students' actual level of intercultural competence or on the effectiveness of the training for that matter. The objective of this paper was to investigate the signs of intercultural awareness that students show after completing the course. When asked about their intercultural experiences in and outside the international classroom, all students mention at least a couple of elements from Deardorff's model of intercultural competence that they consider important for effective communication. Furthermore, students seem to be aware of the challenging nature of intercultural communication due to using English as the working language as well as to managing cultural differences. However, when it comes to understanding and solving conflicts occurring in project groups, students are more likely to see personal rather than cultural differences as the source of the problem. Finally, the more serious communication clashes and conflicts revealed by our data involved Asian and more specifically, Chinese students. Presumably due to the wider linguistic and cultural gap, these students may find it more difficult to adapt to the new learning environment; furthermore, their contribution to group work is rated less positively by their project peers.

With a view to helping students making the most of the learning opportunities in the international classroom, we recommend that study programmes integrate formal intercultural training in their curriculum as well as provide a solid tutoring and mentoring guidance to their students. With regard to training intercultural competence, every course should be designed with the students' needs in mind. The course material should be relevant, engaging and stimulate students to switch between listening, sharing, discussing, reflecting and experimenting. Furthermore, the material has to build on students' prior experience and knowledge and offer them new perspectives and ideas on how to interact effectively in the international classroom and across cultures. Finally, a successful intercultural course and an overall successful international classroom depend on interculturally competent staff. Therefore, teachers should receive adequate intercultural training, if necessary, in order to be able to help students manage group work processes and adapt to new, culturally diverse learning environments.

APPENDIX

Student names with corresponding ethnic background

Dutch:
Lieve

Samantha (Dutch - Indonesian)
John (Dutch - Antillian)
Halima (Dutch - Moroccan)
Aisha (Dutch - Moroccan)
Gianno (Dutch - Turkish)
Roberto (Dutch - Venezuelan)
Nanna (Dutch - Indonesian)

Indonesian:
Juna
Alfie

Chinese:
Cora
Mady
Jerry
Cindy

Finnish:
Maya

English:
Jordy

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REFLECTION

Central questions: How do students in an international classroom respond to TIC and what signs of intercultural competence awareness can be detected in students after having been thought the course?

Background

Up until 2014-15 the Commercial Economies (CE) programme had offered three specializations within the Marketing degree, one of which was International Marketing (IM). In the academic year 2013-14, the IM students were given the PREFLEX (Hernández-Sanchez & Walenkamp, 2012) course in preparation for their study abroad. During the course of the training, it was decided that as part of the internationalisation strategy of the department, the IM specialisation would be eliminated and all CE students would be required to gain a total of 30 'international' ects during the course of their study. Eighteen of these ects would be embedded within the curriculum, and the remaining 12 (or more) could be gained by way of electives with an international focus, study abroad, short international exchanges or an international internship. As part of the embedded courses, Intercultural Competence (IC) was introduced as a mandatory course for all first-year students. The first students to partake in the IC course were 2nd semester students from cohort 2014.

Experience

The IC course is based on the PREFLEX and TIC training, but further developed and adapted specifically to CE (Marketing and Economics) students in a multicultural Dutch classroom. These students have not necessarily chosen for an international focus and may or may not have any experience with an international classroom.

Based on our experience from the PREFLEX training, we realized beforehand that the WHY is very important to these students. They have to understand the significance of intercultural competence training, otherwise it is viewed as a soft skill that really doesn't have anything to do with their degree. Therefore, in addition to focusing on the demographic, technological, economic and interpersonal imperatives, we looked at the significance in terms of their specific future career prospects and professional development, nationally or internationally.

The goal was to help the students to understand their own culture first, before moving on to look at culture in general, intercultural competence, barriers to this competence and the different styles of communication, worldviews and cultural dimensions. Culture was discussed in its broadest sense, so not just nation culture, but also sub-cultures and the cultures of places seemingly typically Dutch, such as Westland and The Hague. There was a great deal of focus on identifying with more than just one culture and the impact of this, as it became quickly apparent to the students that many of their classmates come from extremely diverse backgrounds.

It was fascinating to see the response of these first groups of students to the course. We noticed that their focus remains on the visible aspects of the cultural iceberg; students often refer to cheese and 'boerenkool', even the ones with non-Dutch ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, it was important for students with culturally diverse backgrounds to clearly state that they are mainly just 'Dutch'. The use of the word 'just' before Dutch was also an interesting observation. When given the assignment to present their cultural background by way of a collage, the students were enthusiastic about talking about themselves and engaged in each other's stories. Participation during the lessons varied amongst the students and while the training was done in English, many students chose to partake in discussions or do their portfolio work in Dutch.

Student response

Reactions to the course were diverse and even group dependent. We noticed that the more culturally homogenous classes tended to be negative about the course's relevance, while the more ethnically and culturally diverse groups were open to the course and seemed to understand the value and relevance. Another interesting observation was that students who harboured narrow views with regard to other cultural or ethnic backgrounds were critical of the course and

the necessity of learning about intercultural competence. Language was also an issue for some students who mentioned that the fact that it was given in English made it difficult. Some students were also quite critical of the level of English of the Dutch trainers.

From the portfolios it was apparent that for many students this course was an eye-opener. In their words, 'they had never thought about culture before.' Students referenced Hall's model of high- versus low-context communication to talk about their own communication style, and some discussed their family and cultural background with references to cultural dimensions. There was an obvious new awareness about what it means to be interculturally competent for a number of the students.

In general, our experience has been positive and while we are looking to make further adjustments to the course based on our experience during the first year, I would recommend this type of training for all first year students regardless of the discipline or programme focus.

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