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Student attitudes and intercultural communication studies

One works against their prejudices and judgmental attitudes in teaching intercultural communication to students, in preparing them for dialogue with strangers in professional settings. Cases of young adults with little or no experience of life away from home, much less of contact with foreign people and cultures, are even more problematic. This paper presents an evaluation of the author's own research survey of student attitudes towards intercultural studies, study abroad and contact with 'otherness'. This presentation culminates in a discussion of how the gathered data impacts the design and teaching of intercultural communication courses, especially of discussions of what defines a culture and how one should evaluate cultural difference.

Globalization and its effects on the workplace

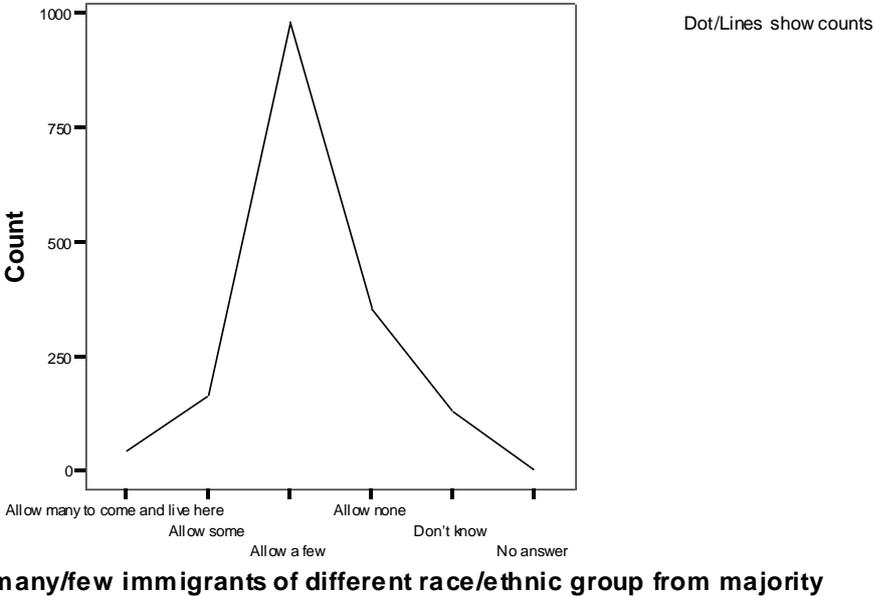
As economic integration and advances in transportation and telecommunication have broken down geographical isolation, the world has become increasingly global and mobile. The phenomenon of globalization is indeed only made possible by the advent of new technologies. As one example, communication has become intensified via electronic media, which facilitates international trade contacts and international projects at a faster pace than previously achievable. When companies expand their operations abroad, they are forced to balance between prospects of growth and the risk associated with operating in unfamiliar markets. Successful companies are those with employees who see and utilize cultural diversity as an opportunity, as something that can be learned, managed, and made use of, and who are willing to develop their *intercultural competence* as part of their social and communication competences. In my understanding, the components of *intercultural competence* include cognition (knowledge), affect (attitudes and emotions), behavior and skills.

In increasingly more European companies, the official working language is what is often termed *International Business English*, and sometimes even called *EuroEnglish* or *Global English*. Holden (2002: 222; 228-229; 317) suggests the term "interactive translation" to describe that work in which members of multicultural teams negotiate common meanings and understandings. He further notes that interactive translation requires "participative competence". The latter term denotes a willingness to discuss problems in a productive way, not only in one's native language, but in foreign languages, as well. Members of multicultural teams often have a varying knowledge of English and use different kinds of accents. Therefore, all the partners in a multicultural conversation require well-grounded intercultural competence.

Especially from, but also to, Hungary, workforce mobility is on the rise. There are thousands of Hungarian expatriate workers active abroad, and not only in menial labor types of employment, but also working as technical and medical experts, in business management, and in finance. Still many Hungarians venture abroad without the requisite intercultural competencies and language skills needed to integrate well into anything more than poorly paid jobs. There are also thousands of immigrants who have moved to Hungary, both from other European Union countries and from the east, e.g. China. Yet, it is improbable that a Hungarian, especially if working outside of Budapest, has a foreign co-worker on any one

working day. In either case, Hungarians largely remain unprepared to face the globalization challenges put on companies and workers here, or on Hungarians doing business or working abroad. Attitudes towards immigration also are incoherent. (See Fig. 1 below) Moreover, although there is evidence that today's employees need intercultural competence in their jobs, the term cannot be found in domestic job recruiting advertisements. It seems that employers are not familiar with the term. Employers usually refer to knowledge of one or more foreign languages when requiring behavior and skills important in international and multicultural working life. Often, when any reference is made to communication or foreign language skill requirements, want-ads use expressions such as communication skills, interpersonal skills, presentation skills, negotiation skills, the ability to work on international projects, and willingness to travel abroad.

Figure 1: Hungarian Attitudes towards Immigration



Source: Graph own source using data from SSPS survey of 1,000 Hungarian citizens.

Increased mobility, both real and virtual, has intensified Hungarians' need for successful cultural adaptation and fluent and efficient communication. When compared with many other cultures, Hungarians' communication style contains several differences. These differences include a high tolerance for remaining the passive participant in conversations with foreigners and avoidance-based politeness. Depending on the context, the Hungarians' communication style can be a strength or weakness. On international assignments, the lack of social and communication skills at home and in the workplace seems to be the main reason for any eventual failures.

Globalization and the student

Worldwide, students engaged in a wide variety of studies are supposed to be preparing themselves to enter a globalized business market. Their abilities to engage and, more importantly, to excel in the careers they will build in this market largely depend on their communicative competencies. Increasingly, these competencies will require enhancement through the development in the student of intercultural competencies. However, in order to become receptive to the knowledge intercultural learning may provide them, students must develop what is termed *intercultural sensitivity*, which is a prerequisite for developing *intercultural competence*. Various definitions for intercultural sensitivity are found in the literature. Bhawak and Brislin (1992) argue that this aspect of one's behavior involves "sensitivity to the importance of cultural differences and to the points of view of people in other cultures" (414). Bennett (1993) describes intercultural sensitivity in terms of a process, in which "the construction of reality [is] increasingly capable of accommodating cultural difference that constitutes development" (24). Bennett sees the development of intercultural sensitivity as one which presupposes direction; yet, any such development also presupposes that any such advancement is desirable in the individual.

In other words, the growth of such sensitivity to others would necessarily imply a positive attitude towards 'Otherness', towards 'difference', and through one's experiences with what is different than the Self, one would evolve towards that acceptance of others that can only come through approval. The process of developing understanding, of constructing new attitudes to what is strange, and to open the self to the experience of difference may lead to what I would term a psychological ability of the individual to deal with cultural differences.

However, this process must begin before exposure to difference occurs. Hammer, Bennett and Wiseman (2003) correctly pointed out that intercultural sensitivity refers to the "ability to discriminate and experience relevant cultural differences," in order for the individual to be able to "think and act in interculturally appropriate ways". (422) The latter half of the statement, which evokes an ability to act, refers to that ability to internally, almost 'naturally' respond to cultural contexts originally unfamiliar to one. Beyond one's competence in recognizing what is right or wrong in another culture, this form of competence points to the emergence of adapted behavior that the cultured individual experiences as being something natural to the self, which has become a part of what defines the self, and is no longer foreign. Such competence goes beyond understanding of how one is expected to act, and moves to the level of at least partially shared identity with the other culture, and, in the best cases, recognition by those born into the other culture that the outsider has somehow come to share in or belong in some way to theirs.

The introduction of students either relatively inexperienced or hitherto unexposed to intercultural situations to the notion of culture poses several problems in the intercultural classroom, as the foundations for this kind of learning are often lacking. A concept of the self, which an adult might possess, is usually still undeveloped, as the student has not yet left the mental stages associated with adolescence. Furthermore, the average student's ideas about what constitutes culture are also often ambiguous. It is important to note here that most people's understanding of culture lies deep in the subconscious, and normally rises to the level of consciousness once one comes into contact with that otherness only someone from a foreign culture can provide.

This stimulation may also be provided by media, such as literature, music or a news broadcast from a foreign news agency. However, in today's visual world, unless one is particularly drawn to a specific A/V stimulus, the feeling of having encountered something one perceives as foreign may too quickly dissipate to have any true impact on one's thinking about anything culturally different. When developing intercultural competence, early challenges and diversified experiences are of major importance. The *knowledge management perspective* presents culture, not as a source of difference and antagonism, but as a form of organizational, company-specific knowledge. This knowledge can be converted into *tacit knowledge*, which both adds value to company activities and is difficult for rivals to copy. (Holden 2002: 71; 75-76) Developing intercultural competence is a slow, gradual *transformative* learning process (Taylor 1994) consisting of foreign language studies, intercultural training, and hands-on experiences of other cultures and their people. Even if nothing can entirely replace face-to-face tuition and learning, information technology should also be made use of when providing training.

The Cultural Assimilator

A *Culture Assimilator* (Cushner & Brislin 1996) is a programmed learning package consisting of critical incidents. *Critical incidents* are short descriptions of situations where there is a problem of cultural adaptation, or where there is a problem arising from cultural differences between the interacting parties. In a Culture Assimilator, the incidents are equipped with alternative explanations and feedback. Learners are expected to choose the "best" explanation considering the context. The idea of implementing a Culture Assimilator with computer technology was introduced as early as in the 1960s (Triandis 1995: 183-184; Cushner & Landis 1996: 198). Of all the approaches developed in intercultural training, the Culture Assimilator method has received the most intense scrutiny and analysis. According to Albert (1995: 157-158; 164-165), the method

- is research-based (both the development of the instrument and the evaluation of its effectiveness)
- has its theoretical foundation on attribution theory, and
- uses psychological principles to increase learning, e.g. trainee involvement, continuous feedback, and self-paced learning.

The Culture Assimilator method is often classified as a *cognitive* technique, because it focuses on the learner's acquisition of knowledge. Albert (ibid), however, argues that the process by which the information is acquired by the learner is in a sense *experiential* (Kolb 1984): Information is acquired through a process of trial-and-error, which simulates the experience of one's entering a new culture, but without the risks of failure and embarrassment hazarded in real life. Albert continues that because the materials in Culture Assimilators also cover the *affect*, i.e. attitudes and emotions, as well as *behaviors* and *skills* of the people involved, the cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of intercultural competence are brought together in the Culture Assimilator method - both in the content of what is learned and the process of learning. This method also employs the *behavioral techniques* of feedback and reinforcement. Not only Albert, but also Wight (1995: 130-134), Bennett (1995: 149), Baxter, Ramsey (1996: 211-212), Cushner, and Landis (1996: 185), write that all the various components of intercultural competence are somehow involved in the use of this method.

Albert (1995: 157-158) argues that the Culture Assimilator method exposes learners to a wide variety of situations in the target culture(s), focuses on differences in perceptions and

interpretations in behaviors, simulates important aspects of the experience of entering a new culture, e.g. ambiguity and uncertainty, centers on key cultural differences between learners' own culture and the target culture, and fosters learners' active involvement.

Cushner and Brislin (1996: 48-51; see also Blake et al. 1996: 169) argue that the Culture Assimilator method has proven to have positive impacts as to the cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of learners' intercultural competence. They continue that the Culture Assimilator is "of considerable use" in preparing individuals such as exchange students and various professionals for interaction in culturally diverse contexts.

Referring to the secondary literature (e.g. Albert 1995: 165; Cushner & Brislin 1996: 14; 20; 25; 51; Cushner & Landis 1996: 188; 191-194), the *Culture Assimilator* is supposed to

- develop complex thinking and the ability to make isomorphic attributions, i.e. similar meanings based on perceptions
- impart knowledge of the subjective culture of the target group
- improve knowledge and application of concepts relevant to intercultural communication
- develop the ability to analyze and solve intercultural problems
- reduce ethnocentrism
- help to develop more accurate expectations in intercultural interactions
- decrease the use of negative stereotypes
- increase intercultural sensitivity to cultural diversity
- help to understand host nationals as judged by the hosts themselves
- help to interact more effectively with people from the target culture
- increase enjoyment in interaction with host nationals
- enhance intercultural adjustment
- increase tolerance for everyday stress
- improve task performance on international assignments, and
- decrease the rate of premature returns from international assignments

Triandis (1995: 184) found that when learners are motivated, the Culture Assimilator method improves their sense of well-being and effectiveness (cf. competence) in the other culture. Albert (1995: 165) refers to "a few minor inconsistencies" and the fact that all of the studies have not documented behavioral changes. Cushner and Landis (1996: 193; 195) state that there is "ample evidence" that changes are produced in learners, but the extent of those changes is still questionable. According to Kealey and Protheroe (1996: 152), the method is cognitive, but aims at some degree of interpersonal skills development. Nevertheless, the factor of one's own culture is determinate.

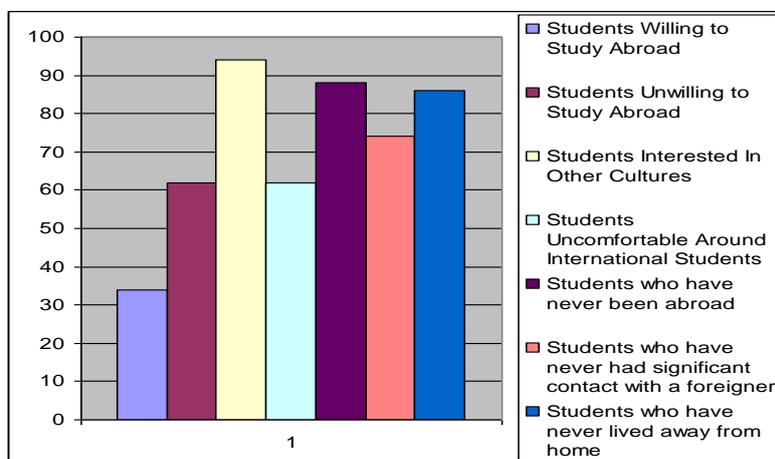
Culture is, by definition, complex; an abstract entity denoting a specific combination of countless manmade, collective, shared objects and artifacts, patterns of behavior, organization, values and concepts, or even language, together which form a given culture when used commonly by a group of individuals. This unique combination is open to interpretation by members of a different culture and varies across cultures, depending on the degree of acceptance or rejection the adjudicator group uses to ascribe meaning or lack of meaning to it. In teaching intercultural communication to students, one works against their prejudices, which often arise from a lack of information, to bring the students from ignorance to knowledge, as well as from ineptitude to competence, to prepare them to dialogue with strangers. (See Kim 1977)

The aim of teaching students intercultural thinking is not only to ready them for modern life, but to develop in them what Wichert (n.d.) terms the "interethnic", i.e. that ability to perform on an international and intercultural level in such a way, as to be competent in interaction with individuals from other countries in communicating. I would add an emphasis to developing professional competencies for interacting with individuals from other countries than one's own, while using a third language as a communication medium as, in this way, neither interlocutor finds himself at a linguistic disadvantage. Both participants in such a dialogue must work to build a constructive platform for dialogue which is not based on host cultural dominance or guest cultural submissiveness, but rather on adaptive contextual evaluation. (Compare Bennett 1993: 489) In other words, at the most micro of levels, a new kind of community is created, one that begins with individuals, and has the potential to spread through the organizations the initial two individuals in dialogue represent, and beyond.

The reality of the problems our students have in adjusting to an intercultural world is best viewed through the students' own statements. Since 2001, I have surveyed 94 (Table 1) and 127 (Table 2) Hungarian students who participated in my Intercultural Communication and American Culture and Civilization classes about their attitudes toward various intercultural situations and, most importantly, what they see as the basis for successful, i.e. mutually beneficial dialogue, with others from different cultures. From Table 1 below, one sees that my students' general attitudes towards foreignness/otherness were not negative whenever the students discussed learning about the members of another society living in their own countries.

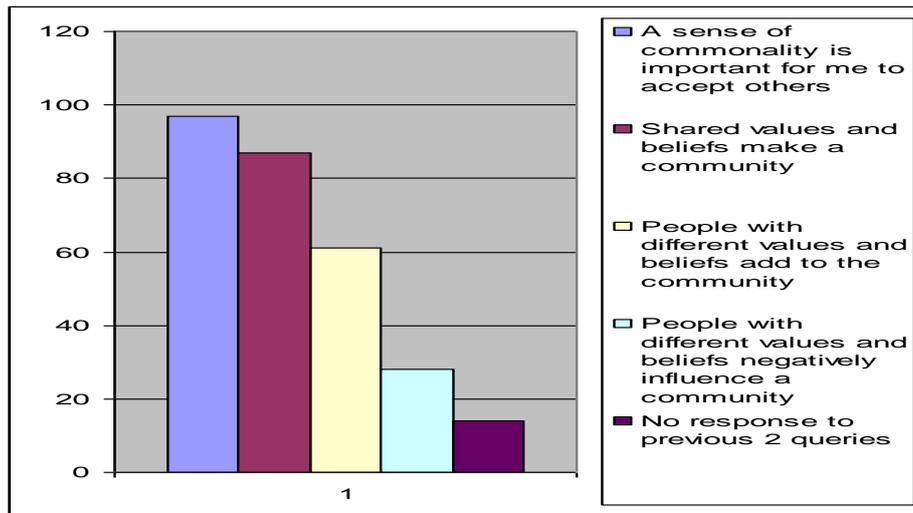
However, the students' attitudes changed when we discussed their desire to travel abroad for minimally one semester, for study purposes. While practically all of my students expressed an interest for learning about other cultures, the overall majority felt uncomfortable with actually having to travel abroad to live in another culture, even in one they had studied. Moreover, a slight majority of my students, even in intercultural communication classes, felt uncomfortable sitting in classes with international students, even though they could not express why this was the case. Significant is the fact that the overwhelming majority of my students have neither ever lived away from their parents, nor been abroad. The majority of students had also never experienced any significant intercultural encounter before entering university. By this, I mean such activities as a longer conversation at a social event, hosting a foreign guest in one's home, serving as a tour guide for foreign visitors.

Table 1. Students' Attitudes towards Intercultural Experiences



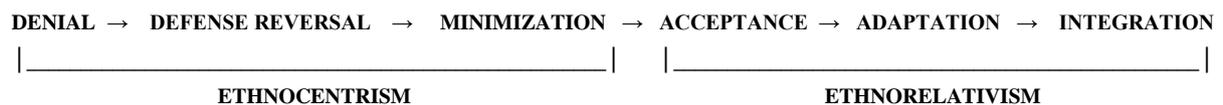
I attempted to get my students to reveal the reasons behind their responses, and discovered that they had at least one criterion for inclusion or exclusion of otherness in their lives, and this was a sense of having something in common with others, based on attitudes, such as values and beliefs. (Table 2) In other words, most of the students required a sense of their intercultural partner's belonging to their community, in order that they may open themselves, i.e. become receptive to their foreign communication partner. The problem with community is that all communities have serious defect: they tend to exclude. Almost one-third of the respondents either gave no response as to how they would evaluate the nature of the impact of difference on their community, or claimed that the impact of difference was negative.

Table 2. Students' Bases for Inclusiveness



There are several models employed in intercultural studies to study how one reacts, and even adapts to, difference. Bennett (1993) developed the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), shown below, in order to explain how people construe cultural difference:

DEVELOPMENTAL MODEL OF INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY

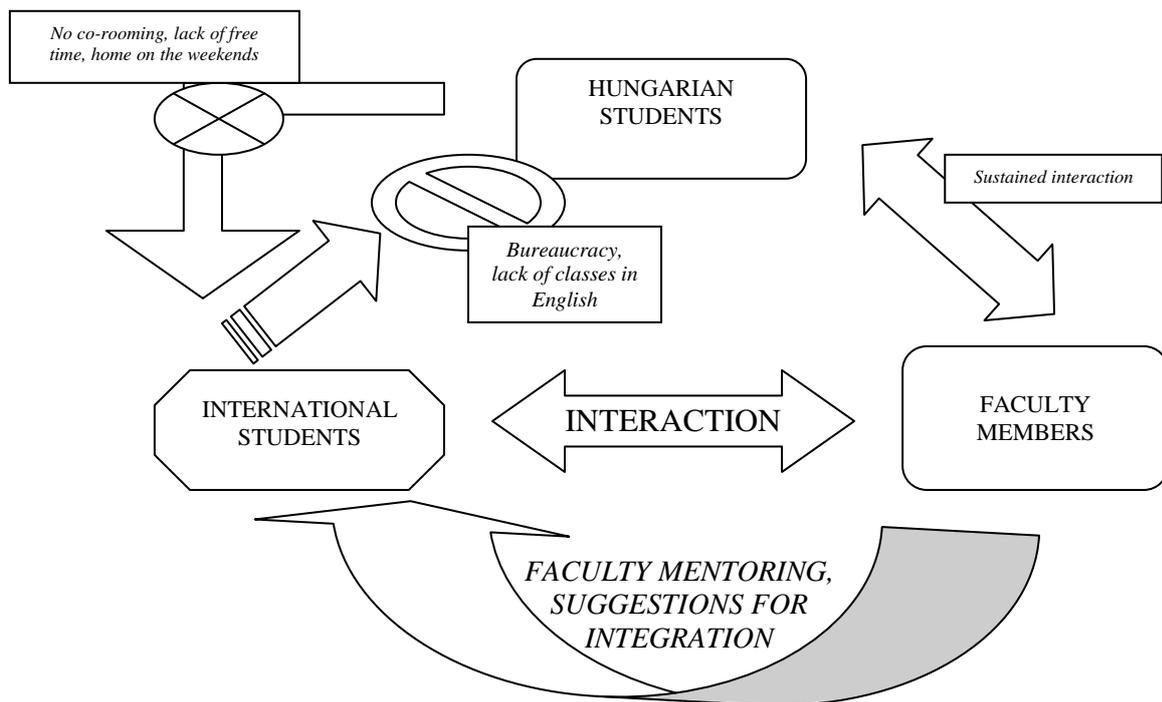


Adapted from Hammer et al. (2003, 424)

Bennett's model is appropriate to categorizing an individual's development of intercultural sensitivity, if the individual in question proves competent enough to adapt in a way that is self-expanding. This individual's behavioral modes and values, and especially how he evaluates these to those of the other, should, according to Bennett's model, undergo metamorphosis over time towards becoming an intercultural person, with each new exposure to an intercultural event. I purposely avoid the term multicultural here, as this term is currently one that is controversial in socio-political debate. (See Casmir 1993) However, this model does not take into account those individuals, which include the predominance of my students, who have only experienced a monocultural socialization, and are thus, as Hammer argues, "unable to construe (and thus are unable to experience) the difference between their own perception of and that of people who are culturally different". (423) Donald & Rattansi (2000) have pointed to the high proportion of unfavorable attitudes to foreignness/otherness in those who encounter foreignness in intergroup situations, such as a classroom, for the first time. The main problem I identify lies in the individual student's sense of the 'self'. Young

adults are discovering their adult personas, which are only just emerging from the confusion of adolescence. Exposure to students from some cultures, in which an individual might emerge more quickly from this latter phase into adulthood, usually causes the domestic student raised in the more sheltered social structure of a monoculture to react negatively, either through resentment or a feeling of insuperiority. Especially when exposed to foreign students with more experience in intercultural situations, who exhibit more self-assured, mature and/or serious thinking, a number of our students withdraw from their international guest students. Although they share the same classes, their personal contact is almost non-existent, especially outside of classes, and *Fig. 2* below shows why:

Figure 2. Faculty-Student-International Student Interaction



Own source.

Although any researcher must admit to variance between groups, such as between classes of students, there generally exists in these subgroups a type of special intergroup communication, based on strong intergroup identity. The question is how to use tools, such as the *Cultural Assimilator*, described above, to integrate the foreign guest students into the subculture of the already existing Hungarian students group. There are four topics listed in one of the Cultural Assimilator projects, which contains a general description of the topic and a number of critical incidents. I would like to be using these in next semester's intercultural communication course, to try to improve the relations between domestic and foreign students. The main topics are as follows:

- 1) All Business Is Local: This topic emphasizes the need to know local habits and customs, and will allow the students to find commonalities in their daily student lives;
- 2) Interacting with People: This topic focuses on the importance of interpersonal skills, and will allow them to explore Otherness through humor and fact-finding;

3) Making Adjustments: This topic illustrates the cultural adaptation process and potential problems, and gives the students insight into each others' problems in integrating into the university community;

4) Tourist Experiences: This topic provides information on some common cultural collisions;

In the future, I will explore whether there are any measurable differences between students of agricultural/agribusiness and arts and sciences faculties on these topics. Yet, in general, the key to opening our students more to foreignness/otherness lies in helping them to build a sense of commonness, or community, through a succession of shared experiences. Related studies are available. Tajfel (1978) discusses the importance of social identity, and Gudykunst (1985) developed from this a model of intergroup communication that I feel applies to my Hungarian students. Gudykunst's model is applicable, because it defines the basis for interpersonal communication, especially as relates to anxiety and uncertainty in communicating with members of other groups, whom Gudykunst terms 'strangers'. Having recognized and understood why my students approach culture, foreignness/otherness and interculturality the way they do, I hope to be able better devise teaching strategies to prepare them to overcome their hesitation to dialogue with difference, and to enter the international job market. By using the Cultural Assimilator with my students, perhaps progress can be made in the training presently lacking in this area.

Irodalom

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