1. GSiK-Tag

6. Mai 2011

Workshop:

Breaking Barriers

… in Perception, Communication and English

Teilprojektbeteiligter:
Zentrum für Lehrerbildung und Bildungsforschung (ZfL)

Referentin:
Ingrid Ebert (Zweites Staatsexamen Anglistik und Geschichte)

Co-Trainerin:
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Introduction

The workshop was to introduce some aspects of the basic principles and dynamics of communication and perception in interpersonal and intercultural interaction. Due to the very limited amount of time we managed only to dip into a few important aspects of intercultural communication. The workshop covered the following areas:

1. It is impossible not to communicate
2. Competencies involved in constructive intercultural interaction
3. Language and intercultural communication
4. Nonverbal communication
5. Aspects that influence how we understand and interpret each other's behaviour

The aims of these areas were to
- experience and understand basic dynamics of intercultural and interpersonal interaction in groups
- formulate guidelines and core competencies for constructive intercultural interaction
- understand the ambiguity in verbal and nonverbal communication
- to discuss important aspects that influence how we understand and interpret each other's messages and behaviour

The outcome of participant-activities and discussions are taken down in blue and information given by the trainer in black. The summary includes the PPP slides as well as a few pictures of students' activities and flipchart summaries.

1. It is Impossible Not to Communicate

One of the most quoted communication principles is the Austrian-American psychologist Paul Watzlawick's axiom "**One Can Not *Not* Communicate**". According to Watzlawick all behaviour constitutes a kind of communication. "Behaviour has no opposite; one cannot *not* behave. If it is accepted that all behaviour in an interactional situation has message value, i. e., is communication, it follows that no matter how one may try, one cannot *not* communicate."[1] As soon as you are aware of each other there is some kind of communication going on. Whether you speak or stay silent, whether you gesticulate or remain motionless, you send out a message that will be interpreted in some way by others. Intentionally and unintentionally you transmit information to others with your voice or/and your body and behaviour.[2] This was made clear to the participants by the next exercise.

2. Competencies involved in constructive intercultural interaction

[ˈɪŋglɪʃ]

„One Cannot Not Communicate."
(Paul Watzlawick)

- How did you achieve your goal?
- Obstacles?
- Strategies to solve problems?
- Observations? (self and others)
- 3-5 guidelines for constructive human interaction across cultures

Exercise: Communication not allowed![3]

In the first exercise the workshop participants were asked not to communicate – not with their voice, not with gesture or any other body language. Without communicating they were asked to form different shapes and letter like the letters of GSiK (G – S – I – K) by positioning themselves as a group-image in the room.

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[1] Watzlawick, P., Beavin, J. H., & Jackson, D. D. (1967). *Pragmatics of human communication*. New York: W.W. Norton, p. 48.
[2] See Adler, AB, Proctor II, RF & Towne, N. (2005). *Looking out / looking in*, 11th edn. Belmont, California: Thompson Learning, p. 17.
[3] This is an improvisation theatre exercise.

After the exercise they were to reflect upon and discuss in subgroups the following questions and observations:

- Not being allowed to communicate, how did you achieve the goal?
- What difficulties or obstacles did arise?
- What strategies did you use to solve these problems?
- Which strategies did you observe in the behaviour of other group members?

On the basis of their conclusions they were to formulate about 3 – 5 concise guidelines for effective human interaction that they thought holds true across cultures:
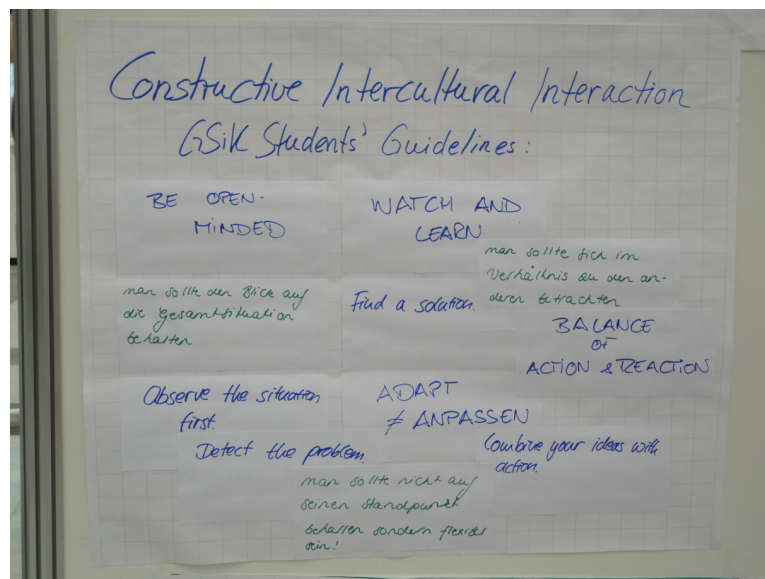
As core competencies for constructive intercultural interaction the participants considered the following:

Group A:

- *Individuals must be open-minded.*
- *In intercultural situations it is important to watch and learn.*
- *For successful group interaction it is important to keep a balance between action and reaction.*
- *You should 'adapt' - ohne sich 'anpassen' zu müssen! (Considering that the word 'anpassen' has a negative connotation in our German culture but the word 'adapt' has a neutral connotation in English).*

Group B:

- *Man sollte sich im Verhältnis zu den anderen betrachten.*
- *Man sollte den Blick auf die Gesamtsituation behalten.*
- *Man sollte nicht auf seinen Standpunkt beharren, sondern flexibel sein!*
- *Weshalb war die erfolgreiche Durchführung der Übung in diesem fall so einfach? (Teilnehmer hatten denselben kulturellen Hintergrund). Was erschwert die erfolgreiche Durchführung der Übung?*

Group C:

- *Observe the situation first.*
- *Detect any problems.*
- *Find a solution.*
- *Your idea (e. g. for a solution) should be followed by appropriate action.*

3. Language and intercultural communication

Exercise: Individual Associations

The participants had one minute to write down all their associations with the word 'ocean'. To see how many students had the same associations, one student with a long list of associations read her words out loud and the rest of the students raised their hands when they had the same association.

Outcome: The only association all students had in common was the word 'blue'. Even associations like 'water' and 'beach' were not shared by all group members. Other associations were even more divergent like 'fun, surfing, happy' versus 'danger, fear, deep'.

This exercise was to show how different the meaning attached to a word or concept can be even within one speech community and that each of us brings along their individual associations, perception and interpretation of a word.

Language is a structured system of symbols for sharing meaning. Objects, ideas, events or relationships are only represented by these symbols, but they have no meaning apart from the one we as a society or culture give them. According to Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure there is no natural connection between signifier and signified. Meaning is derived from the associations or connections each of us makes when we interpret these words.[4]

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[4] See A. Linke, M. Nussbaumer, P. R. Portmann (2004). *Studienbuch Linguistik*. Tübingen: Niemeyer Max Verlag GmbH, page 33. See also Roth, Gerhard (1997). *Das Gehirn und seine Wirklichkeit. Kognitive Neurobiologie und ihre philosophischen Konsequenzen*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, pp. 107 f.

Meaning depends on common agreement among a speech community and its historical and social context as well as its culture. Meaning is not established in social isolation.[5] So from a linguistic point of view adding the female ending to the word 'Student' to include female students in the German language is not necessary. Due to the word's historical context people in the 19th century would have, of course, associated only men with the word 'Studenten' but today the speech community agrees in its association of both men and women with the word 'Studenten'.

['ɪŋglɪʃ]

Communication Defined

Nobelpreiskläger   Achterwahn

Schweinespitzel

team mouse effect   credit tart

It's a process of constructing and sharing meaning, and of making sense of the world.

To make words meaningful and functional the speech community must agree to use these words with their corresponding meaning.[6] New words like 'Nobelpreiskläger', 'Achterwahn', 'Schweinespitzel', 'Zündrüssel', 'team-mouse effect' or 'credit tart' may be created and even given a definition. However, they won't enter the stream of messages unless a wider speech community decides to actually use these words. Only then they'd become functional and part of meaningful communication.

['ɪŋglɪʃ]

Language, Meaning & Culture

„Prostitutes Appeal to Pope!"

„Kids Make Nutritious Snacks."

„Nothing sucks like an Electrolux"

„Deformed Man Toilet"

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[5] See Rothwell, J. Dan (2010). *In Mixed Company. Communicating in small groups and teams*. Boston: Wadsworth, p. 12.
[6] See Rothwell, J. Dan (2010). p. 12.

Words can be ambiguous and have double or multiple common meanings even within one speech community. Shared meaning does not prevent misunderstandings. This is illustrated by newspaper headlines like "Prostitutes Appeal to Pope" and "Kids make Nutritious Snacks".[7]

Culture complicates verbal misunderstanding and makes it more likely. The slogan "Nothing sucks like an Electrolux" by the Scandinavian manufacturer of vacuum cleaners was quickly pulled in the United States once the misunderstanding was clear. During the 2008 Olympics in China an American was hired to correct poor translations like "Deformed Man Toilet". **Our assumption that we all share the same meaning for words paves the way for misunderstanding.**

Not only the ambiguity of words and sentence structures poses a challenge to interpersonal and intercultural communication, but also different communication styles. Asian cultures value silence, discourage the expression of thoughts and feelings and phrase their messages in a face-saving indirect way. Westerners, in contrast, may interpret silence as lack of interest, unwillingness to communicate, hostility or shyness and consider indirect communication as deceptive or dishonest. Due to their individualistic social context they are conditioned to speak their mind in a more direct way.[8] This communication style is by Asian standards often considered as insincere and showing off. Both cultures, however, "are behaving in ways they believe are proper, yet each views the other with disapproval and mistrust. Only when they recognize the different standard of behaviour can they adapt to one another, or at least understand and respect their differences."[9]

Exercise: Film clip 'Tea With Mussolini'

The students watched a clip from the 1999 British-Italian semi-autobiographical film 'Tea with Mussolini' directed by Franco Zeffirelli, telling the story of young Italian boy Luca's upbringing by a circle of English and American women before and during World War II. [10] In this short scene[11] an Italian businessman dictates a letter to his British secretary. The British woman transforms and shortens the elaborate and 'flowery' language of the Italian business man into a more succinct and concise British version.

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[7] See Rothwell (2010), p. 12.
[8] See Adler, RB & Rodman, G (1997). *Understanding human communication.* 6th edn., Fort Worth: Holt, Reinhart and Winston Inc., p. 38f.
9 Adler, RB & Rodman, G (1997), p. 39.
[10] See Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tea_with_Mussolini
[11] Parsons, C. et al. (Producers), & Zeffirelli, F. (Director). (1999). *Tea with Mussolini.* [Motion picture]. United Kingdom and Italy: Universal Studios, 0:05:30 – 0:06:20.

The students w ere asked to get together in 'cultural' subgroups and w rite a version of the same letter to confirm the delivery of an order as worded in their ow n culture.

| Italian businessman:	Caro Signor Keagan, most respected and *famoso mercante di Manchester*.
British secretary:	Dear Sir
Italian businessman:	I am in *grande gratitudine* for the massive and *importante* bundle of silk w hich w ill bring *lacrime allegre* to the eyes of *molte belissime* Signore Florenine.
British secretary:	Thank you for the consignment of fabric. It is up to your usual standard.
Italian businessman:	Please accept, Signore, my most humble compliments and *sincerissimi* good w ishes.
British secretary:	Yours sincerely, …
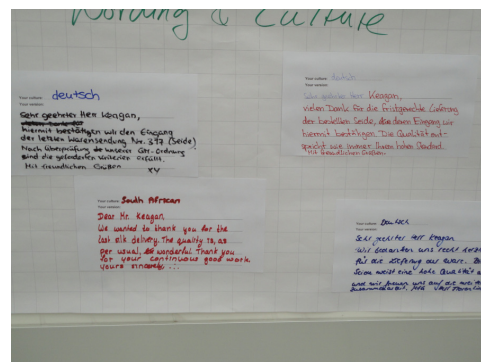
Culture: deutsch

Sehr geehrter Herr Keagan,

hiermit bestätigen wir den Eingang der letzten Warensendung Nr. 317 (Seide). Nach Überprüfung unserer QM-Ordnung sind die geforderten Kriterien erfüllt.

Mit freundlichen Grüßen
XY

Culture: South African

Dear Mr Keagan

We wanted to thank you fort he last silk delivery. The quality is, as per usual, wonderful. Thank you for your continuous good work.

Yours sincerely
…

Culture: deutsch

Sehr geehrter Herr Keagan,

vielen Dank für die fristgerechte Lieferung der bestellten Seide, deren Eingang wir hiermit bestätigen. Die Qualität entspricht wie immer Ihrem hohen Standard.

Mit freundlichen Grüßen
…

Culture: deutsch

Sehr geehrter Herr Keagan

Wir bedanken uns recht herzlich für die Lieferung der Ware. Die Seide weist eine hohe Qualität auf und wir freuen uns auf die weitere Zusammenarbeit.

Mit freundlichen Grüßen
Herr Florentine

[ˈɪŋglɪʃ]

Language, Meaning & Culture

The week ahead of us …

The worst behind us …

Shànyuè (up.month) = last month

Xiàyuè (down.month) = next month

„The Metaphor TIME AS SPACE across Languages"[12]: Although there is no external visual stimuli for us to see, describe and feel ‚time', there is empirical evidence that humans perceive and feel ‚time' as an internal subjective experience (time passing quickly or slowly).To speak about time we use spatio-physical metaphors.
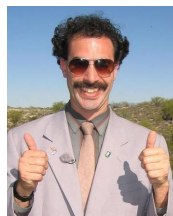
When Western cultures speak about time they visualize it as a front-back orientation due to our spatial experience of motion toward the front (not vertical = top-down or lateral from left to right). This is reflected in phrases like 'The week **ahead of** us…' or 'The worst **behind** us …'. We don't visualize a month approaching from above.

Chinese people commonly conceptualize time vertically. Earlier times viewed as ‚up' or coming from above and later times as ‚down'. This is reflected in words like 'Shànyuè' (up.month) = last month and 'Xiàyuè' (down.month) = next month. In the Chinese river-model of time it is seen as flowing. This may have been reinforced by the cultural importance of the Yangtze River in Chinese culture.[13]

4. Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication consists of messages by non-linguistic means or without using words. They include

- facial expression,
- eye behaviour,
- personal appearance,
- tone of voice,
- gesture,
- body posture,
- touch,

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[12] Radden, Günter (2003). The Metaphor TIME AS SPACE across Languages. In Baumgarten, Nicole/Böttger, Claudia/Motz, Markus/Probst,Julia (eds.), Übersetzen, Interkulturelle Kommunikation, Spracherwerb und Sprachvermittlung – das Leben mit mehreren Sprachen. Festschrift für Juliane House zum 60. Geburtstag. *Zeitschrift für Interkulturellen Fremdsprachenunterricht* [Online], 8(2/3), 226-239, http://www.ualberta.ca/~german/ejournal/Radden.pdf.
[13] See Radden, Günter (2003), p. 228.

- use of space and time,
- movement,
- clothing,
- and physical environment.

Whereas verbal messages have clear beginnings and endings, nonverbal communication is pervasive, continuous and can't be stopped. Nonverbal messages are always available as a source of information about others. They mostly suggest messages about attitudes and feelings. While many behaviours are universal, in terms of their use and meaning they vary from culture to another. They are more ambiguous than verbal messages and therefore more difficult to identify and interpret accurately.[14] The meaning of some gestures couldn't be more divergent in different cultures. 'Thumbs up', for example, has a positive connotation in most Western and other cultures meaning 'well done' or 'great'. In some Middle Eastern countries, however, it "traditionally translates as the foulest of gesticular insults."[15]

Exercise: Body language and facial expression - 'Rotating Star'

The participants were asked to get together in pair facing each other. The setting was that of a 'rotating star' with an inner circle of people facing out and the outer circle facing one person in the inner circle. This setting makes changing partners easy and smooth.

Each participant in the inner circle was asked to make a small concise gesture and freeze it. The outer circle participants were to mirror / copy this gesture, instantly interpret it and on the basis of their interpretation modify / carry on with this gesture by one sequence. The inner circle was to mirror the modification and from there interpret and carry on with the gesture and so forth. After a short nonverbal interaction the outer circle was asked to rotate. The same procedure was followed with different partners and after another round with facial expressions.

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[14] See Adler, R. Rosenfeld, L. & Towne, N. (1998). *Interplay: the process of interpersonal communication,* Florida: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, pp. 172 – 205.
[15] Wikipedia, Thumbs signal, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thumbs_signal#The_gesture_internationally.

After the exercise the students discussed the following questions:

What dynamics of nonverbal interaction have you observed and experienced during this exercise? Discuss your findings in subgroups. How does body language and facial expression affect people's interaction?

Outcome: *The students realized and were startled by how often their gestures and facial expression were misinterpreted and their intention was not picked up on. Thus their nonverbal interaction/communication constantly changed its direction which the participants had to adapt or react to. It required great flexibility, spontaneity and creativity to keep the interaction flowing. With regard to their facial expressions they showed surprise about how differently to their intention they were sometimes mirrored. They that people are often unaware of what their facial expression looks like, how it is perceived by others and what message it sends out. They also felt it was difficult to deliberately create a facial expression and to mirror another person's facial expression rather than reacting to it.*

5. Aspects that influence how we understand and interpret each other's behaviour

Exercise: Film clip 'Father of the Bride'[16]

The participants watched another movie clip from the 1991 comedy *Father of the Bride*[17] starring Steve Martin and Diane Keaton. In this scene the young protagonist, played by Kimberly Williams-Paisley, and her parents, played by Steve Martin and Diane Keaton, are going to a wedding planner to discuss the wedding arrangements. The French wedding planner Frank has a very strong accent and very expressive communication style. George Banks, the father of the bride, doesn't understand a word of what Frank says and in an inner

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[16] For further information on content see Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Father_of_the_Bride_(1991_film).
[17] Baum, C., Rosenman, H. (Producers), & Shyer, Ch. (Director), (1991). Father of the Bride. [Motion picture], United States: Touchstone Pictures, 0:47:44 -

monologue asks himself "Right away I realized this was a mistake of gargantuan proportions. This guy was going to coordinate our wedding? How? With subtitles?"[18]

The students were to observe the interaction in this film clip and discuss in sub-groups as many reasons as possible why mother and daughter understand the French wedding perfectly well whereas Steve Martin doesn't. They were to draw conclusions on what influences how we understand and interpret each other's behaviour and message.

Students' findings:
- *It depends on our pre-experience. Has our ear already been exposed and tuned in with a French accent?*
- *Specific pre-knowledge plays a role. How much do we already know about weddings?*
- *Gender is important. Due to gender roles, picturing their wedding, acting it out, talking about it is part of every girl's childhood. That's why they are already familiar with the topic whereas men are not.*
- *Different interests and motivation play a role. Men are not as interested in the topic 'wedding' as women are.*
- *A positive attitude and open-mindedness towards conversation partner and topic is important. The two women have a positive and Steve Martin a negative attitude towards Frank.*
- *This leads to the importance of making an effort to understand. Do you want to understand?*
- *Another aspect is your disposition. In this example rationalism clashes with romanticism.*

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[18] Father of the Bride (1991), 0:49:37 – 0:49:47.

All these aspects can facilitate or cause a barrier to communication.
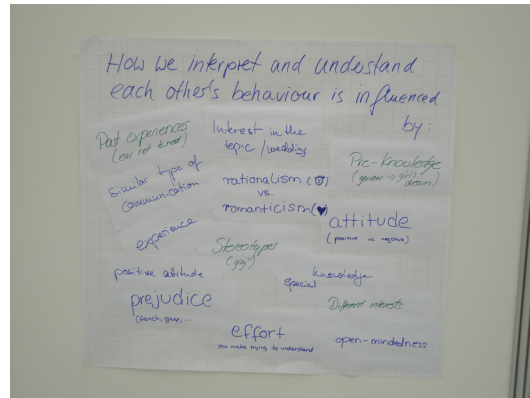
How we interpret and understand each other's behaviour is influenced by our different **'environments' or 'fields of experience':**[19]

*   Physical location / situation (meeting, wedding reception, football stadium, someone we know, a stranger, hierarchical aspects, time)
*   Personal experience and background (e.g. eventful life, inexperienced, rich, poor); and
*   Cultural background (e.g. Western – Asian culture).
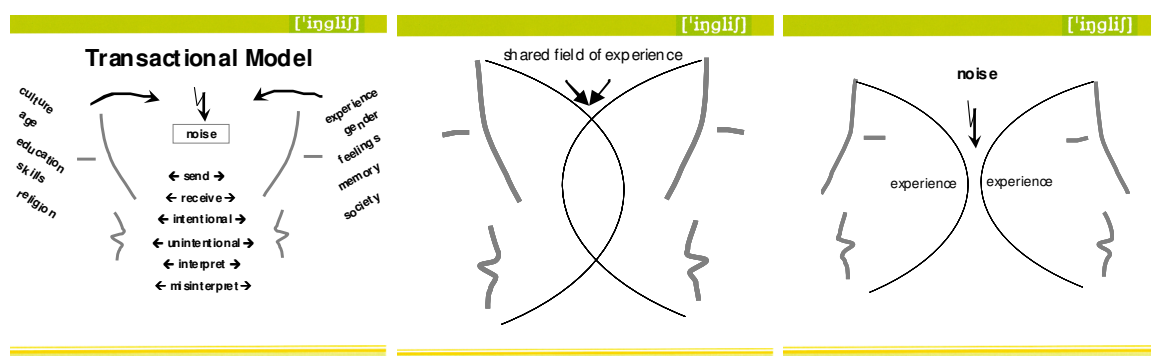
The smaller the shared 'environment', the more difficult communication becomes. Bosses who have trouble understanding the perspective of their employees will be less effective managers, and workers who do not identify with or understand the perspective of their boss or the company as a whole are likely to be less cooperative.

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[19] See Adler (2005), p.12. See also Shirley Tyler (2002). *Communication: a foundation course.* French Forests: Pearson Education Australia, pp. 20 f.

Messages are often distorted by *'noise'*:[20] 'Noise' is anything that interferes with the effective transmission of the originally intended meaning of messages. It includes:

- External / physical noise (loud music, smoke, crowded room, eye-catching distraction)
- Physiological noise (illness, tiredness, hearing loss, bad eyesight)
- Psychological noise (mood, emotion, personality, upbringing, expectation, biases ⇨ highly complex, difficult to manage)
- Semantic noise (different understanding of the meaning of a word):
  - Denotation (literal meaning)
  - Connotation (attached meaning – culturally, historically and personally shaped).

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[20] See Adler (2005), p. 13. See also Tyler (2002), p. 19 f.