Ingrid Devjak

Centre of Expertise Brede Welvaart & Nieuw Ondernemerschap, Avans University of Applied Sciences, Netherlands
i.devjak@avans.nl
ORCID ID: 0009-0009-1821-8757

Anna Sabidussi

International School of Business, HAN University of Applied Sciences, Netherlands
anna.sabidussi@han.nl
ORCID ID: 0009-0005-1355-2167

Irem Bezcioğlu-Göktolga

Centre of Expertise Brede Welvaart & Nieuw Ondernemerschap, Avans University of Applied Sciences, Netherlands
Department of Culture Studies, Tilburg University, the Netherlands
i.bezcioglu@tilburguniversity.edu
ORCID ID: 0000-0003-4179-9587

Reinier Smeets

Centre of Expertise Brede Welvaart & Nieuw Ondernemerschap, Avans University of Applied Sciences, Netherlands
reiniersmeets@heinenoord.nl
ORCID ID: 0009-0006-7214-9359

Intercultural Communication: Hampering and Facilitating Factors in International Business

ABSTRACT

Objective: This paper aims at uncovering the hampering and facilitating factors in intercultural communication that professionals encounter in their business relationships.

Methodology: The data collection process involved conducting individual interviews and two rounds of focus groups with professionals who shared their experiences in working with another culture. The transcripts were analyzed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) with the assistance of Atlas.ti 9.

Findings: The key challenges that emerged were differences in communication styles: too direct versus too indirect; misunderstandings and misconceptions when communicating in non-native languages; differences in business customs, such as separating business from private life versus blurred business and personal relationships; differences in decision-making and stereotyping.

Value Added: We offer a new perspective about existing models and theories of intercultural dimensions, highlighting the risks they entail when superficially generalized. Our paper contributes to professional practice by illustrating how language, differences in the communication style, business etiquette and stereotyping can prevent successful interactions. We show that business English may facilitate international communication but may easily become a source of misinterpretation.

Recommendations: Intercultural flexibility can play a fundamental role in contextualizing communication and providing true meaning to businesses exchanges. Adjusting language, focusing on building trustful relationships and creating alignment processes can all be instrumental for more effective and successful business communication. Future research with business professionals from diverse cultural backgrounds would enrich our understanding of intercultural business communication.

Key words: international business, intercultural communication, hampering factor, facilitating factor, business professional, cultural intelligence

Introduction

International business activities involve interactions between actors from different cultural backgrounds. These interactions can be considered the "essence of business"; they manifest in "dyadic business relationships" (Leszczyński et al., 2021, p. 725) and imply a communication exchange.

As international business interactions take place in an intercultural environment, they require participants to become familiar with their counterparts' cultural perspective in order to have effective communication. Problems in intercultural communication arise from differences in what is considered acceptable to say, how it is said and how what is said is interpreted (Francis, 1991; Ferri, 2018).

The literature has indeed discussed how cultural dimensions such as behaviors, attitudes, norms and values influence intercultural communication (Salacuse, 1999). The general assumption is that by understanding the other culture and adapting to their counterparts' perspectives, organizations can bridge cultural distances and facilitate communication (Francis, 1991).

A variety of models have been used to cluster common national cultural traits along key dimensions as illustrated in the work of Hofstede (1991), Trompenaars (1994) and Hall (1976). In these frameworks, the key cultural dimensions are defined at the national/country level. The underlying assumption is that intercultural communication is challenging particularly when countries exhibit large gaps among their respective cultural dimensions. This approach is challenging for two main reasons. First, it tends to overlook the business interactions between relatively similar countries. Second, it does not fully reflect the complex experience of business professionals as individuals. Although interactions occur between companies, organizations represent aggregated entities, whose members are individuals. Culture defines individuals (Jameson, 2007). In order to better understand the challenges and facilitating factors in intercultural business communication, it is necessary to deepen our understanding of the role of individuals in business interactions. In this context, country-level conclusions are not necessarily applicable to individuals in general and to business professionals in particular.

We therefore focus on international business professionals as a level of analysis. We selected business professionals from Ireland and the Netherlands. This approach offers the opportunity of studying intercultural communication from the specific perspective of business practice.

We organized a series of workshops with Irish and Dutch business professionals experienced in working with the other culture. Through focus groups and individual interviews, we collected experiences, insights and anecdotes from participants about business interactions, and elicited discussions on the difficulties encountered in their intercultural communication and the ways to overcome these. We adopted an exploratory approach in order to gather a clearer understanding of the underlying issue.

The paper uncovers the most relevant hampering and facilitating factors business professionals face when interacting with partners from another culture. Our results are valuable for both research and practice. For the research, our exploratory study identifies the key areas on which future studies can focus and shows that not all the dimensions usually cited in previous studies are relevant in the context of business interactions. For business practice, it creates awareness about the key challenges and identifies concrete solutions for improving the effectiveness of intercultural communication.

Conceptual Framework

Intercultural Business Communication

Business professionals are members of diverse cultural groups: their corporate culture, the industry culture, the general business culture, and their national culture (Varner, 2000). When two business professionals from two distinct cultures interact, they bring their own backgrounds with them.

Kurbakova et al. (2020) define intercultural business communication as an art that can be used to overcome intercultural shock and achieve mutual understanding with a foreign business partner. Social factors and the behavioral

standards of the communicators' cultures come into play within a complex context of differences in values, standards and thinking typical of different cultures.

In the past decades the prevailing approach to intercultural interactions has been that of cross-cultural comparisons between countries. Critics have argued that comparisons on national levels tend to essentialize culture and treat it as a static phenomenon (Nathan, 2015). On a practical level, the value dimensions frameworks do not seem to explain appropriately the differences in behavior and perspective that emerge during intercultural business interactions.

In fact, even in business interactions between professionals from countries that are culturally close and economically comparable, there are cultural challenges. Misunderstanding or misinterpreting cultural behavior can lead to missed business opportunities or even conflicts.

Expanding his research into organizational cultures, Hofstede (1991) discovered that the roles that values and practices play in cultures on a national level are different on the level of organizations. Where values explain the cultural differences on a national level, it is business practices that account for the cultural differences on an organizational level.

According to Hofstede (1991), the place of the socialization of the individual becomes relevant when considering culture from a three-levels perspective: national, professional and organizational. This changes in different periods of life. National values are learned in early childhood within the boundaries of the family and the neighborhood. Organizational cultures, on the other hand, are learned during socialization at work, as adults. Finally, the socialization at professional schools and universities in the period leading towards adulthood accounts for the differences in cultures observed among professions. The latter are equally influenced by both values and practices. Hofstede (1991) concluded that national culture in the sense of shared values, and organizational culture in the sense of shared experience of daily practices, are two different phenomena.

During intercultural business interactions, other dimensions become relevant to understanding the cultural differences. They concern concepts such as time, relations with others, rules, affection and the way of communicating. Different researchers have suggested different frameworks of dimensions to capture these aspects. Meyer (2014) proposes an eight-scale model which

represents key areas that managers must be aware of. It enables them to decode how culture influences international collaboration. The areas include communicating (low-context versus high), evaluating (direct versus indirect negative feedback) persuading (principles first versus applications-first), leading (egalitarian versus hierarchical), deciding (consensual versus top-down), trusting (task-based versus relationship-based), disagreeing (confrontational versus avoiding confrontation) and scheduling (linear versus flexible time). These dimensions represent a more appropriate framework for our research to explain the challenges encountered by our respondents.

Szkudlarek et al. (2020) advocate for shifting the focus to more process-oriented research which can capture the dynamic nature of communicative interactions. These are in fact different with each encounter, "presenting an interplay among individuals' background, characteristics, situational circumstances, and contextual cues" (Szkudlarek et al., 2020, p. 2). Fewer studies seem to have researched this interactional level where culturally diverse individuals meet and co-create meaning.

Hampering and Facilitating Factors in Business Interaction

The relevance of the business context in intercultural communication is clearly stated by Varner (2000). It interrelates with the intercultural and the communication aspects of business activities and reflects the dynamic nature of intercultural business communication. Intercultural business communication represents, therefore, a distinctive competence which is set apart from general intercultural skills as well as from international business.

Braslauskas (2020) lists the main obstacles to intercultural communication as follows: the inability to master anxiety and uncertainty when communicating with other cultures, the lack of intercultural communication competences, the inability to resolve conflicts arising in intercultural interaction, the lack of appropriate conflict resolution strategies and styles. What is more, there are our own hostile reactions to intercultural interactions to account for, such as a sense of superiority, ethnocentrism, cultural relativity, the premise of universality and stereotypes.

Different approaches have been suggested to tackle the obstacles arising from cultural differences in international communication. Gesteland (1997, in Braslauskas, 2020) proposes the negotiations perspective. His framework includes the following dimensions: a focus on business matters and interpersonal relationships, formality and informality, time and agenda orientation, and finally, expressiveness and reservation.

What is more, individuals vary in their degree of cultural abilities. Some individuals display behaviors that facilitate intercultural business interaction. Recent research suggests that one way of overcoming cultural barriers is tapping into the potential presented by multicultural employees with their abilities to operate within and between diverse cultures (Backman et al., 2020). They display behaviors such as facilitating, translating, integrating, mediating, and empathetic comforting that can be seen as key enablers of intercultural communication.

Other ways of dealing with obstacles in intercultural business communication include fostering intercultural competence and sensitivity which are encompassed in the concept of cultural intelligence. Earley and Ang (2003) define cultural intelligence as an individual's capability to function and manage effectively in culturally diverse settings. They include four facets in their conceptualization: behavioral, motivational, cognitive, and metacognitive cultural intelligence.

Culturally intelligent business professionals are more effective in adapting to new cultural business settings. They adjust their behavior to their business partners from another culture by creating rapport, listening attentively, being open and prepared to deal with different business practices, acquiring knowledge of others and their culture, showing interest in other ways of doing things, suspending judgement, and anticipating and monitoring the interactions.

Finally, there is consensus among scholars about the importance of language proficiency, and of the socio-linguistic awareness of the relation between language and meaning in a societal context (Deardorff, 2006). Learning what to say when and to whom enables relationship building by signaling a willingness to engage socially (Zaharna, 2009). Rasmussen and Siek (2015) suggest that learning ritualistic communication such as greetings and expressions are also

an important part of socio-linguistic awareness. When it comes to intercultural business encounters between native and non-native English speakers, additional challenges are to be expected. Although native speakers seem to be aware of the limitation of the language use of non-natives, they still face the problem of being accommodating to the non-natives (Sweeney & Hua, 2010).

There is a paucity of empirical studies describing intercultural business communication from the perspective of effective business interaction. One such text is Gao and Prime's (2010) research on American-Chinese business practices, which identifies the main obstacles to conducting business effectively in the multiplicity of regional cultures and subcultures, relationship or task orientations, time concept, business style difference and language use.

Methods

In this study we used qualitative research methods and explored how business professionals experience working together in an intercultural setting. Interviews and focus groups allowed us to obtain relevant and original insights and helped us focus on individual meaning in the complexity of relations in intercultural communication. In addition, as Szkudlarek and her colleagues (2020) suggest, using qualitative methods enhanced our understanding of intercultural communication in international business from a static comparison to context-rich processes as well as from an organizational or country comparison perspective to a more interpersonal perspective.

Sample

The target population consisted of Irish and Dutch business professionals living in the Netherlands or Ireland and working together. We used the purposive sampling method (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006) and aimed at approaching participants who were (1) Irish or Dutch, (2) lived in the Netherlands or in Ireland, (3) worked in business, (4) had experience of working with each other in a business

setting. We recruited participants through social media and by contacting businesses and organizations working with Irish and Dutch professionals.

Potential participants were asked to register online, providing personal information including their nationality, years of experience, industry and job title as well as their availability to join online sessions. A total of 26 business professionals responded to the call. Participants who did not meet the criteria were excluded. Finally, 19 participants took part in data collection. Three of these participants were interviewed individually. The remaining 16 participants took part in the focus groups. All participants were experienced in working in an intercultural setting in the Irish-Dutch context. The years of experience varied between 1 and 43 years, and most of them had experience of 14 years. Thirteen participants were Irish. Among them, 68% lived in the Netherlands and 32% resided in Ireland. Regarding gender, 14% were female, 61% were male, and the remaining participants did not indicate their gender. Among the Dutch participants, 50% lived in the Netherlands, and 67% of them were male.

Data Collection

We organized data collection in several cycles which included three separate online events. Collecting online gave us the possibility to bring more participants together and to be more flexible in scheduling during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Data collection included individual interviews, and two rounds of focus groups between June and July 2021. A third online event took place in November 2021. This was a dissemination event where the main insights of the study were shared with the participants.

The first step consisted of intensive discussions among researchers and experts on relevant theories and studies, which led to refined planning of the individual interviews and focus groups. During the individual interviews, participants were asked about their background, and their intercultural experiences with the opposite group in a business setting, as well as stories about the obstacles they faced and facilitators they encountered. The first focus group focused on the challenges that participants experienced. The planning of the second focus group was based on the obstacles the participants had in

interactions with each other, and questions were addressed to gather information on how to facilitate overcoming those challenges among business professionals. The interaction was prompted by visuals on cultural differences (Liu, 2010). The visuals were about individual and collectivistic cultures, sharing opinions and directness in communication.

Each focus group session started with a general introduction. Afterwards, participants were divided into smaller break-out rooms with 3 or 4 other participants from the same nationality. Each break-out room was moderated by the researchers, and each session was concluded in the main call. The first focus group session consisted of 4 break-out rooms (3 rooms for the Irish and 1 room for the Dutch), and the second one consisted of 3 break-out rooms (2 rooms for the Irish and 1 room for the Dutch). Interviews were conducted in English with the Irish and in Dutch with the Dutch participants. Allowing participants to talk in their mother tongue was intended to allow unfiltered, non-biased communication.

All communication during the data collection was recorded and transcribed. After the first focus group, within a month, the transcripts were studied carefully by the researchers. Challenges that participants indicated were identified individually and aligned in a working session. The most frequently shared challenges were used to design the content of the second focus group.

Analysis

We obtained a total of 530 minutes or 8.8 hours of data. Both interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis was conducted in Atlas.ti 9, using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The steps of Thematic Analysis (TA) were followed in data analysis. It gave us the opportunity to identify, organize, describe, interpret and contextualize data in a systematic and unique way. Braun and Clarke (2012) indicate that accessibility and flexibility are the two main advantages of TA. Regarding flexibility, we were able to use deductive and inductive coding and analysis. Hampering factors and facilitators were two codes we defined in the initial phase of the analysis. The remaining analysis was inductive where the codes and themes were identified based on the data.

The initial step was to become familiar with the data through transcribing, reading and re-reading transcriptions, and discussions within the research team. In addition, moderators involved in a specific focus group gave an overview of the data collection process and elaborated on the transcripts. Where necessary, they shared their personal notes with each other. Afterwards, a separate code was given to each meaningful unit in an interview. Each utterance was read carefully, and every single word that revealed data about cultural challenges and addressing them was identified. Three researchers collaborated on the coding of the interviews. A total of 366 codes were identified in the initial coding. In order to ensure the quality of the codes, several meetings were held and alignment was ensured. The next step allowed the researcher to identify the patterns and themes. Eight themes were identified in the analysis: Background, Netherlands, Cultural Challenges, Overcoming Challenges, Dutch Culture, Irish Culture, Intercultural Differences and Language. Codes were merged into themes depending on the identified patterns and were reviewed independently by the researchers to ensure accurate representations of the data. After this, the most frequent and relevant themes were selected under the 2 categories: hampering and facilitating factors.

In order to ensure the anonymity of the participants, we labeled each participant with an identifier (Irish or Dutch) and a number (e.g., Irish 1, Dutch 2). Quotations from the Irish participants were documented as they were produced during the interviews. Quotations uttered by the Dutch participants were translated into English.

Results

Hampering Factors

The interviews revealed several recurring obstacles and facilitators related to intercultural business encounters. This section documents the findings of our research, starting with the obstacles and proceeding with how participants addressed them.

Obstacles that Dutch and Irish business professionals face in interactions with each other revolved mostly around language, communication style differences, differences in business etiquette and approaching each other with stereotypes in mind. It is worth noticing that the above-mentioned cultural challenges may be simultaneously present and intertwined. It is therefore necessary to be able to recognize and identify them.

Language

Language emerged as the most dominant theme in all interviews with the Irish participants, both as an obstacle and a facilitator. As explained in the facilitators section, language was a facilitator for both the Dutch and the Irish participants; however, while almost all Irish participants saw language as one of the obstacles, none of the Dutch participants mentioned it.

The language of communication was English in business encounters. The fact that English is a native language to the Irish but a non-native language to the Dutch resulted in misunderstandings and misconceptions. The Irish tended to become so absorbed in the fact that they communicated in their native language that they forgot they were communicating with people whose native language is not English. They presumed they were understood easily, so they used colloquial language, sayings and impressions and complex structures. As one participant stated, *If that's done in a way that you would do to an all-native English audience, you can be guaranteed that half of the message will not be received* (Irish 13).

Furthermore, according to the Irish participants, the Dutch felt so confident in their English skills that they disregarded any possibility of misunderstandings and misconceptions. Namely, the Dutch tended to rely on communicating in English itself rather than communicating the actual message, and this led to a disruption in meaning. The same participant (Irish 13) continued:

> So, it's also part of the background and our thinking of this was, what we've seen, is that you can have an Irish person speaking English to a Dutch person also speaking English, and they may both be speaking the same language, but actually they mean different things.

All in all, the Irish participants criticized the fact that they overestimated the English skills of their Dutch partners and noted that speaking the same language did not always mean understanding the message.

Style Differences

Even among the participants who had lived in the country for a considerable amount of time, differences in the communication style were central to encountering obstacles. The Irish found Dutch communication too direct whereas the Dutch found Irish communication too indirect. This was neither new nor surprising to them, since both sides were aware of cultural differences between each other, but having an awareness of such differences did not prevent them from experiencing the effects of obstacles.

One Irish participant described Dutch directness as a:

> *massive challenge for us, between, let's say the finance division in Europe and the finance division on the head office* (Irish 10)*. Directness was also viewed as a sign of arrogance, as It is pretty hard to have somebody come and host them and then say, you know, your coffee is crap, oh I don't like this or it's hard to deal with, it is really hard to be hurting inside when you're pretending that you don't care* (Irish 5).

Apparently, not everybody was accustomed to conducting business in the direct way the Dutch were used to, so it was an explicit challenge for Irish partners.

On the other hand, from the Dutch side, it was a challenge to adjust their communication to the indirect communication style of the Irish:

> *I was at the customer service counter and had to speak to customers, Irish customers. At one point my Irish colleague came down and said to me if I wanted to be a little less direct in my answers to the Irish. So, I didn't have to say that the event was full, but I had to say, "I'm afraid I have to inform you that we have no more room on this event* (Dutch 4).

Business Etiquette

Similar to the previous two obstacles, both parties were aware of the fact that there are differences in business etiquette between Ireland and the Netherlands. They still found it difficult to understand how business was maintained.

First, talking business had a different meaning for the Dutch and the Irish. For example, the Irish started a meeting with non-business topics and regarded this as a part of doing business, which was inefficient for the Dutch:

> *We spent an hour on it and after 45 minutes it was still about football and who they all knew. I felt like I was going to write a story. I remember my boss said: he's not used to it yet, but that's how we do business in Ireland. And I thought it was something from the old days. But then I had it again in 2018. I introduced 2 friends of mine who I also knew professionally. To my amazement, that was another 50 minutes about who they knew, about rugby, how the team was doing… it went on and on* (Dutch 1)*.*

Second, the Dutch tended to separate business from their private life, which was surprising to the Irish. One of the Irish participants (Irish 2) gave the example below:

> *I was getting feedback from a (Dutch) manager. I've had a project that my part didn't go too well and was very Dutch-direct criticism. And I think I was maybe six months or a year there, so I wasn't quite into it. And my Irish brain was going: Oh my God, he's going to fire me, like literally. And then you know, my Irish brain was going: How can you say these things to me, I thought we had a good relationship, you know. And then afterwards, you know, it was finished, it was 12 o'clock, lunchtime, he said "Should we go for lunch?". And my Irish brain was thinking: You've just said all these things and now you want to go for lunch?*

Third, the decision-making process was different in both cultures, which puzzled both parties in business encounters. Irish participants stated that the decisions in Ireland were ultimately taken by the management, and co-workers obeyed them. On the other hand, each decision to be made in a company in the Netherlands was questioned by the Dutch, and every employee expected to have a say in it.

In short, differences in business customs, although implemented with positive intentions, resulted in misunderstandings and miscommunication in business.

Stereotyping

There are common patterns and threads each culture has. The obstacles above come from a lack of awareness or acceptance of such differences. However, it is also tricky to approach a culture with the stereotypes in mind. In the second round of the interviews, participants talked more about the fact that no culture was black and white, and they tended to forget this in business. Namely, not all Dutch communication was always direct, and not all Irish meetings started with a long non-business-related discussion. One participant (Dutch 2) criticized the generalization that the Irish were collectivistic whereas the Dutch were individualistic. Similarly, an Irish participant (Irish 1) agreed that they were stereotyping that Dutch people were direct in business. In addition, Irish participants who had lived in the Netherlands for at least a decade also found it difficult to decide which part they identified with more due to the fluidity of their experiences.

Facilitators

As indicated in the previous section, participants faced challenges in business due to differences in business communication. They also used several facilitators to overcome or even to prevent them. All these facilitators were about raising intercultural flexibility in business. Participants indicated that understanding

and appreciating cultural differences, and accepting that there were different ways of conducting successful business in intercultural encounters, helped them have a smooth business relationship with each other. Besides, all participants were willing to establish long-term business partnerships; therefore, they all wanted to gain knowledge of each other, including language and communication, cultural norms and values, and personal priorities. This section provides an overview of how these facilitators contribute to intercultural awareness.

Building Relationships

Relationships are the key to success. Participants expressed that when they got to know each other at a personal and cultural level, they started building trustful relationships. These trustful relationships helped them eliminate challenges and establish long-term business partnerships. A Dutch professional (Dutch 5) suggested *I think that chit-chat which the Irish tend to do because they create a bond of trust with is, a kind and a whole easy atmosphere, a very informal atmosphere and that has a really good function, too.* Participants agreed that socializing at a pub with the Irish partners increased the quality of communication and improved the quality of work. Such social activities resulted in more cooperation, which facilitated overcoming obstacles such as directness and indirectness in communication since both parties understood each other better.

Intercultural Flexibility

Strengthening relationships through interest in each other at a cultural or national level was also a very significant facilitator. A few of the international companies where the participants worked had already initiated an adjustment of their habits within departments for the needs and interests of the local culture they were located in. One Dutch professional (Dutch 2) confessed that they scheduled a longer kick-off meeting with their Irish partners than with some of their international partners. The reason was that they knew that the Irish would enjoy a casual conversation before they started a meeting, and indeed

the small talk they had beforehand actually provided them with essential information about business.

Similarly, the Irish participants agreed that although being too direct in communication was not favored in Irish culture, they accepted this and focused on the message behind this rather than the form of communication. One Irish professional (Irish 12) added that having international experience helped business professionals to be outside of their own culture and realize what they had always believed to be a normal behavior might not be normal in another culture. Success came when people gained sensitivity to such differences.

Language Sensitivity

English was a common language of business communication between the Irish and the Dutch, and language emerged as both an obstacle and a facilitator in this study. So as not to miss any nuances within the language, especially during communication between native and non-native speakers, language awareness was crucial. Irish participants focused on the necessity of always keeping in mind that they might be speaking with a colleague for whom English was a foreign language (Irish 9), *slowing down and realizing it is not the first language* (Irish 12) for the other side, *validating the message and saying the same thing in different ways and switching to Dutch if possible to show respect and empathy when possible* (Irish 13). The emphasis the participants made here was that speaking the same language facilitated communication, but in a conversation with a non-native speaker, validating that the message was conveyed as it was sent led to a deeper connection.

Adjusting Communication

Language awareness was important because business professionals communicated mostly through verbal or written language. However, there were other forms of communication, and people of different cultures tended to have a different interpretation of these forms. Participants shared a few strategies that help them understand the non-verbal messages of their business partners. One

of the Irish participants (Irish 1) suggested that in order for the directness of the Dutch not to cause misunderstandings and tension, she benefited from written facts, statistics and evidence. Another participant (Irish 3) benefitted from asking for confirmation even if the message indicated a 'yes' or a 'no', and then to make a mutual agreement. Similarly, a Dutch professional (Dutch 1) indicated a consensus on the business communication style and consistency in implementing it helped to achieve successful partnerships.

Overall, from Meyer's perspective (2014), the Dutch respondents naturally related to task-orientation which was opposed to the Irish propensity for relationship-orientation. In communication, the differences between low-context and high-context were visible. Similarly, regarding leading, the egalitarian and hierarchical differences in business resulted in challenges. When each partner was conscious of these differences, showed flexibility, built relationships and was able to adjust communication accordingly, these obstacles were overcome.

Discussion and Conclusions

The present study reaffirms the power of intercultural sensitivity for successful business practices. The results show that language, differences in the communication style, business etiquette and stereotyping are the main hampering factors that Dutch and Irish business professionals face in interactions with each other. These obstacles are overcome when both parties engage in building rapport, are open to becoming culturally flexible, are aware of language differences and adjust their communication accordingly. Based on these findings, we argue that context is the key to understanding intercultural business interactions, speaking the same language does not suffice to understand each other, and awareness of each culture does not mean the business interactions will go smoothly.

First of all, there are generalizations about the characteristics of different cultures and countries, yet many of them disregard specific dynamics within specific businesses and personal interactions. The findings of our study are

in line with the dimensions of Meyer (2004) to a certain extent. Still, under-estimating the nuances in a specific context hampers successful intercultural encounters in which stakeholders understand each other, accept communication challenges and address them accordingly. Our results show that professionals are aware of intercultural competences models and theories. Surprisingly, they seem to perceive these models as potentially misleading, giving the superficial impression of knowing the counterpart's viewpoint. Instead, they might contribute to generating stereotypes which actually limit effective and genuine business communication.

One of the strengths of this study is that it investigates intercultural business communication in its unique context, combining national dynamics, business culture and individual elements. This is of great significance, and something which needs to be addressed, especially in today's world, where cultural encounters are intertwined through international business. It is therefore important to be aware of the context in which each intercultural encounter takes place rather than judging one culture based on stereotypes or a specific theory.

Secondly, one interesting finding of the study is how the Irish and the Dutch differ in their views of language. Although most of the Irish participants indicated that language hampers communication since the Dutch speak English as a foreign language and fail to understand the context of communication, paradoxically, none of the Dutch participants saw this as a challenge. They believed their English was proficient enough to communicate in a professional setting. This supports the idea that although business interactions take place in English, this does not mean that it is a common language. Although it is believed that it is non-native speakers who find it challenging to communicate with native speakers (Kankaanranta, 2008), in our study, native speakers of English were the ones who brought this up as a hampering factor in business communication. Business English is different from daily English, and as Zelenková and Javorčíková (2020) argue, it is crucial to have an intercultural approach in Business English. Native speakers frequently overlook the fact that non-natives do not catch all the nuances of the language, nor can they express them. This is one of the important aspects that proves nuances are crucial to understanding.

As easy as it can make the relationships on the surface, it leads to challenges in the long run, when it hinders understanding cultural differences and the real meaning of a message. When the language of communication is taken for granted and both parties do not think in depth about what it entails, it leads to inertia and prevents partnerships from excelling.

In addition, our findings show that experience is not per se sufficient for enabling effective business communication. Most of the participants of this study had many years of experience in working with each other's culture. It is clear from the interviews that they had awareness of one another when it comes to cultural differences. Even though our respondents seemed to be well aware of the cultural differences during their business interactions, that did not make it any easier. They still faced challenges in business interactions. This indicates that although awareness is considered to be the key to having successful intercultural encounters, being aware and knowing how to address cultural differences are different capabilities (Baker, 2015; Deardorff, 2004). Our results support this claim. The reason might be that all hampering factors mentioned in this study may be simultaneously present and intertwined. Awareness may not be enough to see them. Culture and language are key sources of friction in international business and can potentially prevent or hamper effective business relations. In order to overcome these barriers, business professionals can step outside their own cultural and business environment and create a new context (Bolten, 1999, in Varner, 2000). The concept of cultural intelligence on the other hand, seems to capture the complexity of these interactions more comprehensively. In addition to the metacognitive facet that includes cultural awareness, and knowledge about the culture, it also accounts for the motivational facet such as willingness to engage in such encounters and the behavioral one, which is the ability to adjust verbally and non-verbally (Earley & Ang, 2003). Business professionals need to be equipped with the skills to recognize and identify possible obstacles and address them proactively. In order to achieve this, companies that aim to function at an international level need to invest in intercultural business communication. They need to provide their employees with continuous training in intercultural business communication, and provide interventions if needed. They

themselves need to have a systematic way of constantly improving their skills, by taking development and change into consideration. This will turn them into effective, culturally intelligent business professionals.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has certain limitations. First, it was conducted with Irish and Dutch business professionals living and/or working in Ireland or in the Netherlands. Due to this unique context, no generalization can be made for Irish or Dutch business professionals in other countries and in contact with business professionals in a different context. Secondly, the study is based on self-reported data, which may cause biases regarding the objectivity of the responses. Thirdly, due to the qualitative nature of the study, the findings cannot be generalized. Finally, the data collection is limited to online settings. Future research with business professionals from other cultural backgrounds, in different countries, studies which involve multiple cultural backgrounds in similar business settings, as well as an approach which involves multiple data collection methodologies, is recommended. This will enhance our understanding of the role of successful intercultural communication in international business.

References

Backmann, J. Kanitz, R, Tian, A.W., Hoffmann, P., & Hoegl, M. (2020). Cultural gap bridging in multinational teams. *Journal of International Business Studies*, *51*, 1283–1311. DOI: 10.1057/s41267-020-00310-4.

Baker, W. (2015). Research into practice: Cultural and intercultural awareness. *Language Teaching*, *48*(1), 130–141.

Bolten, J. (1999). Intercultural business communication: An interactive approach. In Lovitt, C. R., & Goswami, D. (Eds.), *Exploring the rhetoric of international professional communication* (pp. 139–156). New York: Baywood.

Braslauskas, J. (2020). Effective creative intercultural communication in the context of business interaction: theoretical and practical aspects. *Creativity Studies*, *13*(1), 199–215.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In Teo, T. (Eds), *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology* (pp. 1947–1952). New York, NY: Springer DOI: 10.1007/978–1–4614–5583–7.

Deardorff, D. K. (2004). In search of intercultural competence. *International Educator*, *13*(2), 13.

Deardorff, D. K. (2006). Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *10*(3), 241–266.

Earley, P. C., & Ang, S. (2003). *Cultural intelligence: Individual interactions across cultures.* Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

Ferri, G. (2018). *Intercultural communication: Critical approaches and future challenges*. Springer.

Fraenkel, J. R., & N. E. Wallen. (2006). How to Design and Evaluate Research in Education. 6th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Francis, J. N.P. (1991). When in Rome? The effects of cultural adaptation on intercultural business negotiations. *Journal of International Business Studies, 22*(3), 403–428.

Gao, H., & Prime, P. (2010). Facilitators *and Obstacles of intercultural business communication for American Companies in China: Lessons Learned from the UPS Case*. Vol. 15. Faculty Publications, Kennesaw State University.

Gesteland, R. R. (1997). Kaip išgauti 'taip': menas bendrauti ir derėtis įvairiose kultūrose. Tyto alba.

Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond culture.* New York: Doubleday.

Hofstede, G. (1991). *Cultures and Organizations. Software of the mind.* London: McGraw-Hill.

Jameson, D. A. (1973). Reconceptualizing cultural identity and its role in intercultural business communication. *The Journal of Business Communication (*2007*), 44*(3), 199–235.

Kankaanranta, A. (2008). Business English Lingua Franca in intercultural (business) communication. *Language at Work-Bridging Theory and Practice*, *3*(4). DOI: 10.7146/law. v3i4.6193.

Kurbakova, S. N., Galizina, E. G., Karnaukhova, A. A., Pletneva, N. S., & Kuzminov, V. A. (2020). Development of approaches to intercultural business communication in the context of globalization. *International Journal of Management (IJM)*, *11*(3), 449–456.

Leszczyński, G., Mandjak, T., Margitay, T., & Zieliński, M. (2022). The business paradigm: explanation for patterns of business interactions. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, *37*(4), 723–733.

Liu, Y. (2010). *Ost trifft West.* Schmidt.

Meyer, E. (2014). The *Culture Map. Decoding how people think, lead, and get things done across cultures.* Public Affairs, New York.

Nathan, G. (2015). A non-essentialist model of culture: Implications of identity, agency and structure within multinational/multicultural organizations. *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, *15*(1), 101–124.

Platova, E.D. (2020). Strategies and Tactics of Business Interaction in Orenburg Region. In Proceedings *of the Philological Readings (PhR 2019)* (pp. 342–349).

Rasmussen, L. J., & Sieck, W. R. (2015). Culture-general competence: Evidence from a cognitive field study of professionals who work in many cultures. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *48*, 75–90.

Salacuse, J. W. (1999). Intercultural negotiation in international business. *Group Decision and Negotiation*, *8*, 217–236.

Sweeney, E., & Hua, Z. (2010). Accommodating toward your audience: Do native speakers of English know how to accommodate their communication strategies toward nonnative speakers of English? *The Journal of Business Communication*, *47*(4), 477–504.

Szkudlarek, B., Osland, J. S., Nardon, L., & Zander, L. (2020). Communication and culture in international business – Moving the field forward. *Journal of World Business*, *55*(6), 101126.

Trompenaars, F. (1994). *Riding the waves of culture: Understanding diversity in global business.* New York: Irwin.

Varner, I. I. (2000). The Theoretical Foundation for Intercultural Business Communication: A Conceptual Model. *The Journal of Business Communication*, *37*(1), 39–57.

Zaharna, R. S. (2009). An associative approach to intercultural communication competence in the Arab world. In Deardorff, D. (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of intercultural competence* (pp. 179–195)*.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Zelenková, A., & Javorčíková, J. (2020). Business English Today: The Need for Intercultural Approach. In Michalik, U., Zakrajewski, P., Sznicer, I., & Stwora, A. (Eds.), *Exploring Business Language and Culture* (pp. 3–21). Springer.