

Fostering complex understandings of international business collaborations in the higher education classroom

Kristin Rygg, Paula Rice, and Anne Linda Løhre

Abstract

This article gives an account of how an intercultural business project was used as a case study in class without providing learners with theoretical information about national or work cultures prior to the session. By removing the focus from the essentialist view that misunderstandings on intercultural collaborations must be due to cultural differences, we provided the learners with a space in which to consider other interpretations, making more explicit the various communities to which an individual belongs. The extent to which the classroom session delivered on its aim of fostering a more complex understanding of international business collaborations is assessed based on learners' reflection notes and classroom discussions.

Keywords: bottom-up approach; case study; critical pedagogy; intercultural business communication; social and critical constructivist view of learning

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Introduction

This study investigates the learning outcomes from the use of case study in three culturally diverse classrooms in business studies in higher education in Norway. The classes took place at two academic institutions in towns with long maritime and marine traditions, and thus, the case was chosen for its relevance to these locations. The case study is based on data from a shipbuilding project that is set in a shipyard in South Korea where the Norwegian Navy had procured the building of a logistic vessel. The present Norwegian Navy project manager described the collaboration between the Norwegian Royal Navy personnel and the South Korean shipyard personnel as 'the world championship in misunderstanding' (personal communication), and a commander of the Norwegian Navy confessed to the media: 'We underestimated cultural differences and experienced large communication problems' (Dahlløkken, 2020). Interviews with the Norwegian Royal Navy and the

South Korean shipyard personnel revealed that both parties saw the misunderstanding as a result of Norwegian and Korean national cultural differences, and the only way to solve their differences was to convince the other party about who was right (Løhre et al., 2021).

With these kinds of research outcomes, it is not surprising that an essentialist view of culture persists among intercultural communication practitioners and researchers alike. After all, as noted by Piller (2012), ‘discourses of national identity and national belonging are powerful ones that have been around for a considerable period and are powerfully supported by a range of state, media, and other institutional practices’ (p. 6). Thus, many academic courses on intercultural communication still tend to teach and assess learners in a traditional way, based on the accumulation of knowledge about different cultures, often reduced to the concept of nations (Dervin & Tournebise, 2013; Fang, 2006).

The traditional way of teaching intercultural communication has been criticised by many scholars (e.g., Dervin, 2010; Holliday, 2013; Holliday et al., 2010; Piller, 2012). However, new theoretical frameworks should be followed up by creating and assessing teaching activities that aim for a more complex understanding of encounters in an international setting, and it is this that this study exemplifies.

The informants in the shipbuilding project focused on essentialist explanations for the misunderstandings, but our own preliminary analysis suggested that the informants’ views might be too simplistic. By making the learners our co-researchers, we created a case study for use in class based on some of the interview data from the shipbuilding project without informing them about our hypothesis (more details below). Using Ly and Rygg’s (2016) ‘bottom-up’ approach to case teaching in the intercultural communication classroom (see more below), the learning objective was to foster a more complex understanding of international collaborations. The extent to which the session delivered on its aim was assessed through learners’ reflection notes and classroom discussions. The motivation behind the learning objective is further detailed below.

Intercultural communication research

Intercultural communication research such as Hall (1976), Hofstede ([1980] 2001), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner ([1993] 2012), and Lewis ([1996] 2018) tend to view the notion of ‘culture’ from an essentialist point of view, where people come into collaborations with a socially programmed and static set of values and norms that are not easily changed (Dahl, 2014). These theories take an ‘etic’ perspective (Pike, 1954) where theories are believed to be universally applicable to

the understanding of any culture. In contrast, there exists an 'emic' perspective that is country-specific and grounded on the assumption that every culture must be understood on its own terms. Since the focus is on trying to make sense of the internal logic in one specific country, studies that adopt an emic approach tend to promote a more positive perspective on culture (Stahl & Tung, 2015). However, the emic approach is also occupied with describing cultural homogeneity without addressing the dynamics and paradoxes that normally exist (Fang, 2006), and thus, rarely provides a more nuanced picture.

Within the field, cross-cultural encounters also have a long tradition of being viewed as 'collisions' between cultures, a term used by Lewis ([1996] 2018) and criticised by Fang (2012). This is despite the fact that several studies on global teamwork (Barmeyer & Franklin, 2016; Brannen & Salk, 2000; Koch et al., 2016; Peeters et al., 2015; Stahl et al., 2010) are based on stories told by global executives about positive collaborations where the team members' different backgrounds result in more creative and effective solutions and where diverse styles are synchronised into a hybrid culture that is more effective than any one individual approach. Yet, Stahl and Tung (2015) argue that in academic journals, there is less balance between a positive and a negative view on cross-cultural collaborations, and the common assumption is that culture is a problem rather than a resource.

A pessimistic view of cultural encounters is not only the academic scholars' fault. Rygg (2012) noted that when business expatriates are being asked about their collaboration with the locals, their answers tend to focus on the differences that cause problems, and the same was found among the informants in the ship building project introduced above (Løhre et al., 2021). Based in the field of psychology, Gillespie (2007, p. 3) contends that 'it has long been observed that people tend to positively differentiate themselves and their ingroup from other people and outgroups'. Holliday et al. (2010, p. 24) defines 'Otherization' as 'reducing the foreign Other to less than what they are', meaning that they are seen as a stereotypical representative of their culture. Typically, the ingroup is referred to as 'we' and the outsiders as 'they' (Holliday et al., 2010, p. 24). Looking at Nordic expatriates in Japan, Peltokorpi (2007) found that expatriates with insufficient proficiency in the host-country language were more likely to be categorised as outgroup members. On the other hand, the expatriates themselves might choose to be outsiders. Thus, Szkudlarek and van Bakel (2014, p. 109) maintain that 'contact with the host nationals is usually more stressful and uncertainty-prone than contacts with fellow expatriates, which is why many expatriates do not seek these interactions'. However, since expatriates are geographically closer to the local office than to their home office, they might find themselves confronted with the challenge of determining where their workplace loyalty lies (Szkudlarek & van Bakel, 2014). Thus, on an individual level, collaborations in an international setting

may be more complicated than the intercultural communication theories above suggest.

This static understanding of culture has been criticised for being a theoretical and ideological construction (Piller, 2012) that defines all members of a country as having the same values and norms regardless of factors such as gender (Gooderham & Nordhaug, 2002), occupation, or regional differences (McSweeney, 2002), and thus, ends up with simplified stereotypes of real life (Osland & Bird, 2000). Recently, new theoretical frameworks based on social constructivist views have appeared in research (see for instance Dervin, 2010; Holliday, 2013; Holliday, Hyde, & Kullman, 2021). Related to the notion of misunderstandings, Dervin and Tournebise (2013) quote Sarangi (1994, p. 418), who raised the question:

Why should an instance of miscommunication, when it involves participants from different ethnic/cultural backgrounds, be treated as resulting from culture-specific behaviour whereas the same instance of mismatch, when it involves participants from the same 'culture', becomes labelled as a challenge?

In our study, the notion of 'culture' only exists through the discourses/narratives that (re)produce it. As mentioned by Piller (2012) in the introduction, it is an imagined community to many people. We agree with Dervin and Tournebise (2013) that it is not 'culture' that guides interactions but the co-construction of various identities such as gender, age, profession, social class, power, and so on. In contrast to the imagined community that Holliday (2013) calls 'big culture', there exists 'small culture formation', by which he means a smaller, and therefore, observable group of people who jointly negotiate meaning and practices as they engage in a shared activity. In this study, the learners were asked to observe one such small culture, namely the people involved in the shipbuilding project. Holliday, Hyde, and Kullman (2010), and Holliday (2013) rejected the traditional way of investigating culture—which they called the 'top-down approach'—that starts with large assumptions about national cultures (big culture) followed by observation of authentic encounters in order to find traces of that big culture. In contrast, a 'small culture' investigation is about interpreting emerging behaviour within a social grouping and is more of an inductive process, hence a 'bottom-up' approach (Holliday, 2013). In the following section, we take the notion of 'bottom-up' into intercultural communication teaching. This is followed by the session plan, an overview of the learners, and presentation and discussion of the results.

Courses: Pedagogical approach

The case study was used in three different courses, outlined in Table 1. Courses 1 and 3 are taught at a business school and Course 2 at a university within a department of international business. All three courses shared an aim to enable learners to critically reflect on the relationship between one's understanding of self and the 'Other'.

Courses	Program	ECTS	Course title
Course 1	BA	7.5	East Asian Culture and Communication
Course 2	BA 5 th semester	7.5	Understanding Culture
Course 3	MA	7.5	Global Management Practices

Table 1. Outline of the courses

All three courses owe much to a critical constructivist theory of learning, where the focus of learning is on learners rather than teachers. The teachers mediate and structure learning rather than assume the role of a giver of knowledge. Teachers provide scaffolding to enable learners to be actively involved in solving problems and provide opportunities for learners to come up with their own interpretations through discussion with each other and the teacher (Jordan, Carlile, & Stack, 2008). The use of case studies as instructional material is suited to constructivist theories of learning (University College Dublin, 2020) because they can be presented as problem solving activities that lend themselves to discussion and interpretation. In addition, our approach is also predicated on critical pedagogy where learners are active participants rather than 'passive consumers' (hooks, 1994, p. 14); where content is not provided in advance of learning, but rather it is created from knowledge that develops through interactions among learners and with the teacher (Stommel, 2014).

Case studies are often used to illustrate a particular issue or theory already familiar to learners (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Inspired by Holliday (2013), Ly and Rygg (2016) have called this a top-down approach to case teaching. They suggest instead a bottom-up approach, by which they mean that learners are not provided with any theories prior to working on the case. This aligns with critical pedagogy and a social and critical constructivist view of learning, allowing learners to enquire, discuss, interpret, and reflect on the situation in collaboration with the teacher. In our view, this is essential in the teaching of culture, itself a social construct where knowledge is created through interaction. As mentioned earlier, Holliday (2013) disputed the traditional way of investigating culture, which he

called the ‘top-down approach’. In his opinion, such assumptions will later colour all cultural observations and are ‘associated with stereotyping’ (2013, p. 30). They also perpetuate the idea of ‘methodological nationalism’ (Beck, 2007), which conceptualises a nation-state society that encompasses all who live there. This view makes achieving global social justice more difficult as it fails to address inequities in power structures, in direct opposition to the learning goals of a social constructivist and critical pedagogy. We did not expect learners to come to the classes with no pre-conceptions regarding culture or the study of culture. The learners brought their individual experiences to the class which they could share through discussion of the case study. The discussion was intended to enable them to test their assumptions and ideas.

All the learners were asked to reflect on their learning at the end of the class as a way of helping them to understand how changes in thinking may have occurred through using the case study. As an assessment tool, reflection is aligned to the epistemology of social and critical constructivism as it allows learners to articulate their learning process. In all three courses, reflection is used as an assessment tool throughout. According to Koivisto and Jokinen (2019), reflection in higher education is important to develop learners’ independence, innovation, and flexibility. In classes on intercultural communication, we believe reflection is vital because, as Kimmel (2006, p. 461) contends: ‘Mere information about your own and other’s cultures does not affect your mind set or provide a solid basis for intercultural exploration’.

Session plan

The teaching session comprised 90 minutes of class time. Session material comprised three interview transcripts from the original study (see Appendix) and a PowerPoint presentation. The transcripts were chosen to reflect the three groups of interviewees in the original study: a representative of the project and the Royal Norwegian Navy, a civil representative of the project, and a representative of the project and the South Korean shipyard. Learners were provided with the following information through an informal spoken presentation accompanied by the PowerPoint presentation:

HNoMS XXX is the largest ship ever built by the Norwegian Navy. The building took place at the South Korean Shipbuilding and Marine Engineering (DSME). The contract for building was signed in 2013, but the maiden voyage out of South Korea did not take place until 2019, three years later than originally planned. The final costs went beyond the original budget to 2.2 billion NOK (Johansen, 2019).

Planning started with a British consultancy firm, which had already co-operated with the South Koreans on the building of four Tide class tankers for the British Royal Navy. These were delivered in 2017. The Norwegians wanted a version of these, but with space for two NH 90 helicopters, a fully operational hospital with 48 beds, and four Sea Protector remote control weapons. The British project had used a firm specialising in marine project management on site in South Korea, and the Norwegians followed suit. According to commander (sg) Thorvald Dahll, the ship's 'primary role is to support the Royal Norwegian Navy, but it can also serve as mothership, with mooring and fendering arrangements, for submarines, corvettes, mine-countermeasure vessels or special forces' (Toremans, 2016). All of these epitomise the versatility of the vessel.

The DSME has 13,458 employees with 500 workers from other countries in Asia. Next to Hyundai and Samsung, it is one of the 'Big Three' shipyards in South Korea. This huge ship building community represents a multilingual society where English courses are options for only a few. Interviews were conducted with some of the white-collar employees, engineers mostly, who possessed some knowledge of English.

The three transcripts used during the session came from the interviews with three participants: Peter, the naval project manager based in Norway throughout the project, who was in his 40s and had a background as an engineer; Bjørn, a civilian engineer, also in his 40s, hired by the Navy because of his previous experience with ship building projects abroad, who lived as an ex-patriot from Norway in South Korea during the build; and Ms. Park, a contract manager in her 30s who worked directly for the shipyard in South Korea and had a background in human resources. These three participants were all given pseudonyms. The analysis of the shipbuilding project is forthcoming in Løhre et al. (2021).

This presentation provided opportunities in class for activities that encouraged learners to construct knowledge. For example, at the beginning of the session questions such as 'What kind of projects take place across international borders?' helped to connect new knowledge to existing knowledge. Questions that focus on the context ('Have you heard of the SHIP?', 'Has anyone visited South Korea?', 'What do you know about South Korea?') included learners' previous knowledge and experiences.

In line with universal design for learning principles as a way of creating an inclusive classroom, the transcripts and PowerPoint presentation were made available days before the session so that learners had the possibility of reading these before the class. As all the learners in the courses were second or third language speakers of English, this removed some of the pressure of reading in a designated time during the session, providing a chance for learners to check unknown

vocabulary. It also provided extra time for learners with neurodiversities, such as dyslexia, who may have found fast reading challenging.

Learners were also given time to read through the transcripts in class so that everyone had an overview of each interviewee. They were then divided into groups, with each group focusing on one interviewee and given the question prompt: ‘What issue does this participant find challenging?’ Learners discussed this in their groups, noting down their ideas. They then changed groups to share their findings on what the interviewees said. Discussion promotes active learning and higher-order level thinking skills. In addition, working on a task together involves collaborative learning—constructing knowledge and developing communication skills (Trinidad, 2020). Knowledge building by encouraging learners to think of alternative conceptualisations and understanding that may not fit with their current understanding is in line with constructivist views of learning (Kelly 1958/1969a in Taber, 2020, p. 374) and aligns to learning outcomes in all three courses, specifically critically analysing attitudes towards others. Learners had the opportunity to share their ideas in a plenary discussion that also involved the lecturer.

The final activity asked learners to reflect on their learning and discuss their ideas. This was done as writing and plenary discussion during the class in Courses 1 and 3, and outside of class in Course 2, where learners wrote or sound recorded their reflections. They posted these on a discussion forum where they also commented on each other’s ideas and received feedback from the teacher. In all three cases, the reflections created a record of learning.

The learners

The case was used in Courses 1 and 2 in autumn 2019, and in Course 3 in spring 2020. Table 2 is a profile of the learners in class the day that the case study was taught. The last column is an overview of the students’ reported intercultural experience.

Course	Number of learners	Age	Previous intercultural experience
Course 1	14	19-24	A course with many international exchange students to Norway. For most of them, it was their first semester abroad. Two reported growing up in a multicultural family/neighbourhood.
Course 2	23	20-33	A course with mostly Norwegian nationals registered in a three-year degree programme. Four one semester Erasmus exchange students.
Course 3	19	22-29	A CEMS (Global Alliance in Management Education) course with students from all over the world, including a few locals. All reported having lived more than 3 months in several different countries and on having extensive intercultural experience.

Table 2. The learners

Evidence of learning

We used the case study to encourage learners to move beyond considering national culture as the only possible framework for discussing the ship building project. One of the aims of the session is that learners develop awareness that misunderstandings in cross-border collaborations cannot be understood by using an essentialist notion of national culture as a framework. We encouraged learning through session activities based on social constructivist theories of learning. The class discussions and end of session reflections as a record of learning show the extent to which the session delivered on its aims. The learners' discussion and reflections focused on two aspects: How the learners reacted to the fact that the informants in the transcript explained most of the misunderstandings on the basis of Norwegian and South-Korean cultural differences, and how the learners added other contextual explanations that were not mentioned by the informants.

The learners detected that both parties in the shipbuilding project blame most of the misunderstandings on differences in language and national cultures. For instance, Peter, the project manager with the Norwegian Navy, blames the Koreans for being unable to understand English, for being too polite to ask questions, and for signing the contract and then starting to negotiate. The latter he finds extremely impolite even if the Koreans, in his view, are otherwise very polite. Peter explains that because Korea and Norway are on opposite sides of the world, they regard things completely differently. Learners noted that Peter seemed to doubt the Koreans'

reliability regarding upholding the contract based on what he had learned from other Norwegians with projects in South Korea, thus, creating the preconditions and beliefs about the Other with which he entered the project.

The learners reacted in various ways to the informants' one-sided focus on national cultural differences. In Course 1, many of the learners had recently arrived in Norway on a student exchange program and, therefore, were in the process of discovering how their own norms and values contrasted with their classmates'. The case study appeared to strengthen their impression that people are different, with comments such as 'today, what struck me the most is how different cultures affect the team dynamics', or 'during the lesson, I was thinking that culture really plays an important role in our lives, what we do on a personal level, can affect the way we work'. In the latter quote, 'culture' is not an imagined community but rather a term for individual preferences.

In Course 2, where there are mostly Norwegian students with limited intercultural experience, around half the learners felt that the main point that emerged was that cultural background was important and that in order to reduce the risk of misunderstanding it was important to gain an understanding of an individual's cultural background. The learners' responses demonstrated a belief that misunderstandings could be avoided through learning about another's culture. The learners in Course 3, on the other hand, had extensive intercultural experience, which might be the reason why they focused more on solving the problems than on discovering the differences and were concerned with how the situation could be resolved or avoided.

After the first feedback on the case, we asked the learners in Course 3 what additional information they needed, and one suggested that it would have been useful to have 'more knowledge about Norwegian and Korean business cultures'. Thus, consciously departing from the bottom-up approach, we gave them two internet texts about the respective business cultures¹ and asked them about how useful they found the information. Most learners agreed that the texts shed light on the misunderstandings portrayed in the case study, but being exposed to much intercultural experience themselves, they still thought that it was a pity that there was only focus on what separated people and not on what could bring them together as a better functioning team.

While some learners' ideas still centred around national culture, this was not the only or even the first interpretations put forward by many of them:

There are several factors that determine what perspective you get. Not just what nationality, language or cultural affiliation you have; also, the background and/or your position in the group. For example, both Norwegians had different

perceptions of the problems that degenerated even if they spoke the same language and were from the same country. What differed in their views was to a large extent the experience they had with similar projects as well as the experience of working with different cultures. (Course 2, Learner 1)

Another learner said ‘a good example today was the two Norwegians who struggle with different things, despite both being Norwegians. I think that is an interesting case of culture not being the only reason for misunderstandings’ (Course 1, Learner 1).

The learners here are talking about Bjørn, the civilian Norwegian project manager who was stationed in South Korea during the build. As mentioned in the introduction, due to insufficient proficiency in the host-country language, expatriates are often considered outsiders by the locals (Peltokorpi, 2007). Students found no comments in the interviews that suggest that the Koreans saw Bjørn as one of them. However, they did note that Bjørn also experienced many communication difficulties with fellow Norwegians, and the reason for this is not only geographic distance to his home office as mentioned by Szkudlarek and van Bakel (2014), but also that he is a civilian temporarily employed by the navy. His outsider position affects his access to information from both sides. The students also found his interview answers difficult to read and thought that the Koreans might not be the only ones whose English is difficult for outsiders to understand.

Learners identified aspects such as the roles and previous experience of participants, age, and institutional culture. By so doing, they moved away from ‘othering’, by validating all the participants’ perspectives: ‘It is not only the country’s culture that is different. A 30-year-old woman with HR background will see things different than a 50-year-old man with military-background’ (Course 2, Learner 3); ‘The reason why the Norwegians did not go out for a drink with the South Koreans every night when they were there was maybe because of the age difference between themselves and the Koreans’ (Course 1, Learner 2), and ‘Peter knew that Koreans negotiate the contract after it has been signed. Park knew that Norwegians’ contracts are binding and that they need to comply with it. Why weren’t they more flexible and adaptable?’ (Course 3, Learner 2).

This led to reflections on one’s position within an event as a way of understanding how people behave or communicate, ‘Today, what struck me the most is how different cultures affect the team dynamics. I was thinking how easily we classify people into “we” and “they” just because we feel different. And, that being an insider/outsider changes the way you view the respective culture’ (Course 1, Learner 2); ‘A case can be viewed on both the inside and the outside, and the

perspectives will be different in that the people on the inside have a different access to information and a different view than those who have an outside perspective' (Course 2, Learner 2). One learner said, 'When reading the case, I was really struggling to understand why these people didn't just ask each other when they didn't understand' (Course 3, Learner 1), demonstrating an engagement with the case that had moved beyond a reified view of culture as something that someone has, to viewing it as a discursive construct created through interaction.

Learners also looked at the case as a meta-analysis, suggesting that the experiences they were given access to may result from the researchers as an influencing factor on the participants' accounts. They noted that Ms. Park placed more emphasis on general Korean values and norms as explanatory factors for their actions than Peter did. They hypothesised that she did this because the interviewers were Norwegian and therefore Ms. Park was trying to compensate for their lack of shared lived experience. The learners wondered what would have been the outcome if the researchers had been South Koreans.

The approach to learning and teaching taken in the three sessions meant that the relationship between learners and teachers became more fluid as learners and teachers created new knowledge as co-researchers, through discussion between learners and learners and teacher and learners. Stommel (2014) suggests that learning which breaks with more traditional interactions between learners and teachers enables them to 'co-author together the parameters for their individual and collective learning', opening up new possibilities for knowledge creation and learning.

Transfer value to similar courses in intercultural communication

In the introduction, we claimed, in line with many others (Dervin, 2010; Dervin & Tournebise, 2013; Fang, 2006; Holliday, 2013; Holliday, Hyde, & Kullman, 2010; Ly & Rygg, 2016), that many academic courses on intercultural communication still tend to teach and assess learners in a traditional way, based on the accumulation of knowledge about different cultures, often reduced to the concept of nations. Theorising culture often ends up simplifying an otherwise complex reality.

Stahl and Tung (2015, p. 407), who asked for a more balanced treatment of intercultural collaborations in research, advocate that instead of just looking for culture differences, one should pay more attention to context and process. By not providing learners with theories on cultural differences, which would be a typical top-down approach (Holliday, 2013), prior to working on the case, we believe they were better able to see its complexity. Thus, they noticed how contextual factors such as occupational culture, age, previous experience, language proficiency, perspective, and preconditions and beliefs about the Other influenced how the

participants in the building project interpreted themselves, the situation, and the other people involved.

Stahl and Tung (2015, p. 410) go on to hypothesise that it may not be cultural distance per se that creates problems but rather the way cultural differences are recognised, understood, and managed. The learners in Course 3, who reported having the most intercultural experience, preferred focusing on solutions rather than on differences. However, sharing knowledge and being given the opportunity to take a critical stance that tests previous knowledge gave learners responsibility for their learning, adding ownership in the task and the possibility of deeper learning. Learners may find these positions of choice as eye openers to various socio-cultural stances that they seem to be able to posit simultaneously. Ownership presents the possibility to continually re-interpret both the tasks and one's own subject position in a reflective cycle (Ryan, 2014).

The purpose of this article has been to give an account of how an intercultural business project made into a case study for use in class was analysed by the learners without providing them with theoretical information about national or work cultures prior to the session. However, it would be wrong to assume that they did not already have preconceived notions regarding the existence of national culture in general and Norwegian and South Korean national culture in particular. The concept of nation has long had the concomitant of culture (Klerides, 2009; Piller, 2012) and continues to do so through the work of scholars such as Hofstede, banal nationalism, and a plethora of popular and easily available information on how to behave and what to expect in foreign countries. However, by removing the focus from this link, we provided the learners with a space in which to consider other interpretations alongside that of nation and culture, making more explicit the various communities to which an individual belongs. We hope that it will inspire others who teach subjects where the intercultural dimension plays a part to be conscious about choosing methods that encourage a more complex understanding of international collaborations.

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Appendix: Handout to the learners

The Norwegian navy had a navy vessel built at a shipyard in South Korea between 2013 and 2018. People from the navy called it «a world championship in misunderstandings». We, three researchers from Norway, did a fieldwork where we interviewed three Norwegians in Norway and three Koreans at the shipyard in South Korea about their experiences working on the building project. The following are interview transcripts from three of the informants. Names are pseudonyms and the photos are fictional. The first interview was conducted in Norwegian and has been translated into 'Norw-English' by the authors. Information in brackets is added for better understanding. CAPITAL LETTERS mean that a word was being stressed.

What are the main issues for the informants? Read the three extracts and make notes.

Peter

Project Manager

Norwegian

Age: Mid 40ies

Military

Background: Naval Academy/engineer

Living in Norway

In the beginning, we were over in England and mostly had interaction with the English engineers (who were partners with the Korean shipyard at the time) who were very occupied with having things done quickly and properly and within the time frame, and in a meeting there could be maybe ten different engineers who presented different parts, and on our (the Norwegian navy's) side of the table there were maybe six or seven, and then there was ONE Korean who was the one to follow the process from the Korean shipyard and see that things were within the contract and so on. And, what we didn't know at THAT time was that the Korean in question only understood TOP ten percent of what was being said, and maybe TOP half of what was written on the slides because things were going too quickly and his English was not so good.

Researcher: And he didn't say anything either?

- No, they tended to be very quiet and very polite and all that, so

[...]

- in many cases it looked like they had understood and even answered affirmatively, because all was written down IN DETAIL in the minutes taken from the meetings,

and then we reviewed the minutes and we were absolutely CONVINCED that everyone around the table now has the same understanding of the situation, and then some time later, it comes up that what he, the Korean, has communicated back to his department, that is something completely different.

[...]

So, in that sense, you might say that it has been an ONGOING battle often generated by misunderstandings in a meeting. Or, when a Korean reads a functional requirement, then they have ANOTHER understanding. Even if it SAYS that the vessel has to be able to operate in minus thirty degrees, he might not read that. To us it is a completely CRYSTAL CLEAR requirement, right, maybe he doesn't understand that the vessel must be able to operate in minus thirty all the time. Then maybe he has the understanding that the vessel MAYBE is to operate in minus thirty degree in VERY rare occasions, in MAYBE two hours, that might be his understanding.

Researcher: So it is not only lack of English proficiency then?

- It is a little of both. [...] The language is CLEARLY one dimension. And the other thing is that we are LITERALLY on opposite sides of the globe and have COMPLETELY different understandings of things, QUITE SIMPLE things, that we in Norway understand in one way, and then they might have a completely different understanding of the same thing.

Researcher: Do you have any examples?

- have to think a little, because there are many such trivial matters that we have faced, and often it is about cost, right, and the understanding of who should carry the loss or take the bill. Then, it is very typical that, for us it is LOGICAL that when you have a contract and it says that you will get this and this for a set sum of money, then that is how it is. But he the Korean has the understanding that, no, for that sum of money, you can get as much as I can afford. And this is well known, we learned about this from [names of large, Norwegian companies also operating in South Korea] before we signed the contract. For the Korean the negotiation starts when you have signed the contract. Everything before that was just introduction to the negotiations. The real negotiation starts AFTER the contract is signed. Then you are on the hook. Then he wants much more.

[...] So there are many things that collide. That is, whereas they have an ENORMOUSLY polite culture, you can find ABSOLUTE impoliteness when, for instance, it comes to respecting a contract.

Ms. Park

Contract Manager

South Korean

Age: late 30s

Civilian

Background: HR

Living in South-Korea

- Erm, it was quite a different way to proceed the project, Norwegian and Korean. Yeah, the Norwegians they are very, yeah they think the contract is set, it's very important, a strict matter to follow. But we, believe and we think, ok, contract is contract but we have another way to solve it. So, 'cause we have our own experience, in ship building company, more than forty years, so,

Researcher: Do European contracts seem to be based more on European standards than what you are used to? So maybe you thought that: ok, it is written in the contract, but we think we can do better, is that how you?

-Yes, yes. If we have another way to achieve the goal, to assure the goal, or easier, or faster, we can find another way.

Researcher: But you have a time limit for that. Can you amend and change for so long, or is there a time limit set for that?

- Most of the case, the idea we proposed to the ship owner, is shorter than schedule. And even when we believe 'oh yeah, we can save the cost'. Well, basically, we believe that the most simple deal was the contract BUUT, just think about it, we have our own better idea, to meet the target date and to save the cost. Our basic concept was asserted from our main contract but we have our commercial ship, offshore project and other special ship project, so we have our own knowhow.

Researcher: Do you remember anything about the Norwegians that puzzled you or made you wonder why are they doing like this or talking like this, you know, something that was different from your own culture?

-Yes, actually, I know the British guys well (The British engineering firm who were partners with the shipyard at the time), but (laughter), when DSME (the shipyard) proposed our own method or way to the Norwegians, it was REALLY difficult to make them understand WHY we changed the way. So they have their own way or proceed to conduct a vessel, or there was, erm, CLEARLY mentioned the way or time limit or method in the contract, so it was NOT easy to change their decision.

Researcher: How did you go about to do that?

-Just to show them the evidence, real result. Every aspect, construction, support, quality matters, or our previous vessels, which had better results. So we had to show them the real, the actual data.

Researcher: But I think they would probably say: But you have already signed the contract

-Yes, they ALWAYS say; contract is contract. I understand your opinion but, contract is contract. So, we had to, DSME has to follow our contract. It was REALLY difficult to change their mind.

[...]

Researcher: Did the Norwegians answer emails as quickly as you expected?

-No (laughter).

Researcher: There could for example be something about how you use yes-es and no'es that are slightly different from how we usually use yes and no. Did they catch up on that, the Norwegians?

-Yeah, after the first time they didn't understand our meaning of yes. Koreans, and Asian people, we think that the relationship between two guys is important. And we usually think that our work and our personal and individual work is the same, sometimes. So, so if we had quite tough or difficult issues to be decide, we easily think: ah, I met him for several years ago, between our relationship I had to think their opinion, their position, but they do not. Work is work and relationship is relationship.

Researcher: So sometimes you might say yes that's a good idea because you don't want to destroy that relationship, right?

-Yes, when I did not want to make a trouble with him, I said: yes, I agree with you, but actually, some time it was not.

Researcher: So how did you manage to?

-Erm, it took quite a long time to be honest with them and to make them understand what is the Korean culture, good thing is good is a Korean thinking

Researcher: Ok, what does that mean?

-In every case when we meet people or when we make a decision, we think about the relationship. So, if I had the opposite opinion [with] (to) him, but it is not easy to talk to him, because I think if I say like this, if he didn't like me anymore or we had a difficult or a tough time, to solve for the picture, what can I do that? (how can I solve that?), what do I need to say?

Researcher: So it is better to be a little indirect

-Yeah.

Researcher: So, at the end of this, do you think you could come up with a set of advice what Norwegians who are going to work with Koreans need to know about before entering such a relationship?

-Erm, Korean guys, we become friends, we usually have an alcohol culture. I believe, more than 50% of Korean workers believe, after work, if we had alcohol together, we can get to know each other, at the beginning stage. We usually ask them, can we go out tonight?

Researcher: And did you ask the Norwegians to do the same?

- NE (Korean for 'yeah'). Chicken and beer, there are several types of alcohol we like. So, when they came to DSME first, we invite them to dinner several times to understand each other (29.51)

Researcher: That was a good thing?

Yees, buut, I think that it is, what can I say, (with) Korean and British guys it was worse, I mean, a bit easier to work together, but Norwegians are quite separate (between) work and free time

Researcher: Did you feel that you did not become closer to the Norwegians even though you went out for a drink?

-Not that much

Researcher: Because I know Norwegians sometimes will say ‘sorry it is past four o’clock’ and they will not go out

-Yes.

Researcher: Can I ask you on a general basis, do you ever become friends with the foreigners who come here?

-Yeah.

Researcher: Did you become friends with any of the Norwegians?

- Erm, no. But the OTHER ship owners, they usually stay on the ship yard from the start to the final stage of the project, so we have more time to be closer, but. And, the age, gap. On other projects, their position or length or age were very varied from early twenties to fifty, but Norwegian guys they are all older than me, and they are all very gentle, and sometimes they didn’t want to go out with us, cause we had A LOT to drink.

- [...] Four years ago, when we did the ceremony for the first cut steel event, in that case the Norwegians guys invited their Norwegian CHURCH

Researcher: Yeah, I understand, their own people instead of

-So, it was not easy to be close to them. They already have their own

Bjørn

Building Inspector

Norwegian

Age: late 40ies

Civilian

Background: engineer

Stationed in South-Korea

Researcher: What was your involvement in the project?

-When I started this...in this project that was, they applied for a building, building inspector in South Korea, based in South Korea. So, among some other candidates I was chosen to go to South Korea. I had my civilian background. So I had done inspection on other civilian project in Romania, Indonesia, Poland, Norway, yep. So I have some, some experience from that.

Researcher: Did you experience that hierarchy playing out like that while you were working there?

-Yes, especially from the engineering side.

Researcher: Did it cause you problems?

(Sigh) Yeah, because it is like, if you don't, the decision from one meeting to another meeting was not always there. So it was dragging on in time because the one that you expect as a leader in the civilian world, erm, you will, either you do it or you don't; then you got a problem. But in this Korean yard, it is, if you cannot do it today, then you do it next week. It looks like, the minutes, the minutes of meeting from one meeting to the next meeting next week, they haven't done anything. So, some people was sitting on their telephones and reading the minutes from last week, try to solve out and have an answer when it was their turn, the answer.

Researcher: Actually during the meeting? During the meeting. Did you experience that kind of thing quite often?

-Quite often, especially with one of those guys.

Researcher: Yeah. Did you do anything to try and...make this situation better from your point of view?

-It is hard to control the opposite part, how they shall do their work. So, um, even if you try to ask them for 'Can you please check this before the next meeting?' It was only 'Yes, yes', 'Yes, yes'. So, it was hard.

Researcher: When I was asking about expectations before, was this new to you, or did you think this might be some of the problems you would encounter?

-I, Of course, some of this was expected. There's always, if everything goes smooth, there's no need for meetings, just for meetings. Then you can just postpone the meetings. Some challenge was supposed I should expect and meet, but not so much. But at the end, they, or half the way, they struggled with the economic loss of, yeah, no much money to build. They see they could not meet the delivery date – far behind. But at the, at the other side, my boss, my project manager told me that 'It looks like you have been outside of the project and looked us in and told us what to do. You have not been part of the team', he told me.

Researcher: He was talking about you?

-He was talking about me. So, so that was their look to me.

Researcher: And that was a Norwegian project manager?

-Mm hmm. But, you need to understand, I am dealing with the yard every single day. I am seeing those people, every day. I need to be on top of it, and the only person I have to discuss is with our site team that we had erm, one Clive, that was hired in through a company called Seaquest (an international firm that was hired to help with build inspection on site). So we had, he was from UK, then we had some Korean workers, we had some Asian worker and one from India. So those was the people. Er, but the team home in Norway looked at, what they say, I was discussing with Seaquest as a third party company, they say 'we have hired them in, we pay them; they are part of *NDMA* (on the Norwegian navy's side)'. So, it is not that I'm

discussing with people from outside of the project; they are the project. So, I need to discuss, and this is because of the time difference, it was always like 8 o'clock in the morning here, 4 o'clock in Korea, then they start a meeting. We have no time upfront to start discussing things that we, we want to bring up. We had a chat after the meeting just before 11.30 when they should go to lunch. And it was 7.30 in Korea. And when they was coming from Norway, in meeting to Korea, they came late evening, the evening before the meeting start, and it was no time for any discussion, so, what they said to me, I need to come closer to the project. I said 'I have tried to come closer to the project, but the project don't want to come closer to me'. That is one challenge I have, I said. So, we a little bit, not agree upon everything.