Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) Intercultural Competence: A Phenomenological Exploration of Trainees' Experiences within Global Virtual Training Environments.

Chris O' Toole[*a]

a. Technology Enhanced Learning Specialist and adjunct Lecturer National University of Ireland Galway, PhD Candidate Lancaster University

Abstract

Research suggests that a crucial aspect of communication for successful interactions between online trainers and trainees of different cultures is intercultural competence. A question is therefore posed: "*To what extent and in what ways does the trainee experience trainer intercultural competence within a global virtual training environment?*" It is important to answer this question to understand and enhance intercultural competence of trainers within a global virtual training environment (VTE).This phenomenological study explored the lived experience of three trainees (one being the researcher) within two professional global VTEs. Data was collected through short written reports of participants' experience of the phenomenon and through an in-depth semi-structured interview. Findings revealed low levels of intercultural competence within global VTEs. However the data collected also suggested that enhanced intercultural communication on behalf of the trainers would improve training. Three themes described the participants' experiences; substantial intercultural biases held by trainers towards trainees; frequent communication problems between trainers and trainees; and a preference by trainees for trainers to enhance their intercultural competence within global VTEs. Limitations included the relatively low number of participants.

---

* Corresponding author. Email: chris.otoole@nuigalway.ie

1. Introduction

With the current trend of globalisation, professionals are moving across national and cultural borders to a greater extent (Trede et al., 2013). Thus we face an increasingly diverse workforce (Varner & Beamer, 2011). Intercultural communication has subsequently become an increasingly important field. This is particularly true in online training and education (Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005) delivered with Virtual Training Environments (VTEs) by globally based trainers from wide ranging cultures, where the successful delivery of training depends on the trainee in their own culture understanding the training as communicated by the trainer, frequently from a different culture (Finder, 2005; Tomozeiu, 2016).

Within a VTE, communication problems among trainers and trainees arise due to difficulties with languages pronunciation by non-native speaking trainers, inability for trainees to learn new languages to reply to trainers of that language, challenges in developing pedagogical skills, and the complexities of intercultural communication (Finder, 2005; Gravois, 2005). The researcher has not experienced these same issues manifesting themselves in face to face training where the trainer is nearly always from the same culture as the trainee. In this study, the researcher addresses one crucial aspect of communication that is essential for successful interactions between VTE trainers and trainees, namely the development of intercultural competence (Chen, 2005; Morley, 1991), which Deardoff (2006) notes as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitude.

Making an assumption that we all think alike because of similar superficial online appearances may cause misunderstanding in communication because people could still be different at a deeper level (Jandt, 2010). In a global VTE, communication between trainers and trainees is often complicated and at times problematic. Trainers and trainees alike from different cultures do not attach the same meaning to nonverbal language, thus the interpretation by the trainee may not be the same as that which was intended by the trainer (Matsumoto & Juang, 2008; Varner & Beamer, 2011). Understanding the role that intercultural competence of the trainer plays in enhancing the global intercultural learning experience here becomes an important issue. Few published articles, to any extent focus on the phenomenon of trainer intercultural competence in VTEs and none focusing on the lived experience.

Thus the researcher asks, *"To what extent and in what ways does the trainee experience trainer intercultural competence within a global virtual training environment?"*

2. Definition of Terms

Intercultural Communication

The term *Intercultural Communication* is defined as "a symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual process, in which people from different cultures create shared meanings" (Lustig & Koester, 2007:46). In this paper the term *Intercultural Communication* is used to mean "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people of different cultures".

Intercultural Competence

Deardorff (2004, p. 194) points out that a generic definition accepted by intercultural scholars defines the term *Intercultural Communication* as "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes". In this paper the term Intercultural Competence is used to mean "the ability to discern and experience relevant cultural differences".

Intercultural Pedagogical Approach

According to Gogolin (2011), the term *Intercultural Pedagogical Approach* means "dealing with the diversity of circumstances and experiences of abilities and dispositions of students: thus, with the constellations of multicultural teaching and learning". In this paper the term *Intercultural Pedagogical Approach* is used to mean "an approach that strives to include all learners in the education regardless of what culture, identities or nationality they are from".

Lived Experience

According to (Moustakas (1994) the term *Lived Experience* means "emphasising the importance of individual experiences of people as conscious human beings". In this paper the term *Lived Experience* means "the first-hand accounts and impressions of living as a global VTE trainer".

Technology Enhanced Learning

According to Kirkwood & Price (2014), the term *Technology Enhanced Learning* means "the application of information and communication technologies to teaching and learning". In this paper the term *Technology Enhanced Learning* is used to mean "any online facility or system that directly supports learning and teaching".

Virtual Training Environments

Fardinpour (2016), defined the term *Virtual Training Environment* as "a training-specific VLE that creates a safe, immersive, authentic and accessible training environment in which to practise, re-assess, and master skills". In this paper the term *Virtual Training Environment* is used to mean "a Virtual Leaning Environment for training where training is delivered by a combination of text based discussion forums and virtual labs in conjunction with synchronous video with voice interactive training".

3. Literature Review

The researcher considered various theoretical framework models of intercultural competence which address attitudes, skills and knowledge as the components of intercultural competence: Facework-based model (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998); Pyramid model of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006; 2009); Global competencies model (Hunter et al., 2006).

However the researcher chose the Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence[1] (Deardorff, 2006; 2009) as the theoretical framework for this study as it emphasises that an individual can be more effective and appropriate in one's intercultural interactions acquiring the necessary knowledge, skills and forming the requisite attitudes. The exploration of trainer attitudes, skills, knowledge and comprehension as components of intercultural competence, in achieving the goal of training, are best placed within this research framework. Deardorff's framework breaks down intercultural competence into the following sub categories: (1) desired external outcome, (2) desired internal outcome, (3) knowledge and comprehension, (4) skills, and (5) attitudes (see Figure 1). The core principles 3, 4 and 5 match the core components of intercultural competence being explored. The Model will thus be used to explore the trainee experience of trainer intercultural competence based on trainers intercultural knowledge and comprehension, skills and attitudes and desired outcome to "*Behave and communicate effectively and appropriately [...] to achieve one's goal to some degree*" (Deardorff, 2006).

DESIRED EXTERNAL OUTCOME:
Behaving and communicating effectively and appropriately (based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes) to achieve one's goals to some degree

DESIRED INTERNAL OUTCOME:
Shift of the Informed frame of reference/filter:
Adaptability (to different communication styles and behaviors; adjustment to new cultural environments);
Flexibility (selecting and using appropriate communication styles and behaviors; cognitive flexibility);
Ethno-relative view; Empathy

Knowledge & Comprehension:
Cultural self-awareness;
Deep understanding and knowledge of culture (including contexts, role and impact of culture & others' world views);
Culture-specific information; Sociolinguistic awareness

Skills:
To listen, observe, and interpret
To analyze, evaluate, and relate

Requisite Attitudes:
Respect (valuing other cultures, cultural diversity)
Openness and withholding judgment (to intercultural learning and to people from other cultures)
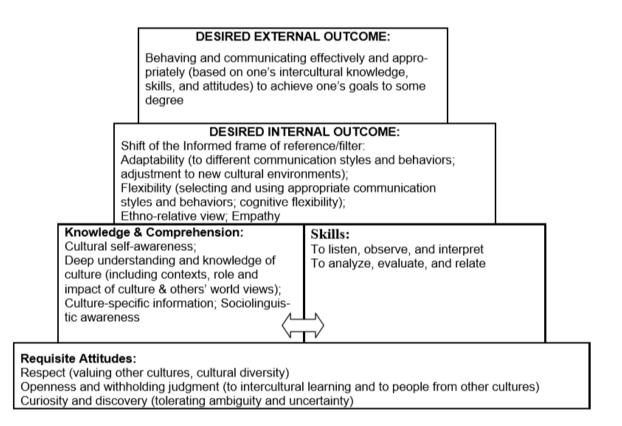Curiosity and discovery (tolerating ambiguity and uncertainty)

Figure 1 Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence (Deardorff, 2006, 2009)

Deardorff's (2006) study found that it is possible to assess degrees or levels of intercultural competence using qualitative methods in the assessment, including interviews, observation, and judgment by self and others. More specifically, ninety percent of the panel of expert interculturalists agreed that interviews, mixed measures, qualitative measures, self-report instruments, and triangulation were effective ways to assess intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2009, p.478).

---

[1] The researcher deeply appreciated Dr. Deardorff's permission of using this conceptual framework in the study.

Lauring (2011) examined the area of intercultural competence in relation to global organisational cultures, but from the point of view of the communications supporting the employees' general work place tasks rather than the employees' personal experience of intercultural competence within global VTEs. In general, the literature has focused much more on the intercultural communication technology (Chiper, 2013) and the communicative pedagogy itself than how trainers can enhance the intercultural communication and improve training within global VTEs.

A review of the research focused on intercultural competence and global online training helps to illuminate the current study. Specifically the areas of required skills, experience, global awareness, good communication, intercultural development and a supportive environment were chosen based on Deardorff's desired external outcomes.

Studies on culture and trainers of VTEs reveal that they may lack the required skills as many trainers question the value of addressing culturally related objectives, have minimal experience carrying out cultural explorations (Sercu, 2005; Dimitrov & Haque, 2016) or question their preparedness to train culture specific content (Sercu, Mendez & Castro, 2005). Professional development for global VTE trainers therefore could adopt an approach that addresses these required skills in culture and pedagogy. In particular, we need to build on the developing base of work on intercultural language studies where there is language hegemony of some kind (Goodfellow, et al., 2009).

The global trainer should have the background required to effectively 'read' a second culture: "*to interpret its symbols and negotiate its meanings in a practical day-to-day context*" (Heyward, 2004, p. 51). Trainers increasingly have to master crucial 21st century skill sets which include global awareness (Stewart, 2007; Morris, Savani, & Roberts, 2014) and competence (Jackson, 2009; Scarboro, 2012; Sperandio et al., 2010). It takes a cross-culturally competent trainer to diversify VTE experiences to include global dimensions and engage students in cross-cultural experiences (Diller & Moule, 2005).

Larsson (2010) notes that in today's multicultural training environments it is essential to be a successful communicator. In addition, in order to effectively communicate in intercultural VTEs, trainers need to be competent users of foreign languages; therefore, incorporating an intercultural approach into training (Young & Sachdev, 2011). As highlighted by many researchers (Byram et al. 2002; Sercu 2010), intercultural communicative competence involves the ability to use a foreign language appropriately in various intercultural situations.

Elola & Oskoz (2008) have shed light on the beneficial effects for intercultural trainers engaging in online intercultural development. Both technology enhanced learning and outside cultural experiences that intercultural trainers engage in may also contribute to an increased willingness to communicate with foreigners, openness to other cultures and deepened intercultural understanding (Schuetze, 2008; Zeiss & Isabelli-Garcı´a, 2005).It is important to note however that development of intercultural competence takes place over time (Deardorff, 2006).

A supportive environment is required to derive intercultural understanding from an intercultural VTE experience. Such experience should help create a welcoming environment (cognitive and affective), otherwise trainees may become jaded and disillusioned with the

experience and may derive no benefit from it (Sen, 2003). Both Perry and Southwell (2011) and (Trede et al., 2013), note that incorporating intercultural competence within training strategies can have a profound influence on global training outcomes.

Therefore, a study which carefully looks at the lived experiences of trainees within global VTEs deserves serious exploration. Focusing on the lived experience is powerful for understanding subjective trainee perceptions of the trainer enhanced intercultural training experience, gaining insights into their motivations and actions, and cutting through the clutter of taken-for-granted assumptions and conventional wisdom.

4. Philosophical Approach

To understand the purpose and position of this research, it is necessary to outline the researcher's own ontological and epistemological presuppositions (philosophical approach) underlying this study. The researcher's position is taken from a constructivist/interpretivist paradigm where the view of the world is that knowledge is based on experiences that are socially constructed (Creswell, 2009) and emphasises the importance of personal perspective and interpretation. Thus the researcher sought a method that allowed exploration of the lived experience of VTE trainees and consequently chose phenomenology. The research purpose has personal significance to the researcher given his own direct connection and experience of being a trainee and sometimes a trainer within global VTEs.

5. Research Question

This study aimed to explore the following research question:

> "*To what extent, and in what ways, does the trainee experience trainer intercultural competence within a global virtual training environment?*"

6. Methodology

Research Design

In this qualitative research study, the researcher sought to understand the lived experiences of professional trainees within a VTE, of trainer intercultural competence.

Creswell (2007) described five qualitative traditions as narrative, grounded theory, case study, ethnography, and phenomenological. Having reviewed all the researcher employed the qualitative method of phenomenology as "*a phenomenology provides a deep understanding of a phenomenon as experienced by several individuals*", (Creswell, 2007, p.62). This study consists of an interpretivist narrative of the phenomenon based on the views of two independent participants as well as the views of the researcher, the third participant. The researcher subsequently conducted an analysis of themes in order to explore "*the deep meaning of individual subject's experiences*" (Rossman & Rallis, 1998, p.72).

According to Giorgi (2009), the aim of the researcher is to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-given framework, but remaining true to the facts. Accordingly, this study relied on detailed data from individual in-depth written accounts together with a semi-structured interview to investigate the research question. Here analysis facilitates the researcher identifying/exploring themes emerging from qualitative data (Cohen, et al., 2011).

Researcher's and Participants' Contexts

Participants were experienced employees within the financial services sector, on information technology (IT) related training programmes delivered by a US based global training organisation. The first participant (who was also the researcher) was 46 years old, male and of Irish decent. The second participant was 40 years old, female and of Irish decent. The third participant was 45 years old, male and of Indian decent but had been living and working in Ireland for 20 years. The researcher was employed in an Irish based Life and Pensions institution while the other two participants were employed in a financial payments corporation. Therefore, the researcher's insider position, background and perspectives have influenced the rationale, operationalization and interpretation of this research. However, insider mitigation techniques proposed by others (Mercer, 2007) were employed. Specifically the epistemological assumptions undergirding the methodological approach are made clear, the researcher's biases are disclosed, the researcher situated himself and acknowledged his role (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher also worked to challenge his subjective tendencies through the process of researcher reflexivity (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) and peer debriefing where he had a colleague review the research before and after the data collection. In addition open ended questions were used.

Participant Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select participants. According to Patton (2002), this sampling method solicits participants who have experienced the phenomenon being studied and meet the inclusion criteria being researched. Three participants were invited to take part in the study due to the limited time and scale of the research and also the need to gather in-depth experiences of the phenomenon. It therefore aligns to Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), who advocate that a small sample size is acceptable as phenomenology deals with understanding specific phenomena in specific contexts. Selection criterion was having more than five years' experience as a trainee within virtual training environments of global training institutions.

Ethical and consent issues were duly considered given the nature of the data to be collected (Kanuka & Anderson, 2007, p.5). Ethical approval was granted from Lancaster University, and written permission to invite the trainees was not required as they were not representing their employers. Participants were recruited through email invitation containing a link to the research project participant consent form as well as a participant information sheet. Participants were informed that participation in the research was voluntary, and that they could choose not to answer specific questions.

Data Collection

Written reports of the participants experience based on semi-structured questions were requested from two participants. The researcher obtained written consent to obtain the written

reports. The written report was piloted with experienced trainees and revised based on feedback. Participants were given a total of five days to complete, with a reminder email sent after three days. They were informed that the data obtained would be anonymised and that they should not spend more than forty minutes on the written report.

A semi-structured interview was undertaken with the third participant. The interview was conducted face to face and was limited to 30 minutes. The researcher obtained verbal consent to record the interview. The interview questions were piloted with experienced trainees and revised based on feedback.

Both written reports and the transcribed interview were initially reviewed for completeness by the researcher. This gave a closer look at the data collected, and provided some familiarity with the data. This was viewed as a first step in the analysis and, once reviewed the data was re-read systematically to allow for patterns and themes to emerge. The purpose of collecting data from three different informants using two different data gathering methods is an attempt to gather a diverse set of research data. That is, the researcher attempted to use diverse data to enhance the exploration of the same phenomenon in terms of person, space and time. Here analysis facilitates the researcher identifying/exploring themes emerging from qualitative data (Cohen, et al., 2011).

Data Analysis

The researcher performed an IPA analysis of the written report and interview data using a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) tool called NVivo 9 to code the transcripts, identify themes and visualise models of the data. Gibbs (2003) specifically supports the use of NVivo for IPA and other types of qualitative data analysis because of the way the software makes the original interview data easily accessible and the analyses well grounded in the data. Another key benefit of using NVivo was that the researcher could minimise at least some researcher bias by visualising the texts as thoroughly coded and linked to themes. In this way, the researcher could see quite plainly what he addressed or did not address in the data. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was performed, including the following characteristics: (a) movement from what is unique to a participant to what is shared among the participants, (b) description of the experience which moves to an interpretation of the experience, (c) commitment to understanding the participant's point of view, and (d) psychological focus on personal meaning-making within a particular context (Smith et al., 2009). Following the IPA process, the researcher conducted initial noting, which includes descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments (Smith et al., 2009).

After completing initial noting on each participant's data, the researcher searched for emerging themes across all participants by examining discrete sections of the written reports and interview transcript and simultaneously recalling what had been learned during the analysis up to this point. The themes not only reflected the participants' original words and thoughts but also the researcher's interpretations. In the development of themes, the researcher supported each theme again by descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments made by each of the participants.

The process produced a rich and varied description of the participants' training experience, their perception of trainer intercultural competence and its improvement of training within VTEs.

Data validation of the research themes involved triangulation, researcher acknowledgement of potential bias, member checks, peer reviews and comparison of descriptive data collected (Hays & Singh, 2012).

7. Ethical Considerations

Permission to conduct the research was obtained from Lancaster University prior to data collection. The researcher then identified participants and provided them with informed consent forms, which informed them about the study and let them know about their rights as participants (Creswell, 2013). Using pseudonyms, anonymity protected the privacy of everyone involved, both for the participants and the HEIs. Additionally, the data was stored in password-protected documents on secure servers.

8. Limitations

This study represents an initial exploration of the perceptions of trainees within a global VTE of their trainers' intercultural competence. As such it is foundation research in this area. Given the time constraints with this short study, it was only possible to ascertain written reports from two participants and interview one other participant for a short time. In addition, all three trainees (one being the researcher himself) were known to the researcher. They were IT trainees based at global offices of financial institutions within Ireland receiving professional training from an IT training company providing training on a global scale using its VTE. Future research could widen the context to include cross-sector studies with larger sample sizes in order to perform further analyses to confirm whether intercultural competence makes a significant difference to training within global VTEs for trainees from all industry sectors and receiving training other than IT training.

The researcher acknowledges the possibility of researcher bias within this study given his involvement as both author in the original paper and a participant, and the professional relationships that have been sustained over time with the other selected participants. Where the source of bias could have appeared in particular was in conducting the interview (Cohen et al., 2011) and soliciting written reports. Because of this, every effort was taken to ensure questions were phrased in an open manner, without pre-empting responses. Opportunities were also offered for participants to elaborate on experiences that the researcher would have knowledge of.

9. Findings and Discussion

The findings section is organised by three themes identified in the data analysis section:

1) Substantial intercultural biases held by trainers towards trainees
2) Frequent communication problems between trainers and trainees
3) The need for trainers to enhance their intercultural competence

The themes developed in this study illustrate to what extent and in what ways the trainee experiences trainer intercultural competence within a global virtual training environment.

The section below will describe each of these in more detail, and support these with extracts from the written reports and interview transcript. Written reports are identified as [W1*][2] and [W2]. The interview transcript is identified as [I1].

1) Substantial intercultural biases[3] held by trainers towards trainees

The researcher found that all of the participants in this study experienced substantial intercultural biases on behalf of their trainers towards them.

> "Where I have experienced poor training with the inability of the trainer to communicate effectively and appropriately with myself, I can categorically say that I have felt significant biases towards me. In one such instance, a trainer *assumed* that within the Financial Services industry in Ireland, the IT term 'switch' had the same meaning to that in the trainer's culture. The resulting miscomprehension led to the trainee making a fundamental mistake when putting his training into practice." [I1]

Another participant further identified biases in the context of preconceptions trainers had as regards the ability of trainees using virtual training labs that required keyboard input. As this participant put it,

> "… when attempting a task specified by the trainer, I entered 'ALT and Q' which caused the lab software to stop working. This was due the fact that in the trainer's culture, a different keyboard character configuration applies. Once the trainer checked and realised the need on their part to ensure that trainees from each different culture were given instructions appropriate to the keyboard configuration of their culture, they were able to perform the allocated training tasks,…" [W2]

2) Frequent communication problems between trainers and trainees

All three participants highlighted the difficulty with communication between the trainee and trainer speaking different languages.

> "To be honest, trainers can rarely communicate the information first time, due to difficulty with foreign language pronunciation. I will very rarely interrupt the trainers as they have a similar difficulty with my pronunciation. I prefer to refer to the manual myself…" [W1]

> "I don't like to be seen to be ignorant throughout the training session, so I don't highlight my communication issues." [W2]

One participant recalled an occasion when there was miscommunication regarding the submission deadline for a virtual lab assignment, which resulted in a student failing a task.

> "On one occasion, I posted my assignment by 12pm. However the trainer incorrectly assumed I was residing in a MST zone, but I was in a GMT zone and so my assignment was late." [W2]

---

[2] The asterisk after W1 indicates that this participant was the researcher.
[3] Trainee's interpreting and judging phenomena by standards inherent to their own culture (Douglas, 1982).

These participant perceptions seem to support the idea of how VTE trainers could consciously use a foreign language appropriately in various intercultural situations (Byram et al. 2002; Sercu 2010). It is interesting to note that, in order to effectively communicate in intercultural VTEs, trainers need to be competent users of foreign languages; therefore, incorporating an intercultural approach into training (Young & Sachdev 2011).

3) The need for trainers to enhance their intercultural competence

All participants in this study experienced great benefit to enhanced trainer intercultural competence by means of comparing their experience of receiving training on different parts of the same course, formally assessed and delivered by trainers displaying higher levels of intercultural competence.

One participant recalled the first training session where the trainer was more competent with the differing cultures, and noted the increased activity, the higher standard of critical analysis and discourse, and overall the much improved training scores.

> "I could immediately see how my level of knowledge increased. It was euphoric. We began to communicate much more and my overall understanding and level of knowledge on the subject increased greatly." [W2]

All participants noted that the initial negative feelings associated with the extra time required to comprehend information from a trainer of lower intercultural competence gave way to many positive emotions associated with the increased knowledge gain from receiving training delivered with a greater level of intercultural competence.

> "Initially I felt that there was a huge effort required to comprehend and undertake the training tasks as the trainer was not competent as regards my own culture. However it soon became apparent that my additional effort was not required, when I recognised the improved intercultural competence held by the second trainer who was substantially more competent regarding my own culture specific methods of comprehension." [I1]

All participants indicated a preference for global training organisations to enhance their trainers' intercultural competence as a primary objective of their role within the industry.

> "… and I now have a preference to require any trainers working with a training corporation providing virtual training globally to enhance their level of intercultural competence to enable optimum training and I see this as a primary goal of their training role. I have stipulated this requirement to three such corporations and they have confirmed that they are ensuring their corporate strategy is such aligned." [I1]

This indicated that global training organisations had consciously made a shift towards an intercultural pedagogical approach to their training provision. This is further evidenced by one participant who explained that the training schedule for all trainees in a global training organisation he had received training from, were

> "…including a development plan for their trainers to develop intercultural competence by means of both formal academic qualifications and spending periods

working in various globally located centres with different cultures"[W2].

In this particular research, using the qualitative methods of written accounts and interview, the researcher assessed VTE trainer intercultural competence by self and others (the participants) as was suggested by Deardorff (2006). Trainees perceived global trainers of VTEs having low levels of intercultural competence. This is specifically so with regard to not having acquired the necessary skills, knowledge and requisite attitudes required for satisfactory intercultural competence as outlined in Deardorff's Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence. In addition the study showed that these trainees also see the benefit of and wish to set the requirement for on-going trainer intercultural competence development as they perceive it improves training. This agrees with Elola and Oskoz (2008) and with by Perry and Southwell (2011), in that trainers should be made aware of the benefits of enhancing intercultural competence and how it can improve training. It also strengthens the view of Diller and Moule (2005) who assert that trainers should ensure that they diversify VTE experiences to include global dimensions and engage students in cross-cultural experiences in order to improve the training.

The findings show that in the hands of this researcher, trainers have substantial intercultural biases towards trainees. The frequent misunderstanding together with preconceptions held by trainers of trainees is aligned to Sercu, Mendez and Castro (2005) who question their preparedness to train culture specific content.

In agreement with the opinion of Larsson (2010), the findings recommended that in today's multicultural training environments with frequent communication problems between trainers and trainees, it is essential to be a successful communicator. This is also aligned with the view of Young and Sachdev (2011) who assert that trainers need to be competent users of foreign languages, in order to effectively communicate in intercultural VTEs.

In this research global trainees appear to experience benefit from a welcoming environment where trainers derive intercultural understanding. This finding supports Sen (2003) who asserts that trainer enhancement has a positive effect on the training experience. Consequently, there is a clear requirement by trainers to master critical 21st century skill sets which include global awareness.

> "In my opinion the positive welcome and constant effort on behalf of the trainer to ensure the technical terms were understood by trainees from cultures other than his own, in a manner that was not condescending towards trainees, had a direct and definite positive affect on the trainees' learning within the VTE." [W2]

This substantiates the need for trainers to enhance their global awareness as asserted by Stewart (2007) and intercultural competence by Scarboro (2012).

The results are particularly exciting because as this comment indicates, the trainee lived experience of enhanced trainer intercultural competence within VTEs is that it leads to improved training, which they perceive as worth the additional trainer effort. The results further scaffold those found by Perry and Southwell (2011) and shows that the use of intercultural competence skills and pedagogies by trainers has a profound influence on VTE training outcomes.

10. Conclusion and Practical Implications

This qualitative study attempted to explore how intercultural competence is experienced within Global VTEs, through the lens of trainees. It is an important complement to the existing literature on intercultural competence. This is particularly so as regards globalisation and intercultural communication within the context of technology enhanced learning. Although the study had its limitations, in the hands of the researcher the findings are compelling.

The key things to take from this study are as follows. Firstly to be aware of the need to reduce and eliminate intercultural biases towards trainees. Secondly to improve intercultural communication between trainees and trainers. And lastly for global trainers to proactively enhance their intercultural competence as they continue as practicing global training professionals. This alone may go a long way toward helping to improve the training within global VTEs.

Based on the findings of this study, it is vitally important to promote and allow for a fundamental belief on the part of the trainer of the value of intercultural competence within global virtual training environments for enhancing the intercultural training experience. As Gorski (2008) advocates, we should abandon the path of least resistance and to choose a more authentic intercultural education.

In this regard the researcher has the following recommendations for practice. Global trainers need to consider ongoing intercultural skills training and development; have cultural awareness in the training context; recognise variation in learner expectations; develop intercultural learning styles; employ effective cross-cultural communication styles. The global trainer needs to have all the key intercultural competences and a lot of personal experience. They need to establish credibility and trust overcoming any power differential and provide honest feedback whilst taking account of the role of language and the complexities of communication in cross-cultural interactions. The global trainer should be flexible, open-minded and creative and have the ability to accept the controversies and divergences that may emerge in addition to refraining from providing stereotypical answers. An experiential learning approach may be applicable.

11. Recommendations for Future Research

This study represents an initial exploration of the perceptions of trainees within a global VTE of their trainers' intercultural competence. What is still unknown is how trainers themselves experience their level of intercultural competence and how easily they feel they can and are willing to proactively enhance their intercultural competence. Carrying out this research would provide a complimentary view of trainers' intercultural competence within a global VTE. It would also provide a more balanced view having researched the perceptions of both sets of key stakeholders, both the trainers and trainees.

In addition, as this small scale study was subject to time constraints and a very specific context (IT trainees based at global offices of financial institutions within Ireland receiving professional training), further research over a longer period, in a wide context, involving a greater sample would help to affirm or otherwise the current findings. Such findings would be more generalizable.

For example the context could be widened to include cross-sector studies with larger sample sizes in order to perform further analyses to confirm whether intercultural competence makes a significant difference to training within global VTEs for trainees from all industry sectors and receiving training other than IT training.

Acknowledgements

References

Baker, C., Wuest, J. and Stern, P.N. (1992) 'Method slurring: the grounded theory / phenomenology example', Journal of Advanced Nursing, Vol. 17, pp. 1335-1360.

Byram, M., Gribkova, B. &Starkey, H. (2002).Developing the Intercultural Dimension in Language Teaching: A Practical Introduction for Teachers. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

Chen, G. M. (2005). Teaching communication with a foreign accent. *Intercultural Communication Studies, 4*(2), 14-22

Chiper, S. (2013) "Teaching Intercultural Communication: ICT Resources and Best Practices", Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 93, pp. 1641-1645, available: www.sciencedirect.com [25 Jun 2017]

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison K. (eds.)(2011). Research Methods in Education, 7th Edition, London: Routledge.

Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative Inquiry research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (Second ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

Creswell, J. W. (2009). Research Design. Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches, 3rd Edition, Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Deardorff, D.K. (2004). *The identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of international education at institutions of higher education in the United States*. North Carolina State University, Raleigh.

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.

Deardorff, D.K. (2009). Implementing intercultural competence assessment. In D.K. Deardorff (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of intercultural competence,* (pp.477-491). Los Angeles: Sage.

Diller, J., &Moule, J. (2005).*Cultural competence: A primer for educators*. Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.

Dimitrov, N. & Haque, A. (2016). *Training design for intercultural learning: Preparing faculty to teach in diverse classrooms*. Workshop presented at the Educational Developers Caucus Conference, Windsor, ON.

Douglas, M. (1982). "Cultural Bias," in: Douglas, M.: *In the Active Voice*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; 183-254.

Elola, I. & Oskoz, A. (2008). Blogging: Fostering Intercultural Competence Development in Foreign Language and Study Abroad Contexts. Foreign Language Annals, 43, 3, 454-477.

Fardinpour, A. (2016). *Taxonomy of Human Actions for Action-based Learning Assessment in Virtual Training Environments* (Doctoral dissertation, Curtin University).

Fendt, J., & Sachs, W. (2008) 'Grounded Theory in Management Research', Organizational Research Methods, Vol. 11, No. 33, pp. 430-455.

Finder, A. (2005, June 24). Unclear on American campus: What the foreign teacher said. *New York Times*. Retrieved June 25, 2017, from http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/24/education/24assistant.html.

Gibbs, G. R., 2003. Introduction to NVivo. [Online] Available at: http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/3731/ [Accessed 07 August 2017]

Giorgi, A. (2009). *The descriptive phenomenological method in psychology: A modified Husserlian approach.* Pittsburg, PA: Duquesne University.

Glesne, C., & Peshkin, A. (1992). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. White Plains, N.Y: Longman

Gogolin, I. (2011). Multikulturalität als Herausforderung. In Faulstich-Wieland, H. (Hrsg.), Umgang mit Heterogenität & Differenz (S. 49-72). Zürich: Pestalozzianum.

Goodfellow, Robin and Lamy, Marie-Noelle (2009). Conclusion: Directions for Research in Online Learning Cultures. In: Goodfellow, Robin and Lamy, Marie-Noelle eds. Learning Cultures in Online Education. Continuum Studies in Education. London: Continuum Books, pp. 170–183.

Gorski, P. C. (2008) Good intentions are not enough: a decolonizing intercultural education, Intercultural Education, 19:6, 515-525, DOI: 10.1080/14675980802568319

Gravois, J. (2005). Teach impediment. When the student can't understand the instructor, who is to blame? *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved July 2, 2017, fromhttp://chronicle.com/free/v51/i31/31a01001.htm.

Hays, D. G., & Singh, A. A. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry in clinical and educational settings*. New York: Guilford Press.

Heyward, M. (2004).*Intercultural literacy and the international school*. Dissertation/Thesis, University of Tasmania.

Hunter, B., White, G. P., & Godbey, G. C. (2006). What does it mean to be globally competent?. Journal of Studies in International Education, 10(3), 267–285.

Jackson, A. (2009). Global competence: The knowledge and skills our students need. In *Asia Society*. Retrieved from http://asiasociety.org/education/partnership-global-learning/

Jandt, E. F. (2010), *An introduction to intercultural communication: Identities in a global community*, Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

Kanuka, H., & Anderson, T. (2007). Ethical Issues in qualitative e-learning Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Research, 6*(2).

Kirkwood, A., and Price, L. (2014) Technology enhanced learning and teaching in Higher Education: What is "enhanced" and how do we know? A critical literature review. Learning, Media and Technology 39 (1) 6-36

Larsson, I. (2010). *Attbyggabroaröverkulturgränser: Om svenskarskommunikation med icke-svenskar vid arbeteutanförSverige*. Lund; Media-Tryck.

Lauring, J. (2011). Intercultural Organizational Communication: The Social Organizing of Interaction in International Encounters. *Journal of Business Communication*, 48(3), 231-255.

Leedy, P.D. & Ormrod, J.E. (2005) Practical Research: Planning and Design, 8th edn, Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, NJ, US.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). Naturalistic inquiry. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Lustig, M. W., & Koester, J. (2007). Intercultural competence: interpersonal communication across cultures (5th ed.). Shanghai, China: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

Matsumoto, D. & Juang, L. (2008). *Culture & Psychology*. Belmont, CA; Wadsworth.

Mercer, J. (2007) *The Challenges of Insider Research in Educational Institutions: Wielding a double-edged sword and resolving delicate dilemmas* Retrieved 15 July 2017, from: http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/03054980601094651

Morley, J. (1991). The pronunciation component in teaching English to speakers of other languages. *TESOL Quarterly, 25*(3), 481-520.

Morris, M.W., Savani, K., & Roberts, R.D. (2014) Intercultural training and assessment implications for organizational and public policies. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 1(1)*, 63-71.

Morse, J.M. and Richards, L. (2002) Readme first for a user's guide to qualitative research, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA, US.

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Patton, M. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Perry, L. & Southwell, L. (2011). Developing intercultural understanding and skills: models and approaches in Intercultural Education. *Intercultural Education* 22(6) 453-466

Rossman, G.B., & Rallis, S.F. (1998).*Learning in the field: An introduction to qualitative research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Scarboro, D. (2012). Interview in Clydesdale, H. Global Vision: Education aligns to a new world order. *Asia Society.* Retrieved June 22, 2017, from http://asiasociety.org/ education/chinese-language-initiatives/global-vision-education-aligns-new-world-order

Schuetze, U. 2008. Exchanging Second Language Messages Online: Developing an Intercultural Communicative Competence? Foreign Language Annals 41: 660–673.

Sen Gupta, A. (2003). Changing the focus: A discussion of the dynamics of the intercultural experience. In. G. Alred, M. Byram, & M. Fleming (Eds), *Intercultural experience and education* (pp. 155-173). Clevendon: Multilingual Matters.

Sercu, L. 2005. Teaching foreign languages in an intercultural world. In Foreign language teachers and intercultural competence, ed. L. Sercu, 1–18. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters

Sercu, L. 2010. Assessing intercultural competence: More questions than answers. In Testing the untestable in language education, ed. A. Paran and L. Sercu, 17–34. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Sercu, L., Méndez García, M.C., Castro Prieto, P. (2005) Scaffolding culture learning. An investigation of teacher approaches. *Language and Education* 19(6): 483-495. Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009).*Interpretive phenomenological analysis: Theory, method, and research*. London: Sage.

Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research. London, UK: Sage.

Sperandio, J., Grudzinski-Hall, M., & Stewart-Gambino. H. (2010). Developing an undergraduate global citizenship program: Challenges of definition and assessment. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 22*(1), 12-22.

Stewart, V. (2007). Becoming citizens of the world. *Educational Leadership, 64*(7), 8–14.

Suddaby, R. (2006) 'From the editors: What grounded theory is not', Academy of Management Journal, Vol. 49, No. 4, pp. 633-642.

Tesch, R. (1990) Qualitative research: Analysis types and software tools, Falmer, New York, NY, US.

Ting-Toomey, S. & Kurogi, A. (1998). Facework competence in intercultural conflict: an updated face-negotiation theory. International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 22, 187-225.

Tomozeiu, D., Koskinen, K. and D'Arcangelo, A. (2016) *Teaching Intercultural Competence in Translator Training.* The Interpreter and Translator Trainer, 10 (3). pp. 251-267. ISSN 1750-399X

Trede, F., Bowles, W., & Bridges, D. (2013). Developing intercultural competence and global citizenship through international experiences: Academics' perceptions. *Intercultural Education*, *24*(5), 442-445. DOI: 10.1080/14675986.2013.825578

Varner, I. & Beamer, L. (2011).*Intercultural communication in the global workplace*. New York: McGraw-Hill Companies.

Young, T. J., & Sachdev, I. (2011). Intercultural communicative competence: exploring English language teachers' beliefs and practices. Language Awareness, 20(2): 81-98.

Zeiss, E., &Isabelli-Garcı́a, C.(2005). The role of asynchronous computer mediated communicationon enhancing cultural awareness. *Computer Assisted Language Learning 18: 151–169.*

Zhao, C., Kuh, G. D., &Carini, R. M. (2005). A comparison of international student and American student engagement in effective educational practices. *The Journal of Higher Education, 76*(2), 209-231.