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Expatriate Perspectives on Language and Communication Issues

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Intercultural communication within a Chinese subsidiary of a Western MNC: Expatriate perspectives on language and communication issues

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Abstract: This study investigates Polish expatriates' stories of encounters with local personnel in a Chinese subsidiary of a Western multinational company. A narrative analysis of the stories produced important insights into Polish-Chinese communication in an intra-subsidiary context. Low proficiency in the host language was a serious obstacle to expatriate socialization and a source of expatriates' exclusion and social isolation in the workplace, which often led to stress, frustration, and negative attitudes toward collaboration with local personnel. Language-related issues prevented the expatriates from acquiring information from Chinese superiors, learning about problems within a team, and participating in decision-making. The findings of this case study relate to communication challenges in the Chinese subsidiary, expatriates' accounts of how they overcame communication difficulties, and their reflections on what fostered and hampered intercultural communication.

Keywords: expatriate, intercultural collaboration, intercultural communication, multinational company (MNC), narrative

1 Introduction

Although business expatriation has been attracting much attention against a backdrop of globalizing business activities, previous studies have mostly explored interactions involving expatriates from the U.S., China, Japan, West Europe, and Nordic countries. Accordingly, little is known about, for example, intercultural collaborations of Polish professionals delegated to geographically

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and culturally distant locations. Besides, prior studies on language in international business have mostly focused on multinational company's (MNC's) language policies and their influence on the headquarters-subsidiary or inter-subsidiary communication, neglecting an intra-subsidiary level of analysis. For example, it is not clear how one company language used as lingua franca in the home subsidiary influences expatriate-host country national communication in the host subsidiary where another company language is used.

Addressing these gaps, we offer an exploratory, qualitative study of six Polish expatriates' accounts of their communication with Chinese employees in Shenyang, Liaoning Province, China, between 2011 and 2015. Their assignment was to train, coach, and advise local employees as part of the venture of building a Chinese subsidiary of a Western European MNC. That production site was a highly multicultural environment involving 1,500 local employees and over 150 international expatriates. The participants were the first Poles the MNC had ever expatriated to a distant location.

This study contributes to MNC communication and expatriate research. First, we draw on narrative inquiry for expatriates' retrospective accounts of intercultural encounters. Second, we respond to calls for more context-specific research on MNC communication (Luo and Shenkar 2006) by empirically investigating interpretations of communication encounters at the intra-subsidiary level between an under-researched group of (Polish) expatriates and culturally distant (Chinese) professionals. Third, we shed light on actual problems and experiences of Central European expatriates in China.

This study focuses on intercultural communication from an international business perspective. We take a process perspective when looking at communication as meaning production, and at intercultural communication as making sense of events and creating shared meanings among individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds (Chen 2017; Piller 2007). After a brief review of prior literature on expatriate-local personnel communication, we present our methodological approach and the role of Polish specialists in the MNC's global strategy. Subsequently, we present the findings, followed by a discussion and concluding remarks of our study and its implications.

2 Previous research on expatriate-local personnel communication

Expatriate-local personnel interactions in MNC subsidiaries are influenced by cultural differences, (culture-specific) communication styles, and languages

used in the workplace (Peltokorpi 2007; Peltokorpi 2008; Peltokorpi 2010; Piekkari 2006; Welch et al. 2005). For example, a shared language does not ensure successful communication due to different sociolinguistic orientations and differences in cultural values manifested through different communication styles, which results in different interpretations of the same messages (Angouri 2013; Björkman et al. 2005; Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1997; Peltokorpi 2007; Peltokorpi 2010).

Language is crucial to communication flows in an MNC, building horizontal inter-unit and headquarters-subsidiary relationships, and establishing informal communication networks (Froese et al. 2012; Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999). Studies of Japanese expatriates in the USA (Takeuchi et al. 2002) and Western expatriates in China (Selmer 2006) show that host language proficiency allows expatriates to acquire the relevant work values, behave appropriately in the workplace, adjust better to the host country (Froese et al. 2012; Peltokorpi 2008; Selmer 2006; Takeuchi et al. 2002), and facilitate intercultural communication in general. Moreover, the proficiency exposes expatriates to more interactions with host country nationals, fosters communication and trust between them, helps understand the host culture, and provides expatriates with access to local networks (Froese 2010; Selmer 2006; Takeuchi et al. 2002; Welch et al. 2005), which facilitates inter-unit communication (Marschan et al. 1997; Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999).

By contrast, insufficient host language proficiency results in expatriates' exclusion from communication networks and limits intercultural interactions in work and non-work contexts (Froese et al. 2012; Peltokorpi 2007; Peltokorpi 2008; Peltokorpi 2010; Selmer 2006; Zhang and Harzing 2016). It also hampers intercultural communication and information flows, and has a negative impact on the general expatriate adjustment (Selmer 2006; Peltokorpi 2008; Zhang and Peltokorpi 2015).

Language is also recognized as a source of power that permeates intercultural communication in MNCs (Charles 2007; Hong and Snell 2008; Marschan et al. 1997; Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999). Having command of the relevant languages enables individuals to play the role of information gatekeepers, to act as language intermediaries between superiors, and grants access to sensitive information (Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999). For example, in the case of local personnel's low competence in the company language and expatriates' low competence in the host language, the locals who act as translators or information nodes may engage in gate-keeping behaviors, manage information flow (Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999; Selmer and Luring 2015), and filter or even change its contents and intent to their advantage (Peltokorpi 2007; Piekkari et al. 2013). Thus, expatriates become dependent on such locals (Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999; Peltokorpi and

Vaara 2014; Heizmann et al. 2018). Local personnel using a host language instead of the company language may in turn lead to negative perceptions of local personnel and to expatriates' frustration, resentment, and sense of exclusion (Peltokorpi 2007; Wright et al. 2001).

Prior research into language and intercultural communication in international business has essentially focused on individuals, cross-cultural teams, headquarters-subsidiaries relationships, between-subsidiary relationships, and MNCs as whole entities (cf. Piekkari 2006). The scarcity of case studies dealing with communication at the subsidiary level (see, e.g., Heizmann et al. 2018; Peltokorpi 2007) calls for further investigation of how cross-cultural collaboration is fostered in a multicultural business setting. Although it has been well-established that cultural values and language play a role in expatriate-local personnel interactions and expatriates' general adjustment, there is still a lack of knowledge concerning several issues. First, little is known about Central European expatriates' communication experiences in a multicultural workplace. Second, the issue of how using different company languages in the home and host subsidiaries influences expatriate-host country national communication is still under-researched. Specifically, in this case study the company language in the Chinese subsidiary is English, whereas in the Polish subsidiary—French. Accordingly, the Poles used English as a third language in China. We assume that using different company languages in the home and host subsidiaries puts expatriates at a disadvantage. It is thus vital to study how a limited ability to speak the company language influences expatriates' interactions with and perceptions of cultural Others, their adjustment in a multicultural business setting, and how they overcome communication barriers.

We aim to fill these knowledge gaps by providing a Polish expatriate perspective on intercultural communication in a Chinese subsidiary of a European MNC. We pose the following questions: (1) What aspects of communication are highlighted in Polish expatriates' stories of intercultural collaboration with Chinese personnel? (2) What communication strategies do Polish expatriates apply to increase intercultural collaboration? (3) What effects does communication with local personnel in a third language have on the expatriates' intercultural adjustment?

3 Methodology

This study explores Polish expatriates' accounts of communication with Chinese personnel in an intra-subsidiary context. The empirical material comprises

expatriates' stories collected in 2016 through semi-structured, narrative interviews. We chose the narrative method as it allows examining socio-cultural and psychological phenomena (Daiute and Lightfoot 2004), e.g. in storytelling (Holmes 1998), identity construction and development (Cook-Gumperz 2009; Galasiński and Galasińska 2008; Ishihara and Menard-Warwick 2018), and allows metacognition (Gertsen and Sørderberg 2011) by enhancing a reflexive understanding of intercultural experiences.

The interviews were first analyzed thematically (Clarke and Braun 2013) to answer research question 1. Then, the relevant stories under each theme were analyzed using a narrative approach to answer research questions 1 and 2.

The empirical material consists of intercultural collaboration stories told by Polish expatriates after their return to Poland. It is unfortunately not complemented with similar stories told by the Chinese employees since we could not get access to the Chinese subsidiary, and thus were also prevented from conducting observations of the actual collaboration processes.

3.1 Chinese subsidiary and the role of Polish specialists in the MNC's global expansion strategy

The MNC is an automotive component manufacturer and the world leader in its industry with a market share of about 20%. It operates in over 150 countries and has several dozen factories in over 15 countries on four continents. Between 2011 and 2015, the MNC built a subsidiary in Shenyang (the scene for the Polish-Chinese encounters) to meet high domestic demand for high-performance components.

Although the MNC already had one factory in Shanghai and one in Shenyang, the Shenyang factory did not satisfy the demand for high-quality products, so building a new factory played a strategic role for the company's growth on the Chinese market. The MNC decided to increase the quality of its products by (a) installing a new machinery park in Shenyang, (b) implementing a new approach to production management, and (c) setting higher production standards. Because a new production process, which functioned well in Europe and in the U.S., was planned to be implemented, reaching these objectives required expatriates' previous experience from factories producing top-quality products. This is why around 150 managers and experts from other subsidiaries were delegated to accelerate a start-up of two new factories in Shenyang and ensure high quality of the initial production. Because the new Chinese subsidiary was a direct copy of the Polish subsidiary (due to its high performance), Polish specialists were sent to participate in that venture.

3.2 Communication in the Chinese subsidiary

The MNC's language policy sets out that local languages may be used in subsidiaries by production foremen and operators, but technologists and managers are required to be able to communicate in the company language. French is used as the company language in most European subsidiaries and English in non-European subsidiaries. Accordingly, local lower-ranked personnel used Chinese in Shenyang, whereas expatriates used English to communicate with Chinese technologists and managers. The MNC offered the Poles a pre-departure English course to facilitate the process of switching from French to English. A specific industry context also affected communication within the Chinese subsidiary. Expatriates enhanced communication by using visual communication, which was introduced via lean manufacturing, a waste reduction system implemented in the host subsidiary.

3.3 Interviewees

One female and five males, aged from 36 to 44, were recruited for our study. One informant used personal contacts to gain access to Polish colleagues delegated to China. Further sampling was carried out according to these criteria: (1) interviewees had to be either managers or specialists, which entailed communication with the Chinese, and (2) they had to have worked in Shenyang for at least one year. Six out of all eight Polish expatriates delegated to China fulfilled the criteria. All Poles had had previous experience interacting with foreigners, gained through short-term assignments, but none of them reported previous experience in China. All interviewees declared they had either good or proficient knowledge of English, although they had used Polish and French in the Polish subsidiary. In Shenyang, they received basic Chinese (Mandarin) language training to deal with every day matters rather than to use at work.

Table 1 provides a list of interviewees' characteristics (for the sake of anonymity, their names were changed), followed by their individual profiles.

Anna is a well-educated manager with a psychology degree, a postgraduate degree in logistics, leadership and personnel in Poland, and an MBA from France. She has been with the MNC for 15 years. She has international experience as she had worked four years in the French subsidiary before going to China. Anna moved to China with her husband and son.

Janusz is an electrotechnician and external auditor. He has worked in the Polish subsidiary for almost 10 years as a production technologist. In China, he was expected to use the management and coaching experience he had gained

Table 1: Interviewees.

Fictitious name	Function in Shenyang	Assignment	Years spent in a Polish subsidiary/ in Shenyang	Previous international experience
Anna	Specialist/ Coordinator	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– To implement lean manufacturing– To coach three Chinese counterparts– To give trainings on production methods to department managers, production masters, and technologists	9/3.5	France
Janusz	Specialist	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– To coach and support the head of quality assurance department	9.5/2	Thailand
Robert	Specialist	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– To support the commissioning and start-up phase of the plant	7/2.5	Numerous European countries
Stefan	Specialist	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– To advise and coach technologists– To implement company methods and conduct internal audits– To coach seven Chinese engineers	7/3	USA, France
Władysław	Specialist	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– To design and develop training matrices for functional personnel– To coach five product managers at the local level	2/2.5	Scotland, France
Artur	Specialist	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– To train three Chinese technologists– To coach one Chinese counterpart to be head of the quality assurance team	8/1.5	France

working for two years as a control manager in a Thai subsidiary. Janusz moved to China with his wife.

Robert, a chemical engineer, took a position as a technologist in Shenyang. He was a member of a team comprised of local employees and supervised by a Chinese manager. Although China was his first expatriation, he had carried out numerous short-term assignments in Europe. Robert went to China with his wife.

Stefan is a mechanical engineer with experience as a maintenance technician specialist. He had had experience in short-term assignments in the US and France. Stefan went to China with his wife and two sons.

Władysław, a chemist with a PhD, had worked as a construction specialist in Poland and maintained the same position in China to work in a team of 20 local specialists supervised by a French manager. He is internationally experienced;

he has worked for five years in a Scottish subsidiary and for over a year in a French one. His main motivation behind going to China was to “gain more intercultural experiences”. Władysław went to China with his wife and two children.

Artur is an industrial engineer with 10 years of experience as a quality assurance specialist. Before going to Shenyang, he had trained a Chinese employee in the Polish subsidiary for the position of a quality assurance specialist and then continued coaching her in Shenyang. Artur had worked for one and a half years in a French subsidiary. He went to China with his wife and two children.

3.4 Interviewees’ “expert” background

The Polish subsidiary was established in the mid-1990s. It currently employs over 4,000 people and ranks third in the MNC’s production capacity. In terms of internal management culture, we learned during the informal talks held in the concluding phase of the narrative interviews (see Section 3.8 Procedure) that it remains somehow hierarchical, although the headquarters has sought to introduce more autonomy by dividing the organizational structure into numerous managerial levels. However, Poles are quite dependent on management in regards to budget decisions. Discipline and authority are favored in the Polish subsidiary and employees tend to favor hierarchy, e.g. by pushing decision-making up the organizational hierarchy. Whereas paternalistic leadership style (Farh and Cheng 2000) is still common in such post-transition countries as Poland (Bluhm et al. 2014), interviewees referred to their style as a “specialist” style—individuals are expected to become specialists in a specific field and then they are given more autonomy (although they are still clearly hierarchized). They also regarded themselves as specialists due to their advanced knowledge of production management systems, which allowed them to take specialist positions in China; being selected for expatriation was regarded as a form of acknowledgment of their expertise.

3.5 Local employees

We could not interview Chinese employees, but through interviews with the Poles we learned that most of them were highly educated, with a bachelor’s degree or higher (industrial engineering, chemical engineering, etc.). The goal of the collaboration with expatriates was to upgrade their professional skills. Part of the local personnel were hired from the company’s older subsidiary in

Shenyang, but most of them were headhunted from other Chinese companies and foreign MNCs based in China; about one third of them had experiences working with foreigners. It was required that all higher-level personnel hired by the new subsidiary had a fluent command of English—which was checked by a native English speaker through an oral interview. The Chinese personnel received no English-language training at the Chinese site.

3.6 Site

Interviews were carried out in one of the Polish researchers' place of residence. The friendly atmosphere of the house helped to make interviewees feel comfortable. They could speak freely and willingly told stories, in some cases very personal ones, through which they also expressed their emotions in relation to experiences from the time spent in Shenyang.

3.7 The role of the interviewer in the construction of meanings

Interviews were conducted by the first author who himself is Polish. His role was constitutive in the construction of meanings, because (1) interviews were performed at his initiative; (2) he asked follow-up questions about specific topics and hence influenced the interpretation of the material. A shared Polish nationality between the authors and the expatriates played a role in data collection and analysis. First, expatriates were found thanks to personal contacts between the authors and one of the expatriates who further encouraged other colleagues to participate in the study. Second, conducting the interviews in Polish allowed the gathering of rich and emotionally laden stories; this suggests that interviewees found the interviewer trustworthy enough to share their critical experiences with him, presumably expecting that he would understand their perspectives owing to the shared nationality, language, and culture. Third, a shared cultural background facilitated interpretation of the material as some of the expatriates' perspectives were highly culture-specific.

3.8 Procedure

The procedure was designed using recommendations given by Bauer and Gaskell (2000). Each interview lasted 60–90 minutes. Interviewees were initially prompted for stories: "Please, tell me (a story) about your experiences with your co-workers in China". In the narration phase, interviewees were encouraged to

continue the storytelling both verbally and non-verbally. Having delivered a story, they were asked detailed questions in order to focus on critical events: “Can you think of something particularly surprising/frustrating/difficult/positive/thought-provoking/challenging?” (cf. Gertsen and Sørderberg 2011). In the concluding phase, the interviewer asked why-questions and took notes with paper and pencil.

The interviewer conducted all interviews in Polish to obtain elaborate and multi-faceted stories. He audio-recorded the interviews (with the interviewees’ consent) and transcribed them verbatim. The material was further analyzed thematically by the interviewer (the first author) and the third author to excerpt (a) interviewees’ background data; (b) contextual information concerning the Polish subsidiary and interviewees’ role in China; (c) stories about collaboration with the local personnel. In order to include the second author in the analysis and discussion of the findings, the first author, who has a background in English philology, translated the interviews into English as literally as possible to faithfully retain the original meanings.

3.9 Analysis and presentation of the material

The interviews were analyzed thematically according to the guidelines of Charmaz (2014), and Strauss and Corbin (1998) to excerpt stories about intercultural communication and to establish patterns relevant to research question 1. Based on the patterns, we established three main themes which will serve to structure the findings. Further, all three authors conducted narrative analyses of the translated empirical material in order to answer research questions 2 and 3, which we present in the ensuing sections.

4 Findings

4.1 Communication challenges in the Chinese subsidiary

New work, life, and communication contexts were a challenge to the Poles. In work contexts, serious communication problems arose in their initial encounters with the locals, which is evident in Robert’s story:

My first encounter [= clash] with my [Chinese] superior was... nonsense. There was a language barrier as it took me almost *half a year* to get used to Chinese English, but later it was fine. So, at the beginning he simply could not understand me and I could not

understand a single bloody thing he was saying to me. I remember that the first day there... turned into... it's a convenient excuse but let's call it "cultural problems". Any attempt to make jokes, rather obvious to me, caused zero reactions in him, so we could not establish this... relation. He was stressed, because I was white. He did not know how to behave. He said that to me... that he did not know how he should... behave, because I was the first expatriate he had ever collaborated with and he was supposed to be my boss... and he did not know, he could not... I heard all the time: "I do not know, I do not understand, I do not know, I do not understand". From the first day, his behavior constantly stressed me out. He tried to be nice, though... (Robert)

The narrator ascribes his miscommunication to both a language and a cultural barrier. He recalls this communication as something stressful for himself ("his behavior constantly stressed me out") and his Chinese superior who keeps repeating "I do not know, I do not understand" as if he was in a panic. Interestingly, he terms his 'cultural' perspective on this miscommunication as "a convenient excuse" as if he expected the interviewer to find it trivial. Nevertheless, later in the story, he suggests that expatriates' initial communication problems derived from their insufficient (pre-departure) cultural preparation for collaboration with Chinese personnel:

We were sent there without... any preparation for working in a different cultural circle. China is far different from France, Romania, or Hungary. We have lots of factories in Eastern, Southern, and Northern Europe—but these are pretty much the same. We think in a similar way, we have the same working style. But what I saw there... I was completely unprepared for that. (Robert)

All interviewees highlighted that face-to-face communication with local employees was problematic due to using English as company language. Besides difficulties in understanding a Chinese accent, they tentatively ascribed problems with creating shared meanings to different ways of teaching English in Poland and China. Also insufficient knowledge of the company jargon was viewed as a serious obstacle and source of misunderstandings. Below, Artur recalls such problems:

We are taught English here, in Europe, in a different manner. We are taught more... British English rather than American English. Moreover, we use a lot of abbreviations in our company. I was used to these abbreviations before going to China, but... in French. And when I went there, the same things were named completely differently. These were American abbreviations. So a lot of misunderstandings also resulted from misusing abbreviations. And they, for example, nodded their heads that they understand everything: "Yes, yes". The next day, when it came to verifying what they had done, how they had understood [instructions], then it turned out that they had not understood anything. But the Chinese have something in their culture like... that they cannot acknowledge that [there is something] they do not know. So it is hard when somebody does not understand these abbreviations and also cannot admit it. Even they [the locals] sometimes did not understand one another at the meetings. (Artur)

The narrator suggests that Polish expatriates had problems with understanding company jargon because they used French as the company language in Poland. In China they had to switch from French to English, which entailed either translation of the previously acquired terminology or learning new company jargon, e.g. abbreviations of products, company positions, and abbreviations used in production management. Besides, the narrator recalls that the locals had difficulties understanding English abbreviations, too, which were presumably caused by the implementation of new production processes and management systems (which entailed acquiring new terminology).

Another problem was Chinese employees' unwillingness to communicate in English. Some Poles ascribed it to the locals' insufficient English proficiency, whereas others believed speaking a mother tongue was more natural and convenient. Stefan describes how the omnipresent Chinese language (Mandarin) hindered collaboration with his team of Chinese technicians and how it aroused a feeling of uncertainty and restricted his ability to react to potential problems:

I was seated in one office with them, the whole three years. And during these three years, I was able to understand virtually nothing from their conversations, so I did not know what was going on around me. They were discussing something, and I even heard my name a few times, but I did not know what they were talking about. I did not know whether to react or not, or if they needed some help from me. I would often turn back and ask: "What are you talking about"? And they would explain the thing to me, and then it would turn out that I could help. They would only approach me and tell me about some specific problem. But, normally, they tried to solve most problems among themselves. (Stefan)

Another interviewee reflected on speaking a mother tongue at a workplace as a strategy to undermine the expatriate's position. Władysław told us a story about his difficult collaboration with a Chinese specialist who was on his team of construction specialists (Władysław was the only non-Chinese member). She also served as an intermediary between a French manager and the team, and communicated the manager's instructions.

She was supposed to participate in meetings, communicate with the boss, and inform us about his decisions, instructions, and so on. And she did inform us... oftentimes in Mandarin. When she communicated something and I was out of office, she "forgot" to pass it on to me. And then the boss demanded something, but I did not know what. He did not get anything from me as I did not know. And here comes her mentality, typical of a Chinese person,

I did say that!

And I'd say:

Maybe you did, but not to me.

But I cannot do everything.

But you can at least say it in English, as everybody knows English here.

I had such a situation a few times more after that. It happened on several occasions, I experienced that... she wanted to somehow undermine me. She knew why I had come there and she was kind of afraid that I could replace her, take her position, right? (Władysław)

The narrator constructs himself as being in opposition to his Chinese co-worker. He recounts collaboration with her as a power struggle between an expatriate and a local employee who feels threatened by the expatriate. He assumes his colleague speaks Mandarin to the team deliberately to prevent him from understanding his superior’s instructions and, consequently, from doing his job. Although it is impossible to ascertain the true intentions of the Chinese co-worker based on this story alone, it is evident that the narrator ascribes his inability to perform well to the lack of information from his manager. He blames his Chinese colleague for the poor communication flow.

4.2 Overcoming communication difficulties in the Chinese subsidiary—personal accounts

Expatriates devised ad hoc strategies (see Table 2) to overcome communication difficulties caused by misunderstandings, ambiguity, and uncertainty. For example, Władysław replicated Chinese employees’ behaviors to maintain enjoyable interactions.

Table 2: Strategies devised by Polish expatriates to facilitate communication and collaboration with Chinese employees.

Problem	Strategy
<i>Ambiguous nodding/understatements</i>	<i>Repetition</i>
“There were lots of understatements there. They, e.g., nod their heads to show they understand everything: ‘Yes, yes’. The next day, (...) it turned out that they had understood nothing.” (Artur)	“I asked them to repeat exactly what they were supposed to do.” (Artur)
“I finally started taking breaks [during my presentations] and asking them questions to see if they understood everything. And they did not respond to my questions. They just nodded—everything was clear to them. Later on, the ‘everything’ turned out to be not so clear and when we were implementing the methods, then... it was not clear to them at all.” (Anna)	<i>Getting to know the interactant better</i>
	“The more you work with a given person, the more you talk to them, spend time with them, then you get to know that person better and you start understanding that person intuitively...” (Artur)
	<i>Replication of interactants’ behaviors</i>
	“I often nodded back. Sometimes I had to ‘walk in their shoes’ and behave like them. That let me get many things faster.” (Władysław)

(continued)

Table 2: (continued)

Problem	Strategy
<i>Difficulty in understanding figurative language</i> “Sometimes, I told them to do something, either I tried to joke and give them some example, or a kind of funny comparison to something, and they read it entirely seriously.” (Anna)	<i>Asking clarifying questions</i> “I finally started taking breaks [during my presentations] and asking them questions to see if they understood everything.” (Anna) <i>Communicating literally</i> “You needed to speak really clearly and simply... and very literally, using no metaphors, no jokes, no similes, no comparisons to something abstract, because that simply does not work with them.” (Anna)
<i>Lack of feedback</i> “But when you spoke, and it was quick, they often did not ask you further questions if they did not understand, and that was a source of problems.” (Stefan)	<i>Summarizing e-mail</i> “So what we often did was that (...) we had a meeting and afterwards I sent them an e-mail with a summarized task the receiver was supposed to do. And that worked fine.” (Stefan) <i>Network-based communication</i> “One of my employees told me..., because I sent him a message via a chat program, (...) ‘You know what? Chatting with you is much better than talking, because I understand you better [this way].’ So they gave me such signals from time to time.” (Stefan)
<i>Uncertainty about the right interpretation of the message</i> “Using the same words, talking to a white [person], I always knew, more or less, what to expect. Talking to or asking a Chinese person the same question, I <i>never</i> knew what answer I could get.” (Robert; original emphasis)	<i>Asking for confirmation</i> “I had to confirm every single thing three, four, five times with the Chinese.” (Robert)
<i>Lack of direct communication approachability</i> “... and it was difficult if you did not get to people via their manager... then there was no progress, you could not push anything through. That was <i>difficult</i> .” (Stefan; original emphasis)	<i>Communicating via the superior</i> “I learned then how to communicate with the Chinese, because you have to talk to them via their manager.” (Stefan)

I often nodded back. I took on their mentality and did what they did: nodded, smiled, etc. Even when I needed something very much, and urgently, I knew it would be difficult to get it due to all the steps you need to go through with them. But this nodding, smiling... I was not trying to please them but rather observing how they do it. (Władysław)

The narrator positions himself as an observer who tries to adapt to a group of local employees by, first, trying to understand their way of thinking, and,

second, by mirroring their behaviors. He learns that local employees' ways of collaboration work well for them, so he restrains himself from changing their behaviors and thus shows respect for their working and communication styles.

In another story, Stefan describes his rule of thumb according to which communicating via the superior increased the efficacy of expatriate-local employee contact. Otherwise, the communication was often one-directional and led to poor or no performance.

First, you go to the boss of the person you will collaborate with and you explain what needs to be done. The boss delegates certain duties to his subordinate and then you can approach that subordinate and explain what he needs to do, because any attempt to work directly with them, without the participation of their boss, it usually failed—it only came down to a talk, and they said: “Yes, yes”, and they continued doing their own thing. So there was a rule that you needed to get to people via the boss. (Stefan)

The narrator clearly describes a communication step-by-step sequence for initiating collaboration with Chinese co-workers. This indirect communication consisted of three phases: expatriate to superior (in English), superior to employee (in Mandarin/English, depending on the superior), and expatriate to employee (in English). Stefan states that any deviation from this system ended in placating him with nodding, while the work went ignored. The story shows that the strategy resulted from some cultural learning that took place among expatriates. Terming the strategy a “rule”, the narrator implies the expatriates worked it out collaborating with the Chinese employees. It is likely the Poles had learned about the strong hierarchy in the Chinese subsidiary and swiftly adapted to it as they themselves came from a hierarchical working environment.

Anna recalls how she tried to cope with difficulties in social communication with the locals:

Sometimes I told them [three local subordinates] to do something, either I tried to joke and give them some example, or a funny comparison to something, and they read it entirely seriously. And I even analyzed such funny situations with my husband... [and we concluded] that there are no such things as jokes or metaphors in Mandarin, in general, or metaphors, or similes, such quite abstract ones... Because whenever I tried to use them, these people did not understand them at all, you know? I had such situations also with my Chinese teacher with whom I tried to joke and use various metaphors or allegories and she did not understand me at all, so I concluded that it was something entirely alien to them. You needed to speak really clearly and simply... and *very* literally, using no metaphors, no jokes, no similes, no comparisons to something abstract, because that simply does not work with them. (Anna)

The narrator shows high communicative awareness by analyzing unsuccessful social communication with the locals through verbal humor. Furthermore, this

aspect of communication played an important role for her as it was even a theme of family discussions. Even if she extrapolates from her observations and implies that the Chinese had difficulty with understanding her humor and figurative language, it is likely that this social miscommunication was caused by the way humor was communicated. As Anna reflects elsewhere, “my English was not so perfect to overcome it [problems with understanding the locals], as my French is definitely better than English. So it took me some time to understand what a Chinese person has in mind speaking English.” That is why speaking “really clearly” worked in that context.

4.3 Expatriate reflections on what fostered or hampered their intercultural communication

The interviewees emphasized that Mandarin was spoken during social events. However, they expressed their understanding for using the mother tongue if it was understood by the majority of the group. This reflection can be interpreted in the context of expatriates’ previous experiences in Poland which is a highly monolingual and monocultural country where it is common that people converse in Polish even when eating in the presence of foreigners. But although the interviewees did relate speaking English to showing an open attitude toward foreigners, they could at the same time perceive it as unnecessary, incomprehensible, or—when asked to speak English—as an obligation to be open. For example, in the following interview excerpt, Stefan views his Polish colleague’s suggestion about speaking English as something unnatural and “rare”:

When you went out for dinner and there was one foreigner and all the others were Chinese, then they did not speak English just because of me. Imagine a Frenchman coming to Poland and going out for dinner with a bunch of Poles. They will not speak French just so that that Frenchman understands. That is obvious. We had a situation with our Polish colleague who always said: “Do not speak Polish. Speak only English as he does not know Polish.” He kind of forced us to get opened to that. But, it is rare, because it is much easier to speak your own language if most people speak that language, rather than adjust yourself to one person. It worked this way in China. They are not going to speak English only for me. (Stefan)

Stefan fully understands the rationale for using a local language in the presence of foreigners. This finding appears puzzling as the expatriate seems to favor convenience over enhancing mutual understanding and integration.

Expatriates’ inability to speak Mandarin limited integration at social events, because they could not engage in dinner-table conversations. This made them feel awkward, excluded, and gave them a feeling of not belonging to the group. Low

Mandarin proficiency prevented integration and resulted in their feeling of being ignored, and—in the long run—led them to prefer social isolation at the workplace:

One day I thought, “Ok, I am going to eat lunch with the Chinese.” I gave up after a week. I said, “No, thank you, I do not want to as it does not add any real value.” I sat there on my own and I heard them speak Mandarin... And I said, “Enough!” When two or three Chinese people met at the table, nobody was interested in you, never... So I said, “If I am to sit on my own here? then I prefer to sit on my own there?” (Janusz)

Speaking Mandarin was also necessary to participate in the decision-making process. Using Mandarin at the meetings inhibited expatriate-local employee communication and collaboration, and created a feeling among the expatriates of not belonging to the work group.

Although the boss held the meetings in English, they discussed everything in Mandarin. And we are sitting there, with my boss, as they are talking Mandarin, and we do not know what is going on. Somebody tries to translate that, but they have been talking for twenty minutes, and somebody translates that for two minutes. And then we had another meeting with other things discussed in Mandarin, not in English. They easily switched into Mandarin and discussed everything among themselves, even if we were a part of the group, too. And the decision was taken—without us. (Władysław)

Some Polish expatriates ascribed collaboration difficulties to an insufficient understanding of the subject matter, e.g. the methods to be implemented. Although they reasoned that providing a clear and unambiguous message fostered intercultural communication, Stefan’s story shows that comprehensible instructions do not necessarily ensure effective manager or employee performance. In such cases, additional explanations are required.

They often started to apply a method, but they did not understand completely *why* they should apply it, which became apparent after a few months. I think they did not apply those methods deeply enough, because they were not clear enough. So then additional explanations were needed. And when they knew *why* and *what for*, then it was much easier. Communication with managers looked different as well. I had a particularly resistant manager, who resisted for a very long time, but later it turned out that he did not understand what we wanted to implement and why. At some point, the things were moving in such a bad direction that I said, “That is enough! I have to arrange a meeting with that manager and his four masters, and I need to talk to them, as something is apparently not working here.” And just after the meeting, he comes up to me and says, “Listen, I understand everything now, I know everything, and it is going to be good now.” And then something switched in his head, maybe my boss talked to him as well? In any event, things moved much, much better with him after that. (Stefan; original emphasis)

The narrator implies that besides clear instructions and understanding the essence of the implemented method, being convinced by somebody higher in

hierarchy, or at the same managerial level, may have also been a decisive factor in enhancing performance. Apparently, the cultural category of hierarchy served the Poles as a tool for making sense of their collaborations with the Chinese. Being unable to account for a change of the local employee's behavior, the narrator applies a cultural lens to understand that change.

Another communication obstacle was lack of feedback, which often led to understatements, misunderstandings, delays in task performance, and even financial losses. Lack of feedback also caused uncertainty and a feeling of being ignored. Interviewees described it as something difficult, surprising, sometimes frustrating, and something different from their previous collaboration experiences. The Chinese did not ask any questions during seminars and training sessions when receiving oral or written recommendations. To stimulate asking questions or getting feedback, Polish expatriates devised strategies that helped them determine the extent to which the message was understood (Table 2). However, these strategies sometimes failed if, for example, being asked about understanding an instruction, Chinese colleagues only nodded or just said “Yes, everything is OK,” or if they skipped e-mails with meeting minutes.

What finally enhanced communication and collaboration was an on-site cross-cultural training, which lasted between two to five days. An expatriate's task was to bring one Chinese person to such a training, and then they participated in interactive games aimed at “fostering, strengthening, and improving communication.” (Janusz)

It [the training] gave me a deeper understanding of typical Chinese behaviors. We could compare them with the behaviors of Europeans, Americans, or others. We could see how others coped with them, as other expatriates also told [us] about their experiences in a Chinese environment. The Chinese also told us about their experiences with us (...). That allowed us to draw some conclusions about how to behave to attain your goals, because you came here to work, right? So it [that work] needs to be done. (Władysław)

All expatriates appreciated the training as it helped them strengthen collaboration and improve their understanding of some culture-specific behaviors of Chinese employees. For example, one informant stressed he had learned about building trust with Chinese counterparts.

Importantly, cross-cultural training increased expatriates' cultural self-awareness:

You could get to know yourself better, not only to improve communication skills with the Chinese, but your own, too. We could get to know each other, what one person thinks of the other, who prefers a particular working style. That was really cool. (Janusz)

Nevertheless, all interviewees highlighted the training had been delivered too late—between one and one and a half years after the Poles arrived in China.

5 Discussion and conclusion

This study contributes to intercultural communication in MNCs by exploring Polish expatriates' stories of their encounters with Chinese personnel in a Chinese subsidiary of a Western MNC. With regard to research question 1, the stories revealed communication challenges in the Chinese subsidiary, expatriates' individual strategies to mitigate communication difficulties, and their reflections on the factors that hampered or fostered intercultural communication.

We found that expatriates-local personnel collaboration was based on direct, person-to-person communication in English, which was a third language for the Poles who had used Polish and French in the home subsidiary. The industry context also played a role in the expatriate-local personnel communication—which was enhanced by visual communication used during seminars, meetings, and trainings. Such communication resulted from the production and management method implemented in the subsidiary, i.e. lean manufacturing, which entails using visual management techniques to communicate with organizational members in a more effective, open, and attractive manner, and thereby to promote a sharing work culture in an organization (cf. Galsworth 2005; Ware 2004). Besides, the Poles often had to resort to indirect communication by relaying messages to Chinese employees through their superiors, which helped them collaborate with the Chinese who otherwise ignored their messages. This strategy is consistent with the expatriates' "specialist" style and results from their unclear position in the hierarchy (they only served a supportive function). Nevertheless, the cultural effect of this style may, to some degree, alleviate potential culture-based miscommunication. This finding suggests that further research may provide insight into the relationship between leadership style and expatriate-local employee communication.

On the one hand, problems with understanding oral messages suggest a determining effect of English proficiency on effective intercultural communication. While the Poles had difficulty understanding Chinese accents in English and English abbreviations of company jargon, figurative messages communicated by them in English were ambiguous for the locals. Moreover, whereas expatriates were given a basic Mandarin course, Chinese employees received no such English-language training by the MNC. Proficiency in a shared language is critical for the exchange of explicit and tacit knowledge (Mäkelä et al. 2007; Welch et al. 2005), and so is the role of expatriate managers in this exchange

(Gamble 2003; Heizmann et al. 2018). Given that cultural distance has a negative effect on knowledge exchange due to culture-based misunderstandings and reduced communication (Ambos and Ambos 2009), more equal distribution of language skills could have enhanced such exchange.

Omnipresent Mandarin prevented expatriates from acquiring information from Chinese superiors, learning about problems within a team, and participating in the decision-making processes. As a result, expatriates were deprived of equal access to content-related material. Besides this obstacle to attaining transactional goals, also relational goals could not be met (Holmes 2005), because Mandarin prevented expatriates' inclusion and equal access to colleagues and workplace activities.

On the other hand, in line with prior research, English does not ensure efficient intercultural communication (Angouri 2013; Björkman et al. 2005; Peltokorpi 2007) nor does it ensure that things will get done by the local workforce (Nair-Venugopal 2015). Expatriates' stories showed that low host language proficiency hampered expatriate-local employee communication. This finding contributes to research on the role of host language in expatriate work-related adjustment (Peltokorpi 2008; Selmer 2006; Takeuchi et al. 2002; Zhang and Peltokorpi 2015) by indicating that low host language proficiency hampers expatriate-local personnel socialization and causes expatriates' exclusion, social isolation, and the feeling of being ignored or not belonging to the group. Furthermore, given previous studies of expatriates' perceptions of using local languages at a workplace (e.g., Wright et al. 2001), expatriates' stories revealed that speaking Mandarin in the presence of expatriates led to suspicion that the Chinese may have had evil intentions; one interviewee implied that the local employees used Mandarin deliberately to prevent expatriates from understanding instructions, which suggests applying code switching to regain decreasing power (Hinds et al. 2014).

Chinese “ambiguous nodding” may have been used to avoid further communication with expatriates. Although the Chinese were expected to ask for clarifications, it is possible that they did not, because that could have been interpreted by the Poles as a sign of weakness or ignorance. Since hiding ignorance may be more important than telling the truth (Faure and Fang 2008), the Chinese behavior can be regarded as a means to save face (Bond 1991; Ting-Toomey 2005; cf. Peltokorpi 2010). The “ambiguous nodding” was interpreted by Polish expatriates in cultural terms (Artur: “The Chinese have something in their culture like... that they cannot acknowledge that [there is something] they do not know”).

With regard to research question 2, Poles developed individual strategies to overcome communication barriers related to using English as a company language, to increase reciprocal understanding of messages, and to increase

intercultural contact. These were repetition, adjustment to Chinese interactants' behaviors, asking clarifying questions, asking for confirmation, or summarizing the message through e-mail, etc. Although such communication strategies may work in Polish business contexts, some of them may inadvertently have posed a threat to the Chinese interlocutor's face, especially if applied in public. By demanding feedback at scheduled meetings, expatriates may have shown little intercultural sensitivity, i.e. the affective aspect of intercultural competence being the desire to understand, accept, and appreciate cultural differences (Chen and Starosta 1997), which is necessary for successful intercultural interactions (Chen and Starosta 1997; Graf 2004; Moran et al. 2007). Even if they sought to work out strategies for enhancing communication, such strategies often did not alleviate ambiguity or uncertainty, and may have turned out to be counterproductive for collaboration. By contrast, demonstrating respect by replicating local employees' communication behaviors showed that although collaboration was more time-consuming for expatriates, it was effective in the long run.

The abovementioned strategies differ from those previously reported in the literature. For instance, Peltokorpi (2007) has shown that Nordic expatriates in Japan used culture-congruent strategies to maintain intercultural interactions with local personnel, such as informal meetings with local managers and meetings with local employees without their local managers whose presence could affect smooth expatriate-local employee work relations. Our findings hence contribute to studies of expatriates' tactics to increase intercultural communication and information flow in foreign subsidiaries.

With regard to research question 3, we exposed negative components of intercultural adjustments (Beaven 2007). The expatriates' inability to speak Mandarin, followed by difficulties to socialize and integrate with the team, often led to stress, frustration, and even to negative attitudes toward collaboration in general. Consistent with the literature suggesting that cultural fatigue or shock may turn into hostile attitudes toward host nationals (Selmer 1999) and lower expatriate performance (Eschbach et al. 2001), this finding points out a crucial role of relevant foreign language proficiency. Our contribution is that we do not merely enumerate the difficulties met, but we allow interviewees to reflect on the strategies they developed to better cope with the challenges and pave the way for better communication and collaboration.

Our study also showed that little attention was paid to adequate preparation of expatriates for their assignment, e.g. by delivering a pre-departure training that lets expatriates and their families learn about the host culture, people, and all the changes to be made in the families' lives (Eschbach et al. 2001). Such a practice, if applied, could have lowered expatriates' uncertainty toward living in a new environment and mitigate the results of culture shock.

6 Implications

Future research can continue to explore the impact of cultural sensitivity and agility on intercultural collaborations in MNCs. Our findings indicate that the ability to attain communication goals does not automatically lead to effective collaboration. Respecting cultural differences in behaviors, even at the cost of communication, may facilitate collaboration in certain cultural contexts.

Narrative interviewing could be used by researchers and expatriates' mentors to gain more insight into their perceptions and interpretations of intercultural encounters, and to show where communication can be improved, intercultural trust built, and intercultural communication competence developed (Gertsen and Søderberg 2011; Søderberg 2017).

In practical terms, this case study shows that companies should focus more on expatriates' cultural preparation. Besides, our findings suggest the need for foreign language courses, which have been found to increase headquarters-subsidary and inter-unit communication flows (Charles and Marschan-Piekkari 2002; Harzing et al. 2011). Finally, providing a mentor experienced in the host culture would let expatriates voice their problems and help them handle in-company operations, and adjust to a new living environment.

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