

# LCT - Outcomes of workshop and round table (Sept. 2012) REPORT

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The Language and Culture in Tourism project (funded by UCL Enterprise under its Knowledge Transfer Champion scheme) included two half-day Public Engagement events (supported by The Academy Hotel, The Montague on the Gardens Hotel, YHA and the UCL Grand Challenge of Intercultural Interaction):

- Workshop (14 Sept. 2012) – Intercultural communication for tourism professionals
- Round table (21 Sept. 2012) – Communicating in London's tourism industry

This document (drafted by Dr Clyde Ancarno) reports and evaluates the outcome of these two events.

## Round table

The round table was intended to gather a diverse range of professionals and academics interested in reflecting and exchanging ideas around the topic of 'Communicating in London's tourism industry'. The event was convened by Dr Clyde Ancarno, Project Leader of LCT. There were two guest speakers:

- Mr Federico Ciampi, Hotel manager The Academy Hotel, London
- Dr Jo Angouri, Senior Lecturer in Intercultural Communication and Linguistics at the University of the West of England, Bristol

This event was organised as follows:

10.00-10.15	<b>Welcome by Dr Clyde Ancarno</b>
10.15-11.00	<b>Communicative practices in tourism and tourism businesses' outlook on communication skills.</b> Presentation by <b>Mr Federico Ciampi</b> followed by group work.
11.00-11.25	<b>Tea break</b>
11.25-12.10	<b>Intercultural communication in the workplace.</b> Presentation by <b>Dr Jo Angouri</b> followed by group work.
12.10-1.00	<b>Round table session</b>
1.00-2.00	<b>Lunch</b>

The people present (list below) included professionals working in hotels and hostels in managerial and frontline roles and academics from a diverse range of disciplines (e.g. Intercultural Communication, Tourism and Travel, Cross-Cultural Management). List of attendees:

### **Dr Clyde Ancarno**

Research Associate - Project Leader of Language and Culture in Tourism project (LCT)  
Researches Intercultural Communication in Tourism  
UCL

### **Mr Matthew Edwards**

Deputy Manager  
YHA London St Pauls

**Dr Jo Angouri**

Senior Lecturer in Intercultural Communication and Linguistics  
Researches Intercultural Communication in the workplace  
UWE

**Prof Zhu Hua**

Professor of Applied Linguistics and Communication  
Researches Intercultural Communication  
Birkbeck College – University of London

**Ms Marika Beecherl**

Front Office Manager  
Montague on the Gardens Hotel  
Red Carnation Hotels

**Ms Becky Hudgell**

Hostel Manager  
YHA London Oxford Street

**Dr Noreen Breakey**

Lecturer in the Hotel and Hospitality Management Stream  
Researches Sustainable Visitor Usage of the World's Existing, Developing, and Potential Tourism Destinations  
University of Queensland (Australia, School of Tourism)

**Dr Gerdi Quist**

Lecturer in Dutch  
Researches Language-and-Culture Teaching  
UCL

**Mr Federico Ciampi**

General Manager  
The Academy Hotel

**Dr Caroline Tie**

Lecturer in Tourism and Hospitality Management  
University of Bedfordshire

**Dr Barbara Czarnecka**

Lecturer in Marketing  
University of Bedfordshire

**Ms Issa Torres**

Research Assistant - Institute for Tourism Research (INTOUR)  
University of Bedfordshire

In the following paragraphs, I will point to some of the questions having arisen from the discussions which occurred during this round table event. Federico Ciampi and Jo Angouri's presentations lasted approximately 25 minutes each and were both followed by a question-answer session. As a professional with thirteen years of experience of working in the hospitality industry across the world, Federico Ciampi kindly shared his views on the topic of 'Communication in London's tourism industry'. Jo Angouri's presentation on 'Intercultural Encounters in Tourism', whose area of expertise lies in Intercultural Communication (particularly in professional contexts), provided a useful insight into intercultural corporate communication, problematising the notions of culture and globalisation.

**Questions addressed during the round table discussion**

Discussions having arisen from the two above-mentioned presentations were lively and insightful. This meant that less time than anticipated was dedicated to the round table discussion per se, for discussions occurred at various stages in the morning (e.g. time for questions and answers after the presentations). This relative flexibility of the event was agreed upon as a group and proved extremely useful. I certainly felt that it allowed participants to yield ideas related to the debate under discussion in ways which would not have been possible should we have had, on this particular occasion, a rigid approach to time-keeping. The following section of this report on the round table presents some of the questions having arisen during (but not only) the round table discussion. These are meant to show the breadth of the debate having occurred on the day. Questions which were discussed include the following:

- **In communicating with colleagues and guests/customers, what sort of challenges do tourism professionals face?**

Most of the challenges participants mentioned were language-related. Professionals' lack of vocabulary and issues they face with particular politeness strategies were alluded to alongside with issues related to the 'absence of a common language'. The latter referred to situations where staff and guests/customers do not share a common language and thus rely significantly on non-verbal cues.

Issues specific to interactions among colleagues or 'backstage' form of communication were also briefly discussed (this follows Goffman's dramaturgical perspective on social interaction which leads him to distinguish 'backstage' and 'frontstage' behaviour). In that regard, situations where there might be language-related issues or differences in terms of communicative behaviour/competence and how these may be overcome were alluded to.

It was suggested that when such issues are envisaged in relation to interactions between staff and guests we should bear in mind the critical question 'Are both people [parties] trying?'. This question was meant to express the idea that at times people may not be communicatively cooperative and even cause (consciously or not) communication breakdown. In that regard, it was noted that the reverse is also true, namely some people are particularly skilful (again, consciously or not) in supporting successful communicative situations.

Other challenges cited include the variety of guests/customers tourism professionals have to interact with. The importance of patience for successful communication was singled out. Discussants also referred to the extent to which expectations related to what communication entails in the context of tourism may also become a challenge to communication. It was suggested that perhaps the limited understanding of these expectations by some staff can at times hinder communication (e.g. guests' expectations). Although the usefulness of interpreting body language was mentioned several times throughout the morning, the latter was also seen to represent a potential challenge to successful communication in that it is not always straightforward to interpret. The way in which body language may be interpreted differently depending on the cultural background [read 'nationality'] of the guest was alluded to. For example, participants referred to how eye contact may be seen as an acceptable and necessary element of communication by some and as offensive by others. They also mentioned that the interconnectedness between communication and 'settings' could also be challenging. To illustrate this point, the sometimes 'unrealistic' expectation of universal standards by guests in hotels/hostels was alluded to. The discrepancies in terms of the services offered by 4\* hotels/hostels across countries but also within countries. The difference in terms of room accommodation standards in the United States and the UK were used as specific examples. These examples stressed that people's expectations in customer service skills can vary greatly and can sometimes be bound to nationality.

The issues pertaining to the ways in which guests' expectations can be managed were also mentioned. Extreme examples of guests arriving in hostels and expecting the service comparable to that of hotels (e.g. room service) were brought up during this discussion.

The high pressure work context of the hospitality industry was also debated. It was emphasised that hospitality is a sector of the tourism industry, which, unlike most other sectors of this industry (e.g. retail businesses, tour guides, travel agencies) operate 24/7. It was mentioned that guests' lack of awareness of the long hours inherent to this industry sector sometimes led some of them to mistake staff's tiredness, for example, for lack of professionalism.

Finally, it was stressed that in addition to the importance of paying attention to what is said in the course of conversation and to the difficulty in interpreting what is said (see language-related issues), another challenge of communication in tourism was what people 'do not say'. This was meant to be critical in relation to guests because what they do not say may lead to their decision not to return to a particular hotel/shop/city, particularly when they may have felt the quality of service was not as they expected it. This point seemed to bear particular relevance to the professionals present and for whom a decision 'not to return' is equated with a loss of income.

- **Do all tourism professionals require the same communication skills?**

Upon reflecting on the ways in which staff build a relationship with their guests/customers, it was suggested that this process of building a relationship involved life skills which were developed from the day we were born. Communication skills were therefore perceived to be the same for everybody and issues were considered to lie in the ways in which these skills are acquired as opposed to the idea that skills are changing from one sector of the tourism industry to another.

However, very quickly the discussants suggested the reverse, namely that all tourism professionals do not require/display the same skills. In order to substantiate these claims, the skills required by hotel staff and airline staff, for example, were compared, particularly the difference in the communicative situations involved in these two tourism professions. The example which was drawn upon was that of airline staff having to deal with a delayed flight and hotel staff having to explain that the release of a room may be delayed by two hours. The contrast was summarised by describing these two communicative situations as, respectively, 'mechanical' and 'having a personal touch'. To further illustrate this difference in communication skills of professionals across businesses in the tourism industry, another discussant mentioned the difference in terms of the type of relationship established between guests/customers and staff in tourism businesses, whereby the relationship may be seen as 'short-lived' in the case of interactions occurring in the context of travel agencies and 'ongoing' in the context of hotels.

- **What are the goals of communication in the tourism industry?**

One of the first points raised in relation to this question was that the goals of communication in the tourism industry can vary greatly, especially as there are many variables which shape the goals of communication.

Although this was taunted as a clear challenge for the discussion of communication goals, the 'identity' of businesses was mentioned as a potential 'variable' determining the goals of communication in the context of tourism. In this stretch of conversations, 'identity' was understood as the ways in which particular businesses are presenting themselves to the outside world, i.e. their attempt to build their business identity, brand themselves as, for example, an 'effective', 'friendly', 'reliable' business. It was suggested that as part of this attempt to portray their business in a particular way, tourism businesses can develop communicative practices which have a very specific goal which at times become part of their 'branding strategy'.

Focussing on the goals of communication in tourism was said to be essential and useful in terms of finding a unifying theme for communication in tourism.

To conclude, and following the discussion of the multifacetedness of the goals of communication in tourism, it was suggested that communication skills should be applicable to any situation within this professional context, which is of course pertinent to the later discussions regarding training possibilities in communication skills in tourism.

- **What characterises communication in the context of tourism?**

Several key aspects of communication in tourism were mentioned for this question. It was suggested that when investigating communication in tourism, it is necessary to examine the reason why guests/customers choose a particular business. Drawing on the example of people choosing a hostel, it was highlighted that communication often starts before the customers/guests reach the business they have chosen. Discussants were clear in terms of the impact of these initial forms of communication and therefore the importance of creating a strong business identity. While debating the importance of communication with guests/customers before they reach a business (insofar as we are not dealing with online services), someone suggested that 'How you communicate who you are [as a tourism business]' is critical, thus emphasising the centrality of communication in building the identity of tourism businesses. The role of Trip Advisor in informing the prospective guests' decision to stay at a particular hostel, for example, was mentioned but the limited control of businesses over this initial contact and the little attention paid by hotels/hostels to it were also taken into account.

It was also suggested that tourism staff can be limited by the policy of the business employing them. For example, one of the professionals present mentioned the strict 3-minute policy for check-ins in some hotels, and it impacts on the communicative behaviour of staff.

- **What are the characteristics of effective communication in tourism?**

Clarity, appropriacy and efficiency of communication were mentioned. For example, a discussant mentioned the challenge in explaining how specific/intricate things operate (e.g. particular way a lift may work) for members of staff who are not native speakers of English. Formality was also referred to when discussing differences between the way staff would talk to guests in hotels and hostels, with suggestions that a lesser degree of formality was required in hostels. The specificities of the language used in tourism brochures to reach tourists was also discussed, notably the need for direct and accessible language which can cater for the large proportion of readers for whom English is not their first language.

- **Do tourism staff rely on stereotypes [to interact with guests]?**

It was suggested that stereotypes were necessarily drawn upon as a resource in communicative situations but that the impact of these stereotypes on communication was limited.

- **Can training in intercultural communication be beneficial?**

This question was approached in general terms, i.e. training in intercultural communication can benefit any professional (of which tourism professionals). It was suggested that the value of training in intercultural communication lies in its ability to allow people to recognise others may have different expectations/norms in mind.

- **What training is already in place?**

The different existing approaches to training (e.g. in-house training, training delivered by companies tourism businesses are affiliated with) and the fact that training rarely addresses issues related to intercultural communication per se were referred to. The context of hospitality was used as an example. It was recognised that some training/CPD courses tourism professionals attend during their career aims to get staff to treat everybody in the same way. This was felt to sometimes fail to account for the fact that we are different/unique.

Some participants also asked what could be done within universities to further support this industry with its communication skills. The difficulty in identifying adequate training was alluded to and one participant interestingly suggested that we may be 'shifting back to people training'.

- **What are the implications of having to deal with multilingual, multicultural and international workers and customers?**

Answers to this question indicated that it is essential to understand the needs of guests/customers. The length of check-ins, for example, was said not to be related to nationality but to other things (e.g. imposed 3-min check in policy). One of the discussant alluded to the notion of a 'backpacker culture', suggesting that backpackers visiting hostels would probably be adversely affected by what he/she would perceive as a rigid (and possibly unfriendly) 3-minute check-in policy. Here, it was mentioned that the rules of the 'culture game' were unstable and that culture could therefore rightfully be considered as 'fluid'. An example of someone forever holding doors because it was what they perceived as good manners brought the question of where culture 'stops'. In relation to the 'holding doors' example, it was mentioned that in a busy shopping mall one would have to decide when to 'stop' or run the risk of holding doors for an extended period of time. This then led discussants to explore the extent to which culture is subject to negotiation.

Finally, the difficulty in meeting the needs of a culturally [read 'nationality'] diverse customer base were explicitly alluded to. Two examples were used to exemplify the complexity of the decisions faced by tourism professionals when dealing with customers from specific 'cultural' backgrounds. One related to the often mentioned importance of hierarchy in Chinese culture. The other was based upon the idea that it is not acceptable for males to address a married Muslim woman who is

veiled. For The first example referred to a situation where a member of staff was checking-in a group of Chinese guests and was faced with the awkward decision regarding whether or not to hand in the key to the guest who was physically the closest to the reception desk although he was a 'younger' member of the group. The second example described the difficulty in deciding, as a member of staff, whether or not to engage in conversation a veiled Muslim woman. This second example was informed by training received by one of the participants in the United Arab Emirates and where they were instructed that male members of staff should neither look at/engage in conversation with the wives of 'Arab men'. These two examples generated much discussion and it was suggested that for both examples knowing your guests, trusting your assessment of the situation and checking with guests whether your behaviour is acceptable to them seemed realistic courses of action. The issue of playing it safe and catering for the needs of the guests underpinned most of these discussions.

- **How can we make sure that university courses adequately prepare students to work within the tourism industry?**

Here, the context of hospitality in particular was focussed upon. It was observed that first-hand experience of working within the industry prior to students graduating was critical in allowing students to gauge the working conditions within the hospitality industry (e.g. rates of pay, working hours) and in gaining a thorough understanding of the 'needs' of professionals within their chosen profession.

Other questions participants brought up but that we did not have time to cover include the following (e.g. What type of education/training can be provided that would be helpful to the industry?).

## Workshop

The workshop focussed on the relationship between culture and communication in the context of London's hospitality industry. It focused on the communication challenges professionals in the tourism sector face and raised awareness of issues that may influence hotel/hostel guests' experience. The workshop focussed both on intercultural communication in multinational and multilingual workplaces (see first two sessions) and language skills (see Mandarin Chinese language taster). The workshop facilitators were as follows:

- Dr Gerdi Quist, Lecturer in Intercultural Communication at UCL
- Mrs Betty Lutyens-Humfrey, language teacher and translator/interpreter (English, Chinese, Japanese) with experience of working in tourism
- Dr Jo Angouri, Senior Lecturer in Intercultural Communication and Linguistics at the University of the West of England, Bristol
- Dr Clyde Ancarno, Linguist and Project Leader of LCT

This half-day event was organised as follows:

10.00-10.15	<b>Welcome</b>
10.15-11.00	<b>Understandings of culture in tourism</b> (Dr Gerdi Quist)
11.00 - 11.30	<b>Tea break</b>
11.30 – 12.15	<b>Communicating in London's multicultural and multilingual hotels and hostels</b> (Dr Clyde Ancarno and Dr Jo Angouri)
12.15 - 1.00	<b>Chinese language taster</b> (Mrs Betty Lutyens-Humfrey)

The first session focussing on intercultural communication introduced the concepts of 'identity' and 'culture' as complex constructs. This was with a particular view to tackle issues related to essentialist perceptions of culture in the context of London's tourism. The second session intended to get participants to draw on their knowledge of and experience in the tourism industry to reflect on the range of issues that influence communication with guests in hotels and hostels, on the implications of working in a multilingual and multinational professional context and on the communication strategies/skills they use daily and examples (based on their experience) of good practice. A range of data (including naturally occurring data) was used in these two sessions, including tourism professionals' own views on communication in London's tourism industry taken from the interview data collected during the LCT project and excerpts from Trip Advisor. An example of an activity used for the workshop is reproduced below:

### **Activity 1: Multilingualism in tourism**

In pairs, work on the following questions:

- a) Write a brief description of what you understand by the word communication.
- b) Identify what prevents successful communication in the excerpt from *Fawlty Towers* (Manuel answers the phone)?
- c) List the languages spoken by staff in your workplace either as a mother tongue or a second language. Which of these languages you consider 'useful'?
- d) Is English alone sufficient to communicate effectively in your place of work? If not, what else do you need?



The Mandarin Chinese language taster gave participants the opportunity to gain a further understanding of the languages spoken in China and to learn a few phrases in Mandarin Chinese.

## **Evaluation (round table and workshop)**

Both events were critical in terms of finding out whether LCT's research questions were pertinent to the reality of tourism professionals' working lives and to research in Intercultural (Business) Communication. It can be said without equivocation that the way the workshop and round table unfolded and the verbal and written feedback (evaluation forms) confirmed that the LCT project focussed on topics in need of timely attention. The uptake of these events by participants was extremely positive and encouraging.

### **Written evaluation forms**

Owing to the pilot and exploratory nature of the project, gaining a candid impression of participants' views on the events and more broadly the research questions at the core of the LCT project was essential, thus the use of written evaluation forms.

For the workshop, the questions asked in these forms focussed on gauging the extent to which the tourism professionals felt the activities included in the workshop benefited them and whether they thought they could apply the knowledge gained in their professional practice.

The evaluation forms for the round table mainly focussed on the areas which participants were most interested in finding out more about in future events. All 8 participants in the workshop indicated that they found the activities beneficial and that they would recommend the workshop should there be more events of this kind organised in the future.

Participants to both events recurrently shared their willingness to take part in more workshops/round tables where they would have 'more time' to explore some of the points we discussed, which reaffirmed the validity of the research questions driving LCT.

Things participants have said in their evaluation forms: *Coming soon...*