Enhancing adaptive transfer of cross-cultural training: Lessons learned from the broader training literature

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ABSTRACT

Drawing insights from the broader training literature, we argue that evaluation of cross-cultural training effectiveness should adopt comprehensive criteria, including cognitive, skill-based, and affective learning outcomes as well as adaptive transfer. We propose that the integration of an error management supplement in cross-cultural training can enhance trainee acquisition of self-regulation skills and self-efficacy that facilitate adaptive application of learning to novel cultural situations. In addition to the traditional error management training designs (i.e., positive error framing), the current paper describes additional design elements to promote acquisition of cognitive strategies, prevent premature automaticity, alleviate concerns about error occurrence during learning, and enhance readiness to transfer. In addition, we offer propositions regarding the effects of the supplement on learning and transfer outcomes, along with implications for future research and practice on cross-cultural training.

1. Introduction

Cross-cultural work has been drastically growing with the ongoing rise in globalization. Expatriates and sojourners, essential to multinational business and usually highly compensated, are vulnerable to failure and difficult to replace (Hechanova, Beehr, & Christiansen, 2003; Littrell, Salas, Hess, Paley, & Riedel, 2006). Without geographic relocation, cross-cultural interactions are becoming increasingly convenient and frequent given the assistance of technology, the reduction in physical barriers (e.g., physical office), and the culturally diversifying workplace (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2014). Therefore, human resource management faces complex challenges created by various cross-cultural work situations, such as facilitating expatriate and sojourner adjustment (Hechanova et al., 2003), enhancing cross-cultural communication, building relationships among diverse employees (Trejo, Richard, van Driel, & McDonald, 2015), and developing leaders in cross-cultural contexts (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004; White & Shullman, 2012).

Research has suggested cross-cultural training (CCT), the learning process that improves "cognitive, affective, and behavioral competences" (Littrell et al., 2006, p.356) for successful intercultural interactions, as a viable organizational intervention to facilitate successful cross-cultural adaptation of workers. However, the effectiveness of CCT has been debatable thus far (Bhawuk & Brislin, 2000; Hechanova et al., 2003; Littrell et al., 2006). Early research showed that CCT generally positively predicts various cognitive, skill-based, and attitudinal outcomes of expatriates (Bhawuk & Brislin, 2000; Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Littrell et al., 2006), yet the meta-analytic effects appear to be weak on important behavioral outcomes (i.e., 7% variance in expatriate performance and 0–2% variance in expatriate adjustment; Hechanova et al., 2003; Morris & Robie, 2001). More recent studies have identified several

boundary conditions that may limit CCT effectiveness (Degens, Hofstede, Beulens, Krumhuber, & Kappas, 2015; Puck, Kittler, & Wright, 2008; Wurtz, 2014). Given the inconsistent effectiveness of CCT and the potential benefit of enhancing cross-cultural adaptability, we turn to the broader training literature to formulate actionable plans to strengthen CCT design.

Our examination of the CCT literature revealed three noteworthy gaps between extant CCT research and the broader training literature. First, the evaluation of CCT outcomes consists of disjointed components that are not well aligned with models from the broader training literature (e.g., Baldwin & Ford, 1988, p. 87; Goldstein & Ford, 2002). There is general consensus in the training literature that training impacts immediate cognitive, skill-based, and affective learning outcomes (Kraiger, Ford, & Salas, 1993), which can further influence transfer of training. Training transfer, consisting of the maintenance of learning over time and the generalization of learning to different work situations, represents the actual return of training investment (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Baldwin, Ford, & Blume, 2009; Blume, Ford, Baldwin, & Huang, 2010). In contrast, most of the existing CCT evaluations have been focused on declarative knowledge (Bhawuk, 2001; Caligiuri, Phillips, Lazarova, Tarique, & Burgi, 2001; Fiedler, Mitchell, & Triandis, 1971), expatriate adjustment (Hechanova et al., 2003), expatriate performance (Morris & Robie, 2001; Wurtz, 2014), and/or early return (Littrell & Salas, 2005). These outcomes are not likely to adequately capture the direct outputs and transfer of training due to two different reasons. On the one hand, declarative knowledge (i.e., "information about what"), as a component of learning outcomes (Kraiger et al., 1993, p. 313), is much too narrow than the entire spectrum of knowledge, skills, and attitudes covered by CCT. On the other hand, expatriate adjustment, expatriate performance, and early return are usually too distal and broad to cover factors outside of the trainees' control. Thus, a closer examination and critique of extant CCT research vis-à-vis learning outcomes (e.g., cognitive strategies, affective outcomes) and transfer assessment is direly needed.

Second, the context of CCT goes beyond the preparation and adjustment of Western workers to another culture (Littrell et al., 2006; Littrell & Salas, 2005). The workplace is no longer limited to the bicultural interactions and is increasingly multicultural. These multicultural situations can range from day-to-day interactions with diverse coworkers to leading teams consisting of geographically dispersed members. The growth in opportunities for multicultural interactions is accompanied by the increase in needs for adaptability to unfamiliar cultural environments and the restricted utility of CCT that only prepares trainees to directly reproduce acquired behaviors. Therefore, it is critical to move beyond the evaluation of CCT in a single cultural context and instead emphasize trainees' capability to generate adaptive behavioral responses to various cultures (see Degens et al., 2015). The shift toward multicultural adaptation also requires CCT to integrate design elements that can facilitate trainees' effective adjustment in novel cultural situations with a high level of uncertainty.

Third, emerged from the under-emphasis of the comprehensive learning outcomes and adaptive transfer, the design of CCT has been constrained from directly targeting at these desirable objectives. Based on the complex and dynamic nature of cross-cultural situations (Morris & Robie, 2001), we argue that learning does not cease by the end of CCT, but successful trainees should continue acquiring knowledge and refining skills while adapting to novel situations (Huang, Ford, & Ryan, 2016). Ultimately, through continuous practice, CCT trainees can become "experts" who are able to effectively engage in emerging cultural encounters without deliberate preparation (Ericsson, 2008). Among the common designs of CCT, the culture assimilator (Bhawuk, 2001; Fiedler et al., 1971) and met expectation (Caligiuri et al., 2001) approaches primarily aim at developing declarative knowledge. The behavioral modeling approach based on social learning theory enhances the reproduction of desirable behaviors and self-efficacy in analogous situations (Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991; Morris & Robie, 2001; Wurtz, 2014). Each of these approaches exhibits values with regard to a specific set of objectives yet are insufficient for promoting adaptive transfer. To enhance acquisition of complex skills and achievement of expert performance, CCT should integrate novel theoretical perspectives. We seek to provide one example based on error management training (EMT), which can promote adaptive outcomes by encouraging learners to actively explore in the learning environment without be concerned about making errors (Keith & Frese, 2008). Beyond introducing EMT to promote cross-cultural adaptability, we also contribute to the EMT literature by investigating errors in nontechnical skill acquisition, specifically interpersonal errors in the cross-cultural interactions that stem from values, beliefs, and norms.

Drawing from theories and evidence from the broader training literature, the present paper addresses the three gaps of CCT by a) connecting CCT with the well-developed training framework, including Baldwin and Ford's (1988) model of the transfer process and Kraiger et al.'s (1993) learning outcome taxonomy, and b) integrating the novel theoretical perspective from error management (EM; Keith & Frese, 2008), an approach that utilizes errors constructively to inform learning, to enhance the effectiveness of CCT. In doing so, we offer propositions that link EM to CCT learning and transfer outcomes and provide new perspectives for CCT research and practice in organizations.

2. CCT transfer and learning outcomes

To systematically design a training program, one of the most important steps is to assess the needs and derive the objectives (Goldstein & Ford, 2002). According to the model of the transfer process by Baldwin and Ford (1988), the ultimate objective of training is the long-term application of training on the job. In other words, effective training is reflected in improved work performance, and other components of the training system should serve this objective. Moreover, learning outcomes, usually considered the direct outputs of training and assessed immediately after training, transmit the influence of training design characteristics on transfer. Therefore, we first discuss the objective of CCT (i.e., transfer — the successful application of knowledge and skills acquired in training to one's job; Blume et al., 2010) and then turn to the learning outcomes that serve as important linkage between CCT and transfer.