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Measuring Interpersonal Communication Competence in SME Internationalization

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Abstract

This study examines interpersonal communication competence in the context of internationalization of small and medium sized enterprises. The article reports and analyses how the representatives of small and medium sized enterprises and the intermediary organizations assess their own and each others' interpersonal communication competence. The discussion examines the validity and reliability of the assessment of interpersonal communication competence in international business collaboration.

Keywords: *Assessment, International Business Collaboration, Interpersonal Communication Competence, Measurement, SME Internationalization*

Introduction

The importance of interpersonal communication competence (ICC) in international business and organizational settings is undeniable. The studies of ICC have corroborated the relationships between, for instance, communication competence and high job performance (Payne 2005), or the supervisors' communication competence and both employee work and communication satisfaction (Madlock 2008) and ICC can be seen as vital to career success and business enterprises (see Morreale, Osborn & Pearson 2000). The current business context is increasingly international and multicultural, and characterized by the diversity of the globalized business community (Charles 2007). International business actors must be able to adjust the content, style and format of their communication, as well as the level of formality according to the needs of the wide range of citizens, clients and colleagues (Dannels 2001:144).

This paper examines ICC in the context of internationalization of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). When aiming to internationalize their business operations, SMEs often face challenges such as limited personnel and financial resources, or insufficient expertise and skills (Forsman, Hinttu & Kock 2002). Thus, SME internationalization typically involves collaborative relationships between the representatives of SMEs and the intermediary organizations such as authorities, business consultancies and finance companies that may provide access to the necessary resources and international networks. Collaborative relationships in the context of SME internationalization bring together participants from a variety of cultural, personal, organizational and national backgrounds. The internationalization of SMEs involves inter-organizational, inter-sectoral and international collaboration.

Collaborative arrangements have become a significant part of today's global business context, but little attention has been given to ICC specific to international business collaboration. This study focuses on ICC in collaborative relationships between the international representatives of SMEs and intermediary organizations involved in the SME internationalization. The primary purposes of the study are to examine the operationalization and measurement of ICC in international business collaboration, and to explore how the individual participants, that are the representatives of SMEs and intermediary organizations, assess their own and each others' ICC.

Measurement of interpersonal communication competence

Interpersonal communication competence (ICC) has been approached from various theoretical perspectives (Wilson & Sabee 2003). Numerous studies have relied on the foundation provided by Spitzberg & Cupach (1984), according to which ICC is a construction of cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions. From this standpoint, ICC requires knowledge about effective and appropriate interpersonal communication, motivation to engage in social interaction, meta-cognitive communication skills, as well as the interpersonal communication skills needed to act in a way that the interactants perceive to be both effective and appropriate (Valkonen 2003:26).

Social interaction always takes place within a certain culture, time, relationship, situation or function (Spitzberg 2003:96). The perceptions of the context give rise to different expectations of ICC, and the conceptualizations of ICC have also been sensitive to the specific context of social interaction. This contextual nature of ICC is explicitly taken into account in the definitions of *intercultural communication competence*. The aspects of ICC that are emphasized in intercultural and international communication contexts include intercultural sensitivity, awareness and adroitness, perspective taking, adaptation, and empathy (Chen & Starosta 1996; Wiseman 2002; Arasaratnam 2006). Thus the conceptualizations of intercultural communication competence reflect cultural differences and expectations regarding ICC.

Studies have also produced several contextually sensitive definitions of ICC specific to organizational and international business communication. Table 1 presents some recent conceptualizations proposed, for instance, in the fields of speech communication (e.g. Rouhiainen-Neunhäuserer 2009), business communication (Kankaanranta & Planken 2010; Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta 2011) and international business management (Macpherson & Wilson 2003; Phan, Styles & Matterson 2005).

Table 1: *Conceptualizations of ICC in organizational and international business communication*

Concept	Conceptualization	References
BELF (business English as a lingua franca) competence	• Clarity and accuracy of content • Knowledge of business-specific vocabulary and genre conventions • Relational orientation	Kankaanranta & Planken 2010:380
Global communicative competence	• Multicultural competence including listening and accommodation skills, and acknowledgement of and flexibility and tolerance towards national, corporate and professional cultures • BELF competence including situation-specific and strategic language use • Business know-how	Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta 2011:259
Interactive competences	• Customer focus: Service orientation, proactive in understanding and responding to customer requirements • Communication: Formal and ad hoc interactions, quality information systems and information sharing, collaborative approach, possibly multi-level and multi-functional	Macpherson & Wilson 2003:172

Intercultural communication competence	• Effective communication skills/abilities • Cultural awareness and understanding • Open-mindedness and non-judgmental attitude • Personal competence and intelligence	Matveev 2004:55
Organizational communication competence	• The judgment of successful communication where interactants' goals are met using messages that are perceived as appropriate and effective within the organizational context • Involves knowledge of the organization and of communication, ability to carry out skilled behaviors, and one's motivation to perform competently	Payne 2005:64
Relational competency	• The manager's ability to communicate effectively with the managers of the partner firm	Phan, Styles & Patterson 2005:173
Leadership communication competence	• Knowledge about and skills in managing different tensions and expectations towards leadership communication • Motivation and willingness to communicate with the subordinates	Rouhiainen-Neunhäuserer 2009:193

Regardless of the field of study, the definitions of ICC in organizational and international business communication emphasize accomplishing a professional task as well as the crucial role of *relational communication* that creates, maintains and develops interpersonal relationships. Indeed, the organizational members share a lot of spontaneous relational communication including self-disclosure, humor and small talk (Sivunen 2007). Relational communication functions, such as empathy, demonstrating presence or interest, and discussion of social or personal issues, are likely to enhance effective communication and the organizational members' ICC in both addressing the task and in maintaining interpersonal relationships (Pullin 2010; Thompson 2009).

The conceptualizations of ICC have often provided a basis for ICC assessment and measurement. ICC can be assessed using both direct methods (such as observation or simulations) and indirect methods (such as interviews or introspective questionnaires) (Spitzberg 2003; Spitzberg & Cupach 1989). The assessment tools and measures can differ in focusing on only one or many of the dimensions of ICC (cognitive, affective, or behavioral). In addition, measurements can assess the atomistic qualities of ICC (e.g. eye contact or gestures), or the holistic inferences of one's communication behavior (e.g. empathy, activity), and ICC can be assessed by the interactant her/himself, by the interlocutor or a third party as an observer (see Author 2003; Wilson & Sabee 2003).

In spite of a large number of ICC measures and rating tools (for reviews, see e.g. Spitzberg 2003; Spitzberg & Cupach 1989), the studies on ICC in organizational or international business communication have made only little contribution in the operationalization or measurement of ICC. Recent studies on ICC in organizational and business communication have not produced or validated context-specific assessment tools or ratings scales. With the exception of the assessment scales by Payne (2005), these studies have only proposed skills- and behavior-based specifications of ICC within business and organizations. These characterizations include interpersonal communication skills that support task accomplishment, such as assertiveness, persuasion, information sharing, or team skills, as well as skills in adaptation and adjustment, such as adaptability and perspective taking (Payne 2005; Phan, Styles & Patterson 2005; Rouhiainen-Neunhäuserer 2009; Wardrobe 2002). In addition, relational communication skills including empathizing, intimacy, or creating and supporting interpersonal relationships, have been suggested as specific to ICC in business and organizational communication (Payne 2005; Phan, Styles &

Patterson 2005; Rouhiainen-Neunhäuserer 2009). The following Table 2 illustrates some recent specifications of ICC in organizational and international business settings in greater detail.

Table 2: *Specifications of ICC in organizational and international business communication*

Instrument or specification	Operationalization	References
Communication skill scale	• Skill at adapting communication, at empathizing, and at managing interaction	Payne 2005
Communication knowledge scale	• Knowledge of adaptability, of empathy, and of interaction management	
Communication motivation scale	• Motivation to adapt, to empathize, and to communicate	
Relational competence	Relationship initiation competence: • Assertiveness • Dominance • Instrumental competence • Shyness (negative variable) • Social anxiety (negative variable) Relationship maintenance competence: • Intimacy • Trusting ability • Interpersonal sensitivity • Altruism • Perspective taking	Phan, Styles & Patterson 2005
Leadership communication competence	ICC in the functions of: • Persuading and engaging employees • Gathering, interpreting and sharing information • Creating and supporting interaction and social relationships • Guiding work and providing feedback • Supporting the interaction between employees	Rouhiainen-Neunhäuserer 2009
Business communication skills	• Written skills • Cultural literacy skills • Technology-mediated skills • Interpersonal skills • Listening skills • Group/team skills	Wardrobe 2002

Despite various interpersonal communication skills found crucial to ICC within business and organizations, the measurement of ICC still holds to measures developed for and used primarily in educational settings. These assessment tools cannot as such be deemed applicable in organizational or business settings.

A review of the literature reveals some obvious gaps in research. There appears to be a lack of research examining ICC in international business collaboration. An exception is Juch and Rathje's (2011) study on cooperation competence in commercial alliances defining communication principles such as transparency, willingness to compromise, recognition of cultural relativity, desire for development, or anticipatory trust as central to the process formation and the establishment of relationships in a cooperative setting. No study contributing to the theoretical conceptualization of ICC in the culturally diverse business collaboration was found. However, ICC in an inter-organizational, inter-sectoral or international context such as collaborative relationships between individual stakeholders in SME internationalization may differ from ICC involved in workplace relationships within the same organization, such as in leader-member communication, and different kinds of expectations and appreciations regarding ICC are likely to evoke.

ICC in international business collaboration is an aspect that warrants analysis, as well as the examination of how and to what extent it can be assessed or measured. This study contributes to the development of the measurement of ICC in SME internationalization and is guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the level of ICC in collaborative interaction between the representatives of SMEs and intermediary organizations?

2. What are the validity and reliability of Collaborative Communication Competence Scale (CCCS), and of the self-assessments and partner assessments of ICC in international business collaboration?

Method

Development and content of the measure: Collaborative Communication Competence Scale (CCCS)

The first stage of developing a measure for ICC in SME internationalization involved a systematic review of the relevant literature concerning ICC in international business collaboration. A review of the theory base of interpersonal communication competence, intercultural communication competence and interpersonal networks and collaborative interaction produced a concept analysis of ICC that is specific to and necessary for SME internationalization (Purhonen 2008). This concept analysis provided a framework for the second stage of developing a new measure for ICC.

Based on the literature review (Purhonen 2008) several behaviors and characteristics that underlie ICC in international business collaboration were identified and formulated into 42 statements. This version of the measurement tool was tested prior to the actual process of data collection by conducting eight interviews in Hong Kong and Shanghai, China, in autumn 2008. Five Chinese and three Finnish representatives of SMEs and intermediary organizations participated in the interviews. Following a method adapted from *cognitive interviews* (Godenhjelm 2002), the interviewees were encouraged to *think aloud* and point out all the unclear instructions or concepts used in this pilot version of measurement tool while answering it. Testing the measure did not provide actual research data but the feedback received from the interviewees was used to revise the measure for ICC in SME internationalization. The method of cognitive interviews caused only minor changes to the language used in the measure.

The final version of *Collaborative Communication Competence Scale (CCCS)* included a pool of 42 statements (see Table 4). The statements were phrased to reflect respondent's perceptions of ICC in six communication functions: 1) *thecreation and management of relationships, 2) information sharing, 3) management of network resources, 4) integrative negotiation, 5) management of diversity,* and *6)*

adaptation and adjustment. Likert-type scales with 5-point variation (*Agree – Somewhat agree – Neither agree nor disagree –Somewhat disagree – Disagree*) were used to assess how strongly the representatives of SMEs and intermediary organizations agreed or disagreed with the statements. There were two CCCS versions: 1. CCCS self-assessment (CCCSsa), and 2. CCCS partner assessment (CCCSpa), both in two languages, Finnish and English. Cronbach's alpha was .96 for the 42-item CCCSsa and .95 for the 42-item CCCSpa.

Participants and procedure

The study was conducted in *the context oftheentry of Finnish SMEs into China*. China's fast-growing markets have attracted approximately 280 Finnish companies to start international business operations there (the Confederation of Finnish Industries EK 2011). China has an important role as a supplier to European SMEs, but in addition to imports, SME internationalization involves exports and co-operative business activities such as technological collaboration, subcontracting or investments (Internationalization of European SMEs 2010). Due, for instance, to language barriers and differences in the business environments between Finland and China the role of intermediary organizations may be crucial when a Finnish SME aims to initiate business operations in China. Interpersonal relationships, particularly with authorities, can help in coping with regulations and laws in China, and provide protection against opportunism and other business risks in the context of SME internationalization (Ai 2006; So & Walker 2006).

Members of Finnish SMEs operating or aiming to establish business operations in China and of the intermediary organizations involved in the internationalization process of SMEs were invited to participate in the study during spring 2009. The invitations were both sent by direct emails and published in three web pages related to the internationalization of Finnish SMEs into China.

The data gathering led to a sample of 115 participants, 49 of which represented Finnish SMEs while 66 were from the intermediary organizations. The respondents had varying levels of experience of operating in the Chinese markets (from less than one year to more than ten years). The majority of the participants were men (n = 91, 23 women, and 1 unreported). There was a bias towards Finnish participants (n = 101) but the sample also included representatives of other nationalities (6 Chinese, 3 Swedish, 2 Norwegian, 1 French, 1 Italian, and 1 Taiwanese). The ages of the participants ranged from 26 to 71 years (*M* = 48.0).

To participate in the study, the SME representatives were asked to choose one collaborating partner who worked in an intermediary organization in Finland, China or elsewhere, and who had significantly assisted the SME's internationalization process in China. The majority of the SME representatives reported collaboration with Finnish (n = 27) or Chinese (n = 17) representatives of intermediary organizations. In addition, the collaborating partners were from Hong Kong (n = 3), Australia (n = 1) and UK (n = 1).

The representatives of the intermediary organizations likewise were requested to choose a person from a Finnish SME, and refer to this collaborating partner, one person, in the partner assessments. The collaborating partners from Finnish SMEs were mainly Finnish (n = 54), with only a few Chinese representatives (n = 9, unreported/unclear responses n = 3). The nationalities of all research participants and their collaborating partners are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Nationalities of respondents and their collaborating partners

	Respondents	Collaborating partners
Finnish (n)	101	81
Chinese (n)	6	26
Other (n)	8	8

Total (N)	115	115

Comparison of the nationalities revealed that 61 % (n = 70) of the collaborative relationships under scrutiny were relationships in which both collaborating partners were Finnish stakeholders while 25 % (n = 29) were relationships between a Finnish and a Chinese stakeholder in SME internationalization. The sample also included a collaborative relationship of two Chinese stakeholders (1 %), and an assortment of international collaborations (13 %, n = 15) including Australian-Norwegian, Finnish-French, Finnish-Hong Kong, Finnish-Italian, Finnish-Norwegian, Finnish-Swedish and Finnish-British. Thus the study sample represents a diverse range of collaborative relationships, including both national and international collaboration. Due to the different professional, organizational and sectoral backgrounds of the collaborating partners, the study sample can be deemed culturally diverse.

The examination also revealed a diversity of collaborative relationships from newly formed partnerships to long-term relationships sustained for several years. The durations of the collaborative relationships were: less than a year (13 %), 1–3 years (42 %), 4–10 years (27 %), and more than 10 years (18 %).

Analysis

The data were analyzed statistically and computed using the SPSS for Windows 16.0 statistical program. The descriptive statistics (mean scores and standard deviations), item/total correlations, and the percentile frequencies of the ratings were examined. Additionally, a Mann-Whitney test was used to study the differences between the self-assessments and partner assessments. This non-parametric test was chosen because the data were not normally distributed but distorted towards the upper values on the scale of 1–5. To test the underlying factor structures of the CCCSsa and CCCSpa, items were subjected to exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with the principal axis method and varimax (orthogonal) rotation. The missing values were not substituted that caused a minor reduction in sample size.

Results

The level of interpersonal communication competence

SME and intermediary representatives' self-assessments using the Collaborative Communication Competence Scale (CCCSsa) yielded high values of the level of ICC in collaborative relationships ($M = 4.31$, $SD = .44$). The level of ICC was rated highest in *avoiding offensive language* ("I do not use offensive language" $M = 4.79$, $SD = .45$), *being trustworthy* ("S/he can trust me" $M = 4.77$, $SD = .42$) and *showing respect* ("I show him/her that I respect him/her" $M = 4.62$, $SD = .54$) and *trust* ("I show to my collaboration partner that I trust him/her" $M = 4.59$, $SD = .53$) (see Table 4). In turn, interpersonal communication skills in *informal communication and relationship maintenance* had the lowest mean scores ("I have invited him/her to informal meetings and gatherings" $M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.46$; "I share personal information with him/her" $M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.24$).

Assessments of the collaborating partner's ICC using the CCCSpa produced lower values than the self-assessments of the level of interpersonal communication competence ($M = 4.04$, $SD = .58$). Ratings of *avoiding offensive language* were the highest ($M = 4.74$, $SD = .64$). *Showing trust* (M = *4.45*, SD = .69),*creating a comfortable atmosphere* ($M = 4.41$, $SD = .78$), and *being trustworthy* ($M = 4.37$, $SD = .81$) were also skills that yielded a high mean score (see Table 4). Ratings of the collaborating partner's interpersonal communication skills were lowest in *informal communication and relationship maintenance* ("S/he has invited me to informal meetings and gatherings" $M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.43$; "S/he shares personal information with me" $M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.34$) and *assurance* ("S/he makes sure that I understand him/her $M = 3.63$, $SD = 0.99$).

Table 4: *Descriptive Statistics of the Assessment of Interpersonal Communication Competence*

	CCCSsa: statements (N=113)	Mean	SD	Item/ total corr.	CCCSpa:statements (N=115)	Mean	SD	Item/ total corr.
1	I openly share my knowledge and opinions with my collaboration partner	4.41	0.66	0.51	My collaboration partner openly shares her/his knowledge with me	4.31	0.74	0.56
2	I answer her/his questions thoroughly enough	4.45	0.61	0.56	S/he answers to my questions thoroughly enough	4.15	0.81	0.56
3	I provide her/his with a lot of information that s/he needs	4.36	0.81	0.64	S/he provides me a lot of information that I need	4.05	0.79	0.69
4	I tell her/him about the possible problems and difficulties	4.42	0.85	0.64	S/he tells me about the possible problems and difficulties	3.93	0.97	0.56
5	I come up with a lot of new ideas and suggestions	4.16	0.85	0.61	S/he comes up with a lot of new ideas and suggestions	3.88	1.00	0.66
6	I make sure that s/he understands me	4.38	0.66	0.66	S/he makes sure that I understand him/her	3.63	0.99	0.73
7	I am goal oriented	4.53	0.63	0.54	S/he is goal oriented	4.18	0.78	0.51
8	I am innovative	4.37	0.71	0.66	S/he is innovative	4.07	0.90	0.55
9	With my help my collaboration partner can accomplish results s/he could not reach by her/himself	4.19	0.83	0.53	With her/his help I can accomplish results that I could not reach by myself	4.01	0.88	0.56
10	I have a lot of knowledge about what kind of competencies	4.45	0.68	0.61	S/he has a lot of knowledge about what kind of competencies exist in her/his networks	4.19	0.83	0.57

	exist in my networks							
11	I make use of the competencies of my networks in our collaboration	4.39	0.74	0.62	S/he makes use of the competencies of her/his networks in our collaboration	4.08	0.83	0.58
12	I actively ask for her/his opinion	4.23	0.78	0.44	S/he actively asks for my opinion	3.93	0.87	0.53
13	I inform her/him about collaborators who could be of assistance to her/him	4.27	0.85	0.62	S/he informs me about collaborators who would be of assistance to me	3.70	1.13	0.67
14	I have introduced her/him to new collaborators	4.10	1.07	0.60	S/he has introduced me to new collaborators	3.72	1.28	0.58
15	I support my collaboration partner in going forward	4.26	0.84	0.66	S/he supports me in going forward	3.74	0.98	0.73
16	I aim to further her/him case with my own actions	4.49	0.76	0.67	S/he aims to further my case with her/his own actions	3.90	0.95	0.74
17	I am active in our network	4.25	0.80	0.67	S/he is active in our network	3.96	0.88	0.66
18	I am well prepared for our meetings	4.20	0.71	0.59	S/he is well prepared for our meetings	3.90	0.96	0.50
19	The language I use is clear and easy to understand	4.33	0.65	0.60	The language s/he uses is clear and easy to understand	4.14	0.84	0.54
20	I use convincing arguments in reasoning my opinions	4.39	0.62	0.61	S/he uses convincing arguments in reasoning her/his opinions	4.00	0.90	0.69
21	I ask her/him for further	4.39	0.67	0.53	S/he asks me for further arguments when needed	4.10	0.78	0.52

	arguments when needed							
22	I acknowledge the goals and perspectives of my collaboration partner	4.46	0.57	0.49	S/he acknowledges my goals and perspectives	4.09	0.76	0.70
23	I know her/his organization well	4.11	0.80	0.50	S/he knows my organization well	4.06	0.90	0.48
24	I know her/him well	3.98	0.94	0.60	S/he knows me well	4.10	0.93	0.58
25	I understand her/his culture	4.30	0.86	0.47	S/he understands my culture	4.18	0.82	0.45
26	It is easy to talk with me in difficult situations	4.35	0.66	0.50	It is easy to talk with her/him in difficult situations	4.23	0.81	0.69
27	I show her/him that I respect him/her	4.62	0.54	0.58	S/he shows me that s/he respects me	4.35	0.70	0.66
28	I do not use offensive language	4.79	4.45	0.31	S/he does not use offensive language	4.74	0.64	0.35
29	I show my collaboration partner that I trust her/him	4.59	0.53	0.54	S/he shows that s/he trusts me	4.45	0.69	0.79
30	S/he can trust me	4.77	0.42	0.48	I can trust her/him	4.37	0.81	0.73
31	I create a comfortable atmosphere to our meetings	4.43	0.62	0.69	S/he creates a comfortable atmosphere to our meetings	4.41	0.78	0.77
32	I share personal information with her/him	3.47	1.24	0.52	S/he shares personal information with me	3.44	1.34	0.58
33	I have invited her/him to informal meetings and gatherings	3.45	1.46	0.60	S/he has invited me to informal meetings and gatherings	3.38	1.43	0.54

34	I am interested in her/him and her/his case	4.30	0.75	0.64	S/he is interested in me and my case	3.90	1.00	0.70
35	I am committed to collaborating with her/him	4.53	0.66	0.58	S/he is committed to collaborating with me	4.14	0.85	0.71
36	I am active in keeping contact with her/him	4.09	0.89	0.63	S/he is active in keeping contact with me	3.90	0.89	0.69
37	I aim to understand him/her even if s/he disagrees with me	4.45	0.60	0.49	S/he aims to understand me even if I disagree with her/him	4.04	0.70	0.63
38	I am flexible	4.36	0.63	0.47	S/he is flexible	4.13	0.90	0.70
39	I handle well the uncertainty related to collaboration	4.23	0.86	0.53	S/he handles well the uncertainty related to collaboration	4.04	0.84	0.61
40	I adjust quickly to changing situations	4.45	0.64	0.66	S/he adjusts quickly to changing situations	4.10	0.94	0.70
41	In disagreements I strive for a conclusion that is satisfying for both of us	4.36	0.71	0.53	In disagreements s/he strives for a conclusion that is satisfying for both of us	4.02	0.88	0.65
42	I am a good listener	4.25	0.74	0.51	S/he is a good listener	4.00	0.99	0.75

The consistency of self-assessments and partner assessments

A Mann-Whitney test revealed differences between the self-assessments and partner assessments of interpersonal communication competence in collaborative relationships. SME and intermediary representatives assessed their own interpersonal communication competence significantly higher than that of their collaborating partners ($p = 0.000$).

All the 42 items of both CCCSsa and CCCSpa demonstrated high item reliabilities. To search for items that were linked together in the SME and intermediary representatives' inferences of interpersonal communication competence, EFA with the principal axis method and varimax (orthogonal) rotation was applied to all 42 items of CCCSsa and to all 42 items of CCCSpa. Items which failed to produce at least .50 loading on the primary factor were removed from the analysis. This allowed the identification of the problematic items, and the reduction of the assessment scales into 19 items for CCCSsa and 21 items for CCCSpa (see Table 5 and Table 6). None of the items included in the analysis had secondary loadings

above .40. Exploratory factors analysis for CCCSsa and EFA for CCCSpa resulted in different factor solutions.

Table 5: Factor Loadings for CCCSsa Obtained Using Exploratory Factor Analysis with Varimax Rotation (N = 101)

Statements	Factor 1: Connectedness	Factor 2: Clarity and Credibility	Factor 3: Personal Communication	Factor 4: Trust and Respect
I support my collaboration partner to go forward	.708			
I aim to further her/his case with my own actions	.702			
I am active in our network	.702			
I have introduced her/him to new collaborators	.656			
I inform her/him about the collaborators who could be of assistance to her/him	.655			
I make use of the competencies of my networks in our collaboration	.644			
I am active in keeping contact with her/him	.615			
The language I use is clear and easy to understand		.769		
It is easy to talk with me in difficult situations		.665		
I am well prepared to our meetings		.624		
I make sure that s/he understands me		.624		
I use convincing arguments in reasoning my opinions		.615		
I ask her/him for further arguments when needed		.502		
I share personal information with her/him			.810	
			.730	

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5
I have invited him/her to informal meetings and gatherings					
I know her/him well				.590	
I show my collaboration partner that I trust her/him					.765
I show that I respect and appreciate her/him					.629
S/he can trust me					.558

Table 6: *Factor Loadings for CCCSpa Obtained Using Exploratory Factor Analysis with Varimax Rotation (N = 101)*

Statements	Factor 1: Connectedness	Factor 2: Information Sharing	Factor 3: Familiarity	Factor 4: Adjustment	Factor 5: Trust and Respect
S/he has introduced me to new collaborators	.746				
S/he is active in our network	.712				
S/he makes use of the competencies of her/his networks in our collaboration	.694				
S/he aims to further my case with her/his own actions	.666				
S/he informs me about the collaborators who could be of assistance to me	.661				
My collaboration partner supports me in going forward	.609				
With her/his help I can accomplish results that I could not reach by myself	.603				
		.824			

S/he answers my questions thoroughly enough					
S/he provides me a lot of information that I need		.732			
My collaboration partner openly shares her/his knowledge and opinions with me		.673			
S/he tells me about the possible problems and difficulties		.657			
S/he shares personal information with me			.762		
S/he has invited me to informal meetings and gatherings			.717		
S/he knows me well			.685		
S/he knows my organization well			.555		
S/he adjusts quickly to changing situations				.759	
S/he is flexible				.671	
S/he handles well the uncertainty related to collaboration				.616	
S/he does not use offensive language					.637
S/he creates a comfortable atmosphere to our meetings					.635
I can trust her/him					.625

Exploratory factor analysis for CCCSsa yielded a factor solution accounting for 65.6% of the variance, with four factors that had eigenvalues greater than 1.0. The first, and the strongest, factor accounting for 38.7% of the variance and demonstrated good internal reliability ($\alpha = .88$) and contained seven items, four of them related to networking, two addressed help and support to the collaborating partner and one referred to active relationship maintenance. The factor was accordingly labeled *Connectedness*. The

second factor, labeled *Clarity and Credibility*, contained six items addressing inferences of clarity and ease of communication, assurance and argumentation. The factor explained 11.8% of the variance (α = .86). The third factor indicated sharing personal information with the collaborating partner, invited the partner to informal meetings, and knew the partner well. This *Personal Communication* factor explained 8.5% of the variance among the items (α = .81). Similarly to the third factor, the fourth factor contained only three items, accounted for 6.7% of the variance, and was labeled *Trust and Respect* (α = .78). High ratings in this factor indicated that the respondent was trustworthy and showed trust and respect in the collaborative relationship.

The procedure of EFA for CCCSpa revealed a factor solution explaining 72.3% of the variance in the item set, and including 5 factors with eigenvalue greater than 1.0. The first factor, labeled *Connectedness*, included seven items which indicated ICC in the management of networks and helping and supporting the collaborating partner. The Connectedness factor accounted for 42.8% of the variance and demonstrated good internal reliability (α = .89). The second factor contained four items that addressed answering questions, sharing information, knowledge and opinions, and also revealing problems and difficulties. The factor was labeled *Information Sharing* and accounted for 9.8% of the variance (α = .86). The third factor, labeled *Familiarity* explained 8.0% of the variance among the items (α = .82). Ratings in this factor reported self-disclosure, knowing the collaborating partner and his/her organization, and inviting the partner to informal gatherings. The fourth factor accounted for 6.4% of the variance and contained three items (α = .88). Ratings in this *Adjustment* factor indicated that the person adjusts to changing situations, is flexible and handles well the uncertainty related to collaboration. Finally, the fifth factor, labeled *Trust and Respect* accounted for 5.3% of the variance (α = .81). The three items in this factor referred to avoiding offensive language, creating a comfortable atmosphere, and being trustworthy.

As the structures of CCCSsa and CCCSpa were modified due to the results achieved with EFA, the final results of self-assessments and partners assessments cannot be compared as such. The examination of the percentile frequencies of ratings (see Table 7 and Table 8), however, reveals that both self-assessments and partner assessments are clearly concentrated at the positive end, that is, in the options "somewhat agree" and "agree". There is most variation among the self-assessments of ICC in *Personal Communication*. Hence the assessments of ICC were not normally or evenly distributed, but accumulated around the positive attributions.

Table 7: Percentile Frequencies of the Self-Assessments of Interpersonal Communication Competence (CCCSsa)

Measure	Negative %	Neutral %	Positive %	M	SD
Connectedness	1.8	8.8	89.4	4.36	0.65
Clarity and Credibility	0.0	5.3	94.7	4.31	0.50
Personal Communication	17.9	25.0	57.1	3.64	1.04
Trust and Respect	0.0	0.0	100.0	4.66	0.42

Negative = *disagree or somewhat disagree* (Mean < 2.50), Neutral = *neither agree nor disagree* (Mean = 2.50 - 3.49), Positive = *somewhat agree or agree* with the statement (Mean > 3.49)
N=101

Table 8: Percentile Frequencies of the Partner Assessments of Interpersonal Communication Competence (CCCSpa)

Measure	Negative %	Neutral %	Positive %	M	SD
Connectedness	3.5	32.2	64.3	3.87	0.78
Information Sharing	1.7	10.5	87.8	4.10	0.69
Familiarity	6.1	30.4	63.5	3.74	0.94
Adjustment	3.5	17.4	79.1	4.09	0.80
Trust and Respect	1.7	5.3	93.0	4.51	0.63

Negative = *disagree or somewhat disagree* (Mean < 2.50), Neutral = *neither agree nor disagree (Mean = 2.50 - 3.49)*,
Positive = *somewhat agree or agree* with the statement (Mean > 3.49)
N=101

Discussion

Assessments of ICC in SME internationalization

This study examined ICC and its' measurement in international business collaboration. Self-assessments and partner assessments of ICC in collaborative relationships between the representatives of SMEs and intermediary organizations resulted to high ratings. In the context of showing trust and respect, ICC is a particular strength of the representatives of SMEs and intermediary organizations based on the assessments of their own and those of their collaborating partners. This is an encouraging finding as trust can be seen as an important building block in both addressing the task and maintaining social relationships in the organizational settings (Thompson 2009). Trust and respect have also been emphasized as ethical principles of collaboration (see Lewis 2006).

On the other hand, personal communication and familiarity seem to be aspects of ICC that the representatives of SMEs and intermediary organizations do not manage as successfully as showing trust and respect. In the context of international business collaboration, ICC should also be managed in the functions of relationship creation and maintenance because as Myers (2010:137) suggests successful organizational relationships can facilitate the development of collaboration and networks, and thereby lead to new opportunities which may not otherwise occur. Creating strong interpersonal relationships has been emphasized in particular in Chinese business communication (e.g. Ding 2006; Zhu, Nel & Bhat 2006). ICC in Chinese context can be seen as prioritizing relationship maintenance over directness or accuracy, and rather sacrificing effectiveness than embarrassing anyone involved in social interaction (Yeh 2010:72–73).

Measuring ICC related to relationship maintenance can, however, be a complicated process. The ratings of personal communication and familiarity may be influenced by the SME and intermediary representatives' differing expectations towards international business collaboration or the value given to it. Representatives of SMEs and intermediary organizations are found to perceive their collaborative relationships as both personal and professional, and both emergent and strategic and this may have affected the assessments of ICC in personal communication and familiarity (see Purhonen 2010). The differing expectations may due to the national or ethnic, but also organizational backgrounds of collaborating partners. The value given to particular ICC may, indeed, vary among the employees of different types of organizations (private, public and state enterprise) even within one national culture (see Sriussadaporn-Charoenngam & Jablin 1999). Nevertheless, the assessments may refer to the participants' appreciations or expectations given to, for instance, personal or emotional connectedness as part of international business collaboration and ICC instead of actual communication behavior.

The representatives of SMEs and intermediary organizations assessed their own ICC significantly higher than that of their collaborating partners. For the study the SME and intermediary representatives were asked to assess ICC in a relationship with a partner, whom the SME and intermediary representatives had mostly been in contact with and whom they had met at least once. The reason for this request was to exclude from examination those relationships which do not involve the ongoing management of the relationship. However, this advice may have led only to assessments of ICC in collaborative relationships which could be perceived as successful. The self-assessments may then relate more to the SME and intermediary representatives' satisfaction with the accomplishment of their goals or the fulfillment of their expectations rather than be assessments of their actual interpersonal communication behavior. Further, because the SME and intermediary representatives' self-assessments of their own ICC were significantly higher than the judgments made by their collaborating partners, it is also possible that the self-assessments are to some extent based on "false competence" which can be understood as taking responsibility for positive results that the individual did not actually produce (Parks 1994).

The assessments of ICC in collaborative relationships may also be biased by the tendency to assess too positively a person whom one knows well and with whom one likes to work with compared with how one would assess interaction partners who are not so close or with whom collaboration has not been successful. Hence, the assessments may reflect positive experiences of the interpersonal relationship rather than assessments of actual interpersonal communication behavior. Further, the percentile frequencies of both self-assessments and partner assessments were concentrated at the positive end and the data were not normally distributed. This indicates a possibility that the respondents' tendency to depend on holistic impressions when assessing ICC has lead to biased assessments.

The respondents' ability to accurately report their own communication activities should also be taken into consideration. In particular in the case of self-assessments, despite an apparent desire to report accurately and confidently, the respondents may in fact be inaccurate (Boster & Sherry 2010). Therefore, self-assessments cannot be seen as perfectly reliable method for behavioral assessment or valid representation of the construct being examined (Miller 2001). By using self-reports to examine ICC in SME internationalization it may only be possible to gain understanding concerning the SME and intermediary representatives' communication goals, confidence or feelings about their own communication behavior. In addition, the self-assessments may refer to factors such as communication satisfaction, goal-accomplishment or self-efficacy instead of actual interpersonal communication skills (Valkonen 2003). Self-assessments appear to be inaccurate to assessing actual communication behavior, but they can be seen as highly suitable for ascertaining beliefs, attitudes and values such as the importance given to trust and respect or personal connectedness in international business collaboration.

Conceptualization and operationalization of ICC

In this study ICC was operationalized according to six communicative functions of international business collaboration: 1) *thecreation and management of relationships, 2) information sharing, 3) management of network resources, 4) integrative negotiation, 5) management of diversity,* and *6) adaptation and adjustment.* Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) did not confirm this original six-dimensional structure of ICC in SME internationalization but indicated that CCCSsa (Collaborative Communication Competence Scale self-assessment) is viable for measuring different aspects of ICC, as compared to CCCSpa (Collaborative Communication Competence Scale partner assessment). Whereas CCCSsa seemed to encompass self-impressions of *connectedness, clarity and credibility, personal communication,* and *trust and respect,* CCCSpa measured ICC in *connectedness, information sharing, familiarity, adjustment,* and *trust and respect.*

The internal consistency of both CCCSsa and CCCSpa was tested using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Both measures yielded a coefficient of greater than .70. However, the results of EFA and even the high Cronbach alphas may refer to difficulties in the conceptualization and operationalization of ICC in SME internationalization. Measurement of ICC can be seen as sensitive to different kinds of rating errors (e.g. Valkonen 2003) and the high Cronbach alpha values may reflect a tendency to base assessments on holistic impressions of oneself or one's interaction partner rather than analytically assessing separate items of ICC.

Another challenge emerges from the findings based on EFA. As the self-assessments seemed to examine aspects divergent with partner assessments, do these two methods of assessment actually measure the same phenomenon, ICC in international business collaboration? Based on the results achieved with EFA the self-assessments and partner assessments of ICC in SME internationalization are not comparable.

Limitations and future directions

Interpersonal communication competence was assessed here using non-standardized measurement scales designed specifically for the present study. The results of both EFA and Cronbach alpha indicated scale quality, but a larger corpus of research data, and a pilot study or testing program would have increased the measurement validity and reliability (see Frey, Botan & Kreps 2000). A larger amount of data would have allowed, for instance, statistical comparisons or groupings. It could have been interesting, for instance, to search for differences in the assessments of ICC between international or national relationships, or between Finnish and Chinese respondents. The findings of this study should be viewed with some caution, as both CCCCSsa and CCCSpa require extensive testing and further confirmation.

The findings achieved in this study cast doubt on the suitability and validity of measuring ICC in a complicated international business setting. According to the empirical data of this study, measurement of ICC seem to be influenced by several cultural, individual- and relationship-specific factors such as the variety of communication goals or shared experiences of the participants in the given collaborative relationship (see also Purhonen, Rouhiainen-Neunhäuserer & Valkonen 2010). Both self-assessments and partner assessments of ICC appear to be exposed to several biases. Self-assessments may reflect the inferences of goal accomplishment, satisfaction or self-efficacy, and even false competence instead of actual interpersonal communication skills. Whereas partner assessments may provide information about the actual communication behavior, they might also be biased, for instance, by the value given to ICC or the closeness and familiarity of the collaborative partner. Also the different kinds of expectations towards the given context or the relationship (such as how formal or informal or how private or professional collaborative relationships should be) may complicate the assessment of ICC in international business collaboration.

Future studies should use triangulation of both direct and indirect methods to produce a deeper understanding of ICC in a complex business context. Direct methods such as observation could provide a more reliable picture of the collaborating partners' actual communication behavior (e.g. interpersonal communication skills), but may not alone be sufficient or adequate to encompass ICC in international business collaboration. A third party always lacks relationship-specific information, which is necessary in assessing ICC in a given interpersonal relationship (see Parks 1994). Indirect methods should not be treated as useless, as they appear to be viable in providing knowledge of the values and attitudes influencing ICC. Hence, examination of ICC in international business collaboration could follow a mixed methods approach and apply individual interviews, focus groups or direct observations before the development and implementation of the ICC measurement (see also Onwuegbuzie, Bustamante & Nelson 2010, for conducting mixed research for developing quantitative instruments). Such practice would help the researcher to better understand the contextual parameters such as communication practices, organizational roles or the professional tasks inherent in the assessment context and develop a contextually sensitive measure for ICC.

This study revealed challenges in the measurement of ICC in international business collaboration and indicated that measurements do not provide sufficient understanding or explain the participants' communicative strengths or the stumbling blocks in collaboration. Measurement cannot provide an objective or absolute picture of ICC in complicated, international business collaboration, but assessments are always subjective inferences and only valid in particular relationships or contexts (see also Purhonen, Rouhiainen-Neunhäuserer & Valkonen 2010). Operationalization of ICC in international business collaboration that involves a diverse range of collaborating participants and cultural, personal and organizational expectations, goals and appreciations, is challenging. International business collaboration is a phenomenon that has received scant attention from scholars in interpersonal and intercultural communication. Consequently continued research into this complex issue is necessary.

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