

Review

Close encounters of a cultural kind: Lessons for business, negotiation and friendship (a review)

Original work by Richard D. Lewis published by NB Books 2020

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Received 17.08.2020 | **Revised** 12.09.2020 | **Accepted** 18.09.2020

Recommended citation format: Tomalin, B. (2020). Close encounters of a cultural kind: Lessons for business, negotiation and friendship (a review). *Training, Language and Culture*, 4(3), 77-78. Doi: 10.22363/2521-442X-2020-4-3-77-78



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Richard Lewis, Chair of Richard Lewis Communications in the UK, world-leading intercultural consultant and creator of the Lewis model of intercultural interaction is the author of a number of influential books on the role of culture in international business, notably *When Cultures Collide*.

His newest book is different. Part memoir and part experiences of the people he has met on his travels around the world as a language teacher and cultural consultant, its forty-nine short chapters offer vignettes of friends and colleagues and people of different nationalities he has met and dealt with in the UK, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greenland, China, Japan, North and South Korea, Hungary, Romania, Russia, Tunisia, Belize and the USA. What is common to each is the stories of individuals in intercultural situations and environments and how they behave. It is a rich store of reading materials written in a conversational style and accessible, I would suggest, to teachers, students of CEFR B2+ and above and an excellent source of critical incidents for use in cultural training.

As Milton Bennett, interculturalist and creator of the famous Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) explains in his excellent and informative preface, Lewis is writing about individuals, not countries or cultures, but shows how individuals display personal attitudes and behaviours that are characteristic of people who come from particular countries or regions. This does not mean everyone who comes from that country or region is like this (stereotyping) but that a general style of behaviour or type of attitude may exist that some members will reflect in how they deal with others. A pertinent example is a Lufthansa airline pilot steering his aircraft through mid-Atlantic turbulence on his way from Frankfurt in Germany to Boston in the US. His passengers were mainly German and American. Over the aircraft public address system the passengers received in German a fairly detailed assessment of the weather causing the turbulence, re-assurance on the technical quality and efficiency of the engines and the action the pilot intended to take to avoid the air turbulence. In English, the US passen-

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gers got this. ‘As you can see we are on a bit of a roller coaster. So just sit back, tighten your seatbelts and enjoy the ride’. In cultural terms you could use the generalisation, many Germans are more process-orientated and value more detailed technical information whereas many Americans are more results-oriented and just need to feel reassured that the pilot knows what he (it was a ‘he’) is doing and that the result will be successful. The relaxed general description of the turbulence as ‘a bit of a roller coaster’ and the advice to ‘sit back, tighten your seatbelts and enjoy the ride,’ was all the reassurance they needed.

Lewis has travelled worldwide and speaks twelve languages (ten European and two Asian) and has experience of running language schools and directing language school chains all over the world. However, he has especially deep experience of Finland and Japan, and this is reflected in many of the stories in the book. Thus, a number of stories concern Japanese politeness.

When he was living in Tokyo a house near him caught fire early in the morning. It was made of wood, and burned to the ground. The following day the owner of the house called on Richard Lewis and all his neighbours with presents to apologise for the discomfort to their sleep caused by the fire. At a loss to know how to respond, Richard Lewis and his wife sent a letter of commiseration to the owner, as did his neighbours down the

street. There are many stories like this in the book. Marina Dzashi, anchor person on Russia Today and host of International Business Ethics used to live and work in Japan and especially enjoyed Lewis’s stories of the differences between Western and Eastern business cultures, especially regarding relationship building and communication.

As for the Finns, many are noted for being quite taciturn and tend to be modest about their achievements. Lasse Viren, an Olympics winning long distance runner did an English course at Riversdown House, Richard Lewis’s training centre in the southwest of England. At the end of their course students were asked to make a presentation or write an essay to conclude their studies. Lasse Viren chose an essay. Richard Lewis asked Viren’s teacher how she judged the essay. ‘Very creditable’, the teacher replied, ‘and quite interesting. Only one funny thing though... He never mentioned running.’

Used appropriately, according to nationality or environment, teachers and trainers can adapt many of these stories as critical incidents to discuss relationships between people from different cultures and how they can deal with each other. They can also use chapters – many are very short, just one and a half pages – as the basis of extensive reading exercises at upper intermediate and advanced level to explore cultural differences and appreciate situations from another’s point of view.

As Bennett says in his preface, we no longer need to travel to experience cultural difference. It has come to us through the globalisation of business, hyperconnected communication, immigration, and political and climate change refugees. ‘The frontier of intercultural communication is now next door.’

Marina Dzashi endorses Bennett’s observations. ‘This book’, she writes, ‘full of real-life stories and critical incidents, is an excellent guide that will give you the right set of tools to understand people from a reality that may be vastly different from yours and will help you develop what the world sometimes needs most of all, cross-cultural empathy.’ Developing intercultural empathy is what it is all about.