

CONTRASTS IN EUROPEAN AWARENESS BETWEEN IRISH AND ZIMBABWEAN STUDENTS

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Abstract. This paper summarises the results of a survey of the level of recognition of European countries by university level students in Ireland and Zimbabwe. While Irish students have a significantly higher level of recognition there are a number of common features between the results of both surveys. Countries with distinctive shapes, large size and/or coastal locations are best recognised. Also the member states of the European Community are generally better known than members of other regional groupings. There is also a high degree of confusion amongst both student samples in relation to members of groupings that are frequently identified by historical/regional labels such as Scandinavia or the Balkan states.

In 1992 a unique opportunity arose to examine the comparative levels of locational knowledge of Europe attained by students in Ireland and in Zimbabwe. The two groups of students selected (113 Irish and 74 Zimbabwean) were both studying geography as part of their degree course and were at approximately the same stage in their studies. The approach adopted was based on an adaptation of the method of data collection used by King and McGrath (1988) for their study of the locational knowledge of African countries possessed by a group of Irish students.

Hypotheses

It was envisaged that this study would provide material to test the following hypotheses.

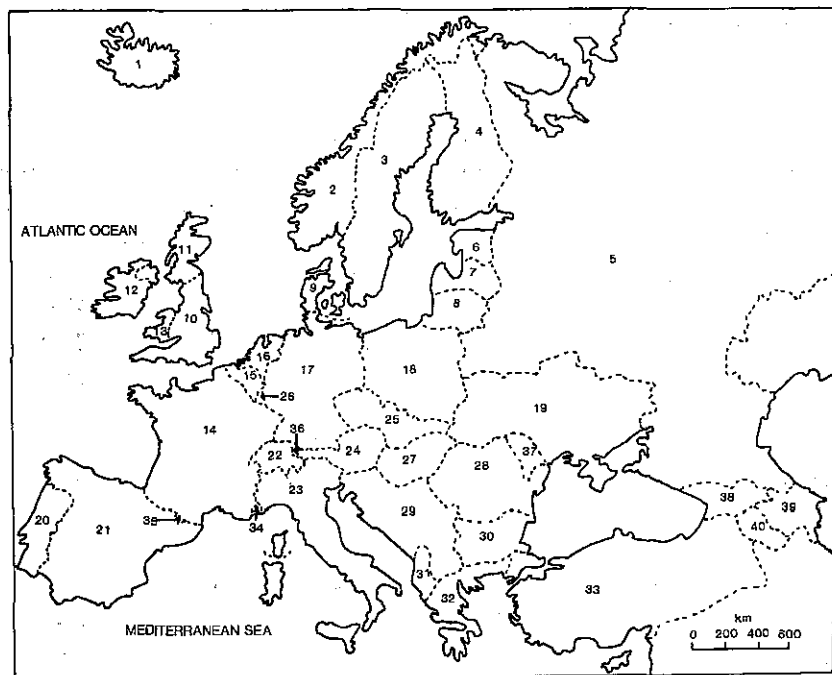
- (1) Recognition levels of European countries may vary between the Irish and Zimbabwean students. It was considered likely that the Irish would have a higher recognition rate, as their exposure to such information would be greater from such sources as holiday visits, media coverage, Ireland's EC membership, etc. Clearly, the African students would be disadvantaged in all these respects.
- (2) Recognition levels may be influenced by factors such as:
 - location - coastal or inland;
 - proximity - closer countries may be more recognised than distant ones;
 - size - large or small area;
 - membership of regional grouping (e.g. EC);
 - recency of establishment - e.g. states of former USSR.
- (3) Possible confusion of country identity may exist within particular regions of Europe - e.g. Scandinavia.

Administration of the Test

Each student was supplied with an A4-sized map of Europe on which national boundaries were marked and each country numbered from 1 to 40 (Figure 1). The former Yugoslavia was shown on the map rather than the new states formed from

undertaken. On a separate sheet students were asked to list the name of each country beside its appropriate number. This facilitated much more rapid processing of results than allowing students to write directly on to the maps (the method used by King and McGrath). Students were not supplied with a list of the names of the countries, although this might have improved success rates for the exercise. The use of a list was favoured by King and McGrath and would probably be desirable if the exercise was repeated with younger students. Respondents were allowed approximately 20 minutes to complete the exercise.

Figure 1. Europe map for test



Results

(1) Overall recognition rates

The results confirmed the hypothesis that recognition levels were different for the two groups. The Irish group, as expected, were significantly more successful (with a mean recognition rate of approximately 23 countries) than the Zimbabwean group, who had a mean recognition rate of approximately 11 countries. Table 1 shows that none of the Irish students identified fewer than nine countries and one-third identified more than 25. By contrast, none of the Zimbabweans identified more than 23 while the recognition level for almost 40% was less than nine countries.

Table 1. Summary of recognition levels by Irish and Zimbabwean students

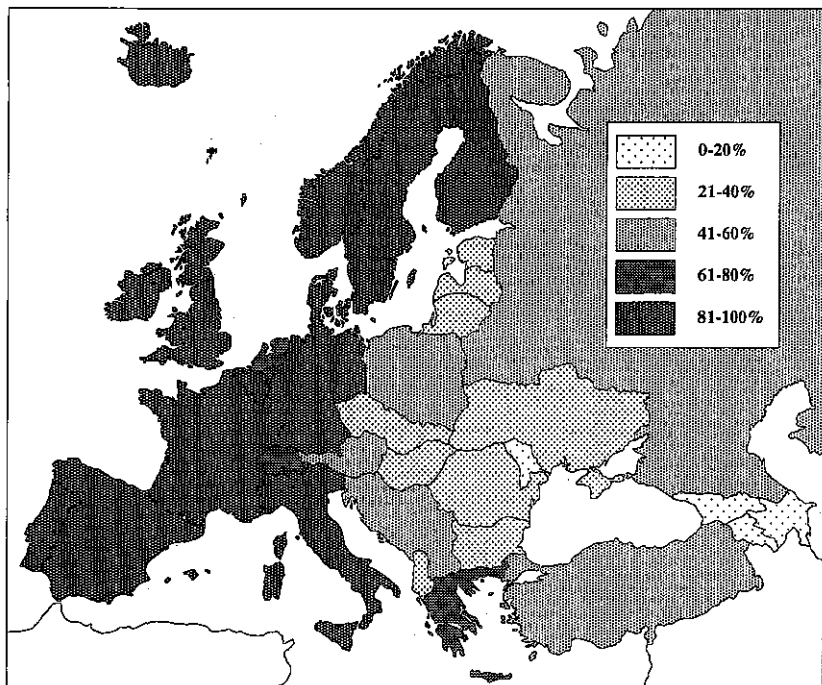
No. of Countries	Percentage of Students	
	Irish	Zimbabwean
0 - 8	0.0	37.8
9 - 16	17.0	47.3
17 - 24	49.5	14.9
25 - 32	18.5	0.0
33 - 40	15.0	0.0

Table 2. Ranking of countries according to level of Recognition by Irish and Zimbabwean Students

Country	Ireland	Zimbabwe	Country	Ireland	Zimbabwe
Scotland	1	13	Austria	21=	19=
Italy	2=	1	Turkey	21=	19=
Portugal	2=	2	Poland	23	23
Spain	2=	2	Yugoslavia	24	25=
Wales	2=	17	Albania	25	29=
France	6	3=	Czechoslovakia	26	18
Iceland	7=	9=	Latvia	27=	31=
Ireland	7=	11	Monaco	27=	31=
England	9=	*19=	Bulgaria	29	27
Germany	9=	5	Estonia	30	31=
Denmark	11	12	Lithuania	31=	27=
Norway	12=	8	Romania	31=	29=
Sweden	12=	7	Ukraine	33	31=
Belgium	14	15	Lichtenstein	34	31
Greece	15	6	Hungary	35	21
Finland	16	9=	Andorra	36	31=
Netherlands	17	16	Armenia	37=	31=
Switzerland	18	22	Azerbaijan	37=	31=
Luxemburg	19	25=	Georgia	37=	31=
Russia	20	14	Moldova	40	31=

* See text

Figure 2a. Percentage of Irish Students correctly identifying each country



Percentage recognition rates for individual countries are shown on Figures 2a and 2b for Irish students and on Figure 2b for Zimbabwean students. When rank order of successful identification was examined only a relatively weak correlation ($r_s = 0.4556$) was found between the rank order for the two groups, see Table 2.

However, if just the best known and the least known are compared a correlation becomes much more apparent as seven of the ten most recognised and seven of the ten least recognised are common to both groups (see Table 3). Many of the Zimbabwean students misidentified England as the UK. If this mistake is ignored then England would also be among the most recognised for this group as it is for the Irish students.

(2) Factors affecting rates of recognition

Location: For both groups it was found that none of the best recognised countries was entirely landlocked. Indeed, with the exception of Germany they had long coastlines. Well recognised countries were, in general, in the west of Europe. The only exception to this finding was Greece, which was the sixth most recognised country by the Zimbabweans, and it was also recognised by more Irish students than neighbouring states. It is possible that factors such as Greece's membership of the EC,

Figure 2b. Percentage of Zimbabwean students correctly identifying each country

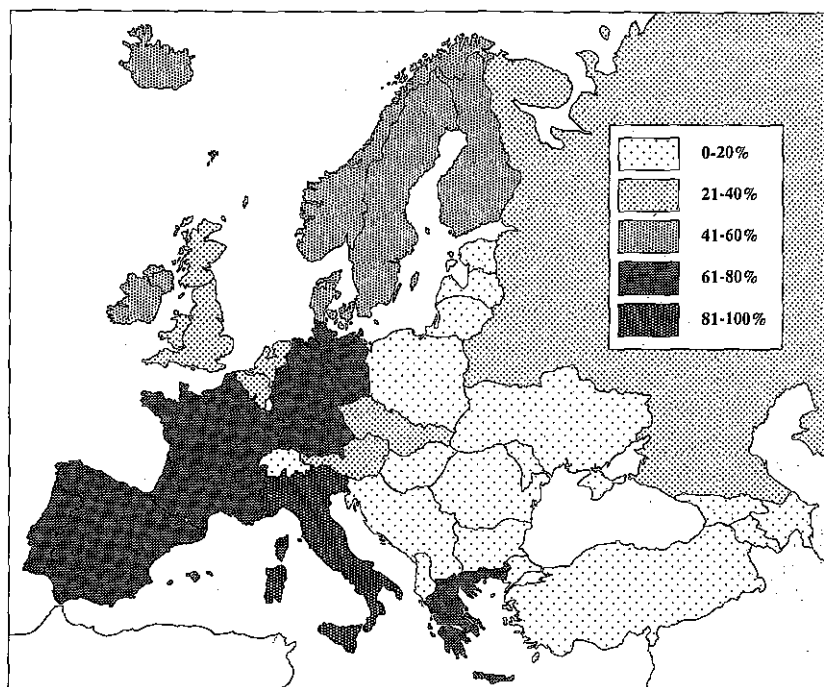


Table 3. Most Recognised and Least Recognised Countries

Most Recognised				Least Recognised			
Rank	Zimbabwe	Rank	Ireland	Rank	Zimbabwe	Rank	Ireland
1	Italy	1	Scotland	31=	Latvia	31=	Lithuania
2	Portugal	2=	Italy	31=	Monaco	31=	Romania
3=	Spain	2=	Portugal	31=	Estonia	33	Ukraine
3=	France	2=	Spain	31=	Ukraine	34	Lichtenstein
5	Germany	2=	Wales	31=	Lichtenstein	35	Hungary
6	Greece	6	France	31=	Andorra	36	Andorra
7	Sweden	7=	Iceland	31=	Armenia	37=	Armenia
8	Norway	7=	Ireland	31=	Azerbaijan	37=	Azerbaijan
9=	Iceland	9=	England	31=	Georgia	37=	Georgia
9=	Finland	9=	Germany	31=	Moldova	40	Moldova

historical significance and its importance as a holiday destination may have influenced this finding.

Proximity: Those countries closest to Ireland were better recognised than the rest of Europe. They were also EC partners and tend to be the European destination countries of most Irish emigrants and tourists. They were also the best recognised countries by Zimbabweans, who are not EC members, do not live close to any European country and of whom relatively few migrate to any European country. Thus, it is not possible to arrive at any firm conclusion on the effect of proximity.

Regional grouping: For Irish students nine of the ten most recognised countries were EC members (Iceland being the only exception) and six of those most recognised by Zimbabweans were also EC member states. Neither group was particularly successful in identifying former members of the Warsaw Pact or COMECON groups. Indeed, membership of these latter groupings appears to correlate negatively with recognition as 8 out of ten Irish and 7 out of the ten Zimbabwean least identified countries were members of these groupings.

Size and Shape: Distinctive shape appeared to affect recognition levels positively, for example Italy (with its distinctive "boot" shape) was identified by 87% of Zimbabwean students and by 99% of Irish students, while Hungary (an indeterminate ovoid shape) was only recognised by 19% and 22% respectively. Small size had in general a negative effect on recognition, with Lichtenstein, Andorra and Monaco being identified by only small numbers of Irish students and by none of the Zimbabweans. Luxemburg was recognised by only 8% of Zimbabweans, but was identified successfully by 68% of Irish students. This higher recognition rate may be explained by its membership of the EC, which would ensure a higher level of media attention, for example during Luxemburg's recent EC presidency, and because of the location of some EC institutions within that state. Other small countries are also found within the least recognised group, for example Moldova, but it is reasonable to suggest that the recency of their independent status may have had a greater effect on recognition rates than did size.

Newly independent states: States which had only recently been recognised as independent by the international community were very poorly identified by all students. The only exception to this was Russia. Six states of the former USSR were not identified by any Zimbabwean students and by only a small number of Irish students. No former USSR states were identified by more than 29% (33 students) of the Irish group. Russia was clearly recognised by the majority of respondents in both groups, but was incorrectly designated as either the USSR or CIS by many of them (41% of Zimbabwean and 43% of Irish respondents).

(3) *Regional confusions*

Some mis-identifications were clearly wild guesses, for example one Irish student identified Turkey as India and one Zimbabwean student thought Wales was China. However, in both groups common errors frequently involved confusion between neighbouring countries, for example the three physically linked Scandinavian countries of Norway, Sweden and Finland were frequently mistaken for each other.

Where overall recognition rates were lower this confusion appeared more marked, for example a large number of respondents knew the names of the three Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, but a much smaller percentage could identify them individually. The same confusion appeared to exist between Hungary and Yugoslavia. Interestingly while only 23% of Zimbabwean students named England correctly, a further 63% identified it as either the United Kingdom or Great Britain. It may be argued that the UK has a unitary status in the world and, therefore, Zimbabweans would be much more familiar with the group name than that of the separate countries, which are referred to much less frequently. Only one Irish respondent made the same error. Also Zimbabwe is a former British colony and so the term Great Britain is probably more familiar than the names of the individual countries of which it is composed. Scotland was correctly identified by a greater percentage of Zimbabwean students than England (35%) although Wales had a similar success rate to England. Since the test was administered in Zimbabwe by a visiting Irish person, it is impossible to assess the previous level of knowledge of Ireland's location as it may be supposed that some students would have been sufficiently curious to find out where their visitor came from on a map, if they did not already know. It is, however, possible that it is more easily identifiable than Wales or Scotland either because it is an independent country, because of its peripheral (and thus more noticeable) location, or because it is an island. Russia was identified by over 40% of both groups as the USSR or CIS, indicating actual knowledge of the country, but a possible lack of knowledge of current affairs, despite maps appearing on television and in the press showing the newly independent republics and their names being widely used. This would suggest that, as with the confusion over recognition of England, the problem may not be one of lack of some knowledge of a location, but much more a lack of attention to changes after a particular set of facts has been first committed to memory.

It is of interest to note that despite the conflicts which have raged in the former Yugoslavia it was identified successfully by only 48% of Irish students and a mere 8% of Zimbabweans. In the case of the Irish respondents, this represents an improvement on level of recognition by a previous comparable group in 1990, but at the time of the study maps of the region were shown almost nightly on the television news and in the daily papers. This would appear to provide support for the suggestion that even geography students, who might be supposed to be more map conscious than the general population, do not always pay close attention to information presented in this form.

Comparisons with Irish Recognition of African Countries

Zimbabwean students were slightly more successful on average at identifying European countries, with a 27% success rate, compared with 23% for the Irish students who did the exercise on African countries. Approximately half of the Zimbabweans could identify no more than 25% of the countries of Europe, compared

with 70% of King and McGrath's Irish group who could identify fewer than one quarter of the countries of Africa. On the other hand there were several countries in Europe which none of the Zimbabweans could identify, whereas there was no country in Africa which was not identified successfully by at least one Irish student.

Many of King and McGrath's findings about factors influencing recognition of African countries by Irish students were reciprocated by Zimbabwean students identifying European countries. In both cases no country was correctly identified by all respondents, generally larger countries were better known than smaller ones and countries located near to each other tended to be confused. However, while proximity to Europe appeared to influence the recognition rate for Irish students, Zimbabweans recognised both southern European countries, such as Greece and northern ones, such as Norway well. Peripheral location and distinctive shape, both identified by King and McGrath as being important for African recognition, would appear to have more influence than proximity for Zimbabwean students.

Conclusions

This exercise has provided some interesting suggestions about factors which make countries memorable and also produced some thoughtful discussion among both participating groups about these factors. It would be interesting to repeat the exercise with younger Irish students, particularly bearing in mind the decrease in the specifically regional content of the Junior Certificate course in comparison with the previous examination courses and in view of the comments made in various places about the effects of this on the locational knowledge of our students.

Reference

King R. & McGrath, F. (1988) Mapping the Geography of Ignorance. *Geographical Viewpoint*, 16, 1988, 73 - 80.