

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AS A CHALLENGE AND AS A TOOL IN MULTICULTURAL ENVIRONMENTS

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Abstract

Today's world is becoming increasingly multicultural, which means the need for new competencies, especially of communication, in both professional and personal environments. Since a person is a social being and one of the essential characteristics of the latter is the need to communicate, cooperate, and be part of a certain society, communication in this context is an integral part of any society and one of the crucial skills of any person. And here it is important not only to know the language of that society, but also to know essential communication strategies, such as the ability to use various non-verbal means of communication, listen and hear what others say, concentrate, engage and participate in a conversation, speak in public, control your tone of voice, etc. These strategies are especially needed in order to reduce as much as possible the noise that exists in any communication process, which, according to communication experts, not only complicates the communication process itself, but can also negatively affect the results of that communication. In addition to the usual types of noise, such as psychological, physical, physiological, etc., today, culturally based communication noise is increasingly being referred to. This means that cultural characteristics have an impact on how the communication message itself is constructed and sent in the communication process, as well as how it is decoded, i.e. how a person belonging to another culture will understand what was said, how they will react to it, etc. And it is not knowledge of the relevant language, but the existing intercultural communication competence that can help them feel good and act constructively and communicate in a multicultural environment. For these reasons, intercultural communication can pose certain challenges in the communication process, but, on the other hand, having intercultural communication skills can be an excellent tool for communication in a multicultural environment. And the communication could be treated as effective context for development intercultural communication skills and competencies, because practice, reflection and experiential learning are the best ways for developing interculturality in general. The article will examine both of these aspects - as a challenge and as a tool - of intercultural communication, based on the experience of the Siauliai State Higher Education Institution in working with national and international students, it will analyse the challenges encountered in communicating in multicultural environments, and ways in which intercultural communication competencies can be developed during formal and informal studies.

Keywords: *Intercultural communication, multicultural environments, communication strategies, higher education, development of intercultural communication skills and competencies.*

1. Introduction

Today's world is becoming increasingly multicultural, which means the need for new competencies, especially of communication, in both professional and personal environments (Multicultural & Global Literacy – 21st Century Education, 2017). Since a person is a social being and one of the essential characteristics of the latter is the need to communicate, cooperate, and be part of a certain society, communication in this context is an integral part of any society and one of the crucial skills of any person. And here it is important not only to know the language of that society, but also to know essential communication strategies, such as the ability to use various non-verbal means of communication, listen and hear what others say, concentrate, engage and participate in a conversation, speak in public, control your tone of voice, etc. These strategies are especially needed in order to reduce as much as possible the noise that exists in any communication process, which, according to communication experts, not only complicates the communication process itself, but can also negatively affect the results of that communication. In addition to the usual types of noise, such as psychological, physical, physiological, etc., today, culturally

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2. Intercultural communication: Theoretical discourse

Being an integral part of any society and one of the most important skills of any person, high-quality communication is one of the necessary conditions for any process in which more than one person participates. For this reason, the development of communication skills is one of the most important parts of any educational process. Most scientists studying communication processes distinguish such essential elements of the communication process as the sender, the recipient, the content, the channel, the means, as well as feedback (Paulston et al., 2014). The latter is needed in order to understand whether the message sent by the sender is understandable to the recipient, whether the information received by the recipient is as close as possible to the information sent by the sender. On the other hand, it is obvious that due to the psychological, physiological, physical, etc. noise existing in the communication process, there cannot be an absolutely identical understanding of the sent information. This is especially true of intercultural communication, because in this communication process, in addition to the other types of communication noise already mentioned, semantic, in other words, culturally based noise, also appears. This is because the same things can be perceived differently in different cultures, from the perspective of their own culture. For this reason, intercultural communication skills include not only knowledge of various languages, but also other important communication skills. According to many authors, the most important of them are the following (Northup, 2025, Pocevicene, 2021, 2023a, 2023b, 2024a, 2024b, Baraldsnes, 2012; Pruskus, 2012; Paulston et al., 2014):

1. **Active listening.** This is paying attention to the person being communicated with, i.e. the ability to focus only on the speaker, pay attention to his facial expressions and body language, listen to his tone of voice, if necessary, clarify his point of view by asking additional questions or paraphrasing what he said, etc. The practice of active listening can not only establish relationships with the persons participating in the communication process, but also help to receive feedback, understand cultural differences, etc.
2. **Using the appropriate communication methods and channels.** When choosing a communication method, it is very important to consider the audience and the information you want to share. In the case of intercultural communication, direct contact is always better, because there is an opportunity to receive feedback here and now, and if necessary, correct errors or discrepancies that have arisen in the communication process due to communication noise.
3. **Friendliness,** which could also be described as empathy, as the ability to "step into another's shoes", to imagine oneself in another's place. Friendliness greatly strengthens trust in the communication process, and the success of communication itself largely depends on it.
4. **Self-confidence,** which also has a positive effect on the entire communication process, because people are more likely to respond to ideas that are presented confidently. In this context, eye contact, the choice of sitting or standing, and in general, all participation in communication is also important, which can also be understood and expressed differently in different cultural aspects.
5. **Reaction and feedback** to the information provided, it is especially important that they are constructive. Here it should also be remembered that in different cultural contexts people present, receive, and react to information differently, therefore, the perception of the cultural background and its influence can also be treated as an ability for intercultural communication.
6. **Volume and tone.** An important speaking skill is knowing how to be heard clearly. Adjusting your speaking voice to suit different situations is essential for effective communication. And controlling your tone, pitch, emphasis, and pauses can help your audience better understand your message.
7. **Empathy.** This quality can be called "emotional intelligence" and is important both in a team and individually. Listening to other people's emotions and being able to respond appropriately are factors in successful communication, including intercultural communication.

8. **Respect**, which is usually understood as a general norm and attitude of behaviour, not only enables you to hear and understand the other person better, but is also a means of promoting communication.
9. **Nonverbal language**. People also communicate through nonverbal cues: body language, facial expressions, and eye contact. Most authors believe that we receive much more information through non-verbal language than through verbal language, so if someone uses body language that you are not used to, and in multicultural environments this is not such a rare phenomenon, it is necessary to ask clarifying questions.
10. **Responsiveness**, or rather its speed and quality as well can also be treated as a condition for the success of communication, as in intercultural communication become even more significant due to the cultural differences in their perception

3. Methodology

The main methodological concepts are based on:

- Social constructivism and reconstructivism, which enable critical interpretation of "formed" educational phenomena and understanding them in a sociocultural context. (Berger, Luckmann, 1999; Duoblienè, 2006, and etc.)
- Pragmatism as a philosophy (Dewey, 1966; Bitinas, 2000; Duoblienè, 2006), which emphasizes active participation in learning process by the way of experimenting, solving real life problems, assessing the behavioural effects, active participation in society's life; which also emphasizes the importance of interaction between individuality and society. Learning by doing is one of the most effective teaching / learning methods in intercultural education, because it enables learners not only implement their knowledge into the practice, but also encourage them to reflect the process, to analyse their own and the others experience, and on that base rethink their own behaviour and change it if it's needed.
- Humanistic psychology and pedagogy, where education in a democratic community is characterized by "cooperation, participation in the management of educational institutions, social integration, social responsibility and independent learners learning to enjoy themselves freedom, independence and life can take hold. (Maslow, 1943; Rodgers, 1996 and etc.). In this case the most valuable teaching/learning methods are treated by those who promote students' self-knowledge in the various problem-solving, creative potential, school and social environment relations. This approach is very significant and helpful in intercultural communication, especially in multicultural environments.
- Progressivism philosophy (W. Kilpatric cit. from Duoblienè, 2006; Bitinas, 2000), which emphasizes active person 's participation in his/her own learning process and society 's life too. The principles of progressivism didactics such as individual experience, experimentation, and academics consulting are very significant for this research.
- "Free" education access (Rogers, 1996; Duoblienè, 2006), which is based on the student's and teacher's interaction, where the student and teacher has to be free to find their own truths, where the learning process is seen as a discovery, learning from their experiences and through his experience as an active and conscious participation in the process. This approach also could be treated as one of the essential approaches in intercultural communication and education.
- The learner-centred conception (Bitinas, 2000; Duoblienè, 2006), which is based on humanism, pragmatism, progressivism ideas about the free, conscious and active personality, which can realize your needs, actively and constructively to solve real life problems, and so on.

3.1. Objectives

The research aimed to theoretically and practically justify intercultural communication process as a challenge and as a tool for development of intercultural communication skills as well as identify the challenges encountered in communicating in multicultural environments, and ways in which intercultural communication competencies can be developed during formal and informal studies.

3.2. Methods

The research consisted of survey and the qualitative analysis of the focus groups discussions about what challenges students experienced working in intercultural groups during different kind formal and unformal activities, what helped or hindered them from working well in those groups, and what could be the ways in which intercultural communication competencies can be developed during formal and informal studies.

3.3. Design

The research was conducted in Šiaulių valstybinė kolegija / Higher Education Institution in 2023-2025 working with intercultural groups in formal (educational activities according to the study subjects) and informal (e.g. Blended Intensive Programmes (BIP)). In the research participated 35 students with different cultural, educational, intercultural background. The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods enabled to gather more qualitative results and to create the wider picture of the research topic as well as to suggest more suitable and supportable recommendations for intercultural communication and development of intercultural communication skills which are necessary working in multicultural environments.

4. Discussion

The analysis of the results obtained during the 2023-2025 survey shows that the vast majority (91,4%) of students who participated in various educational activities (both formal, i.e. lectures, seminars, exercises, and informal, i.e. BIP activities) believe that intercultural communication (in other words, tasks and activities that need to be performed in multicultural groups) is an excellent tool for developing intercultural communication skills. The remaining (8,6%), although they agree with this opinion, still see more difficulties and limitations, especially when those activities and tasks are assessed by grades.

Since no significant differences were observed in the responses of students who participated in both formal and informal educational activities, they are all analysed in a common sample.

Analysis of students' opinion about the role of intercultural communication in multicultural environment is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Students' Opinion about the Role of Intercultural Communication in Multicultural Environment.

Subcategories	Statements
Positive	<i>"Clear communication and clear instructions helped us work well as a team"</i> <i>"[...] the collaboration was effective thanks to good communication and involvement [...]"</i> <i>"[...] it was easy to communicate and organise outings outside the planed ones as a group and get to know each other."</i> <i>"We also had good communication and mutual respect, which allowed us to work efficiently and share responsibilities[...]"</i>
Helpful, supportive	<i>"Here really helped that our groups were all mixed from different universities so that we got to know all participants[...]"</i> <i>"[...] one factor that really helped our team collaboration was the diversity of perspectives. Each group member brought unique ideas based on their cultural background, which made our discussions richer and more creative."</i> <i>"[...] these difficulties became learning opportunities, we had to practice patience, active listening, and adaptability, which are essential global competencies."</i>
Challenges	<i>"Since all came from different backgrounds (especially different cultures) was a high-end awareness there that misunderstandings can occur."</i> <i>"In the most cases these misunderstandings where simple to solve through concrete questions and clear communication."</i>
Restrictions	<i>"Some members didn't understand English and they wanted to work with their friends[...]"</i> <i>"It was harder to work because of our different accent"</i> <i>"Working in an international group was enriching but sometimes challenging because of language barriers and different working styles[...]"</i> <i>"Sometimes, differences in communication style or expectations about deadlines made it harder to stay coordinated"</i> <i>"In a few cases, language barriers or hesitancy to speak openly created small misunderstandings[...]"</i>

Based on the analysis of qualitative data, it can be stated that most students see more positive, even encouraging, engaging, motivating and helpful things in intercultural communication than negative or problematic things. As the students themselves say, intercultural communication even significantly supplemented their learning outcomes, increased the efficiency of their educational process, because it enabled them to look at the same things and situations from different cultural perspectives. During intercultural communication, they also got to know other cultures better, as well as their own, because high-quality and constructive intercultural communication is always a dialogue between cultures.

The problems that arise in this are mostly related to the knowledge/lack of knowledge of the language itself, but not to the communication process itself.

5. Conclusions

- The study theoretically and practically substantiated that in a multicultural environment the process of intercultural communication can be treated as a challenge and as a means for developing intercultural communication skills.
- The use of various formal and informal intercultural communication competence activities is an effective means and educational environment for the development of intercultural competences
- In order to identify the challenges arising in this process, it is obvious that the respondents themselves see more advantages than disadvantages in intercultural communication. Moreover, the latter are mainly related to language proficiency/inability, and not to the communication process itself and during it, due to various cultural differences, communication noises that may arise.

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