

Exchange Students' Experiences in Intercultural Communication

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crossref <http://dx.doi.org/10.5755/j01.sal.0.18.410>

Abstract. The paper discusses the intercultural communication competence of Mykolas Romeris University exchange students who were studying at American, Finnish, Czech and German universities. The study explores the frequency of interactions between the exchange students and students from other countries; the difficulties they encountered and the reasons they attributed to these difficulties. Research results, derived from interviews and questionnaires, reveal that about 68 % of the exchange students communicated with students from other countries very frequently and more than 85 % of the respondents had at least one foreign friend. In this study, 74 % of the students reported they had faced difficulties when interacting with foreign students. Cultural differences were regarded as a significant reason to communication difficulties. One of the most notable difficulties was finding a suitable conversation topic to get the conversation going on. Many communicating difficulties derived from stereotypes against other cultures, culture shock and differences in politeness or misunderstandings of nonverbal communication. The paper formulates recommendations for good practice in helping students to develop effective skills of intercultural communication.

Keywords: *intercultural communication; student exchange; interpersonal communication skills.*

Introduction

In an integrated world, with growing intercultural awareness, the need for Lithuanian youth to study abroad becomes more important than in previous time periods. Student exchange programs aim to elevate global and cultural awareness, encourage independent study interests, improve foreign language skills among participants and enhance inter-cultural communication competencies that are a very important part of today's education (Cesevičiūtė, Minkutė, 2002).

Students derive many benefits from studying abroad. Choosing to spend at least a semester in a foreign country has become a useful addition to students' degree, giving them a well-rounded education. Studying abroad helps them make career and life decisions and improve problem-solving skills. Moreover, the possibilities to improve their foreign language learning and gain intercultural understanding, to achieve individual academic goals are highly valued among students. Program participants live and learn in cultures that are different from their own. According to Malmberg (2003), the understanding of foreign cultures is a necessity for young people and an exchange is a great way not only to achieve that understanding but also to get to know oneself better.

The researchers' informal observations, coupled with previous studies, have revealed that the exchange students from the Faculty of Public Security in Mykolas Romeris University prefer to mix with people from their own community rather than interact or communicate with students from other cultural backgrounds. This phenomenon led to the present investigation which aims to undertake a systematic study of the students' intercultural behaviour and verify initial observations. In addition, due to the increase in and development of multi-ethnic communities world-wide, the research aimed to study the exchange students' perceptions and interest in intercultural communication with students from other countries and the difficulties they encountered in intercultural communication.

Moreover, the ELT syllabus and teaching practices in our country in primary and secondary education place emphasis on teaching competence in macroskills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) and microskills (vocabulary and grammar) without enough emphasis on the development of intercultural skills.

The **aims** of the study are to examine to what extent the exchange program students from Mykolas Romeris University interact with students from other countries; to explore the difficulties they encounter and the reasons for these difficulties; to investigate the students' opinions on intercultural communication training, and, finally, to formulate recommendations for good practice in helping students to develop effective skills of intercultural communication.

Definitions

There are many definitions for intercultural communication, depending on the way culture and communication are defined. For example, Karlfried Knapp (2001, p.38) defines it

as the interpersonal interaction between members of different groups, which differ from each other in respect of the knowledge shared by their members and in respect of their linguistic forms of symbolic behaviour.

Damen (1987, p.23) defines intercultural communication as

acts of communication undertaken by individuals identified with groups exhibiting intergroup variation in shared social and cultural patterns. These shared patterns, individually expressed, are the major variables in the purpose, the manner, the mode, and the means by which the communicative process is effected.

Intercultural communication, in Lustig and Koester's words (2003, p.49), "is a symbolic process in which people from different cultures create shared meanings". It occurs when large and important cultural differences create dissimilar interpretations and expectations about how to communicate competently. Jandt (2004) pointed out that intercultural

communication is not only between individuals but also between “groups of diverse cultural identifications”. In summary, intercultural communication describes the interaction between individual and groups with different perceptions of communicative behaviour and differences in interpretations.

Methodology and Data Collection

One of the **methods** of the research is the overview of scientific works. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with exchange students have also been used as a certain sort of methods.

The participants in this study were 34 exchange students from the Faculty of Public Security in Mykolas Romeris University. During the 2006/07, 2007/08 and 2008/09 school years they spent one semester at host universities in Germany, the USA, Finland and in the Czech Republic. Among them, 20 were females and 14 were males. All agreed to participate in the research voluntarily.

The questionnaires were carefully designed using closed-response and open-response questions. The participants were asked about their difficulties in interactions with students from other countries, their preferences in communication and their knowledge of cultural differences. Many questions combined closed-response with open-response questions in order to get more information and to encourage respondents to offer additional relevant details.

The interview method was also employed to complement the data obtained from the questionnaires and to add to the validity of the questionnaire responses. The semistructured interview was adopted in order to obtain more in-depth information about the participants’ intercultural communication status (Cohen and Manion, 2000). The questions revolved around the students’ intercultural difficulties, their knowledge and opinion about intercultural communication, and their opinion about the use of intercultural communication skills in teaching professional foreign language.

Findings and Discussion

The data from the questionnaires and interviews show the range of experiences of Mykolas Romeris University students when communicating with students from other countries. Their experiences were analyzed to see if their communication difficulties, and the reasons for these difficulties were related to the extent of interaction with other students. The students’ opinions on intercultural communication and the relationship between intercultural communication and professional foreign language teaching are also shown.

General Intercultural Communication Status of Lithuanian Students

Table 1. Friends from Other Countries.

	0 friend	1–2 friends	3–4 friends	5–6 friends	More than 7 friends
Male	7.1 %	7.1 %	28.6 %	35.7 %	21.4 %
Female	20 %	10 %	30 %	15 %	25 %
Total	14.7 %	8.8 %	29.4 %	23.5 %	23.5 %

Table 2. Frequency of Communication with Students from Other Countries.

	Everyday	Few times a week	Once a week	Few times a month	No communication
Male	28.6 %	35.7 %	0 %	35.7 %	0 %
Female	30 %	40 %	10 %	5 %	15 %
Total	29.4 %	38.2 %	5.9 %	17.7 %	8.8 %

From the tables above we can see that the students had a high level of intercultural communication with foreign students. About 85 % of the study group had at least one foreign friend, with 24 % having more than 7 friends. Also, about 90 % of the group communicated at least once a week with a foreign student, and a third of them had a daily experience of such communication. This is positive in that it seems Lithuanian students take advantage of the cultural richness in foreign countries, engaging in communication with people from other countries.

However, there were clear differences between males and females. As shown in table 1, about a third (25 %) of the females had more than 7 foreign friends, compared to only 21.4 % of males. Yet, surprisingly, 20 % of female students had no foreign friends, compared to 7.1 % of males.

Figures in table 2 show that although 50 % of the females communicated with foreign students at least once a week, compared to only 36 % of the males, 9 % of the females had no communication with foreign students. The differences, therefore, might not be mainly related to gender but to other factors, such as personalities, hobbies, and lifestyles.

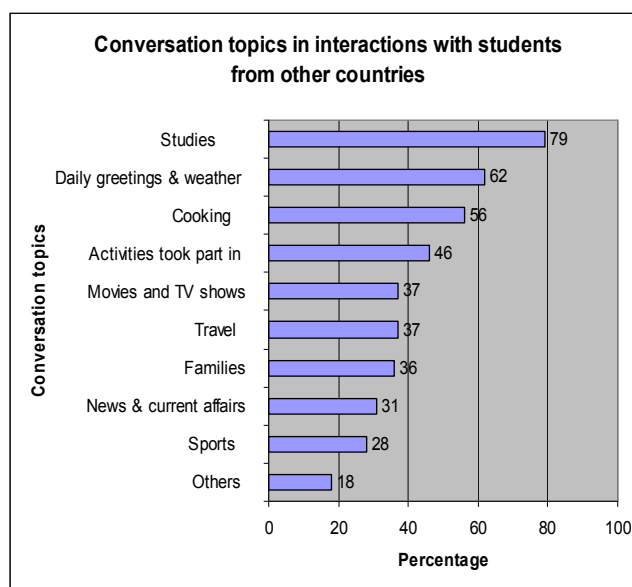


Figure 1. Conversation Topics in Interactions with Foreign Students.

Figure 1 describes the frequency of conversation topics in the students’ intercultural encounters. It is apparent that many of the communications were on the topics, which are not greatly influenced by cultural knowledge, while the more difficult or possibly sensitive topics, such as sports, news and current affairs, and other topics, were less frequent.

Considering that all the participants had studied English or German for at least 8 years, and before they came to study

abroad, had passed the foreign language test that indicated sufficient proficiency in English and German to enable them to deal with the topics listed in this question. Therefore, the length of foreign language study does not seem to be the reason for participants choosing easy and safe topics to communicate with students from other countries.

One explanation for the limited choice of topics in the interaction was obtained from the interview responses. All participants reported having limited knowledge about other cultures. In their understanding, culture means customs, holidays, life styles, music, food, religions, or histories. “Culture”, according to Samovar and Porter (2004), is an integrated system. It contains history, religion, values, social organization and language. The lack of sufficient knowledge about values, common faith, or the political views held by students from other countries, made Lithuanian students reluctant to engage in conversation on topics that are more serious and personal.

Another probable reason for the limited conversation between the students is the stereotypes that students have about the people living in a country where a certain language is spoken.

The stereotypes that people have do not necessarily have a negative affect if they are changeable after receiving new and informative information about that certain culture (Malmberg, 2003). She also (ibid) stresses the importance of not letting the stereotype images affect opinions about individuals because these images give only certain descriptions about groups of people in that culture. There are certain images that many people have when thinking about the Germans, for instance, the fact that Germans are very hard working and diligent. This does not, however, mean that every individual in Germany works e.g. any differently that some Finns do. The stereotypes some students have are superficial and affected through media. Regardless of the influences from which these ideas are received, exchange students point out that the stereotype images go away after they have spent some time in the foreign country and have already made some contact with somebody from that culture.

One more explanation for the limited conversations is the low level of intercultural communication skills training given in secondary schools. According to the participants, foreign language teaching focuses on grammar and training in macroskills, which include speaking listening, reading, writing and aim at students’ passing tests and exams. Five participants reported that all the intercultural communication knowledge they learned in secondary schools was about body language or gestures, and very little was learnt about politeness.

Four participants suggested that they do not have enough intercultural communication education during their university studies.

The limited knowledge of culture and intercultural communication skills may explain why more than 3 % of participants had no communication with their foreign friends and 12.5 % participants had no foreign friends. Although the majority of exchange students interacted with

students from other countries to some degree the conversation topics still remained within the scope of daily life.

Intercultural Communication Difficulties and Reasons

Table 3 below shows the number of students’ intercultural communication difficulties. A high percentage of students (73.5 %) experienced communication difficulties. Females had more difficulties, compared to 64 % of males. Thus, one third of the males had no communication difficulties, compared to 20 % of females.

Table 3. Participants’ Intercultural Communication Difficulties.

	Have difficulties	No difficulties
Male	64 %	36 %
Female	80 %	20 %
Total	73.5 %	26.5 %

Figure 2 shows that stereotypes against other cultures was the most common reason given for this difficulty. “Culture shock” was the second most common problem. The third equally important group of problems that received the same scores was the students’ lack of motivation in communicating and the lack of knowledge about the topic. A small but significant number of problems was ascribed to differences in politeness and disagreement of opinions.

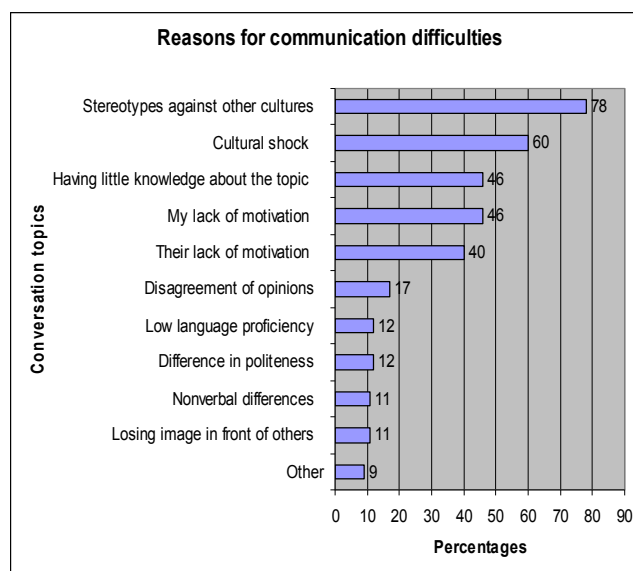


Figure 2. Reasons for Communication Difficulties.

Cultural Problems

Culture shock was considered a major reason for communication difficulties. It is “precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse” (Samovar and Porter, 2004). The culture shock experienced by the participants results from different understanding of the social interactions, different values in the two cultures, differences in personal interactions, and different lifestyles (Karaliūtė, 2009). Culture shock is an inevitable experience people undergo to different degrees. Effective intercultural communication entails the understanding and acceptance of differences. To achieve that, people should accept the difference of viewpoints and cultural values between them (Lustig, Koester, 2003).

When asked to describe the feelings experienced in situations of miscommunications, participants gave different answers. More than 30 % of the participants felt quite comfortable when interacting with students from other cultures. They paid little attention to the miscommunication and continued the conversation. On the other hand, 27 % felt frustrated and disappointed about what happened; nearly 12 % felt embarrassed. However, 23 % of students developed strategies to deal with the situation. They provided explanations to clarify their behaviour or changed the topic to a safer one. Such feelings suggest that the lack of intercultural communication knowledge can result in the embarrassment and estrangement for the participants.

Students' Opinions on Intercultural Communication

All the participants in the interview acknowledged the importance of intercultural communication training. The common reasons that were put forward included that

- 1) it is very useful to be equipped with some cultural knowledge about other countries;
- 2) it is an effective way to avoid culture shock and misunderstanding caused by lack of cultural awareness;
- 3) it helps to build a person's confidence and improve the intercultural communication competence;
- 4) it can play an important role in promoting the relationship among people from different cultures;
- 5) it helps in adapting to the new cultural environment and contribute to more successful intercultural interactions in their future careers. According to the participants, intercultural communication knowledge will benefit students who plan to study abroad. With more intercultural communication knowledge, they will be able to interact more easily with people from diverse cultures.

Conclusions

Most exchange students from Mykolas Romeris University at foreign universities were actively engaged in intercultural communications. About 68 % of the students communicated with students from other countries very frequently and more than 85 % of the respondents had at least one foreign friend. These figures imply that Lithuanian students have a strong willingness to interact with students from other countries.

Aušra Stepanovienė

Mainų programos studentų tarpkultūrinio bendravimo patirtis

Santrauka

Lietuvai plėtojant veiklą Europos Sąjungoje bei perimant naujausius mokslo ir studijų pasiekimus, kasmet vis daugiau ir daugiau studentų įsitraukia į studijų mainų programas. Straipsnyje nagrinėjama Mykolo Romerio universiteto Viešojo saugumo fakulteto mainų programos studentų tarpkultūrinio bendravimo patirtis. Apžvelgiami sunkumai, su kuriais susiduria studentai, išvykę dalinėms vieno semestro studijoms užsienio universitetuose, ir nurodomos pagrindinės šiuos sunkumus sukėlusios priežastys. Tyrimo rezultatai rodo, kad apie 68 % studentų dažnai ir aktyviai bendrauja su užsienio šalių studentais. Remiantis anketų duomenimis matyti, kad 74 % studentų patiria bendravimo sunkumus. Pagrindine priežastimi jie įvardija egzistuojančius tarpkultūrinius skirtumus ir žinių apie kitų šalių kultūrų įvairovę stoką, kultūros šoką. Kitos dažniausiai minimos priežastys yra užsienio kalbos žinių, motyvacijos, tolerancijos trūkumas. Išanalizavus tyrime dalyvavusių studentų apklausos rezultatus, akivaizdu, kad studentams būtina tobulinti tarpkultūrinę kompetenciją. Straipsnyje pateikiamos rekomendacijos, kaip pagerinti išvykstančiųjų studijuoti svetur tarpkultūrinio ir tarpasmeninio bendravimo įgūdžius.

In this study, 74 % of the students reported they had faced difficulties when interacting with foreign students. Cultural differences were regarded as a significant reason to communication difficulties. The respondents maintained their conversations with students from other countries on the safest topics, such as greetings and weather, studies and family. Most communicating difficulties derived from stereotypes against other cultures and culture shock. All these communicating difficulties indicate that students need to improve their intercultural communication knowledge before they study abroad. They need a better preparation to function adequately and survive harmoniously in the situations encountered in the new cultural environment. This knowledge should incorporate information about other cultural values, customs, politeness and non-verbal features of other countries and world varieties. Special courses should be organized after which students should have a better understanding of foreign culture, improved intercultural understanding and communication skills and enhanced interpersonal communication skills.

Future studies examining the processes of intercultural sojourn should consider more detailed qualitative analysis of students' in-country experiences to gain a deeper understanding of the time abroad and how it may cause changes within the individual.

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Straipsnis įteiktas 2010 04
Parengtas spaudai 2010 12

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