

THE ROLE OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: *Scientific and technological advances have made their mark on the means of communication, but also on the mobility of individuals. The latter has led to increased interaction and cooperation at international level. In the last decades we are witnessing a significant increase in the mobility in higher education level and the diversification of the types of international cooperation. Inevitably, cultural diversity is also manifested in higher education level, intercultural communication in the academic world becoming an increasingly appreciated subject. The purpose of this research is to identify how the intercultural communication competence influences the academic mobility of teachers and students.*

Keywords: *intercultural communication; internationalization of higher education; academic mobility;*

1. Introduction

Culture can have multiple connotations, but in a broad definition culture can be understood as representing an accumulation of "ever-changing values, traditions, social and political relationships, created everywhere, owned by a group of people gathered together by a combination of factors that include common history, geographical position, social class or religion, as well as the ways in which they are transformed by those who share them" (Nedelcu, 2008, p. 19). From the perspective of social sciences, the term culture refers to beliefs, expressive symbols and values that a group acquires and characterizes in terms of organizing the experiences and the behaviour of its own owners (Băran-Pescaru, 2008, pp. 7-8).

S. Schwartz (1999, p. 25) defines cultural values as "implicit or explicit abstract ideas shared by individuals who belong to that culture about what is right, what is good or desirable for society." Values are the most stable cultural elements, "they have the purpose of ordering and giving meaning to our deeds" (Voinea, 2014, p. 40). Adherence to certain values contributes to the differentiation of people or human communities, and these differences significantly affect human interaction. Cultural diversity is an indispensable element of society. Diversity cannot be removed, it becomes self-imposing and it tends to belong to the interior from a social point of view, of nature and culture (Nedelcu, 2008, p. 9).

The concept of "multicultural" presents the diverse nature from the cultural perspective of a human society, it refers to aspects such as linguistic, religious diversity, not only to the elements of ethnic and national culture (Băran-Pescaru, 2008, p. 46). Multiculturalism is a reality of coexistence on the same spatio-temporal line of groups of individuals belonging to several cultures, but which stand out individually, bypassing the contamination (Rey, 1999, p. 153 cit. in Pavalache-Ilie & Plugaru, 2007, p. 8). Multiculturalism can be difficult to define, but we can mention that it is used in two contexts. The first context takes into account the educational side, here, multiculturalism refers to what is taught and taught as "culture". The second context is of a social, economic, political nature. The idea that groups with cultures different from the majority culture are not sufficiently

protected by individual rights is underlined, that is why specific rights are needed to protect their own culture, meaning, the way of life (Okin, 1998, pp. 661-662).

Interculturality involves interaction, reciprocity, interdependence. Therefore, it is concerned with the identification of values, lifestyles, certain symbolic representations through which a relationship with human beings is established, the individual or groups in interaction, but also the identification of interactions that take place between many aspects of the same culture and between cultures (Rey, 1986 cit. in Dasen Pierre, Perregaux, & Rey, 1999, p. 152). The prefix "inter" implies the relationship, but also a mutual conditioning between individuals. The intercultural approach does not have within the range of its objectives the identification of the other by isolating him in a set of meanings, it puts the individual in a special place as a subject, regardless of its cultural characteristics (Bârlogeanu, 2007, p. 150).

Communication is a specific human behavior, conditioned by the desire to relate and interact (Țurcanu-Spatari & Grîu, 2015, p. 41). Interculturality takes on itself an elementary element of communication that admits an approach from interpersonal and social communication to intercultural communication. Intercultural communication is an "exchange or value transaction with the understanding of adjacent meanings, between people or groups that belong to different cultures. Exchanges can be made at an ideological, verbal, nonverbal, behavioral, physical, objectual, organizational level" (Cucoș, 2000, p. 136). Intercultural communication points to a fundamental human connection, but also to an idea that involves reflection: the relationship between us and others or, in other words, a relationship between distinct cultural identities (Georgiu, 2010, p. 115). As for the actors of intercultural communication, individuals, groups, ethnic, local, religious, linguistic communities, as well as societies are remarked. Where there is interindividual communication, it will be followed by intercultural communication, because individuals have diverse and personalized cultural structures. The difference between the two types of communication lies in the differences in language, religion, values, behavioral norms, habits, cultural experiences, and diverse views on the world (Georgiu, 2010, p. 117).

At present, the internationalization of education, understood as the "process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, function or delivery of postsecondary education" (Knight, 2003, p. 2), determines broad curricular reforms that aim to the increasing the number of academic programs taught in large-scale circulation languages, international recognition of qualifications and training standards, increasing physical mobility of students and teachers, and encouraging cross-border collaboration.

A convenient description of globalization is provided by Jane Knight and Hans de Wit (1997 cit. in Bogdan, n.d., p. 2), as follows: "In higher education, globalization implies a technological, economic, informational flow of people, values, ideas and transcend borders ". Internationalization and globalization are two distinct concepts in which globalization can be an activator process, and internationalization implies a direct manifestation of globalization. The main factors influencing the process of internationalization of higher education are (cf. Pricopie & Nicolescu, 2009, p. 11):

- Perceiving the importance of education for the economic, social and cultural welfare of society;
- Constant integration of information and communication technologies in teaching, learning and research;
- Pressures on higher education institutions to prepare graduates for life and work in an international context;
- Increasingly facilitating the mobility of highly skilled human resources, thus creating a highly competitive international labour market;

- The decrease or stagnation of public funds allocated to higher education in countries around the world, with no drop in demand for higher education;
- Increasing the pressure on higher education institutions to diversify their sources of funding to meet demands;
- The emergence, partly due to the above, of new suppliers and innovations in the higher education market as well as in the process of generating information.

The various ways of internationalization of higher education are grouped into six categories of phenomena and activities (cf. Pricopie & Nicolescu, 2009, pp. 11-14):

- a) Physical mobility - refers to travels across national boundaries, both for students and for teachers;
- b) Cross-border recognition of qualifications at the completion of studies or study modules conducted within other higher education institutions, especially those located in other countries;
- c) Curricular reform, the purpose of which is to internationalize both from the perspective of the content and the way of carrying out a university degree program;
- d) Promoting the European Higher Education Area Agenda to increase mutual trust between institutions providing tertiary education in different countries;
- e) Academic and scientific marketing consisting in the promotion abroad of the educational offer of the higher education institutions;
- f) The relatively recent development of some cross-border activities and of some forms of institutional mobility for the provision of study programs abroad.

2. Research methodology

2.1. The objective and hypothesis of research

O. Investigating the role of intercultural communication competence on the academic mobility of teachers and students.

I. We assume that the level of development of intercultural communication influences the level of academic mobility of teachers and students.

2.2. Participants, methods and research tools

The research group consisted of 21 teachers and 29 students from Transylvania University from Brasov. The research method used was the survey based on a questionnaire. The questionnaire has a total of 11 items, 2 open items and 9 items closed. The issues covered by the questionnaire are: occupational status, age, gender, whether or not they have participated in academic mobility, the known international languages and the general level of linguistic competence, intercultural communication capacity, obstacles encountered in intercultural communication and knowledge of host culture.

The relationship between teachers and students who participated in academic mobility and those who did not participate can be seen in Figure no. 1.

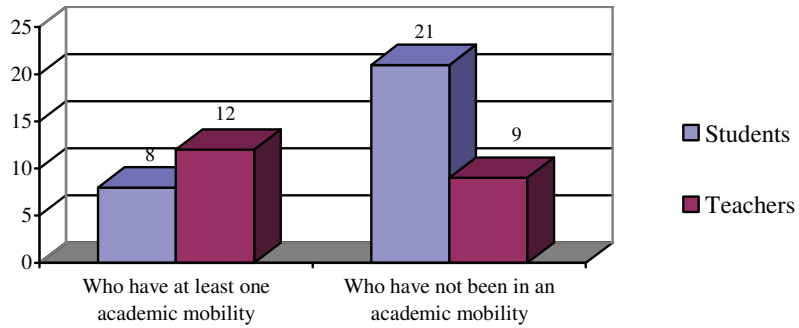


Figure 1. Distribution of participants according to the academic mobility criterion

2.3. Analysis and interpretation of research results

We present the most relevant results in the light of the objective and hypothesis. Thus, for the item "I feel comfortable communicating with people from other countries", the most significant difference between students who participated in international mobility and those who did not participate, we find at the level of the "strong agreement" option of response, so as can be seen in figure no. 2. In the case of teachers, there are notable differences in the same response option.

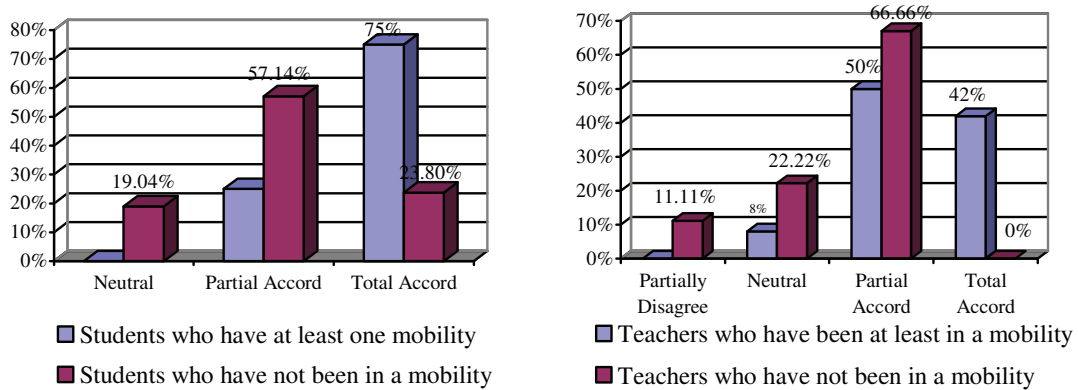


Figure 2. The students and teachers comfort level in intercultural communication

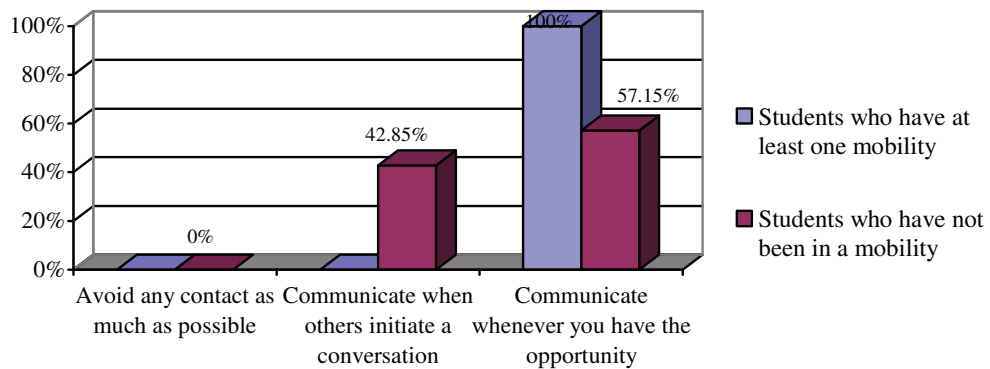


Figure 3. Intercultural Communication Initiative (Students)

The ability to initiate a conversation is an important element of communication competence in general, and of intercultural communication competence in particular. The results presented in Figures 3 and 4 highlight how students and teachers communicate when they meet a foreign person.

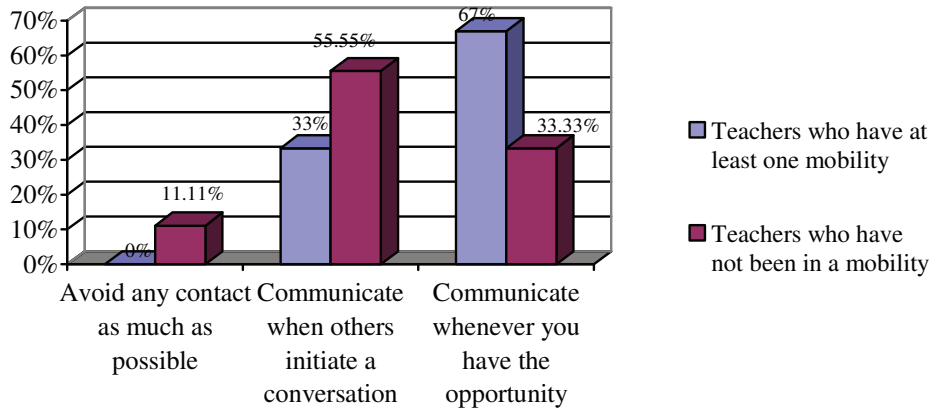


Figure 4. Intercultural Communication Initiative (Teachers)

We note that students and teachers who have been in an academic mobility have responded to communicating with people from another country whenever they have the opportunity, to a greater extent than students and teachers who have not been in such a mobility.

Curiosity, the desire to know people belonging to another culture, we appreciate as being one of the determining factors when considering the possibility of international academic mobility. Thus, the participants in the study were invited to appreciate the extent to which communication with a foreign person belonging to another culture is fascinating. The results can be seen in figure no. 5.

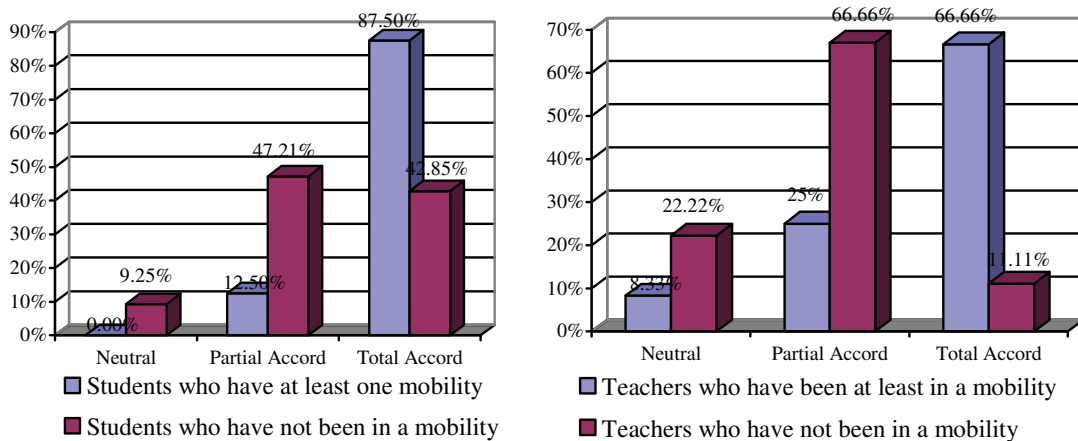


Figure 5. Respondents' responses to the extent to which communication with a foreign person is or not compelling

Notable differences can also be observed in this regard. Students and teachers who have been in academic mobility appreciate in a much greater proportion how engaging communication with people belonging to another culture is exciting.

5. Conclusions

The internationalization of higher education creates opportunities for teachers and students to interact with cultures, civilizations, ethnicities or different races more than ever in the past. Intercultural communication places in the center the relationship that is formed between interlocutors, individuals or groups belonging to different cultures. A correct approach to intercultural communication starts from the awareness that we are different, and this diversity is precisely the bond that unites us and helps us to accumulate valuable experiences. Undoubtedly, intercultural communication "does not reduce itself to only the use of a known foreign language (...) but also involves a reference to the target cultural system" (Alexandru, 2010, p. 6). Intercultural communication has as a "medium / instrument" the knowledge of one or more languages of international circulation, but also certain cognitive, volitional, emotional, and attitudinal and behavioural abilities. It is easy to understand why the tools and abilities of intercultural communication must be the subject of continuous training and development, both of the teacher and the student.

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