
**BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENT AND
INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION FOR MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING**

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Abstract: This article aims at introducing a project on intercultural communication that we are currently involved in. We have set ourselves the task to address and study some problems of intercultural communication and for this reason we need to consider how culture and communication relate within and amongst social groups and how cultural values are retained, protected and interrelated within cross-cultural interactions.

We have grounded our research in the idea that “culture is an acquired, adaptable, symbolic behavior, based on wholesome language, related to technical ingenuity, a complex of skills, which in its turn is based on the ability to organize relations of exchange between communities” (Adam Cooper, 1994).

Communication is a process through which two or more people share information and its meaning. The term “communication” is used to explain the science area and multitude of activities related to it. It is a dynamic process which emerged in the 20th century. The general characteristics of communication is that it is a process, it is always semiotic (i.e. it uses signs) and an interaction between at least two people. At the base of each sign system the components of communication are the most important – the participants, codes, channels, messages themselves, feedback, etc.

In the last decades thanks to the media and the new communication technologies which offer infinite opportunities for communication between representatives of different cultures, real life contacts among people in each corner of the world lead to their integration into one community. Multicultural communities live in megalopolises around the world and air transport facilitates the movement of people from one country to another, which results in a greater need for interpersonal and intercultural awareness.

In business, education, and personal life today competence is expected in respect to interpersonal and intercultural contacts. Among the top ten skills most appreciated by employers in the IT sector are communication skills, teamwork, adaptability, creativity, and fluency in foreign languages.

Cultural differences in communication concern the abilities of all people to influence not only their professional and individual success, but also their personal satisfaction. For each person it is important to know that with time their realization and success will depend to a large extent on their ability to communicate competently with people of other cultures (clients, users, business partners, colleagues). For this reason the project that we are working on has an important meaning for the future professional realization of all learners, and not just foreign students in Bulgaria. We are convinced that our research project will have an important contribution to higher education and society as a whole.

Keywords: intercultural communication, cultural values, multicultural communities, interpersonal and intercultural awareness.

1. BACKGROUND

This project is an interdisciplinary study of language and culture in a medical university environment. It combines theoretical and empirical research and aims to explain instances of intercultural differences, incidents, and situations where specific cultural competence must be acquired for the better understanding between the native and international student body at three Bulgarian universities. As a primary focus of research we conduct surveys and meetings with international students and discover how their respective culture influences their adaptation and perceptions of the local university environment. The participating universities are Medical University – Plovdiv with international students in Human Medicine and Pharmacy, University of Plovdiv “Paisii Hilendarski”, and Trakia University – Stara Zagora with international students in Human and Veterinary Medicine.

2. JUSTIFICATION

At the moment we are living in a unique situation which offers infinite opportunities (internet, social media, etc.) to communicate between people with different cultural identity. The interaction among young people of different cultures is growing at an unprecedented rate – not only a large number of foreign students come to Bulgaria to study, but also tens of thousands of Bulgarian students are pursuing their education abroad. In all these cases cultural differences are apparent. That is why in both international and national context each of us needs a certain intercultural competence in the form of knowledge and practical skills.

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On the basis of religious affinity and foreign investment in the contemporary world, as well as the development of the tourist industry on an international level, we can conclude that intercultural communication competence is needed from an international perspective.

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One of the tasks we've set for ourselves is to develop a conceptual toolbox, which will help us understand better how cultural differences reflect on interpersonal communication. Another task is to acquire main practical knowledge and skills for most effective and successful behaviour when stumbling on cultural differences. That is why in order to realize our research purposes, we shall deliver a research project with important contribution to higher education and society as a whole.

3.AIMS

The theoretical and research objectives which the project sets out to achieve are related to introducing students to the fundamental problems of intercultural communication, teaching the main concepts and terminology, and developing cultural sensitivity and ability for the proper interpretation of specific situations of intercultural contacts. The project provides all students with the opportunity to build, practice, and improve their foreign language skills through common activities with foreign cultures in order to create a final educational product. Through interactions with other cultures, students shall acquire better comprehension and awareness of their own culture and values. In the process we shall use modern technologies for communication and presentation.

The applied objectives of the project are:

- To study the processes of intercultural communication and communicative styles in different cultures;
- To establish the reasons for problems in communication between representatives of other cultures;
- To train students in certain habits for thinking in multicultural context and to create a positive attitude to foreign cultures;
- To recognize the values of cultural diversity in the contemporary world;
- To define and analyse communicative behavioural patterns of foreign students and how they change the host environment;
- To determine difficulties in communication, their character, manifestations and to demonstrate a culturological argumentation;
- To create supportive relations in the adaptation of foreign students to the university environment in three Bulgarian universities;
- To analyse the influence of the choice of specialty on motivation, skills and achievements of students.

Specific tasks, which we set out for this project:

- To collect examples for intercultural “critical incidents” in order to better understand the cultural features and expectations of the participants in communication. The term “critical incident” refers to a situation of communication which is considered problematic, confusing or even amusing by the participants (the participant may

be only one). Usually critical incidents include examples for events with confronting different cultures or situations in which unexpected behaviour is observed. In the explanations for critical incidents detailed information is included about the cause of the misunderstandings, and suggestions for tackling the problems are made.

- To find cultural stereotypes of students participating in the research and set up a database with descriptions of their characteristics.

- To collect idiomatic expressions, proverbs and sayings related to the described stereotypes.

- To prepare and publish a booklet with useful advice, recommendations and important information, necessary to facilitate the homestay of foreign students in Bulgaria (e.g. how to look for emergency medical help, to seek assistance from the police or the fire department, samples of forms and documents required by state institutions, etc.)

As additional objectives of the project we can consider the improved qualification of academic staff and the dissemination of the results from the specific research activity.

4.HYPOTHESES

We are convinced that in the course of research the following trends will emerge as most relevant:

1) The choice of major and respectively the combination of professional and academic values, shared by the relevant community of foreign students, plays an important role for the motivation of students to adapt and understand local culture.

2) If students in multicultural higher schools in Bulgaria are trained to recognize and contemplate on the reasons for the emergence of critical incidents in the form of open discussions and sharing of their experience with other students, they will communicate better in their academic environment and will be more motivated and productive in their work.

3) If students perceive dialogue and discussion as a method for achieving understanding and intercultural conflict resolution, they will reconsider their own position, recreate their own experience and will become active participants in a more efficient communication in and outside academic institutions.

5.METHODS

In order to implement this project we need to build relationships of trust between the researchers and the people who are an object of the research. It is important to add that for the purposes of the present study we do not use an intermediary, i.e. an interpreter, because the communication among the participants is carried out in Bulgarian or in English. This type of direct communication guarantees the correct interpretation of the shared information, and also facilitates spontaneous conversations, during which problems occurring in the process of integration in a foreign environment, as well as suggestions how to avoid and tackle them in the fastest and most effective ways are discussed.

To warm up and get ready to share with the researcher respondents can be introduced to doing individual and group exercises. Students are interviewed by other students, which fosters self-critical and inquisitive attitude and curiosity. Special attention must be paid to the formulation and the content of the questions in the different sections, which must comply with the work group and the progress of the process up to this stage. When integrating the participants' experiences we are cautious not to harm, or hurt the feelings, or provoke any hostile reaction from the interviewees. During the interviews time is allotted to respondents to react, because not every group (or a person) are ready to reflect on themselves at an equal speed. We must not underestimate the effect of emerging experiences and "hidden" memories. It is of crucial importance to respect each person's freedom to go as deep into the evoked experiences as they wish.

We encourage participants to view intercultural obstacles in the process of adaptation not only as external factors, but also to direct those inwards. At these meetings we realize how other people see us, and what our common points and differences are.

A collection of examples of intercultural "critical incidents" from the students' personal experiences are elicited in order to better understand the cultural characteristics and expectations of the participants in communication. The sample for the texts will include a description of the problematic case, the reasons for its occurrence and possible solutions to the conflict.

After holding the interviews and the creation of a corpus with multicultural incidents we envision having role plays to test techniques to deal with dangerous critical incidents. Respondents may act as representatives of a foreign culture and play out their reactions to specific situations.

The technique “Vignettes” can be used as an ice-breaker at the beginning of the interviews and for the role plays. It is a short scenario in writing or images intended to provoke answers to typical scripts. It can also be defined as specific examples for people and their behaviour, about which participants can suggest a comment or an opinion. It is used to analyse cultural norms and ethnic attitudes, as well as to find an answer to a conditional situation, i.e. what would you do if you were the third person in the story, etc.

Through presenting ideas and achievements of the research we intend to inspire discussions during which ideas, suggestions and recommendations will be made for future collaboration.

6.PLANNED ACTIVITIES

During the first year we plan to focus on the theoretical training of the team on the researched topic and to collect empirical data, while the second one will include the analysis, generalization and presentation of the data to the public interested in the studied area.

The working program includes research and activities for each work package:

- 1) The Preparatory Stage plans to prepare a literature review on the topic and problems of the project in order to define more specifically the object of study, to compile a data base with information about the participating Bulgarian and foreign students, including country of origin, level of English (as of Bulgarian and foreign students), to determine the native language of each participant, and the specification of the topics, which will be studied with the planned surveys and interviews (e.g. religion, customs, traditions, cultural curiosities, difficulties in communication, everyday hardships, degree of adaptability to a foreign culture), to prepare questions for the surveys and interviews, specification of the questions, and the scale on which answers will be measured.
- 2) The Work Groups stage seeks to assign participants in the project to work groups, who will be shown presentations and short video films in order to instruct participants how to conduct the interviews and surveys.
- 3) The Surveys stage will include the preparation and conducting of surveys to determine the students' educational needs and the difficulties they encounter when communicating with representatives of foreign cultures in an academic context. A psychologist will join in as a consultant.
- 4) Interviews will be held to provide an opportunity to students to discuss problems which they face as they adapt to a foreign culture.
- 5) Together with the extra-curricular activities we plan to introduce an elective course in Plovdiv University, which shall be essential for setting out the objectives of research, teaching the main terminology and discussing problems of intercultural communication. The course will include preparation and creating questions for the interviews, conducting interviews with foreign students from the other two universities participating in the study, summarizing the respondents' answers and presenting the results and impressions from the project activity with Power Point presentations to the rest of the participants.
- 6) The round tables which we plan to organize will be a way to popularize the project, present the activities which have taken place until the present moment and the results achieved, and deliver a report by the working team and the general public.
- 7) A special research task shall be the collection and analysis of idiomatic expressions, related to behavioral stereotypes, and cultural confrontations as a result of the encounter and interaction of different traditions.

As a material product of our research we shall design and publishing a booklet with useful advice, recommendations and important information necessary for facilitating the stay of foreigners in Bulgaria (e.g. how to seek emergency medical aid, assistance from the police and the fire department, etc.; samples of forms and documents required by state institutions).

7.EXPECTED RESULTS

We expect to contribute to the current research of intercultural communication a detailed description of our activities and empirical work through the analysis of the surveys and interviews. We also hope to create an environment of curiosity and interest in other cultures by targeting and discussing stereotypes and cultural perceptions. Our interest in the didactic aspect of cultural sensitivity acquisition shall compensate the lack of methodological research into how foreign medical students relate to other colleagues and patients in Bulgaria, how

they are trained to recognize the cultural incident as a phenomenon and how they can overcome conflicts and difficulties through an intercultural approach.

We also expect to develop a strategy to help students (both Bulgarian and foreign) recognize local specifics and to train them to build an identity and competence of a medical practitioner who will be skilled in communicating with a wide variety of patients and colleagues from different cultures from a safe and informed perspective. This tolerance and trust in the scientific method will be a continuation of the effort medical practitioners put to provide quality healthcare, improve multicultural awareness and learn more about how language and culture combine to communicate a message of understanding and trust.

8. CONCLUSIONS

The project attempts to be a dynamic and inquisitive attempt to bring international students closer to the Bulgarian reality they live in for five consecutive years. It will also draw from the experience of local students and staff who will benefit from the methodology, activities, and products to sustain an informed attitude towards the university environment, which is becoming more and more culturally diverse. The benefits for the universities involved are yet to be discovered, but they will nevertheless be timely and needed.

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