**The Art of Crossing Cultures:**

**Intercultural Competence of University Students Revisited**

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**Abstract**

The article entitled *The Art of Crossing Cultures: Intercultural Competence of University Students Revisited* summarises partial results of a qualitative research conducted in March 2021 (100 respondents). It is based on the assumption that understanding culture of the target language is an indispensable part of a successful foreign language competence. The research is a result of an analysis of three intercultural situations where interlocutors understand the linguistic aspect of communication, however, they do not fully recognize the cultural load; a mistake that may often lead to misunderstanding, missed deadlines, delays and occupational injuries. Therefore, special attention should be paid to intercultural preparation of university graduates, especially in future teacher and translator/interpreter training.

**Key words**: culture, intercultural awareness, intercultural competence, cultural studies, crossing cultures

**Introduction**

With the intensified globalisation, more attention should be paid to learning foreign languages within the cultural context of the target countries, i.e. countries where these languages are official (English in the Great Britain), working (English in the EU countries) or have a long-established cultural tradition (English in India). Therefore, the aim of this study is an analysis of intercultural awareness of university undergraduate students of the 3rd year of their bachelor studies at Matej Bel University, in order to better focus their future linguistic preparation in English. We take as the starting point of the research the assumption that, in order to facilitate the successful language learning at the university the training of intercultural competence is indispensable. To examine the assumption we conducted the research focused on the analysis of intercultural awareness of university undergraduate students of the 3rd year of their bachelor studies at Matej Bel University. The research will help to analyze respondents’ abilities to understand language and its cultural context and better focus their language preparation.

**1 Theoretical Background and Stating the Problem**

Scarcella and Oxford (1992, pp. 75-80) defined four competences of a successful communicator:

1. **linguistic competence** (familiarity with language as a form)
2. **sociolinguistic competence** (the ability to use the language items properly in each situation, i.e. to relate the form to its function)
3. **discourse competence** (use the discourse relevant for the particular communication context)
4. **strategic competence** (ability to overcome difficulties and gaps in the above).

Professionals in cultural studies (UNESCO, 2013) have recently added the fifth competence **–** **intercultural competence,** defined as “...the ability to function effectively across cultures, to think and act appropriately, and to communicate and work with people from different cultural backgrounds – at home or abroad (Leung, Ang and Tan, 2014; Gudykunst, 2003). Leung, Ang and Tan further suggest, the intercultural competence integrates a hierarchical complex of skills and sub-skills, attitudes, beliefs and cultural components, as presented in Fig. 1:

Fig. 1: Intercultural competence according to McKimmon (2013), quoted in Leung, Ang and Tan (2014)



Source: McKimon (2013)

Scholars (Hohn, 2021; Šipošová, 2017; McKimon, 2013; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992) point out that for linguists, language-related components of the intercultural competence are of key importance, however, they need to manage all the components in order to function in a new cultural environment, i.e. to master the art of “crossing cultures”.[[1]](#footnote-1) In order to indicate Slovak undergraduate students’ (future linguists, teachers, interpreters and translators) ability to understand culturally loaded phrases, in the presented research, we have asked the research question: How well can Slovak and international students understand culturally loaded phrases? On the basis of the research question, the H0 and H1 were formulated:

H0 Undergraduate students can understand culturally loaded phrases with minimum 65% correctness.[[2]](#footnote-2)

H1 Undergraduate students cannot understand culturally loaded phrases with minimum 65% correctness.

The presented study shows partial research results, analysing three intercultural situations (31 situations were tested; they will be subject to the following research). By **intercultural situations** proper we mean general understanding of situations, which arise when an individual perceives another person (or group of people) as being culturally different from themselves. Every human being is regularly exposed to intercultural situations, with or without direct interactions with others [1]. **Intercultural communication** arises when “…essentially means communication across different cultural boundaries. When two or more people with different cultural backgrounds interact and communicate with each other or one another, we can say that intercultural communication is taking place. So intercultural communication can be defined as the sharing of information on different levels of awareness between people with different cultural backgrounds, or put simply: individuals influenced by different cultural groups negotiate shared meaning in interactions.” [2].

**1.1 Procedure**

The research of intercultural competence served as a starting point for a quantitative research, conducted in March 2021.[[3]](#footnote-3) In order to identify their strengths and weaknesses in intercultural awareness, 131 written tests of intercultural competence were administered to 3rd-year full-time undergraduates, studying English teaching and translation studies at Matej Bel University, Banská Bystrica, Slovakia.[[4]](#footnote-4) After stratified random sampling, the sample unit consisted of 100 valid tests (50 teaching programme and 50 translation studies students). The test was done online, at one sitting. Time was not measured.

Respondents were asked to interpret three intercultural situations in the form of a fictitious discussion between two co-workers. Speaker 1 was Slovak, speaker 2 was British. The speaker 2 was expressing his or her reaction to what speaker 1 said by a short culturally loaded phrase. These phrases represented the research corpus of culturally loaded phrases and were formed on the basis of 2019 BBC research; however, they were adopted for the purposes of a serious research and accompanied by a meaningful context, devised by the researcher. Each of the three selected phrases expressed a negative attitude: disapproval, discontent or criticism. Respondents could interpret the situations via pre-formatted phrases (option A and B) or, provide their own interpretation, indicated as C – “other”. The phrases were the following:

1. *It’s rather short* (*rather* indicates dissatisfaction, Oxford Dictionary, 2021).
2. *With the greatest respect* (indicates disapproval and underestimation of speaker 1 standpoint; 2019 BBC research)
3. *I hear what you say* (indicates disapproval and wish to end the conversation; 2019 BBC research)

**2 Research outcomes**

In the first task, students were exposed to the following situation: A Slovak employee wrote a report, however, his/her English colleague’s reaction was: “It’s rather short”. Students were asked to interpret the meaning of this intercultural situation. They could choose from two preformatted answers (A – “She thinks it should be longer” and B – “She is impressed with how effectively I can write”), or, provide their own interpretation (option C) in the space provided. Figure 1 shows the bar chart of the participants’ responses in situation 3:



Source: author

Fig. 1 shows 90% of respondents were familiar with the modifier *rather,* which is used to mean “fairly” or “to some degree”, often, when you are disappointed, surprised or expressing slight criticism (Oxford Dictionary, 2021). 6 respondents, however, did not decode the phrase accurately and considered the utterance a praise of one’s economic writing skills. Thus, they completely misunderstood the message. Finally, 4% of students selected the option: “Other”. Out of these, 3% of students decoded the message as a request to amend or improve text report:

R93: *Either it’s too short or it’s missing on the quality side.[[5]](#footnote-5)*

R99: *I think that the report can be written simply.*

R102: *She may think I could add more specific information.*

One respondent decoded the need to revise and amend the document. Moreover, this respondent was also pro-active and suggested a solution of this intercultural situation: R 97: *The report can be open again for some editing, it could be useful to ask Brianna what she would add to the report.*

In the second situation that is a subject to this analysis, respondents were to decode the message of the intercultural situation, where somebody’s report is commented by a British colleague: “I hear what you say” (which, according to the 2019 BBC survey means, the interlocutor does not accept the argument). As Figure 2 shows, this phrase was misunderstood by 62% of respondents:



Source: author

As Fig. 2 shows, only 32 % of participants decoded the situation correctly; 62% understood the lexical and grammatical meanings of the utterance but completely misunderstood the cultural meaning of the phrase. 6 respondents picked the option “other”. 2 respondents decoded the phrase in a broader way, as understanding the point of speaker 1, but disagreeing with it:

R48: *I accept your point of view even if I do not agree with you.*

R110: *I accept your opinion, but disagree with it.*

Respondent 70 decoded the situation as confirmation of the message, without taking a side: R70: *He understood what I was trying to expr*ess and R97 understood the speaker 2 as “undecided” on the issue: *He’s aware of what is said, but does not have any perspective or take any side on the issue*.

Finally, R53 decoded the utterance “I hear what you say” as a stop to conversation, or a signal to put off the conversation for later. (R53: *Maybe he agrees but there is not time for that issue now*. Fig. 3 shows the multiplicity of interpretations of the phrase “I hear what you say”:



Source: author

Finally, respondents were to interpret the intercultural situation where the speaker 2 responded with the phrase: “With the greatest respect.” Figure 4 shows the proportion of correct and incorrect answers and other interpretations:

Fig. 4: Total results: interpretation of the phrase: “With the greatest respect.”



Source: author

Oxford Dictionary (2021) confirms, this phrase indicates disapproval. 40% respondents correctly decoded this message, however, 24% understood the situation as intensive interest. As many as 36% of participants provided their own interpretation. These answers can be put into six semantic categories as in Table 1:

Tab. 1: Partial results: option C: individual interpretations of the phrase: “With the greatest respect”

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **CONTENT/****cognitive component – neutral disapproval** | **CONTENT/****cognitive component – polite disapproval** | **CONTENT/****cognitive component –disapproval****&****Affective component: sarcastic** | **CONTENT/****cognitive component – expression of different opinion** | **CONTENT****/cognitive component –****Expressing objection** | **CONTENT/****cognitive component – strong approval** |
| No. of resp. | 9 | 9 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| (%) | 9 | 9 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 |

Source: author

The original interpretation in the option A used strong language (Richard thinks John is an idiom). The researchers used the original strong language, however, several respondents disagreed with the insulting interpretation and did not consider the phrase “With the greatest respect” derogatory or offensive (e.g. R118 commented on the issue: *Richard has listened to John and does not think he is an idiot. Nevertheless the phrase "With the greatest respect..." comes across a bit sarcastic.*).

**4 Discussion**

The three analysed situations prove Slovak undergraduate’s intercultural awareness in three situations where one of the interlocutors was exposed to criticism or disapproval from the British partner. Table 2 shows that overall results (correct answers and C – other interpretations that researchers evaluated as “correct”) exceeded the university benchmark of 65%:

Tab. 2: Overall research results:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Culturally loaded phrase | **CORRECT ANSWERS (%)** | **OPTION C: answers considered “correct”** | **CORRECT TOTAL****(%)** | **INCORRECT ANSWERS****(%)** | **OPTION C: answers considered “correct”** | **INCORRECT TOTAL****(%)** |
| It*’*s rather short | 90 | 4 | 94 | 6 | 0 | 6 |
| I hear what you say | 32 | 3 | 35 | 62 | 3 | 65 |
| With the greatest respect | 40 | 34 | 74 | 24 | 2 | 26 |
| Mean |  |  | 67.67 |  |  | 32.33 |

Source: author

Table 2 shows that respondents were able to decode the intercultural situation with the over 65% correctness in 2 out of three situations (“It’s rather short” – 94% correct answers and “With the greatest respect” – 74% correct answers). In situation 2 (“I hear what you say”), they only reached 35 % correction. Cumulative mean of correct answers was 67.67%, just above the university pass mark (65%). Thus, the research confirmed H0 hypothesis:

H0 Undergraduate students can understand culturally loaded phrases with minimum 65% correctness.

However, the research also showed that substantial number of students needs more instruction, guidance and training in decoding selected intercultural situations (situation 2). The presented research will help the instructors to focus their attention on those students who achieved substandard score.

**Conclusion**

The presented research outcomes represent partial results of a quantitative research of undergraduate students’ intercultural awareness, demonstrated by their ability to decode three English culturally loaded phrases, which indicate criticism, disapproval or dissatisfaction. The research proved that acquainting students with language and also with the culture of the target language is indispensable (Kramsch, 1993; Hidasi, 2014; Byram, 1997) as it helps them to function more effectively in the globalized world and intercultural society (Šipošová, 2017; Židová, 2018), understand “otherness” (Kolečány Lenčová, 2020; Pondelíková, 2021) and also get more data for critical thinking (Hanesová, 2014; Hanesová-Zelenková, 2020), whereas, they are competent to avoid cultural stereotypes (Pecníková, 2021). Some situations and culturally loaded phrases may be understood easier, however, attention should be paid to those that were detected as difficult to decode. Intercultural preparation thus is inevitable part of foreign language learning.

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1. The title of this study is inspired by a lecture “The Art of Crossing Cultures”, provided for Fulbright visiting scholars in the USA, as a part of their preparation for overseas living. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 65% is a passmark at Matej Bel University (MBU University Statute, 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The pilot-testing was conducted at Matej Bel University, Department of English and American Studies in January 2021; 20 respondents. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 31 Slovak respondents were discarded (on the basis of incomplete information, etc.). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. R = respondent. Responses were not edited or proofread. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)