

*Intercultural Communication as One of the Key Issues of Second Language Acquisition
in the 21st Century*

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Abstract

Universities aim to prepare students to become global citizens that are successful members of competitive labor markets. Intercultural awareness is one of the key skills of the 21st century. Communication between cultures is a great challenge in language teaching. The culture of the target language is an inevitable part of successful foreign language competency. The present study entitled *Intercultural communication as one of the key issues of second language acquisition in the 21st century* aims to determine to what extent are students of higher education able to recognize means of expression in two languages from different language families. The object of the investigation was the interpretation of ten culturally loaded phrases commonly used in business meetings. The study results collected from more than three hundred participants show the inability to fully recognize the sociolinguistic aspects of the given communication extracts. The effectiveness of the communication process depends on the feedback received, by which the sender verifies the understanding and effect of his message and monitors the reaction of the receiver. The interlocutors understood the linguistic aspect of communication. On the other hand, they did not fully recognize the cultural load of the phrases. Empirical data confirm the importance of intercultural awareness. It also emphasizes the sociocultural importance of intercultural communication in the modern world.

Keywords: Culture, Intercultural Awareness, Intercultural Communication, Second Language Acquisition, Skills of the 21st Century

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Introduction

Since the inception of human civilization, interactions among individuals have extended beyond the confines of specific ethnic enclaves to encompass a broader spectrum of ethnicities and nations. The phenomenon of intercultural communication has garnered significant attention in light of the ever-expanding process of global integration, the establishment and potential enlargement of the European Union, and the heightened prominence of migratory movements. The reception and interpretation of information stem from distinct perceptual lenses through which communicative expressions are viewed within varying cultural contexts. The educational resources available in this domain tend to be sporadic in nature and frequently focus on a limited array of subjects.

For students pursuing higher education, cultivating intercultural awareness within a foreign language assumes particular significance, as it equips them with essential skills for their professional endeavors post-graduation. Consequently, this partial investigation seeks to assess the extent to which students are proficient in identifying linguistic nuances across two distinct languages.

Skills of the 21st Century

The scope of proficiencies imperative for fostering effective student learning and proficient pedagogical practices transcends the confines of mere literacy and numeracy. Referred to as essential competencies and skills of the 21st century, these foundational aptitudes encompass a nexus of knowledge, skills, and dispositions contextualized within their respective environments. Within this framework, competences are construed as an amalgamation of cognitive, practical, and affective attributes pertinent to the given setting. Notably, key competences delineate those proficiencies universally essential for individual self-actualization and advancement, as well as active civic engagement, societal inclusivity, and meaningful vocational participation.

According to *The Reference Framework of the European Parliament* (2006), key competences encompass proficiencies that hold universal significance, requisite for the holistic realization of personal growth and fulfilment, the facilitation of engaged and responsible citizenship, the promotion of societal inclusivity, and the enhancement of prospects in the realm of gainful employment.

The Reference Framework (2006, p. 4) sets out eight key competences for the life-long learning:

- 1) Communication in the mother tongue,
- 2) Communication in foreign languages,
- 3) Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology,
- 4) Digital competence,
- 5) Learning to learn,
- 6) Social and civic competences,
- 7) Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship,
- 8) Cultural awareness and expression.

Each of the key competences holds equal significance, as they collectively contribute to the attainment of a prosperous existence within a knowledge-driven society. We are going to focus on the last competence from the list above.

Culture

The notion of culture is intricate and multi-faceted, deriving its form from an intricate interplay of diverse determinants and influences. Commencing with an archetype of historical origin, one that accentuates the temporal aspect, culture assumes the role of "a historically conveyed configuration of significances embedded within symbols, or a framework of inherited notions conveyed through symbolic manifestations, through which a human disseminates, upholds, and apprehends their cognizance and dispositions towards existence" (Geertz, 1973, p. 89 In Samovar et al., 2009, p. 10). UNESCO defines culture as: "the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, that encompasses, not only art and literature but lifestyle, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs" (UNESCO, 2009). Halls (1976), in a reflective discourse on the nexus between culture and human subsistence, postulates: "Culture serves as the intermediary of man: No facet of human existence remains untouched or unaltered by culture" (Halls, 1976, p. 16).

Intercultural Communication

Communication assumes a pivotal role within social interactions, serving as a conduit for the manifestation of an individual's cultural identity. This mode of expression enables individuals to convey their values, convictions, and cognitive frameworks. Through this communicative exchange, individuals collectively shape significance and foster comprehension. As implied by the prefix "inter," the domain of intercultural communication pertains to interactions involving participants from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Intercultural communication, as characterized by Byram (1997, p. 8), transpires between two individuals conversing in distinct languages, under the circumstances where:

- both originate from different countries, with one being a native speaker of the language used for communication, or
- both hail from separate countries and employ a language as a lingua franca, or
- both belong to a single country, but communicate using dissimilar languages, with one being a native speaker.

Given the necessity for divergent choices of verbal and nonverbal linguistic tools in intercultural communication, such interplay can prove demanding. Challenges in communication between individuals of disparate cultures may arise from a lack of awareness concerning each other's cultures or the complete absence of certain elements within one of the cultures (Cakir, 2006, p. 1). Nonetheless, this form of communication possesses the potential to offer opportunities for enriching exchanges of ideas, perspectives, and experiences.

Culture in Foreign Language Learning

The advent of cultural consciousness within the domain of foreign language pedagogy was inaugurated during the 1970s and 1980s, concurrent with Dell Hymes' formulation of the term "communicative competence". This marked a progressive stride in language pedagogy, although the realm of intercultural communication had yet to emerge within this phase. Brown (2000, p. 86) aligns in acknowledging that the novel approach to foreign language education deviated from the conventional paradigm of language acquisition, which centered

on rote memorization of vocabulary governed by grammatical structures, and the pursuit of linguistic analogues in the target language.

Bennet (1997, p. 16) aptly likened the outcome of this approach to a 'fluent tool,' an individual capable of articulating and generating discourse in a foreign tongue, yet lacking a grasp of the social and philosophical underpinnings inherent in the speech. To circumvent this, a realization dawns that language, though an instrument of communication, concurrently functions as a tool of perception and cogitation. The contours of prosperous English language communication, as depicted by Gondová (2011, p. 49), extend beyond mere grammatical correctness and comprehensibility in context. The adept speaker must adroitly navigate communicative predicaments, demonstrating acumen in wielding both verbal and non-verbal modes of expression.

In the epoch of the 'global age,' the paradigm of communication has undergone a profound metamorphosis, evolving from the mere transmission of facts and ideas to the endeavor of being heard figuratively, encapsulating the entitlement to voice individual opinions and stances (Kramsch, 2014, p. 407). Dilemmas in cross-cultural communication between divergent cultural cohorts may emanate from a dearth of acquaintance with each other's cultural milieu or the conspicuous absence of specific constituents within one cultural sphere (Cakir, 2006, p. 1). This accentuates the contemporary emphasis on learning English as extending beyond mere grammar and lexicon acquisition. Communicative competence engenders not only proficiency in what to convey to whom but also discernment in the nuanced articulation tailored to distinct contexts.

Intercultural Awareness in Foreign Language Learning

Intercultural awareness refers to the ability to recognize, appreciate, and respect cultural differences. It involves developing knowledge about various cultural practices, beliefs, values, and communication styles. This awareness enables individuals to navigate cultural encounters and engage in meaningful intercultural interactions. In the context of foreign language learning, intercultural awareness goes beyond mere linguistic competence and encompasses a deeper understanding of the target language's culture.

Chen and Starosta (2000, pp. 45 – 80) discuss the importance of intercultural awareness for foreign language learning. They can be summarized as follows:

1. **Effective Communication:** Intercultural awareness enhances effective communication by promoting sensitivity and adaptability. Language learners who possess intercultural awareness can interpret and respond to cultural cues appropriately, leading to smoother and more successful interactions.
2. **Cultural Understanding:** Learning a foreign language without understanding its cultural context can result in misinterpretations and misunderstandings. Intercultural awareness enables learners to grasp the underlying cultural nuances, enabling a more accurate interpretation of language use.
3. **Empathy and Open-mindedness:** Intercultural awareness fosters empathy and open-mindedness towards diverse perspectives. It encourages language learners to appreciate different cultural viewpoints and challenges stereotypes, thereby promoting cultural sensitivity and tolerance.
4. **Building Relationships:** By demonstrating intercultural awareness, language learners can establish stronger connections with native speakers of the target language.

Understanding cultural norms and customs allows for meaningful and respectful engagement, thereby nurturing authentic relationships.

5. Enhancing Language Proficiency: Intercultural awareness complements language proficiency by providing context and depth to language use. It facilitates the development of a culturally appropriate and nuanced communication style, improving overall language proficiency.

High-Context and Low-Context Cultures Communication

Intercultural communication is influenced by divergent communication paradigms inherent to varying cultural contexts. Achieving efficacious intercultural communication necessitates a comprehensive grasp of these disparities and their underlying origins. One of the ways to attain such comprehensive understanding is through the conceptual framework of *high-context* and *low-context* cultures, a construct first mentioned by American anthropologist Edward T. Hall in his work *The Silent Language* from 1959. Hall categorized cultures into these distinct typologies based on their prevailing modes of communication. In the discourse of *high-context cultures*, the conveyance of information transpires implicitly, imbued with implicit cues and contextual subtext. Conversely, *low-context* cultures prioritize explicit articulation of information (Hall, 1976, p. 91). The *high-context* and *low-context* cultural framework equips individuals with an analytical tool to decipher the intricate tapestry of cultural communication patterns. Comprehending these cultural communication dynamics fosters enhanced intercultural competency and facilitates meaningful engagement across cultural boundaries. In embracing Hall's typology, individuals and entities are better poised to navigate the intricacies of global interactions, enriching their cross-cultural interactions with nuanced awareness and adept adaptability.

Hall's model of high-context and low-context cultures is further elaborated to a great extent by Erin Meyer, an American author on business intercultural communication. In her book *The Culture Map* (2016, p. 39), she defines the difference in communication between *high-context* culture and *low-context* cultures as the following:

- a) *high-context* cultures: Effective communication is sophisticated, nuanced and multidimensional. Messages transcend mere verbal utterances, encompassing implicit undertones. Communication frequently hinges on inferred meanings rather than overt articulation.
- b) *low-context* cultures: Effective communication is characterized by precision, simplicity, and transparency. Messages are conveyed and comprehended at their surface level, embracing clarity. The repetition of information is valued when it contributes to the lucidity of communication.

The countries with *high-context* cultures include e.g. Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Mexico, France, Argentina, Russia etc. Long shared history is a typical feature of high-context countries. Apart from that, the vast majority of the population shares the same ethnic origin, language and religion. Japan is considered as the country with the *highest-context* of all the above-mentioned. On the other hand, countries such as the US, Netherlands, Denmark, UK, Germany or Poland belong to the countries with low-context culture. The US is the country with the lowest-context culture. A country characterized by an influx of immigrants from different countries around the world has the greatest ethnical, linguistic, and cultural diversity (Meyer, 2016, pp. 38 – 40).

On contrary of what is stated in the previous lines, there is one exception in countries and their *high-context* and *low-context* cultures. That is the way of expressing disagreement or criticism. Some countries can be placed in the opposite communication style. The USA, UK and Canada belong to the *high-context* countries and Russia is the *low-context* country in terms of providing negative feedback (Meyer, 2016, p. 67).

Ripmeester (2011) created the Anglo-Dutch Translation Guide based on the theory of communication in *high-context* and *low-context* cultures. 28 phrases have been chosen to point out the differences between what is said and what is meant in different cultures. To illustrate, here are three examples:

What the British say	What the British mean	What the Dutch understand
<i>With all due respect....</i>	<i>I think you are wrong.</i>	<i>He is listening to me.</i>
<i>I was a bit disappointed that...</i>	<i>I am very upset and angry that....</i>	<i>It does not really matter.</i>
<i>I am sure it's my fault.</i>	<i>It's not my fault.</i>	<i>It's his fault.</i>

Table 1: Anglo-Dutch differences
Source: Ripmeester, 2011

As can be seen in the table above, the communication style across cultures may vary.

Methodology and Data Analysis

The aim of the research part is to determine to what extent are students able to interpret chosen culturally loaded phrases. The research sample consists of 300 students at a technical university, the University of Zilina. Respondents were given a written test/ survey via the on-line platform - socrative.com. The tests were administered in 1 sitting. The time was not restricted. The students' answers are further analysed on the scale from agreement to disagreement. Responses are authentic, neither grammatically, nor formally corrected. Students are referred to as numbers, names are not mentioned.

Respondents were asked to decode the meaning of 3 phrases taken from *Nanette Ripmeester Anglo-Dutch Translation Guide* (2011). The phrases were applied as a part of utterances. The students were informed about a hypothetical place of these three utterances – the United Kingdom. To make the survey more uniform and precise, the phrases were put into the context of a workplace.

The following phrases were elaborated on:

- A. *'It is rather short'* - used to express an opposite opinion.
- B. *'I see where you are coming from'* - to understand the reason why a person has a particular opinion, although they do not have the same opinion.
- C. *"Well, in my opinion"* – a solution-focused argument, that softens the disagreement.

It can be observed that in all cases it is an indirect disagreement. Students were not given any options. They were asked to write the meaning in their own words. The method of qualitative research was used. After conducting the research, the answers were classified into 4 groups:

- a) agreement,
- b) disagreement,
- c) do not know,

d) no answer/ no relevant answer.

The first survey question was as follows:

Situation A:

The team leader Benjamin orders one of the subordinate employees, John, to write a report on financial indicators during the last month. After reading it, Benjamin states: "IT S RATHER SHORT" (neutral tone, no gestures). What does Benjamin mean?

The results are the following:

- a) agreement – 83 students → 30 %
- b) disagreement – 167 students → 60 %
- c) do not know – 6 students → 2 %
- d) no answer/ no relevant answer – 22 students → 8 %

Situation B:

John participated in a team meeting to discuss financial indicators during the last month. John takes part in the discussion but his colleague, Mark, interrupts him and says: "I SEE WHERE YOU'RE COMING FROM...."(neutral tone, no gestures). What does Mark mean?

The results are the following:

- a) agreement – 39 students → 12 %
- b) disagreement – 145 students → 48 %
- c) do not know – 114 students → 38 %
- d) no answer/ no relevant answer – 6 students → 2 %

Situation C:

John is participating in a team meeting to discuss financial indicators during the last month. John proposes his idea, and his colleague Peter says: "WELL, IN MY OPINION..." (neutral tone, no gestures). What does Peter mean?

The results are the following:

- a) agreement – 132 students → 44 %
- b) disagreement – 135 students → 45 %
- c) do not know – 10 students → 3 %
- d) no answer/ no relevant answer – 23 students → 8 %

Conclusion

It can be assumed that European companies will be increasingly asked to deal with problems of cultural diversity, such as tensions and issues as a result of the lack of knowledge about differences; efforts to express them in order to emphasise their own identity; the perpetuation of negative attitudes; stereotypes concerning others/people. Language is a natural cultural phenomenon. Foreign language learning must reflect on the above-mentioned possible interferences. The importance is barely attributed to the way of expressing agreement or disagreement in the English language. Undoubtedly, appropriate approaching, decoding and communicating in these situations, may be considered a part of the intercultural awareness of a person. The present study uses data obtained from the survey conducted on students of a technical university in Slovakia, the University of Zilina. The object of the investigation was

the interpretation of three culturally loaded phrases. The students were asked to decode three culturally loaded phrases given in possible workplace situations. The research results show the inability of participants to fully recognise the sociolinguistic aspects of the given communications extracts. The highest percentage of correct answers was 60 % (in situation A). The other two situations were fully understood by 45 % (situation C) and 48 % (situation B). The empirical data confirms the need for culture in foreign language education. The research sample for this article was rather limited. However, the phrases may be extensively elaborated on for further research, either for qualitative analysis or as a basis for audiovisual dialogues.

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