

FOSTERING MULTILINGUALISM AND INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL

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Abstract. The article focuses on some aspects of EU language policy of multilingualism and the necessity to address the development of intercultural speakers at the tertiary level. The results of a small-scale research conducted among European Studies students at Sofia University St; Kliment Ohridski over the past two years are presented and discussed providing some food for thought with regard to the practical implications of the above.

Keywords: linguodidactology; multilingualism; intercultural communicative competence; intercultural speaker; European Studies

Multilingualism today

Today, multilingualism is a common phenomenon throughout the world, with trends of contact and interaction between languages at the individual and societal levels increasing in parallel with the processes of globalisation. The Special Eurobarometer 540 “Europeans and Their Languages” (European Commission, 2024) measures not only what languages and how often are spoken by European citizens but also reveals what Europeans think about the role of languages in their personal and professional lives and allows to see how EU citizens’ views about languages and multilingualism have changed over time. According to a previous survey administered in 2012, “there is a broad consensus among Europeans that everyone in the EU should be able to speak at least one foreign language. More than four in five of Europeans (84%) agree, and more than two in five (44%) ‘totally agree’, that all EU citizens should be able to speak a foreign language. (European Commission, 2012). In 2024, it was established that “younger respondents are more likely to agree that improving language skills should be a policy priority, with eight in ten (80%, +2) among those aged 15 – 24 agreeing, compared to 73% among those aged 55 and up.” (European Commission, 2024).

Effective policies and initiatives in the field of multilingualism increase citizens’ opportunities for education and professional development, contribute to promoting

intercultural dialogue and social cohesion. Languages are inseparably linked to identity, but they are also part of a common heritage, they can serve as a bridge to other peoples and cultures¹.

Studying the concept of multilingualism is associated with the development of linguistics and foreign language learning (Stoicheva, 2006, p. 83). Researchers contend that learning a foreign language is not simply the construction of a new monolingualism that coexists separately from learners' initial monolingualism, but it leads to the emergence of a multilingual personality able to use this repertoire to express themselves, to communicate, and to identify with and understand others in different situations. In the process of language learning, the available linguistic resources, both individual (of the learner) and collective (of the group/class), are combined, which supports competence development. This, in turn, gives meaning to the didactic overlap of the different languages available (Castellotti, 2001, pp. 105 – 109).

The Intercultural Speaker notion

Considering the role of culture in the communication process, some authors highlight intercultural communication as a form of communicative interaction that can be acquired. (Samovar, Porter 2004). Scientific research substantiates the specifics of the concept of intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997; Byram, 2021). However, some problems may arise, and they are related to: 1) different emotions and experiences that lead to anxiety, facing prejudices, expression of belonging; 2) areas of knowledge that may be difficult to understand, such as time and space orientation, communication and language use, roles, rituals, values; 3) foundations of cultural differences related to the way people think or process information – categorisation, differentiation, meaning attribution, learning styles. (Cushner, Brislin, 1994, p. 39).

In the context of the European Union, the principle of cultural diversity and the right of different cultural and ethnic groups to preserve their distinctive cultural identities is upheld. The promotion of intercultural dialogue is in the centre of the efforts of another international organisation - the Council of Europe – to protect human rights and promote democracy and the rule of law, while respecting the cultural diversity that characterises Europe's rich cultural heritage. A number of steps have been taken in this direction, including the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (1995), the establishment of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, the adoption of the Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (2005), and the creation of the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue (2008). Thus the idea of intercultural dialogue, understood as “an exchange of ideas and opinions between different cultures”, emphasizes the importance of establishing a common “language”, connections between different cultures, communities, people, by encouraging “an open and respectful exchange

of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage on the basis of mutual understanding and respect” (Council of Europe, 2008).

In the context of increasing multilingualism, intensive contacts between speakers of different first languages and of the constantly improving foreign language education, it is particularly important to revisit the five-component model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) proposed by Michael Byram in 1997 and revisited in 2021 (Byram, 1997; Byram, 2021), which continues to be used as a reference point in the discussion of intercultural competence. This model proposes the concept of the intercultural speaker who possesses certain attitudes - curiosity and openness, who is ready to overcome distrust of other cultures and seeing one’s own as the only correct one; the intercultural speaker also knows about social groups and their products and practices, both in one’s own country and in the country whose language he/she is studying; the intercultural speaker is able to interpret (i.e. a document or event from one culture) and to connect/compare it with a document or event from one’s own); the intercultural speaker is able to acquire new knowledge about a given culture, and to operate with this knowledge, skills and attitudes in the conditions of real-life communication; last but not least, the intercultural speaker possesses “critical cultural awareness”, which includes the ability to evaluate perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and foreign cultures. That is why some authors think that the best foreign language teacher is the one who manages to reveal to his/her students not just the richness of a given language, but the skills, attitudes and values manifested through it, who can help students establish connections between their own and other cultures (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002, p. 11; Tsvetkova, 2012).

The above have a particular place in the field of tertiary education in Bulgaria as a whole and, more specifically, when it comes to educating European Studies students. In view of the current challenges that societies are facing - economic and political, but also identity-based, future European Studies specialists have to be able to communicate, act, make decisions, etc., on an arena that is far larger than the national or even the European Union one. This makes it even more necessary for these students’ language training to lead to the development of ICC so that, ultimately, foreign language training is truly training in intercultural and European citizenship. At higher education level there is still untapped potential for developing ICC through language learning. Despite the momentum of implementing the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001), the European Language Portfolio and the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters (Byram, Barrett, Iprgrave, Jackson and Méndez García, 2009) in educational practice, despite the intensive physical and virtual mobility and the increasing internationalisation of higher education, interculturality is still not fully integrated into language learning in this specific context.

The EU multilingualism policy plays a pivotal role in these processes. Language is an indispensable element of cultural identity, as it provides “shared meaning, not only as semantic content, but also as social, cultural and other conventions in the community” (Stoicheva, 2016, p. 57). Multilingual people can use their different linguistic resources and repertoires for different purposes, most notably for creating and recreating different identities. Sometimes this mobilisation of their linguistic repertoire can lead to a fun, innovative result (for example, a word game that is based on more than one language); on other occasions, the result may not be so positive, and in practice the use of one language or another may lead to establishing boundaries and barriers between individual groups. Thus, the greater the shared knowledge between multilingual speakers, the lower the probability of negative outcomes in multilingual encounters. Seen from this perspective, the concept of intercultural dialogue could benefit from including multilingualism as a key element in the study of intercultural communication.

In contemporary foreign language learning, multiculturalism is seen as an aspect of multilingual didactics, which takes as a reference point regarding the ultimate goal of language learning not the so-called native speaker model, but, more and more often, the intercultural speaker model. At the same time, this process is strongly focused on the personality of the language learner.

It is natural that socio-political and socio-economic conditions determine the motivation and increase the interest of the younger generation in learning languages. In this respect, the traditions in Bulgarian foreign language teaching at secondary school allow for the development and improvement of such methodologies in theoretical and practical terms. Research shows that a large part of high school graduates are inclined to continue their language training after completing secondary education, both in the first and in the second foreign language studied at school (see Chavdarova et al., 2013). This creates conditions for continuity in language learning which spans secondary and tertiary education in general.

Context of the study

Students of European Studies at Sofia University study at least two foreign languages up to a level that allows them to understand and interpret EU documents, EU law, EU media communications, in order to prepare for participation in international negotiations, creation, promotion and implementation of EU policies, etc. The majority of these students come from secondary schools with intensive foreign language learning, and both at school and during their studies at the bachelor’s level, students increasingly have the opportunity to interact with students from other EU countries. Therefore, it can be summarised that there is a clearly defined need to use the potential of language learning in European Studies to develop intercultural speakers able to mediate between their own and other cultures and between cultures more broadly.

This article presents part of a study related to issues of multilingualism and intercultural communication as they are interpreted in a higher education context with the aim is to focus on some results obtained from a survey of students' opinions on emerging intercultural situations in different spheres of communication. The idea is to establish to what extent young people are aware of cultural differences and are able to assess the appropriateness of behaviour in conditions of intercultural communication. The study is carried out by use of a questionnaire, completed by 110 students from the European Studies Department, Faculty of Philosophy of Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. The collected data sheds light on how young people perceive cultural differences and how successful intercultural communication strategies can be developed or enhanced.

The administered survey

The questionnaire consists of five parts with narrated incidents, and statements, rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 – “I strongly disagree”, 2 – “I disagree to some extent”, 3 – “I have no opinion”, 4 – “I agree to some extent” and 5 – “I strongly agree”). Students have to express their opinion in relation to each statement, taking into account the presented intercultural situation. In the fourth section, students are invited to put themselves in the shoes of participants in a situation, offering options for specific behaviour, which they have to accept or reject. The fifth section invites them to reflect on their answers in the previous sections in an open-ended format.

In the first section, “Public Spaces”, students analyse an intercultural encounter occurring in a public place. The second section, “Professional Communication”, aims to reveal students' abilities to analyse the specifics of the intercultural situation in the process of professional communication close to their own life experiences and to assess the risks that arise from misunderstanding. The third section, “Personal Communication”, can be used to establish students' opinions about the difficulties encountered in interpersonal communication with people from different cultures. The fourth section, “Miscellaneous,” asks students to imagine themselves in a situation where they might encounter someone from another culture, assuming that that person acts in a way that is different from the student's own behaviour. Students should choose the response that is closest to how they would act. The fifth section, “Reflection”, contains the participants' self-reflection; they have to determine the reasons why they responded in one way or another in the previous sections.

Survey results

The data from the first section are presented in Table 1 below. The results show that Bulgarian students do not accept the final statements – 59% do not agree at all that the Englishman made a fool of himself, and 70% do not accept that the passengers have every right to laugh at him. More than 1/3 of the students disagree to a certain extent with the statement that the Englishman is right to call the other

passengers on the tram “ignorant”. There are high scores clusters where students express support for the statement that the Englishman’s feelings were hurt by the passengers’ behavior – 50% agree to some extent and 35% strongly agree which can be interpreted as skills to accept others’ behavior rather than see one’s own as appropriate. It can be assumed that a relatively large part of the participants (46% and 39%) can accept and explain the described with the statement that “the passengers laughed because in Bulgaria it is not appropriate for men to use a fan”. However, the relatively large differences and the “dispersion” of the answers on the different levels of the scale show that intercultural differences can still lead to problems in communication.

Table 1. Results from the “Public Spaces” section

Statements	Responses in % by option				
	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
a) The Englishman made a fool of himself.	59	28	4	5	3
b) The Englishman’s feelings were hurt.	1	7	7	50	35
c) The Englishman was right to call the other passengers on the tram “ignorant”.	16	35	12	24	12
d) The passengers laughed because in Bulgaria it is not customary for men to use a fan.	7	5	3	46	39
e) Most likely, the passengers on the tram were shocked by the Englishman’s behavior.	7	19	9	43	22
f) The passengers on the tram had every right to laugh at the Englishman.	70	26	0	4	0

The results obtained in the second section (presented in Table 2) show that the answers are distributed across all options and that there is no categorical acceptance or rejection of the individual statements. Two higher percentages are noticeable – 45% of the participants accept the first statement (Table 2, item a) about the created intercultural situation between the Korean doctoral students and the university staff in Bulgaria, and 46% agree to some extent with the fourth statement (Table 2, item d). In other words, both statements are almost equally acceptable for the respondents. They look for the reasons for the situation in both options: the staff had to make sure that the level of English proficiency of the doctoral students was good enough to understand what the discussion was about and it was necessary for the staff to prepare the questions in a way that corresponded to the doctoral students’ cultural background. However, it is necessary to emphasise that in the analysed situation, it is not only intercultural differences that have an impact, but other factors also play a role – educational, professional, etc. In this sense, the process of overcoming barriers to intercultural communication carried out in the professional sphere may prove to be more difficult and lengthy.

Table 2. Results from the “Professional Communication” section

Statements	Responses in % by option				
	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
a) The staff should have made sure that the doctoral students' level of English was good enough to understand what the discussion was about.	4	7	14	31	45
b) The Korean PhD students were probably not sincere.	11	30	24	32	3
c) Employees use inappropriate techniques to obtain feedback.	11	22	30	35	3
d) It was necessary for the staff to prepare the questions in a way appropriate to the cultural background of the doctoral students.	5	20	9	46	19
e) It was necessary to prepare doctoral students about what responses are acceptable in such situations.	20	23	20	26	11

The results related to personal communication obtained from the answers in the third section (Table 3) show that some of the students are able to navigate in certain intercultural situations – for example, the percentage (45%) of students who disagree with the statement that the Indian woman did not belong to a high caste, but was only pretending to be, is relatively high, since there is actually no information in the text that would give grounds for accepting such a statement. It is striking, however, that the percentage (39%) of students who do not express an opinion on this statement is also very high. It can be assumed that if the “dish served on the floor” raises doubts in them about belonging to a high caste, the lack of an answer indicates a lack of knowledge of Indian customs. The accumulation of positive answers (39% and 11%) for the statement that the Eastern European woman acted on the basis of erroneous assumptions about demonstrating respect also draw attention to the fact that students have greater difficulty navigating this specific intercultural situation, maybe due to the “exotic” and distant Indian culture.

Table 3. Results from the “Personal Communication” section

Statements	Responses in % by option				
	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
a) In reality, the Indian woman did not belong to a high caste, but only pretended to.	45	12	39	4	0
b) The Eastern European woman acted on faulty assumptions about showing respect.	7	20	23	39	11
c) The hostess should have explained in advance what she had planned for dinner.	4	12	4	47	32

d) The hostess was supposed to serve the dinner at the table and offer her guests cutlery.	7	47	14	22	11
e) The Eastern European woman should have asked for a set of cutlery.	5	20	12	41	22

The answers from the fourth section in relation to the proposed situation in which the surveyed students evaluate imaginary intercultural encounters with a representative of another culture in which they participate and in which the other person acts in a manner different from the behaviour “natural” to the students are presented in Table 4. In general, the responses in this section are more categorical than those in the previous ones. According to the data students do not expect the representative of other cultures to change their behaviour (45% and 45% for both the options “Strongly disagree” and “Disagree”). They do not accept the decision to stop communicating with such a person (39% and 36% for options 1 and 2 respectively) or with other representatives of this particular culture (66% and 27% for options 1 and 2 respectively), and they do not agree that they should end the relationship altogether (61% and 19% for options 1 and 2 respectively). The accumulations in the positive degrees for Question 1 (49% and 43% options 4 and 5 respectively) are related to the need to understand what makes the other person behave the way they do, while at the same time keeping up the interaction. The results of this section provide grounds to claim that students exhibit a positive attitude towards intercultural communication, display a prononence towards acceptance of cultural differences, and express a desire to communicate with representatives of other cultures despite potential differences.

Table 4. Results from the “Miscellaneous” section

Statements	Responses in % by option				
	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
a) You expect this person to start behaving like you in order for communication to be successful.	45	45	1	9	0
b) You try to understand what makes the other person behave the way they do and continue to interact with them.	3	4	1	49	43
c) You continue to participate in the interaction, but decide that you will no longer communicate with this person.	39	36	16	7	1
d) You continue to participate in the interaction, but decide that you will no longer communicate with representatives of this culture.	66	27	1	1	4
e) You decide that successful communication is not possible and end the interaction.	61	19	9	7	4

The fifth section requires students to reflect on their responses to the questions in the previous sections. The majority of students explain their answers in Section 1 demonstrating an ability to distance themselves from their own cultural biases and try to assess hypothetical intercultural encounters objectively. Below are two of these open-ended answers which best exemplify this tendency to openness and empathy.

“Nowadays, it often happens that people make fun of things that are not familiar to them and have not yet become established in our country. I believe that we should be tolerant of different cultures and be open to learning new things every day and respecting the different understandings of people from other countries.”

“Intercultural conflict is caused by a misunderstanding of the perspectives of both parties.”

The explanations for the responses in the second section show that students reflect on the way using a third language to communicate can impede the interaction (*“The hosts should have made sure their guests’ level of English proficiency is relevant to the task they gave them”*), that it is necessary to research the specifics of the other people’s culture (*“The hosts should have taken in consideration Eastern cultures tendency to behave respectfully to your hosts”*).

With regard to the responses in the third section of the survey, most students point out that “intercultural communication in the interpersonal sphere can be very rewarding but also difficult” and that people should try to prepare in advance about what is considered appropriate in the other’s culture. An important observation shared in the survey is that one should be able to evaluate the extend to which one’s own culture shapes behavior, which can be interpreted as a tendency towards relativising one’s own background.

Conclusion

In summary, the survey reveals that European Studies students have a relatively high level of intercultural communicative competence, they are ready to withhold their judgement in situations involving intercultural communication. They are also able to critically evaluate the use of English in international settings and display empathy and readiness to engage in interacting with the “unknown”. The results can be used to develop materials for use in the tertiary language classrooms based on real-life situations requiring students to mobilise their skills and knowledge not only in English but in other languages as well and putting them in situations in which they should respond in a way appropriate to the cultures involved.

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NOTES

1. Support for linguistic diversity is one of the key horizontal priorities for the development of the European Education Area (<https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/improving-quality/multilingualism/linguistic-diversity>).

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