

Intercultural communication: from theory to practice

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Abstract

The paper explores the bridge between intercultural communication theory and its real-world practice within the international academic environment. The main objective is to identify the strategies needed to develop intercultural communicative competence in the multicultural university environment at the Petroleum and Gas University of Ploiești. The study presents a theoretical framework (including concepts such as cultural identity, culture shock, stereotypes, and intercultural competence) and analyses the challenges international students face: language barriers, distinct social norms, and different communication styles. The study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on a case study design. This strategy was selected because it allows for an in-depth investigation of the socio-cultural adaptation process of international students through their participation in extracurricular activities. The study emphasizes that communication is not merely an exchange of information, but also a process deeply shaped by cultural background, norms, values and perceptions. We focus on the experiences international students have as they navigate the challenges of studying abroad.

The paper also examines strategies that facilitate intercultural adaptation: developing cultural empathy, cultivating tolerance, creating academic environments that celebrate diversity. The study highlights the important role of universities in facilitating intercultural communication.

Ultimately, the study concludes that cultural diversity can be turned into a resource for learning and collaboration. Intercultural communication serves as a bridge connecting international students across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Keywords: cultural identity, cultural diversity, multicultural education, intercultural competence, cross-cultural adaptation.

Introduction

Cultural identity is the sense of belonging to a particular group defined by shared traditions, languages, religion, social norms, values, customs, art, music, and cuisine; all these influence worldview, behaviour, and emotional connection to others. Studying abroad brings cultural identity into focus. International students navigate between more cultural worlds, creating a

zone of negotiation, the so-called ‘third space’ (Bhabha, 1994). Multicultural education fosters respect for different cultural perspectives.

Intercultural communication represents the exchange of information between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. The term was introduced in 1959 by the American anthropologist Edward T. Hall in his work *The Silent Language*. Widely considered the founder of the field, the author identified the challenges that arise from contact with a foreign culture and established a connection between culture, seen as a way of life, and communication. Intercultural communication is a process through which people from different cultures exchange ideas, values, emotions, and information. It involves not only knowledge of the other’s language, but also an understanding of cultural codes, gestures, norms, and the contexts in which communication takes place:

Comunicarea interculturală reprezintă un schimb sau o tranzacție valorică, însoțit(ă) de înțelegerea semnificațiilor adiacente între persoane sau grupuri care fac parte din culturi diferite. Schimburile se pot realiza la nivel ideatic, verbal, nonverbal, comportamental, fizic, obiectual, organizațional (Cucuș, 2000, p.136). - *Intercultural communication represents an exchange or a value transaction, accompanied by the understanding of adjacent meanings between individuals or groups belonging to different cultures. These exchanges may take place at the ideological, verbal, non-verbal, behavioral, physical, material, or organizational level* (our translation).

Intercultural communication occurs when the producers and receivers of a message belong to different cultural backgrounds, meaning that their processes of encoding and decoding verbal and non-verbal symbols are guided by distinct cultural maps. (Samovar et al., 2017). Romanian universities welcome thousands of international students each year, who come from diverse cultural backgrounds. Integrating these students can become a major challenge. Intercultural education is a necessary response to diversity (Nedelcu, 2009) and a fundamental tool for shaping the experiences of international students. It is a process aimed at developing students’ capacity to live together in diversity. This process involves promoting intercultural dialogue, reducing stereotypes, and combating discrimination. Navigating an unfamiliar campus forces students to engage in cross-cultural dialogue, exposing them to diverse viewpoints and interaction styles. As they learn to interpret unfamiliar cultural norms and adjust their behavior, their initial interactions mature into deep cultural fluency. For international students, daily intercultural communication is not just an academic requirement, but a catalyst for developing intercultural competence – the ability to communicate and behave both effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations. To understand how individuals develop this competence, scholars rely on the following theoretical frameworks:

- ❖ Byram’s ICC Model (1997). Michael Byram argues that language proficiency alone is insufficient for successful cross-cultural interaction. His model introduces five distinct dimensions (*savoirs*):
 - a. *savoir être* (intercultural attitudes): curiosity, openness;
 - b. *savoirs* (knowledge): understanding social groups, their products, and practices in both one’s own and the interlocutor’s country;

- c. *savoir comprendre* (skills of interpreting and relating): the ability to interpret an event or a document from another culture and relate it to one's own;
 - d. *savoir apprendre/faire* (skills of discovery and interaction): the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and operate it in real-time communication;
 - e. *savoir s'engager* (critical cultural awareness): the ability to evaluate critically perspectives, practices, and products in one's own and other cultures.
- ❖ Deardorff's Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence (2006). Intercultural competence is seen as a continuous process. It begins with the appropriate attitudes (respect, curiosity, openness), moves through knowledge and skills, leads to an internal outcome, and ultimately manifests as an external outcome.

In the context of higher education, fostering intercultural competence is crucial. International students do not merely face linguistic barriers; they experience culture shock – a feeling of confusion caused by a sudden shift in social norms, unwritten rules, and communication styles. Therefore, developing intercultural competence requires pedagogical strategies and extracurricular engagement.

Materials and methods

Materials

In order to understand how international students enrolled at Petroleum and Gas University of Ploiești perceive linguistic, socio-cultural, educational or psycho-relational differences in intercultural communication, a research study was conducted. The research materials used in this study consist of two primary instruments: a structured questionnaire administered to the international student cohort, and qualitative observation protocols. These protocols were implemented during institutional integration initiatives to assess student perceptions of linguistic, socio-cultural, educational, and psycho-relational variables in intercultural communication.

Methods

The present study employs a qualitative research methodology using a case study design. This strategy enables the investigation of a complex phenomenon: the socio-cultural adaptation process of international students through their participation in extracurricular activities at a Romanian university. This process implies flexibility in the face of novelty while rejecting rigidity, intolerance, or monotony. The main technique for empirical data collection was active participant observation. The teacher's status as an organizer of these multicultural extracurricular activities facilitated "insider" access to direct, systematic observation of social interactions, communication barriers and culture shock. Within intercultural educational activities, the teacher serves as a guide to communication, responsible for identifying and managing mechanisms that can generate misunderstandings or conflicts, both among students and at a personal level.

Results and discussion

1. Challenges the International Students Face

International students face numerous challenges when they arrive in Romania. The most important difficulties are: language barrier, the main obstacle in communication; culture shock, which causes feelings of isolation and confusion; differences in learning styles, which may lead to difficulties in adapting to the host country's educational system; differences in communication styles or in the social values and norms of different cultures.

Culture shock is a psychological and emotional reaction that individuals experience when they enter an unfamiliar cultural environment. The term describes the anxiety people feel when they encounter a culture different from their own.

According to the empirical data collected via the structured questionnaire, the international student cohort identified a series of obstacles that impede effective intercultural communication. They mentioned:

- ❖ Linguistic and cognitive friction: language barriers emerged as the primary immediate impediment, restricting both academic performance and daily social interactions.
- ❖ Socio-divergence: participants frequently highlighted the impact of rigid social norms and a contrast in belief systems. These divergences manifest in different expectations regarding public behavior and interpersonal boundaries which reinforce existing stereotypes.
- ❖ Material and environmental dislocation: beyond abstract communicative challenges, the transition also implies the loss of familiar things. This includes abrupt adaptations to the local climate and the unavailability of traditional food.

The language barrier is determined by:

- ❖ the phonological system: Romanian has some sounds not found in other languages;
- ❖ grammatical differences (for example, Romanian has three genders, and some languages, such as Arabic or Portuguese, do not have three genders); verb conjugation is difficult; the distinction formal/informal pronouns can be unfamiliar to some speakers);
- ❖ idiomatic expressions may be confusing; for example, *a scoate din pepeni* (literal English translation: *to take someone out of his watermelons*; meaning: "to drive someone nuts"; Romanian synonym: *a enerva, a înfuria pe cineva*), *om cu scaun la cap* (literal English translation: *to be a man with a chair on the head*; meaning: "to be wise"; Romanian synonym: *a fi înțelept*), *a face capul calendar* (literal English translation: *to make a calendar out of someone's head*; meaning: *to confuse someone*; Romanian synonym: "a zăpăci pe cineva", *a freca menta* (meaning: "to waste time"; Romanian synonyms: *a pierde timpul/a lenevi/a tăia frunză la câini*) etc.
- ❖ the writing system may be difficult for Arabic speakers.

Contrast in values and belief systems is another mentioned barrier. When asked "What surprised you when you came to Romania?", many respondents said they were unpleasantly surprised by the high number of single, unmarried, or divorced individuals or by the reduced presence of extended families which are normal in countries such as Angola or Arab states: "There are many people who are single, without family." (North Korea), "Social relationships are very limited." (Iraq).

Perception is shaped by one's cultural background. For example, what is considered polite in one culture may be seen as distant in another. These perceptual filters can distort messages. Many students, especially of Arab origin, were surprised by the affectionate gestures made in public, by women's autonomy and by the consumption of alcohol. The space between two people is also socially determined. Differences in how personal space is perceived explain the reluctance of some Turkmen and Arab students to approach or touch a woman.

Attitudes toward time and formality differ by nationality. Romanians generally appreciate punctuality, especially in academic and professional contexts. Angolan students, for example, perceive delays of more than 20 minutes, or even 30, as acceptable. Attitude toward authority is also different. Romanians have a certain respect for hierarchy: professors are addressed formally (*domnule profesor, doamna profesoară*), and students may feel a distance compared to the informal atmosphere in other universities.

International students arrive with a set of expectations and preconceived ideas, taken from various sources. Stereotypes about Romanians – whether negative (such as the belief that Romanians are thieves, lazy, or corrupt) or positive (hospitable, hardworking, attached to traditions) – influence their initial perception and, implicitly, their intercultural interactions. Most students mentioned they had heard of a few common stereotypes about Romanians before coming to our country. One of the most well-known ideas is that Romania is associated with Dracula. Some also mentioned hearing that Romania is one of the poorest countries in Europe, or that Romanian women are very beautiful:

- ✓ I definitely knew about Dracula. I didn't know any other stereotypes. In Turkmenistan, people don't talk much about Romania. (Turkmenistan)
- ✓ I had heard a few popular stereotypes, such as the idea that Romania is the country of Dracula or that it's the poorest country in Europe. (Vietnam)
- ✓ I knew that Romanian women are considered beautiful, and I also knew that Romania built an oil refinery in my country, Syria. (Syria)

However, as they begin to engage directly with the reality in Romania, many students revise their initial image. Authentic contact with people, the university environment, and Romanian culture all support the fight against prejudice and help end stereotypes. Thus, intercultural communication becomes a space for transformation – from oversimplified labels to personal experiences that rebuild the image of “the other” based on reality.

To overcome these barriers, individuals must develop intercultural competence: the ability to understand, respect, and adapt to different cultures.

2. Strategies to facilitate intercultural adaptations and to develop intercultural competence

Adapting to a new culture is a unique journey. Intercultural adaptation is the process of adjusting to a new cultural environment while maintaining one's sense of identity. This process involves learning new social norms, values, communication styles and behavioral expectations.

The strategies to immerse students into Romanian culture and to help them connect deeply with our local and national traditions and values are:

- ❖ experiential cultural activities such as traditional cooking classes to make local dishes, music and dance sessions with traditional songs and dances. These kinds of activities allow students to live the culture;
- ❖ community and outdoor experiences: visits to museums and to local festivals, seasonal celebrations. These are immersive experiences in authentic cultural settings.

In the following section, I will present several activities organized in order to help international students connect with Romanian traditions and cultural values. These activities are aimed at fostering intercultural dialogue and giving the students the opportunity for experiential learning.

To facilitate the intercultural adaptation of international students, a structured series of extracurricular initiatives was designed and implemented. These activities were conceptualized not merely as recreational events, but as pedagogical tools aimed at fostering intercultural dialogue, empathy, and mutual understanding.

These initiatives can be categorized into three main pillars: gastronomic heritage workshops, celebration of national and religious traditions, and place-based community immersion.

2.1. Gastronomic Heritage as a Tool for Intercultural Dialogue

Culinary traditions serve as an accessible yet profound entry point into the host country's ethos. Gastronomic workshops were conducted both in the classroom for less complex preparations (e.g., traditional salads) and in the campus kitchen for more complex culinary tasks. A key case study in this category is the celebration of *Romania's National Day* (December 1st), centered around the preparation of the traditional bean stew (*iahnie de fasole*). To ensure inclusivity and respect for the diverse religious and cultural backgrounds of the students, the activity was adapted by offering both the standard recipe and a pork-free alternative for Muslim students. This adaptation shifted the activity from a simple cooking class to a practical exercise in cultural negotiation and mutual respect.



Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.

Cultural exchange through traditional cuisine sharing

2.2. Rituals and Celebration of Religious Traditions

Seasonal Romanian traditions were systematically used as a primary vehicle for delivering authentic, firsthand ethnographic experiences to the international students.

- ❖ Easter rituals: conducted in the period preceding the Orthodox Easter, specialized workshops dedicated to the traditional art of egg painting were organized. These sessions served as immersive cultural laboratories in which international students were introduced to iconographic symbols and specific decorative motifs. By engaging directly with this intangible cultural heritage, participants transitioned from passive observers to active practitioners, gaining a deeper, embodied understanding of Romanian spiritual values.
- ❖ Winter holidays: in collaboration with the Children's Palace in Ploiești, an annual Christmas carol concert was staged. International students actively performed Romanian carols (*colinde*), using the musical rhythm to accelerate language acquisition and foster emotional connection. The Christmas intercultural gathering facilitated connections between international and local Romanian students, who taught traditional Romanian folk dances (*horă, sârbă*), while international students introduced dances from their own cultures, resulting in a symmetrical cultural exchange. This structured artistic interaction resulted in a rich cultural exchange, in which non-verbal communication transcended linguistic barriers, fostering mutual respect and balanced intercultural integration.



Figure 4.

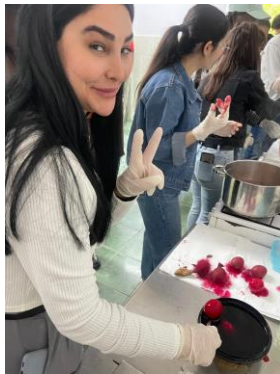


Figure 5.



Figure 6.

International students experiencing Romanian seasonal traditions

2.3. Place-based Community Immersion

To bridge the gap between academic environments and the local community, a series of outdoor and institutional visits took place.

- ❖ To integrate local heritage into the students' experiential learning framework, field visits were organized across the entire museum network of Ploiești. The initiative was strategically aligned with the international cultural event *The Long Night of Museums*. By participating in this large-scale community event, the international students were exposed to the host city's unique cultural treasures, including its horological history (the Clock Museum "Nicolae Simache"), pioneering industrial heritage (the National Oil Museum), and artistic expressions (the *Art Museum*).
- ❖ Responding directly to the spiritual curiosity of the students, a visit to the local Catholic Church was organized, fostering a comparative understanding of sacred spaces in a predominantly Orthodox country.
- ❖ During a traditional music and dance performance at the Philharmonic in Ploiești students volunteered to wear authentic Romanian traditional costume. This act of physical embodiment transformed the students from external observers to active participants in Romanian material culture.
- ❖ Spring activities included excursions to the main park of Ploiești. These field activities incorporated informal recreational sports, such as football matches, alongside various outdoor leisure initiatives designed to create stress-free environments. Crucially, domestic Romanian students actively participated in these sessions. This deliberate inclusion of peer interlocutors served a dual pedagogical purpose: it significantly reduced intercultural anxiety among the international students and catalyzed genuine interpersonal connection, shifting communication from formal academic constraints to authentic social integration.



Figure 7.



Figure 8.



Figure 9.



Figure 10.

Cultural and recreational itineraries

The impact of these activities extends far beyond mere entertainment, serving as a deliberate pedagogical intervention. These interactive frameworks resulted in two distinct outcomes: cognitive-linguistic development, as students practiced communicative Romanian in an informal setting, and socio-affective integration, as sharing the same framework with Romanians helped international students overcome culture shock. International students actively engaged in the practical application of Romanian. This contextualized usage facilitated the acquisition of vocabulary, bridging the gap between abstract classroom grammar and spontaneous verbal interaction. Simultaneously, the collaborative frameworks

shared between international and domestic Romanian students acted as a crucial psychological support system. This shared experiential space accelerated the mitigation of culture shock by reducing feelings of anxiety.

Conclusions

In conclusion, while preliminary obstacles, such as the language barrier (the phonological system, the idiomatic expressions, etc.), contrasting temporal norms, and deep-seated stereotypes (e.g., the Dracula myth), induce varying degrees of cultural shock, direct and authentic engagement acts as a catalyst for transformation. The findings highlight that targeted institutional integration initiatives play a crucial role in mitigating these differences and facilitating a smoother socio-cultural transition for foreign students.

Adapting to a new culture is a unique journey. The ability to navigate cultural differences requires both awareness and practice. Intercultural adaptation is a dynamic and ongoing process. Activities that combine experiential learning with cultural immersion are not merely auxiliary tools in teaching; they are essential pillars of modern education. They have proved to be valuable tools for promoting intercultural communication, empathy, and mutual respect among students of different nationalities. By moving students beyond the theoretical background of the classroom into real-world social interaction, they learn to dismantle cultural stereotypes, appreciate diverse traditions, and engage in meaningful, respectful dialogue across cultural boundaries. Direct exposure to traditions and values fosters authentic intercultural communication.

The paper demonstrates that even if cultural differences are viewed as potential barriers to communication and integration, they can be turned into a learning resource. Intercultural communication serves as a bridge that dissolves both linguistic and social boundaries. International students learn not only the Romanian language, history, and traditions, but also new ways of seeing community, respect, and tradition. Combining intercultural knowledge with adaptive strategies creates opportunities for mutual learning, professional development, and meaningful relationships across cultures.

To effectively support this transitional journey, higher education institutions must implement proactive strategies, including the creation of inclusive environments. Developing cultural empathy, cultivating tolerance, and creating academic environments that celebrate diversity are important strategies to facilitate intercultural adaptation.

The findings of this study demonstrate that structured extracurricular interventions play a pivotal role in international student adaptation within higher education institutions. By systematically moving beyond the traditional classroom setting, the implemented activities – ranging from seasonal ethnographic workshops and institutional field research during *The Long Night of Museums* to community-based recreational initiatives – provided a necessary psychosocial framework for international students.

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