



Özdemir-Çağatay, S. & Küllü-Sülü, A. (2013). An investigation of intercultural miscommunication experiences. *International Online Journal of Education and Teaching (IOJET)*,1(1). 39-52. <http://iojet.org/index.php/IOJET/article/view/43/63>

## AN INVESTIGATION OF INTERCULTURAL MISCOMMUNICATION EXPERIENCES

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### **Abstract**

Communication, which has always been one of the basic elements of life, is becoming more and more intercultural in today's world. People are not only transferring goods and technology among nations; they are also transferring their thoughts, ideas, and cultures. As this flow of communication among nations becomes common, intercultural communication problems, which is called as intercultural miscommunication, is becoming common as well. This paper investigates possible reasons of miscommunication among people from different cultures. Twenty-two participants from different nationalities took part in the study, and shared their intercultural miscommunication experiences. The researchers analyzed these miscommunication experiences by classifying them according to the categories suggested in the literature and the categories the researchers themselves suggested. The participants feelings and thought about their miscommunication experiences were also investigated. This study showed that there are many causes and factors that can lead to intercultural miscommunication. Thus, effort, desire and patience is needed a lot to get better mutual understanding and learn more about cultural differences so that we can increase cross-cultural awareness.

### **1. Introduction**

Communication among people from different cultures, which is called as intercultural communication, goes back to the dawn of civilization, when first people formed tribal groups and started to interact with people from different tribes (Samovar et al., 2010). However, as a discipline, intercultural communication has a fairly short history (Xin, 2007). In contemporary society, as a result of globalization and immigration, communication among people from different cultures has been inevitable. Though people are biologically alike, they are mostly socially different as they come from different cultural backgrounds. Different cultural backgrounds and different languages have made it difficult for people to understand one another while communicating. These communication problems have led to the need for understanding the reasons behind miscommunication between different cultures, which is referred to as intercultural miscommunication. This study concentrates on people's intercultural miscommunication experiences, and aims to analyze the causes and facts which are responsible for miscommunication among people from different cultures.

#### **1.1 Research Question:**

- 1- What are the reasons for miscommunication among people from different cultures?
- 2- Is miscommunication resulted by the language, pronunciation, socio-cultural, lexical or any other differences?
- 3- What do interlocutors think about the reasons of intercultural miscommunication?

## 2. Literature Review

In order to understand miscommunication problems between people from different cultures, we should first need to understand the relationship between culture and communication.

### 2.1. The Relationship between Communication and Culture

Keating (1994) describes communication as the competency of sharing your beliefs, values, opinions, and emotions. Among the principles of communication, Samovar, Porter and McDaniel (2010) include being contextual as it happens in certain situations which influence the way we talk to others and what we understand from their expressions. They claim that many of these contextual norms are directly related to the speaker's culture. Culture is described as "the deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving" (Porter & Samovar, 1994, p.11). Another definition of culture is given by Hall (1977). He describes culture as communication and communication as culture by saying that culture is learnt via communication, and communication is a reflection of the speaker's culture. His definition puts emphasis on the relationship between culture and communication, thus is similar to the anthropologists' view who describe culture as communication (Hall, 1959). Since there is a strong relationship between culture and communication, in situations where the speakers do not share the same culture, some communication problems occur. Xin (2007) calls these communication problems as "intercultural miscommunication".

### 2.2. Intercultural Miscommunication

Intercultural miscommunication could be described as the communication problems among people from different cultures. Different researchers have proposed different sources for the cause of intercultural miscommunication.

Chick (1996) gives five different sources of miscommunication. According to her, the first source of intercultural miscommunication is **sociolinguistic transfer**. Sociolinguistic transfer is the use of the rules of speaking of one's own speech community or cultural group when interacting with members of another community or group (Chick, 1996). This is mostly seen when one or more of the interlocutors is using a foreign or second language but employing the rules of speaking of his or her native language. It can also be seen between people with the same native language, but belong to speech communities that have different rules of speaking. Another source is **differences in the distribution of compliments in different communities**; that is there is frequently interactional trouble when members of one cultural group compliment in situations where compliments are inappropriate for members of other groups. According to Chick (1996) the third source of miscommunication is the **systematic difference in contextualization cues**. Contextualization cues are in the form of verbal and nonverbal messages: lexical, syntactic, phonological, prosodic, and paralinguistic choices; use of formulaic expressions, code switching and style switching; and changes in postural configurations, gestures, and facial expressions. The third source of miscommunication is **intonation**. As different languages have different intonations, speakers may exploit intonation in different ways. Chick (1996) gives having **different politeness strategies** in different cultures as the last source of miscommunication.

Another researcher who investigated intercultural miscommunication is Hu Xin (2007). In his article, Xin (2007) mainly discusses intercultural communication from ideological differences between Eastern and Western cultures. From this point of view, he states that

intercultural miscommunication can be analyzed from four aspects: "**ways of thinking, value system, belief and attitude, and language use and habits**" (Xin, 2007, p. 54). The first aspect of intercultural miscommunication, different ways of thinking, refers to the thinking differences between the East and the West. For example, rationalism in the East tends to be specific. Chinese people like presenting more examples and talking about specific matter while Western rationalism tends to be abstract. Thus, Western people often talk about concepts, methods and principles. Value system, which is the second aspect, is also different between Eastern and Western cultures. The value system of a culture plays crucial role in intercultural communication. Though values are generalized for cultures, it should not be forgotten that not everyone in the same culture has the same values. According to intercultural miscommunication theory, miscommunication and tension begin to mount when the interlocutors are not aware of their differences, or the way members of a different community understand particular behaviors (Hall, 1959). The third reason for miscommunication is different beliefs and attitudes (Xin, 2007). As belief systems are the core of our thoughts and actions, they are significant for intercultural communication. Thus, cultural differences in beliefs and behaviors are viewed as barriers to effective intergroup communication and sources of misperception and distrust. The last reason for intercultural miscommunication that Xin (2007) proposes is different language use and habits. As Sapir (1958, p. 69) states, "no two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality." In this quotation, Edward Sapir emphasizes the strong relationship between culture and language, and somewhat says "language is a reflection of culture, and vice versa" (Xin, 2007, p. 56).

In addition to Chick (1996) and Xin (2007), who investigated the possible sources intercultural miscommunication, Lowell and Devlin (1998) investigated miscommunication between Aboriginal students and their non-Aboriginal teachers in a bilingual school. They found that the effectiveness of classroom instruction is severely reduced due to cultural, linguistic and sociolinguistic differences. Lowell and Devlin (1998) propose the following points as the causes of miscommunication: differences in perspectives, expectations, understandings and interpretations (phenomenological differences). They state that linguistic, pragmatic and sociolinguistic differences between the languages are another reason for communication failure.

Petković and Škifić (2011) who investigated the relationship between miscommunication and identity in Wayne Wang's films state that miscommunication appears even when interlocutors belong to different generations and use the same language. In such a case, the miscommunication originates exclusively from different cultural backgrounds. Other than these sources of miscommunication; individual differences should also be taken into consideration (Chick, 1996).

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Participants**

Twenty-two participants voluntarily took part in the study to share their own experiences in regard to miscommunication across different cultures (see Table 1). The participants' native languages range from Turkish, Iranian, French, and Hindi to English. Their experience generally took place in the countries they have visited. The miscommunication problems can be observed in a variety of languages such as Turkish, English, Arabic, Irish English, French, Morocco Arabic... Most of the participants (14 out of 22) are from the US. All participants have had experience in relation to miscommunication except the 14<sup>th</sup> one.

### 3.2. Instruments

All participants were interviewed through the program “Skype” and e-mail, and the recordings of the Skype were transcribed to analyze the data easily. The interview questions were sent beforehand so that the interviewees have time to think about their intercultural miscommunication experiences. The Skype interviews took about 10-15 minutes for each person. It started with the demographic information about the participant such as name, education, profession, native language, languages known, the countries visited and the language with which they had miscommunication problems. Then the interviewees were asked to share their intercultural miscommunication experiences if they had any.

### 4. The Analysis of Data

Table 1. *List of coding categories*

1. Sociolinguistic Transfer 2. Differences in contextual clues: (DICC) a. Verbal / Linguistics: lexical, accent, pronunciation b. Non-verbal clues: gestures, mimics 3. Intonation	Chick’s (1996) categories
4. Politeness strategies 5. Individual Difference 6. Thinking 7. Values 8. Beliefs	Xin’s (2007) categories
9. Lack of background information: The lack of knowledge on the general topic, context 10. The delivery of speech: the pace of the speech delivered or responded, how soft the speech was given.	The researchers’ categories

The data was analyzed by the two researchers separately, then the results of both analyses were compared, and a list of categories was reached. The analysis was done through both deductive and inductive methods of analysis. That is, some categories were determined on the basis of the reasons pointed out in Chick’s (1996) and Xin’s (2007) studies, which was a deductive method of analysis, while some emerged during the coding, which was an inductive way. The categories used in this study are given in Table 1 below:

Overall analysis of the demographic information and each participant’s miscommunication analysis can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. *Analysis of the data*

Participants	Experience	Reasons	Native Language	Miscommunication Language	Languages Known	Feeling About Miscommunication
Partic. 1	Jokes	a. Sociolinguistic transfer b. Beliefs c. Values d. Background Information	Chinese	Korean	Chinese, Korean, and English	
Partic. 2	“Gelirim” Tense	Politeness Strategies	Chinese	Turkish	Chinese, Korean, English, Turkish, and	

					Japanese	
Partic.3	Lots of :No specific examples	DICC: Verbal Clues	USA English	UK	English, Spanish, Italian, Turkish	Respectful to all cultures, DICC: Non-verbal clues gesture helped
Partic. 4	Helping out Timing	1.a.Politeness b.Values 2.Values	USA English	German	English, Turkish	
Partic. 5	Foreign Professor assignment Mineral water in Turkish	1.a.DICC: Verbal: Accent b. The delivery of speech: Soft voice 2.Beliefs	USA English	1. English 2. Turkish	English, Turkish	
Partic. 6	Korean directions Directions in French Say Taxi driver : “turn right and left” too soon	1. DICC: Verbal clues: Pronunciation 2. a. The delivery of speech b. DICC: Verbal: limited word 3. Thinking	USA English	1. Korean 2. French 3. Arabic	English, French, Spanish	
Partic. 7	Think-thing Close-clause Casada: married/ cansada: tired	1. DICC: Verbal: pronunciation 2. DICC: Verbal: pronunciation	USA English	1. Arabic 2. Spanish	English, Spanish	Funny, embarrassing, isolated
Partic. 8	Jokes Titanic	1. a. Sociolinguistic transfer b. Values c. Beliefs 2.Background information	USA English	1. French 2. Arabic	English, French, Spanish	
Partic. 9	“Thank you” to shopping cashier	a. Politeness b. beliefs	USA English	Chinese	English, Chinese, Spanish	Suspicious, strange looks
Partic. 10	Direction	a. the delivery of speech b. thinking (spatial perception btw east and western people)	USA English	Turkish	English, Spanish, Turkish	Depressed, dependent on others confident , victorious
Partic. 11	Thank you dog dog	a. DICC: Verbal: Pronunciation b. Intonation	USA English	Thai	English	

Partic. 12	Paper: Barber	a. DICC: Verbal: Accent	USA English	Irish	English	
Partic. 13	Phone lost	DICC: Verbal: Lexical Missing	USA English	Indian English/Hindi	English	
Partic. 14	No Miscommunica tion Problem		USA English		English	Wonderful evening
Partic. 15	1. Not Talk to berbers in French Taxi Driver	1. Thinking, Beliefs, DICC: Verbal: Accent 2. DICC: Non- Verbal: Gestures	USA English	Moroccan Arabic	English	thrilled
Partic. 16	Purchase/ rent a camera	DICC: Verbal: Lexical Missing	USA English	Indian English/ Hindi	English	offensive
Partic. 17	Partner	Beliefs, values	Turkish	USA English	Turkish English	dramatic, embarrassing
Partic. 18	Gerry Mending: Mayor or a term	Background information	Turkish	USA English	Turkish , English German, Latin	embarrassment
Partic. 19	Directions : right and Left	Individual Difference	Iranian	Turkish	Persian - English - Turkish - Urdu	difficult
Partic. 20	Acaba/ abaza Less gosses/ testicles	1. DICC: Verbal: Pronunciation 2. DICC: Verbal: Accent	Canadian (English &French)	1. Turkish 2. French in France	English, French, Swedish, German, Turkish and Portuguese	
Partic. 21	Turkey/ Hindi (in English)/Hindi (in Turkish)	Background Information	Hindi	Turkish	Hindi, English, Arabic, French	
Partic. 22	Turkey / shopping	DICC: Verbal: Lexical Missing	Korean- American	Turkish	Korean (1 <sup>st</sup> language), English (2 <sup>nd</sup> language), Spanish- conversational	hard, uncomfortable

In this table, the second column on the left side gives an indication of the experiences of the participants. Almost all of them have gone through a miscommunication problem except the 14<sup>th</sup> participant. Most of their experiences have occurred in informal and daily life contexts such as while giving directions, shopping, travelling on a taxi or while joking. However, they have different reasons for their miscommunication problems. In order to examine the general patterns on the causes of these miscommunication experiences, the reasons are analyzed in detail in Table 3:

PARTICIPANTS	CATEGORIES									
	Socio-ling. Transfer	DICC*	Intonation	Politeness Strategies	Individual Difference	Thinking	Values	Beliefs	Lack of Background Information	Delivery of Speech
Partic. 1	1						1	1	1	
Partic. 2				1						
Partic. 3		1 (V)								
Partic. 4				1			2			
Partic. 5		1(V)						1		1
Partic. 6		2 (V)				1				1
Partic. 7		2 (V)								
Partic. 8	1						1	1	1	
Partic. 9				1				1		
Partic. 10						1				1
Partic. 11		1(V)	1							
Partic. 12		1 (V)								
Partic. 13		1(V)								
Partic. 14										
Partic. 15		1(V) 1NV				1		1		
Partic. 16		1 (V)								
Partic. 17							1	1		
Partic. 18									1	
Partic. 19					1					
Partic. 20	1	1(V)								
Partic. 21									1	
Partic. 22		1 (V)								
<u>TOTAL</u>	3	13 V 1 NV	1	3	1	3	5	7	4	3



\*DICC refers to Differences In Contextual Clues: V refers to Verbal cues, NV refers to Non-verbal clues

As it is clearly seen in the table, most of the participants have undergone miscommunication due to some differences in contextual clues (DICC). To put it another way, most of them have had problems with verbal as well as non-verbal clues in the speech. To illustrate, participant 6 indicated her experience as an example for a DICC: Verbal Difference: Pronunciation

...I tried to understand directions from a Korean friend and I could not understand his pronunciation. I never could find the place he wanted me to find...

The other striking result on Table 3 is that 7 of the participants' miscommunication experience can be attributed to beliefs. This might be because people's understanding different cultures largely rest upon what people attach importance to. For instance, participant 5 has an experience on a communication problem caused by the belief of the waiter in Turkey.

...One of the hardest words for me to say in Turkish is the word for water. I usually have to say it twice, and then the person asking repeats to make sure he or she understood correctly. One time I was the only foreigner with a bunch of Turkish friends, and I ordered mineral water, but the waiter could not understand. My friends said that either it was because I did not say it loud enough or because she was not expecting to understand a foreigner. I find that the case in Turkey sometimes...occasionally people seem to not understand me even though I say something correctly because they are not expecting me to speak Turkish or they are not expecting to be able to understand what I say...

It is seen in the example that the Turkish waiter has a belief in that a foreigner does not speak Turkish, so his prejudice might have hindered his understanding of the participant in addition to some other possible factors such as accent of the foreigner.

In line with the beliefs, some of the participants' (five of them) experience seem to be affected by the values of either themselves or the interlocutors'. Here is an example of the participants' values.

The second major difficulty that I still have is because of the lexical differences. Since American people assign different meanings to the words based on their idiosyncratic socio-cultural characteristics, sometimes I get myself into funny and embarrassing situations. One of these situations occurred when I first arrived in NYC and was trying to get to know my PHD colleagues better. During an informal conversation, one of them, a female, was casually talking about her "partner". She also had a ring on her marriage finger. Therefore, because I wanted to show that I am interested in learning more about them, I happened to ask if she is married and what her "husband" is doing. There were also a few others with us and everybody was silent for a moment. Then, she explained to me, **a bit uncomfortably**, that her "partner is not a he but she" and she was not married because same-sex marriage was not allowed at that time in NYC. After that incident, I have always been very careful with my assumptions and especially with the word "partner" which is used not only by people in homosexual relationship but by heterosexuals as well who want to show their support for LGBT community.

The participant has some values that marriage could be done just by heterosexual people. However, the values in marriage are quite different among all people and largely depend on individual values and principles. Therefore, the value of this specific participant is projected in her first reaction to the word “partner” by asking the “husband” of the interlocutor.

Apart from the categories mentioned in Chick (1996) and Xin (2007), we have found out two more categories: lack of background knowledge and the delivery of speech. Below is an example of miscommunication caused by lack of background information:

...In my classes here in the UAE, I have discovered that many of the lessons in the book are misunderstood because of the local culture and lack of world knowledge. So if a person has no frame of reference to the history or the culture it is easy to misunderstand the message. Students here, for example, do not study much world history, so when there is reference to a historical event they usually don't understand what is being discussed. They didn't know that the Titanic was a historical ship. They thought it was just a story in the movies...

In this example, students are not aware of the reality of the event. That might be caused by their history education or the importance they give to western history in schools.

A Chinese participant also emphasized the importance of the pace/ the delivery of the speech.

...‘X’ nerede? Asking directions in Turkish is easy. At least, it is linguistically easy. Just put the name of the place you are looking for in front of the word ‘nerede’, add a little (not too much) rising intonation – and there you go! The difficulty is in dealing with what happens next.

You asked in Turkish, so you will be told in Turkish! With a barrage of words and lots of gestures. If you are lucky you will understand a few key words such as turn right or left, perhaps the distance, but mostly it will be a cascade of incomprehensible sound that you are so busy trying to decipher that you forget the key points anyway. However, you thank the person who tried to help you and proceed in the direction you think he indicated until you find the next person to ask and hope for someone who speaks more slowly...

As indicated on the table, intonation stands as the least reflected factor among the participants. This result is probably because the meaning in most of these languages such as English, Turkish, or Spanish does not depend on the intonation like Chinese. However, the way people utter the words is of great importance in communicating in these languages. At this point, the DICC was analyzed in depth to reveal the underlying reasons for miscommunication. The analysis of DICC could be seen below, in Table 4:

Difference in Contextual Clues( DICC)			
	Non-Verbal Clues	Verbal Clues	
	2(Gestures)	Accent	Pronunciation
			Lexical items
		9	4
<b>TOTAL</b>	1	13	

Table 4: DICC ( Difference in Contextual Clues)

As reflected in the Table 4, most of the miscommunication problems that participants experienced, with regard to DICC, could stem from the pronunciation of the word or the different accents. This result is interesting in the sense that both the speakers and interlocutors understand the words or the structures in their own native tongue fully, but sometimes they are not able to make any sense because of the accent or the pronunciation of the word in another culture/country. Even though participant 12 is an American woman, she has undergone a difficulty in Ireland, where English is also spoken largely.

In Ireland, it was really a struggle for me to understand what most of the Irish were saying and I had to concentrate really hard. I had to ask one man to repeat himself four times to realize he was asking me where he could buy a paper (newspaper), but I thought he was looking for a barber. English is the language of both our countries, but our accents couldn't be more different!

This experience shows that, as Chick (1996) points out in her study, the intercultural miscommunication is probable to occur even among the users of the same languages.

While the verbal factors play an important role in miscommunication, the non-verbal features such as gesture and mimics do not seem to impact the communication that much. They rather enabled the participants to overcome the language barriers. Participant 3 illustrates how she coped with the language barrier and any communication breakdown.

I would say I have experienced three main kinds of miscommunication. In most countries I have visited, there has been a language barrier. This has made basic actions like getting around the country a little difficult. However, I have found that ordering food, finding your way around cities, etc. are all controlled by universal body language which makes being understood much easier.

Apart from the strategies of participant 3 to fix possible problems, participant 14 also emphasizes the precautions she has taken to prevent any potential miscommunication.

In Turkey, there were many people who didn't speak English, but that didn't stop us from communicating with the few Turkish words I learned, using lots of smiles and acting out what we meant with our hands. In Malatya, I went home with a woman and her grown daughter – even though neither spoke a word of English. I could tell they were kind and their cousin came over to their home to interpret for us. We had a **wonderful evening and we stay in touch still** today by emailing messages that must be translated on-line.

She attached importance to use her gestures and she seems to be positive towards another cultural dinner. This attitude and using gestures with an appropriate universal way such as smiling worked out for her. At this point, it is clear that people's affective side have a great impact on the prevention of miscommunication. Some other participants (participant 7, 9, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19) pinpointed the emotions or their feelings about the miscommunication. Here are some examples:

Participant 7: It often works very well, but sometimes it doesn't work at all. Sometimes it's **funny and sometimes it is embarrassing**

Participant 9: People often talk about foreigners getting depressed as an aspect of culture shock but I think it may have more to do with the psychological effect of being incapable of doing simple tasks and of being dependent on others

Participant 15: However, the native Berbers in villages were **thrilled** when I said my basic words in Moroccan Arabic

Participant 16:...In some cultures the motions of my hands can be **offensive**

Participant 17: There were also a few others with us and everybody was silent for a moment. Then, she explained to me, a **bit uncomfortably**, that her “partner is not a he but she” and she was not married because same-sex marriage was not allowed at that time in NYC

Participant 18: **To my embarrassment**, in the following week I was told by an American classmate that gerry mending is a political term, not the name of the major

Participant 19: because I was not able to use correct grammar to connect the words communication was **difficult**.

When it comes to the affective side, people seem to have felt really sorry, depressed or embarrassed for their miscommunication problem. However, it is sometimes caused by the reasons out of their control. Participant 10 emphasizes the affective side of miscommunication in her following sentences:

... If it is too difficult to communicate, if your efforts fail on too many occasions, or if people are discourteous when you try to communicate, you find yourself not wanting to try, not wanting to engage with people, or even not wanting to go out to do the necessary things in daily life. People often talk about foreigners getting depressed as an aspect of culture shock but I think it may have more to do with the psychological effect of being incapable of doing simple tasks and of being dependent on others to help with so many things you would like just to do yourself. The flip side is that when you are successful at accomplishing even a small task using the language skills you have, you feel quite victorious. In learning language in the classroom – or on the street, as it were – one needs to build on small successes in order to feel confident, and to feel confident in order to take more and more risks with doing something in another language...

The psychological aspect to communication in a foreign language is emphasized in her sentences. This aspect of communication problems is often overlooked when language is being taught and learned. These comments show the importance of communication skills among people from different cultures, and also the importance of being respectful and understanding to foreign cultures.

## **5. Conclusion**

The literature on intercultural miscommunication has introduced different reasons for miscommunication, most of which were supported by this study as well. The communication breakdown people have experienced in both their native and foreign languages is investigated in this study. The study also examined the reasons for people’s miscommunication problems in regard to sociolinguistic transfer; differences in contextual clues (DICC): Verbal / Linguistic clues such as lexicon, accent, pronunciation, as well as non-verbal clues such as gestures, mimics, and intonation; politeness strategies, individual differences; thinking; values and beliefs. The reasons for the problems are also found in the lack of background

knowledge and the delivery of the speech. In alignment with these categories, the participants seem to have more miscommunication experiences caused by DICC, in particular pronunciation and accent differences. Moreover, beliefs and values also give rise to difficulty in communication. It is also found that in contrast to Chick's (1996) study, non-verbal contextual clues do not cause miscommunication a lot; verbal contextual clues play a more important role while communicating with people from different cultures. Taking all these into consideration, teachers need to be careful with teaching contextual clues, and should make students aware of the different accents. In such a way, they need to be exposed to not only the Standard English but also the other varieties. In addition, the teachers usually pave the way to the attitudes towards different cultures, so they might focus more on different beliefs and values of people to hinder any communication breakdown.

On the basis of the findings reported in this paper, it can be concluded that achieving mutual understanding between cultures is not easy. There are many causes and factors that can lead to intercultural miscommunication. For that reason, we need effort, desire and patience to get better mutual understanding and learn more about cultural differences so that we can increase cross-cultural awareness.

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## APPENDIX

### Interview Questions

Name:

Nationality:

Languages you know (including your native tongue):

Profession:

Education:

Countries you visited:

Have you ever experienced any miscommunication problems while communicating with people from other countries? The reason for miscommunication could be the language, pronunciation, socio-cultural, lexical or any other differences. Please, write your experiences about miscommunication.