

# INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES AND INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE. CASE STUDY ON ACADEMY OF ECONOMIC STUDIES BUCHAREST

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*The paper debates the topics of intercultural competences and intercultural dialogue. The main research whose results are being disseminated through this paper are part of a national research project, "Equality of chances and intercultural dialogue", project granted by competition and which benefits from the expertise of a dynamic team of University Professors and lecturers as well as enthusiastic PhD students. The authors present the results of their academic and research activities involving students (both Romanian and foreign) studying Economics in foreign languages (at the Faculty of Business Administration taught in foreign languages, English section within the Bucharest University of Economics).*

*Key words: intercultural dialogue, intercultural competence, intercultural sensitivity, knowledge-based society*

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## **1. Introduction**

*MOTTO: "We want to go beyond multicultural societies, where cultures and cultural groups simply coexist side by side, where they live 'parallel lives'. We need to become intercultural societies where plurality of cultures cooperates in dialogue and in shared responsibility. 2008 as the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue is an important part of the effort to move beyond tolerance and towards a genuine intercultural Europe." (Ján Figel, Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture, and Youth, *Intercultural dialogue as a long-term priority for the EU, "Intercultural Dialogue as the Fundamental Value of the EU"*, Ljubljana, 7 January 2008)*

The issues of intercultural dialogue and intercultural competence play a key role in shaping and reshaping the future. Intercultural rhetoric uses cultural difference to build knowledge and support wise action. This paper examines examples of good practices used to design an intercultural dialogue, to manage diversity, and to build *intercultural knowledge competences* within one of the most important higher education institutions from Romania.

Promoting a *diverse multiethnic student groups* demands more elaborate pedagogical approaches to facilitate every student's acquisition of *intercultural competencies within the framework of intercultural dialogue*. Due to its importance 2008 was declared *the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue*.

Drawing from a case study regarding learning in foreign languages economics subjects and one based on learning a foreign language dedicated to support economics competences the paper argued that *intercultural communication* and *dialogue* can play a key role for a knowledge-based society. The paper stresses the need for *intercultural communication education (ICE)* that concerns several academic disciplines - psychology, social psychology, sociology, education, media studies, cultural anthropology and management (Stier, 2003).

## **2.Higher Education and intercultural dialogue. From intercultural sensitivity to intercultural competence and effectiveness**

Recent debates tended to be more practically oriented. Good intercultural teaching practice (for example in languages) focus on the intercultural competence which requires shifting from "intercultural awareness and sensitivity" to "intercultural effectiveness" (Salo-Lee, 2007). A constructive intercultural dialogue within a university is becoming essential to perform successfully in the long-run. Universities should promote "cultural respect" that requires respect for all persons involved in intercultural communication, regardless of their origins and cultural choices. G. Chen and W. J. Starosta (1996) describe a model which focuses on four elements: communication skills, personal attributes (including the capacity for "social relaxation"), psychological adaptation (including the ability to cope with stress), and cultural sensitivity. Kim (2001) examines the importance for intercultural communication of: cognitive components, affective components and operational components.

*Intercultural competence* can be divided into: *content-competencies* and *processual competencies* (Stier 2003). *Content-competencies* have a one-dimensional or static character and refer to knowing a specific aspect. *Processual competencies* consider the *dynamic character of intercultural competence* and its *interaction context* (Hall 1976; Stier, 2004). This *knowing how-aspect* of intercultural competence, involves *intrapersonal* and *interpersonal competencies*. *Intrapersonal competencies* involve *cognitive* and *emotional skills*, coping with diverse feelings - xenophobia, frustration, ethnocentrism (Gudykunst 2003).

*Interpersonal competencies* refer to *interactive skills* being aware of one's own interaction style (*communication competence*) and adequately responding to *contextual meanings* (*situational sensitivity*). *Intercultural communication education (ICE)* should enhance students' understanding of the *dynamics of intercultural interactions*. It should enable them to obtain *intercultural competence*. *Intercultural Programmes' Student Outcomes (IPSO)* refer to *meta-competences* and extend beyond 'knowing that' and 'knowing how-aspects of culture'.

Instead they are about *knowing why and or even knowing why one knows why*. The *Features of Academic Curricula and Teaching Orientations (FACTO)* make up a fertile ground for *intercultural learning* and acquisition of *intercultural competence* (Stier 2006).

## **3.Intercultural Competence when all the subjects are taught in foreign language and when we deal with diverse multiethnic student groups. The cases of the Faculty of Business Administration (taught in foreign language), at the Bucharest University of Economics**

The majority of courses offered in our universities are taught in Romanian. However, there are faculties where all the subjects are taught in foreign languages. We focused our research on the *Faculty of Business Administration (taught in foreign languages)* that offers courses taught in foreign languages (English, French, German). This faculty was created in 1990 and now there are both Romanian and foreign students (from more than 50 countries). We consider that this faculty is *an example of good practice for a multilingual university that facilitates intercultural dialogue*. We had applied the questionnaire method.

In the case of the *Faculty of Business Administration (taught in foreign languages)*, English section we applied a questionnaire on a number of 98 respondents, all of whom are students at the *Faculty of Business Administration (taught in foreign languages)*, English section, at the Bucharest University of Economics. Most of the respondents taking part in this study are aged 19 years old (64% out of a total of 98 students) and they are first year students. As for the respondents' nationality, at the *Faculty of Business Administration (taught in foreign languages)*, 86% are Romanian. 4% of the respondents did not declare their nationality, while the others have Israeli (3%), American (2%), Turkish (2%), Lebanese (1%), Palestinian (1%), and Belarusian nationality (1%). Their citizenship is almost the same as their nationality with very few exceptions. Most of the Romanian students (having Romanian citizenship and/or nationality) have Romanian parents. Almost all of the foreign students have parents of different nationalities from the Romanian one with only very few exceptions (one Israeli student having parents of Romanian nationality). The nationality declared for the parents are: Lebanese, Israeli, Romanian, Palestinian, Belarusian, Turkish, American and German, while 6% of the respondents chose not to declare their parents' nationality and citizenship.

When asked *whether they interact with foreign students or not*, at the *Faculty of Business Administration (taught in foreign languages)* the large majority declared that they do interact with foreign students (Romanians and foreign students alike)-figure 1.

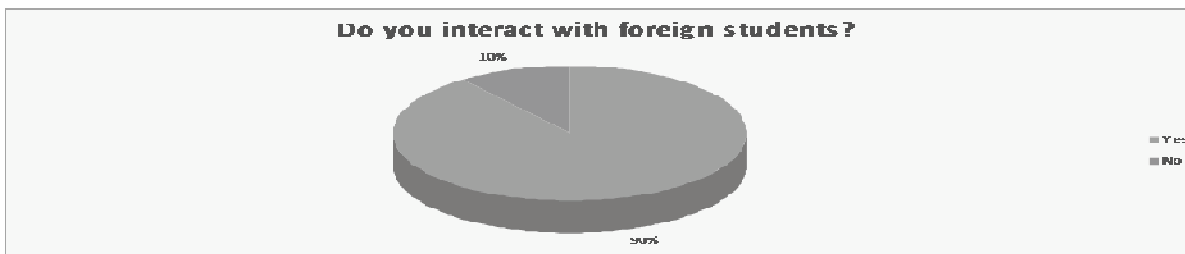


Figure 1. Answers of students from the Faculty of Business Administration to the question “Do you interact with foreign students ?”

However, 10% of the respondents did not give a positive answer. It seems that they feel just like they *coexist* in a "multicultural situation" (Taylor, 1992; Semprini, 1997). It is very likely that their answer explains or reveals the lack of communication with their foreign colleagues despite the fact that they are students in the same year and series with foreign students. All of the negative answers were given by Romanian students meaning that all foreign students interact with Romanians and not only with students of their own nationality and/or citizenship. Out of the 88 students having stated that they interact with foreign students, 71% said that they interact with less than 10 foreign students, 13% said they interact with more than 11 students but with less than 50 students and only 1% said they interact with more than 50 foreign students. However, a part of the respondents (15%) did not provide any figure at all. The circumstances under which the students of the *Faculty of Business Administration (taught in foreign languages)* declared that they interacted with foreign students were: university activities (an expectedly large proportion 71%) and other activities and circumstances (17%) – figure 2.

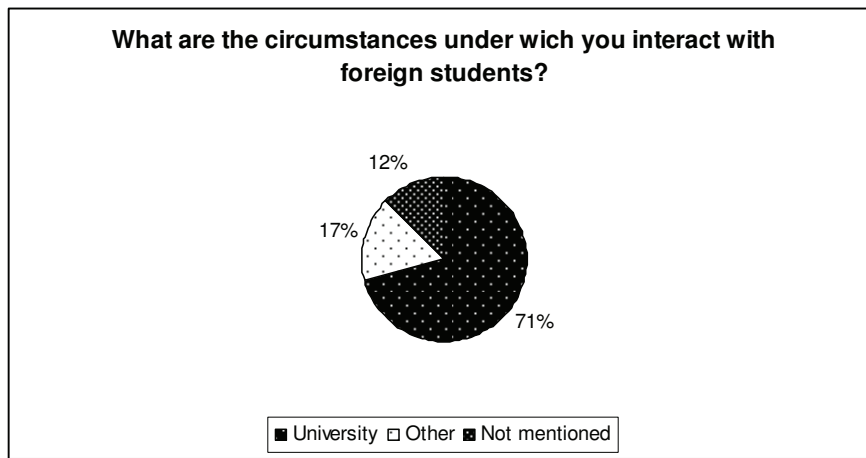


Figure 2. Answers of students from the Faculty of Business Administration to the question “*What are the circumstances under which you interact with foreign students?*”

12% of the respondents, however, did not want to state what these circumstances were. Within the category “*other circumstances*” fell: leisure activities, extracurricular activities or both.

When asked to point to the main difficulties that foreign students face, the answers were almost equally shared among the four alternatives: understanding the language (27%), adapting (23%), socializing (23%) and the academic environment (27%). Asked to say *what policies or measures they would suggest in order for the Faculty/University to improve or resolve such difficulties*, students said that the best policy to be applied would be promoting courses to boost intercultural dialogue and sensitivity focusing on the cultural specificity of each student (37%). Then followed the organization of workshops with all the students of different nationalities (25%), special preparation programs (22%) and the dissemination of materials with useful information (15%). It is more than obvious that the need for more communication would be a possible solution to these difficulties.

When asked to provide more such solutions, students suggested the following: mixing students of different origins (nationality, citizenship) in groups and series; organizing tour guides for foreign students; “*showing around*” sessions for first year students; organizing more language courses (Romanian); offering more language courses (other than English and Romanian); organizing trips to facilitate communication among students of different nationalities; group and team-building activities; sports events; cultural workshops in music, arts; team projects; different workshops; English as compulsory communication language; socializing and extracurricular activities; brainstorming sessions; better prepared administrative personnel; special advisers for foreign students; after school classes; making more room for NGOs to deal with this problem; encouraging more communication in seminars; having more dialogue in classes; cultural exchange programs and intercultural activities; spending more time with Romanian students; informal meetings for students; culturally-diverse menu at the cafeteria; Romanians offering volunteer to help foreign students adapt.

Asked whether there is any specific policy meant to promote intercultural dialogue in the university, in the case of students in economics the large majority (60%) admitted having no idea about any such policy, while 28% said there is such a policy and 12% said there is no such policy. This question is very useful in understanding the degree of information of students on such issues. For the question “*How much does your University/faculty focus on supporting management of diversity, inclusive treatment and equal opportunities?*” the answers were: “*a lot*” (11%), “*to some extent*” (45%), “*not enough*” (27%), “*I don’t know*” (17%).

For the question “What are the communication difficulties that you encountered in the relationship with students of other nationalities?” the answers were: different perceptions on things (41%), “the language” (24%), “the culture” (18%), “preconceived opinions” (16%), other (1%).

When asked whether there are any benefits for students to be taught in a foreign language, at the Faculty of Business Administration (taught in foreign languages), 87% said there are benefits, 3% said there are no benefits, while the remaining 10% did not know what to answer - figure 3.

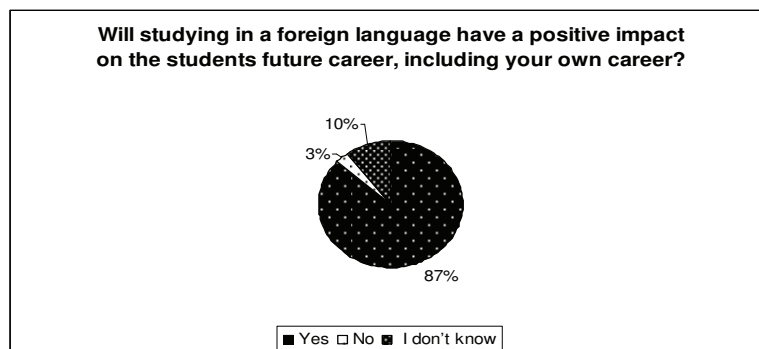


Figure 3. Answers of students from the Faculty of Business Administration to the question “Will studying in a foreign language have a positive impact on student’s future career ?”

Most of the positive answers (32%) were in favour of a better preparation to face any future challenges related to intercultural dialogue. 25% of the answers referred to better and improved language skills due to courses taught in a foreign language; 22% of the answers pointed to an easier socialisation due to courses taught in a foreign language; 20% of the answers referred to openness to communicate. Other students (2%) suggested that enlarging career opportunities and learning about other cultures would be other benefits. The respondents consider that the academic curricula taught in foreign languages are adapted to internationally agreed contents and standards (58%). 23% marked the “not the case” variant, while the remaining 19% chose “I do not know”.

When asked what students should focus more on in order to make the best of the intercultural dialogue to work in favour of stimulating creative and innovative potential of foreign students, their answers were: displaying an inclusive and supporting behaviour (33% for economics and 29% for engineering), forming diverse teams (23%), having an international experience of their own in order to understand cultural diversity (19%), asking for their help (11%), just being tolerant (9%), learning their language (5%).

### Conclusions

In our case study students were very confident and said that studies in foreign languages and studying a foreign language like English could contribute to make them *feel better prepared to face any future challenges*. Some suggested that intercultural competences and dialogue could be a means of better adapting to a foreign country, as well as an opportunity to study topics of professional interest in the original. *The interpersonal aspect* was not ignored, as many students mentioned *socializing easier* as a plus of studies in foreign languages, while a lot of students remarked that students participating in such studies were *much more open to communication*.

We consider that we need to work on various fronts: *first*, making people and universities aware of what they can gain from *lifelong learning investing in language training* and in adopting a strategic approach to *knowledge management based on intercultural dialogue and competences*. *Second*, as English is seen more as a *'basic competence'* that everyone needs in the labour market.

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