INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE: INSIGHTS INTO SOCIOLINGUISTIC, DISCOURSE AND STRATEGIC PROFICIENCY OF ESP STUDENTS

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Abstract

In this increasingly interconnected world, effective intercultural communication is vital for tackling diverse social and professional contexts. This study explores intercultural communicative competence (ICC), with a specific focus on examining sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic abilities. Using a Google Forms questionnaire, data were gathered from 37 participants across various age groups (18-38 years). It included 37 ESP students from the Faculty of Biotechnical Sciences, at St. Kliment Ohridski University-Bitola, enrolled across various food technology undergraduate, master's and PhD programs. This sample was selected because it included current and potential future participants in student exchange programs (ERASMUS, CEEPUS), as well as foreign students studying at the faculty, making them particularly relevant for evaluating intercultural communicative competence. The analysis reveal certain perceptions into participants' capacities to adapt speech to different communication contexts, engage in conversations with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, and employ strategic communication strategies when faced with language barriers. This is a supplementary analysis and it provides an investigation of ICC, highlighting how sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies intersect. The findings point out both the strengths as well as the weaknesses of the participants' ICC, highlighting the need for acquisition of the aforesaid competencies for the efficient conduct of their intercultural communication endeavors, offering recommendations for educators and researchers to improve intercultural communication in the modern world.

Keywords: Intercultural communicative competence, strategic competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, cross-cultural communication.

INTRODUCTION

Effective communication across cultural boundaries has become essential for successful interactions in various social, academic, and professional contexts. Gudykunst and Kim (2003) emphasize that intercultural communication relies on adapting one's behavior to bridge cultural gaps effectively. Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has emerged as a crucial element for understanding and enhancing individuals' abilities to engage in meaningful and effective communication with people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Byram, 1997; Byram & Risager, 1999). Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) conceptualize ICC as a dynamic process requiring the integration of knowledge, skills, and attitudes to handle cultural complexities effectively. ICC particularly incorporates a complex set of skills, knowledge, and attitudes that enable individuals to cope with intercultural encounters with sensitivity, flexibility, and adaptability (Deardorff, 2006). One key aspect of ICC is **sociolinguistic competence,** which refers to the ability to appropriately adjust one's language use based on the social and cultural norms of the communicative context (Savignon, 2001). This includes understanding and appropriately employing variations in speech styles, register, and politeness strategies across different cultural settings (Kramsch, 1998). **Discourse competence** is another fundamental component of ICC, focusing on individuals' ability to effectively structure and co-create meaning in interactions with speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Canale & Swain, 1980). It involves not only linguistic proficiency but also an understanding of cultural norms leading conversational turn-taking, storytelling conventions, and pragmatic strategies for maintaining rapport and managing misunderstandings (Scollon & Scollon, 2001). **Strategic competence** completes the set of three ICC components, encompassing individuals' ability to employ communication strategies to overcome language and cultural barriers in intercultural interactions (Canale, 1983; Oxford, 1990). This includes tactics such as paraphrasing, clarification requests, and the use of compensatory strategies to convey meaning when faced with linguistic limitations or cultural misunderstandings (Oxford, 1990). While the concept of ICC has gained significant attention in the field of language education and intercultural communication, yet further exploration and empirical research into its various components still remain necessary. Exploring the aforementioned competencies, the author aims to gain a deeper comprehension of how students cope with cultural differences in communication and identify strategies for enhancing ICC development in educational and professional settings. To date, very little empirical attention has been given to ICC, with prior research primarily confined to surveys on the theories and definitions of ICC (Fantini, 2009; Lustig & Koester, 2010). However, decades of these types of investigations have only provided the initial insights into the nature of inter and cultural interactions, and despite an acknowledged need for more research that systematically looks at specific skills that make up ICC, the literature is still seriously lacking in this regard. The current study is a supplementary analysis and provides an exploration of ICC, highlighting how sociolinguistic, discourse, and sgrategic competences intersect. Thus, utilizing a structured questionnaire given through Google Forms, the author intends to find out about the participants' level of competencies in dealing with different aspects of intercultural communication. In line with the works of Byram (1997), Deardorff (2006), and Canale and Swain (1980), this study approaches ICC from a general perspective acknowledging the interdependency and interactivity of its constituent components in practical communicative events. By exploring all three competences collectively, the author seeks to provide a detailed understanding of how individuals handle cultural differences in communication and identify areas for intervention and improvement. It is important to highlight that the results of this study

are going to be beneficial for the improvement of theoretical and practical implementation in the fields of language education, intercultural communication training and cross cultural competency development. Thus, indicating the certain areas of strength and areas for improvement in participants' ICC, the author can point out to the possibility to use interventions aimed for promoting intercultural communicative competence in intercultural environment. Furthermore, the study seeks to establish the implications for intercultural communicative competence development and its impact on educational programs.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is a complex construct that has attracted attention in the fields of language education and intercultural communication. As Fantini (2009) noted, ICC plays a critical role in fostering effective intercultural communication. Following Byram's model of ICC (1997), this study emphasizes sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence as core components. Byram (1997) defines ICC as the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, combining knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Deardorff (2006) further highlights the need for assessing ICC as a measurable outcome of international education, emphasizing its dynamic and iterative nature. Canale and Swain (1980) identify sociolinguistic and discourse competencies as critical for successful communication, while Oxford (1990) elaborates on the strategic use of communication tactics to overcome barriers. Previous studies have highlighted the importance of ICC in fostering effective intercultural interactions (Deardorff, 2006; Fantini, 2009). Additionally, Fantini (2006) emphasizes that ICC requires individuals to develop both linguistic and cultural adaptability to cope with diverse contexts effectively. Similarly, Bennett (1993) discusses how intercultural sensitivity is a developmental process essential to fostering effective communication across cultures. Moreover, Chen and Starosta (2000) highlight the importance of intercultural sensitivity and awareness as foundational elements of ICC, further underlining the interconnectedness of its components. Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) provide a comprehensive framework for conceptualizing ICC, which includes behavioral, cognitive, and affective dimensions. This framework complements Byram's model by emphasizing the integration of these dimensions in real-world intercultural interactions. Furthermore, Gudykunst and Kim (2003) focus on the role of cultural adaptation strategies in bridging communication gaps, providing valuable insights into strategic competence. However, a need for empirical research that explores specific competencies, particularly in student populations, to understand how these skills develop and manifest in real-world settings. This study aims to address this gap by examining ICC among students in higher education, providing a detailed understanding of their capabilities and areas for improvement.

METHODOLOGY

Research design and participants

This study is a supplementary analysis which seeks to establish the sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence of the current undergraduate, master's and PhD students. To conduct this study, the research design was created based on Byram's model which emphasizes the key components of ICC: attitudes, knowledge, skills, and competencies, as essential for

effective intercultural communication. This model highlights the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. The structured questionnaire used in the study was developed by Zhong et al. (2013), a validated instrument specifically designed to assess ICC in higher education contexts. Its relevance for this study lies in its capacity to evaluate the competencies of the participants within an academic and intercultural framework. The aim of this study was to explore three specific aspects of participants' aspects of ICC. First, the study examined how students adapt their language use to align with various intercultural contexts, reflecting their sociolinguistic competence. Second, the research investigated students' ability to structure conversations and co-create meaning in interactions with individuals from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, highlighting their discourse competence. Finally, the study assessed students' use of strategic communication techniques, such as paraphrasing and clarification requests, to overcome language and cultural challenges. The participants in this study were 37 higher education students enrolled in undergraduate, master's and PhD study programs, including Food and Dietetics, Food Quality and Safety, Agro-management, Zootechnique, and Food Technology and Safety, at the Faculty of Biotechnical Sciences at St. Kliment Ohridski University-Bitola. The participants were selected for their relevance to intercultural settings, given that many are current or potential participants in international exchange programs (e.g. ERASMUS, CEEPUS) or are foreign students. This diversity makes the group particularly suitable for evaluating ICC in a globally interconnected academic environment. Specific inclusion criteria included participants' affiliation as students of the Faculty of Biotechnical Sciences, thus, there were no restrictions as to the cycle or the study program. Additionally, the participants were required to demonstrate sufficient English proficiency, which was verified through their successful completion of the mandatory English for Biotechnology (B2-C1) course. English proficiency ensured that participants can fully engage with the ICC questionnaire, which was administered in English.

Instrumentation, data collection and analysis

The questionnaire used in this study is an adapted version of Zhong's ICC questionnaire, which is based on Byram's model of ICC. This validated instrument was specifically designed to measure sociolonguistic, discourse and strategic competencies in higher education contexts. The focus of this study is a supplementary analysis that exclusively examines these three ICC components, while other items in the questionnaire are the subject of separate research. Data collection was conducted via Google Forms, user-friendly and acceptable platforms for online surveys. The responses from the questionnaire are available at: file:///C:/Users/DELL/Downloads/Intercultural%20Communicative%20Competence%20Questionnaire%20-%20Google%20Forms%20(2).mhtml (question 23-37).The participants were informed about the voluntary and anonymous nature of their participation and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. No personal data was collected, ensuring the participants privacy throughout the process. The responses were analyzed quantitatively to identify general patterns in sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competencies. This approach enabled the study to highlight key areas of strength and areas requiring improvement, providing actionable insights into the participants' intercultural communicative communication.

RESULTS

Sociolinguistic Competence

Adjusting Speech to Different Communication Situations: The majority of participants (48.6%), strongly agreed, and 21.6% agreed that they can adjust their ways of speaking according to different communication situations. This indicates a high level of sociolinguistic competence among the participants, as they demonstrate flexibility in adapting their language use to different contexts.

Adjusting Speech Based on the Age, Gender, Identity, Status, and Closeness to the Other Party: Participants generally demonstrated a high level of ability to adjust their speech based on various factors such as age, gender, identity, status, and closeness to the other party. The percentages for strongly agree and agree responses were consistently high across all items, ranging from 51.4% to 67.6%.

Table 1. Sociolinguistic competence

No.	Question Description	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
23	I can adjust my ways of speaking according to different communication situations.	10	18	8	1	0
24	I can adjust my ways of speaking based on the age of the other party.	12	14	9	2	0
25	I can adjust my ways of speaking according to the gender of the other party.	9	16	11	1	0
26	I can adjust my ways of speaking based on the identity and status of the other party.	9	16	10	2	0
27	I can adjust my ways of speaking based on how close I am to the other party.	10	12	14	1	0

Discourse Competence

Choosing the Right Topic: A majority of participants (56.8%), agreed that they can choose the right topic when communicating with people from different cultures. This indicates a adequate level of confidence in this aspect of discourse competence. However, with 21.6% expressing neutrality and a small percentage disagreeing (2.7%), there is still room for further development to ensure that all participants feel confident in their ability to select culturally appropriate topics in conversations. **Continuing the Conversation Smoothly:** The majority of participants (45.9%), agreed that they are able to continue the conversation smoothly when communicating with people from different cultures. However, a significant proportion (27%) indicated neutrality on this item, indicating some variability in participants' confidence in maintaining smooth conversations across cultural boundaries.

Starting and Ending Conversations Appropriately: A substantial number of participants (43.2%) agreed that they were able to start and end conversations appropriately and naturally when communicating with people from different cultures. However, similar to the previous item, a notable percentage (27%) indicated neutrality, suggesting room for improvement in this aspect of discourse competence.

Table 2. Discourse competence

No.	Question Description	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
28	I can choose the right topic when communicating with people from different cultures.	7	21	8	1	0
29	I am able to continue the conversation smoothly when communicating with people from different cultures.	10	17	8	2	0
30	When communicating with people from different cultures, I was able to start and end conversations appropriately and naturally.	9	16	10	2	0

Strategic Competence

I will keep silent when I encounter something I cannot express in English: A majority of participants (59.5%) either agreed or strongly agreed that they would keep silent when encountering something they cannot express in English. This indicates a tendency among participants to refrain from speaking when faced with linguistic challenges, potentially affecting their strategic competence in intercultural communication.

Avoiding Topics Unable to Express Ideas: A significant number of participants (45.9%), strongly agreed or agreed that they would avoid topics in which they are not able to express their ideas. This suggests a potential limitation in participants' strategic competence, as they may avoid engaging in certain conversations due to perceived language barriers.

Using Communication Strategies for Overcoming Difficulties: The majority of responses indicated agreement with statements related to using strategies such as choosing synonyms for unfamiliar words (56.7% agreed or strongly agreed), expressing confidence in using longer sentences to explain concepts (56.7% agreed or strongly agreed), using conversation fillers to buy time (51.3% agreed or strongly agreed), and actively employing clarification and repetition strategies (67.5% agreed or strongly agreed). Therefore, the participants generally demonstrated a high level of strategic competence in employing communication strategies to overcome difficulties in intercultural communication.

Table 3. Strategic competence

No.	Question Description	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
31	I will keep silent when I encounter something I cannot express in English.	4	9	12	10	2
32	I will avoid the topic in which I am not able to express my ideas.	4	13	9	8	3
33	When I encounter words that I cannot remember, I will choose other	15	16	5	1	0

	words with similar meanings instead.					
34	When I encounter something that cannot be expressed in a word, I will use a long sentence to explain it.	14	16	5	2	0
35	I will use conversation fillers such as "er" or "well" to win time for thinking.	5	17	14	1	0
36	When I encounter communication difficulties, I will ask the other party to repeat or reorganize the language.	8	17	9	3	0

Based on the results presented in the tables, we can address the research questions and draw conclusions as follows:

The outcomes of the study that concern the level of **sociolinguistic competence of students of Biotechnical Sciences** suggest that most of the participants possess a high level of sociolinguistic competence. They were confident about their ability to regulate the communicative means to the communication context and to the relational variables of age, gender, identity, power, and closeness of the co-participants. This suggests that participants possess the ability to adapt their language use to various social and cultural contexts, which is essential for effective intercultural communication. Regarding the extent of the **discourse competence in intercultural communication of the students at the Faculty of Biotechnical Sciences**, the findings reveal variability in participants' levels. A sizable number of participants were neutral regarding their ability to pick a suitable topic when interacting with individuals from other cultures, and to maintain the conversation without encountering any complications. This points to the idea that while some of the participants may be self-assured in their ability to engage in intercultural communication, others may define obstacles when it comes to choosing what kind of topic and how to communicate seamlessly across cultures. In as far as the use of **communication strategies as a way of handling possible intercultural communication barriers**, the participants reported moderate to high strategic focus. They explained the strategies like replacing certain word; speaking more formally; using the extra 'thinking words' which help gain thinking time. However, some of the participants also noted tendency to avoid certain topics where they felt less prepared to contribute. This suggests that while they employ strategies effectively in many contexts, additional support may help build their confidence to engage fully across a wide range of topics.

DISCUSSION

While the findings of this study provide valuable insights into the sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence of higher education students regarding the intercultural communication, it is important to acknowledge the broader implications of these findings. One of the specific implications is the social aspect or the awareness of sociolinguistic differences in relation to different cultures. With regard to these findings, it can be stated that intercultural competence is valuable in interpersonal communication since it encompasses individuals'

capacity to vary language when interacting with different cultures and communities. In addition, the findings also contributed to the existing knowledge of the nature of discourse competence in intercultural communication. Although there were several participants who displayed clear competence in engaging at the pragmatic level of structuring communication and co-constructing context across cultures, there were those who reported either marginal or mixed competence when it came to the selection of topics to discuss or the interpersonal management of communication. This implies that the discourse competence is influenced by multiple factors across contexts, highlighting the importance of providing students with structured opportunities for explicit instructions and practical engagement in intercultural communication. Thus, by nurturing students' discourse competence, instructors can assist them in assuming more competent positions in dealing with interlocutors from a different culture in communication. Also, the impact of strategic competence in mediating linguistic factors and soft power in the field of intercultural communication is also discussed in the study. Even though participants demonstrated a strong tendency to employ communication strategies such as paraphrasing and clarification requests, some indicated a tendency to remain silent or avoid topics in which they felt linguistically challenged. While many actively utilized these strategies, others expressed hesitation, often avoiding topics they felt less prepared to discuss. This tendency should not necessarily be viewed as a weakness but rather as an opportunity for growth, highlighting the need for targeted training that equips students with the confidence and tools to engage more seriously across various intercultural scenarios.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations that may impact the generalizability and scope of its findings. To begin with, the relatively small sample size (37 participants) may limit the applicability of the results to a broader population. Future studies with larger and more diverse sample sizes are needed to enhance generalizability. Second, the use of self-reported measures in the form of questionnaires introduces may introduce some subjectivity, as participants might provide responses they perceive as favorable rather than fully reflective of their actual competencies. To enhance data reliability in future research, it would be beneficial to integrate some interviews as well. Third, this study was limited to students enrolled at the Faculty of Biotechnical Studies at UKLO- Bitola, North Macedonia. Consequently, the findings may not be directly applicable to students from other academic disciplines or professional contexts. Comparative studies across other faculties or institutions could yield a broader understanding of ICC. Finally, the study focused exclusively on three components of ICC- strategic, discourse and sociolinguistic competencies. Other critical aspects in the scope of the ICC such as intercultural knowledge, skills, awareness and attitudes are a subject of separate study. This supplementary nature of the study narrows its range but provides valuable insights into specific competencies.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Further on, it's of an utmost importance to expand on the results of this study and analyze more aspects of intercultural communicative competence. Investigating the personality traits or cultural backgrounds when shaping the individuals' ICC, is the very first option. Having the opportunity to examine how individual differences interact with sociolinguistic, discourse, and

strategic competence, researchers can gain knowledge about the factors that contribute to effective intercultural communication. Additionally, exploring the transferability of ICC across different contexts and cultures would be valuable. Cross-cultural comparisons could shed light on how individuals' ICC evolves over time and adapts to changing socio-cultural contexts, offering important insights into the three competencies within ICC among young adults. To address these implications, the following activities may be considered as practical and necessary. Implementing role-playing scenarios or case studies that encourage students to adapt their communication to various conversational settings, including age, gender, and power dynamics, to strengthen the sociolinguistic competence. To enhance the discourse competence, educators may consider developing workshops focused on topic selection and conversation management, emphasizing conversational flow and addressing misunderstandings in intercultural contexts. Finally, to improve strategic competence, practical training in paraphrasing, using conversation fillers, and employing clarification requests through real-world or simulated intercultural communication practice, should be encouraged. By addressing these future research directions, this study offers a pathway for developing more inclusive and culturally responsive communication practices.

CONCLUSION

Conclusively, this study provides an examination of sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence within the context of intercultural communication. Analyzing participants' responses, the author provided valuable insights into their abilities to handle the cultural differences in communication and implement effective communication strategies. Considering the implications and future research directions outlined in the discussion, the author and the readers can continue to advance the understanding of ICC and contribute to the development of more inclusive and culturally responsive communication practices in educational and professional settings.

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