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New perspectives in intercultural competence and cultural inclusion of students: a case study of international students in the US

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present the way international students in the USA utilize their multilingual and multicultural background in order to communicate in daily life and how they adapt to their new environment.

In this presentation, we look into the students' social, cultural, and linguistic perceptions of their practices and we demonstrate how they comprehend the significant role that their multicultural and multilingual background plays in their everyday life. The question we try to answer is how international students develop an intercultural competence through the challenges of their educational and cultural encounters.

We argue that international students - in a world that is increasingly interconnected through global migrations - exercise their multicultural and multilingual competences along a fluid continuum between their cultural and linguistic repertoire in order to communicate effectively in different social, cultural and domain-specific contexts. We also find responses to questions about how they perceive the asset of having several languages and cultures in their repertoires and the issues they face as international students in adapting themselves in a different culture and way of life.

By employing both a quantitative and a qualitative approach in this research to analyze the students' responses to the questionnaires, this article provides critical insights on intercultural competence of international students and the principles of the day-to-day management of their cultural encounters in an immersive environment.

Keywords: cultural inclusion, intercultural competence, multilingualism, perceptions

1. Introduction

This paper is the result of a research conducted at The University of Akron, Ohio, in order to look into international students' social, cultural, and linguistic perceptions of their practices and demonstrate how they comprehend the significant role that their multicultural and multilingual background plays in everyday life. The question we try to answer is how these students develop an intercultural competence through the challenges of their educational and cultural encounters. We argue that international students - in a world that is increasingly interconnected through global migrations - exercise their multicultural and multilingual competences along a fluid continuum between their cultural and linguistic repertoires in order to communicate effectively in different social, cultural and domain-specific contexts. We also try to find responses to questions about how they perceive the asset of having several languages and cultures in their repertoires, and the issues they face as international students in adapting themselves to a different culture and way of life.

2. Theoretical background and methodology

We believe that intercultural competence is an alternative view for changing action and beliefs. Mill proposes that this is important when different ways of living exist, just as it is useful when different opinions are expressed. Mill suggests that “just as it is useful that there be differing opinions, it is good for there to be different lifestyles and that every allowance be made for diverse characters provided they do not harm one another” (Mill, 1990:49).

This paper provides a reflection on the experience and practices of international students who are developing an intercultural competence through the challenges of educational and cultural encounters in the country they study.

Through data, we also present how the development of intercultural awareness can be seen through Mill’s model, as:

- ◆ A positive perception of difference: As long as we have a negative perception of difference, as a state of tension between different beliefs and not as a source of enrichment for us all, we will not be able to achieve the democratic goal of respect for diversity of cultures and people. Out of a fear of being different, we sometimes seek homogeneity in our personal beliefs, which guarantees legitimacy and helps us avoid vulnerability. However, this fervent attempt to avoid vulnerability weighs down on us in our daily lives, because as we are trying to hide our uniqueness we end up restricting the free development of our personalities.
- ◆ Identification through diversity: The culture of a given society consists of “all that one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members” (Bennett, 1999), but this “acceptable” manner takes on a new perspective in intercultural competence. What is acceptable in our home society is not acceptable in another context (as the American society where the international students live and study).

The basic premise of the paper states that, because of “the presence of the social dimension in each individual’s mind” (Descombes, 1995), students who leave their country in order to study in a different one through the challenges of everyday life become intercultural people who can bring changes to society. This happens through an examination of the preconceptions of their culture and the culture of the new country they live in and through an exploration of their beliefs which may or may not be different from the beliefs of those in the other country.

As Byram emphasizes, the development of intercultural competence has to lead to a critical cultural awareness. When such change “takes hold and becomes incorporated into the person’s sense of themselves, a step towards being an intercultural person has been taken (in Alfred, Byram, Fleming, 2007). The intercultural competence can be accomplished through possibilities that emerge from the acknowledgement that diversity is a fundamental human asset.

In employing a quantitative and qualitative methodology in this research through questionnaires, this article answers some questions and provides a study on the perceptions of international students and their day-to-day management of their encounters in an immersive environment.

The questions we try to answer are:

- What are the perceptions of international students concerning their new cultural and educational environment?
- How do they adapt to this new environment?
- How do they develop an intercultural competence through the challenges of their educational and cultural encounters?
- Are there any statistically significant links between the perceptions and the variables of this research (age, time of stay, sex, ethnic/national origin)?

The questionnaire (appendix) includes Likert-scale questions and closed questions (single coded ranking and multiple-choice) which have been treated with the SPHYNX statistical program. The open-ended questions have been treated with qualitative methods of discourse analysis.

2.1. The population of the research

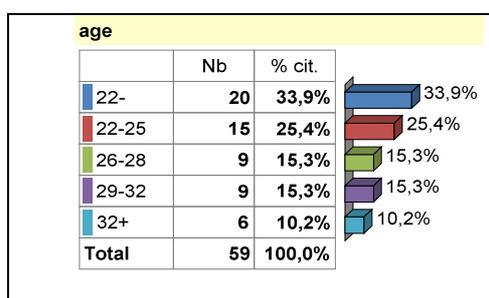
The subject population of this research comprises international students who have lived in the USA for one to four years. We targeted 100 responses after having distributed more than 450 questionnaires to international students at The University of Akron. This research is in progress as out of the 100 responses only 60 have been analyzed statistically to date. In our sample population of 100 international students, 25 different national origins have been identified (Table 1).

Table 1: Origin of the students

India	Venezuela	China	Libya	Shri Lanka
Germany	Ethiopia	Nepal	Turkey	Saudi Arabia
Russia	Mexico	Iran	Ghana	Taiwan
Romania	Colombia	Vietnam	Turkmenistan	Brazil
Timor Leste	Guinea	S. Korea	Bangladesh	

All the students are multilingual people and speak two, three or sometimes more languages. They are between 22 and 32+ years old as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: The students' ages



Our sample population includes more men than women: Men, 81.4%, Women, 18.6%. This may be attributed to the fact that most of the responses we received were from the College of Engineering (58.3%) and the College of Business Administration and fewer from the College of Arts and Sciences.

The analyzed responses of these 60 students show that 25 students have been in the US less than one year, 20 between one and two years, and 15 for more than three years.

3. Data analysis and results

Within the framework of this research we examined how the students self-evaluate their English skills. We noticed that most of the international students feel less confident when it comes to their writing skills and that this is independent of their time of stay in the US: By cross-referencing their answers with the years of study in Akron, we found no statistically significant difference between these two variables. On the contrary, most of the students seem more confident about their listening skills, as presented in Table 3, below.

Table 3: Self-evaluation of the students concerning their skills in English

english skills writing	Nb.cit.	Fréq.	english skills reading	Nb.cit.	Fréq.
excellent	19	31,7%	excellent	10	16,7%
very good	19	31,7%	very good	25	41,7%
good	21	35,0%	good	24	40,0%
TOTAL OBS.	60		TOTAL OBS.	60	

english skills speaking	Nb.cit.	Fréq.	english skills listening	Nb.cit.	Fréq.
excellent	18	30,0%	excellent	23	38,3%
very good	22	36,7%	very good	24	40,0%
good	19	31,7%	good	12	20,0%
TOTAL OBS.	60		TOTAL OBS.	60	

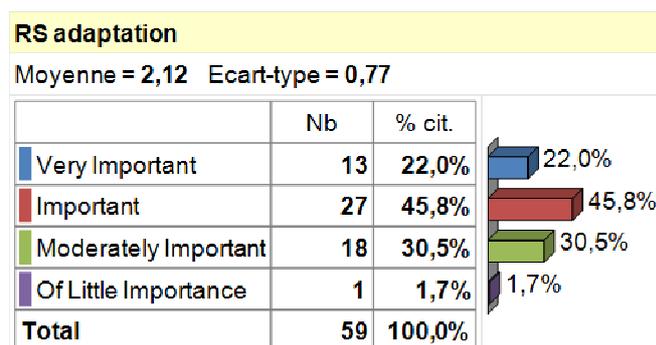
Clearly, the students' main objective when they go abroad to study is to succeed in their studies and in order to do so they have to develop the type of intercultural competence that opens individuals from a given culture to individuals of another culture. This competence involves certain aptitudes for the students concerned, in particular:

1. The aptitude to use behaviour strategies which enable them to adapt to cultural differences.
2. The aptitude to analyze, at the moment of intercultural contact, the difficulties which may arise during this interaction as a result of cultural differences.
3. The aptitude to view their own behaviour as determined by the cultural group to which they belong, and to be conscious of the relativity of their perception of reality.

With regard to the first point of aptitudes which is adaptation, we present here the views of the students on adaption in a new culture. 40 out of the 60 students believe that is very important or important to adapt themselves in their new environment, while only 19 students

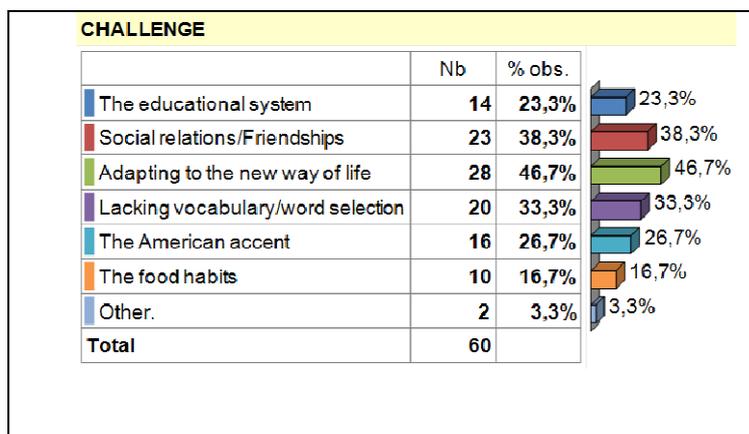
find it moderately important. We have no data for the behaviour strategies they use to adapt to the new culture, so far.

Table 4: Adaptation to the new culture



With regard to the second point of the aptitudes which is how students face difficulties, the students tell us about the challenges they had to face when in interaction with the new culture. Nearly half of them (46.7%) argue that their biggest challenge is to adapt to the new social and educational environment and more precisely to have friends and a social life. Table 4 hereunder gives us an analytical view of the students' challenges.

Table 5: What is the biggest challenge?



No statistically significant difference has been confirmed between the answers of the students and the variables we cross-referenced as age, time of stay in the new country and sex. (SPHYNX statistic program Chi2) :

- Age (the dependence is not significant. $\chi^2 = 5,99$, $ddl = 10$, $1-p = 18,35\%$.)
- Time of stay (the dependence is not significant.. $\chi^2 = 10,17$, $ddl = 15$, $1-p = 19,14\%$.)
- Sex (the dependence is not significant.. $\chi^2 = 7,63$, $ddl = 5$, $1-p = 82,19\%$.)

Concerning the third point and the aptitude to view their own behaviour as determined by the cultural group to which they belong and to be conscious of the relativity of the perception of reality, change of perception cannot be radical. In order to assure continuity the individual's views change progressively, because the fundamental role of views is to secure one's development without violent ruptures in one's identity. Positive attitudes can progressively turn into negative perceptions of difference or the inverse.

Students have a generally positive attitude when they first come to the US. When we ask them: What impressed you the most when you came to the United States? , Their responses are mostly enthusiastic:

“People are very friendly in US and being international in this country does not make you feel alone compare with other countries in the worlds. Also, I impressed by the level of religious believes among major population of this country.”

29 years old, male, Iranian, 3 years in the US.¹

“In general, Ohio's resident are so friendly and their life rhythm is so organized and clear. Especially, the governmental sector is very neat, classified and soothe pattern. Rarely, facing an uncivilized person in Ohio.”

32 years old, male, Saudi Arabian, more than 3 years in the US

“The people here are more expressive about what they feel and think. Students especially in class are given more freedom to ask questions or give their input. The relationship between professor and student is more friendly and warm.”

24 years old, female, Indian, 1.5 year in the US

¹ We kept the formulation of their answers even if the English is not correct in some of them, in order to not change their words.

“Grades are not published publicly. / People do not interfere in other's lives; neither do they judge anyone for their choices.”

23 years old, female, Indian, 6 months in the US

“The linguistic diversity in this country, due to the many foreigners that come here to study, work or travel.”

24 years old, male, Brazilian, more than 6 months in the US

Positive attitudes are easily adopted when you start a new life. International students begin with a high level of optimism known as the “honeymoon phase”. The newly arrived students (for those that are 3 years in the US we base our assumption that this is how they felt when they arrived) are excited to be in the US and find everything impressive, as the views of the students above demonstrate.

Concerning the question about cultural differences it seems that international students have difficulties to accept some aspects of the American culture, more specifically when they compare these aspects with their native culture.

“What do you believe is the biggest difference between your native culture and the American one?”

“Many people are resentful of foreigners and are pretty bad at hiding that resent. People are too busy showing off their worldly goods to find time for real family, friendship.”

32 years old, from Turkey, male, more than 5 years in the US.

“The big difference between my native culture and American culture are friends. How hard I try I cannot make an American my best friend because Americans have thoughts about Arabs.”

2 years old, from Saudi Arabia, male, more than 3 years in the US

“Here is emphasized on individual, whereas the culture I came from is more collective or group.”

39 years old, from Timor Leste, female, 1 year in the US

“In my culture we are caring of the social life and our relationship with each other. However in USA they don't have a social life like us. But, sometimes it's headache i mean the social life.”

32 years old, from Jordan, male, 2 years in the US

“Here it is hard to have help when you need. In my country my whole family will stand with me when I have a problem.”

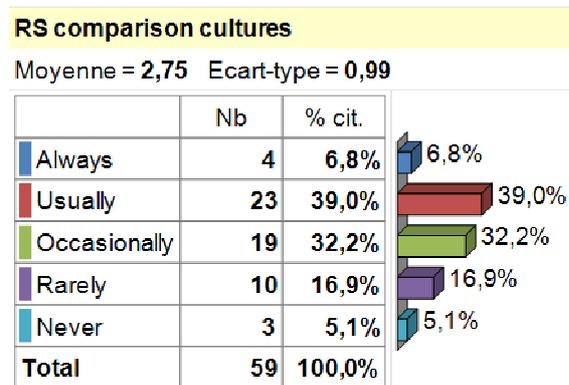
23 years old, from S. Korea, male, 6 months in the US

“Being joint to the family even in very old ages is more popular in my native culture.”

26 years old, from China, 4 years in the US

The answers of the students might be interpreted as a negative feedback of American culture when they are led to compare the new culture with their native one. Most of the students compare in everyday life (usually: 23 students and occasionally 19 students) the two cultures. But as we mentioned before, international students do not limit themselves to comparison. Instead it seems to us that they want (table 4) and believe that in order to adapt themselves to their new culture they have to make conscious choices about ways to extend their adaptation and to understand that respect for diverse lifestyles would make it possible “to let each man live as he sees fit rather than force him to live as others see fit” (Mill, 1990:79).

Table 6: Comparing the two cultures



The statements of the students presented in this paper (if we take informants’ claims for the truth) seem to confirm their aptitude in using diverse behaviour strategies which enable them to adapt to cultural differences. Most of them say that it is very important to adapt but (i) every person may have a different idea of what adapting to a new culture means, and (ii) what they say they think it is important and what they actually do might be a different story. However all students seem to develop the intercultural competence because of the choices

they make and because of the way they interact within their new environment. International students - in a world that is increasingly interconnected through global migrations - exercise their multicultural and multilingual competences along a fluid continuum between their cultural and linguistic repertoires in order to communicate effectively in different social, cultural and domain-specific contexts.

4. Conclusion

The results of the research presented in this paper lead us to conclude that students' answers generate a reflection which can contribute to a better understanding of what being an intercultural person means. Discovering by themselves other realities is the goal of intercultural competence. The students' answers demonstrated that they are able to acquire new knowledge and face new challenges as a result of communication and interaction with their new environment. As Byram writes, one could say that intercultural competence, "among other things, involves everyone developing a position to accommodate the other person's 'otherness' and to adopt a constructive and knowledgeable attitude towards it" (Byram, 2008: 55).

Our hypothesis that perceptions of the students are related to age, sex and time of stay has not been verified. The perceptions of the international students vary a lot and there are not any statistically significant links between these perceptions and the variables of this research. It seems that adaptation depends more on a variety of other factors including possibly previous experiences, learning styles, cognitive thinking, but do not include age, sex or time of stay in the new country.

Individuals largely live in and through structures. These structures, and the rules by which they function, establish how much they value cultural diversity in society. The experiences of international students expand their capacity for intercultural dialogue in and between all individuals of different cultures not only in the framework of their studies but in what they can become together in their everyday life. The international students I have researched adapt themselves to their new environment and they are knowledgeable, reflective learners and intercultural individuals.

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APPENDIX

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. How old are you? Sex : Female Male Origin.....

2. What is your native language?

<input type="checkbox"/>	English	<input type="checkbox"/>	Italian
<input type="checkbox"/>	French	<input type="checkbox"/>	Spanish
<input type="checkbox"/>	Arabic	<input type="checkbox"/>	Hindi
<input type="checkbox"/>	Russian	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other:

3. How many languages do you speak (even if not fluently, please list them)

4. How many years have you been in the US? What do you study?

Art Engineering Humanities Sciences Business

other.....

5. Are you taking (or have taken) any English Language courses in the US? Yes

No

6. Would you assess your English skills?

	<i>Writing</i>	<i>Reading</i>	<i>Speaking</i>	<i>understanding</i>
excellent				
very good				
good				

7. What is/was the biggest challenge when coming to the US (you can check up to two items):

<input type="checkbox"/>	The educational system
<input type="checkbox"/>	Social relations/ Friendships

	adapting to the new way of life
	lacking vocabulary / word selection
	The american accent
	The food habits
	Other:

8. Please read the following statements and give us your opinion:

a. A language can be spoken well only if it is learned at a young age.

Strongly agree *agree* *don't know* *disagree* *strongly disagree*

b. Being bilingual/multilingual means to have a very good speaking, understanding, reading, and writing in two or more languages:

Strongly agree *agree* *don't know* *disagree* *strongly disagree*

c. When I learn English I compare it (translate, find similarities or differences...) with my native language:

Very Frequently *Frequently* *Occasionally* *Rarely* *Never*

d. Being able to adapt to the American culture and way of life is:

Very Important *Important* *Moderately Important* *Of Little Importance*

e. I compare my culture with the American one:

Always *Usually* *Occasionally* *Rarely* *Never*

f. Having a different language and culture is a disadvantage when living in the US:

Strongly agree *agree* *don't know* *disagree* *strongly disagree*

9. What impressed you the most when you came to the USA (from a cultural or linguistic point of view)

10. Can you give an example of what you believe is the biggest difference between your native culture and the American one?

11. How often do you use your native language?

Very Frequently *Frequently* *Occasionally* *Rarely* *Never*

12. I use the following language when : (If you use both, please check both columns)

	English	Mother tong
Shopping list		
Write on Facebook/ Twitter		
Take notes during a course		
Texting friends		
Texting family members		
Other.....		

13. Please give us a writing sample of any of the above (3-4 lines). You can copy-paste something you have posted, or written.

THANK YOU FOR ANSWERING!