



## **Focusing on Intercultural Communication through English: An Analysis of Learners' Responses**

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### **Abstract**

*The global role of English as a primary means of intercultural communication has highlighted the need to develop intercultural competences in language learners. The more learners are able to see that different cultures represent equally legitimate ways of looking at the world, the higher is the chance for them to act like intercultural citizens. Based on these premises, the study will attempt to explore the relationship between language and culture from a cultural and intercultural perspective. Secondly, the intercultural nature of English will be highlighted in the attempt to identify which factors are more likely to contribute to successful intercultural communication. In the specific, the study will analyse the attitudes of two groups. The first sample is composed of students belonging to different first language backgrounds, mainly non-native speakers of English studying in a non-target language environment, the University of Calabria (South of Italy). The second sample is made up of both native and non-native English speakers studying in target-language environments, Chicago Loyola University (USA) and University of Alberta (Canada) where English is not only the main means of communication but also the main medium of academic instruction. An online link to a questionnaire was sent via email to all participants and was used as a research instrument to collect quantitative data. In particular, the study will investigate whether exposure to non-native English and familiarity with multicultural academic communities, leads participants to manifest more or less positive attitudes towards the relation between culture and language and the factors facilitating or hindering intercultural communication.*

**Keywords:** *Intercultural communication, language and culture, non-native varieties of English.*

### **1. Introduction**

The present study will address students' perceptions towards culture and intercultural communication. It is a follow-up of a previous study which attempted to explore the relationship between language and culture from a cultural and intercultural perspective. In the former study, the perspective of a group of international students studying at the University of Calabria (Italy) was analysed, assuming that international students belonging to different linguistic and cultural backgrounds are likely to use ELF as the major medium of intercultural communication. Consequently, it was decided to continue and expand the analysis with a larger sample in order to identify similarities or differences between different groups and gain further insights into participants' attitudes towards the factors affecting intercultural communication and the extent to which culture impacts on intercultural understanding. The present study will try to understand, in the specific, which group of students, displays more or less awareness of the relation between culture and language as well as of the factors which may impact on successful intercultural communication. Studies reveal positive correlations between prior exposure to non-native English speech and greater tolerance of it, as exposure to non-native accents and speech has been shown to reduce stereotyping and linguistic bias. In other words, students who had contacts with non-native English speech showed more positive perceptions of the speakers and greater comprehension of their speech [6]. Hopefully, investigation into the impacts of exposure to non-native English speech will be helpful in designing effective interventions or trainings for both students and teachers.

### **2. Method**

#### **2.1 Participants and settings**

The study investigates two groups of participants. Group 1 includes 168 students belonging to different first language backgrounds, studying in a non-target language environment, the University of Calabria (Italy). Among them, 153 respondents stated to be non-native speakers of English. An online link to a questionnaire was sent via email, in the case of Calabria University (Italy), to all international



students with the support of the international relations office of the university. The link was emailed along with a letter which explained the objective of the study and the main reasons for involving the students. Contact details of the researcher were provided for any further question, doubt or clarification that was felt necessary from the participants. The second group, is composed of 58 respondents, who were all studying in target-language environments. The questionnaire was administered to participants from the Modern Languages and Literatures department, minoring in Italian American Studies, at Chicago Loyola University (U.S.A.), and from Social Studies Department at Alberta University (Canada). Out of 58 students who responded, 18 stated to be non-native English speakers and 40 native English speakers. They were reached through their academic lecturers which had already been contacted and informed about the study purposes. After accepting to support the study, the lecturers were required to forward the link to their students in class and inform them about the overall objectives. The survey meant to ensure anonymity so that students did not feel any pressure when reporting their answers. The first set of data was collected in the period of January/February 2020, the second set was collected in the period of March/May 2021.

## **2.2 Research approach and instruments**

To examine students' attitudes, a quantitative design was employed. An online questionnaire was designed and administered to the participants via email. The questionnaire was based on a study by Baker [1] and adapted from his case study in Thailand. The first part is a preliminary/general information section aimed at identifying students' language background and experiences. The second section of the questionnaire aimed at investigating students' awareness of the relation between language and culture. They were encouraged to reflect on the role of culture on communication in order to find out whether they agree or disagree with the idea that to communicate effectively in different cultural settings you need to have an understanding of the relationship between language and culture. The survey specifically addresses in the final 7 questions, the factors which may facilitate successful intercultural communication.

Respondents were required to record their responses on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree.

- Culture and language are closely linked.
- Language is culture.
- A language represents a specific culture with its world views, values and beliefs.
- The English language is linked to English culture only.
- Cultures and specific languages can be separated (for example, the English language can be separated from British culture).
- In multicultural settings, negotiation strategies (confirmation checks, clarification requests, paraphrasing, repetitions, code-mixing and so on), contribute to achieve effective communication in English.
- English used in multicultural settings enables speakers to share their different cultures.
- In order to communicate effectively, it is important to understand the influence of culture on communication.
- In order to communicate effectively, it is necessary to know the culture of the people you are communicating with.
- Knowing about the way other non-native English speakers use English.
- Knowing about the culture of the non-native English speakers you are communicating with.
- Knowing about the culture of native English speaking countries.
- Having a native-like pronunciation.
- Using correct native-like grammar.
- Knowing about the relationship between language and culture.

## **2.3 Research design**

American and Canadian universities are known to promote globalization and welcome staff who are Non-Native English Speakers (NNEs) [5]. For many students, classes at universities are their first major exposure to people from other countries and to non-native speech [7 p.141]. The purpose of the study will be to investigate whether higher exposure to non-native varieties of English and more direct involvement in multicultural academic communities where English is not only the main means of



communication but also the main medium of academic instruction, leads participants to manifest more or less positive attitudes towards the relation between culture and language and the factors facilitating or hindering intercultural communication. The hypothesis is that being the second group of students more exposed to non-native English and to multicultural contexts compared to the first, it may be more willing to accommodate intercultural misunderstandings and more aware of the issues affecting successful intercultural communication.

## 2.4 Data analysis and discussion

Data analysis of the questionnaire was conducted by using SPSS version 26 which included descriptive statistics, tabulations of responses, percentages and mean scores. Before analysing and interpreting the data, the limitations of the study must be identified. The analysis and findings do not aim to be comprehensive or to draw any definitive conclusions at the present stage having relied on statistical procedures exclusively. The analysis has meant to investigate comparison of mean scores in two sample groups, group 1 and group 2. The objective was to identify similarities or differences between learners' responses in terms of attitudes. Being the sum of the sample considered larger than 100, a two tailed normal distribution Z was applied ( $H_0: \mu_1 = \mu_2$ , versus  $H_1: \mu_1 \neq \mu_2$ ,  $\alpha = 0,05$ ,  $Z_{\alpha/2} = +/- 1,96$ ) [2] and statistically significant differences observed, as table 2 shows. From the analysis, it emerges that mean scores are higher for the second group especially when surveyed about the factors which facilitate intercultural communication.

As shown in table 1 and 2 below, questions 10 and 11 (*Knowing about the way other non-native English speakers use English* and *Knowing about the culture of the non-native English speakers you are communicating with*) present higher mean scores in the second group (4.15 and 4.15) compared to the first group (mean scores 3.5 and 3.6). In these cases statistical significant differences are revealed from the analysis as shown in table 3 below. Moreover, questions 8, *In order to communicate effectively it is important to know the influence of culture on communication* and question 9, *In order to communicate effectively it is necessary to know the culture of the people you are communicating with*, both present higher means in group 2 (4.12; 4.12) compared to group 1 (3.91; 3.6). In question 9, a statistical significant difference is observed. These results highlight the participants' positive attitudes towards the need of engaging with their interlocutors' different cultures when intercultural interaction takes place and the crucial role culture plays on communication. This idea is reinforced in question 1, *Culture and language are closely linked*, with mean scores of 4.41 (group 2) and 3.94 (group 1) which also reveal a statistical significant difference as shown in the table below. In general terms, respondents from group 2 seem to show higher tolerance of the way non-native speakers use English in interaction which is likely to be considered an important factor to achieve communication.

When surveyed about the relation between culture and language we observe the following results. Question 3, *A language represents a specific culture with its world views, values and beliefs*, presents, on the contrary, higher mean scores in group 1 (3.85) compared to group 2 (3.63). Although the question does not reveal statistical significant differences, it may suggest that students living in a non-target language environment, who have less opportunities to experience a real ELF communicative contexts are more likely to view languages as attached to specific national cultures which reflect those values and beliefs. The idea of languages as crossing borders and transcending well-defined cultures may be something they are not aware of, while empirical studies have largely highlighted that English as a lingua franca is "hybrid" and "de-territorialized", ELF transcends national borders and draws on cultural flows and multiple linguistic resources that are modified and recreated during interaction [3; 8; 9]. Moreover, participants from group 1 seem to be more aware that negotiating strategies (code-mixing, clarification requests, comprehension checks, paraphrasing and so on) used to achieve mutual understanding are helpful to negotiate meaning in intercultural interaction (question 6) and that English used in multicultural settings enables speakers to share their different cultures (question 7). In question 7 a significant difference is revealed from the analysis.

Significant differences are also observed in question 14, *Using correct native like grammar*, which presents slightly higher mean scores in the first group (3.7) compared to the second (3.3). Question 13, *Having a native-like pronunciation*, also reveals slightly higher scores in the first group (3.3) compared to the second (3.1), though no statistical significance is revealed in this last question. The data seem to suggest that for students who are more familiar with intercultural-oriented environments, the use of standard British/American grammar or native pronunciation is not considered a relevant factor in facilitating intercultural communication, Moreover, the idea that the English language is not linked to English culture only as in question 4, again presents slightly higher mean scores in group 1 (2.2) as compared to group 2 (1.7) with a higher level of disagreement in group 2. In this particular



question, a statistical significant difference is observed. This result seems to support the previous view that higher learners' exposure to English in multicultural settings may lead to a greater awareness of the diversity of English as well as of its wider connections with a variety of geographical and cultural settings which transcend the British borders. In overall terms, the data seem to support the hypothesis that the second group of participants, being more exposed to multicultural communicative contexts where English is used in different non-native forms and for different communicative purposes, manifest more awareness of the impact interlocutors' cultures may have on achieving intercultural communication and the role non-native English may play in terms of promoting and facilitating mutual understanding.

Variables	Group1	Group 2
Q1	3,994	4,414
Q2	4,060	4,034
Q3	3,857	3,638
Q4	2,220	1,707
Q5	3,137	3,379
Q6	3,923	3,638
Q7	4,185	3,603
Q8	3,917	4,121
Q9	3,679	4,121
Q10	3,571	4,155
Q11	3,619	4,155
Q12	3,613	3,759
Q13	3,381	3,155
Q14	3,732	3,362
Q15	3,792	3,983

Table 1 Means calculated for the fifteen variables in the two groups

Group 1 N.=168	Group 2 N=58	For $\alpha=0,05$ , $z_{\alpha/2}=\pm 1,96$	
Q1	Q1	-3,2393	Reject H0
Q2	Q2	0,1574	Accept H0
Q3	Q3	1,3152	Accept H0
Q4	Q4	3,5568	Reject H0
Q5	Q5	-1,3742	Accept H0
Q6	Q6	1,9515	Accept H0
Q7	Q7	4,2175	Reject H0
Q8	Q8	-1,3832	Accept H0
Q9	Q9	-2,7058	Reject H0
Q10	Q10	-4,7191	Reject H0
Q11	Q11	-3,8658	Reject H0
Q12	Q12	-0,9205	Accept H0
Q13	Q13	1,3806	Accept H0
Q14	Q14	2,2866	Reject H0
Q15	Q15	-1,4084	Accept H0

Table 2 A two tailed normal distribution calculated for fifteen corresponding variables in the two groups



### 3 Conclusions

In overall terms, it can be concluded that though tentative and partial, the results analysed seem to suggest that, according to the participants, culture and language play an important role in enhancing intercultural communication. In other words, the data highlight that engaging with different cultures and different varieties of English may contribute to successful intercultural communication. In particular, results reveal that students, living and studying in real ELF contexts where English is the lingua franca for intercultural communication, seem to be more aware of non-native English use in intercultural communication and more willing to accept and embrace different forms of English. Studying how learners perceive intercultural communication issues may raise language teachers' awareness of the need to incorporate intercultural communication, which is often relegated to a «fifth» and last skill, after the other four: listening, reading, writing and speaking, have been covered [11]. Embracing intercultural communication in the classroom may open students new doors, encourage them to enlarge their perspectives and experiment what communication actually entails in the multifaceted English world where cultural diversity and unconventional language norms allow for new encounters and deeper understanding. It is believed that Intercultural communication should have a fundamental role in the language classroom as students do need to realize that English is the most widely used means of intercultural communication. As ELF studies have demonstrated [10] [4], the majority of interactions through English occur among non-native speakers of English who, by sharing their different cultures, successfully communicate their message across, although they use non-standard forms of English. It is therefore essential to provide our learners with a realistic and meaningful communicative model and with the necessary competence to function in diverse and changing cultural contexts which, most of the time, are far removed from the standard, native speaker model teaching materials present.

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