

E D I T O R I A L

Bridging Cultures: The Importance of Intercultural Communication at Universities

Universities today are vibrant hubs of cultural exchange, bringing together national and international students in an increasingly globalized academic landscape. With the rise of English Medium Education (EME), institutions are embracing new ways of teaching that go beyond traditional classroom methods, fostering an environment where diverse perspectives enrich learning.

However, effective intercultural communication remains a challenge. Differences in language proficiency, academic expectations, and social norms can create barriers that hinder

collaboration and mutual understanding. Universities **must take proactive steps to bridge these gaps** by promoting intercultural competence, encouraging peer interaction, and incorporating inclusive teaching strategies.

This edition of *Głos Politechniki* includes an interesting article prepared by Małgorzata Baczynska, M.A. on Intercultural Communication at universities. Katarzyna Matuszak, Ph.D. presents new ways of communicating at administrative level, while Edyta Olejarczuk, Ph.D. recommends a book on communication. Finally, Nuala Mederski, M.A. and I bring

some news from the Eunice4U perspective, where real intercultural communication begins.

Intercultural communication is no longer an optional skill; it is a necessity for success in a globalized world. By fostering meaningful dialogue and understanding, universities can prepare students for a future where collaboration across cultures is the key to innovation and progress.

Happy reading!
PUT Prof.

Liliana Szczuka-Dorna, Ph.D.

Intercultural communication in the EMI context

In an environment where the language of communication and instruction is English, and individual interlocutors represent various often very different cultural backgrounds, the knowledge of those

sometimes subtle cultural gaps may determine how successful or inauspicious a given conversation or instruction will be. Hence, the concept of intercultural communication is an indispensable element of EMI,

facilitating a flourishing educational experience.

Students consistently coming late for class, not to mention failing to meet all the assigned deadlines, the

all-pervading silence when the teacher opens a discussion but there is no volunteer to carry on the conversation, or a resentful student reacting to negative feedback even though it is provided constructively and politely - these are probably only some of the possible problems every academic teacher faces while dealing with international students. Quite naturally, both sides may take such situations personally, or at least make snap judgements that the student is negligent, dismissive or simply rude, and the teacher bossy, fastidious or intolerant. To make matters worse, if both sides do not tackle the situation subtly and with an open mind, the misjudgements, which may actually be derived from having different cultural backgrounds, will only intensify leading to a complete disaster, i.e. a demotivated and dissatisfied student and/ or teacher.

When dealing with international students, these are the teachers who, due to their life and academic experience, should take a much broader perspective on what is going on during class. An awareness of cultural differences does not necessarily lead to the perpetuation of stereotypes, but, on the contrary, means we do not look at others through the lens of our own culture. So, what are those elusive signals every academic teacher should pay attention to or be alarmed by?

First of all, make sure you are familiar with **the concept of time and deadlines** throughout cultures. In some cultures, time is perceived as more flexible, while in others it is a non-negotiable element of every

meeting or deadline. According to Pant (2016), 'Western cultures tend to view time as linear, with a definitive beginning and end.' Time is viewed as in limited supply, so Western people structure their lives, '[...] by milestones and deadlines.' Not surprisingly, if someone fails to meet a deadline, they are usually perceived as incompetent. The other extreme of the scale is occupied by those cultures treating time as cyclical and endless. It is more important to do things properly and in harmony rather than to worry about being on time (Pant, 2016). Following Pant (2016), 'in India, for instance, deadlines are viewed as "targets" to be met in the context of completing tasks [...] and the potential damage a delay would have on a particular relationship.' The **solution** is simple: talk to your students at the very beginning, ask them about their perception of time and explain how it works in your country. While emphasizing that meeting deadlines is important, try to appeal to students' values. As Pant (2016) observes, if in one culture having a good relationship is important, then accentuate how missing the deadline will destroy this relation. Also, use some visuals such as timelines to illustrate due dates.

Secondly, be aware of **direct and indirect communication styles**. Direct communicators have a tendency to say what they think, mostly interpreting words literally (Joyce, 2012). They usually represent low-context, more heterogeneous cultures, where clear communication is the key to success. Indirect communication observed in high-context cultures is usually richer in such elements as

context, silence or tone of voice. It definitely requires the skill of reading between the lines. **Solution:** while Western cultures usually give direct feedback, which may be perceived as harsh or even insulting by Eastern cultures, try to encourage students' open and honest communication. Depending on your students' cultural background, provide feedback in a culturally sensitive way, giving so-called 'sandwich feedback', i.e. positive feedback, then constructive criticism, followed once more by positive feedback.

Finally, if silence is the answer, then consider the idea of **power distance**. According to Hofstede, high power-distance cultures are usually reluctant to ask questions of or contradict a person in power, whereas low power-distance cultures, on the contrary, treat everybody equally and the society as such is less hierarchical. A perfect example of a high power-distance country is Russia and post-Soviet countries, while Scandinavian countries and the USA definitely represent the less hierarchical model. **Solution:** do not expect to change your students' approach. Try to provide a safe, friendly and open environment which encourages dialogue and critical thinking. Encourage your students to challenge your ideas.

These were just a few examples of the most common misunderstandings. The potential, however, is huge and only by being conscious of such challenges and addressing them patiently and peacefully, can you create an inclusive and supportive learning environment. So, as an EMI teacher, you should respect va-

rious perspectives, encourage open dialogue, and clearly communicate your expectations concerning assignments, projects, attendance etc. Consider broadening your knowledge of different teaching methods that take into account cultural differences, be open-minded and, most of all, create opportunities for your students to talk, interact and also learn about other cultures. It is in your hands.

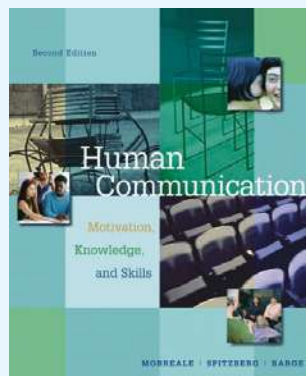
Malgorzata Baczynska, M.A.

Book review:

'Human Communication: Motivation, Knowledge, Skills'

by Sherwyn P. Morreale, Brian H. Spitzberg, J. Kevin Barge

2007 second edition,
2013 third edition



References:

1. Pant, Bhaskar, 2016. Different Cultures See Deadlines Differently, Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2016/05/different-cultures-see-deadlines-differently> (last access 25.01.2025)
2. Joyce Cynthia, 2012. The Impact of Direct and Indirect Communication. The University of Iowa, edition of the Independent Voice, the newsletter of the International Ombudsman Association.

3. <https://geerthofstede.com/culture-geert-hofstede-gert-jan-hofstede/6d-model-of-national-culture/> (last access 25.01.2025)

Have you ever wondered how human communication works? Or have you ever been in a situation when you were misunderstood by your students or colleagues at university? Was this because of cultural differences, non-verbal communication, or simply that the listener did not understand your joke? If your answer is positive in at least one of these cases, 'Human Communication: Motivation, Knowledge, Skills' by Sherwyn P. Morreale, Brian H. Spitzberg, and J. Kevin Barge is an excellent choice for you. The book features the collaborative work of recognized experts in the field of human communication and offers practical tips on how to communicate across cultures.

The book, published in 2007 by *Thomson Learning*, appears to be relevant for a wide audience including academic teachers, content teachers, and PhD students, as well as English as a Medium of Instruction courses offered to students in international settings.

The book is firstly divided into 5 parts – (1) Foundations of communication, (2) Interpersonal communication, (3) Small group communication, (4) Public speaking, and (5) Communication competence in a mediated world – and then further into 16 chapters, so that the reader may choose the particular sections he/she is interested in. What is more, at the end of each chapter, there is a 'Building Skills' section with hands-on tasks for individual work and group activities that help readers develop a framework for choosing communication messages that will allow them to act competently. One of the main strengths of this book is the accessible way it is written and the pleasant way it is designed, with a number of pictures and charts.

All in all, it is a clear, concise and comprehensive book covering the extremely interesting topic of human communication and cultural differences with plenty of food for thought.

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