

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS ON EASTERN AND CENTRAL EUROPEAN STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY. RESEARCH CONDUCTED IN ROMANIA, HUNGARY AND SLOVENIA

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Abstract: *The following study is meant to be an extension of and completion to a former research paper entitled "The Role of Foreign Language Teachers in Developing Students' Intercultural Communication Skills" concluding that students of the University of Oradea, Romania, generally lack intercultural sensitivity and it falls to a great extent to foreign language teachers to change this state of affairs. When the former study came up with proposals for methods of enhancing students' cultural awareness (see simulation games on cultural differences like Barnaga, BaFá BaFá, Randömia Balloon Factory and others), the present study focuses on an international comparison, though limited to only three academic institutions in three countries, regarding Eastern and Central European students' intercultural sensitivity. The initial idea was to see to what extent students of the University of Oradea, Romania, studying Economics, Medicine and Law dispose of intercultural skills. For this reason a Likert-type scale questionnaire was applied to more than 200 students of the above mentioned faculties. The survey was extended in the second round in Oradea, Romania, also to the Faculty of Environmental Protection and that of Electrical Engineering and Information Technology, respectively to an international level asking students of the University of Debrecen, Hungary and the University of Maribor, Slovenia, the same questions. Although we are aware of the limitations of present study, - only three institutions included in the research, having in Debrecen and Maribor less respondents than in Oradea and only from some fields of study, Slovenian students not getting a Slovenian version of the questionnaire, which may have influenced their level of understanding issues, responses not always being consistent - its results have still an informative value. They confirm the author's initial hypothesis that in spite of the extended international relations and travel opportunities Romanian students are not really aware of cultural diversity and its overwhelming impact upon people's behaviour, reactions and way of thinking. As to our surprise there are no better results with the other two nations either, specific measures are to be taken in this respect including not only valuable contribution of foreign language teachers - as proposed in the former study - but also curriculum change by incorporating some form of intercultural training, too.*

Keywords: intercultural communication competence; cultural differences; intercultural encounters; simulation games; curriculum change; intercultural training

1. Introduction

Since E.T. Hall, Hofstede (1991), Gesteland (1997) and others and due to their research and pragmatic work we know nowadays that cultural differences existing among nations cannot be neglected. Effective communication i.e. conveying a message as it was really meant by the sender depends to an equal measure both on linguistic and on intercultural competence. That includes not only knowledge about different cultural profiles and traits but the skills to handle them appropriately for the physical - referring to location -, social - referring to events-related expectations - and interpersonal context - pointing to one's expectations about people's behaviour depending on the relationship between them (see Lustig and Koester, 2010).

The current study is meant to be an extension of and completion to a former research paper entitled "The Role of Foreign Language Teachers in Developing Students' Intercultural Communication Skills" (Hamburg, A., 2014) concluding that students of the University of Oradea, Romania, generally lack intercultural sensitivity and it falls to a great extent to foreign language teachers to change this state of affairs. To take the over 200 students of Economics, Medicine and Law - 70-80 people from each field of study responding to a questionnaire - representative for the about 16,000 students of the above mentioned university, might seem too bold and unscientific, but we have serious reasons to suppose that the rest of the students, having even less experience of an internationalized medium than their mates studying subjects included in the former research, would not present better results regarding intercultural competence either. To confirm this supposition, for the present study we have applied the same questionnaire also to other two faculties of the University of Oradea, with help of teacher colleagues. The reason to choose the Faculty of Environmental Protection and that of Electrical Engineering and Information Technology lies in the fact that besides the Faculty of Economic Sciences and the Faculty of Medicine these two host the most incoming Erasmus students. Thus students studying there are most likely to have some international experience. The results of the extended survey in Romania will be presented in subchapter 2.1.

When the former study came up with proposals for methods of enhancing students' cultural awareness (see simulation games on cultural differences like Barnaga, BaFá BaFá, Randömia Balloon Factory and others), the present study focuses on an international comparison however limited to only three academic institutions in three countries regarding Eastern and Central European students' intercultural sensitivity. Being conscious of the limitations of the following research and the dimensions of the subject proposed, we consider the results and conclusions of present study only of illustrative and in no way of absolute value.

The other two institutions included in the research, the University of Debrecen, Hungary and the University of Maribor, Slovenia, were chosen partially due to the bilateral relations of the Faculty of Economic Sciences, University of Oradea - the author's institution of affiliation - to them. The other reason is to be found in the supposition that in an academic centre with so many international students as in Debrecen for instance, the results of the questionnaire should be different in a positive way.

2. Research Methodology

Both in Debrecen and Maribor students of the same three faculties (Faculty of Economic Sciences, Medicine and Law) as in Oradea were supposed to complete the questionnaire formerly applied to their Romanian colleagues. We reproduce below the questionnaire our research results of 2014 were based on distributed to 77 Economics, 88 Law, respectively 75 Medicine students of the University of Oradea, Romania, having foreign language classes in English, German and French.

Questionnaire

Please mark on a scale from **1** to **5** to what extent the following statements match your opinion. (1 means “not at all” and 5 stays for “to a great extent”).

1. There is a single condition so that people from different nations can communicate efficiently with each other and this is the knowledge of a common language.
2. Knowing the culture of a nation doesn't only mean knowing its history, art, literature and so on, but its set of beliefs, symbols, convictions, too.
3. People not having a personal/individual opinion of things and the world in general are indifferent, indolent and dispose of a limited intellectual capacity.
4. Not being punctual at meetings shows lack of education and indifference to one's partner.
5. In business life everywhere in the world primary goal is to develop good relationship with one's business partner.

Answer these 2 supplementary questions, please!

1. Have you ever spent more than 3 weeks in a foreign country? If yes, on what occasion?
2. Do you have personal contacts to foreign students (e.g. Erasmus students) at the faculty you are studying at or to foreigners in general in your private life? If yes, how often do you meet each other or how intense is your contact to them?

The first two statements intend to reveal awareness of cultural differences in general, while items three to five refer to specific cultural profiles. They were formulated by intention in such a way to reflect different views upon the world to avoid false positive or false negative answers induced by identification with one or another cultural profile. That's why we considered in case of items one, three, four and five total disagreement with the content of the statement (indicating values of 1 or 2), while with issue number two agreement with respective content (values of 4 or 5) to be a sign of intercultural sensitivity. The other way round, values at the

opposite end of the scale were proofs of unawareness of different cultural patterns. 3 being situated in the middle of the scale given to survey participants, persons indicating this value presented accordingly a moderate level of intercultural sensitivity.

2.1. Level of Intercultural Awareness with Students of the University of Oradea, Romania

Resorting to the results of the research paper published in 2014 one may conclude that Romanian students show irrespective of their field of study and surroundings a quite low level of intercultural awareness. The first question revealed awareness of cultural differences with merely about 12% of Economics, 8% of Law and only 7% of Medicine students. The second issue resulting in a surprisingly high level of intercultural sensitivity with all the three segments analysed might be attributed to a possible misunderstanding or misreading. With the last three items, students' reactions returned to a great extent to the levels of awareness registered in case of the first question, however showing quite an increase with question number 3.

The answer to the questions why for 26% of Economics students, 28% of Law, respectively 25% of Medicine students is quite normal not to have a personal opinion on things and why further 33% of Economics, 25% of Law and 35% of Medicine students show a relative understanding in this respect may be found in Romanian people's cultural profile. The fact that they adapt to a relatively great extent to collectivistic values is not as much a sign of intercultural sensitivity but much more cultural identification on their part. This seems to be confirmed by the results of the last two issues. There were signs of sensitivity or relative awareness with 18% respectively 14% of Economics, 11% respectively 13% of Law and 12% respectively 17% of Medicine students in case of question number 4 and the results concerning the last issue are quite similar.

The extended survey conducted in 2015 at the University of Oradea confirmed once more our supposition regarding Romanian students' awareness of cultural differences: students studying at the Faculty of Environmental Protection presented similarly low values of intercultural sensitivity as their colleagues at the faculties analysed in 2014. 10% of the 79 responding students proved to be sensitive to cultural matters according to their answer given to item number 1, this value is 28% with item number 3, 20% respectively 5% with the last two items. Regarding the second issue the same inconsistency or misunderstanding is to be observed in their case as with other students, too, as 59,5% of the respondents agreed to a great extent with the statement of the questionnaire revealing thus a quite high level of awareness of cultural differences. There is not much difference in the values obtained with engineering students: according to the answers given to item number 1 only 10% of the 60 respondents proved to be culturally sensitive, this value is 33,3% with issue number 3 and merely 20%, respectively 10% in case of the last two items. As 63% of the respondents presented high values of cultural awareness according to their reactions to issue number 2, it is almost sure they had misinterpreted or misread this item, too.

To offer a synthetic and visual overview of the results regarding Romanian students' intercultural competence (in the segment supposed to be compared at international level) we created the following chart.

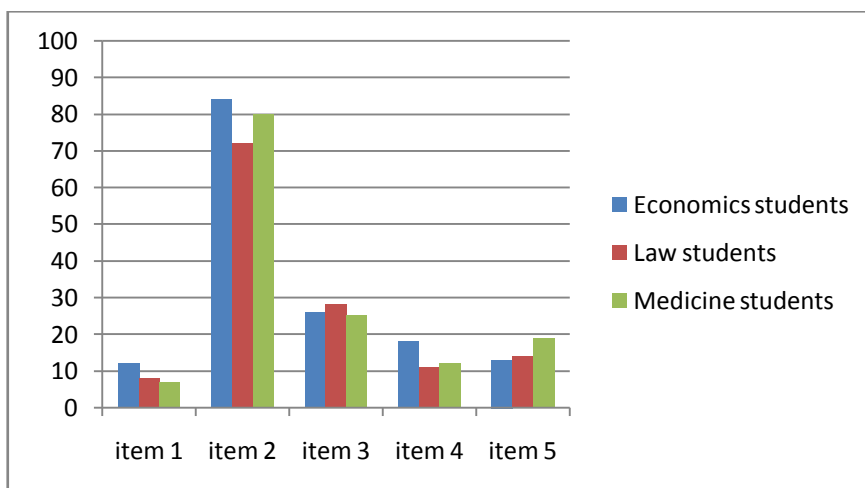


Figure 1: Ratio of the awareness of cultural differences with Economics, Law and Medicine students of the University of Oradea, Romania (data given in percents)
Source: own creation

Most surprising are the results in case of Medicine students where in spite of the possibly frequent encounters with international students no increase in Romanian students' intercultural awareness can be registered. This confirms once more our initial hypothesis of 2014, that in foreign language class it is not enough to teach/learn the respective language as real life encounters in a globalised world require from participants not just linguistic, but at least to an equal extent, intercultural competence as well. Furthermore, that unconscious experiencing of cultural differences is insufficient; the issue of their existence and importance must be raised in a conscious way.

2.2. Level of Intercultural Awareness with Students of the University of Debrecen, Hungary

The 88 Hungarian Law students taking part in the survey present in overall quite the same levels of intercultural sensitivity as their Romanian colleagues except for issues number 3 and 5 where their ratio of awareness of cultural differences was even lower than with Romanian students studying Law. The findings in case of item 3 i.e. Romanian Law students being more tolerant of people not expressing personal opinions could be the result of their cultural profile tending towards collectivistic values more than that of Hungarian people. The concrete figures to the 5 items are as follows. About 9% of the responding Law students presented signs of cultural sensitivity and further 19% some concern about it with issue number 1, while 70% seemed not to be aware of cultural differences. The values indicated for item number 2 - 67% culturally sensitive, 25% presenting moderate values and only 8% with no knowledge about cultural issues - are in strong dissonance with the former ones. A possible misreading of the assertion or the halo effect could be responsible for it. Item number 3 and 4 present with 13% respectively 11% similar levels of awareness of cultural diversity sinking with issue number 5 to merely 3.5%. A great part of responding Hungarian Law students - 56-56% with item number 3 and 4 and 78.5% with the last item - proves to be

culturally insensitive, while according to the scores given to the last three assertions 31%, 33% respectively 18% can be situated at medium levels of sensitivity. Based on the answers of the target group it can be generally stated that people with no experience abroad and no international encounters show a very low degree of cultural sensitivity, however almost 23% of the responding students being of the category mentioned before could still bring up some awareness of cultural diversity.

Economics students in Debrecen - 80 respondents - have surprisingly disproved our initial supposition as, in spite of the many international students studying at the faculty, they present in case of each item lower levels of cultural awareness than their Romanian counterparts. The values are 9%, 77.5% - the same possible misunderstanding may have intervened as in the cases before -, 15%, 7.5% and 0% versus the Romanian 12%, 84%, 26%, 18% respectively 14%. Their moderate values: 25% versus the Romanian 18% with item number 1, 20% with item number 2, 24% compared to the Romanian 33%, 27.5% versus the Romanian 14% and 12.5% compared to the Romanian 16% with the last three issues do not change much on the negative balance either. Except for item number 2 the level of unawareness of cultural diversity exceeds 60% with each issue culminating with the last item at 87.5%.

Through the prism of this there is no wonder that 25% of the responding students having had the experience of international encounters still presented low degrees of intercultural sensitivity, fact that reinforces once more the idea that intercultural matters have to be brought into the classroom on a conscious level.

Unfortunately we have no data regarding the Faculty of Medicine in Debrecen as we could not get their agreement to conduct the research with students studying there.

Based on the results obtained at the collaborating two faculties it seems that Hungarian students are even more ethnocentric than their Romanian counterparts. The following chart can give a synthetic overview upon our findings.

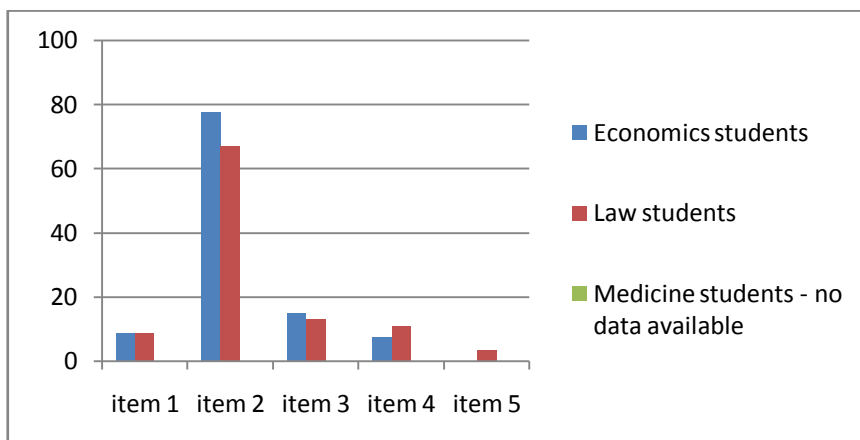


Figure 2: Ratio of the awareness of cultural differences with Economics and Law students of the University of Debrecen, Hungary (data given in percents)

Source: own creation

2.3. Level of Intercultural Awareness with Students of the University of Maribor, Slovenia

Unfortunately, data obtained from Maribor do not allow a complete comparison of the analysed segment either, as we only could apply the questionnaire at the Faculty of Economic Sciences. The 88 Slovenian Economics students participating in the survey presented in general higher values of intercultural sensitivity than Hungarian ones and quite similar rates to their Romanian colleagues. It is interesting however that their moderate values revealed at the five items are considerably higher than those observed in the case of Romanian Economics students. As a support of these statements let's see the concrete results to the issues of the survey. With only 4.5% of the respondents showing signs of cultural awareness, Slovenian students presented regarding item number 1 the lowest rate in the international comparison. 62.5% seemed to be completely unaware of cultural differences, while 33% of the subjects presented moderate values of intercultural sensitivity versus the Romanian rate of merely 18%. The potential misreading or misunderstanding in case of item number 2 experienced with the other participants of the survey have strongly influenced the Slovenian results, too. Thus the following distribution of rates is observable: 78% of the respondents indicated values of high, further 14% values of moderate awareness and 8% showed little understanding of cultural diversity. Inconsistence in handling the issues of the questionnaire is also valid for Slovenian students as their intercultural sensitivity shows a downward tendency from 23%, according to item number 3, to merely 19%, respectively 11% with the last two issues. The same decreasing trend is observable in the case of their moderate values from 37% with the third item to 27% with the last two statements. However, these values are still higher than Romanian ones – 33% (item number 3), 14%, respectively 13% (items 4 and 5). In parallel we notice a considerable increase in their level of intercultural insensitiveness. When in the case of item number 3 only 40% reacted as if not being aware of the existence of cultural differences, this value is 54% with item number 4 and 62% with the last issue. The following chart offers a synthetic overview upon our findings.

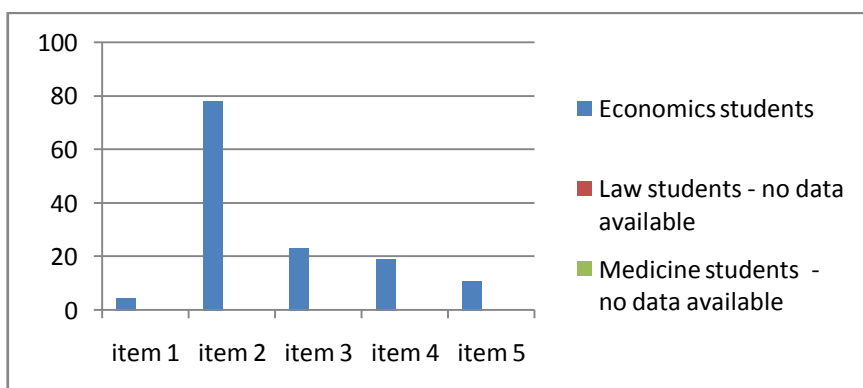


Figure 3: Ratio of the awareness of cultural differences with Economics students of the University of Maribor, Slovenia (data given in percents)

Source: own creation

An international synthetic comparison of the values analysed in our survey is outlined in the figure below.

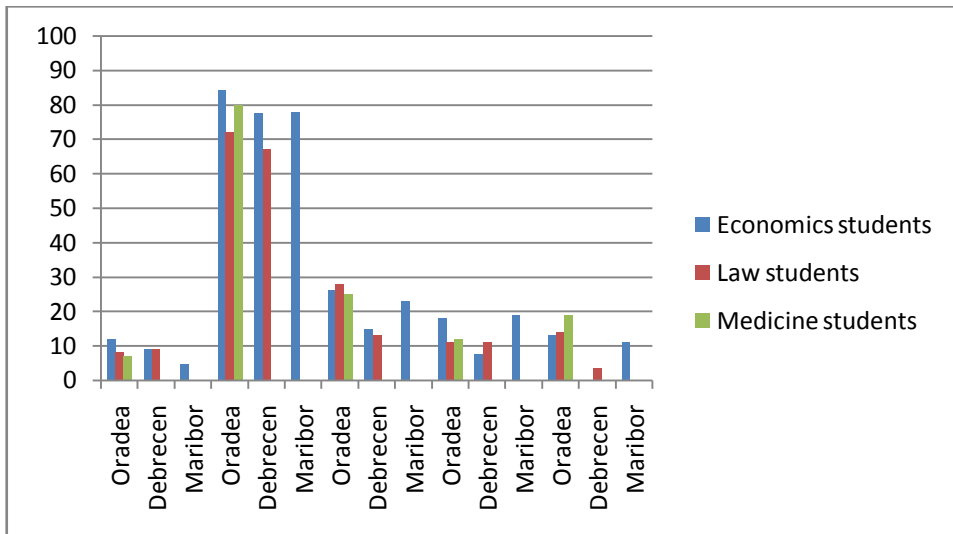


Figure 4: Levels of intercultural sensitivity among Economics, Law and Medicine students of the Universities of Oradea, Debrecen and Maribor included in the research (data given in percents)

Source: own creation

3. Conclusions and Perspectives

So far a kind of statistical overview upon present situation. The questions are what could be done to achieve positive changes in youth's intercultural competence and whose task is to do it? When dealing with intercultural issues developing skills necessary for effective intercultural interaction and adequate attitudes towards otherness often come too short opposite to knowledge about cultural differences, as in these areas outcomes are only in a medium to long term observable and much more difficult to achieve. Intercultural games can be of great help in this respect as they not only create awareness of cultural issues, but at the same time develop and train the skills of accepting, including, tolerating, collaborating, so necessary not only when experiencing intercultural encounters but in homogenous groups and domestic affairs, too. Besides those mentioned in previous research work - Barnga, Randömia Balloon Factory, BaFá BaFá, Ecotonos etc. - there are a lot of others with a broad applicability like, for instance, Yan-koloba, or Free time (see H. Spencer-Oatey and P. Franklin, 2009) as they develop everyday skills needed to an equal extent in private and school life, respectively in workplace situations.

Another measure would be introducing into the curricula, at least at academic level, a discipline dealing with intercultural issues. Should it be called intercultural training, intercultural skills development or whatever, its task should be to make changes at cognitive, attitudinal and competence level regarding cultural differences among people in the world. Thus, in the future it should not be the self-

imposed task of merely foreign language teachers to train their students' intercultural competence as they might themselves lack the right knowledge about cultural matters, the adequate attitude or necessary skills for dealing with them. Of course they could and should play an important role in developing and reinforcing students' intercultural skills at least regarding the cultural and linguistic domain they are activating in, but it should not be only their responsibility to assure students' future professional success on the "international playground".

As students of all the three nations included in the research presented lack of consistence in dealing with the five items of the questionnaire, indicating much higher values of cultural sensitivity with one item and much lower ones with others, it would be interesting to analyse the background of this phenomenon. Thus conducting semi- or unstructured interviews at least with part of the respondents - mainly with those giving inconsistent answers - would be a further step in increasing validity of the results obtained. Last but not least, in a future research there is also space for improving the questionnaire by reformulating some statements in order to avoid potential misunderstandings as in the case of item number two.

4. Acknowledgements

In this way we would like to thank all colleagues, international and study office workers, students at the faculties included in this research for having contributed to the creation of the present study with information, by distributing the questionnaire among their students and, respectively, by completing it.

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