

Development of Intercultural Communicative Competence in International Students: A Longitudinal and Cross-Sectional Study in the UK MA Programs

Dunia Alghamdi

Newcastle University, Newcastle, United Kingdom

Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

There has been a growing scholarly interest in the international student experience (Schartner, 2014) and the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) (Lantz-Deaton, 2017; Schartner, 2016). ICC is one of the qualities higher education institutions seek to develop in their international students (Young & Schartner, 2014). This mixed-method study, both longitudinal and repeated cross-sectional, assessed the development of ICC in international students in one-year MA programs at UK universities (N=103). Conducted over the 22/23 academic year, it combined questionnaire data (N=103) with interviews (N=22) measured via the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (Van der Zee et al., 2013). Findings indicated that flexibility and social initiative demonstrated a consistent decrease, indicating a reduction in adaptability and social engagement, respectively, while emotional stability increased, suggesting improved emotional management. These insights indicate that fostering these traits can enhance intercultural communication and assist educators in addressing international students' learning challenges.

Full paper

Background:

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has become a primary concern in modern globalised societies, fuelling scholarly debate about what precisely ICC is (Salisbury, 2011, cited in Schartner, 2016). Over 300 conceptual approaches and ICC models were found within the meta-analysis by Spitzberg and Changnon (2009), drawn from multiple disciplines, including international education, communication studies, psychology and personality studies (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005). Across the literature, the term ICC is used relatively interchangeably alongside cross-cultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, multicultural effectiveness, and global competency (Fantini & Tirmizi, 2006). Fantini and Tirmizi (2006, p.12), however, defined ICC as the "complex of abilities required to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself", with the terms "effective" and "appropriate" used to reference how native speakers of the target language culture perceive the performance of another individual within the context of that culture's language (Fantini, 2009).

The construction of ICC as a concept thus acts as a focal point for the conceptual framework used in this study, which seeks to examine ICC among international students. According to Fantini (2006), each dimension consists of many distinct factors that are potentially critical for the successful completion of fruitful intercultural encounters. It is also clear that, regardless of the number of dimensions listed, these do not form distinct entities being instead interconnected and overlapping components forming a more complex competency. This study thus aims to answer the research question “How do international students perceive and experience the development of intercultural communicative competence?”

Methodology:

This research took place within a higher education setting in the UK, specifically targeting international students enrolled in one-year master’s degree programmes in various disciplines. The study used a repeated cross-sectional design, asking similar questions across various samples of the same population over time using a questionnaire (Fox, 2022), as well as a longitudinal design based on interviews, again asking similar questions of different samples of the same population over time (Fox, 2022).

In order to measure the development of ICC over time, the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (short form) (van der Zee et al., 2013) was administered to participants three times over academic year 22/23, in September, February, and July. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (totally not applicable) to 5 (completely applicable). Of the participants involved in the quantitative portion of the study, a subset of 22 also engaged in these follow-up interviews.

Findings:



International students’ development of ICC in UK universities over nine months was assessed by using both interview and survey data. Figure 1 shows how the international students developed throughout the year. In the initial phase of their journey in the UK, international students, despite facing initial culture shock and challenges in adapting to new social norms and communication styles that slightly impacted their emotional stability (ES), exhibited high levels of eagerness and openness towards learning about and engaging with various cultures, producing stable cultural empathy (CE) and open mindedness (OM) scores. Students were eager to adapt to and engage with the new cultural environment, and to embrace new experiences: “I do like to learn from other cultures, so I am more than open to hearing about their culture.” (Gabriela, Mexico).

By the second phase, five months into their programmes, most students had advanced in their intercultural journeys, moving from mere curiosity to more integrative and empathetic engagement with their host culture. Despite a slight quantitative decline in CE and OM and a continued decrease in flexibility (FX) and social initiative (SI), the qualitative insights revealed a nuanced picture reflecting cultural openness and empathy. These narratives underscored students’ improved social skills and the development of active listening, pointing to focused and meaningful engagement with different cultures: “I think it is very useful when dealing with other cultures. Unless you actively listen to what the

other person has to say, you can't understand the differences and truly grasp who they are as a person" (Sally, Slovakia).

In the final phase, the qualitative data highlighted increased openness and adaptability to new cultural experiences alongside improved social skills, particularly in terms of initiating conversations and forming close relationships, indicating a successful transcultural interaction: "I'm getting better at understanding what they actually mean, like, the lines within it like. I think I can ask for more" (Alma, Spain). The quantitative data showed that CE began high, then dipped slightly in Phase 2, while becoming stable by Phase 3, in alignment with qualitative reports of deepened understanding and empathy.

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