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# Elements Influencing Intercultural Classroom Communication

## Student Voices

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### Abstract

The case study is an attempt to clarify and understand how students experience intercultural classroom communication and what kind of competences they need to cope in intercultural classroom communication. The context is a supplementary course in English for university enrolment in Denmark. It is a mixed student body, and all the students have finished upper-secondary school. The motive is to uncover challenges in intercultural classroom communication and to suggest tools for improving student outcome. The method applied is grounded theory focusing on student voices and student perspectives and comprising observation of classroom communication, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

According to the study there are different categories and sub-categories of students in relation to the students' intercultural communication and awareness. Some student categories are interested in intercultural classroom communication and awareness whereas, for different reasons, other student categories are not. The outcome of the study is discussed and explained in relation to theories on student behavior and intercultural competence.

Elements influencing intercultural classroom communication are student agendas in relation to learning and communicating. Other elements are course description and students' language level. The study suggests tools to improve intercultural classroom communication in terms of teacher and student roles. In the intercultural classroom, teachers should act as instructors and mediators and students should act as learners and initiators.

**Key words:** Intercultural classroom communication, student voices, students as initiators, teachers as mediators

### Introduction

The background of the research study is my involvement in organizing and teaching supplementary courses in English advanced level for university enrolment in Denmark. In addition, it is my involvement in supervising individual student competences in English on the basis of the students' previous exams and experiences in English in order to give students access to university. Based on these experiences, I started questioning whether there is a connection between student behavior and student outcome in an intercultural classroom with multiple voices to be listened to and thus a possibility of improving intercultural classroom communication. My subject expertise has given access to a case study covering two specific English courses. The study comprises a bottom-up approach to data analysis and a comparison with relevant theories in order to give further meaning to the findings.

### Research context and case study rationale

The case study focuses on two English courses of 5 weeks covering 150 periods each. The language used is mainly English and some Danish. The students' reasons for taking the course are mainly that they need a higher grade or a higher level of English to be enrolled at university. A few students feel forced to take the course.

The course description and curriculum objective of the two courses are the same comprising the following major elements:

- Text material covering the UK, the USA and other English speaking countries:
  - English literature from different literary periods
  - Non-fiction texts dealing with the above countries' culture, history and society
- Essay writing, grammar, stylistics and movie analysis
- Oral exam in literature
- Written exam in essay writing, grammar and stylistics

(Adapted from STX-bekendtgørelse, Undervisningsministeriet: 12-06-2013, 50-52).

The number of participants are 11 female students and 9 male students chosen at random. They are between 20 and 26 years old, and they come from the following countries: Afghanistan: 1 female student; China: 1 male student; Ghana: 1 male student; Hungary: 1 female student; India: 1 male student; Russia: 1 female and 1 male students; Saudi Arabia: 1 female and 1 male students; Turkey: 3 female and 1 male students; Vietnam: 1 male student. Denmark: 5 students comprising 3 female students who grew up in Denmark; 1 female student who grew up primarily in Mexico; 1 male student who grew up primarily in the Middle East.

All the participants have finished upper-secondary school, and according to their linguistic background they can be divided into the following main groups:

- Native speakers of Danish having English as a foreign language.
- Students of Danish parents who have lived most of their life abroad. They have English as their first language since they went to American schools.
- Students of migrant parents. They have a home language and Danish as their second language. English is their foreign language.
- Foreign students living in Denmark. They have Danish and English as foreign languages, or English as their second language depending on their background

The motive of the study is to uncover challenges in intercultural classroom communication and to suggest tools to improve student outcome. It is a question of improving student access to intercultural communication in a classroom with multiple student voices from different nationalities and of finding out whether there is a connection between the students' access to intercultural classroom communication and the students' competences in terms of the students' communicative, linguistic and literary outcome. The research question is: How do students experience intercultural classroom communication? What kind of intercultural competence do students need to cope in intercultural classroom communication?

To fulfil the purpose of the study, it is important to approach intercultural classroom communication from a student point of view, i.e. to listen to student voices and perspectives.

## **Methodology**

The aim is to use a research methodology which highlights the inside perspective, and which acknowledges the importance of the individual and the local classroom. An ethnographic survey (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995) provides views from the field and approaches intercultural classroom communication from a student point of view. Grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Charmaz, 2006; Tarp 2011) is suitable for that purpose since the aim of using grounded theory is to accept the individual students as agents belonging to different categories or sub-categories. It is essential that both categories and sub-categories are grounded in observations based upon a bottom-up approach. Grounded theory enables the researcher to obtain multilayered, complex and rich data. The construction of categories is an instrument to understand data. It is an attempt to describe what is characteristic about persons or events. The term category is used instead of identity or ideal type because it is the concept applied within the framework of grounded theory.

The negative aspects of using a grounded theory approach are that the categories constructed will be subject to constant change and in constant flux. It may not be possible to generalize the categories and sub-categories to other settings, especially not settings relating to other subjects. Furthermore, it might be argued that the researcher makes a subjective interpretation affected by his/her race, gender, etc. Ways of meeting that criticism is for the researcher to disclose more about his/her position, view and commitment. It is also important to disclose the researcher's opportunities and constraints in his/her relationship in the field. So the researcher has to struggle with own interpretation and images of unfamiliar groups. My positioning in the field is as a researcher having knowledge of the course contents from previously teaching the same course, which gave rise to my wondering about student behavior and outcome in the intercultural classroom. I started considering how to collect data and thus get access to student experience and competence in order to understand student behavior from a bottom-up perspective.

### **Design and data collection**

The research instruments consist of observation of classroom communication and questionnaires focusing on student data and advantages and challenges when learning English. Data from 20 hours' observation were captured in the form of field notes. In addition, semi-structured individual and group interviews of about 60 minutes took place focusing on learning English and on intercultural communication. A minority of the students did not want the interview to be recorded but agreed to the interview being quoted. During the interviews, students were engaged in discussing both communication in class but also outside class. Finally they were confronted with the different student categories, sub-categories and student statements. By engaging the students in a confrontation with their self-image and other students' self-image, they began to think more seriously about their experiences when communicating in English.

It shall be mentioned that this study consists of an interpretive perspective of actions in the classroom, and what actions in the classroom mean for participants. It is a study in search of meaning, therefore I not only observe but I also ask the students.

Depending on whether you look at the data from a student experience perspective or from a meta perspective, it makes it possible to make different readings: one reading focusing on student categories and the other reading focusing on student behavior and intercultural competence in the classroom.

### **Data analysis: The interculturally aware student**

In the inductive thematic analysis I looked for individual stories and major emergent recurring themes before constructing categories and sub-categories. The analysis shows how the interview and the discussion make students aware of their language level and communication skills.

The following two examples are chosen to illuminate how students with different backgrounds experience being in an intercultural classroom, and how they manage to cope both as to communicative and linguistic skills.

The first example is a 21-year-old student (A1) who spent the first seven years of his life in Japan and the rest in the Middle East. Now he lives in Denmark and is preparing himself for being enrolled at university. English is his first language, Danish his second language and Arabic and French his foreign languages. He ended having top grades in English and is able to develop both his intercultural competence and to contribute to intercultural classroom communication. All A1's comments are based upon comparison with the Danish culture. He is aware of challenges in intercultural communication when speaking a foreign language:

Arabic countries appreciate if you make an attempt to learn their language, they are helpful to learn the language.

Danes do not seem to appreciate that foreigners learn their language. They make no attempt to understand foreigners if they have the wrong accent. They focus on me to learn the language and make myself understood – not on themselves to understand me.

A1 is also aware of relevant strategies to cope in a foreign culture:

Learn the language. Getting along depends on your attitude. Start saying something from the very beginning. Do not wait.

A1 appreciates the school environment as a place of learning a foreign language and a place of intercultural communication. The advantages of learning the language at school are the variety in vocabulary and the possibility of being corrected by the teacher in comparison with a traditional work environment:

The school environment helps you to learn the language. Learning the language through education is better than through work.

A1 emphasizes attitude, awareness and language skills as conditions of coping in a foreign culture and taking part in intercultural classroom communication:

Awareness is important also through education. What can you do and not do. Do not expect to change the culture, adapt to the culture and accept the culture. You can keep your eating habits but not your own country's law system.

It is obvious how A1's multicultural background influences his way of thinking and acting. Due to his background he is aware that he needs to adapt to the foreign culture he lives in. He is the one who needs to adapt and change not his new country. He is also aware that education will give him language and knowledge, which may be less accessible outside school.

The second example is a Russian female student (A2) who came to Denmark in 2011, and who finished the English course with top grades. She has experienced a short-term exchange with France, has worked as a pre-school teacher of French in Russia and speaks different languages. In the interview she focuses on differences and similarities between the Danish and the Russian cultures. She gives examples of differences concerning student/teacher relationship, behavior in general, gender roles, job possibilities, school systems and sense of humor. She emphasizes the importance of awareness and identity:

Before I came to Denmark I knew the stereotypes (the Queen, Hans Christian Andersen, etc.) – not about the way of life. I feel comfortable in class. I do not feel so foreign any more. It is a question of mentality, personality and background. I am interested in working together with different cultures. I am able to increase my intercultural network due to languages. Be careful: do not forget your identity.

She constantly compares with her background, and she is aware of how her identity influences the way she perceives and understands what goes on in the intercultural classroom in Denmark.

While the above-mentioned students A1 and A2 have intercultural competence to cope in an intercultural classroom, some of the other students in class do not possess the same level of intercultural competence. These students have different reasons for acting the way they do. The following diagram, Fig. 1, shows categorization of students in relation to inter-student communication and intercultural awareness.

### **Diagram: student categories and student agendas**

By using specific markers in the analysis, such as inter-student communication and intercultural awareness, the participants are divided into different categories and subcategories.

In the diagram, Fig. 1, the horizontal axis shows the level of importance of intercultural awareness, and the vertical axis shows the level of importance of inter-student communication, i.e.

communication between students. Intra-cultural communication applies to communication between students of the same nationality, and intercultural communication applies to communication across nationalities. The subject of English is not mentioned in the diagram since it is the requirement of the course and the main purpose for students to learn.

<b>Inter-student communication</b>		
<b>C</b>	<i>high</i>	<b>A</b>
INTRA-cultural communication		INTERcultural communication
1. Danes		Intercultural awareness
2. Foreigners		
<i>low</i>	<b>D</b>	<b>B</b> <i>high</i>
Exam focused		Student passivity
Lack of interest in intercultural insight		1. Language insufficient
		2. Expect the teacher to take action
<b>E</b>		
Lack of interest in intercultural insight and school subject		
	<i>low</i>	<b>Inter-cultural awareness</b>

Figure 1. Student categories and sub-categories

Since it is a question of a cultural meeting, the question arises whether nationality plays a role in intercultural classroom communication. In this study nationality is related to student background in terms of e.g Afghan, Arabic, Russian, no matter whether the students were born in Denmark by immigrant parents or immigrated to Denmark themselves. What decides student categories is the students' attitude to intercultural communication and awareness. Nationality only plays a role when students start isolating themselves with students of own nationality not being interested in intercultural communication. There might be other aspects of nationality, but they do not appear as influencing aspects in the analysis.

The diagram shows different rooms for different student categories and sub-categories. As mentioned above category A students pay high attention to intercultural awareness and intercultural communication. Category B students are passive in class communication. They are interested in achieving intercultural awareness but feel they lack access to intercultural communication for different reasons. One reason is insufficient language level, and another reason is lack of openness. They often find English complicated because they have a home language (in this case Turkish), went to an Arabic private school or do not have a sufficient level of English from upper-secondary school. In the questionnaire these students explain that they prefer the teacher to take action and to be available for questions. They do not like taking action themselves, and they have problems planning and organizing homework and work during lessons. During the interview category B students clearly show an interest in being in focus and opening up. Their final exam grades are low, or they fail.

Category C students show little interest in English, and their class activity is low. They focus on communication with own nationality, i.e. intra-cultural communication, and they are not interested in intercultural communication or awareness. They prefer not to adapt their behavior to a new context. Category C students will only exist if there are several students belonging to the same nationality in class not being interested in intercultural communication. Since the Danish students form the majority in the classes in question, and since they feel they know the context, they tend to be the most typical sub-category C. However, other nationalities comprising several students in class and not being interested in intercultural communication also belong to a sub-category focusing on intra-cultural communication. Category C students get low exam grades, or they fail.

Due to future university enrolment requiring high grades, category D students are not interested in any topic or activity not being emphasized in the course description. They are not interested in

learning about other cultures and achieving intercultural awareness. Their focus is on achieving the highest possible exam result, which they normally do.

Category E students lack interest in intercultural communication and awareness since they have a different student agenda than learning. Some of them have experienced lack of success in school, so they have given up learning. Others are forced to be in class due to their participation in rehabilitation or youth unemployment projects, or they are attracted by study grants. Often they leave class before the exam or fail.

To further illuminate the outcome of the study, it is relevant to compare student categories with the concepts of education and intercultural dialogue defined by UNESCO and the Council of Europe. Besides student categories also resonate with Bourdieu's theory of culture and behavior and Byram's model of intercultural competence in terms of the five *savoirs*.

### **Discussion of student behavior and competence**

The following discussion draws upon definitions and aspects considered essential in relation to intercultural awareness and communication.

In 1996 the UNESCO group on education defined what the next century would mean for education and learning to live together. Education would be necessary throughout life, and there would be four essentials in education, four pillars:

Simply speaking, the Commission felt that education throughout life is based upon four pillars: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be. (UNESCO, 1996: 90)

Category A students are aware of the four pillars whereas to some extent category B students lack capacity and skills to learn. Category C students have access to the four pillars as long as their own nationality is concerned. Category D students are not interested in learning to live together, and category E students are not interested in learning in the given context.

Another important definition concerning learning to live together originates from the Council of Europe. Intercultural dialogue is considered important in a Europe consisting of multicultural societies. According to the Council of Europe, intercultural dialogue is:

Exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic background and heritage. Freedom to express oneself. Willingness and capacity to listen to the views of others (Council of Europe, 2008: 9).

For different reasons some student categories are unable to live up to the above definition of intercultural dialogue. They lack capacity and freedom due to insufficient language level, or they lack willingness because they have a different focus such as exam result or communication with own nationality. This means that they are unwilling to debate and accept the views of others. Basically student attitude to intercultural dialogue is decided by student agenda depending on student background, knowledge and skills.

Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus* and *capital* offer a way of understanding student behavior and student agenda. According to Bourdieu (1990: 82), the past and present which we carry with us "at all times and in all places, in the forms of dispositions which are so many marks of social position" is multi-layered and operates at two levels: that of the individual and that of society. Thus *habitus* is formed by a set of dispositions. For Bourdieu (1993: 86):

... that which one has acquired, but which has become durably incorporated in the body in the form of permanent dispositions. ... refers to something historical, linked to individual history ... something like a property, a capital. And indeed, the *habitus* is a capital, but one which, because it is embodied, appears innate.

So habitus is not only invisible (innate) and made up of attributes such as thoughts and dispositions but it is also visible (embodied) in the way that people stand, speak or act (Bourdieu 1990: 70). Thus, cultural symbols (such as language) reflect the complexity and history of social experiences and the relationships people have with their dominant culture. It is for such reasons that it is assumed that the students have acquired a set of dispositions, habitus, reflecting the central structural elements of their society, and therefore they behave in ways which necessarily reproduce those structural elements. Their thinking and opinions cannot not be separated from their history. Their lived experiences are linked to their socialization and influence the way in which they perceive and understand what they do in school. Individual experiences and life histories are thus key ingredients in shaping the type of student.

In the multicultural classroom students have different kinds of habitus (what students do). Student habitus will decide whether they can build up capital (what students gain) in the field. Capital is divided into symbolic capital (academic knowledge, language) and social knowledge (social competence) (Bourdieu, 1998: 19-30).

In relation to the concept of habitus, some students' discomfort is quite natural since they enter a new context, a new field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 127), which requires reflection on an entrenched behavior, habitus, which they consider natural. Besides they have to speak a language which is not their mother tongue. They do not have the right habitus to cope in the field, and they need to change their existing schemas of how to behave. To some extent this is the case for categories B, C, D and E students whereas category A students are able to cope in the new field.

Category C students prefer intra-cultural communication with students of their own nationality. This attitude resonates with Bourdieu's and Wilken's concepts of cultural capital, habitus and home ground (Bourdieu 1986: 241; Wilken 2007: 153-155). Wilken mentions that it is relevant to consider how much cultural capital in terms of cultural knowledge the students have. In this study it is quite obvious that students of the same nationality have different kinds of cultural capital and intercultural competence. Intra-cultural communication in the Danish group can be explained by the Danish group being dominating since they operate in their home country. Other nationalities might also be dominating in the classroom and prefer communication with own nationality. The level of intercultural communication seems to depend on the students' language level, background and attitude (capital and habitus). So nationality only plays a role in cases when students do not have the right habitus and capital to participate in intercultural communication.

Besides focusing on student experience, the analysis also focuses on student behavior and competence in the intercultural classroom (Hu & Byram, 2009: 27; Byram, 1997). In this case it is relevant to draw upon Byram's model of the five *savoirs* (Porto, 2013: 146; Lenz & Berthele, 2010: 26-27; Alred, Byram & Fleming, 2006: 118). Intercultural competence is a combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviors (Barrett, Byram & Lázàr, 2013: 7; Council of Europe, 2009: 8) which allow a speaker, to varying degrees, to recognise, understand, interpret and accept other ways of living and thinking beyond his or her home culture. Intercultural competence, at its core, has to do with the integration of "otherness" in one's thinking and actions (Lenz & Berthele, 2010: 6).

Category A students possess the five *savoirs*. They show *savoir comprendre* by being able to interpret and relate to other cultures. They pay attention to *savoir être*, the ability to give up ethnocentric attitudes and focus on other students' attitudes and values. The competence of *savoirs*, also possessed by category A students, is represented in terms of acquiring knowledge about aspects of another culture. In addition they have the competence of *savoir apprendre/faire* by having the ability to observe, collect data and analyse how people of another culture behave. This especially appears from their intercultural comparison and interaction. They interact with people of another culture in real time, by drawing upon and integrating the other *savoirs*. Besides they show examples of *savoir s'engager* in terms of critical cultural awareness and judgement. Category A students

consider English to be the key to cope in a foreign culture – the key to develop the five competences of *savoirs*.

Category B students either lack a sufficient language level or sufficient openness to acquire new intercultural knowledge, collect data, analyse, become aware of and interact with people of another culture. They are interested in learning and observing the other cultures but not able to interact. Category C, D and E students do not have the right attitudes, curiosity and openness to develop intercultural awareness and to participate in intercultural communication. They do not possess sufficient competence of *savoir*.

According to the students, the following elements seem to influence intercultural communication: attitude, awareness, background, behavior, curiosity, education, intercultural knowledge, language level, expectation, identity, mentality, moral code, openness, personality and willingness. Therefore, to improve intercultural classroom communication and student outcome, it is essential both for students and teachers to understand student behavior and student agendas.

### **Student and teacher roles**

The study suggests that students and teachers should both act according to grounded knowledge of student behavior and student agendas. There are two student roles in the intercultural classroom: the student as a learner and as an initiator of intercultural communication. There are two kinds of communication: intra-cultural communication within nationalities and intercultural communication across nationalities.

Category A students are both learners and initiators at the same time, and they seem to benefit from having the two roles. Being an initiator develops the students' ability to communicate across cultures. Benefitting from the role as an initiator is also important for the other student categories. This can happen by making the students aware of the different student categories either by means of research interviews or the teacher being a mediator.

The pedagogic effect of being involved in a research interview is discussed by Byram (1996), who talks about the "pedagogical function" of the interview. Byram argues that the interview process itself helps the interviewee to develop a new understanding of the experiences which are in focus. The interview process might create reflection and reanalysis of taken-for-granted realities. Thus an interview can make students aware of the benefit of intercultural communication.

There are two teacher roles in the intercultural classroom: the teacher as an instructor and as a mediator of cultural insight and increased intercultural communication. As a mediator the teacher should encourage action across cultures. To fulfil that role he/she has to be aware of the students' language level and student-agenda categories. When acting as a mediator, the teacher should take advantage of category A students' intercultural competence in order to transfer their competence to other student categories.

To improve intercultural communication in the classroom both students and teachers should be aware why some students participate and some students do not participate in intercultural communication. Thus the teacher can teach intercultural competence effectively by using an approach that takes into account the students' language level and student-agenda categories.

### **Conclusion**

This case study grounded in student voices and research observations shows that elements influencing intercultural classroom communication are student agendas, intra-cultural and intercultural classroom communication, course description and students' language level. There are two student roles, as a learner and as an initiator, and two teacher roles, as an instructor and as a mediator, in the intercultural classroom. If the school system wants to increase the students' intercultural communication and to improve their intercultural awareness, this study suggests that the school system should pay attention to student agendas and be aware of the background of and

the reasons for their agendas. The teacher can become a mediator between the different student categories across cultures. Besides the students can act as initiators of intercultural classroom communication. However, the condition is that both students and teachers are familiar with student agendas and language level. In other words, the students' intercultural competence, curiosity, freedom, openness and willingness are conditions for intercultural dialogue and intercultural communication to succeed in the intercultural classroom with the result of improved language learning and intercultural awareness.

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