Developing Students’ Intercultural Communicative Competence Through Online Learning

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Abstract—in a rapidly globalising world, every modern person needs a sufficient level of intercultural competence (IC). An increasing part of communication is carried out through the online environment, and it becomes more natural to acquire communication skills in it. However, representatives of non-linguistic specialities may not be aware of the importance of this phenomenon. The primary purpose of this research is to identify the attitude of representatives of a non-linguistic speciality to IC through online learning. To collect information, semi-structured interviews were conducted among students of medical and linguistic specialities, for which online learning is practiced. It is crucial to find out how diverse the attitude towards IC is among the representatives of various fields of activity. Bachelor students of state universities took part in the semi-structured interview. All the respondents are in the fourth year of study. The survey included 370 students aged 20-21. The difference in the specialities was one of the most important criteria for selecting respondents. As the results show, representatives of a non-linguistic speciality are indeed less aware and interested in increasing IC in online learning. Several solutions were proposed to solve this problem: increasing interest in interculturalism by spreading information in an educational institution's online environment; teachers’ help to students to develop such a competence; using the online environment; providing additional online materials; participation in international online events and exchange programmes.

Keywords—Intercultural communication, online learning, multicultural education, cross-cultural, intercultural communication competence, medical students’ intercultural competence

1 Introduction

Initially, globalisation manifested itself in the formation of international trade networks and the emergence of an international globalised labour market. The latter has stimulated masses of people to search for a better-paid job as well as a better life by foregrounding the issue of intercultural communications on the agenda of public policy in many countries [1]. Globalisation and the development of new communication technologies have turned human society into a globally connected network. The most
important and motivating part of intercultural communication is an interaction in the context of work [2].

Intercultural communication has become a ubiquitous and generally accessible phenomenon thanks to the Internet, remote work and training have formed a global layer of online communication. Obtaining information about other cultures through foreign languages is increasingly taking place in an online environment and by web instruments [3]. The intensification of the movement of people, the emergence of the tourism phenomenon has led to more frequent contacts between representatives of different cultures, even without moving to another country. People need to develop the ability to communicate in an intercultural environment [4]. Many researchers affirm that it is no longer sufficient to achieve only communicative competence and that the notion of intercultural communicative competence should be taken into account [5,6]. The reason for this is the different requirements and restrictions imposed by different cultures that might give rise to conflicts [2].

It is believed that foreign language learning should be accompanied by the development of both linguistic and intercultural skills [7,8]. Many countries apply the development of intercultural competence (IC) in their policy of teaching foreign languages, including in the form of online learning and blended learning programs. The development of intercultural communication in foreign language classes is widely encouraged [9]. A person that possesses IC can develop relationships with people from different cultures and are able to resolve conflicts arising as a result of cultural differences; improve his or her ability to do business with counterparts from different cultures [10].

When analysing the levels of intercultural sensitivity among university students, the influence of education and intercultural experience on the development of IC is also considered. The results show that students’ respect for different cultures increases with increasing participation in international online interactions. This is the reason why students pursuing Humanities, in particular philologists, show significant interest in IC, while students pursuing medical and natural sciences display much less interest.

Several researchers indicate that students of different specialities experience fear and a negative attitude towards a foreign language precisely in connection with the need for high-quality intercultural communication. Students often find themselves unprepared for it if they are no longer involved in such communication through social networks and other means of online communication [11,12]. A student depends solely on the educational institution where he/she learns a foreign language. Disciplines such as geography, history, and similar subjects, enable students to become familiar with the culture of the country whose language they are studying [13].

The teachers help students develop language skills, as well as a number of non-linguistic competencies. For this, the teachers are required to become intercultural guides, and able to act as mediators between their own culture and the cultures of the languages being studied [14].

IC applies to all types of communicative situations in which not only native speakers of the target language are involved, but also interlocutors from different cultures. To allow language learners to interact with people of a different cultural identity, the goals of language teaching should include the development of relationships based on mutual respect and acceptance [15]. The availability of communication and the technical
implementation of the contact for which emergency technologies are used are critically important [16].

In this regard, the primary purposes of the study are to conduct semi-structured interviews with students on issues of IC online learning aimed at identifying possible problems and features of increasing cross-cultural competence among students of non-linguistic specialities through online learning based on the received answers. Following the findings, the researchers have formulated recommendations that can help increase the level of IC of the students based on the obtained data.

The study begins with a description of the methods employed in the study. It describes the design of the study, the selection of the participants, and research tools. The sections following the methods section present the survey analysis and critically discusses the findings. In the conclusion section, the practical application of the research results is outlined.

2 Method

2.1 Research design

This research deployed semi-structured interviews, which were conducted with medical and linguistic students, for which online learning is practiced. Continuous blended or online learning experience is at least one year. A comparative analysis of the results was carried out in order to probe how different the attitudes to IC are among the representatives of various fields of study.

Before the research, the message about the study was distributed in educational institutions indicated below with an invitation to take part in the interview. After that, interviews were held with everyone who agreed to take part. Participants’ consent to participate in the interview was confirmed. The interviews were conducted afterward within a time frame of one month.

2.2 Participants

Bachelor students took part in the semi-structured interviews. All the participants study in the fourth year. A total of 370 students took part in the survey, of which 64% were women, and 36% were men aged 20 to 21. Tables 1 and 2 provide an overview of the participants. All students study full-time.

Online training is represented by online classes remotely, the availability of all training materials through "cloud" services; constant availability of online teachers' consultations in person and on special forums; sharing data and collaborative problem solving online with other students. Online learning is regular, mixed with regular classes and personal work with teachers.
Table 1. Linguistic students

| Number of students | Age   | University                                      | Speciality                                      |
|--------------------|-------|------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| 100                | 20-21 | Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia        | Linguistics                                    |
| 120                | 20-21 | Moscow State Institute of International Relations | Translation, linguistic studies, and intercultural communication |

Table 2. Medical students

| Number of students | Age   | University                                      | Speciality                        |
|--------------------|-------|------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 80                 | 20-21 | I.M. Sechenov First Moscow State Medical University | General Medicine                  |
| 70                 | 20-21 | N.I. Pirogov National Medical University        | Clinical psychology               |

2.3 The selection criterion of the participants

The survey was conducted among the fourth-year students' online and blended learning curriculum. This is because the fourth-year students are the senior students, who are on the verge of completing formal education and are ready to enter the labour market. Besides, at this stage of formal training, students have already completed most of the special courses in their speciality, including practical tasks and other training.

The difference in the specialities became another critical selection criterion of the respondents. It can be assumed that linguistic students are more aware of IC than medical students are. This helped in identifying possible problems in this area among non-linguistic specialities.

2.4 Research instrument

As mentioned above, semi-structured interviews were used to conduct the interviews. The key advantage of this method is that the respondents are not restricted to answering in limited words or just ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Indeed, in semi-structured interviews, the respondents find an opportunity to elaborate on the questions they as asked. Our interview framework consisted of six questions linked to IC online learning. Students were asked to answer all of them in a detailed manner. All the responses were recorded and analysed (need reference).

Notwithstanding, before conducting the interviews, we did have confusion in our minds as to how is it possible to talk about the concepts of IC and communication if the participant is partially aware of these concepts. However, after much thought, in the first question, we asked the participants to define the concepts of “intercultural communication” and “intercultural competence”. This question made it possible to understand the level of the respondents’ awareness of these concepts. Besides, the respondents were asked to evaluate the role IC in their particular speciality – Can you say that high IC is an integral part of your profession? If so, Why?

The next question was – Do you think that in the modern world every person should have a high level of IC? If so, Why? We presumed that this question carried a global meaning. It demonstrates not only how deeply the students of the two specialities are...
aware of the process of globalisation but also displays how strongly it influences the need to increase the level of IC.

Then the respondents were asked to indicate whether their educational institution provides them with the necessary information on IC that might help them to develop this competence – Do you think that your university provides enough information for you to increase your IC level? If so, please give examples. The medical students’ responses to this question helped us assess as to what materials are provided at non-linguistic faculties and whether they are sufficient to form the necessary IC.

In response to the question – Do you think that it is possible to achieve the required level of IC only within an educational institution or it is also necessary to communicate with foreigners, travel, etc.? – the respondents had to express their opinion on whether it is realistic to achieve the proper level of IC within an educational institution. And the last question was – Would you like to increase your level of IC? If so, why?” In response to this question, the participants expressed their opinion on whether they should increase the level of IC. The participants’ responses to this question helped to evaluate as to how the students are interested in this issue, and the scale to which they recognise the importance of globalisation in communication.

2.5 Research issues and restrictions

One of the main limitations of this study is that the interviews were conducted only among students of Russian universities and among one age group.

Students were invited to participate in the interviews either after their lessons or in their free time. All participants in the study had agreed to participate in this study. None of the participants knew about the participation of other participants in the study, and all the data collected during the study were completely anonymous. The researchers recorded no personal data of the respondents, except for the age and gender. Thus, the personal rights or interests of the students were not violated.

2.6 Data analysis

All the responses of the semi-structured interviews were recorded and analysed. During the analysis, the most frequent, and similar responses were identified. Following the analysis of all the interviews, the responses of the two specialities were compared.

3 Results and Discussion

The primary purpose of this research is to develop students’ IC competence. When analysing the responses to the first question, the researchers’ note that linguistic students in online learning expectedly have given more informative and comprehensive responses. Most often, these respondents have given clear definitions that can be found in the educational literature.

However, the majority of medical students have rather given short answers based on assumptions. Indeed, the definitions on IC as given by the medical students include
“communication of people from different cultures”, “communication between cultures”, and “knowledge of other culture’s peculiarities”, “understanding of a foreign culture” and others. It is worth noting that seven medical students (making 4% of respondents) could not give precise definitions of IC.

In the second question, the opinions of the two groups of respondents are opposite. Representatives of linguistic specialities almost unanimously state that the proper level of IC is one of the most important components of their future profession. They justify this response by the fact that with a high level of IC they will be able to work with international clients, better understand a foreign language, and that IC opens up more opportunities for working abroad.

As for medical students, only a small percentage, which is about 15% note that a high level of cross-cultural competence is necessary for medical workers (mostly for working with international clients and participation in international medical conferences).

The respondents are unanimous that modern people need a certain level of IC for different purposes (see Fig. 1).

![Fig. 1. Reasons for increasing need of IC](image)

The category ‘work’ includes options such as – working abroad, international exchange of experience, cooperation with foreign clients, and others. The category ‘travel’ represents various arguments such as – when visiting another country, it is necessary to know at least partially its laws and traditions, and IC may help with that. The ‘personal’ category includes students that put forward the opinion that a modern person living in a multinational world may be interested in increasing IC to expand his/her worldview. In the ‘global’ category, there are students, who feel that a high level of IC is necessary when it comes to international exchange programmes and similar other events. Medical students indicate that they do not receive enough intercultural knowledge.
Most representatives of both specialities state that real experience is required for full-fledged intercultural online and off-line communication. Many medical students note that information about other cultures might not be provided sufficiently through both classes and online learning, which also reduces the possibility of acquiring successful IC.

The majority (61%) of medical students reported that they would not like to increase their IC. However, 39% expressed such a desire, justifying it with the opportunity to work with international clients, and exchange experience with colleagues from abroad online. As for linguists, they express a desire to increase their cross-cultural competence, justifying that a higher IC level will contribute to the development of their professional qualities.

It can be concluded that non-linguistic students have an extremely low level of interest in intercultural communication. Therefore, they do not seek to increase cross-cultural competence even through online learning. One of the main reasons for this indicator is that non-linguistic students mostly do not consider it essential to communicate with the representatives of other cultures.

Besides, there might not be enough online materials and opportunities for direct communication with native speakers of a foreign language online on IC learning. Thus, the representatives of non-linguistic specialities receive a deficient level of IC online, which can be considered a problem. This problem is multidimensional and requires a systematic approach.

3.1 Strategy of increasing intercultural communication interest

As the study shows, the representatives of non-linguistic specialities have a very vague idea of the concept of IC. It implies a low interest in this phenomenon. Increasing IC requires a particular systematic approach. Both students and teachers should clearly plan the development strategy. In order for students to have a desire to increase their IC, they must realise its practical value and the ways of applying this knowledge in life and work. Pupils should develop IC from the school level. They should be aware of the differences between cultures and the ways to overcome disagreements associated with them. Also, pupils are not yet focused on acquiring a specific profession and thus are not limited by the requirements of a degree programme. It opens up more opportunities for increasing IC.

Studies have shown that motivation to develop IC increases as a result of culture-based activity and activity in professionally oriented activity within the framework of a foreign language culture [17].

3.2 Using an online environment

Online learning tools are practical and convenient for cultural data exchange and practicing a foreign language. Foreign language teachers can provide students with relevant services that exist on the internet. The university can organise its own online platform on which students can exchange not only professional but also cultural experience with international students.
Additional resources (audio and video), which will contribute to increasing IC, can also be placed on such a platform. In this way, the online platform may serve two main functions – communication with international students and obtain additional cultural information.

3.3 Additional sources of information

According to the results of the semi-structured interviews, students of non-linguistic specialities receive very little information related to the cultures of other countries. Students are limited in real IC (inability to travel, lack of international friends.). Hence, the major sources of information about the country where the studied language is spoken are documentary and educational films, etc. These sources exclude real-time communication but allow students to immerse into the life of foreign residents.

3.4 Participation in international online events and exchange programmes, exchange of professional experience

One of the most effective ways to increase the level of IC within the native country can be considered via participation in international online events. This allows one to exchange professional experience and lay the foundation for future professional cooperation with a much wider professional audience around the world. For this, the representatives of non-linguistic specialities, who know a foreign language well enough, can perhaps organise special exchange programmes.

In current conditions, intercultural online communication plays a vital role in education. Studies typologically, similar to the current study [4, 6, 11, 12, 18-30] have been conducted in many countries unravelling the importance of IC among students and scholars. For instance, Abisheva et al. introduced a new concept of ecolinguistics, as a sphere of studying multicultural linguistic phenomena and a new level of solving the problem of interlanguage dialogue [4].

Similarly, a study was conducted in Iran in 2018, which found out how the level of IC affected the motivation among the 60 student participants aged 21-28 to learn the English language. Their key goal in learning English was to become English literate, increase its proficiency, and to study better in their academic and public life [18]. Nonetheless, the majority of these studies point out the need to change the way specialists are trained because of the increased requirement for intercultural communication, which requires versatile knowledge and skills.

Now turning on the results of this study, the findings show that the representatives of a non-linguistic speciality are much less knowledgeable and interested in increasing IC. As a vast majority of literature demonstrates the increasing necessity of IC, that is why it is necessary to give information about the countries, the languages of which are being studied, starting from the school level. The teachers’ responsibility is to develop English language skills among the students by delivering continuous lectures and seminars, thereby, allowing the students to learn not only the basic rules but also the cultural aspect of the language [31]. For this, various forms of classes can be introduced.
The provision of additional materials on this subject can also contribute to the increase of IC, for which, an online environment can be used. One of the best solutions could be the creation of an online platform within an educational institution where students can receive additional information and exchange cultural experience with foreigners/ international students. It is also necessary to encourage students to participate in international events. Students with a sufficient language level should participate in different exchange programmes.

4 Conclusion

To collect information, it was decided to conduct semi-structured interviews among students of medical and linguistic specialities, for which online learning is practiced. Further, a comparative analysis was carried out concerning the attitudes of both groups of students towards intercultural competence. Bachelor students of state universities took part in the semi-structured interview. All respondents studied in the fourth year, more than a year of experience in participating in online learning programs. The survey included 370 full-time students aged 20 to 21.

One of the most important criteria for selecting respondents was the difference in the specialities of the respondents. It can be assumed that linguistic students are more aware of intercultural competence than medical students are. This helped to identify possible difficulties in this area that exist among non-linguistic specialities through language and communicative online learning.

This research aimed at identifying students’ attitudes towards IC competence online using semi-structured interviews among 370 students of medical and linguistic specialities aged 20 - to 21 of state universities. The findings indicate the increasing importance of IC among the students.

The research results can be taken as a basis by other universities in Russia, as well as other countries, for conducting their own research on IC. Besides, a similar study can be conducted among students of other specialities to identify their attitudes towards interculturalism.

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