

Investigating Intercultural Effectiveness of High and Low Academic Achievers

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Abstract

We aimed basically, through this paper, to investigate the extent to which academic achievement may contribute to developing the students' intercultural effectiveness. To attain such an aim, we selected the intercultural effectiveness scale as the research tool. It was addressed to sixty third year students of English in the Department of English at Constantine University, divided into two groups according to their high or low academic achievement in English for measuring particular capacities and skills viewed as indispensable components in a culturally diverse environment. The analysis of the data gathered has showed that students with high academic achievement are more interculturally effective than students with low academic achievement.

Keywords: Language and culture, intercultural competence, intercultural effectiveness, intercultural effectiveness scale, academic achievement

Résumé

Nous avons essentiellement cherché, dans le présent article, à déterminer dans quelle mesure la réussite scolaire pouvait contribuer au développement de l'efficacité interculturelle des étudiants. Pour atteindre un tel objectif, nous avons choisi l'échelle d'efficacité interculturelle comme outil de recherche dans laquelle nous avons impliqué soixante (60) étudiants de troisième année de licence au département d'anglais à l'Université de Constantine. Les soixante participants ont été sélectionnés sur la base de leurs résultats scolaires en langue anglaise afin de pouvoir mesurer leurs capacités et leurs compétences particulières considérées comme éléments indispensables dans un environnement culturellement diversifié. L'analyse des données recueillies a montré que les étudiants ayant un niveau de réussite scolaire élevé sont plus efficaces sur le plan interculturel que les étudiants ayant un faible niveau de réussite scolaire.

Mots-clés : Langue et culture, compétence interculturelle, efficacité interculturelle, échelle de l'efficacité interculturelle, réussite scolaire.

المخلص

من خلال هذا المقال أردنا أساسًا البحث في مدى مساهمة التحصيل الدراسي في تطوير الفعالية الثقافية بين الطلاب. لتحقيق هذا الهدف، اخترنا مقياس الفعالية بين الثقافات كأداة البحث الخاصة بنا حيث تم توجيه استبيان إلى ستين طالبًا في السنة الثالثة في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية في جامعة قسنطينة، مقسمين إلى مجموعتين وفقًا لتحصيلهم الأكاديمي باللغة الإنجليزية: طلبة ذوو تحصيل عالي وطلبة ذوو تحصيل متدني، وذلك لغرض قياس قدرات ومهارات معينة ينظر إليها على أنها مكونات لا غنى عنها في بيئة متنوعة ثقافيًا. أظهرت البيانات التي تم جمعها على أن الطلاب ذوي التحصيل الدراسي العالي هم أكثر فعالية من الناحية الثقافية من الطلاب ذوي التحصيل الدراسي المنخفض.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللغة والثقافة، الكفاءة الثقافية، الفعالية الثقافية، استبيان الفعالية بين الثقافات، التحصيل الأكاديمي.

Introduction

Living in a globalized world, intercultural communication is more likely to face individuals every time they step out of their community. Accordingly, people need to be interculturally competent in order to achieve communication goals, and avoid problematic and embarrassing situations that are the outcome of lack of intercultural competence. Foreign language learners are more concerned with the conception of interculturality, as they are learning and using English as an international language. They need to develop their intercultural competence alongside their linguistic competence in order to be interculturally competent. In other words, achieving communication goals in intercultural communication is the outcome of the mastery of different skills including language proficiency; however, English learners often rely on their language proficiency alone, neglecting the cultural aspect of the language. Therefore, it seems problematic if the students are not interculturally competent or effective, because communication that lacks appropriate cultural content often results in hilarious incidents, leads to misunderstanding and hampers achieving communication goals. Further, the problematic issue in this research is that one cannot know whether having a high academic level may contribute in developing the students' intercultural effectiveness in the absence of an explicit intercultural teaching at the Department of English at Constantine University. The present paper, therefore, aims fundamentally at figuring out the relationship found between academic achievement and intercultural effectiveness. Based on this, the principal research question to be asked is to what extent academic achievement can influence the intercultural effectiveness of the students at the Department of English at Constantine University? Asking such a major question, one hypothesizes that high academic achievers would attain higher intercultural effectiveness than low academic achievers.

1. Literature Review

1.1 The Concept of Culture

Culture has many definitions, depending on the scholars' perspectives and points of view. Nieto (2002) supports that there is more than one perspective to view and reach a good understanding of culture, since it depends on the context; for that reason, it cannot be given a specific definition. However, Taylor (1871) offers a standard definition which was agreed upon largely; he said that culture is that complex whole which consists of knowledge, belief, art moral, law, customs, and any capacities and habits acquired by individuals who are members in a given society. Similarly, Brown (2007) thinks of culture as, "the ideas, customs, skills, arts, and tools that characterize a certain group of people in a given period of time" (p. 177). He adds also that culture is "a way of life, as the context within which people exist, think feel, and relate to others, as the "glue" that binds groups of people together" (p.177). In short, one cannot refer to culture as one isolated aspect of life but a combination of various aspects.

1.2 Intercultural Competence

Interculturality is a universal experience, which requires fostering intercultural competence that is largely agreed to be, by intercultural scholars, the fundamental component to survive in such diverse world and to achieve successful communication. This term of intercultural competence was defined by the majority of the scholars as the ability to communicate effectively in a culturally different environment. For example, Portalla and Chen (2010, p. 21) state that it is the "individuals ability to achieve their communication goal while effectively and appropriately utilizing communication behaviors to negotiate between the different identities present within a culturally diverse environment". In foreign language teaching and learning, intercultural competence was seen as "the ability of a person to behave adequately in a flexible manner when confronted with actions, attitudes and expectations of representatives of foreign cultures"

(Meyer, 1991; cited in Cortazzi & Jin, 1999, p. 198). To elaborate, being intercultural competent student means having the ability to make sure that there is a mutual understanding between students who have dissimilar social identities, and the ability to interact with the native speakers taking into account their various identities and their own uniqueness.

1.2.1 Dimensions of Intercultural Competence

According to Portalla and Chen (2010, p. 21), intercultural competence consists of three dimensions, including intercultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and intercultural effectiveness. Chen and Starosta (1996) use intercultural awareness to define the cognitive component of intercultural competence; it refers to the ability to comprehend and explain other cultures. Intercultural sensitivity, on the other hand, was defined as the “individual’s ability to develop a positive emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promotes appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural communication” (Chen & Starosta, 1996, p. 5). Finally, intercultural effectiveness is the behavioral aspect of the intercultural communication competence, sometimes referred to as intercultural adroitness or a skill set. In this research paper, we opted for intercultural effectiveness, as we are more concerned with the behavioral dimension than the affective and cognitive dimensions.

1.2.1.1 Intercultural Effectiveness

Chen and Starosta (1996) claim that intercultural effectiveness should only refer to “intercultural adroitness” or the behavioral aspect of intercultural communication competence, taking into account that intercultural effectiveness relates to communication skills, verbal and nonverbal behaviors together, which allow individuals to achieve their communication goals in intercultural interaction through an appropriate and effective performance. This concept is considered as the most significant dimension that must be dealt with when it

comes to individuals or students engaged in intercultural communication, because it is based on communication skills and attaining communication goals. Intercultural adroitness or effectiveness is the behavioral aspect of intercultural communicative competence in that it refers to “the ability to get the job done and attain communication goals in intercultural interactions.” (Chen & Starosta, 1996, p. 76)

1.2.1.1.1 Components of Intercultural Effectiveness

Scholars have identified various components to account for intercultural effective behaviors, and considered them as the key to achieve communication goals. They can be grouped into five main components which are “message skills, interaction management, behavioral flexibility, identity management, and relationship cultivation.” (Chen, 1989, 2005; Martin & Hammer, 1989; Ruben, 1977; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; cited in Portalla & Chen, 2010, p. 22)

- **Message Skills:** this refers to the ability to use the language of a culture other than one’s own, and in doing so the individual must “exercise one’s counterpart’s verbal and nonverbal behaviors” (Chen, 2007, p. 102). According to Rubin (1982; cited in Portalla & Chen 2010 p. 22), these verbal and nonverbal behaviors of message skills consist of four components: communication codes, oral message evaluation, basic speech communication skills, and human relations.

- **Interaction Management:** it is the key to keep the process of interaction in a smooth way, far away from perplexing moments. Interaction management can be shown through “taking turns in discussion, and initiating and terminating interaction based on an accurate assessment of the needs and desires of others” (Ruben & Kealey, 1979, p. 18; cited in Portalla & Chen, 2010, p. 22). Wiemann (1977, p. 199; cited in Portalla & Chen 2010, p. 23) discuss five components of interaction management, which are interruptions of the speaker are not permitted, one person talks at a time, speaker

turns must interchange, frequent and lengthy pauses should be avoided, and an interactant must be perceived as devoting full attention to the encounter.

- ***Behavioral Flexibility***: this means “the ability to observe an interaction, distinguish and make use of the appropriate behaviors, and adapt to the specific situational context” (Bochner & Kelly, 1974; cited in Portalla & Chen, 2010, p. 23). It is an essential component during interaction, because it helps the individual not only to select suitable behaviors, but also to cope with the different situations encountered.

- ***Identity Management***: it is “based on the ability of knowing oneself as an entity, and at the same time being able to inform the counterparts about who they are” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, p. 151). This implies that identity cannot be shaped alone by oneself; it is rather formed through the process of negotiation and reinforcement between the individuals.

- ***Relationship Cultivation***: this refers to “the ability to establish a certain degree of relationship with one’s partner in order to satisfy each other’s needs and reach a positive outcome of interaction” (Chen, 2007, p. 106). It is solely through this component that the individual needs can be satisfied and brilliant outcomes of interaction can be attained.

1.2.1.1.2 *Measuring Intercultural Effectiveness*

Usually, measuring one’s intercultural effectiveness, and his/her ability to achieve communication goals in an intercultural interaction, is done through the use of *Intercultural Effectiveness Scale* (IES), a research tool that is made by experts in the field like Portalla, Chen, and others, using intercultural items (items that are representative of one’s own intercultural knowledge).

1.2.1.1.2.1 *Intercultural Effectiveness Scale*

Many intercultural effectiveness scales (IES) were developed with a shared purpose: to

evaluate the necessary competencies to interacting effectively with people from different cultures; more specifically, to see how the target sample would perform in this context, and how effective they would be concerning achievement of communication goals. The following are some scales used for attaining the said purposes:

The instrument that was selected as a research tool for this study, the *Intercultural Effectiveness Scale* (IES), is made by Portalla & Chen (2010), professors at the University of Rhode Island, USA. The intercultural effectiveness scale (IES) was developed based on a review of the literature, where 76 items important for intercultural effectiveness were generated. The process of the development and validation of the instrument was about three stages: “the first stage aimed to reduce the number of the original items; the second stage aimed to generate the instrument; and the last stage aimed to test the validity of the instrument.” (Portalla & Chen, 2010, p. 24). As Portalla & Chen (2010, pp. 25-26) explained, the 20-item last version of the scale consists of six factors”; each factor contains particular items made for measuring a particular capability during interaction. They are: behavioral flexibility, interaction relaxation, interactant respect, message skills, identity maintenance, interaction management.

1.3 *Academic Achievement*

The students are familiar with the term of academic achievement, because their main objective during their learning process is a high academic achievement. More practically, academic achievement refers to the performance outcomes that demonstrate the degree to which an individual has reached definite goals that were the focal point of activities in the teaching process, specifically at school, college and university (Steinmayr et al., 2014). Academic achievement is based on some indicators used to determine it; these indicators are (1) general indicators such as procedural and declarative knowledge acquired in an educational system, (2) curricular-based criteria such as grades or performance on an educational achievement test,

and (3) cumulative indicators of academic achievement such as educational degrees and certificates. All these crucial factors involve academic endeavors and thus, more or less, reflect the academic capability of the individual. (Steinmayr et al., 2014)

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Research Participants

The case study for our research is represented by third year students of the Department of English at Constantine University during the academic year 2017-2018. The sample consists of 60 students divided into two groups selected according to their academic achievement. The first group consists of 30 students; they are selected according to their high academic achievement, with an average between 16.04 and 14.90. They are 22 females and 8 males. On the other hand, the other group consists of 30 students selected for representing the low academic achievers; they have an academic average between 06.00 and 07.10. They are 19 females and 11 males. The sample's age ranges between 20 and 24. Most of the participants have been studying English for 10 years.

2.2 Research Instrument

To carry out the research, the *Intercultural Effectiveness Scale*, designed by Portalla and Chen (2010), has been selected. The reason behind the choice of this research tool is that we were dealing with intercultural effectiveness as a concept and as a skill; therefore, the most reliable tool for this is the intercultural effectiveness scale itself. In addition to that, the scale is designed for the measurement of particular capacities and skills that are believed to be necessary in intercultural interaction. This scale aims at measuring the students' ability to distinguish between appropriate behaviors and adapt to specific situations, how comfort and relaxed students would feel in an intercultural interaction, their ability in using the language of the target culture fluently, the level of respect they would show, their ability to express ideas and answer questions during

interaction, and their capability to maintain the unique identity of their culturally different counterpart while also maintaining their own separate identity during interaction.

2.3 Results and Discussion

2.3.1 Comparison of the Two Groups Overall Results

As the comparison would show the level of difference between the groups, we attempted to make a comparison of the two groups participants' overall results of the scale.

Table 1: Overall Results of High and Low Achievers

	High Achievers	Low Achievers
Mean	77	59
Mode	78	55
Low score	67	47
High score	84	70

Reference: made by the researcher

Looking at table 1, it is clear to notice the difference between the two groups. Starting by the mean for each group, high academic achievers turned to a 77 score, while low academic achievers turned to a 59 score. As for the mode, 78 is that of the high academic achievers and it is higher than that scored by the low academic achievers: 55. Looking at the lowest score obtained by both groups would show that good achievers have done better (67, obtained twice) than the lower achievers (47, obtained once); the same is noticed in the case of the highest score of the groups: high academic achievers scored 84 (obtained once), and low academic achievers scored 70 (obtained once).

In this case, the t-test for the independent groups would give us the final decision on which group is more interculturally effective, but so far and after the numbers obtained above, it can be noticed that the students with high academic achievement are more interculturally effective during intercultural communication than students with low academic achievement.

Table 2: T-test for the Scale of High Achievers and Low Achievers

Intercultural Effectiveness Scale	Groups	Mean	SS	df	t	p
	High achievers	77	452.97	58	15.24	< .00001
	Low achievers	59	760.97			

$p < 0.05$, one-tailed *Reference:* made by the researcher

For degrees of freedom (58) corresponding to 0.05 level of significance and for one tailed hypothesis, and p value of < .00001, the results can be described as statistically significant because the computed t of 15.23824 (15.24) is much higher than the p value. Therefore and once again, high academic achievers are interculturally more effective than low academic achievers.

2.2.5.2 Comparison of the Two Groups Results of Individual Subscales

▪ Behavioural Flexibility

Table 3: Behavioral Flexibility Mean

Students	Mean
High Academic Achievers	12.46
Low Academic Achievers	10.93

Reference: made by the researcher

Good Academic achievement seems to be influential concerning behavioral flexibility. As we can see, students with high academic achievement are more likely to be flexible during interaction, and adapt more to specific situations. Possibly, high academic achievers are better than low academic achievers, because the former are said to believe more that it is possible to realize things even when they seem quite impossible. Moreover, they are likely to resist the fear of failure, and therefore, they are quite ready to adapt themselves to different situations to attain their goals.

▪ Interaction Relaxation

Table 4: Interaction Relaxation Mean

Students	Mean
High Academic Achievers	20.27
Low Academic Achievers	15.94

Reference: made by the researcher

The considerable difference, here, shows us that students with high academic achievement tend to feel more comfortable and more relaxed during

intercultural interaction than students with low academic achievement. Actually, this can be justified by the fact that a common trait of high academic achievers is self-confidence. This allows them to perform different tasks with more comfort and relaxation, which is not the case of low academic achievers, whose self-confidence may be affected by several factors.

▪ Interactant Respect

Table 5: Interactant Respect Mean

Students	Mean
High Academic Achievers	13.30
Low Academic Achievers	12.70

Reference: made by the researcher

Unlike the previous subscales, this one seems to have only a slight difference concerning the mean values, where both groups scored high in this skill. This means that, good academic achievement has only a slight impact on whether students prove to show respect to other culture or not. Moreover, learning a foreign language means learning a foreign culture as well; therefore, this can be helpful in the sense that the students turn to be more tolerant to accept differences between cultures, which makes them, regardless of their level, respect the others.

▪ Message Skills

Table 6: Message Skills Mean

Students	Mean
High Academic Achievers	12.03
Low Academic Achievers	08.13

Reference: made by the researcher

As the mean values of the two groups indicate, high academic achievement seems to be helpful in raising the students' ability to use the target language appropriately during intercultural communication. In fact, this difference can be traced

back to the assumption that high academic achievers are most of the time good communicators, as they convey their messages appropriately and accurately. For example, it has been found that they do not commit grammar mistakes when they interact, which makes their language accurate and, therefore, comprehensible.

▪ *Identity Maintenance*

Table 7: Identity Maintenance Mean

Students	Mean
High Academic Achievers	11.06
Low Academic Achievers	08.86

Reference: made by the researcher

From the scores obtained, we may say that good achievers are more capable of maintaining the unique identity of people who are culturally different, while also maintaining their own separate identity during interaction. In other words, they may be more aware than low academic achievers of when, where and why to keep their identity, because it depends on different situations. Being more intelligent and vigilant may help them considerably in managing issues related to identity better than low academic achievers.

▪ *Interaction Management*

Table 2.49 Interaction Management Mean

Students	Mean
High Academic Achievers	07.80
Low Academic Achievers	06.50

Reference: made by the researcher

In this table, we notice the difference between the mean values of the two groups, but we must mention that the intensity of the impact of the high academic achievement is not as with the previous subscales; low achievers see themselves able to manage interaction. Actually, it may seem

somehow contradictory that the low academic achievers score as high as academic achievers' managing interaction, especially, in most of their answers, they seemed uncertain to identify many points; moreover, they scored less than high achievers in many other points.

Conclusion

This research aimed at shedding light on the importance of integrating the cultural aspects in EFL classrooms in general, and more precisely the importance of intercultural effectiveness that turned out to be an unquestionable matter when it comes to intercultural communications. It became a key element to reach communication goals during this kind of interactions. For this reason, this research attempted to measure the students' intercultural effectiveness, and how effective and appropriate they would be in relation to their academic achievement. The obtained results revealed that students with high academic achievement are interculturally more effective than the students with less academic achievement.

People are certainly living in a globalized world, with numerous different cultural backgrounds. Hence, intercultural communications are more likely to occur every time individuals step out of their community, and this makes the skill of intercultural effectiveness, or the ability to achieve communication goals in intercultural interaction, a skill that must be acquired and well developed alongside the linguistic competence.

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