

# THE CONTEXT FOR DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

FLORENTINA ALEXANDRU\*

florentinaalexandru@yahoo.com

**Abstract:** *For the appropriateness and the effectiveness of the interpersonal communication generally and of the intercultural communication especially language proficiency alone is inadequate, because such a process requires knowledge of the ways language and culture interact and of how this interaction operates across cultures. As well individuals as communities will need in this multicultural context on the one hand to relativize their cultural background and to develop very different mentalities and attitudes in order to adapt to the new communication situations, to understand and to cooperate with people from any continent, ethnic origin or culture, and on the other hand to redefine the process of foreign language teaching and learning. From this point of view the key component of the communicative act becomes the intercultural communicative competence. This contribution based on the data from an empirical investigation focuses on the factors which contribute to the determination of the context that facilitates the development and the training of the intercultural communicative competence in the educational process.*

**Keywords:** *intercultural communicative competence, foreign languages, identity, mentalities and attitudes.*

## 1. Intercultural communication

A process of communication does not easily take place even between members of the same culture, let alone among people of different cultural origins. Likewise, it is proven the fact that members of some cultural contexts considered relatively close due to geographical neighbourhood, linguistic similarity, a similar historic, social and economic route can encounter major difficulties while communicating (Oskaar, 1983). From this point of view Europe is maybe the most relevant example taking into consideration the fact that the historic development of European cultures has known an almost identical pattern set on a base of a scale of universal,

---

\* Lecturer Ph.D, - "Dimitrie Cantemir" Christian University, Bucharest.

generally accepted and acknowledged values. At least, this fact gives the impression of a cultural likeness which is very powerful and the interactants' expectations are obviously developed according to this image. Despite an apparently common evolution, Europe is a multicultural, multilinguistic and multicentral context. What it appears to be easily surpassed at the surface, is really more difficult than when the interactants come from completely different cultural contexts, without common points and similarities which, in a way, contradicts Hall's statement (1990: 27) "*the greater the cultural distance, the more difficult the interface*".

Intercultural communication is based, in principle, on the same elements that we can find in intracultural communication and which offer the interactants a higher safety degree in the new communication situation. The intercultural communication situation also presents other characteristics that differentiate it from the intracultural, interpersonal communication such as:

- the different initial fond of knowledge
- divergent models of interpretation
- divergent systems of reference
- different contextualization indexes
- reduced methacommunicative space
- different communication styles.

These characteristics represent the main sources of intercultural communication problems.

Intercultural communication is first of all, a group communication, and the person who does not belong to the group is perceived as "*foreigner*". Between the "*foreigner*" and the members of a cultural group, perceived as different from the original one, an intercultural and "*interidentity*" encounter takes place (Khoa, 1993: 38), in which he/she really participates by being physically present, but, at the same time, by his/her belonging to a different culture. For this reason he/she positions him/herself, at least in the preliminary stages of communication, outside the interactional situation. The psychological effects of an unknown communication situation are uncertainty and fear. The efforts to adapt to a new situation involve strategies of diminishing the environmental pressure and of acknowledging behavioural patterns. The perception of the behavioural pattern of the other members of the group is orientated according to one's own model in such a way that individuals become

aware<sup>1</sup> of their behaviour only when they come into contact with people who interact according to other behavioural strategies. By comparing this to something different the individual has the possibility to interrogate his/her behaviour and to assess it. In a new communication situation, the foreigner is not certain of how to behave (cognitive and behavioural uncertainty) and develops a state of fear for this situation. The minimising of this state of anxiety and uncertainty depends on several factors, among which: knowledge of the target culture, linguistic competence in that language or in another foreign language, cultural identity, cultural similarities, cognitive complexity, tolerance for ambiguity, ethnolinguistic identity. As a rule, reduced cultural differences, almost unperceivable, put a higher pressure on the major interactants.

The influences, exercised on values representations and norms by cultural and social systems, become visible in different cultural standards according to which people interact. Fundamental causes of misunderstandings and also of a communication that is subject to failure are not to be found in poor linguistic competence, but in socio-cultural forms, in the interactants' different interests, representations and expectations. In order to overcome incomprehension and misunderstanding, one must become aware of similarities and differences, a preparation of the cross-cultural encounters is necessary and also the interactants must become sensitive to each other. Interactants' tendency, especially those coming from different cultural contexts, would be to achieve a cooperation based on a consensus of interests and of perspectives in such a way that the communication process has a positive result. The intercultural communicative situation indicates a high degree of instability because interactants are not aware of the differences between their interpretation models of reality and the different knowledge founds. A process of intercultural communication is mainly about communication supported by a metacommunication on the interactants' communicative behaviour more than controlling the process itself. The aims of such a metacommunicative process that accompanies communication itself are:

- ensuring a permanent mutual understanding of the actional intention and the intervention and correction possibilities;

---

<sup>1</sup> *"Habits are situation/behaviour sequences that are or have become automatic, so that they occur without self instruction. The individual is not usually conscious of these sequences. "*– Triandis, H. C. (1980): *Values, attitudes, and interpersonal behaviour*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 204.

- initiation of scenarios which can constitute the theme of the interactive contents, and can clearly and obviously present the cultural differences and understanding;
- negotiation of problems and of conditions and limits of acceptance;
- development of mutual cooperative situations which define the network configuration and also the limits to which this can suffer alterations.

## 2. Interculturality and identity

Multicultural reality generates, obviously, the interculturality phenomenon. Its understanding mainly depends on the identity concept. As a matter of fact existence means having an identity. The individual defines himself through individual identity, in relation with the social group and environment to which he belongs through social identity and in relation to a cultural system, common to a human colectivity, through cultural identity. The manifestation forms of identity are multiple representing an accumulation of the three identity dimensions above mentioned.

Any subject defines himself through individual identity. It represents a set of individually selected values generally accepted by the human group. The individual manifests his identity and tests the identity strategies by interacting<sup>2</sup> with other individuals in the group he belongs to or outside it. Thus, he obtains the coordinates of his similarity to others and those of his difference towards others. The identity image of an individual is made up of two layers, both visible, because they represent the individual in his relationship with his living environment. The permissivity degree of the two layers is different. The stratum made up of fundamental values of the culture the individual originates from is unadjustable and constitutes the resistance structure of individual identity. The other stratum is made up of accumulated experience in his interactional process with the others and it has a high degree of openness and contributes to the individual's adaptability to alteration. One can say that identity permanently changes, it is dynamic, interactive, and multilateral but the modification of individual identity is only partial.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Formation of identity by active identification, differentiation between I and Me; see G. H. Mead: Mind, Self and Society.*

Social identity is that form of identity attributed to the individual by the social environment he interacts with. Each individual looks for a positive social identity to confirm his native or acquired belonging to a certain social group. Social identity is *“that part of an individual’s self concept which derives from his (her) knowledge of his (her) membership in a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership”* (Tajfel, 1978: 63) and it influences the individual’s safety in his interaction with the other members of the group he wants to be identical with. Social identity doubled by an active ethnic status lead, in an intercultural communication situation, to a rise in the unsafely and anxiety state towards the new and the unknown.

By cultural identity the individual defines his belonging to a group, to a collectivity which possesses a common system of symbols and significances and also common norms. Cultural/collective identity is a system of living habits (being/*das Dasein*) and acting norms (acting/*das Handeln*), through which the individual defines him and interrogates the reference system by establishing a relationship with other social actors. Cultural identity is dynamic, it is a subject to changes, and it appears only through interacting and it is mainly transmitted not only from generation to generation but also horizontally, from a cultural circle towards a new comer to that cultural space *“L’identité [collective] repose sur le repli de chacun sur sa différence par rapport à l’Autre, sur son désir de s’opposer, de se distinguer, d’être soi et s’inscrit dans une intersubjectivité soit vis-à-vis des <in-group> soit vis-à-vis des <out-group>”*, it is *“l’objet d’une lutte continue pour la reconnaissance et s’exprime par un réengagement continu”* (Triantaphyllou, 2002:45).

Cultural identity, as an independent variable through which the cultural similarities and differences can be interpreted on the basis of intersubjectivity that is a transmission of significance from one person to another. Intersubjectivity appears to be *“a network of significances”* (Geertz, 1973) to which all the members of a culture are connected. In this network the individual defines his own cultural identity and thus he develops new identities, special to the interaction context. One can talk about a *“generative mechanism”* which directs the individual’s behaviour in intercultural contacts. The individual develops, alters and confirms his cultural identity through communication and his relationship with other social actors. Intercultural communication is a comparison, an evaluation, a confirmation and a change of identities all throughout interaction. In the process of intercultural communication cultural identity is influenced by

other variables such as: communication intention, the individual's characteristics, identity intensity, the number of interactants, and the content of the communication process.

Individual, social or cultural identity makes the difference between individuals – “*identity generates differences*”, says Tzvetan Todorov (1991). In intercultural communication there is, first of all, an identity encounter which means, on the one hand, the confirmation, interrogation and eventually the revision of one's own identity and, on the other hand, the identification and delimitation of the other's identity. In this process of identity study acceptance and rejection attitudes are generated and the latter are specifically to multicultural contexts where differences are more obvious at the level of cultural identity. Identity in globalization contexts is more like a unity in diversity marking a situational concordance in internalizing differences. That's why intercultural identity is characterized by cohesion and less by coherence, manifesting a high degree of fragility because its confirmation and construction are not on the long run. By this identity plural belonging the individual oscillates between “*place*” and “*non-place*” (Augé, 1997) that is between his place origin<sup>3</sup> and the space where nothing of his history and culture is represented.

An intercultural context defines itself through the dichotomy: identity – difference. This opposition in the perception of the environment implies certain characteristics of the interactants. Through these characteristics they can or cannot manifest their sensitivity to cultural diversity. We are talking about the degree of cultural openness or rejection of a person, about his/her ability to accept change to avoid cultural homogeneity as a result of globalizing process. The general tendency is to make this experience of change as less aggressive as possible and that is why there is a self-protective identity and cultural system, based on well-defined psychological components, these being in full accordance with the original culture. The certainty state is given by the fact that the individual proves a certain egocentrism while the other has only a functional role by interacting in the virtue of some “*rational roles*” (Wulf, 2005) which guarantees the correctness of the perception/message (logocentrism), that his cultural identity is superior to another (ethnocentrism) and that the mother tongue is the most important language in multilingualism conditions (linguacentrism). If the first two components, in relation to another being/foreigner, can offer an

---

<sup>3</sup> It is about the individual's identification with his own identity self with his group's collective memory, with the developed relational system (family, friends, acquaintances).

opportunity to interaction in the multicultural context, ethnocentrism and even linguacentrism have the most destructive<sup>4</sup> effects realizing the other's assimilation which is equivalent to its cultural annihilation and his identity one which is even more serious. The dynamic of diversity and implicitly of the difference considerably reduces the anticipation possibility and control of the social environment and that is why a plus of reflexivity on the part of the actants is necessary because it facilitates the self questioning and also the questioning of the communication situation and of the context. Permissivity, openness does not mean unconscious assimilation/adjusting but also transformation, change through identity construction and re-construction. Each person constructs his own personal and cultural identity.

### **3. Empirical study**

Taking into consideration the above mentioned points a research strategy has been developed and its coordinate is the formation of intercultural communicative competence in the process of teaching/learning foreign languages in linguistically and culturally homogenous educational contexts<sup>5</sup>.

The research instrument chosen was the questionnaire and in order to obtain conclusive results we selected a heterogeneous sample of individuals considering their education, age and occupation. However, the main preoccupation was having a slight degree of variation regarding the field of activity and the idea was to obtain this by a direct involvement of all respondents in the process of teaching and learning foreign languages, people who are part of mainly homogenous school environments. This target has allowed us to identify the existence of differences in perceiving the intercultural dimension and how much the development of an intercultural communication competence represents a need of both the executants and the beneficiaries of the process of teaching and learning foreign languages.

The research group includes a number of 650 people and the category distribution of subjects being as follows: 50 professors in the field of philology, 200 foreign language teachers, 200 students of foreign languages, possible teachers, and 200 pupils. Thus, all the four links involved in the educational process have been taken into consideration.

---

<sup>4</sup> See the indications of the universality of western culture, both in different periods of colonialism and in the periods after it.

<sup>5</sup> The research is more ample, here being mentioned only data about this aspect.

The hypotheses of the study are:

- If the process of teaching and learning a foreign language involves an intercultural dimension as well, then this is present regardless of the homogeneity degree of the cultural and linguistic educational environment.
- If learning a foreign language means knowing and understanding both the target language and culture and also the self-knowledge and the reflection of one's knowledge background, then this process implies an intercultural dialogue which is based on a specific competence that is the intercultural communicative competence.

#### 4. Presentation and interpretation of the research results

**Question 1:** *What methodological approach corresponds to the current needs of teaching and learning foreign languages?*

variant	independent			combined				total
	a	b	c	a+b	a+c	b+c	a+b+c	
professors	3	3	30	2	2	3	7	50
teachers	9	8	158	10	1	3	11	200
students	55	43	65	5	8	6	17	200
pupils	49	18	53	22	12	3	43	100

Table 1: The distribution of frequency for the independent and combined answers for the four samples of respondents

variant	number of persons				structure %			
	A <sup>6</sup>	B	C	D	A	B	C	D
grammar based approach	14	31	85	126	19,72	13,14	33,73	39,01
text based approach	15	32	71	86	21,13	13,56	28,17	26,62
communicative-pragmatic based approach	42	173	96	111	59,15	73,30	38,10	34,37
<b>Total</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>236</b>	<b>252</b>	<b>323</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
media numărului de abordări	1.42	1.18	1.26	1.62	-	-	-	-

Table 2: The distribution of frequency and percentage for the independent and combined answers for the four samples of respondents

<sup>6</sup> A – professors, B – teachers, C – students, D – pupils



From the point of view of the variants of methodological approach (grammar based approach-a, text based approach-b, communicative-pragmatic based approach-c) both professors and teachers focus mainly on a communicative-pragmatic approach. *The process of teaching foreign languages tends in their opinion, from a methodological point of view, to a change of the centre of interest on the communicative-pragmatic approach*, while for the other two categories (as expected) approaches are multiple (the highest average for the number of approaches appears in the case of pupils with 1,62 points) and they have almost the same degree of importance (table 2). The fact that students and pupils are in a process of acquisition/increasing of the foreign language knowledge, explains the need for diversified approaches which allow them to come into contact with all areas and levels when forming linguistic competences, first of all, and also socio cultural ones. To put it otherwise, their option wholly justifies the integrative approach which represents a synergy of all three central methods that have been used so far in teaching/learning foreign languages – the method of grammar-translation focused on a strict cognitive formation from a linguistic point of view (text based approach), the behaviourist methods focused on the automatization of linguistic structures (grammar based approach) and the communicative method centred on using the language and the authenticity of communication (communicative-pragmatic approach).

The high percentages obtained for the “*communicative-pragmatic approach*” for both categories of teachers (59,15% in the academic environment and 73,3% in the pre-university environment) (table 2), show, on the one hand, a good knowledge of the current requirements in the teaching foreign languages, as they are presented in the *Common European Framework of Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessing* and, on the other hand, their application in the teaching act proper which also means a concordance with the European educational system. The tendency to centre teaching on one approach as it happens in the case of foreign language teachers (the average of approaches is the lowest – 1,18) can lead to a disregard or even neglect of the other two approaches. Such an opinion comes into contrast with the beneficiaries’ expectations, as can be clearly seen in the graph below (figure 1). Much more realistic is the rapport among the three approaches in academic context. The text based methodological approach has the lowest points because it implies different competences and a high effort of understanding. This is also reflected in written exams which have a lower frequency in comparison with oral

exams. Generally but also, in a misleading way, the text is not assimilated in the communication process. For many people communication is only the spoken language.

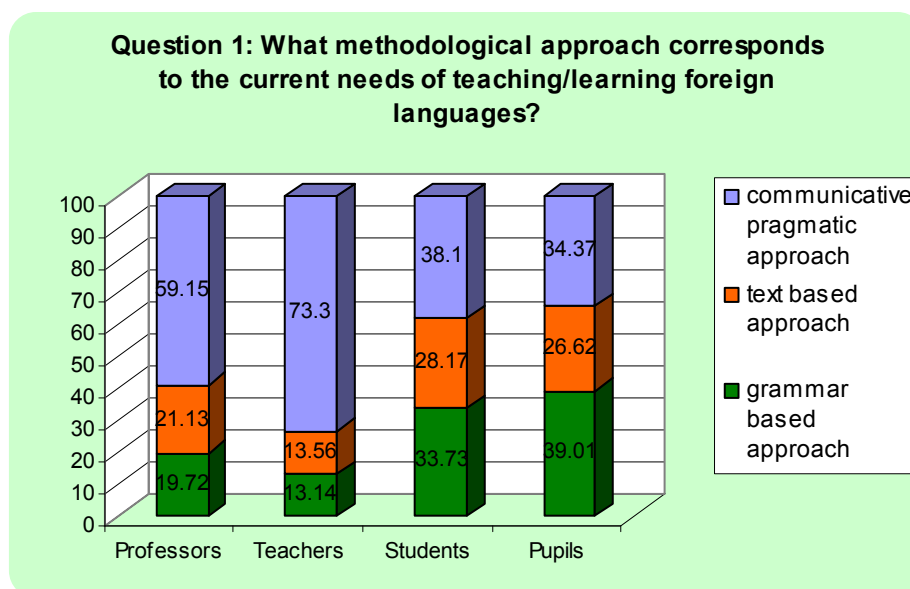


Figure 1

The dispersional analysis of the groups also imposed the determination of the variability degree of all elements that can contribute to the definition of the context of developing an intercultural communicative competence in the initial training of foreign language teachers.

**Question 2:** *In what way do the following elements contribute to the developing of intercultural communicative competence?*

variant	average			structure %		
	A <sup>7</sup>	B	C.	A	B	C
1.knowledge of foreign language	1,34	1,22	1,22	40,79	35,95	34,76
2.knowledge of the basic principles of interpersonal communication	1,82	1,86	1,66	48,69	37,28	43,32
3.knowledge of different communication styles according to the cultural space	1,86	1,96	1,89	54,59	39,70	39,45

<sup>7</sup> A – professors, B – teachers, C – students

4.knowledge of the methacommunicative strategies of identification, analysis, avoidance and repairing of disturbed situations	2,00	2,11	2,05	42,86	43,07	38,91
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,75</b>	<b>1,78</b>	<b>1,71</b>	<b>50,34</b>	<b>44,69</b>	<b>44,22</b>

Table 3: The degree of variation in the communication elements, which can contribute to the development of intercultural communicative competence, in the opinion of three samples of respondents

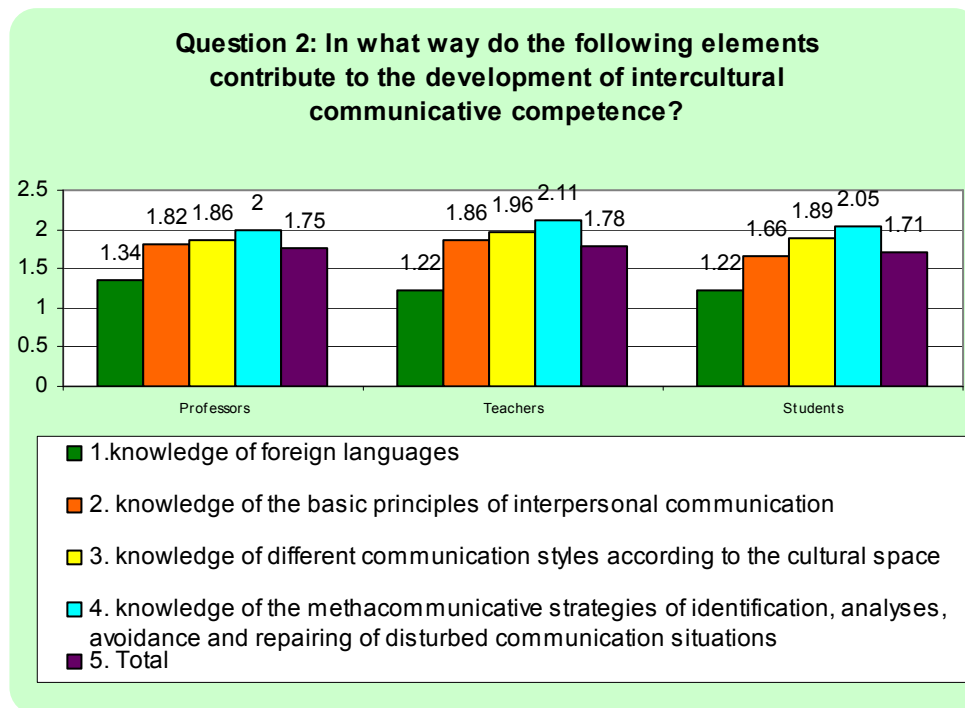


Figure 2

As can be already seen from the above table and graph, the most important part in developing the intercultural communicative competence, in all three categories of respondents, is played by knowledge of a foreign language, the focus being the average level (1.22-1.34). From the point of view of the variation, there is, both for foreign language teachers and students, a homogenous series as definition of this objective's importance (35% of the variation index). At the level of professors there is

a heterogeneous series regarding a certain hierarchy of the elements that contribute to the development of the intercultural communicative competence. This heterogeneity can be argued by the type of the lecture sustained by each professor. “*Knowledge of the methacommunicative strategies of identification, analysis, avoidance and repairing of distorted communication situations*” is, for the three batches of respondents, less important than the other shown variants. On the whole, the average is represented by the high variant (1,71-1,78) and the variation is between 44,22% and 50,34%.

**Question 3:** *In what way do the following abilities and capacities contribute to the development of intercultural communicative competence?*

variant	average			structure %		
	A <sup>8</sup>	B	C	A	B	C
1. sensitivity to other cultures and mentalities	1,30	1,55	1,92	41,42	39,13	41,59
2. capacity of adaptation	1,62	1,69	1,57	40,53	39,35	42,74
3. capacity of assuming perspectives belonging to other culture	1,50	1,85	1,80	38,30	37,88	36,43
4. capacity of understanding cultural differences	1,39	1,61	1,65	34,95	39,25	41,33
5. tolerance to diversity	1,45	1,63	1,78	44,09	44,50	47,02
6. tolerance to ambiguity	2,42	2,42	2,31	48,49	39,45	41,47
7. transcultural empathy	1,80	1,92	2,26	50,92	42,87	42,36
8. socio-cultural and linguistic reflection	1,86	2,18	2,20	47,81	44,09	40,16
9. objectivity	2,00	1,91	1,82	44,72	41,35	43,69
10. flexibility	1,58	1,54	1,60	41,85	41,06	40,02
11. motivation	1,69	1,39	1,56	50,19	43,61	43,61
12. humour	2,55	2,27	2,36	41,91	42,56	43,15
13. creativity	2,26	1,94	1,78	51,31	44,46	50,35
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,80</b>	<b>1,83</b>	<b>1,89</b>	<b>51,61</b>	<b>44,91</b>	<b>45,59</b>

Table 4: The degree of variation of capabilities and skills, which can contribute to the development of intercultural communicative competence, in the opinion of three samples of respondents

<sup>8</sup> A – professors, B – teachers, C – students

**Question 3: In what way do the following abilities and capacities contribute to the development of intercultural communicative competence?**

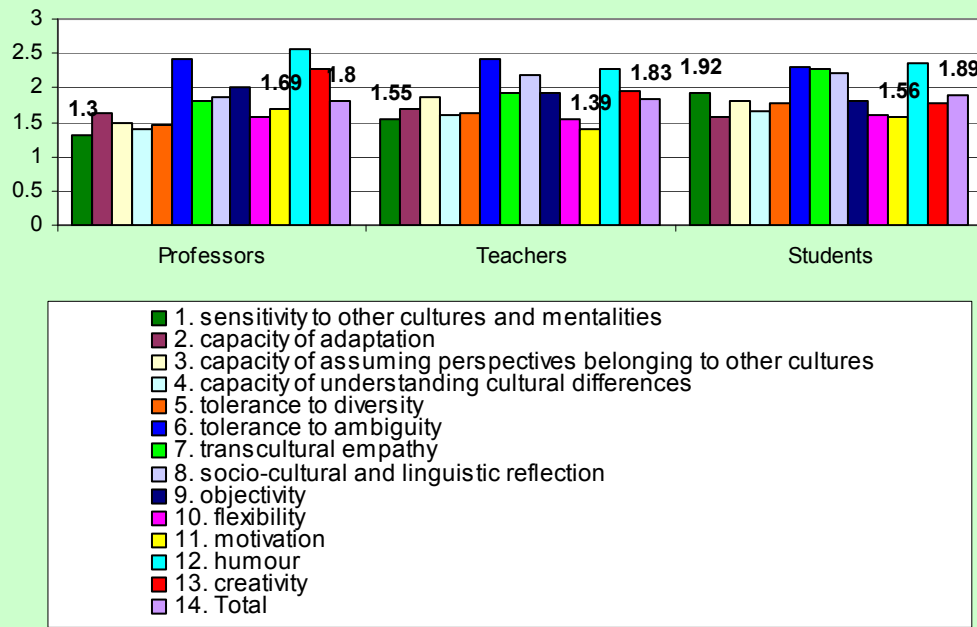


Figure 3

Ranking the capabilities and skills which, in the view of professors, foreign language teachers and students, can contribute to the developing of the intercultural communicative competence, we obtained the following results (table 4 and table 5):

rank	professors	teachers	students
1.	sensitivity to other cultures and mentalities	motivation	motivation
2.	capacity of understanding cultural differences	flexibility	capacity of adaptation
3.	tolerance to diversity	sensitivity to other cultures and mentalities	flexibility

4.	capacity of assuming perspectives belonging to other culture	capacity of understanding cultural differences	capacity of understanding cultural differences
5.	flexibility	tolerance to diversity	tolerance to diversity
6.	capacity of adaptation	capacity of adaptation	creativity
7.	motivation	capacity of assuming perspectives belonging to other culture	capacity of assuming perspectives belonging to other culture
8.	empathy	objectivity	objectivity
9.	socio-cultural and linguistic reflection	empathy	sensitivity to other cultures and mentalities
10.	objectivity	creativity	socio-cultural and linguistic reflection
11.	creativity	socio-cultural and linguistic reflection	empathy
12.	tolerance to ambiguity	humour	tolerance to ambiguity
13.	humour	tolerance to ambiguity	humour

Table 5: The hierarchy of capabilities and skills which can contribute to the development of intercultural communicative competence in the respondents' opinion.

Analysing the answers and comparing the hierarchies one can state the following:

- on the first three positions, the nine variants given, there are four capabilities (77,78%) and two skills (22,22%): the capabilities chosen by the respondents are: *flexibility, motivation, sensitivity to other cultures and mentalities, tolerance to diversity*, the first three can be found to each of the two groups of respondents (*sensitivity*

- to other cultures and mentalities* – professors/teachers, *motivation and flexibility* – teachers/students);
- *motivation* represents the first criterion in developing the intercultural competence both in the case of foreign language teachers and students with 1,39 points and 1,56 points, even if the series was heterogeneous (43,61% in the case of both batches); for professors *the motivation* is a highly heterogeneous one (50,19%) the average being 1,69 this meaning rank 7; on the other hand *the sensitivity to other cultures and mentalities* with an average of 1,3 points is perceived as having the highest contribution;
  - the second and the third places are taken, in the case of teachers, by *flexibility* (1,54 points) and *sensitivity to other cultures and mentalities* (1,55 points), in the case of students, by *adaptation capacity* (1,57 points) and *flexibility* (1,60 points); it is to be noticed the fact that, just like *motivation*, *flexibility* is considered a fundamental capability in developing the intercultural competence, at least in two categories of respondents; in the case of professors the most important capabilities are the *capacity to understand cultural differences and the tolerance to diversity*;
  - if for the teachers the first three most important factors are represented by capabilities, professors and students appreciate with a higher percentage also two skills (*capacity of understanding cultural differences and capacity of adaptation*) which, in fact, are connected with the capabilities that can be found on the neighbouring positions;
  - four of the proposed variants – *flexibility, tolerance to diversity, capacity of adaptation and capacity of understanding cultural differences* – received the same appreciation since they, in the case of all three batches, are found among the first six options, a fact that indicated a homogeneity of opinions although the variation indexes indicate heterogeneity;
  - for the positions from 1 to 6 one could notice a symbiosis of the skills and the capabilities that are generated; the most relevant is that of the professors where the ranking places are alternating between a capability and a skill which is determined by that capability;
  - the middle of the top is dominated by three factors – *empathy, socio-cultural and linguistic reflection and objectivity* – which can be

found in all three batches with different values of the appreciation;

- the last two positions are occupied, in the three batches, by the same factors: *tolerance to ambiguity and humour*;
- by comparing the averages for the three batches one can notice the fact that students' opinions are closer to those of the teachers:
  - *capacity to assume perspectives of another culture* (1,85 with 1,80)
  - *capacity to understand cultural differences* (1,61 with 1,65)
  - *socio-cultural and linguistic reflection* (2,18 with 2,20).

Obviously, for all three batches, the capabilities are the starting points in developing the intercultural competence and only then the skills contribute to this process. The obtained data indicate the fact that *the psycho-emotional field is essential in the development of the intercultural competence*.

On the whole, there is a strict hierarchy of the averages with 1,80 points in the case of professors, 1,83 for foreign language teachers and 1,89 points for students (figure 3). The level of training increased the degree of internalizing the capabilities and the skills which contribute to the development of the intercultural competence.

The obtained results about the factors that can influence the development of the intercultural competence impose a few clarifications. Thus, the fact that both foreign language teachers and students grant the highest importance to *motivation* in developing the intercultural competence justifies the link between the target culture and language since everyone is aware of the importance that motivation plays in learning a foreign language. Both inner and outer motivation, interest and performance, strategic knowledge and self-responsibility are key concepts of the motivational psychology which need to characterise a teaching process which is motivating for both parts, for the trainee and for the trainer. The teacher's role is to offer a stimulating environment and the student's motivation, based on a feedback, determines the teacher's wish to permanently improve the teaching act.

*Flexibility and tolerance* are two extremely used terms which risk losing their significance by decontextualizing. In the process of teaching/learning foreign languages, combined with an intercultural



dialogue, even in homogenous learning environments, flexibility and tolerance to diversity are defining in communication, interaction, a fact that was clearly shown by the answers obtained. Flexibility and tolerance lead one to another and they are determined by family, school and also by the cultural dimensions promoted by a certain society. Flexibility means openness to relativization, alternative and tolerance to diversity, recognition and acceptance of pluralism and difference. The lack of these capabilities or their restraint leads to a difficult and even incorrect perception of the target culture. The enclosure in a cultural space, the original one, favours the formation of stereotypes, prejudices and clichés and encourages racism and xenophobia. Tolerance means recognition: “*the cultural conscience of a society establishes the criteria according to which the persons are socially assessed*” (Honneth, 1994:198).

If *tolerance to diversity* is found in the high positions of the ranking list, *tolerance to ambiguity* takes the last positions in all respondents’ opinions (12<sup>th</sup> place – professors and students, 13<sup>th</sup> place – teachers). Although, we are talking about tolerance in both case, this opinion could have two explanations, either lack of contacts with people whose communicating style is less explicit (collectivist cultures, high context cultures), and a large part of the information is found in the physical context and in individuals or a rather high degree of ambiguity, tolerated by communicating in Romanian, makes this trait highly explainable.

*Socio-cultural reflection* is based on the recognition principle, a basic principle of the pedagogy of socio-cultural diversity which infers its identity and relationship with culture. Reflection is possible only by communication interaction/dialogue. Linguistic internalization’s target is the acceptance of multilingualism by developing the metalinguistic capacity.

The low value obtained by *humour*, in all batches of respondents, makes one believe that the Romanian school environment is more formal and less prone to superficial, the humorous aspect being taken for lack of seriousness. Thus, this feature also occupies last position, 2, 36 points, in students’ opinions. On the other hand, it is possible that respondents didn’t take into consideration the fact that this humorous aspect, from anecdote/joke to irony, is the most difficult to master in an intercultural encounter, since humour has a clear cultural print leading to large differences. In many situations inadequate use of humorous elements jeopardises communication and it can even lead to a complete termination of interaction. At this level the relation between cultural and linguistic knowledge can be easily and clearly seen.

In reference to the *adaptation capacity* there is a necessary distinction to be made between adaptation by assimilation and that by integration. Foreign languages methodology for mainly homogenous cultural environments must have in view the development of the intercultural communicative competence which can ensure the integration in a foreign context by openness to that environment and by decentralization.

### **5. Final remarks**

What do these attributes of intercultural communication mean? Depending on the place of the interaction and its purposes, these socio-cultural and psycho-cultural elements are chosen to enable an optimal development of communication as much as possible. By changing the place, it is obvious that the contextual conditions are changed, thus intercultural communication has a highly *situational* character. One must also take into consideration the concept of context. A common context is the result of a cognitive and interactional process, even in recurrent situations where action is based on a knowledge fund and common expectations, a fact which is relevant only in intracultural communication. In intercultural encounters these repetitive situations, with the ability to create routine, become the mainly disturbing factors.

Interculture as an open space, where the cultures of the interactants meet, has a high degree of permissivity. The elements vary, as we have shown, according to context, in such a way, that some elements which are necessary in some communication situations can prove to be, in other situations, not only useless but even harmful to the communication results. This fluidity of the system, explainable as we have shown through the cultural belonging of the interactants, makes communication more difficult and that's why a major role is assumed by the interpretation, by the correct assessment of the communication and reflection situation.

The intercultural communication situations are, as a rule, time-consuming, needing an elaboration of the strategies of approaching the interaction, but also expensive taking into consideration the preparation required by the interactants. In everyday communication it is possible that these two factors are not to visible but they also exist at this level. Despite financial and temporal efforts that have been made to achieve desired communication goals, the created intermediary area, transcultural interculture, for a certain intercultural interaction is only *temporary*. Once the interaction is ended each interactant comes back to his native context and the common zone, generated between the different cultures, is no

longer necessary as a communication environment. A new transcultural communication situation supposes the appearance of a new intermediary area.

## REFERENCES

1. Bimmel, Peter, (2002), *Aktuelles Fachlexikon*. În: Fremdsprache Deutsch Heft 26. Stuttgart: Klett Edition Deutsch.
2. Bolten, J., (2000), *Konsens durch die Anerkennung von Dissens: Auch ein Kapitel aus der ökonomischen Standardisierungsproblematik*. in: Ethik und Sozialwissenschaften 11(2000), Nr.3.
3. Piepho, H. E., (1974), *Kommunikative Kompetenz als übergeordnetes Lernziel im Englischunterricht*. Limburg: Frankonius.
4. Simmel, Georg, (1992), *Exkurs über den Fremden*. În: Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung, Frankfurt/M.
5. Tajfel, H., (1978), *Social categorization, social identity, and social comparison*. in: H. Tajfel (ed.): *Differentiation between social groups*. London: Academic Press.
6. Wulf, Christoph, (2005), *Puncte critice în transmiterea și învățarea moștenirii intangibile*. in: L. Bârlogeanu, (coord.), *Identitate și globalizare*. Bucharest, Humanitas Educational.