A SZORONGÁS HATÁSA NEMZETKÖZI HALLGATÓK MAGYAROR-SZÁGI INTERKULTURÁLIS KOMMUNIKÁCIÓJÁRA

THE IMPACT OF ANXIETY ON INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN HUNGARY[1]

BAJZÁT TÜNDE[2]

Felsőoktatásban tanulni számos kihívást jelent minden diák számára, különös tekintettel a nemzetközi hallgatókra. Az általános kihívásokon kívül, amivel mindannyiuknak szembe kell nézniük, a külföldi hallgatók számos kulturális különbséggel, kihívással és nehézséggel találkoznak. Tanulmányomban azt elemzem, hogy a külföldi hallgatók szorongása hogyan befolyásolta interkulturális kommunikációjukat Magyarországon.

Kulcsszavak: interkulturális kommunikáció, szorongás, nemzetközi hallgatók

Studying at a higher educational institution is a challenging experience for all students, especially for international students. Besides the common challenges all of them have to face, foreign students experience several cultural dissimilarities, challenges and difficulties. The paper analyses the impact of anxiety on intercultural communication among international students in Hungary.

Keywords: intercultural communication, anxiety, international students

INTRODUCTION

Advances in communication technology have turned our world into a global village. In this global village, more and more people live in countries other than their homelands for business, educational, labour or other purposes. These circumstances require people to understand cultural differences and communicate across cultural borders. Intercultural communication occurs when "[…] a message produced in one culture must be processed in another culture" (PORTER and SAMOVAR 1997: 8). This circumstance is quite problematic because "[…] culture forges and shapes the individual communicator" (PORTER and SAMOVAR 1997: 21). Due to the differences that interlocutors have to face in intercultural communication, misunderstandings, problems or even conflicts can arise. If someone cannot function well in another culture, it can be a physically and mentally stressful as well as disappointing experience. Therefore the aim of this paper is to find out how anxiety influences the intercultural communication of international students in Hungary. The first part of the paper presents the

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[2]   **BAJZÁT Tünde**
egyetemi docens
Miskolci Egyetem Idegennyelvi Oktatási Központ
3515 Miskolc-Egyetemváros
tunde.bajzat@gmail.com

theoretical background, method, setting and subjects of the research. The second part focuses on the results of the empirical study.

1. The theoretical background of the research

Several research studies have been carried out to find out the impact of anxiety on intercultural communication. LaRay M. Barna's research (Barna 1997: 370–377) showed that there are six stumbling blocks in intercultural communication: assumption of similarities, language differences, nonverbal misinterpretations, preconceptions and stereotypes, tendency to evaluate, and high anxiety. High anxiety, also known as tension or stress, is a common feature of intercultural communication because one faces several uncertainties. Anxiety and tension are interconnected because the individual cannot be mentally anxious without being physically tense. Positive attitudes and moderate tension fill the individual with energy to meet the challenges. On the other hand, too much anxiety or tension requires some relief, which often comes in the form of defence, such as withdrawal or hostility – that is why it is considered to be a stumbling block. Stress is inherent in intercultural communication and disturbs the internal equilibrium of the individual system. Therefore one has to be interculturally competent to be able to manage such stress, regain internal balance and carry out the communication process, which would result in successful interaction. High anxiety often underlies and compounds the five other stumbling blocks. If a person stays in a foreign culture for a longer period of time, due to the constant stress, the individual will be affected by culture shock. This sustained anxiety will result in the individual's energy loss, one's physical capacity is weakened, there is a feeling of exhaustion or depression may take over. In order to avoid such problems, it is essential to learn to accept cultural diversity with interest and manage normal stress reactions by activating positive coping mechanisms. If someone expects something to be exciting rather than frightening, somatic changes in the body are more likely to be interpreted as excitement.

Another study, conducted by Yener Keles (Keles 2013: 1519) among 10 European Erasmus exchange students who studied at the University of Mugla in Turkey showed that before going to Turkey to study there, some of the respondents were not anxious because there were some people from the same country; others said they were not anxious, but rather excited about what would come. A few of them reported that they were anxious because before going to Turkey they had heard frightening things about life in Turkey.

Song Wang, Xiujie Sun and Changyuan Liu (Wang–Sun–Liu 2010: 207) carried out their study among Chinese graduate students and their American advisors in U.S. institutions of higher education. 107 Chinese graduate students and 49 American advisors participated in the questionnaire study and 10 Chinese graduate students and 6 American professors took part in the follow-up interview. The results presented that language proficiency and communication in the classroom showed a higher level of anxiety than culture-related behaviour.

The research study described in the paper is similar to the previously shown studies because it also intends to find out the impacts of anxiety on intercultural communication abroad. On the other hand, it is different from the previously described papers because it aims to show the reasons of anxiety in detail before travelling to Hungary and during the participants' stay.

2. The aim, method, setting and subjects of the research

This part of the paper describes in detail the aim, method, setting and subjects of the empirical study. The aim of the empirical study was to learn about the impact of anxiety in international students' intercultural communication at a university in North Hungary. It was hoped that on

the basis of the findings, suggestions could be made on what changes should be carried out in Hungarian tertiary education to better satisfy the needs and promote the adaptation of international students and to help Hungarian students' preparation to study abroad.

The analysed data are partial results of an empirical study. To obtain the research data, non-probability sampling was chosen. It is used when probability sampling is difficult to achieve. Its disadvantage is that it does not involve random selection. Non-probability sampling may not represent the population well, therefore the sample cannot be considered to be representative of the examined population (MAJOROS 2004: 102–104).

In the present research, non-probability sampling was used because doing research among international students who are unknown to the researcher is a difficult task as the researcher has no means to convince the participants to take part in the research. However, this method seemed to be the most suitable one and the individuals could decide whether to participate in the study or not.

The method of data collection was the questionnaire because it is useful for collecting data from large groups of subjects, and it makes large samples easier to process (BABBIE 2001: 274).

The English questionnaire contained closed and open-ended questions and Likert scales.

Closed questions were used because they direct the respondents' thoughts, but at the same time, they allow the researcher to compare the participants' answers and are easy to process. It is easier and quicker to answer closed questions. The disadvantages are the loss of spontaneity and expressiveness (OPPENHEIM 2005: 112–114). The closed questions concerned the participants' personal data, the exchange programme in the framework of which they studied at the University of Miskolc, the faculty and the programme they attended at Miskolc University, the duration of their stay, whether it was the first time they had come to Hungary, and whether they were anxious when they came to Hungary.

Open ended questions give freedom to the respondents, let their thoughts roam freely, and free-response questions are answered spontaneously. They are easy to ask, but difficult to answer and even more difficult to analyse (OPPENHEIM 2005: 112–113). The open-ended questions enquired about the international students' country of their origin and the participants' explanations for anxiety about studying abroad.

The Likert scales aimed to measure the frequency of the international students' anxiety because of not knowing or understanding Hungarian cultural customs during their stay in Hungary.

As the survey method, the self-completion questionnaire was used: the participants filled in the questionnaire, which they received by e-mail and then they sent it back to the researcher. The respondents voluntarily completed the questionnaire and their anonymity was assured.

The study was conducted at the University of Miskolc in North Hungary in winter 2016, where international students who previously attended or are presently studying at the different faculties of the University filled in the English questionnaire. The international students studied at the University of Miskolc between September 2008 and January 2016. The questionnaire was sent out to 418 e-mail addresses and 67 international students (16%) answered the questions.

Table 1 contains further information of the foreign students in question. We can see that a little more than half of the respondents (58%) are male; and almost half of them are female foreigners (42%). The table shows that the participants are quite young: their average age is 27.18 years, a third of them (37%) are between 21 and 25 years of age, nearly half of them (46%) are between 26 and 30 years of age, a few of them (14%) are between 31 and 35 years

of age, and only 2 respondents (3%) are above 35. The table illustrates that half of the participants (52%) studied in Hungary in the framework of the Erasmus programme, more than a third of the respondents (39%) arrived in Hungary with the help of Stipendium Hungaricum programme, and a few students (9%) came with the Brazilian Science Without Borders programme. We can see that almost half of the participants (49%) attended a Bachelor's programme at the University of Miskolc, more than a third of them (39%) studied in a Master's programme and a few of the foreigners (12%) went to a PhD programme. The table also shows that almost a third of the respondents (28%) attended the Faculty of Economics at Miskolc University, a fifth of them (21%) chose the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering and Computer Science, some of them studied at the Faculty of Earth Science and Engineering (18%) and at the Faculty of Materials Science and Engineering (17%), fewer participants attended the Faculty of Law (8%) and the Faculty of Arts (4%), and there were only a few of them who decided to study at the Faculty of Health Care Studies (3%) and Bartók Béla Institute of Music (1%). We can also see that nearly half of the respondents (46%) stayed in Hungary for one semester, more than a third of them (36%) studied at the University of Miskolc for two semesters, some of them (15%) attended Miskolc University for four semesters, and only a few participants (3%) stayed for three semesters.

Table 1
The subjects of the research (n = 67)

	Number of students	Percentage
GENDER	Female: 28	42%
	Male: 39	58%
AGE	average age: 27.18 years	–
	21-25 years: 25	37%
	26-30 years: 31	46%
	31-35 years: 9	14%
	above 35: 2	3%
NAME OF THE EXCHANGE PROGRAMME	Brazilian Science Without Borders: 6	9%
	Erasmus: 35	52%
	Stipendium Hungaricum: 26	39%
STUDIED IN	BSc programme: 33	49%
	MSc programme: 26	39%
	PhD programme: 8	12%
STUDIED AT THE FACULTY OF	Economics	28%
	Mechanical Engineering and Computer Science	21%
	Earth Science and Engineering	18%
	Materials Science and Engineering	17%
	Law	8%
	Arts	4%
	Health Care Studies	3%
	Bartók Béla Institute of Music	1%
DURATION OF STAY	1 semester: 31	46%
	2 semesters: 24	36%
	3 semesters: 2	3%
	4 semesters: 10	15%

As far as the country of origin is concerned, the participating students arrived from 22 different countries mainly from Europe. Most of the students filling in the questionnaire came from Turkey (8 students) and Spain (7 students). Some of the participants arrived from Brazil (6 students), Iraq (5 students), Algeria (4 students), Italy (4 students), Nigeria (4 students), Ecuador (3 students), Germany (3 students), Greece (3 students), India (3 students), Lithuania (3 students), Bulgaria (2 students), China (2 students), Poland (2 students) and Romania (2 students). There was one student from each of the following countries: Colombia, France, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Mongolia and Vietnam. For most of the participants (89%) it was the first time they had come to Hungary, and only some of them (11%) had visited Hungary previously.

3. THE RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

To the closed question: "When you came to Hungary, were you anxious because you did not know what you were expected to do?" almost half of the participants (28 students, 42%) answered yes and a little more than half of them (39 students, 58%) answered no.

More than half of the respondents (36 students, 54%) gave an explanation for their answers. Nineteen participants explained why they were anxious. 7 students felt anxious because it was the first time in their lives that they had left their home countries and lived abroad in a different environment. Here is an example from a Turkish female student: "This is the first time that I stay in a foreign country, and I didn't know the rules about everything." A female participant from Georgia also felt the same way: "I was anxious, because it was my first time here as a student." Another respondent, a Spanish female expressed the same feeling: "It was my first time living abroad, and I was worried about my final thesis." A student from Ecuador was stressed not only because of visiting a new country, but a new continent at the same time, as he said the following: "Because it was my first time in Europe and I didn't know what to expect from the culture, traditions, food, people and the way of living." Although it was the first time living abroad and they were anxious still they were excited at the same time, as it is reflected by the answers of two participants. One of them, a male respondent arriving from Spain, said: "I had never lived alone or abroad, so that made me a little anxious, but I was eager for the experience." The other student who shared his positive view was also a Spanish male participant who expressed his feelings the following way: "Especially because it was the first time I was living abroad for a period longer than two weeks, but it was more a kind of excitement than a negative feeling."

Some respondents felt anxious due to communication differences that might result in misunderstandings. "Yes, because people didn't understand English and I had problems to communicate", remarked a male student from India. An Italian male participant had a similar fear: "Yes, due to the fact that the level of my Hungarian knowledge is at intermediate level and I did not know it for sure whether the people here spoke proper English." A female respondent from Brazil also shared this view: "I was anxious especially, because it was my first time abroad and I arrived in a country the language of which I didn't speak." A Chinese female participant's answer clearly reflects how communication problems lead to disappointment causing further stress: "During the first semester I was so anxious about my studies here because I am the second international PhD student here and there was only me in the class, no other classmates. I feel unsafe about it, and I don't know clearly how to do research, neither could anybody help. Because of the language I can't read documents, because almost all the documents or information are in Hungarian. And the Stipendium Hungaricum program

is also new in Miskolc, I feel that some professors have not prepared well to teach in English, so more or less I feel disappointed, which also makes me anxious."

Several of the international students were worried because of facing new challenges, living in a new country, meeting new people and a new culture, and they did not know what to expect, as it is reflected in the answer of a female participant from Italy: "I was anxious, because it was a new experience and I did not know anybody." Her feelings are echoed by a Spanish male respondent: "Because it was a new country for me, a different culture, different people and a different language." In spite of gaining intercultural experiences while living in another country, a male student from Brazil still had fears of the unknown challenges awaiting him in Hungary: "Despite the fact that I lived in Canada for a few months, going to Hungary was a whole new challenge. It was a country hitherto unknown to me. I didn't know the customs, the habits, etc., I felt a little scared." A female Colombian participant was not afraid of the unknown, but of communication problems and her studies, as she said: "I was anxious, because of the new experiences, meeting new people, I didn't speak Hungarian and my new studies in another country." A male respondent from Brazil was nervous due to the expectations: "I was anxious because of the expectations concerning how it would be." Although two of the female students felt anxious, at the same time they knew it was a natural accompanying feeling when one goes abroad, as it is stated by a Spanish participant: "Just the normal when you are moving to another country for a time frame." Her answer is echoed by a respondent from France: "Yes, but I think it's normal. At the same time I was very excited to discover a new country."

One of the international students, an Algerian female participant felt nervous due to the differences in weather, she wrote the following: "I was anxious, because a lot of people told me that in Hungary the weather was too cold, and in Algeria the weather is hot so I was afraid about that."

On the other hand, sixteen respondents put down why they were not anxious. Most of them were ready and well-prepared for the experience, and were looking forward to living in Hungary. Their answers reflect their confidence, positive attitudes and excitement to experience something new, as it is illustrated by a female student from Lithuania: "New experiences make me excited in a good way, I am not anxious." Her feelings are shared with a Nigerian male respondent: "I was ready and open to learn new things." A male student from Brazil felt the same way and his answer also reflects that he could adapt easily to the new environment: "I was ready for it and got used to my new 'house' easily." A Greek male participant expressed his excitement the following way: "It was a new experience and I was looking forward to get involved in it." A male respondent from Turkey felt excited because he considered his stay in Hungary as an adventure and as a learning experience: "It was a good adventure for me, and I was very excited about living in Hungary, meeting Hungarian people and learning about Hungarian traditions." His feelings are shared with an Iraqi male student: "No, because besides my studies I want to discover the culture, the people and the traditions of the country." A female participant from Italy had a positive attitude, because of her interest in studying at another European institution: "No, because I'm particularly interested in training in a European context." Another respondent who came from Ecuador hoped that his English language skills would help him in intercultural communication: "I was not anxious, because I believed that speaking English was going to be enough to relate to other people."

A few of them felt safe because friends and mentors were waiting for them ready to help, as it is expressed by a male student from Nigeria: "I wasn't anxious, because a mentor was assigned to me and she was quite efficient in carrying out her duties and in guiding me through the required things that needed to be done." His feelings were shared by a Turkish

male participant: "My mentor and my friends supported me, and I overcame difficulties easily." A female respondent from Spain felt reassurance because three of her acquaintances would be there with her: "No, I feel confident, furthermore I knew three students from my home university."

Some of them were not anxious, because of their previous experiences of travelling and visiting different countries, as it is reflected in the answer of a male Ecuadorian student: "Not really, because I travelled a lot in the past, so I had experience in similar situations." A male participant from Iraq expressed the same viewpoint: "I travel a lot and I like to explore and have adventures every time."

A male Nigerian respondent felt safe because within his home country he had experienced different linguistic and cultural varieties in his everyday life, he said the following: "I have been in such situations uncountable times as every city in my country has a different language and culture."

A few other students had no feelings of anxiety because they knew the purpose of coming to Hungary and were oriented accordingly to reach their goals. An Indian male participant's answer reflects this view: "I knew what I would have to do here." His feelings were shared by a female respondent from India: "The purpose of my visit was to study, that was what I had expected before my arrival."

Table 2 shows that more than a third of the international students felt anxious during their stay in Hungary, because they did not know or understand Hungarian cultural customs. Three of the participants had this experience many times and 21 of the respondents felt anxious only sometimes. However, two thirds of the students never felt this way.

Table 2

During your stay in Hungary did you feel anxious because you did not know or understand Hungarian cultural customs? (n = 67)

Yes, many times		Yes, sometimes		No, never	
3 students	5%	21 students	31%	43 students	64%

Some of the respondents (8 students) gave an explanation for their answers. A few students felt stressed due to the differences in Hungarian holidays and their own. A male Brazilian student was anxious because he was not aware of the Hungarian clothing etiquette of formal and casual wear: "About the clothes the students wear in class or on holidays." His feelings were shared by another male participant from Brazil who did not want to look different because of not knowing the rules: "During some festivals or national holidays I didn't know how to dress and behave, and I didn't want to seem careless or offend anyone." A female Lithuanian respondent was stressed because she did not know that on public holidays most services were not operating in Hungary: "We didn't know that shops were closed at Easter."

Two of the students felt anxious because of the daily Hungarian customs. A male participant from Algeria felt stressed about "Kissing cheeks and shaking hands." For a female respondent from Mongolia some of the customs were not easy to comprehend: "Some of the Hungarian customs are difficult to understand."

One female Turkish student was stressed because of the contrasts in "night life and food culture."

A female participant from Colombia was unable to follow some Hungarians' mindsets: "I didn't understand some people's way of thinking."

A female German respondent was worried about not knowing the behavioural customs at a special Hungarian event where she was invited to: "I went to a hunting evening party and I didn't know how they would dance and also how to share the food during the event."

Comparing the answers to the two questions whether the international students felt anxious before coming to Hungary or during their stay, it can be stated that after arriving in Hungary their feelings of anxiety decreased from 42 percent to 36 percent. This means that after indulging in Hungarian culture they could adapt well to the new challenges.

If we compare the outcomes of the research with the results of the studies discussed earlier, we can see that the present study also proved that most of the international students were not anxious either because there were some acquaintances from the same home country or because they were excited about the new experiences, just like in Yener Keles' study. Similarly to Song Wang–Xiujie Sun–Changyuan Liu's study, the present research also showed that language barriers can be a problem in intercultural communication. However, feeling anxious due to culture-related differences proved to be greater than in Song Wang–Xiujie Sun–Changyuan Liu's study.

CONCLUSION

This paper first presented the theoretical background, aim, method, setting and subjects of the empirical research carried out at the University of Miskolc in Hungary in winter 2016. The aim of this paper was to find out how anxiety influences the intercultural communication of international students in Hungary. Sixty-seven students who previously attended or are presently attending the different faculties of the University filled in the English questionnaire. The second part discussed the results of the study. The outcomes showed that the participants arrived from 22 different countries, mainly from Europe and mostly within the framework of the Erasmus programme. The majority of the respondents chose to attend a Bachelor's programme at Miskolc University and most of them studied at the Faculties of Economics, and Mechanical Engineering and Computer Science for 1 semester.

The outcomes of the research imply that anxiety is present in intercultural communication because almost half of the participants were nervous before coming to study in Hungary. The reasons for feeling anxious varied, some of them felt stressed because it was the first time that they had left their home countries and lived abroad; others were afraid of communication differences; some of them were worried about the challenges of living in a new country, meeting new people and a new culture; and one international student mentioned feeling nervous because of the different weather conditions. However, more than half of the respondents did not feel anxious because they felt ready and well-prepared for the experience and were looking forward to living in Hungary; others felt safe because friends and mentors were around and ready to help them; some of them were not worried because of their previous experiences of travelling and visiting different countries; and a few of them were not stressed because they knew the purpose of coming to Hungary. The results also illustrated that after arriving in Hungary the international students' feelings of anxiety decreased. Furthermore, the findings of the present study also showed that in most cases those international students felt anxious who arrived from Asian, Arabic or Southern American countries because the traditions, customs and behaviour in these cultures greatly differ from those in other European cultures and Hungarian culture. Consequently, in order to help international students to have fewer challenges and negative experiences and further reduce their anxiety, the international offices of the University should provide more efficient services, offer support programmes and organize cultural events. Here students could learn more about and better understand

Hungarian cultural customs and traditions, become more interculturally competent, receive further help, and they could also share and contribute their views, opinions, feelings and experiences.

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