

# ERASMUS STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE WITH INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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**ABSTRACT** *Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has become one of the most important competences in today's world that is becoming increasingly intertwined at all levels and in all its segments. Within the educational system, the ICC is recognized as a key competence. In the theoretical part of the paper, ICC models are examined with the aim to identify variables that contribute to its strengthening. Bennett's Developmental Model served as a basis for this research. This study aims at getting insight into Erasmus students' experiences with intercultural communication. A qualitative methodology was employed, and data were analysed using thematic analysis. The results show that all respondents, through the Erasmus programme experience, enhanced their knowledge, skills and awareness related to intercultural communication. Important competences identified for intercultural communication include skills of efficient nonverbal communication, active listening, question-asking, participation in common activities, use of technology and humour. The results of this research show that Erasmus experience helps develop ICC skills, awareness of one's own culture, self-confidence and life skills.*

## KEYWORDS

ERASMUS, STUDENTS, INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION, RESEARCH, COMPETENCES

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## INTRODUCTION

Erasmus+ is the EU's programme whose aim is to support education, training, youth and sport in Europe. It proved to be one of the best programmes ever launched in the EU. Between 2014 and 2021 over 13 million people took part in this programme<sup>1</sup>. It was originally established in 1987 under the name "Erasmus" with a view to promoting closer collaboration between universities and higher education institutions (HEIs) across Europe. Its first objective was to set up an organised system of cross-border student exchange. Over time, the programme has expanded even beyond Europe. It covers a broad framework for transnational cooperation and mobility in the education sector. The name "Erasmus" pays homage to Erasmus of Rotterdam, the leading scholar and an inspiring lecturer from the 16th century, known to have travelled extensively across Europe to teach and study at a number of universities.<sup>2</sup> The programme's objective is pursued through three key actions: Key Action 1, as the first step in the programme, refers to learning mobility of individuals (students and staff); Key Action 2 covers cooperation among organisations and institutions, whereas Key Action 3 supports policy development and cooperation. Other activities include Jean Monnet Actions, which support teaching, learning, research and debates on European integration matters, such as the ones regarding the EU's future challenges and opportunities. The University of Mostar has been part of the programme since 2009.

The Erasmus programme provides students with valuable opportunities to develop and strengthen intercultural communication competence in the framework of higher education. According to Byram (1997) (as cited in Boye and Byram, 2017), critical cultural awareness is a fundamental element of ICC. Intercultural competence consists of three components (knowledge, skills and attitudes) and is supplemented by five values: (1) intercultural attitudes, (2) knowledge, (3) skills of interpreting and relating, (4) skills of discovery and interaction, and (5) critical cultural awareness. Byram summarizes intercultural competence in English language teaching (ELT) as *savoir-être* (attitudes), *savoir* (knowledge), *savoir-comprendre* (skills to interpret and relate), *savoir-s'engager* (critical cultural awareness) and *savoir-faire* (ability to interact and discover). A close connection between language awareness and intercultural communicative competence should be viewed within the relationship between language and culture. Therefore, 'awareness of language' and 'awareness of culture' are at the same time different and similar. The fact is that members of transnational groups bring also their own language into intercultural interactions and need to be able to communicate despite differences (Byram & Golubeva, 2020). Erasmus students thus face numerous linguistic, cultural, social and psychological challenges, when abroad, i.e., in a foreign culture.

According to Spitzberg and Changnon (2009), communication competences in an intercultural context can be divided into the following models: compositional, co-orientational, developmental, adaptational, and causal process. These categories are complementary, not mutually exclusive. Howard-Hamilton et al. (1998), Ting-Toomey and

<sup>1</sup> <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/about-erasmus/history-funding-and-future>. Retrieved on 19/2/2024.

<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the word "Erasmus" also serves as the acronym for The European Community Action Scheme for Mobility of University Students.

Kurogi (1998), and Deardorff (2006) are the founding fathers of the compositional models that emphasise the development of knowledge, attitudes and skills. In Howard-Hamilton's model it is expected that an intercultural competent person can, in an interaction with persons from another culture, assess the group according to its homogeneity, equality, ethnocentricity, discrimination, and risk factors. Ting-Toomey and Kurogi's (1998) model stems from the area of management and intercultural communicative competence. Therefore, it does not emphasise motivational factors and outcomes as much as it emphasises cognitive and behavioural ones. Deardorff (2006) sums up her understanding of the construct in two models of intercultural competence. The first one is pyramidal, where lower-level competences influence higher-level competences in a way that they support them, while the second model is a developmental model. The pyramidal model represents elements of motivation, cognition and skills that are parts of context within these competencies. Compositional models identify hypothetical components of the competence without the elaboration of the relations between these components. Such models represent lists of relevant or possible features, characteristics and skills that should be efficient in a competent intercultural interaction. Co-orientational models put emphasis on communication. Most frequently we refer to Fantini's (1995) *Intercultural Interlocutor Competence Model* and Byram's (1997) *Intercultural Competence Model*. Co-orientational models are the ones that are primarily dedicated to the conceptualisation of interactional achievement of intercultural understanding or any of its variants (for example, perceptive accuracy, empathy, perspective, clarity, overlapping of the meaning system). Such models can share many characteristics with other models, but they are focused on a specific criterion of communicative mutual relationship and common meanings. Developmental models describe developmental phases of acquiring intercultural competence and sensitivity. Such models can possess dimensions of other models, but primarily they place emphasis on the process, i.e., the level of intercultural competence maturity that is to be gained slowly and over time. The most prominent is Benett's (1993) *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)*. Developmental models have a dominant role in the time dimension of the intercultural interaction. Benett's developmental model of intercultural sensitivity will serve as a theoretical background for this research. Adaptational models strive to emphasise, as a highly significant competence, the process of adaptation. They put emphasis on interdependence of many interactions shaping the process of mutual adaptation, which is fundamental in the process of acquiring competence. A good example of such model is Berry's (1989) *Attitude Acculturation Model*, according to which acculturation combined with simultaneous process of maintaining the values of one's own culture frequently causes anxiety. Adaptational models have two specific characteristics: 1) they usually presuppose more interactions in the process, and 2) they emphasise interdependence of these interactions in modelling the processes of mutual adaptation. Multiple interactors can be modelled as a conceptual image of the other, whereas the adaptation process can presuppose representation or inclusion of any number of various outcomes. Emphasis is laid on the fact that competence reflects in mutual exchange of action, attitudes and understanding based on the interaction with the members of another culture. Therefore, adaptation is to be taken as a criterion for competence. Causal models reflect real and specific relations between the dimensions. The most well-known causal model is Arasaratnam's (2006) *Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence*.

According to this model, empathy directly influences competence, and during interaction it influences also attitudes towards intercultural and interactional experience. Causal model processes reflect rather determined componential relations. For sure, there are also alternative typological systems that could be efficiently applied. However, this classification provides a meaningful framework for differentiating between models.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

This paper aims at getting an insight into the experience of Erasmus students with intercultural competence. The research is guided by the following questions:

1. What is students' foreknowledge of intercultural competence before participating in the Erasmus programme abroad?
2. How aware are students of their emotions and flexibility in intercultural communication?
3. What is the the Erasmus programme's contribution to the development of intercultural communicative competence?

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method that provides insight into participants' experiences and subjective realities. It involves six steps: getting acquainted with the data; starting codes development; searching for the topics; checking the recognized topics; setting and naming the topics and, finally, writing a report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A semi-structured interview was used. It consisted of ten questions addressing students' foreknowledge of intercultural communication, communication skills and factors of successful communication that contributed to intercultural communication during their Erasmus stay, and their awareness and self-assessment of intercultural communicative competence after the Erasmus experience abroad. At the end of the interview, students were invited to offer recommendations for improving the Erasmus programme.

### Participants

The participants in this research were students of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Mostar who had spent at least one semester abroad through the Erasmus programme during the academic year 2022/2023. The sampling method, through which we reached the students, is the non-probability method of deliberate sampling (Milas, 2009). The technique used for choosing the respondents was critical case technique. Eligibility required participants to have completed a minimum of one semester abroad attending an Erasmus student exchange programme. The reaseach included nine participants—eight female students and one male student—with an average age of 22 years (ranging from 21 and 23). The participants were mostly students of foreign languages (English, Italian, and German), as well as one student from the Department of Public Relations. Eight students participated in the student exchange programme for the first time, whereas one participant had participated in two different exchange programmes in different countries.

## Procedure

The participants were contacted via e-mail by the Erasmus coordinator from the Office for International Relations of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Mostar. The participants got basic information about the research in this e-mail and were asked to participate. Out of 15 invited students, nine students agreed to take part. All interviews were held in person in the office of the researcher at the Faculty. The interviews were recorded by an audio recorder application on the mobile phone. All participants gave consent to be audio-recorded. The interviews lasted for approximately 40 minutes. During the interview one researcher was leading the interview while the other was in the role of an observer and was making notes according to previously prepared protocol (taking notes about characteristics of the participant, the interviewer and the context). The third member of the research team, who was already known by students, was not included in the interviewing process because it could influence the respondents, thus compromising objectivity. After each interview, the research team identified significant qualitative answers and made notes on these insights.

## Ethical aspects of the research

During the whole procedure, ethical aspects of the research were taken into consideration. First, the participants were asked to participate in the research and informed consent to participate in the research was given. They gave consent in a written form, via e-mail message, and orally, before the interview and before recording it. The participants were acquainted with the purpose of the interview. They were told that the data would be used solely for the group-level analysis for the purpose of writing a research paper. The participants were informed that their participation is voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. The aspect of confidentiality was emphasised, and the participants were made aware of the fact that, in accordance with the privacy protection aspect, neither their names nor surnames, nor personal data would be published. It would not be possible to discover their identity. They were told that their answers would be transcribed and assigned participants' tag numbers and marks, i.e., without their personal names. Finally, the participants were acquainted with the fact that they had the right to have insight into the results of the research and that the paper, once finished, would be sent to them by e-mail.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After having asked the research questions: "What is students' foreknowledge of the students about intercultural competence, before they go abroad to participating in the Erasmus programme abroad?"; "How aware are students of their emotions and flexibility in intercultural communication?"; and "What is the the Erasmus programme's contribution to the development of intercultural communicative competence?", the following results were obtained, as demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of Topics and Codes

TOPICS	CODES
<i>Knowledge of intercultural communication prior to Erasmus</i>	Knowledge of communication Knowledge of different cultures Language skills Self-confidence
<i>Emotions and behaviours in intercultural communication</i>	First-contact fear, culture shock Being confused, cautious and at a distance Support from peers Increased openness and relaxation after some time
<i>Use of intercultural skills during the stay abroad</i>	Nonverbal communication Active listening Asking questions Use of translation tools Joint activities Humour
<i>Self-perception and awareness of intercultural communicative competence after the stay abroad</i>	Broader knowledge of other cultures Better understanding of the situational aspects of communication Stereotype checking Better insight into one's own culture Enhanced efficiency in intercultural communication (observation, empathy, flexibility) Self-confidence Acquisition of life skills

The research results show that students reported possessing language skills and some knowledge of intercultural communication prior to their exchange experience. Participants view this kind of knowledge as necessary for this kind of experience, primarily language skills: "... I am acquainted with the English language, I know the phrases, some colloquial expressions etc. (2); "... I have quite a good level of English language knowledge, so that I did not have fear of the language" (5); "I study English language, I can speak English very well"(7). Regarding knowledge of intercultural communication, the participants reported the following: "For me it is a conversation, exchange of experience, meeting people from different cultures" (1); "I believe that for this kind of communication one needs to understand someone's needs, traditions, religions, food and so on, some habits" (6), "... like a connection of people from different cultures, different environments, attitudes, conceptions, everything actually" (8); "... differences in cultures. We can speak the very same language and still do not understand each other. We do not categorize some things and concepts into the same categories, totally different" (9). Participants emphasised that they were self-confident and open even before going abroad for a student exchange: "... I really do not like being in a shell, in my comfort zone, I like going out of the comfort

zone and that includes, normally, travelling, Erasmus and meeting new people, cultures, their traditions." (6); "... Well, I am a pretty liberal person. I really do not know what could surprise me. When I came there, I saw a lot of stuff, and I was not afraid at all." (5)

To the question "What is intercultural communication?", the respondents gave the answers that align with theoretical definitions. Intercultural competence is a complex of abilities needed for an effective and adequate communication with the others who linguistically and culturally differ from us (Fantini, 2009). Intercultural communicative competence is considered to be "impression management that allows members of different cultural systems to be aware of their cultural identity and cultural differences, and to interact effectively and appropriately with each other in diverse contexts by agreeing on the meaning of diverse symbol systems with the result of mutually satisfying relationships" Kupka, 2008 according to Deardorff, 2009, p. 18).

Quantitative research conducted among social workers about their communication with clients from different cultures (Begić, 2019) speaks about significant contribution of self-efficiency and self-confidence to efficient intercultural communication. Furthermore, considering intercultural knowledge, attending workshops, seminars, courses and conferences showed a significant predictive value for acquiring intercultural competencies. Earlier research confirms that intercultural competence is also influenced by at least minimal attending of intercultural education (Green et al., 2005). Intercultural education and knowledge influence individuals involved as well as people with whom they have interaction (Diaz-Lazaro & Cohen, 2001). According to Anderson et al. (2006), it has been confirmed that the participants of a study programme abroad raise their knowledge regarding adaptation to other cultures and lower their favouritism. A minimum level of exposure to intercultural education influences and strengthens competences, which is in accordance with the compositional theoretical models of intercultural communicative competence. These models place emphasis on the development of knowledge, attitudes and skills, as well as on achieving cognitive and behavioural outcomes (Deardorff, 2006; Howard-Hamilton et al., 1998; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998;).

Asked about awareness of their own emotions and flexibility in intercultural communication, respondents reported experiencing a variety of emotions and behaviours upon arrival in the host country: "It is a little bit confusing and frustrating" (1); "... confusion, because it was the first time I went to a foreign language country where I did not speak the language ... a little bit of fear too" (3); "For me, it was the first time I went away from home, so I was a little bit scared, a little bit frightened" (5); "I was a bit scared because I did not know those people well and I lived with them. The dormitory did not have a security. I lived on the second floor with people I could not understand at all, people from some other cultures" (9).

It is interesting to point out the answers about language barriers and culture shock: "... somebody would approach us and ask if we spoke Spanish and we would say 'No', and they would give up, stop the communication with us. We were very sorry about that" (1);

"... for sure there were some language barriers, they could not express themselves well, not like in their mother tongue, and I also had some smaller difficulties in communication" (2); "In the bank there was only one person who spoke English and they had a very strong Spanish accent in English, but we did manage to understand each other" (5); "... as far as my German is concerned, I had to struggle, but I did not leave my country with a good knowledge of German. In everyday life, I asked for communication to be in English. When I arrived there, I can say that I immediately felt what that culture shock means, from the first hand. The behaviour of people, different weather, norms with, for example, older people, how people behaved, how they go to university, how much more relaxed they are, you could tell that I was in Spain" (6).

Respondents said that at the very beginning of their stay abroad they sought their own group support: "It was a bit of a shock at the beginning. For example, at the airport, as soon as we landed, the workers at the airport did not speak English, and one would suppose that they should know it. But my colleague and I study Italian, and Italian and Spanish are a bit similar, so we could get by somehow" (1); "Hanging out with people from the same culture was very much pronounced in our case. We were four, first. Four of us stuck together. We needed quite a long time, almost a month we sought our people. In the dormitory there were a lot of people from the Balkans, and we would always approach them, we tried to hang out with them" (8); "I must admit that first few meetings were with people who were in Graz, but they were from the Balkans" (9).

Among mechanisms that explain fear and insecurity in communication with others, there are ethnocentrism, stereotypes and prejudice (Kavačić, 2000). Additionally, there are psychological barriers like anxiety, stress, supposing that something is similar, wrong explanation of the nonverbal communication and differences in language. In order to explain what happens in communication with people from a different cultural background, Gudykunst and Kim (2002) developed a theory of anxiety and insecurity. They claim that if the differences between the cultures are large, anxiety and insecurity will increase. Prior to this research, McCroskey (1977) claimed that there were three general settings of behavioural reactions: avoiding communication, drawing back from communication and exaggerated communication.

Respondents reported that they noticed openness and relaxation in intercultural communication after some time spent abroad: "As time was passing by, it was easier. We got used to the situation. But, you see, in those first encounters, we were all flabbergasted" (1); "... For the first 45 days, people stuck just to their people. I would say that after two or three weeks everything was more relaxed. I did not experience that somebody was closed or shy. All those people who came there were extremely open, ready to learn about my country and accept some things" (5); "While I was getting to know them, they were indeed a group where I found myself, we did not close inside ourselves, neither in terms of emotions, nor communication, so that we were open ... I felt that somehow, I naturally got relaxed in the new surrounding. It was a kind of quick" (7); "... Quite a number of them had been studying for a longer period there and they had changed the countries and they got used to it. They were a bit more open. We needed a bit more time to get relaxed. It



could be because of other cultures and new surrounding and you are for the first time in a new city. Later, we also got relaxed and we were at the same level, only a bit less at the beginning" (8).

Developmental models claim that intercultural communicative competence develops over time individually, relationally or both. They try to identify developmental phases that determine the levels of communicative competence in interaction. Over time, the interactivity progresses from relatively ethnocentric understanding of other cultures into a more ethnorelative understanding and accepting. The dimension of development is also emphasised in Bennett's model of intercultural sensitivity from 1986. It goes from the monocultural worldview to the intercultural worldview. Another highly influential developmental model of intercultural communicative competence goes from the concept of culture shock towards the model of gradual adjustment and satisfaction.

One of the topics for overcoming intercultural communication misunderstandings was communication skills. Intercultural communicative competence generally presupposes adequacy and success in behaviour. In accordance to that, Kim (cf. Kim, 1991 as cited in Samovar et al., 2013, p. 324) defines it as a general inner ability of an individual to manage key challenges of intercultural communication, such as cultural differences, inter-group attitudes and stress that follows such a situation. In this context, the research focused on the analysis of the level of cognitive and behavioural skills of the respondents, how they are able to analyse situational aspects of communication and choose adequate manners of behaviour. For this purpose, the participants were asked the following question: "Which communication skills did you use in order to be more efficient in intercultural interaction?".

According to the collected answers, respondents view efficient management of nonverbal behaviours as an important communication skill within intercultural communication, especially in the first phases of adaptation to the new surrounding and culture. "I had to use nonverbal communication. I had to explain a bit to the people, show with my hands what I needed, wave my head and explain with my hands" (1); "At the beginning I used a lot of nonverbal communication, but I do not think I did it consciously, it popped up spontaneously" (4). Although nonverbal communication can serve as an efficient means of better understanding and as an addition to verbal expressions during intercultural communication, it is highly important to develop awareness of various behavioural repertoires within cultural patterns and the ability to interpret them correctly. As Lustig and Koester emphasise (2013), the majority of nonverbal communication forms is to be interpreted within the culture in which they are applied. According to these authors, there are three basic manners that differentiate cultures in their nonverbal behaviours: a specific repertoire of behaviour that are applied (movements, body position, gestures...), the rules of showing nonverbal expressions (needs, adequacy, distance...) and interpretation or meanings that are ascribed to certain nonverbal behaviours.

Mastering nonverbal communication in intercultural context requires knowledge of cultural patterns, awareness of differences and the ability to adapt the style of nonverbal expression to the interlocutor and the context. This dimension presupposes the ability

of active listening and right interpretation of the feedback. Therefore, it is important to say that respondents reported about active listening and asking questions as relevant skills during their Erasmus stay abroad. The importance of active listening with integrated questions is evident from the answers of one participant: "Asking questions, open attitude, showing that I am indeed interested. If someone is talking about something, I will not only passively listen (...) Being interested, I communicate in a way that I connect it with something of my own, for example, I can say 'Yes, I also did it once'. Some comments, so that it does not seem as if I only listened and did a bunk" (5).

One of the basic functions of the skill of active listening is comprehension check. Active listening helps us check what the interlocutor said and meant. By reflecting interpreted meanings, the interlocutor realises that you are included in the conversation and they are offered a chance to explain. Next to paraphrasing and expressing understanding, asking questions is one of the primary techniques of active listening. By asking questions, we strengthen our personal understanding of the content and stimulate the interlocutor to give feedback in order to elaborate their thoughts and feelings (DeVito, 2013).

Research shows that interaction and making friends with members of the culture in which you find yourself influences the feeling of satisfaction and helps overcome the culture shock. In this context it is highly important to emphasise the importance of active participation in social activities, cultural and religious events. By increasing direct contact, the process of adaptation gets easier. The respondents' answers supported this. They reported that joint activities with members of other cultures significantly helped them in the adaptation process. It is interesting to mention that during joint activities they used humour as a universal means of connecting and overcoming misunderstandings, no matter what the cultural background was: "... We used a lot of humour, I do not know if it belongs to a type of communication. Especially via social networks and videos that spread. That was usually a center for us, if we hang out with somebody and if something goes wrong in communication, we use these things to refresh communication a bit. It gets us closer somehow, then we talk about some funny things, but we know that tomorrow we will be able to talk about more serious things because we got closer" (4). In this context, it is important to emphasise the importance of technology. Specifically, respondents used translating tools like Google translate for translation and similar platforms for watching and distributing videos and sitcoms, which resulted in lowering the feeling of unease and tension in communication.

When it comes to the research question "What is the Erasmus programme's contribution to the development of intercultural communicative competence?", respondents reported a larger knowledge about other cultures generated by this experience. Furthermore, this experience helped them better analyse the situational aspects of communication. "I believe that I got pretty large knowledge by doing this, that I otherwise wouldn't get from a book or from the Internet. The first personal contact in that country where there was a lot of various cultures, people, norms, from Spaniards to Germans. I can say that I got back home full of knowledge" (1). From the results one can read about the perceived importance of the stay at Erasmus for a better insight into the particularities of one's own

culture and checking the stereotypes about the others. "Let's say, I have always heard the stereotype that Germans are punctual. That is not the case at all. Everything is late: trains, buses, services, teachers. It is just not like that" (2); "After I got back, I engaged myself more in working actively to broaden my knowledge of my culture, to talk about things that are important to me" (3); "That helped a lot. They made me understand the way we in Mostar think, especially the young. They did not give us feedback, but we could realise that just from their behaviour" (4).

Such answers can be connected with increased self-assessment in communication, since the results show that larger interaction with the other students enabled an introspection into one's own culture, one's own attitudes and reactions in intercultural communication.

When it comes to flexibility in intercultural communication, Samovar, Porter and McDaniel (2013) emphasise the ability to accept unclarities as an integral part of the skill. Furthermore, they claim that the ability to accept unclarities is one of the key elements of intercultural ability. Flexibility is a key communicative skill that enables the speaker to successfully overcome conversational deviations (verbal/nonverbal) that appear in intercultural communication. In order to get a clear insight into the level of flexibility after the Erasmus stay abroad, participants were asked to answer the following question: "If you had a chance to stay abroad again, how would you participate in intercultural communication?". The results show that most respondents believe that they possess a satisfactory level of flexibility in intercultural communication. The following answers were prominent: "The only thing that I would recommend to people who go abroad is that they have to accept both their norms of behaviour and their distance when talking and the way to talk with them, both in relaxed and in serious situations. For me, it was very important to wait and to see how they behave and then to adjust to them. So that the others wouldn't be embarrassed and to make my experience easier" (1); "I believe that I would be definitely more ready and more familiar with some things than I was before this Erasmus experience" (2); "This experience has completely changed everything, also the conclusions that I make, and the way I think and the choices, so that I do not know what to say except that I am more open towards everything and I confront things more freely" (5); "I would probably explain others' behaviour in a more open manner. In the sense that I would not take things for granted. I wouldn't mind some things. People are not aware how some cultures are different" (8).

With a view to gaining insight into respondents' perception of the level of intercultural communicative competence after the Erasmus stay, they were asked the following question "How would you assess your own intercultural competence?". Their answers show that they believe that their Erasmus experience helped them master intercultural communication and to get new life skills, which consequently enhanced their self-confidence. "It made me better in all aspects, I had a different approach. (...) The teachers really cared to show us, to make it easier for us, that experience was excellent to me. That led me, and gave me more self-confidence through those motivational messages, to come here and continue the path. Additionally, let's say, privately or in communication with the

colleagues, I am also more open" (3); "In my nature, I was a kind of closed, introverted person. That has changed, for sure. That inhibited me a bit at the beginning. Now I would be much more relaxed regarding other cultures at least" (8). Enlarged self-confidence correlates with enlarged understanding of other cultures and the adjustment process that enables a successful functioning in foreign surroundings. It is interesting that a satisfaction was detected among participants because of the acquired competencies that lowered the insecurity level due to their experience of living in foreign surroundings. "I think I am more open for meeting new people and new chances. Now I am ready, if there is a need to go somewhere, I can go by myself and adapt" (7).

## OBSERVATIONS BY THE RESEARCHERS

All participants were very open and all of them expressed positive emotions about their participation in the research. The research gave them an opportunity to evoke nice memories and share their positive experiences. For two participants, this was the first time to speak about emotions they had during Erasmus, and they shed tears while answering the questions. They were motivated to suggest also other students to participate in the research. An impression was gained that for the majority of them the research interview evoked pleasant feelings and had a therapeutical effect. There were neither negative reactions nor resistance. On the contrary, participants spent most time answering the questions about emotions during their stay abroad.

The interviewer was a researcher experienced in conducting qualitative interviews, and possessed therapeutical experience. A pleasant and relaxed atmosphere was created through the use of informal empathetic questioning and active listening. The researcher gave clear instructions, confirmed participants' willingness to take part, and obtained consent to be recorded. Participants were also reminded of their right to withdraw at any time. Respect for emotional expression was shown throughout, and no participant was rushed in providing responses.

The research context was the same for all the participants, space and time in the researcher's office were set, so that neither other students nor telephone calls could interrupt the process. The faculty space was familiar to students from earlier as well as the Erasmus programme coordinator who invited them to the interview.

## Limitations and contributions of the research

One concern involves potential subjectivity in interpreting participants' responses. There is also possible influence of respondents on other respondents since they knew each other prior to the interviews. Furthermore, the researcher may have influenced the research materials as students' answers to questions about emotions had to be shortened. Only one researcher was experienced in qualitative research. Another limitation is the scarcity of prior research and literature on intercultural communicative competence, especially in the native language.

The contribution of the research is in the fact that valuable insights into students' intercultural communicative competence were gained. The findings offer practical recommendations for promoting Erasmus among the general student population, expanding the diversity of programming for incoming students, and implementing preparatory trainings and seminars to support outgoing participants. The study also underscores the need to develop capacities of local students, faculty and university staff as well as activities for incoming students through continuous education in intercultural communication.

## CONCLUSION

Before going to Erasmus, it is necessary to possess a good foreknowledge of the language and culture of the host country. In addition to regular factors of successful communication, openness and flexibility emerged as important factors in intercultural communication. During their exposure to intercultural communication, some students experience initial fear and culture shock, which changes into curiosity and fun as time passes by. Because they were insecure and closed at the beginning, a feeling of regret for the lost time was expressed during interviews. Respondents view efficient nonverbal behaviours management as a significant communication skill, especially in the early phases of adaptation to new surroundings and culture. The majority of students reported that during Erasmus they questioned their own prejudices and stereotypes. They became aware of the values of their own culture. The competences that they gained through the Erasmus programme included: improved language proficiency, increased self-confidence, acquiring life skills of living alone independently and organizing one's own life, enhanced maturity, breaking down prejudice, higher awareness about one's own culture, valuing other cultures. These are the reasons why all participants expressed willingness to repeat the experience of student exchange. Several specific qualitative findings emerged. Humour was reported as an effective tool for overcoming intercultural misunderstandings in communication. Participants also used digital technologies for translation and or watching videos and sitcoms, which resulted in lowering unease and stress in communication. Another interesting outcome is awareness of the importance and connection of intercultural communication with acquiring new life skills, such as: travelling abroad, opening a bank account abroad, searching for a flat, taking care of food, attending classes at a foreign university, as well as building personal and professional networks. The research results show that the Erasmus experience helps in mastering intercultural communicative competence skills. It can be summed up that all participants reported benefits from their Erasmus experience, particularly in terms of their knowledge, skills and awareness of intercultural communicative competence.

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# INTERKULTURNA KOMUNIKACIJA STUDENATA NA ERASMUSU

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**SAŽETAK** *Interkulturalna komunikacijska kompetencija postala je jednom od najznačajnijih kompetencija u suvremenom svijetu. U obrazovnom sustavu ta je kompetencija prepoznata kao ključna razvojna kompetencija. U teorijskom dijelu rada donosi se pregled modela interkulture komunikacijske kompetencije s ciljem identificiranja varijabli koje pridonose poboljšanju interkulture komunikacijske kompetencije. Relevantni teorijski model koji je poslužio kao podloga istraživanju jest Benettov razvojni model. Cilj rada bio je dobiti uvid u iskustvo studenata koji su pohađali program Erasmus s interkulture komunikacijom. U istraživanju je primijenjena kvalitativna metoda, a za obradu podataka korištena je tematska analiza. Rezultati istraživanja pokazuju da su svi ispitanici, zahvaljujući sudjelovanju na Erasmusu, profitirali u području znanja, vještina i svijesti o interkulture komunikaciji. Kao bitne kompetencije za učinkovitiju interkulture komunikaciju izdvajaju se vještine učinkovite neverbalne komunikacije, aktivnog slušanja, postavljanja pitanja, sudjelovanja u zajedničkim aktivnostima, uporaba tehnologije i humora. Rezultati istraživanja ukazuju da iskustvo boravka na programu Erasmus pomaže pri razvoju vještina interkulture komunikacijske kompetencije, svijesti o vlastitoj kulturi, samopouzdanja i životnih vještina.*

## KLJUČNE RIJEČI

ERASMUS, STUDENTI, INTERKULTURNA KOMUNIKACIJA, ISTRAŽIVANJE, KOMPETENCIJE

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