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## Students' Interpersonal Communication in a Multicultural Environment

### Abstract

*Introduction.* The study addresses the problem of improving the characteristics of students' interpersonal communication in the context of a multicultural university environment in Kazakhstan. Interpersonal communication constitutes a crucial factor in the formation of students' social adaptation, academic engagement, and intercultural competence. Within a multicultural setting, effective communication functions as an essential condition for the development of tolerance, mutual respect, and the integration of diverse cultural and ethnic groups. Nevertheless, challenges including language barriers, differences in communication styles, and intercultural misunderstandings may hinder the effectiveness of the communicative process. *Methodology and Methods.* The research employed a descriptive research design and survey methodology. The study involved 124 first and second year undergraduate students majoring in Pedagogy and Psychology and Social Pedagogy at a national university in Kazakhstan. The questionnaire was developed on the basis of a process model of intercultural competence proposed in prior scholarly literature and was administered through Google Forms. Descriptive statistical methods were applied for the analysis of the collected data. *Results.* The findings reveal that the majority of respondents demonstrate readiness for intercultural interaction and express a tolerant attitude toward cultural diversity. Students perceive the multicultural environment of the university as a valuable factor in the development of interpersonal and communication skills. At the same time, the study identified persistent challenges, including linguistic difficulties, differing communication norms, and occasional misunderstandings between representatives of different cultural groups. These challenges underscore the need for targeted institutional strategies to strengthen intercultural dialogue. *Scientific novelty.* The study provides new empirical evidence on the specific features of students' interpersonal communication in the multicultural university environment of Kazakhstan. Unlike previous research, which often emphasized general intercultural education, this study highlights the interplay between communication skills, intercultural tolerance, and academic success in a diverse university context, with practical significance. *Practical significance.* The research findings can be applied to the development of intercultural training programs, collaborative learning projects, and multicultural events aimed at promoting inclusiveness in higher education institutions. By implementing such measures, universities can foster a more supportive and cohesive learning environment, contributing to the formation of socially competent and globally minded graduates.

*Keywords:* multicultural environment, interpersonal communication, intercultural competence, tolerance, higher education.

**Introduction.** In the context of globalization, issues of cultural diversity and interpersonal communication within multicultural environments have become increasingly relevant. In educational settings where representatives of various ethnicities, religions, and cultures coexist, the interpersonal relationships of students are considered an important social and pedagogical phenomenon. This is due to the fact that students represent one of the most mobile and adaptable segments of society. Interpersonal

communication in a multicultural environment is not limited to everyday interactions - it is a complex process involving the interplay of cultural, social, and psychological factors. Each student brings their own cultural background into the communication process, which can both enrich and complicate interpersonal interactions.

Research indicates that intercultural communication skills enhance students' professional competence and contribute to their competitiveness in the future labor market.

However, multicultural environments also present challenges such as language barriers, cultural differences, stereotypes, and social distance. The growing academic mobility, the expansion of international partnerships between universities, and the influx of foreign students to Kazakhstan have intensified the need to understand and improve interpersonal communication in multicultural educational contexts. The ability to navigate cultural diversity is now considered an essential skill for future professionals, making this topic not only socially but also economically significant. At the same time, the persistence of communication difficulties and intercultural misunderstandings indicates a gap between the potential benefits of multicultural environments and the experience of students. This study aims to identify the characteristics of students' interpersonal communication in a multicultural environment, with a focus on both facilitating factors and existing barriers.

Contemporary research highlights that universities play a crucial role in shaping respectful, tolerant, and culturally sensitive relationships among students in multicultural environments. Intercultural competence is now recognized as an essential learning outcome that enables students to function effectively within culturally diverse academic settings (Deardorff, 2006). This is particularly relevant for Kazakhstan, where cultural diversity and academic mobility are increasing, strengthening the need for institutions to develop students' abilities to interact constructively across cultural boundaries.

Scholars emphasize that communication styles, values, and interpersonal expectations are shaped by cultural contexts and prior social experiences. Bennett (2004) argues that awareness of cultural differences is a fundamental condition for establishing constructive intercultural dialogue. Within the Kazakhstani context, recognizing not only ethnic diversity but also regional cultural variations contributes to reducing misinterpretations and strengthening mutual respect among students. Gudykunst (2004) notes that intercultural communication becomes more effective

when individuals interpret messages through culturally informed perspectives and adapt their communicative behavior accordingly.

Modern universities are increasingly viewed not only as institutions delivering academic knowledge but also as complex social environments where intercultural cooperation and understanding are cultivated. Volet and Ang (2012) emphasize that culturally mixed student groups foster daily intercultural engagement and create conditions for developing communication strategies transferable beyond the university setting. Similarly, Shahjahan et al., (2024) describe the university as a "micro-society" in which students negotiate norms, values, and interaction patterns necessary for participation in diverse communities.

Interpersonal communication in multicultural academic settings includes both verbal and non-verbal dimensions shaped by participants' cultural backgrounds. Gudykunst (2004) stresses that effective intercultural interaction requires individuals to recognize cultural differences and adjust their communicative behavior accordingly. Such adaptability is particularly important for students preparing for professional careers in international and multicultural contexts. In Kazakhstan, where classrooms frequently include students from diverse ethnic and regional backgrounds, higher education institutions provide a natural platform for developing intercultural communication skills, although structured institutional support remains essential.

The importance of intercultural competence in education is further emphasized by Deardorff (2006), who identifies it as a key outcome for navigating complex cultural environments. Integrating intercultural training into university curricula helps bridge the gap between academic knowledge and practical communication skills required in real-world contexts. Ting-Toomey & Dorjee (2018) demonstrate that expectations regarding communication styles, interaction norms, and conflict resolution differ significantly across cultures. For instance, Tanaka (2025) distinguishes between high-context cultures, where communication relies heavily on implicit cues and non-verbal signals,

and low-context cultures, where interaction is more explicit and direct. When students from such backgrounds interact within the same group, misunderstandings may arise without timely mediation. Therefore, educators' awareness of cultural communication patterns is essential for guiding students toward mutual understanding.

If cultural and communicative differences are ignored, even minor misunderstandings may escalate into interpersonal tensions. Bennett (2004) stresses that educators must possess intercultural awareness and mediation skills to maintain constructive learning environments in culturally diverse classrooms. Consequently, teacher training programs should incorporate modules on cultural sensitivity, conflict resolution, and adaptive communication strategies.

Although multicultural academic settings enrich learning experiences and promote personal development, students may still encounter challenges in establishing meaningful interpersonal relationships. Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) demonstrate through meta-analysis that stereotypes, implicit biases, and limited positive intergroup contact can undermine trust and mutual understanding. These barriers may manifest subtly in exclusionary or avoidance behaviors and therefore require deliberate institutional strategies.

Research by Hurtado and Carter (1997) shows that students who perceive campus climates as non-inclusive are more likely to withdraw socially and less inclined to engage with peers from different cultural backgrounds. This finding underscores the importance of institutional climate: diversity initiatives are unlikely to succeed unless inclusivity is embedded in everyday academic and social practices. Communication challenges may also be intensified by language barriers. Oliver & Jorre de St Jorre (2018) note that students facing unfamiliar linguistic and academic expectations may struggle to articulate their ideas and fully participate in classroom discussions. Similarly, Meyerhuber (2019) highlights that listening comprehension difficulties shaped by linguistic and cultural differences can hinder accurate interpretation of peers' viewpoints.

In Kazakhstan's trilingual educational environment, these challenges may be addressed through targeted language support programs and structured initiatives designed for multicultural cohorts. Research indicates that cooperative learning tasks promote collaborative engagement by encouraging equal participation and shared responsibility among culturally diverse students. Gillies (2006) confirms that well-designed group activities improve interaction quality and help transform cultural diversity into an educational advantage.

In addition to curriculum design, intercultural training enhances students' ability to understand one another and communicate effectively across cultural boundaries. Bennett (2004) highlights that such training fosters empathy, active listening, and respectful engagement with cultural differences. These initiatives may include workshops, guided reflection sessions, and master classes focused on intercultural awareness. Peer mentoring programs that pair students from diverse cultural backgrounds also promote reciprocal support and meaningful interaction. Importantly, such efforts should be continuous rather than episodic to ensure that intercultural competence becomes an integral part of the student learning experience.

Interpersonal relationships in multicultural academic settings are inherently complex, shaped by language differences, cultural expectations, and social inequalities. Nevertheless, coordinated strategies-including intercultural competence development, cooperative learning design, and supportive institutional policies-can significantly enhance the quality of student interactions. Gillies (2006) demonstrates that collaborative learning structures provide balanced participation opportunities, while Hurtado and Carter (1997) emphasize the necessity of cultivating an inclusive institutional climate to sustain meaningful cross-cultural engagement.

Overall, the theoretical perspectives and empirical findings reviewed in this section provide a solid foundation for practical interventions aimed at strengthening interpersonal communication in higher education. Their adaptation within Kazakhstan's multicultural academic context can contribute to the deve-

lopment of inclusive learning environments and prepare students for active participation in a globally interconnected world.

This study aimed to identify the characteristics of students' interpersonal communication in a multicultural academic environment.

**Materials and Methods.** A descriptive research design was employed to systematically examine participants' experiences, perceptions, and attitudes toward intercultural interaction.

**Data Collection Tool.** The study utilized a survey methodology as the primary data collection method. The questionnaire was developed and administered via the Google Forms platform.

**Participants.** The participants were 1st- and 2nd-year undergraduate students majoring in Pedagogy and Psychology and Social Pedagogy at L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University. A total of 124 students voluntarily participated in the survey.

The structure and content of the questionnaire were informed by Deardorff's (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence, which conceptualizes intercultural competence as a combination of attitudes (respect, openness), knowledge, skills, and internal outcomes such as adaptability and effective communication. Based on this framework, the questionnaire included items designed to assess: students' readiness for intercultural communication; their experience of interacting with representatives of different ethnic groups; encounters with language barriers; levels of tolerance toward

cultural differences; and experiences of intercultural misunderstandings or conflicts.

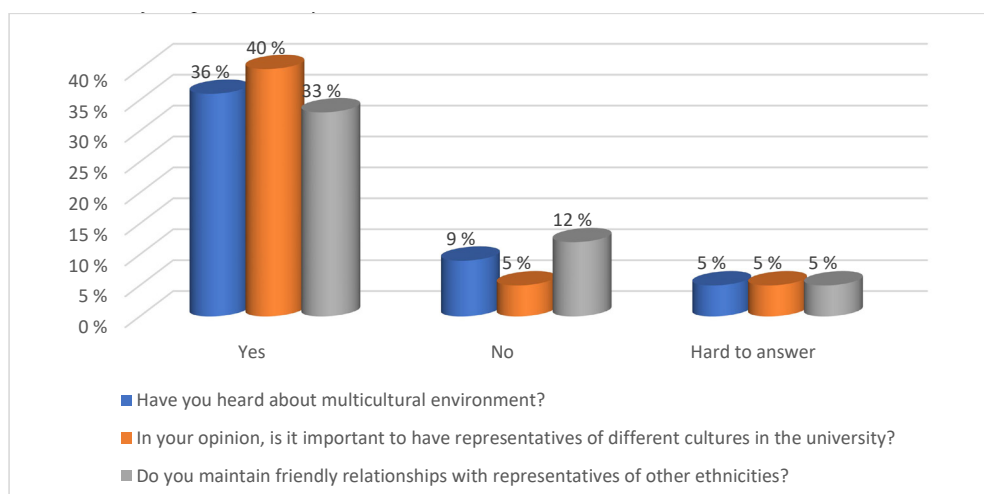
**Data Analysis Technique.** The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended questions, and the data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods, including frequency distribution and percentage calculation.

**Ethics.** Participation was voluntary and anonymous. No personal identifying information was collected. The study was conducted in accordance with the principles of confidentiality and informed consent.

**Results.** A total of 124 students participated in the survey. 67% of respondents indicated that they are ready for intercultural communication. 53% reported having experience interacting with representatives of different ethnic groups. 44% stated that they often encounter language barriers during the learning process or in daily life. Additionally, 72% expressed a tolerant attitude toward cultural differences. 25% reported having faced at least one intercultural conflict. Finally, 81% noted that studying in a multicultural environment has had a positive impact on their interpersonal communication skills. This table illustrates students' adaptation to the multicultural environment and their readiness for intercultural communication. The results indicate that the majority of students show tolerance, maintain friendly relationships with peers from other ethnicities, and perceive studying in a multicultural context as beneficial for their interpersonal skills (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

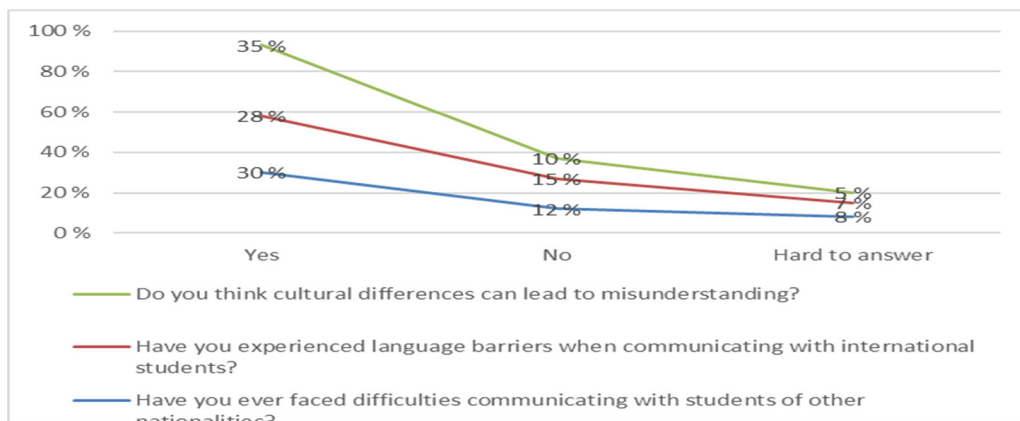
*Results of comparative analysis*



The majority of students (36%–40%) are aware of the multicultural environment and maintain friendly relationships with peers of different ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, 40% believe it is important to have representatives of different cultures at the university, indicating a generally positive attitude toward

multiculturalism. This table presents students' views on communication challenges caused by cultural differences and language barriers. The findings highlight that misunderstandings and linguistic difficulties remain relevant concerns in intercultural contexts (Figure 2).

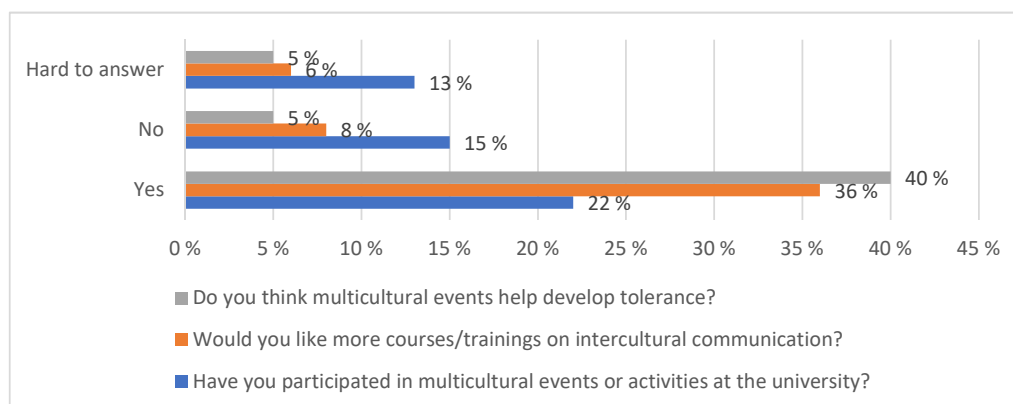
**Figure 2**  
*Results of comparative analysis*



According to the survey results, 35% of respondents believe that cultural differences may lead to misunderstandings. 28% have experienced language barriers when interacting with international students. These findings highlight the importance of addressing language and cultural challenges in multicultural

academic environments. This table describes the extent of students' participation in multicultural university events and their perceptions of these events' impact on the development of tolerance. It also reflects students' interest in additional training on intercultural communication (Figure 3).

**Figure 3**  
*Results of comparative analysis*



The survey results show that 40% of respondents believe that multicultural events help foster tolerance. Furthermore, 36%

expressed interest in additional training on intercultural communication. These results reflect strong student interest in developing

intercultural competencies and participating in inclusive university initiatives.

**Discussion.** Comparison of the study results with established international research indicates that students demonstrate a substantial ability to form interpersonal relationships within multicultural academic settings. This finding corresponds with Bennett's (2004) argument that intercultural sensitivity strengthens constructive interaction across cultural boundaries and with Deardorff's (2006) conceptualization of intercultural competence as a foundation for effective communication in diverse environments. Gudykunst (2004) similarly emphasized that awareness of cultural variation enhances communicative effectiveness and reduces uncertainty in intercultural encounters.

Differences in communication norms also help explain the challenges reported by students. Hofstede (2011) noted that cultural frameworks shape expectations regarding directness, implicitness, and communicative behavior. In the present study, frequent experiences of misunderstanding and linguistic difficulty suggest that unrecognized cultural differences may impede interaction. This finding aligns with Hurtado and Carter's (1997) research, which demonstrated that low perceptions of institutional inclusiveness are associated with reduced engagement with culturally different peers. In our data, 25% of students reported instances of intercultural conflict, further supporting this interpretation.

The role of stereotypes and prejudice in hindering effective communication also appears significant. Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) demonstrated that negative preconceptions reduce trust and create social distance between groups, a pattern reflected in students' reports of strained interactions and discomfort in culturally mixed groups. Although overall tolerance levels were relatively high-67% of respondents reported readiness for intercultural communication, and 72% expressed positive attitudes toward cultural differences, latent tension and bias remained observable.

Language barriers represent another persistent challenge. A considerable proportion of students (44%) indicated that linguistic difficulties limited

their participation, while 35% believed that culturally rooted communication styles easily produce misunderstandings. These findings align with Meyerhuber's (2019) argument that listening and interpretation are culturally influenced processes that, when mismatched, may lead to communicative breakdown.

Despite these challenges, the study also reveals opportunities for improvement. Students expressed interest in additional intercultural communication training (36%), and many respondents (40%) noted that multicultural events foster tolerance and mutual understanding. These preferences correspond with Gillies' (2006) findings that cooperative learning activities enhance group cohesion, mutual trust, and openness to diverse perspectives. Bennett (2004) likewise supports sustained intercultural training as a mechanism for reducing bias and strengthening communication competence.

Overall, the results of this study confirm earlier international research (Bennett, 2004; Deardorff, 2006; Gudykunst, 2004; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) while offering context-specific insights into multicultural interaction within Kazakhstani higher education. As globalization and academic mobility continue to increase cultural diversity in universities, the findings highlight both the strengths and persistent challenges in fostering genuinely inclusive and effective intercultural communication in academic environments.

**Conclusion.** This study investigated the key features of students' interpersonal communication within the multicultural university context of Kazakhstan. The findings indicate that most students demonstrate substantial readiness for intercultural engagement, show tolerant attitudes toward cultural differences, and recognize the academic, social, and personal advantages of studying in culturally diverse environments. These outcomes suggest that higher education institutions in Kazakhstan generally succeed in creating conditions that support the development of intercultural competence and constructive interpersonal relationships.

At the same time, several challenges were identified that may limit the full potential of multicultural learning. Students continue to

encounter linguistic difficulties that affect both comprehension and self-expression; cultural mismatches in communication styles that lead to misunderstandings; and instances of intercultural conflict that, while not widespread, remain significant enough to influence perceptions of inclusiveness. These challenges highlight the importance of systematic institutional strategies aimed at supporting intercultural communication in a consistent and structured manner.

Based on the study's results, several recommendations can be proposed to strengthen universities' capacity to function as inclusive and culturally responsive learning communities:

- Integrate ongoing intercultural communication training into the curriculum, with a focus on empathy, active listening, cultural awareness, and conflict-resolution skills. Such training should be continuous rather than delivered as isolated sessions.

- Expand opportunities for cooperative learning and peer mentoring between students from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. These formats help turn cultural diversity into a resource for shared problem-solving and collaborative knowledge creation.

- Implement regular multicultural programs and events that promote inclusiveness, celebrate diversity, and reduce social distance among student groups. These initiatives should be participatory, enabling students to take active roles in their design and execution.

If consistently applied, these measures can contribute to building a more inclusive, collaborative, and culturally aware university environment. In such a context, students not only improve their interpersonal communication skills but also acquire competencies essential for successful participation in diverse social and professional settings within an increasingly globalized world. Looking forward, future research would benefit from longitudinal studies exploring how students' intercultural communication competencies evolve, especially in response to structured training programs. Comparative studies involving domestic and international students could yield deeper insights into how multicultural experiences shape communicative behavior in different educational settings. Such research would inform evidence-based policies and pedagogical practices aimed at preparing globally competent graduates.

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