

INTERCULTURAL AND CROSS-CULTURAL AWARENESS IN INTERNATIONAL ENGLISH

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Abstract

Intercultural and cross-cultural awareness becomes a crucial part of a speaker's communicative competence within International English as a vehicle for successful international business. The paper deals with theoretical background of several major concepts of cross-cultural dimensions and communication implications, and with its practical application. The research results elaborated by Hofstede and Trompenaars are being challenged by today's global world situation. The author contrasts the classical dimension theory overview with aspects related to current situation, both globally and locally, and opens space for reconsidering formats of cross-cultural communication patterns. To demonstrate hesitation over the classical findings, the author shows results of her current survey carried internationally among students and also a comparison of results between students and company professionals.

Keywords: Intercultural communication, cross-cultural communication, situational context, pragmatics

Introduction

As cultural differences manifest themselves in intercultural communication, the degree of mutual communication pattern likeness was surveyed among university students in six European countries to reveal probabilities with which one may expect certain communication trends in international encounters. The survey results indicated interesting trends in communication of university students in today's Europe. The results showed certain common tendencies as well as areas where there is likeliness to meet a different attitude and different communication patterns conveyed through today's lingua franca – International English.

Today's world has become an extremely interrelated place where cultures meet and merge not only through face-to-face encounters of individual speakers, negotiations of enterprises, mass media broadcast and public speeches of various natures, but also through virtual communication

channels including noticeably influential social media. All this cultural fusion impacts our communication and thus mutual understanding becomes at stake and does not always seem easy to maintain. The understanding phenomenon rests in comprehending not only all the purely linguistic aspects of communication itself, but rather understanding a message and its communication background. The place where communication is conveyed is always set in a certain cultural background and thus it gives an added value to communicated utterances besides their standard linguistic attributes of lexico-grammar and pronunciation, and this value may be seen as an influential player within linguistic pragmatics. The tendencies of cultures to communicate in a certain way or at least to manifest certain patterns in communication are predefined by numerous factors. Understanding these tendencies may significantly help to reveal what literal utterances meant in specific contexts.

Main Text

Intercultural awareness is a pathway for understanding the differences and for establishing a helpful environment enabling speakers to explore their own identities as well as those of their counterparts. Such a pathway may lead to improved message decoding of culturally diverse speakers while preserving mutual respect and eliminating dangers of unpleasant surprise or clash.

In the narrow concept, the communication carried across borders is generally understood as cross-cultural communication; however, not only national borders should be considered. Cultures may be understood as defined by territories of countries, as well as by territories of communities or institutions. Cultures feature specific ways of communication given by agreed conventions, reasons for which are often subtle and may only be perceived through manifestation of certain phenomena to the outside world.

From this viewpoint conventions are rather useful, as they represent a safe journey through establishing relationships, rapport and solidarity, exchanging information within particular communication scenarios, arriving at compromises and satisfactory closures. They are, however, the most crucial during the very opening of communication, as the impression we give during first instances pre-sets the communication development itself. The fewer errors we make, the further the communication may flow. Providing the aim of international communication is a sustainable relationship between counterparts of different cultural backgrounds, the communication means are to reflect it. The choice of language and its appropriate use play a crucial role in this process. Various scientific fields attempted to reveal clues for better understanding across cultures not only in terms of communication for its

own sake but also e.g. for more efficient management and control in business spheres.

Intercultural awareness becomes more and more important with the use of “International English”. International English (IE) can be understood as a concept of English as a global means of communication in plentiful dialects, but also a movement towards coining an international standard for the language. Scholars tend to use several other concepts of global means of communication e.g. World English, English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), Global English etc., while popular media produce a term Globish. To avoid setting too blurred boundaries between them all, it seems worthwhile to provide basic differentiation between them.

Braj Kachru’s concept of World Englishes divides the use of English into three concentric circles: English of the Inner circle, of the Outer one, and of the Expanding circle. The first one is a traditional base of English, where the language was and is used as a native language. The territories comprise the UK and Ireland and the Anglophone populations of the former British colonies of the United States, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada, certain islands of the Caribbean, Indian and Pacific Oceans. The Outer circle is the one where English has official or historical importance and includes most of the countries of the Commonwealth of Nations, including India, Pakistan and Nigeria; and others, e.g. the Philippines, under the sphere of influence of native English-speaking countries. English is used there as a lingua franca between ethnic and language groups; and also a state performs its roles predominantly in English. The Expanding circle uses English for certain functions only, mainly in international business. Though English has no official role there, non-native English speakers using English outnumber native speakers by a factor of three and thus exercise a certain possession over the language, influencing it immensely.

The concept of English as a lingua franca resembles the third expanding Kachru’s circle. Certain scholars see it as an additionally acquired language system which serves as a common means of communication for speakers of different languages. According to Jenkins (2006) English as a lingua franca concept complies with the one of World Englishes in terms of non-judgmental approach to the language. Most speakers in both concepts are non-native speakers and all varieties, native and non-native are accepted, rather than evaluated against a native speakers’ benchmark. Interestingly, non-native varieties are perceived as different and not inferior. The paradigms explore the ways new Englishes develop in their own right as a means of expressing socio-cultural identities of their speakers instead of approximation to the norms of native speakers. Nevertheless, Dewey (2007) finds a clear difference between the two paradigms in their territorial aspect; while the World Englishes concept focuses on bounded varieties of English,

the English as a lingua franca reflects global processes and implies a focus on English as a fluid, flexible, contingent, hybrid and deeply intercultural means of communication. Pennycook (2007) attributes nationalism to certain merits of World Englishes whereas a notion of plurilithic Englishes is ascribed to the ELF concept.

International English is a concept close to English as a lingua franca and its users are often highly skilled communicators whose aim is not to master the language for its own sake, but rather to harness it and make the best of it in terms of reaching their specific functional targets. By an effective use of International English they can demonstrate willingness to be polite and establish rapport, maintain solidarity and project cultural identity. International English not being a culturally rooted language with all the historical connotations compressed in the linguistically compact system comprises two sides of the same coin in itself. On the one hand, it is a fluid, dynamic, effective, living communication vessel; on the other hand, naturally, it opens space for miscommunication based on its historical emptiness and lack of conventional communication agreements to which one may turn during a conversation as to valid safety guidelines usually developed by culturally homogeneous communities. This may lead potentially to risky situations, uncertainties, apprehensions or surprise when a message fails to get responded, though was seemingly conveyed and perceived.

Non –native speakers of English tend to acquire the language in the order that is visible to or audible for them. The hidden part of it is, however, embedded in a situational context, distinctive features of which are, on top of it, blurred by intercultural encounters themselves, and thus the non-native speakers often grasp this aspect last as it totally subjects to a context of the utterances.

Linguistic aspects can be carried out in the levels of lexis and lexicogrammar, pronunciation, and pragmatics and each of them influences a message conveyed. Bearing in mind the axiom incorporated in the above stated concept of International English, which suggests a tendency towards coining new English language standards, it calls for analysing most common mistakes manifested in non-native English speakers' utterances. Many researches worldwide underwent this effort, among the most influential ones being studies of Jenkins on ELF pronunciation (2000, 2002) and Firth (1996) and House (1999) focused on pragmatics.

In terms of phonology, many non-native English speakers replace some elements of standard pronunciation with “non-standard” when they feel relaxed in social communication. However, they do not replace them in contexts of business or academic communication when intelligibility is regarded highly important and may cause severe consequences. This may

result in non-native speakers' tendency to approximate native-speakers' English in high-stakes situations only. To view it from the other side, native speakers of English may influence International English by their accommodating pronunciation to be understood by non-native speakers. Deterding argues this will have repercussions as teaching and learning of accommodating skills is far more demanding than teaching Received Pronunciation or General American.

Similarly, the "high stake" situations are reflected in mastering lexis/lexico-grammar. The most common mistakes occur in students' omitting 3rd person singular "s" morpheme, although they tend to be less frequent in presence of a teacher. Other relatively frequent mistakes are observed in the use of prepositions, article system, collocations, generally in morphology and syntax, incorrect use of tag questions or backchannel, and overdoing explicitness. Another very distinctive area in mistake occurrence concerns idiomatic expressions. As Pitzl (2009) states idiomatic expressions occur very differently from English as a native language and she comes with an expression of re-metaphorization, according to which non-native speakers coin an idiomatic language themselves, sometimes enriching the original and developing it to wordplay – and, obviously it is not seen as inferior.

Pragmatics either adds to the whole meaning of utterances or may completely destroy them by neglecting the significance of their context side, where the most typical mistakes may rest in overgeneralization of language functions or insufficient insight into the register. However, Firth (1996) claims recent research into English as lingua franca pragmatics showed orientation towards mutual understanding regardless of correctness. This undeniable focus of pragmatics on resolving strategies for establishing and maintaining understanding rather than on narrow concepts of appropriate structure knowledge resulted in a fruitful effort to identify productive resolving techniques among which are repetition (Lichtkoppler 2007, Waterson 2008, Cogo 2009), clarification and self-repair (Mauranen 2006), paraphrasing (Kaur 2009), let it pass strategy, and topic change (Firth 1996). As Jenkins, Cogo and Dewey (2011) state, based on conclusions made by studies of Charles in 2007, Ehrenreich 2009, Pullin Stark in 2009, Erling in 2007, Smit in 2010, the communicators from domains of business, higher education and tourism seem to be rather skilled communicators and able of efficient use of pre-empting strategies to maintain understanding.

Nevertheless, there still remains an extensive space for tensions. The one identified by Seidlehofer (2009) slightly overlaps with the lexico-grammatical aspect in terms of the use of idioms. The insecure territory of idiomatic language is a soil for an eternal dispute between ensuring intelligibility on the one hand and keeping signalling and constructing identity on the other. Drawing on the findings of Pitzl (2009) and according

to Seidlehofer (2009), non-native speakers of English do not avoid the use of idioms but rather creatively build on them and produce their own idioms which become markers of in-group membership.

To make it even more multilayer, the idiomatic language draws on both the culturally rooted English as a native language, and on contexts added by the location of its new usage, both in terms of the territory and the native language of the non-native speaker. As a consequence the International English is a melting pot, to borrow this expression from the description of culturally different learning styles by Manicutty (2007), in which all English varieties meet one another, react and response to one another and get melted in a new, though constantly fluid, means of communication. The key point, however, rests in a move away from a pure identification of linguistic aspects forming the means of communication towards a more holistic approach. Such a transfer is explained by Seidlehofer in Jenkins, Cogo and Dewey (2011) as a move from a surface description of particular features to an explanation of the underlying significance of the forms: to ask what work they do, what functions they are symptomatic of. Cogo and Dewey (2006) see that as an attention paid to the pragmatic motives and functional meanings involved in their use.

Speakers of International English often expect to be understood provided they resort to as much correct grammar and lexis as they can. The above mentioned mistakes occurring not only in the lexico-grammatical feature of the language, but rather more often in the pragmatic aspect of communication, may significantly impair their satisfaction in terms of conveying the intended message. Hesitations may arise in terms of compliance with the respective situation, appropriateness of reactions, ellipses in communication, code switching, and degree of shared knowledge.

To examine the ways by which the undesirable hindrances on the pathway of understanding can be eliminated as much as possible and a smoother and smarter surface can be obtained to allow for less anxiety about the intercultural communication processes, scholars tend to simplify the complex communication system and typify from many different perspectives. Probably most prominent work in terms of quantitative studies has been done by cross-cultural management gurus, G. Hofstede and F. Trompenaars, each of them looking at the system from a viewpoint of comparing communication of different nationalities. This makes it a distinctive feature in distinguishing cross-cultural communication from intercultural communication, which deals mostly with communication of individuals from different cultures, while the term cross-cultural communication is reserved for communication of cultures across borders.

Though results of their studies differ in certain dimensions, each of them even explores different dimensions or examines the same ones from

different angles; their results are of eminent value for conceptualizing the scope of research and opening space for different focuses on the subject. The strongest drawback of these surveys rests, however, in their historical limitations even though they attempted to be long-lasting in their conclusions. The pace of development of today's societies does not allow us to take into account data, though with a relatively high face-validity, without questioning them in terms of their origin, context, and other factors. When we consider these variables, we realize that the responses gathered cannot be valid forever; especially some data could not fully reflect the prominent changes on the European continent in 1990s, or before the outburst of economic crisis worldwide.

Both the authors use categorisations of cultures according to several dimensions and structure each cultural dimension from responses to sets of questions collected from thousands of respondents from multinational companies. They were critiqued by other experts in the field, as Schein, who tends to draw more on Hall's approach to individuality, thus more to an intercultural stories concept, and claims there is no point in measuring cultures through quantitative methods. Other critiques reproached rather a limited number of distributed questions in the surveys and picking only certain respondent groups while generalizing the conclusions.

To reveal tendencies in intercultural communication, it is beneficial to combine assets of both the mentioned types – intercultural and cross-cultural communication researches, work with relatively homogeneous groups while deliberately limiting the outcomes to the respective environments and period, and pay attention to the background information of the respondents. Given the role of higher education, university students are influential respondents in terms of their preferences in communication trends and their potential to implement them in intercultural encounters. The students are a typical group of pre-service language users and thus it seems interesting to see if there are any differences between them and in-service language users – business professionals. Comparing their responses may substantially help to reveal if the communication patterns manifest themselves in the same way within the same culture group, however, distinguished by age, experience and environment.

In 2011 and 2012 an international survey was carried among students of six European universities to explore their communication tendencies in IE, reveal similarities in approaches to controversial issues of university students in Europe or comparing discrepancies between groups of different cultural background. However, the survey and its results are not a finished and closed work; they are to be further examined and may be implemented in teaching/learning of International English in terms of implications for

language functions to be taught and their effective use in intercultural encounters.

The survey was responded by 141 students from the universities of Pardubice (Czech Republic), Leipzig (Germany), Zurich /ETH (Switzerland), Oulu (Finland), AUA Athens (Greece) and Marseille-Aix-en-Provence-Luminy (France), representing the following nationalities within their intercultural study environments: Czech (30), German (22), Swiss (21), Finnish (14), Greek (34), French (10), Polish (1) and other (9). For the purpose of this study only 6 nationalities were monitored, their background being science and technology, humanities, business.

As mentioned above, another examined aspect, was a potential difference in communication preferences between students and in-service professionals. Given the space of this research only one cultural group comprising Czech in-service and pre-service respondents was examined. The group of Czech in-service professionals consisted of 10 respondents; their counter-group were the above described 30 Czech students.

The construction of the questionnaire did not resort to one of the previously mentioned schools of dimensions, but rather drew on certain areas of cross-cultural management schools, extended them and added an area of politeness as well. The questionnaire consisted of 28 questions in English, dealing with seven areas of interest, which the author believes, may set implications for expecting tendencies in communication. The discussed areas were controlled emotions in communication, approach to time schedules, approach to rules, individual or team player approach, orientation to achievement, risk taking and degree of politeness or directness in social encounters.

The area of controlled emotions in communication dealt with the degree of openness in expressing important and controversial issues, usually important enough to be solved either for the sake of oneself or for the sake of a whole group the person belongs to, which distinguishes the area from the one of politeness/directness, where no controversy is necessarily involved. The aspect of controlled emotions in communication can be understood as a tendency to refrain from affective communication without logical reasoning by providing hard fact language, the opposite pole being either emotional outburst, including interjections or exclamations as language manifestations, or constipated or suppressed communication due to insulted emotions.

The approach to time schedules was examined in terms of prevailing conventions and expectations to be either time oriented or time relaxed in a short-term horizon only. Implications may lead to relevant language functions on either time punctuality or lenient attitude to keeping deadlines or time agreements in social and business contact.

The approach to rules complies with Trompenaars's concept of application of rules, which may be either universal for everyone or, on the other pole, exceptions are applied, if a particular interest of a respondent is involved, admitted and even expected. To define the concept of rules for the purpose of the questionnaire, the rule is understood as a principle given either by law or a binding agreement/contract, no matter whether concluded in writing or orally. The manifested approaches to application of rules may imply either leisurely communication or, at the other extreme, use of imperatives when communicating these language functions.

The individual or team-player approach was explored through revealing tendencies to sharing responsibility and personal space with others as well as enjoying other people's company. Implications may be drawn to communication patterns in terms of silences and speaking modes, as well as the use of metalanguage.

The aspect of orientation to achievement was examined in compliance with a specific situation of university students, which meant both the focus on success in studies and expected treatment in their future jobs. Potential implications may be derived for language functions used in communicating feedback on performance, including register used with companions in formal settings.

The risk taking area explored attitudes towards establishing new social contacts and operating in multinational working environments; both of them may be seen as undertaking challenges, which is the reason why this area was incorporated. It revealed willingness and readiness to enter uncertain territories in communication, such as addressing new people and opening conversations with strangers in non-native language.

The last area explored politeness and directness attitudes in communication. This area is as culture relative as much as the other ones; however, it reveals tendencies in communication when no profit is at stake, which distinguishes it from the area of emotions. The area of politeness dealt with situations where mere degree of willingness to please counterparts in social interactions by positive attitudes is involved, while the speaker does not risk losing any advantage of his role. The implications may be more general as to language functions are concerned, as this area covers most interactions in all conversations. It may affect rapport establishing functions, e.g. tag questions and backchannels, discourse markers to indicate solidarity with interlocutors, saving face devices, tact, generosity and praise devices, etc.

The statements of the same area of interest were dispersed in the questionnaire, each area being covered by four statements. The four statements were designed to offer options from both the perspectives (agreement/disagreement) of the examined issue, each side being covered by

two statements. The respondents could express their agreement or disagreement with the statements by using a scale starting from strongly agree, agree, neither agree/nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree. For the interpretation phase it was necessary in each area of interest to group the two statements of either positive or negative value and match them with the two statements of the opposite value, so that the final score could be calculated. The respondents could use either paper questionnaires or on-line versions. The collected responses were calculated, both from the point of view of statements and cultural groups of respondents. The areas of interest were analysed as comparisons between cultural groups, which revealed some very interesting results. Further it will be examined from the point of view of general tendencies of university students.

Controlled emotions in communication

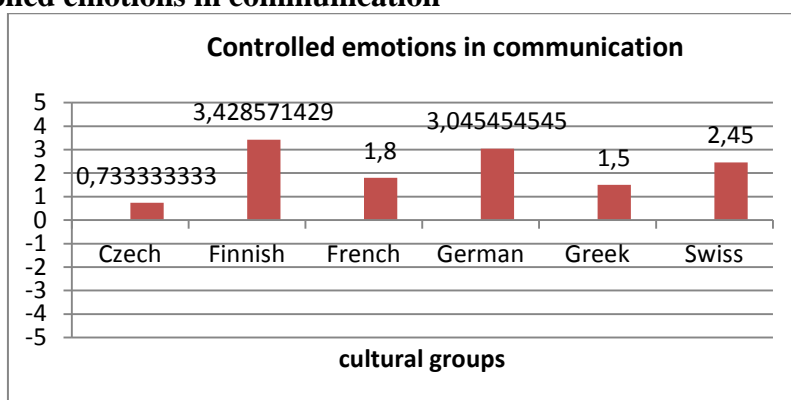


Fig. 1

As obvious from Fig. 1 the highest scores in terms of controlled emotions in communication and their ability to reason logically during expressing themselves can be ascribed to the Finnish group of students, while high scores are reached also by the German and Swiss groups. It probably correlates with stereotyped preconceptions, however, the interesting point shows, that the lowest score is reached by the Czech students, which, bearing in mind the Central European location, is slightly surprising. It may lead to presumptions that a more straightforward language could be used by them in stressful situations.

Approach to time schedules

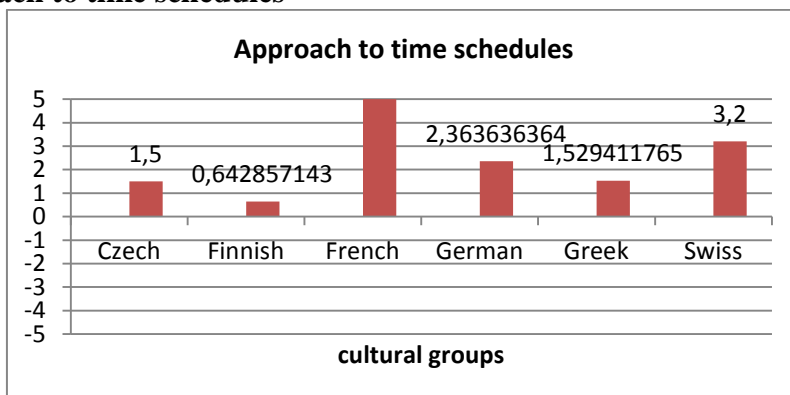


Fig.2.

As shown in Fig.2 the highest scores in terms of time orientation were achieved by the French group of students, which might contradict with the widespread pre-assumptions. The second and third most particular about keeping time schedules were Swiss and German students. The surprising result of the Finnish group calls for further examination. However, all the cultural groups revealed relatively strong commitment to keeping deadlines and respecting schedules. The respective language functions should reflect it in polite apologising or giving explanations for delays, polite structures for suggesting obligatory, however, not imperative assignments time-wise and reactions to them.

Approach to rules

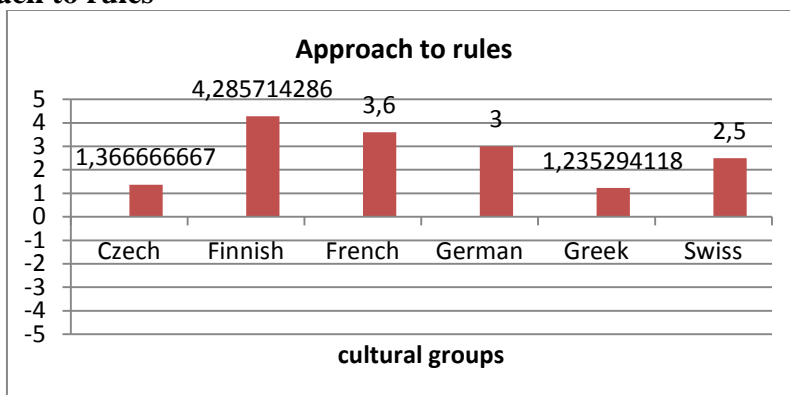


Fig.3.

According to the Fig.3 the results of respecting rules across cultural groups became obvious. The groups where rules tend to be least respected are the Czech and Greek groups, however, the prevailing rule-respecting attitude is similar across all of the groups. Rules tend to be respected, which

in International English might be reflected in using rather subtle emphasizing language in e.g. announcements, memos, notices, and directives. The results showed no need for explicit imperatives.

Individual or team-player approach

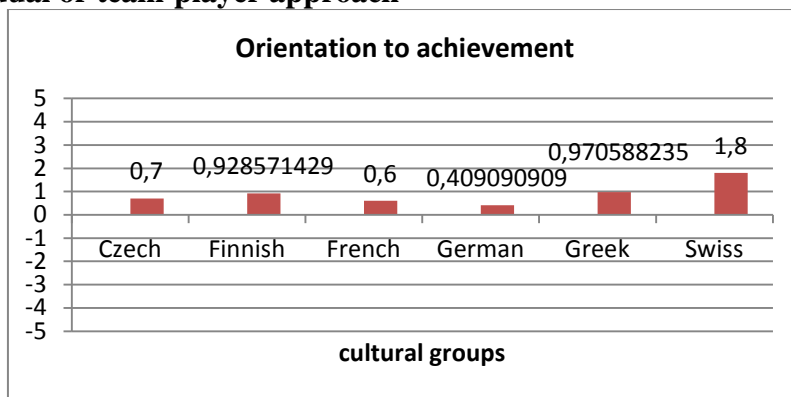


Fig.4.

As evident from the Fig. 4 the French and Greek students were the most individual groups, the other cultural groups tended to team-player approach, however, the results were very balanced. The results would not imply significant changes in silence and speaking modes, it rather leads to enhancing language structures as willingness to sharing, establishing and confirming rapport, politely agreeing or disagreeing, or on the other hand polite demarcation of one’s territory or admitting responsibility.

Orientation to achievement

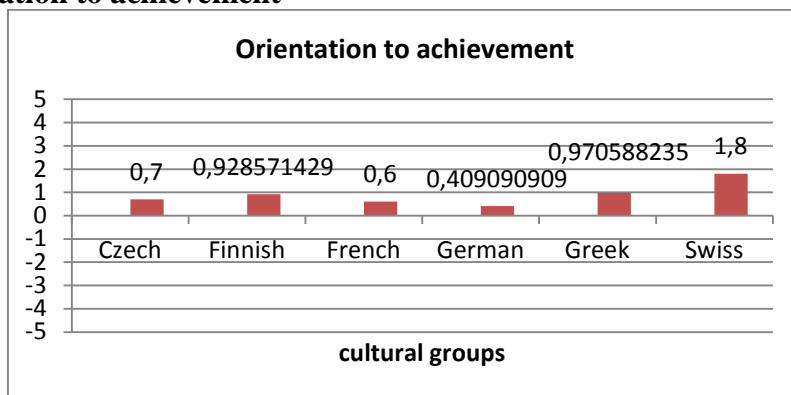


Fig. 5.

As seen from the Fig. 5 it was clear the cultural groups did not manifest significant differences. Such an outcome is safe for using self-

confident language structures in discussing work or study performance, ambitious language of evaluation and self-evaluation.

Risk avoidance

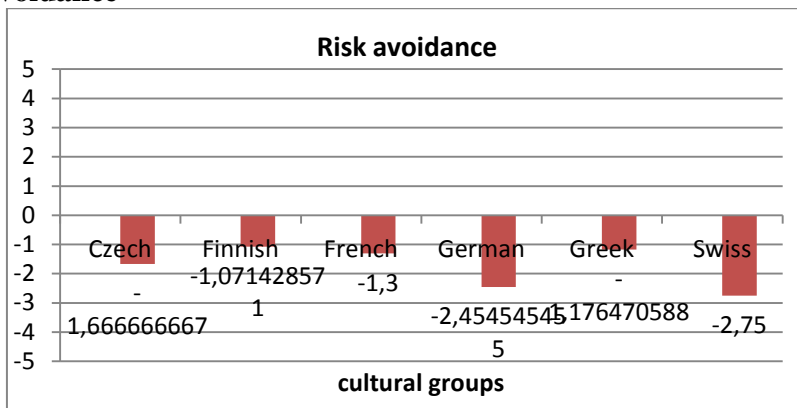


Fig. 6.

According to the Fig. 6 it was evident all the cultural groups tend to taking risk rather than avoiding it, which, bearing in mind the context of International English as a means of establishing new contacts in international environment is positive. The results were relatively balanced across cultures and it was obvious young people do not feel reluctant to talk, neither to approach challenges. International English may reflect it in language structures of starting new social contacts in both formal and informal register. As seen from the Fig. 6 the most daring are Swiss, German and Czech students, which might suggest a tendency to a more straightforward language.

Approach to politeness

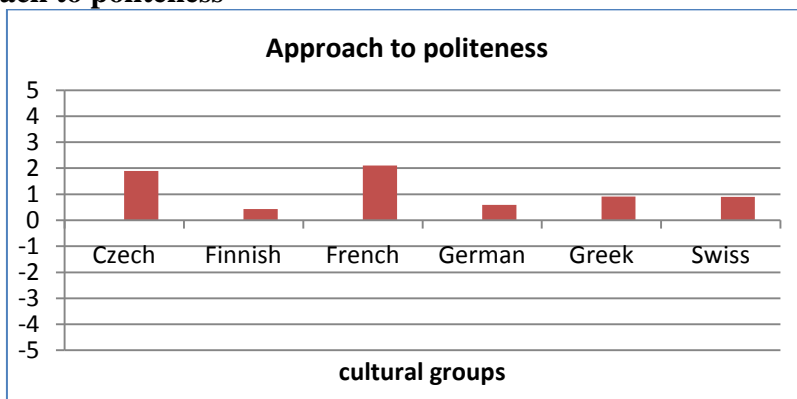


Fig 7.

As seen from the Fig. 7 all the groups prioritize more polite trends over directness. There are still some differences between the groups, as obvious, the Czech and French groups tend to more courteous communication, the least careful about directness are Finnish and German cultural groups. This area touches not only verbal, but also non-verbal communication as an integral part of the pragmatics paradigm.

Conclusion

The carried survey revealed prevailing likeliness in communication trends of the university students, however, certain areas showed either slightly surprising results in terms of preconceptions or implied for a closer look at them being potentially controversial or requiring caution. The important aspect of the survey was the questionnaire language – English. This fact enhanced authenticity of reactions, as the primary aim was to reveal communication trends in IE. Students thus did not focus on the mental content only but were expected to react to the form while applying their language comprehension. A likeness can be generally expected in communication in IE among university students in control of emotions in communication in favour of a more explicit message at high stake situations. However, it does not imply the message can be conveyed in abrupt language. It calls for more attention to be paid to the use of conditionals, subtle language structures, and hedging etc. especially with Czech students, who otherwise tend to be very polite; nevertheless, in stressful situations conveyed in IE they might not fully distinguish the language register of IE. In terms of approach to time schedules the groups are alike oriented, the time particularity of the French group should be further examined. The respective language functions in setting deadlines should involve polite IE structures not to sound imperative. The approach to rules also revealed similar attitudes, which might again be reflected in using subtle language in e.g. announcing rules and obligations. The individual or team player approach aspect showed certain differences in trends among the groups, with both trends present. The differences suggest this area might be a touchy territory and the respective language functions for expressing willingness to sharing or polite demarking personal territory need utmost attention. Orientation to achievement aspect showed the cultural groups likeness attitude towards achievement with the Swiss group reaching the highest scores. The derived language structures should reflect the self-confident approach and count on ambitious reactions. The risk avoidance area revealed all cultural groups tend to taking sound risks in establishing new social contacts, no explicit apprehensions or risk avoidance was obvious in any group, which means no real hindrances stand in the way of IE communication in both formal and

informal register. The area of politeness or directness displayed all the groups tend to the same – polite – pole; however, within this trend they showed differences in the degree or concept of politeness. Implications may be drawn both for verbal and non-verbal communication patterns in IE and focus should be put on the conventions of the audience/interlocutors.

The survey showed IE being a real vessel of international communication intakes, processes and finally manifests cultural communication patterns which should be paid utmost attention in terms of pragmatic aspects and revealing motives of speakers. This way IE may both provide and be provided with a more holistic understanding to spoken utterances.

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