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The Awareness of RIT Croatia Students on Intercultural Competence

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## **ABSTRACT**

According to the latest update of the United Nations World Tourism Organization in 2012, more than 980 million people travelled internationally. Only the United States international receipts surpassed 1 trillion dollars in 2012. One of the most important tools to understand better this intercultural context is to understand intercultural competence. This competence, already defined by researchers as an ability to communicate and behave in appropriate ways to those who are culturally different has thus become one of the crucial skills and competencies in the modern globalized world and it has a special meaning for the world of hospitality industry. The main purpose of this project is to investigate how aware are the students of RIT Croatia of the importance of intercultural competence in order to investigate how aware are the students of RIT Croatia of the potential misunderstandings in cross cultural communication, motivations and abilities.

**Key words:** Intercultural Competence, Intercultural Interactions, Intercultural Friendship, RIT Croatia, Cultural Awareness, Erasmus program, Intercultural Understanding

## **INTRODUCTION**

According to the latest update of the United Nations World Tourism Organization in 2012, more than 980 million people travelled internationally. Only the United States international receipts surpassed 1 trillion dollars in 2012. Such a climate created a need to analyze the demands of different markets in order to understand the difference between the different cultures. Furthermore, the understanding improved the cultural understanding among different nations and also provided useful data to the hospitality industry in their need to answer the demands of their climate.

One of the most important tools to understand better this intercultural context is to understand intercultural competence. According to [culturaldetective.com](http://culturaldetective.com) intercultural competence is defined as the “ability to communicate and behave in appropriate ways to those who are culturally different.” This shows a significant reason why people are interested in knowing more about other people, cultural background and the language.

### **Intercultural Communication in the World**

Intercultural competence can also be seen as model of cross-cultural communication. People have the need to communicate with each other and, furthermore, in this way, through their communication, they can establish a strong relationship, especially if they contact with each other constantly, whether it is face-to-face or through the means of technology. It is also true that while communicating people show their attitudes and beliefs to others in that process. Therefore, it would be interesting to observe several cases of intercultural communication in education.

The first example is the international university in Adelaide, in Australia, in which both local and international students attend and participate in different classes. Most of the international students come from nearby countries, such as China and India. Bell et al in 2008 considered that “collaborative learning activities will develop students’ intercultural learning as well as intercultural skills.” This is an opportunity for all students to learn more about each other and their cultural background, which will help also the students to get used to a specific environment. There is only one problem and that is the difference in language, which makes communication more difficult and challenging. Burdett clearly identified that students’ “lack of language confidence and unfamiliarity with local student terminology created an unfamiliar context and potential misunderstandings.” It means that there is a lack of explanations and

lack of clear communications between local and international students. In the simple words, it means that students from both sides do not understand each other well or it might be that they do not show proper respect for each other. Another reason is the culture. It represents the ignorance of culture. In this case, Burdett, 2014 found out that the local students prefer to work in a group with only local students rather than with internationals. The reason is because they have already gotten used to it, while internationals have their own way of studying and working in the groups.

Another example is Erasmus + program. According to [ec.europa.eu](http://ec.europa.eu), Erasmus + is the EU's program to support education, training, youth and sport. There are many opportunities that Erasmus + offers to students such as: studying abroad, traineeships and receiving master degree in foreign countries at the end. Their official web site also states that students who study abroad have the chance to improve their language skills, gain self-confidence and independence. It is ultimately as well an opportunity to get to know more about the countries, where they study abroad and to meet people with their different cultural backgrounds. Another opportunity for those students who choose to study abroad using this opportunity is to try to study and learn more about their local language and more importantly about the culture itself.

Another researcher, Barrett, in 2015 implied that there should be some important and significant actions that are related to the intergroup contacts. One of the main actions according to this author was "Encouraging Intercultural Friendship." Based on this, the main purpose for the students in those types of intercultural programs is to diminish the intercultural prejudice. It means that students from different cultural background should collaborate with each other in order to be aware of the intercultural competence (Barrett, 2015).

When it comes to the hospitality industry, Yu and Lee were investigating in their study “the structure of the interactions between international tourists and local residents.” What they wanted to investigate is the behavior and attitudes between tourists and residents. Their research also tried to measure the face-to-face communication, and they were observing if there would be an impact of intercultural interaction. They defined intercultural interaction as “face-to-face contacts between people from totally different cultural background.” Intercultural interaction describes actually the way of behaving, the attitudes and self-awareness. People from different cultural background will recognize each other from which countries they come, when it comes to these factors included.

According to another yet researcher in this field, Woosnam and Norman, in 2010, there are exactly four main elements of intercultural competence: beliefs, behavior, interaction and emotional solidarity (Woosnam and Norman, 2010). These four elements play a significant role, not just only in hospitality industry, but in business and in education as well. The primary meanings of the first association of intercultural interactions, according to Reisinger and Turner, (1998) and McNaughton (2006), are: contact, cultural exchange, language sharing and attitude sharing. These four factors are almost the same as the four main elements of intercultural communication. The goal is to persuade the people with different cultural background to get to know more about each other and to establish a strong relationship between them.

Another important key is intercultural understanding. “Intercultural understanding is a part of developing mindedness, an essential for the global citizens (Rader, 2015).” Rader also explored what was included in intercultural understanding or in other words, what are the characteristics of intercultural understanding. According to this author, these characteristics are: knowledge (understanding the culture), skills (communication and sensitivity) attitudes and values.

Friganović Sain et al mentioned in their research that more than 200,000 students from the United States had the study abroad experiences in order to earn the academic credits, which were from their colleagues and universities in the United States. It could mean that study abroad students, especially from the United States have more desire to experience different cultures and intercultural competence abroad. They have the desire to experience the differences between the cultures both from their and the countries where they chose to study abroad. The data used in this research is relevant for this project as well, since it clearly states that the majority of students who have mostly experiences in study abroad come exactly from the United States.

Baker, on the other hand, explored the differences between cultural and intercultural awareness, which play a significant role on a daily basis. “Cultural awareness explores the manner in which national conceptions of culture frame intercultural communication and intercultural communication focuses on Inter and Trans cultural dimension, where there is no clear language, culture and nation correlation” (Baker, 2015). Cultural awareness focuses on the expansion and creation of the national conceptions into intercultural communication, while intercultural awareness focuses on the behaviors of the different nations worldwide and their culture.

### **RIT Croatia – the creation of multicultural environment**

RIT Croatia is a private university that has two campuses: Dubrovnik and Zagreb. First, it was called ACMT (American College of Management and Technology) and it was first opened in Dubrovnik in 1997. In Dubrovnik campus it offers 4-year undergraduate programs: Hospitality and Service Management and Information Technology, while in Zagreb campus offers International Business and Information Technology as well. All courses and classes are

taught in English. When it comes to the students that are studying in Dubrovnik campus, most of them are from Dubrovnik region, but also they come from other cities in Croatia, neighbouring countries such as Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and from abroad (United States, Germany, and France etc.). This is the reason why RIT Croatia creates a multicultural environment. Friganović Sain et al, 2016 considered that “professor-student relationships, academic policies, extra-curricular activities and classroom activities are based on American educational cultural norms and traditions.” What is more important is that students receive two diplomas: American and Croatian. These two diplomas are “recognized by the Croatian Ministry of Education, European nations and American institutions.” (Friganović Sain et al, 2016)

The main purpose of this project is to investigate how aware are the students of RIT Croatia of the importance of intercultural competence. Also it is important to investigate how aware are the students of RIT Croatia, of the possible existing misunderstandings in cross cultural communication, motivations, communication styles and abilities. It is the intention of the author to define if the results obtained will show how significant to them is this competence. The research tries to identify various communicating barriers and investigate the reasons for those barriers.

## **METHODS**

The chosen method for the collection of the data was a questionnaire. The survey was distributed to RIT Croatia students at Dubrovnik campus: domestic students, study abroad students and Erasmus students. The total number of participants was 91, out of which 76 students were domestic students and 15 study abroad/Erasmus students. Its purpose, as stated before, was to investigate the awareness of RIT Croatia students to cross-cultural

communication. The survey was divided in two parts. The first part of the survey contains a few demographic questions; while in the second part of the survey there are the 20 item questions. The 20 item questions were adapted from a survey from Friganović Sain et al in 2016 and, according to the authors, they measured Cultural Intelligence Scale. In the questionnaire the 5-likert scale was used from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). In the Cultural Intelligence Scale there are 4 categories that are being measured in relevance with intercultural competence: Strategy, Knowledge, Motivation and Behavior. According to the explanations provided in the original survey, *Strategy* was based on the students' cultural knowledge and interactions with other people from different cultures. *Knowledge* was based on the knowledge in legal systems, rules and values in different cultures. *Motivation* was based on the enjoyment in communications with people from different cultures. *Behavior* was based on the changing in verbal and non-verbal behavior while communicating. The survey was distributed to students both electronically (Google Forms) and in Pen and Paper format.

## RESULTS

The most interesting fact of the survey was the reason of the problems in communication. Study abroad and Erasmus students said that the language was one of the significant problems in communications, which is still visible today. On the other hand, the majority of domestic students said that the culture was the problem. The difference between study abroad/Erasmus students and domestic students is very significant. Study abroad students have no problems with the knowledge of the culture, but they have problems with knowledge and skills in language. On the other hand, domestic students have no problems with the knowledge and skills in language, although some of them have, but have problems with the knowledge of different cultures.

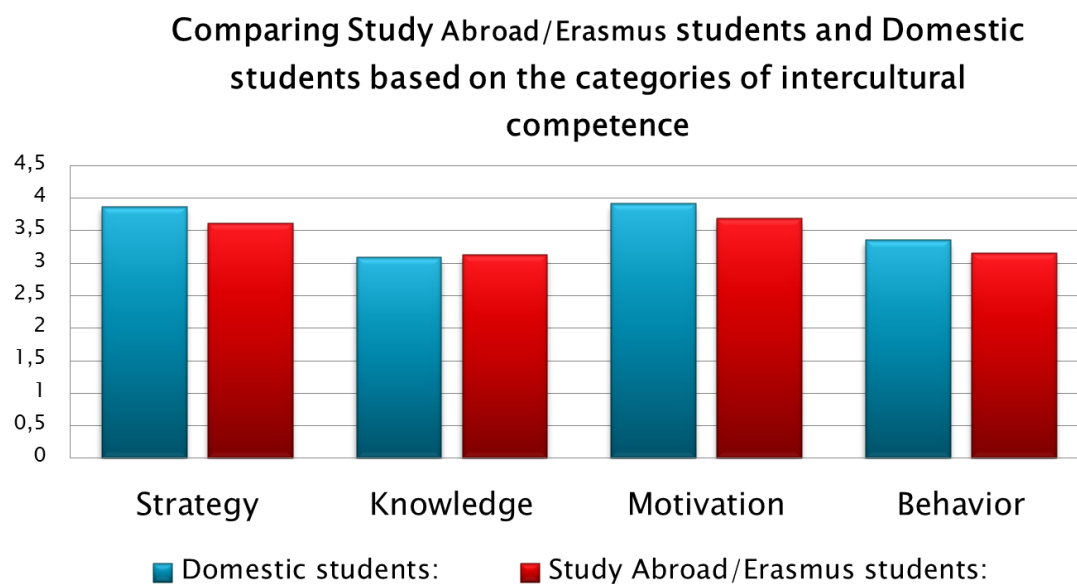
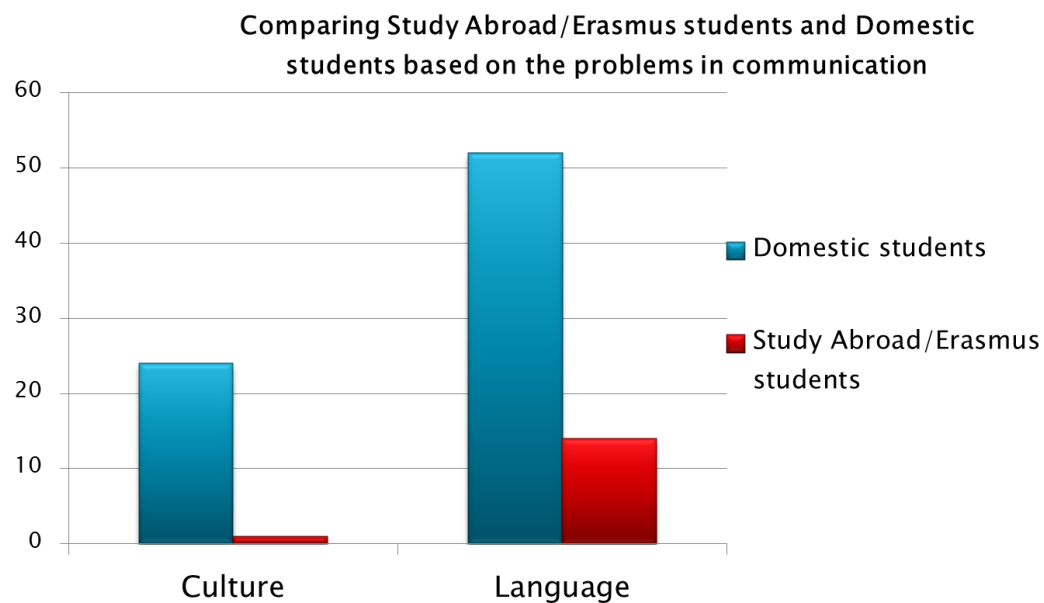
When it comes to the Likert scale, the category that had the strongest agreement was the Motivation (Mean = 3.89) (SD = 0.99). On the other hand, the category that had weakest agreement was the Knowledge (Mean = 3.09) (SD = 0.98). The conclusion was that RIT Croatia students prefer interactions with people from different cultures, rather than knowing the political and economic situations in cultures. But one of the most interesting results was the Standard Deviation of the Behavior category which was: SD = 1. All students prefer using pauses and using verbal and non-verbal behavior while interacting with people from different cultures.

## DISCUSSION

The results obtained from the survey show that even though RIT students do not care about the legal system in different cultures, they do care about getting to know more about other people with different cultural backgrounds and they want to create better relationships and learn how to stay in touch with them. The results also show that students are curious about the behavior of other people, when it comes to verbal and non-verbal communication. The limitations of the study were that there was a small number of study abroad/Erasmus students, and a much larger number of domestic students. From the results it is also clear that there is need to suggest ways to help students to improve their knowledge in intercultural competence. In order to gain that knowledge, the students should show higher level of curiosity and should strive to investigate more about different cultures. The more they become interested in learning, the more improvement will be visible in their knowledge about different cultures. On the other hand, since study abroad and Erasmus students show that they saw language issues as the main source of problems in intercultural communication, they should investigate more about the language of the culture they are going to immerse, in order to gain not only the

language skills in speaking that language but also the cultural knowledge that comes with that the knowledge of each particular language. All RIT Croatia students should know and investigate more about the systems in different culture if they want to go to some countries the cultures of which are completely different from theirs. Nevertheless, the main questions that remain unanswered still are: “Are students prepared to investigate in order to learn more?” and “Are they fully aware of the cross-cultural communication?”. It is clear that without their willingness to learn and their persistence to do the learning they will not improve their intercultural communication skills. The answers to these two questions therefore might possibly enter some light into this dilemma.

## APPENDICES



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