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Pragmatics of Intercultural Encounters: Some Practices Witnessed at an International Summer School

Pragmática de los encuentros interculturales: algunas prácticas presenciadas en una Escuela Internacional de Verano

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This paper delves into a particular academic context of a summer school, in which a truly international atmosphere permeates not only the acquisition of knowledge but also communicative exchanges through the medium of English in a bilingual region of Spain, Galicia. The study focuses on some pragmatic practices that can give us clues on how communication develops in such a multicultural setting, where different high- and low-context cultures meet. The clash of diverse cultures, additionally burdened with an academic environment and the fact that communication is conducted in a foreign language, requires particular care on the part of those who communicate. Assuming that the factors listed might influence linguistic choices, the study aims to investigate the stands of the participants towards sensitive topics, as well as the pragmatic routine of greetings and farewells. The findings yielded by the analysis conducted reveal that the respondents prefer verbal to non-verbal cues and show awareness of topic sensitivity in the observed internationalized context, thus protecting theirs and the face of their interlocutors.

Keywords: *international summer school; intercultural pragmatics; sensitive topics; greetings and farewells.*

Este trabajo parte de un contexto académico particular, de una escuela de verano universitaria, en la que un ambiente verdaderamente internacional impregnó no sólo la adquisición de conocimientos sino también los intercambios comunicativos a través del inglés en una región bilingüe de España, Galicia. El estudio se centra en algunas prácticas pragmáticas que pueden darnos pistas sobre cómo se desarrolla la comunicación en un entorno tan multicultural, donde confluyen diferentes culturas de alto y bajo contexto. El choque de culturas diversas, cargado además con el entorno académico y el hecho de que la comunicación se realice en una lengua extranjera requieren un cuidado especial por

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parte de quienes se comunican. Partiendo de la base de que los factores enumerados podrían influir en las elecciones lingüísticas, el estudio pretende investigar las posturas de los participantes ante temas delicados, así como la rutina pragmática de los saludos y las despedidas.

Palabras clave: *escuela internacional de verano; pragmática intercultural; temas delicados; saludos y despedidas.*

1. INTRODUCTION

International schools gained traction in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, fed by growing worldwide connectivity and an increasing emphasis on cross-cultural competences. Different institutions located both in Europe and North America were pioneers in unleashing the potential of these specialised programmes that were highly attractive for foreign students. Over the course of the previous decades, some short-term programmes, for instance, international schools, have gained the status of an additional form of internationalisation practices done by universities globally (Marinoni & Pina Cardona, 2024). Commonly organised during summer or wintertime, relying on greater availability of international students and academics, international schools have proved to offer numerous advantages: encouraging both teacher and student exchanges, strengthening cooperation between higher education institutions, and providing a unique experience gained in diverse settings where some topical issues are explored via the courses offered (Demeshkant et al., 2015). Apart from the personal growth they lead to, international schools can also bring academic and professional benefits, via ECTS value, digital badges, or other micro-credential models, thus going hand in hand with all the relevant, up-to-date EU pillars and suggestions.

The success of these programmes lies in the fact that it is not only academic knowledge and educational improvement what students gain but also the cultural appreciation they get from living in an unknown environment full of different habits, traditions and social norms. However, a most significant benefit when attending an international summer school is the opportunity for acquiring and/or improving languages, including local languages. In such a multicultural setting, the use of English as a means of communication brings to the fore different cultural traits and pragmatic abilities of participants. These are, precisely, the aspects on which this paper will focus.

This study contributes to bridging the gap between theoretical pragmatics and real-world intercultural communication. It does this by examining how short-term international summer schools, particularly one organised by the University of A Coruña, shape participants' ability to engage in multicultural interactions. The work evaluates the programme's influence on pragmatic proficiency and intercultural attitudes, focusing on communication patterns between students from high- and low-context cultures (HC and LC, respectively). Therefore, special attention is dedicated to certain pragmatic aspects that can be appreciated in students' communicative responses in global interactions. The in-group strategies performed by students from very different linguistic and cultural backgrounds that share only the use of English as a lingua franca in both academic and informal settings are investigated. To this end, Section 2 delves into the characteristics and framework for the development of the observed summer school and the corresponding language conditionings. Section 3 reviews the literature on pragmatic aspects present in international contexts. In the fourth section, the material to be discussed as well as the methodology followed to gather data is explained. It is in Section 5 that the views offered by ISS students are discussed from a pragmatic point of view. Finally, Section 6 presents the conclusions reached in the light of previous results, as well as some relevant implications.

2. INTERNATIONAL SUMMER SCHOOL AT UDC

International summer schools provide a wide array of academic opportunities. Such is the case of the summer school organised by the University of A Coruña (henceforth, UDC). UDC's International Summer School (ISS) was set up in 2014 (https://www.udc.es/es/iss/). Since then, it has been offering a broad selection of two-week intensive courses taught in English by international faculty on a wide array of topics, ranging from law and business to soft skills, natural science, health, engineering or technology. Dozens of lecturers and hundreds of students from 81 different countries have participated and enjoyed this experience in A Coruña so far. The multicultural picture of the ISS comprises countries from all over Europe, the American continent, as well as Asia, and Africa.[1]

This list of countries ensures cultural diversity in the Spanish region of Galicia, becoming a global setting for a couple of weeks in which students enhance their academic, and other soft skills. Sharing an educational environment in which classmates come from different backgrounds promotes students' empathy and fosters the use and maintenance of a common linguistic code that for several reasons (Crespo, 2015) has reached the status of lingua franca (Crystal, 2012).

Students have the chance to practice their English skills with instructors, classmates and in everyday life exchanges. Language skills acquired in this manner are often more practical and nuanced than those learned in a traditional language classroom setting. However, as Lowe & Kiczkowiak (2019: 219) state:

> What seems to be more urgently needed in preparing learners from widely different L1 backgrounds to interact with each other in English is to raise consciousness of intercultural understanding, such as being aware of and sensitive to the fact that people from different cultural backgrounds tend to express politeness, gratitude, and condolences in overtly different ways.

With the stated cultural diversity in mind, this paper sets out to explore intercultural communication patterns among participants of the described summer school, focusing on how individuals from HC and LC cultural backgrounds engage in. For instance, the intercultural communication patterns among participants focusing on how individuals from HC and LC cultural backgrounds engage in everyday interactions. Potential variations in verbal routines such as greetings and farewells, participants' views and comfort levels about neutral and sensitive topics are also investigated.

3. PRAGMATIC CONCERNS: REVISITING AD HOC LITERATURE

From the point of view of pragmatics, taking into account the sociocultural and situational context of any interaction is essential for successful communication. Holmes (1984) emphasised the potential of pragmatic skills in establishing positive links in communicative exchanges, as the result of interpreting and responding to social phenomena accordingly. Such skills become even more prominent in intercultural encounters (Taguchi, 2016; Yang & Ren, 2020) where

[1] Them including: Germany, Austria, Estonia, Armenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Spain, Estonia, France, Hungary, Italy, Kosovo, Bulgaria, Poland, Portugal, UK, Russia, Serbia, Turkey, Ukraine, Montenegro, Romania, Belorussia, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Moldova, Georgia, North Macedonia, Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, Iceland, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Switzerland, Albania, Lithuania, Sweden, Finland, Greece, Norway, Cyprus, Ireland, USA, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Ecuador, Venezuela, Argentina, Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, Cuba, Guatemala, Uruguay, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Vietnam, China, Taiwan, Korea, Malaysia, India, Nepal, Pakistan, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Surinam, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia, Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, Algeria, Kenya.

even some minor flaws in communication could be irrevocable and irreparable. For that reason, pragmatic competence when communicating in a foreign language has largely been investigated so far (Edmonds, 2014; Osuka, 2017; Botey-Riaza et al., 2024).

3.1. *Cultures of different contexts*

The classification into HC and LC cultures (Hall, 1989), although later developed, altered, supported and criticised, is useful to compare different cultural backgrounds and their communicative habits. Despite the universalism characterising human beings (Prodanovic & Crespo, 2024), with specific reference to the assumptions that HC cultures are prone to delivering the messages where "most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message" (Hall, 1989: 91). Low-context cultures are believed to do the opposite: conveying explicit messages, relying less on reading between the lines.

Some recent empirical evidence also supports this, namely, a 2024 study by Wu, Yama and Zakaria reveals that both Japanese and Chinese speakers—normally described as HC—adapt by code-switching toward LC styles when engaging cross-culturally. Another study, conducted by Liu and Kim (2022) shows that HC participants tend to activate sociocentric communication patterns, while LC counterparts prefer an idiocentric model. However, despite all the differences, both groups tend to adjust their styles in intercultural settings. It is also interesting to note that intercultural communication is commonly performed in English, a language commonly connected with LC cultures. This comes as no surprise, as such communication does not include as many contextual cues as communication in an HC language would. For this reason, people from HC cultures would find communication with their LC counterparts less challenging than communication with representatives of other HC cultures (Yang et al., 2021).

Notwithstanding, despite the fact the HC-LC differentiation has been widely exploited over the previous decades, it has also received much criticism pointing to issues such as overgeneralisation, outdated nature, bipolarisation, or muddling up the concepts of culture and nationality, to mention but a few. The vagueness of the classification, along with the lack of any substantial empirical evidence has resulted in countries being classified in different ways (as either HC or LC) by different studies (Kittler et al., 2011). Be that as it may, irrespective of how Hall's classification is seen, what a body of research on intercultural communication underscores is context sensitivity, that is, the fluid nature characterising such encounters which requires high levels of awareness and adaptability.

In intercultural encounters, the activation of some well-known mechanisms from the field of pragmatics could be very helpful, given the fact that our face, that is, our integrity, becomes quite sensitive in such encounters. Our wish to be liked and/or approved, i.e., positive face, and our wish not to be imposed upon, i.e., negative face, could be protected by positive and negative politeness respectively. While the former aims to protect positive face, and can be embodied via compliments, jokes, inclusive language patterns, etc., the latter might include indirectness, euphemisms, apologising, and more, to save negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Pragmatic and cultural competence would thus be ideal companions for a successful international speaker (Byram et al., 2002), who does need "knowledge and skills that support the ability of learners to both understand culture and interact with people from cultures different than their own" (Lane, 2012: 97).

3.2. *Spoken actions: communication patterns and contents*

In terms of pragmatic competence, learning speech acts when studying abroad has been largely investigated so far. For instance, Bataller (2010), Czerwionka and Cuza (2017), Shively and Cohen (2008) explored requests, as they could be rather face threatening, while Kondo (1997), Shively and Cohen (2008), and Zhang et al. (2025) focused on apologies, equally face-threatening and sometimes serving as remedy following requests. In this vein, other studies exploring speech acts have concluded that the progress made by the language learners studying abroad is commonly of a moderate character (Halenko & Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2022). Naturally, many internal and external factors influence their progress, including personality traits, learning styles, cultural shock stage, previous experiences, people they spend time with abroad, or any previous pragmatic-related instructions given.

Unlike an array of speech acts with a strong potential to threaten the face of either a speaker or a hearer (or both), greetings and farewells are commonly used to establish or maintain social contacts (Feller, 2007; Xia et al., 2023). They appear as common, automatic, standardized actions (formulas), mostly semantically empty, and as encompassing actions that are expressed both verbally and non-verbally. We can even see them as specific pragmatic routines, especially if elaborated, used as ice breakers or closing expressions in communication. Clyne (1996) claims that formulaic routines are instances of intercultural tendencies in pragmatic usage and rules for the performance of particular speech acts in a given culture or region.

Greetings exist in all cultures and people of all ages, genders, social statuses, nations and religions apply them on a daily basis (Duranti, 1997). Knowledge of our own culture makes greetings simple in any interaction, irrespective of context, level of formality, or hierarchy, one would know which formulae to use. Malinowski (1923: 315) defines a greeting as a special kind of speech that is called *phatic communication*, "a type of speech in which union is created by a mere exchange of words". These words do not have any semantic content; instead, they fulfil a social function. Searle and Vanderveken (1985: 215), regard *greetings* as marginally illocutionary acts with no propositional contents.

When perceived through an intercultural lens, greetings, like all other speech acts, require a delicate approach and investigation of some universalities, while paying special attention to what cultural nuances are (Duranti, 1997; Wierzbicka, 1985; Pinto, 2008). Just like other attributes of pragmatic competence, those rituals can also be improved as the result of natural, direct exposure to a foreign language. However, not many studies have focused on their development under such circumstances so far (Alcón-Soler & Sánchez-Hernández, 2017, is one of them).

Pragmatics pays attention to a plethora of details expressed both verbally and non-verbally (taboos, stereotypes, prejudices), but it is especially sensitive topics that come to the fore when different cultures meet (Zhang & Shi, 2017). These might include, but are not limited to, race, ethnicity, politics, religion, culture per se, language, or gender, since they exhibit a strong potential to make people feel uncomfortable, intimidated, hurt and, consequently, inhibited in communication. Given their character, such topics could be "gradually approached, partially penetrated and quickly retreated from" (Bredmar, 1996: 372). Since they do not maintain distance, heated topics pose a threat to the *negative face* (Brown & Levinson, 1987) or the independence of the hearer. Therefore, a neutral stand, and harmless topics selection might facilitate intercultural exchanges. All in all, it is worth noting that cultures of the world can have their own safe topics (Goffman, 2017a), i.e. topics that can be immediately discussed with strangers, as well as topics that should not be discussed (so-called taboo topics). Lack of knowledge regarding the selection of topics for discussion consequently hinders communication (Goodwin & Lee, 1994). A couple of questions included in the questionnaire shed some light on how safe and heated topics are tackled by ISS participants.

Section 4 presents the methodological procedure followed to gather responses, as well as the material used as a starting point, that is, the responses given by students from various cultures in an international environment. The section also introduces the research questions and hypotheses.

4. MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

Building on the theoretical concepts and claims laid out, the study is based on the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: Do the students from LC cultures engage in different greeting/farewell patterns than their peers from HC cultures?

RQ2: Is there any difference in the way the students from HC and LC cultures see sensitive topics in international communication?

To this end, an investigation into communication practices in the scenario of the UDC ISS was conducted. From over 2000 participants coming from different corners of the world, 712 participated in this research about their communication practices. The participants were administered a questionnaire with 15 questions. For the sake of consistency, and aiming at offering a balanced distribution, the number of those whose responses have been considered is 600, to ensure there is 15 respondents for each of the 40 countries observed. The respondents represent the countries in Table 1, which have been classified as high-context culture (HC) and low-context culture (LC) according to Hall's classification (1989):

Table 1: ***High- and low-context countries at UDC-ISS***

high-context culture (HC)		low-context culture (LC)
ALBANIA	KENYA	AUSTRIA
ALGERIA	MALAYSIA	CZECH REPUBLIC
ARGENTINA	MEXICO	FINLAND
ARMENIA	MOLDOVA	GERMANY
BAHRAIN	MONTENEGRO	NORWAY
BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA	PORTUGAL	POLAND
BRASIL	RWANDA	UNITED STATES
CHILE	SERBIA	UNITED KINGDOM
GEORGIA	SLOVAKIA	
GHANA	SPAIN	
GREECE	TURKEY	
GUATEMALA	TYNISIA	
INDIA	UKRAINE	
ITALY	UNITED ARAB EMIRATES	
JAPAN	UZBEKISTAN	
KAZAHSTAN	VIETNAM	

With all the attributes differentiating between HC and LC cultures in mind, we hypothesise that:

H_1: The students from HC cultures will use more body language and initiate more elaborate exchanges in greetings/farewells that their LC counterparts.

H_2: The students might see the notion of sensitive topics differently, depending on their respective cultural backgrounds, that is the perception of topic sensitivity.

The observed ISS is certainly full of representatives of HC cultures (80%), with just 20% of those characterised as LC cultures. As can be seen, the discrepancy in HC vs LC cultures of origin is important, but some factors intervening in the collection of data have been disregarded:

1) Whether HC or LC culture representatives are more interested in participating in international, extracurricular activities, such as the ISS.
2) Whether there would be more HC or LC culture representatives responding to the questionnaire distributed.

The questionnaire consisted of fifteen questions that can be identified as belonging to several sections:

1) Placement module (course, discipline)
2) Intercultural setting (home countries, language used in these settings)
3) Speech acts: greetings/farewells
4) Safe/heated topics, cross-cultural misunderstandings

All questions are open-ended, except for one (see Appendix 1). They are useful to elicit more in-depth and qualitative responses, providing richer insights into respondents' thoughts, feelings, and experiences. The predominance of open-ended responses allowed for the identification of some trends through thematic and content analysis which are discussed in Section 4.

Sections 1 and 2 serve as variables for the analysis. As for speech acts, just one type was decided to be introduced as an example which might reveal different attitudes from participants in an international encounter. It is a communicative action representing the opening and closing sequence, i.e. greeting and farewell expressed in an intercultural encounter. Section 4 contains questions on heated and safe topics, that is those the subjects generally considered (non)-threatening and that are (un-)likely to cause offense or disagreement.

5. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The disparity of cultural backgrounds noted above reveals that the HC prevalence supports one of the Hall's attributes of HC cultures being more prone to building relationships or being group-oriented that is, more interested in interpersonal communication and trust development to mention but a few. For these cultures, the context of the conversation (implicitness, non-verbal language) plays a significant role in how messages are interpreted. Unlike them, LC cultures, just by being *silent* in this regard, proved their inclination towards goals and tasks rather than people and relationships.

In the remaining of this section, an analysis of the answers to parts 3 and 4 in the light of HC and LC cultures, when possible, is offered.

5.1. *Speech acts: Greetings and Farewells*

Participants were asked about the patterns they commonly used when greeting/saying goodbye to their course mates/other course participants. *What patterns did you commonly use to greet other course participants (on arrival/departure)?*. In fact, knowing that different cultures do interpret hierarchical relationships in different ways and that power and distance categories can play an important role in this matter the prompt intended to elicit answers as natural possible, free from social constraints. The body of responses could be classified in three major groups,

portraying those responses that were prominent. It is worth noting, that prominent greetings and farewells listed in Table 2 originate from both HC and LC cultures, with no HC and LC differentiation explicitly made at this stage. This was motivated by the fact that HC cultures dominated the sample, which might have led to an imbalance and potentially distorted the interpretation had the classification been applied. At any rate, contextual orientation is further addressed in the discussion that follows.

Table 2: ***Classification of Greetings/Farewells with examples***

Category I Verbal pattern only	Category II Facial expression activated	Category III Other gestures (hugging/kissing) activated
Verbal greeting	Saying hi/ see you and smile	handshake, hug
Hello, no body language	With a smile and a nod	Handshake, hugs or verbal greeting. If initiated by someone else, kisses on cheeks
Hi and bye	Smiling and waving	Handshake
Just normal hi/hello and have a nice day/see you tomorrow		Waiving hands saying hello, handshake
simple ones, “hi, good morning” “see you soon” “bye bye”		Just saying “Hi” and introducing myself. Hug at the end
Say hi, not physical contact (just in case they do not feel comfortable)		
General greeting with no hand shaking		

Despite the expectations resting on the different communication models often attributed to HC and LC cultures, respectively, and, the fact that the responses of HC representatives prevail over the LC ones, the results proved the hypothesis wrong. As can be seen in Figure 1, as many as 516 responses (86%), given by both HC and LC communicators, revolve around verbal communication, many of them explicitly underlining the omission of any physical contact. This involves the predominance of an LC feature among most participants from HC cultures. In the particular setting of an international summer school where English is the medium of instruction and communication, we could wonder whether the patterns for communication purposes of LC countries are being imitated by these non-native speakers of English or whether it is the global environment itself (classmates origins and a variety of mother tongues) that pushes participants to act more freely and directly, without the restrictions of their own cultural conventions.

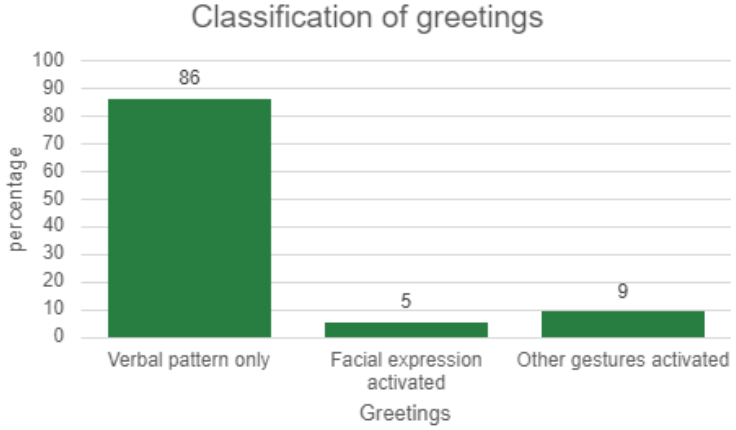

Figure 1: ***Percentage of greetings (farewells included) in each category***

Only 30 respondents (5%) mentioned the concept of smiling (either supporting some body language or verbal expressions), thus belonging to the *activating facial expressions* group. What is specifically surprising is that students from Finland and the USA, LC cultures, were also among them. Accompanying facial expressions, nodding and waving as body language cues have also been mentioned. It could be reasonably argued that the international social context provokes reactions of different kinds among participants either showing their personality traits or revealing attitudes or emotions which are not characteristic of their own cultures. Consequently, the idea of a cultural continuum is raised. Cultures cannot be organized strictly into either high or low context, but rather as a continuum in which most of them fall between the extremes and share both high and low context traits to varying degrees.

As for the activation of other gestures, 54 responses (9%) referred to them. Hugs and kisses are included here. The former are mentioned as patterns to open or end interactions in 15 responses, while the latter are suggested by 7 respondents. The message conveys equality and respect, an easy-going attitude, the desire to begin a smooth relationship. It is to be noted that all the responses containing the body language reference do come from representatives of HC cultures. For them, communication is sophisticated, indirect, and nuanced and body language is important. Body language is commonly expected in the exchanges where HC cultures participate, as it is in this way that they can convey more content, make their messages more convincing, their stories relatable. However, the data collected shows is applied in less than 10% of the responses (54 responses in total). Handshakes dominate here (chosen by 38 respondents out of those 54), as one of the most common forms of non-verbal greetings.

The role greetings/farewells play in this ISS corresponds to the phatic function mentioned by Malinowski (1923). They represent a polite way of approaching people from other cultures to initiate a peaceful coexistence in the classroom. All the elements mentioned, either verbal or non-verbal, fulfil the social function of meeting and getting in contact with the unknown other. In an international setting, students bring with them their own style, attitude, behaviour and social norms, which must be moulded over a myriad other styles and beliefs. The key here is that such environment goes hand in hand with the use of a foreign language for communication purposes. This is the language of an LC culture and, as most of the respondents come from HC cultures, a combination of features from both backgrounds could also explain some of the results in the questionnaire.

5.2. *Safe and heated topics*

The second research question intended to shed some light on the topics regarded as safe and heated in intercultural encounters paying attention to respective preferences of respondents coming from different contexts. Again, despite the fact that the original research question aimed to explore responses characteristic of HC and LC cultures respectively, the table below provides an insight into the preferences of both HC and LC cultures, without explicit HC/LC reference, to prevent imbalance, focusing on dominant responses. In the two categories – safe and heated topics – prevailing responses (all the respondents taken into consideration) included:

Table 3: ***Safe and Heated topics***

Safe topics	Frequency (%)	Heated topics	Frequency (%)
Travels	31	Politics	41
Hobbies/Interests	29	Religion	25
Food/Cuisine	27	Ethnicity	22
Music	7	Race	8
Weather/Climate	6	Gender issues	7

The choices *vis-a-vis* the topics to be initiated, as well as those to be avoided when communicating with different cultures, are fully compliant with the theoretical suggestions (Goffman, 2017a, b; Zhang & Shi, 2017) and oppose the second hypothesis proposed. Both HC and LC cultures have proved to be fully aware of the delicate nature of the topics addressing political, religious, ethnical, racial and gender issues. They all, unquestionably, can exert a negative influence on both the positive and negative faces of our interlocutors (Brown & Levinson, 1987), and prevent success in interaction. In a similar vein, raising the topics that support small talk, breaking the ice, tells us something more about those we communicate with. Knowing more about their likes and dislikes can significantly facilitate all the later stages of communication, encourage the creation of some bonds, and establish friendships, given the usual activation of positive face.

Travels (31%) is the safest topic mentioned followed by hobbies (29%) and food (27%). Most people enjoy discussing travel experiences, talking about places they have been or places they would like to visit. This topic can also lead to sharing interesting cultural insights. Politics (41%), religion (25%) and ethnicity (22%) are the three most frequent heated topics that can bring about disruption in interactive exchanges. In the case of politics, for instance, political views vary widely across cultures, and discussions about it can quickly become heated, especially if individuals hold strong opinions or come from countries with tense political situations. It is curious to note that race and gender issues are among the less frequently mentioned topics.

5.2.1. *Cross-cultural misunderstandings*

This part of the analysis is based on the same set of 600 participants representing both HC and LC cultural backgrounds, and it depicts a selection of prominent examples of cross-cultural miscommunication. In line with the model followed throughout the article, the responses are not explicitly classified according to cultural context at this point. The influence of HC and LC orientations will be explored later in the discussion.

From the responses collected for the question *Have you ever experienced any cross-cultural misunderstanding (illustrate what has happened)?*, three categories of cross-cultural misunderstanding are found: (a) misunderstandings in verbal communication, (b) misunderstandings in non-verbal communication, and (c) misunderstandings generated by sociocultural clashes.

a) Misunderstandings in verbal communication

Miscommunication can be generated by an insufficient command of a language. Sometimes this has to do with formal/informal registers as it is hard for language learners to be competent in both (see example (1)). Another difficulty is connected with the duality between denotative and connotative meaning, mainly because connotations might have to do with culture as reckoned by one of the participants in example (2). Wrong pronunciation of words may also damage comprehension, as in (4). Finally, the difference between HC and LC cultures is linked with communication styles, direct in the case of LC countries such as Germany, relying more on implicitness in the case of HC countries like Armenia (example (3)).

(1) Yes, regarding the misunderstanding of certain colloquial expressions in my mother tongue (Bosnia)

(2) Yes. Mostly due to misunderstandings in language, because of phrases with double meaning or with different cultural expectations (Germany)

(3) A German girl who I was living in the dorm didn't understand I wanted to share a cheesecake with her until I said it directly. (Armenia)

(4) Wrongly pronounced first name of a participant which sounded like an equivalent of *naked* in his/her language. (Poland)

In sum, according to the answers provided, verbal communication may be affected by incorrect pronunciation, pragmatic inference and semantics, all of them damaging meaning and interpretation.

b) Misunderstandings in non-verbal communication

A couple of examples illustrate this category:

(5) Once I was talking to a Bulgarian and, at one point during the conversation, nodded my head to indicate *yes* in a non-verbal manner. Only then did I remember that in Bulgaria nodding your head means *no.* (Bosnia)

(6) During a meeting with parents from India, as I approached to greet them, I instinctively extended my hand for a handshake. However, I quickly noticed that one of the parents hesitated and instead offered a warm but non-contact greeting. (Serbia)

The same gestures may convey different meanings in diverse cultural frames. That is the reason why in (5) the Bosnian respondent experienced an episode of miscommunication with a Bulgarian interlocutor. In a similar vein, handshaking as a greeting may be well received in some cultures whereas in others physical contact is avoided, as happens in India (example (6)). Non-verbal miscommunication is closely connected with social norms and cultural behaviours. As no words intervene, clarification to interpret the information adequately should be requested.

c) Misunderstandings generated by sociocultural clashes

The sociocultural context is responsible for most of the responses that depict cross-cultural misunderstandings. Example (7) illustrates a case of social prejudice based on stereotyping.

(7) Yes. People having pre-judged you and having no interest in changing their opinion. Being excluded by Europeans because I am the outsider. People thinking their opinions are more important or correct. People looking down on Africans because they assume the continent is poor. (Kenya)

Stereotypes are formed through the cognitive elements playing a part in the perceptions of group members. They refer to the positive or negative feelings that are held about social groups and the attitudes shown about them. Closely connected is the term *prejudice*, an anticipated negative feeling or behaviour towards a group or an individual from that group. Prejudice can evoke negative emotions (Pascal et al., 2023) such as dislike, anger, fear, disgust, discomfort, and even hatred. These feelings, because of the social categorisation implicit in them, bring about discrimination and negative behaviours towards certain groups. Such is the picture described by the Kenyan respondent in (7).

(8) We experience it every day. And the result of this is war in my country! When one state does not want to recognize the independence of another and makes language an object of enmity. (Ukraine)

Politics is also a source of severe conflicts, especially if language identity and nationalism struggle for survival and recognition (see (8) above). The rejection to accept such cultural identity and independence may cause the surge of social prejudices.

Personality traits are also acknowledged as being part and parcel of successful communication. However, it should be noted that the individual characteristics are always grounded in a particular social frame. Consequently, the contextual dimension could be a relevant explanation, as in (9):

(9) Little. More related to differences in personality (introvert vs extrovert) than culture. Occasionally, the 'host' sees their role to pay for drinks/food etc. for *guests*. This can sometimes make some guests uncomfortable, as they feel that sharing is more appropriate, or that accepting implies some sort of *debt*. (UK)

(10) The guy from Kazakhstan that looked like Chinese. People were greeting him *ni hao*. (Slovakia)

In (10) stereotyping is manifested through physical appearance. In this case, there is no implicit prejudice implicit as in (7) above.

(11) Yes, especially in the terms of meal. I eat halal. (Uzbekistan)

Another situation perceived as a misunderstanding is related to one of the safe topics: food (example (11)). On occasions, cultural distance may modify the perception of misunderstandings. This seems to be more of a cross-cultural difference than a misunderstanding.

(12) Yes, I was not used to calling teachers by their name rather we would say sir or ma'am or our elders for that matter. But in Europe they call everyone by their names. (Nepal)

Two other cross-cultural differences are related to forms of address and titles, formality and respect, as one of the respondents has pointed out. How people address each other, including the use of titles and honorifics, can differ greatly depending on the social norms and the somewhat strict adherence to conventions in each cultural background.

(13) This is more of a minor difference, but I studied in the Netherlands for three years, and there was a difference in how students approached feedback or responded to feedback, Dutch people tend to be more direct whereas those from Asia, for instance, may prefer to state things more diplomatically. This happened during a client consultation exercise (I was studying law) where my project partner (also Asian) and I had to deal with a client who was asking us to do something that would have clearly been illegal, so for the purpose of the exercise we were supposed to refuse to provide such services, and my partner and I went about it discreetly, directing her towards other avenues but not refusing her outright which is what the Dutch judges evaluating the exercise expected us to do. We were even asked during the feedback session if this was a cultural thing, that we did not directly want to refuse the client. (India)

Example (13) illustrates a case of power distance. Cultures may be confronted in terms of hierarchical vs. egalitarian cultures: in those with high power distance (India, China), there is a greater acceptance of hierarchy and unequal power distribution. Moreover, as representatives of HC cultures, they tend to speak in a more indirect way full of implicitness and open for the interlocutor to create his/her own interpretation. In low power distance cultures (the Netherlands, Scandinavia), equality and minimizing hierarchical differences are emphasized as well as direct and explicit messaging.

It is worth noticing that most of the answers given explain situations provoked by a lack of cultural sensitivity towards *the different*. The examples provided by ISS participants point to habits or traditions in connection with HC and LC countries, social prejudice, stereotyping and political issues as the main reasons to bring about cross-cultural misunderstandings. By being aware of these potential pitfalls and approaching cross-cultural interactions with sensitivity and respect, individuals can minimize misunderstandings and foster more effective and harmonious relationships.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Pragmatics and intercultural phenomena become inseparable when cultures meet, and their intertwined nature is definitely what characterises study abroad, exchange and similar educational practices (Taguchi et al., 2016; Sykes, 2017). It is a fact that time spent abroad can significantly improve language skills, with a special focus on pragmatic and intercultural competences. Therefore, educational settings within an international framework are worth being analysed, pragmatically speaking. Several valuable insights can be drawn from the responses collected, rendering significant potential for both communicative and educational purposes. The analysis of these responses has allowed for the identification of key trends and perceptions that might shed light on the ISS participants' experiences, expectations, and areas for improvement.

Concerning greetings/farewells as speech acts, the answers collected reflect that verbal communication predominates, being this a low context feature, despite the fact that the majority of respondents come from HC cultures. In terms of conversation topics, they all, irrespective of context, perceive the distinction between safe and heated topics to avoid cultural clashes. It is the subsection dedicated to cross-cultural misunderstandings that reveals how meaning is commonly interpreted according to the cultural scheme of each participant. Some misunderstandings occur in verbal communication because denotative meanings or informal expressions are ignored or because words are wrongly pronounced. These examples represent purely linguistic shortcomings. However, some incorrect interpretations develop in the realm of non-verbal communication: gestures, movement, body language. Misinterpretation in these cases is clearly rooted in social norms. Some other sociocultural clashes emerge from situations where stereotyping and prejudice generate feelings of discrimination, discomfort and hatred.

On the whole, in our case-study UDC-ISS, we can speak more of group identity or cultural identity rather than language identity as the tongue spoken for communication is nearly nobody's mother tongue. This is an academic setting, where groups are formed on the basis of their roles and interests in this context. All participants form a community of practice that must face different speech acts and a wide variety of conversation topics. This is a place where they use and interpret both verbal and non-verbal cues, and struggle against prejudices, stereotypes and discrimination showing cultural sensitivity. The respondents mostly come from HC environments. However, they do not use their own language as a vehicle for communication nor the language the country they are in: all of them speak English. We hypothesised that despite the fact all the respondents relied on English, they would still preserve and engage some communication practices characterising the cultures they come from. However, this hypothesis has not been supported, nor has the second one: the respondents showed a preference for verbal cues, and raised awareness of topic sensitivity, thus protecting theirs and the face of their interlocutors in this intercultural encounter.

Notwithstanding the limitations of the study, primarily the fact that it explored the situation of a single summer school, hosted by a single institution in one country and the discrepancy in the numbers of HC and LC representatives, the results obtained might pave the way for both scientific and pedagogical explorations of intercultural pragmatics, i.e. communication in English as a foreign language.

These findings also point at the potentially useful nature of incorporating some hands-on intercultural communication training into (short-term) international educational programmes. Exposure to real-life instances of cross-cultural miscommunication, along with reflection on contextual communication styles, could increase pragmatic awareness of all those participating. Additionally, from the angle of internationalisation, summer schools can serve as testbeds for more inclusive, reflexive internationalisation strategies on a wider scale. Lastly, one of the take-home messages, relevant for other short-term programmes, is that HC and LC distinctions should not be taken for granted, since participants commonly represent complex, diverse individual profiles that cannot be fully understood within a limited timeframe and could, depending on their backgrounds, exhibit attributes from different cultures simultaneously. This conclusion could be valuable both for those attending such programmes and those preparing and delivering them, as it highlights the need for openness, cultural awareness, and a flexible, person-centred approach to foster meaningful intercultural interaction.

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APPENDIX 1 – QUESTIONNAIRE

1) Country you come from:
2) Language/-s you are fluent in:
3) Language/-s you usually rely on in intercultural encounters:
4) What year did you participate in the UDC International Summer School?
5) What was the course you ran/participated in (if there were several, please name them all)?
6) What field of science/study do you belong to (the information will be used just for the purpose of determining any correlation between the field and the responses given)?
7) Can you remember the cultures you shared the ISS classroom with (try to name same of them)?
8) What patterns did you commonly use to greet other course participants (on arrival/departure)?
9) Do you generally avoid any topics whenever find yourself in intercultural encounters (try to give some examples)?
10) In your opinion, what could be safe topics in intercultural setting?
11) Have you ever experienced any cross-cultural misunderstanding (illustrate what has happened)?
12) What would be the essential skills we all need in intercultural communication?
    - foreign language fluency
    - body language interpretation
    - etiquette/politeness
    - knowledge of other cultures
    - Other

13) How do you get yourself prepared for work with international groups?

14) Do you see the International Summer School (similar activities) as formal or informal mode of education? Does that influence you communication style?

15) I agree that my responses may be used for the research purposes.

- YES
- NO