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# DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE IN ROMANIAN MILITARY ENVIRONMENT

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**ABSTRACT**

*Currently, the Romanian military students are part of a military organization that is transparent and open to knowledge, innovation and cooperation, where intercultural mediation and interaction with different cultures is fostered. Interculturality brings with it a new matrix of communication, which implies an opening from interpersonal and social communication to intercultural communication. And the military educational environment must have the capacity to develop and refine intercultural communication competence and to overcome the communication barriers that the young soldier encounters. A paradigm shift is needed in which the Self and the other are complementary. The research presents on the basis of literature the concept of intercultural culture and communication as well as the defining elements for communication competence and intercultural communication competence. To achieve the proposed objectives empirical research based on observation and analysis will be conducted. The development of intercultural communication competence in the military environment implies the ability to negotiate cultural meanings and value system, the cultivation of a tolerant, open and permissive attitude to diversity.*

**KEYWORDS:**

*Intercultural communication competence, interculturality, Romanian military educational environment*

## 1. Introduction

Intercultural interactions have become a part of everyday life in our increasingly multicultural and globalised world. Developing intercultural knowledge, skills and understanding is an essential part of living with others in the diverse world of the 21st century.

Romania's status as a member of EU, NATO and UN organisations offers the possibility of involvement in various international peacekeeping, peace-making,

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peace-enforcement, or peace-building and support operations. Involvement of the military in these missions requires complex training on several levels. The process of educating-training, building and defining the contemporary military starts in the military pre-university educational environment, and then in the university environment the military really defines its competences.

By taking a broad perspective on the interactions of the Romanian military in the international space, with reference to official visits, the activity of military attaches abroad, exchanges of experience in various projects, participation in international scientific activities, educational projects, Erasmus mobilities, humanitarian missions and especially missions in theatres of operations, one can observe the importance of communicative and intercultural competence in defining the military leader.

In missions in theaters of operations where the environment is hostile and tense, the soldiers of the international coalition are generally perceived differently by the population of the country where they perform their missions (maintenance, imposition, restoration of peace or support and support operations), for example: theaters of operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Afghanistan. And if the military has to perform tasks that consist of stability and support, they have to get in touch with the local authorities and implicitly with the local population. In this situation, communication is the main element through which cooperation is achieved in a concrete reality (Harvey, 2022).

Understanding and knowledge of the specific situation is achieved by the military through the cognitive-informational dimension, which is the set of data and information needed to transform them into knowledge through assimilation, appropriation and internalisation in order to acquire intercultural communication skills. This process is undertaken by each soldier involved in the mission, their group and their military institution. This dimension is influenced by the individual variables of the soldier (thinking, memory, skills, temperament, language, insight and health), group variables (cohesion, climate, consensus, size, effectiveness, traditions) and institutional variables (purpose, human, material, financial, informational resources and traditions).

In order to be effective in cross-cultural contexts, it is essential that military personnel are able to translate their understanding of any situation into appropriate behaviours and adjust their actions. In the context of normative behaviour, this action is referred to as intercultural code-switching, i.e. the act of intentionally changing one's behaviour in an interaction in a foreign environment to adapt to different cultural norms by adopting appropriate behaviour (Molinsky, 2007, p. 624).

## 2. Research methodology

In this paper, the research focuses on the importance and development of intercultural communication skills of Romanian military students. The objectives of the paper are to understand the concepts of culture and intercultural communication, to present the defining elements of communication competence and intercultural communication competence, and to present tools to assess the dimensions of intercultural communication competence. The aim of this study is to explore how military students identify and develop their intercultural communication competence needed for interaction with military partners.

## 3. The concept of intercultural culture and communication

Culture and communication are two inseparable and dynamic concepts. Social interaction is achieved through the communication process. And in the military organisation members convey their messages in missions and training through communicative interactions. The whole process is influenced by the military organisational culture to which both senders

and receivers belong. Thus, military organisational culture is one acquired through learning and thorough analysis, passed on from generation to generation as a cultural heritage and is based on symbols. But the dynamic nature of culture makes it prone to change because it is constantly adapted to new external and intercultural sources.

"*Intercultural communication investigates those elements of culture that most influence interaction between members of two or more cultures when individuals are in interpersonal communication situations*" (Samovar & Porter, 2003).

According to researcher C. Cucoş intercultural communication is an "*exchange or transaction of value accompanied by an understanding of the adjacent meanings between individuals or groups from different cultures. Exchanges can take place at the ideational, verbal, non-verbal, behavioural, physical, object, organisational level*" (Cucoș, 2000, p. 136). Intercultural communication can also be defined as the ability to communicate verbally and non-verbally with individuals from other cultures in such a way that all individuals participating in the communication encode and decode the messages communicated and avoid misinterpretations and misjudgements as much as possible.

According to Koester, intercultural communication brings two aspects face to face, on the one hand the preservation and conservation of certain elements and on the other hand the adaptation, the change to other cultures which implies the development of certain cultural and intercultural competences (Cucoș, 2002).

## 4. Communication skills

Communication competence is the individual's ability to interact linguistically, sociolinguistically and pragmatically in a language recognised as an official means of communication in social situations with people who legitimise themselves by belonging to different groups or cultures. According to researchers in the field, communicative competence is defined by two variables: effectiveness and contextual appropriateness. Effectiveness reflects an individual's ability, developed as a result of learning and socialisation processes, to achieve desired outcomes from interaction with a given environment. This ability depends on the ability to identify desired outcomes, to obtain relevant information about them, to predict the reaction of the interlocutor or others, to interact with them according to the conditions of the communication situation, to select and use effective communication strategies in order to achieve the intended goals, and to vary communication strategies according to the diversity of social situations (Kete, Miike & Yin, 2008). Contextual appropriateness refers to the ability to adapt communication and behavioural rules to the given contexts in order to avoid situations that are contrary to generally accepted norms, as well as the ability to effectively perform communication functions related to the control of the communication situation, the expression of feelings, information and perception.

Communication competence is based on the set of maxims of the cooperative principle postulated by Grice (Greenne & Burleson, 2003):

- *The quantity maxim* regulates the amount of information provided by each participant in a verbal exchange. It must be strictly within the limits imposed by the objectives of the respective exchange, neither insufficient nor a surplus.
- *The maxim of quality* requires that the interlocutors tell only the truth; this excludes both the provision of false information and information whose credibleness cannot be adequately proven by the speaker.
- *The maxim of relevance* requires that the various interventions in a verbal exchange be interrelated and, at the same time, appropriate to the topic under discussion.

- *The maxim of the mode of transmission of the message* concerns the way in which the interventions in a verbal exchange should be formulated, requiring clarity and logical structuring of the utterances.

From a language learning perspective, Canale and Swain (Pilat & Jorda, 2005) consider that the dimension of communicative competence depends on the deepening of five distinct dimensions: grammatical competence (referring to lexical, syntactic, semantic, morphological and phonological knowledge), sociolinguistic competence (referring to the speaker's ability to understand and interpret the meanings of information from the perspective of adapting to different communicative contexts), strategic competence (the use of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies to sustain conversations) and discourse competence (the speaker's ability to give his/her discourse cohesion and semantic coherence).

**5. Intercultural communication competence**

Intercultural competence is defined by Kim as a capacity to mobilize knowledge, methods of action, affective experiences in the context of intercultural interactions (Cucoş, 2000). Intercultural competence is concerned with understanding both the other's subjective culture and one's own, i.e. the language, behavioural patterns and shared and learned values within a group. If intercultural communication is about interpersonal interaction between members of groups that are distinct in terms of knowledge and language patterns, intercultural competence is about understanding and perceiving the other's culture, but also one's own culture (language, values, symbols and behavioural patterns).

An individual's communication mode and behaviour are influenced by his/her objective culture, socialisation or knowledge of a new language, thus intercultural communication competence can be divided into two categories: socialisation competence and plurilingual competence.

Socio-cultural competences are knowledge of the social norms, rituals, conventions and taboos of a community and the ways of living together and maintaining interpersonal relationships in that culture, compared to similar aspects of one's own culture. For example, a soldier in a theatre of operations can use this social-cultural competence when negotiating cultural conflicts or disagreements. Recognising social and cultural diversity is the acquisition of socio-cultural communication competence. Psycho-social competences are acquired and developed on the basis of learning a foreign language. Its components are related to the individual data of the soldier expressed as values, beliefs and attitudes which have an impact on the way of learning and using a language. Thus, the way individuals from different cultural groups interact is influenced positively or negatively by these skills.

Multilingual competences validate the idea that knowledge of several languages demonstrates an increased capacity to adapt and integrate into other culturally diverse communities. Multilingual competences are represented by linguistic acquisitions, which consist of grammatical, semantic, orthographic, phonological and orthoepic elements, but to these are added pragmatic, discursive, functional and metalinguistic elements.

Metalinguistic competence is important for the military because it helps them to self-monitor their verbal and intentional behaviour and to reflect on the social-linguistic and pragmatic features of the languages they know and use simultaneously.

Intercultural competence presupposes adaptation and flexibility to a new situation and not rigidity, intolerance and monotony. Intercultural competence is not sufficient to achieve effective communication, but the context in which communication takes place must be taken into account.

### *5.1. Tools for assessing dimensions of intercultural communication skills*

The literature provides the necessary tools to assess the dimensions of intercultural communication skills in order to establish relevant parameters for achieving interpersonal goals. According to researchers (Cui & van den Berg, 1991) the assessment of intercultural communication competence involves three dimensions: cognitive, behavioural and affective.

The military student must demonstrate, upon completion of their studies, the ability to effectively use cross-cultural skills through verbal and non-verbal behaviour appropriate to communicative situations to achieve their interpersonal goals.

Ruben B.D. (1976) provides a first tool used in measuring intercultural communication competence, namely *Behavioral Assessment*, which describes seven dimensions of this competence: tolerance of ambiguity, management of interactions, expression of respect, orientation towards knowledge, management roles imposed by interrelational behavior, proxemics, and empathy.

Another tool for assessing the level of development of intercultural sensitivity is the *Intercultural Developmental Inventory* (Bennett & Hammer, 1998), which defines sensitivity as "*the ability to discriminate and experience culturally significant differences*" (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003, p. 422).

*The Multicultural Personality Questionnaire* (Van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2006) assesses cultural adaptability and considers five dimensions: cultural empathy, emotional stability, openness to the new, flexibility, and social initiative.

## 6. Developing intercultural communication competence in the military environment

The instructional-educational approaches must focus on shaping the intercultural communication skills of the Romanian military to be able to carry out their missions successfully. The Romanian soldier must be able to face the challenges that arise when in contact with other cultures, with the cultural identity, attitudes, values and knowledge through which the individual manifests their belonging to a group or culture.

Intercultural education practiced in a formal setting in the military university educational space cultivates an active tolerance between cultures. It is a new approach to contemporary reality in which cultural diversity is accepted. It is the role of the school to reflect the characteristics of contemporary life and globalisation in the curriculum, to educate today's trainers and military leaders to discover and understand the existential unity of humanity.

The educational system and therefore the teaching staff must find the necessary tools to develop intercultural communication competence in military students, and this implies the ability to negotiate cultural meanings and value systems, cultivating a tolerant attitude, openness and permissiveness to diversity. The communication paradigm is reconfiguring from interpersonal and social communication to intercultural communication.

In the military organization, the idea of community is promoted, where each student maintains his or her identity but adheres to the organizational culture for existential coherence. Identity and otherness are inseparable and coevolutionary. Effective school communication in an intercultural perspective implies the reduction of uncertainty and anxiety about otherness and the construction of a new perspective of the other, which needs to be experienced in the classroom.

Even if the military environment is one governed by strict and clear rules, it must be open and facilitate the exercise of communication and expression of individuality of each student, to demonstrate tolerance and acceptance of diversity, where free speech and trust converge. This empowers the student and leads to self-analysis through the formation of participation and communication skills.

The school must provide optimising communication experiences, allowing students to step out of themselves and open up to others, to get rid of prejudices and stereotypes. The military university environment promotes intercultural communication experiences by involving military students in community programmes, exchanges of experience in various projects, participation in international scientific activities, educational projects, Erasmus mobilities.

In order to define intercultural communication competence, the military student must overcome the obstacles encountered in communicative acts, namely: differences in perception, lack of interest, uncontrollable emotions, personality and cultural paradigm. Communication is a dynamic and long-term process, it does not end when information is received or acquired. All information exerts an effective influence on the opinions, ideas or behaviour of those who receive it, determining a certain effect of communication. Informational value reflects beyond the outcome's probability or improbability of the event's social relevance. What is important to one person may be unimportant to another. Information value is also determined by one's culture, both as an individual and as a group.

The receiver is the creator of meanings in communication, sometimes quite different from those intended by the sender. Decoding the receiver's reference system and value system is therefore an obligation that the sender must assume when communicating cross-culturally. Willingness to negotiate meanings is also strictly necessary to optimise intercultural communication.

In order to develop student's intercultural communication competence, teachers must themselves have the necessary interpersonal and emotional skills. As a result of their work and the demonstration of skills such as empathy, communication, relationship building, teamwork and constructive conflict management, teachers are able to create a strong classroom culture that promotes the learning and practice of these skills by students in their daily classroom work. Teachers must, first and foremost, possess social skills, emotional intelligence and resilience.

Collaboration is the introduction to intercultural communication. Collaborative teachers allow students to express their views on pedagogy, assessment, behaviour management and use of classroom resources. The authoritarian teacher is replaced by the democratic, collaborative teacher who is equally open to learning from students.

Students need to learn to be optimistic and adaptable when faced with difficult situations and unpredictable behaviour, drawing on their strengths, resources and social networks to find solutions and overcome difficulties. They also need to be flexible and reflective, assessing what works and what does not and constantly adapting to every situation. At the same time, they must continue to believe in themselves even in difficult situations, which strengthen their enthusiasm for their work. This resilient approach enables challenges to be turned into learning opportunities for personal and professional development.

Relationships are a strong foundation that supports learning. Teachers and military instructors need to establish trusting and nurturing relationships where students feel safe and learning can take place. They must possess good communication and listening skills, be patient and compassionate, and spend enough time with students to support them according to their needs. Their relationships with others also serve as a model for students in building relationships.

Empathy is another important element in developing intercultural communication competence. Empathetic teachers draw on skills such as the ability to listen and provide feedback to understand the diverse learning and socio-emotional needs of

students and to respond to those needs by adapting their work and behaviour. Empathy is a key intercultural competence, which helps students to be sensitive to cultural differences and to adopt a fair and non-discriminatory attitude, and this behaviour also serves to promote diversity and prevent harassment from peers. Being empathetic also means that students must be prepared to work on their own prejudices in order to become more open and receptive to diversity.

Teachers who possess social and emotional skills are able to control their mental process so that they think more optimistically and manage strong feelings such as frustration, anger and sadness.

This habit also needs to be developed in students when faced with difficult situations, to remain calm, positive and in control of their own emotions. In conflicts with others, they should show an attitude of constructive conflict management, giving them the right of reply and discussing the consequences with other intercultural dialogue partners.

## 7. Conclusions

The military organisation is a knowledge-based organisation, where members are trained to cooperate on the basis of knowledge, trust and mutual support, promote acceptance and tolerance of diversity and abandon self-centred strategies. Military leaders need intercultural communicative competence to interact effectively with foreign populations and partners. Developing intercultural communicative competence is essential to understanding interculturality and involves the ability to negotiate cultural meanings and value systems, cultivating an attitude of tolerance, openness and permissiveness to diversity.

The military student must be able firstly to communicate authentically with one's self, to know his/her own cultural identity, and secondly to communicate effectively with individuals from different cultures, to cultivate mutual respect, to maintain correct relations with others, without dissolving their own identity, and thirdly to cultivate critical spirit and reflexivity towards everyday experience in view of completing the process of self-definition.

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