INVESTIGATING THE NECESSITY OF ENHANCED INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR TOURISM STUDENTS. LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVE AND NEEDS

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ABSTRACT. *Investigating the Necessity of Enhanced Intercultural Communication Skills for Tourism Students. Learners' Perspective and Needs.* The hospitality industry today is, by many accounts, the site of the most cosmopolitan interaction university graduates can possibly find themselves immersed in when it comes to their professional milieu. Preparing future tourism specialists to effectively communicate and mediate with industry stakeholders that come from various corners of the world, having a multitude of cultural, social and economic backgrounds, seems to be one of the most important tasks ESP (English for Specialized Purposes) tutors need to tackle. Encouraged by guidelines promoted by international institutions, language teachers are aware that they need to pay an undivided attention to the development of intercultural communication (ICC) and mediation skills, to fostering the awareness that the business world today is a pluricultural one. What has been less investigated is the perception students themselves have over their need to acquire such competencies and the best way teachers could help them achieve this. The purpose of this article is to investigate the students'

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perspective by processing data collected from a quantitative survey using K means clustering. The results of the analysis support our assumption that for an optimal future professional development tourism students (are aware of the) need to have good ICC competences, although their specific types and the means to achieve this sometimes differs from what teachers usually consider emphasizing in the classroom.

Keywords: *intercultural communication, mediating communication, stereotypes, facilitating pluricultural space, soft skills*

REZUMAT. *Investigarea Necesității Dezvoltării Abilităților de Comunicare Interculturală pentru Studenții din Turism. Perspectiva și Nevoile Cursanților.* Industria ospitalității este astăzi, conform multor păreri, locul unde absolvenții de universitate se pot găsi în probabil cel mai cosmopolitan mediu profesional. Pregătirea viitorilor specialiști în turism pentru comunicarea și medierea eficientă cu părțile interesate din domeniu care provin din colțuri diferite ale lumii, având la bază o multitudine de medii culturale, sociale și economice, pare a fi una din cele mai importante sarcini ale profesorilor de engleză de specialitate. Încurajați de ghiduri elaborate de instituții internaționale, profesorii de limbă străină sunt conștienți de necesitatea acordării unei atenții deosebite dezvoltării abilităților de comunicare și mediere interculturală, clădirii conștientizării că lumea profesională contemporană este una pluriculturală. Ceea ce s-a investigat mai puțin este percepția pe care o au studenții despre necesitatea achiziționării acestor abilități și modalitatea cea mai potrivită pe care profesorii să o folosească pentru a-i ajuta în acest sens. Scopul articolului de față este investigarea percepțiilor studenților prin procesarea rezultatelor unui chestionar cantitativ folosind algoritmul de grupare K means. Rezultatul analizei noastre susține presupunerea că pentru o viitoare dezvoltare optimă profesională, studenții din turism sunt conștienți că au nevoie de bune competențe de comunicare interculturală, deși tipurile lor specifice și mijloacele prin care acestea pot fi obținute diferă câteodată de ceea ce profesorii consideră necesar să sublinieze în clasă.

Cuvinte-cheie: *comunicare interculturală, medierea comunicării, stereotipuri, facilitarea spațiului pluricultural, abilități soft*

Introduction and Theoretical Background

Tourism today is a sector of the economy where globalization is at home and, where interacting with foreigners is almost unavoidable both for tourists and hosts alike. Considering the amazing number of international tourists in 2023 – an estimated 975 million between January 2023 to September 2023

(UNWTO, 2023) – tourism students are in dire need of enhanced intercultural communication skills. Although not yet considered core skills in academia, these have become essential skills tourism graduates need to find a promising job in such a cosmopolitan domain and dynamic labour market.

The interconnectivity of our contemporary world brough about by the accessibility to electronic devices, the internet, the social media and the aviation industry, irreversibly changed the way we encounter outsiders, the way we relate to foreign cultures. An overwhelming number of young people can nowadays travel abroad for holidays, studying or working, thus giving rise to a new necessity of knowing how to interact with sojourners that visit their own country or with foreigners whom they meet abroad. Teaching students about various aspects of foreign cultures has long been on the "to do" list of academia (foreign language) professors; yet teaching students about intercultural communication and interaction has entered the higher education syllabi in former communist countries like Romania only during the last two decades. In most cases, such a task has been quietly passed on or assumed by the foreign language teacher, rendering the ESP course the place where intercultural competence is discussed and even practiced. In view of these changes, several researchers (Byram 2021), (Egli & Cavalli 2023), have discussed the new role language teachers face when it comes to incorporating into their language courses, substantial ICC knowledge and skills. Are ELT teachers really prepared to teach ICC skills? Do they have the necessary training, and more poignantly, do they have the necessary time to squeeze in an already fully packed and time-limited language course the extra competences students need today? For Michael Byram "teaching for linguistic competence cannot be separated from teaching for intercultural competence, any attempt to do so turns another language into an encoding of the learner's language" (Byram 2021, 28) According to these studies, language teachers cannot avoid today improving their own knowledge and skills in intercultural training. They also need to reconsider the scopes of their curriculum planning. To do so, they should be part of a team that develops new language policies, they should also turn the classroom into a safe space for students to voice and accept differences, a place where "highlighting similarities is the basis, then, for valuing differences as opportunities for enrichment for the whole class" (Egli & Cavalli 2023, 144). If most teachers are already aware of the need for these changes, we also should focus on how students perceive them, since they are the main beneficiaries of these curricular changes. Tourism students are the ones who probably need such training the most considering that the hospitality industry is the domain where there is inevitable exposure to outsiders, new cultures, new habits, new ways of thinking and behaving. The students' perception of their need for ICC

competences has been less investigated, and the goal of the present study is to enquire the specific way the beneficiaries of the teaching process consider they could benefit from mastering such skills in their future profession.

In determining how we define intercultural communication competence, we have looked at the guidelines established by the Council of Europe's milestone 2018 document *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture*, especially at Volume 1- *Context, concept and model* and also at another earlier work from 2014, inspired by the European directives, *Developing Intercultural Competence through Education* edited by Jospeh Huber and Christopher Reynolds. For the purpose of the present study we follow on the footsteps of Huber & Reynolds (2014) in understanding through competence a conglomerate of *attitudes, knowledge, skills and actions* that can lead students to respond successfully to situations or tasks that involve interactions with members of other ethnicities and cultures (especially those that live in a foreign country).

When we say that our students should master intercultural competences, we aim to help them develop *attitudes* like valuing cultural diversity, respecting people with different cultural backgrounds, being curious and willing to learn about other cultures and people with different worldviews, being willing to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty when travelling abroad or when meeting tourists at home. Each English teacher focuses at least temporarily on developing *skills* such as multiperspectivity, empathy, cognitive flexibility, skills in discovering and interpreting information about different cultural perspectives, practices, skills in adapting one's behaviour to new cultural environments. Language tutors also instinctively focus on transmitting *knowledge* about a new culture in their course, so naturally, teaching about the internal diversity of all cultural groups, raising the students' communicative awareness that languages may express the same ideas in diverse ways, giving them information about new beliefs, values, traditions, practices should be a natural part of an ESP course. Last but not least, all these attitudes, skills and knowledge should push students to appropriate *actions* for an effective intercultural communication competence. For example, they should seek opportunities to engage with diverse people, interacting and communicating in order to solve problems, to offer help. Students should also actively challenge stereotypes and prejudices when meeting them and they should try to mediate conflictual interactions. [3]

A very similar, quadruple understanding of intercultural competence is also provided by the Council of Europe's *Reference Framework of Competences*

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[3] For more details about the components of the intercultural competence see Chapter 2 – "The Components of Intercultural Competence" from Huber, Jospeh; Reynolds, Cristopher. (Eds.) (2014) *Developing Intercultural Competence through Education*. Council of Europe Pestalozzi Series, No3., Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, pp. 19-22.

for Democratic Culture (2018), as one can notice in *Figure 1*. Considering that democracy and intercultural dialogue are complementary since they require respect for one's interlocutors, both aforementioned documents underline the fact that intercultural competence provides the background for the development of global citizens who have a solid professional training as well as a lasting education for democracy and tolerance.
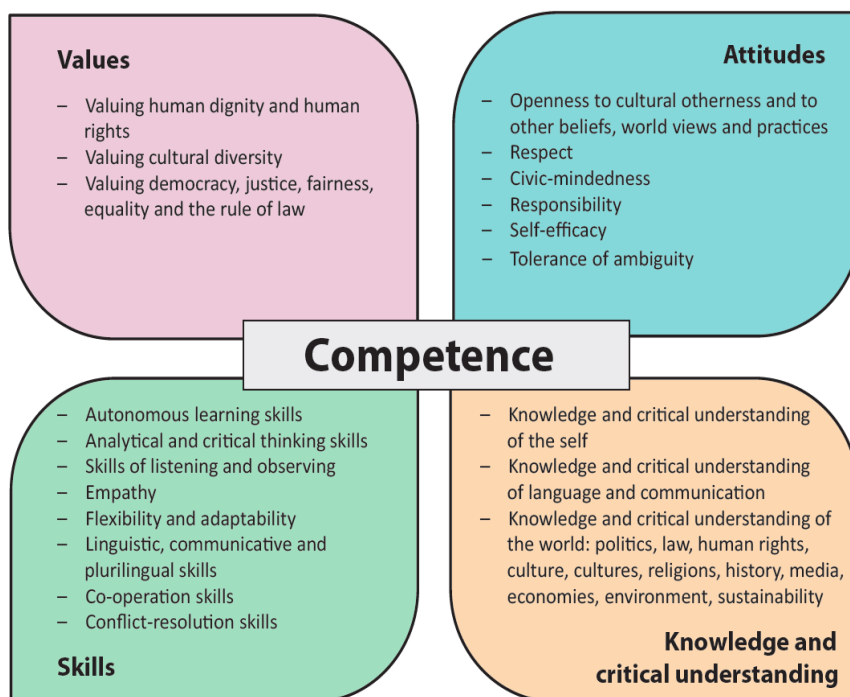

Figure 1. The 20 components of the model of competence required for democratic culture and intercultural dialogue. © Council of Europe (2018). *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture.* Volume 1- "Context, concept and model", p. 38.

Intercultural competence teaching and training can have many facets – from making students aware of the stereotypes and prejudices they (may) have on foreign people, passing by teaching them about the values, culture, and lifestyle of sojourners, to teaching them sartorial and communication etiquette, i.e. how to dress, how to greet, how to offer information and help if tourists need them. It can even tackle taboo topics that must be avoided or knowing how to refrain from behaviour that may be considered normal in one's country but criminalized in others. Intercultural communication is more than a means of assuring satisfactory business results in international ventures or relaxing,

problem-free foreign journeys. It can also help students better understand and appreciate their own culture by comparison. It can also aid with the acquisition of foreign language skills, making the target culture more accessible.

However, as indicated by Gobert (2015) and Wilkinson (2012), the key is finding the right balance between openness to the new culture and people without denying or downplaying the importance of the home culture: "The path is one of delicate balance, teaching students about the target culture for effective intercultural communication, without inadvertently encouraging them to adopt the cultural norms of the target culture, [...] forsaking their own culture." (Gobert 2015, 111) Learning about the intricacies of a new culture, becoming aware of the sensitivities of cultural difference to avoid blunders and hurt feelings does not entail that intercultural explorers "go native" and fully immerse themselves in the new environment. Maintaining a critical distance helps future tourism specialists, for example, gain a comparative perspective for better understanding their own culture and appreciate the novelty and even quirkiness of the newly discovered realms. As Alvino E. Fantini noticed, self-awareness, introspection or reflection about one's own culture are boosted by dealing with people from another culture: "As one learns about others, one learns about oneself". (Fantini, 2012, 392)

One of the first dangers that teachers must point out to students is the necessity of avoiding stereotypical thinking that is so common among the general population regarding various outlanders and foreign cultures. Ron Scollon and Suzanne Wong Scollon (2001) highlight the polarization that accompanies such stereotypes when people assume that two cultures or societies must necessarily be polar opposites. How many people, less exposed to diversity and travelling, assume from hearsay that Southern Europeans like the Spanish people, all Spanish people, must be warm, friendly and talkative while Northern Europeans like the Norwegians, all Norwegians, must be distant, cold and taciturn? Internal differences within a group or exceptions from a rule are simply swept away by the ideological power of stereotypes; that why intercultural communication tutors must point out that each person is simultaneously a member of multiple groups (cultural, religious, gender-based, professional, social, etc.) which creates differences. Furthermore, cultures have multiple facets that various in-group members may embrace, ignore or reject. Such an awareness for diversity when it comes to interacting with members of new cultures can help avoid prejudice, racism, xenophobia and discrimination.

> Stereotyping is another word for overgeneralization. The difference, however, is that stereotyping carries with it an ideological position. Characteristics of the group are not only overgeneralized to apply to each member of the group, but

> they are also taken to have some exaggerated negative or positive value. These values are also taken as arguments to support social or political relationships in regard to members of those groups. [...] Ideologies are based on stereotypical thinking, or to put it the other way round, stereotypes are largely ideological. [...] Stereotypes limit our understanding of human behavior and intercultural discourse because they limit our view of human activity [...]. Furthermore, they go on ideologically to use that limited view of individuals and groups to justify preferential or discriminatory treatment by others who hold greater political power. (Scollon & Wong Scollon, 2001, 168, 169)

The above-mentioned authors point out that both positive and negative stereotyping is harmful, therefore hindering communication – the first one seeing members of different groups as identical and the latter seeing them as complete opposites. They also distinguish between a *solidarity fallacy*, i.e. falsely grouping characteristics of one group with those of another, and a *lumping fallacy* which happens when such assimilation is done in reference to two other groups. (Scollon & Wong Scollon, 2001, 173, 174). Avoiding these pitfalls is the first step Tourism students must take in creating a positive intercultural interaction. But what makes an ordinary speaker of a foreign language a proficient intercultural communicator? Brian Spitzberg defines intercultural communication competence as "an impression that behaviour is appropriate and effective in a given context" (Spitzberg, 2015, 343), because after all, "cultures do not interact, people do" (Spitzberg, 2015, 343) thus considering that both guest and host cultures need to adapt to each other. It is not a unidirectional flow of actions. The same idea is emphasized by John Corbertt (2022) who mentions that both learners (of foreign languages, students of out-group cultures) and the outsiders they meet need to co-construct the meaning of their interaction:

> All models of ICC share the conception of the learner as an explorer and mediator. [...] The encounter between the learner and other cultures affords learners to enter into hybrid 'third spaces' from which the home culture and the target culture can be viewed, challenged, and re-evaluated. [...] Neither learners nor their interlocutors alone are responsible for making meaning in any interaction, and so, rather than intercultural competence, we might focus on 'intercultural dynamics', thus acknowledging that the making of meaning is collaborative. (Corbett, 2022, 42, 63)

Not only does mastering ICC competence help students identify and avoid cultural stereotypes and prejudice, but as noted by Louise Tranekjær (2023), plurilingual/ pluricultural and intercultural communication competences can be used to negotiate and mediate inequalities and power asymmetries between international interactants. That can prove to be particularly helpful in tourism

where quite often there is an economic power imbalance between rich tourists from developed countries and poorer hosts adding to the challenges of cultural differences. So how do we, as ESP teachers, prepare our Tourism students to interact with strangers in a world that has become a global village? Teaching about a foreign culture is a corollary to teaching a foreign language, therefore learning a new language is a suitable vehicle for acquiring intercultural communicative competencies. As noted by Kostyrya et al. (2022), there is a double correlation between English language communicative competences and intercultural communication skills, each of them being a tool used to enhance the other. Nonetheless, it goes beyond that, it is more than learning about the linguistic intricacies of a new idiom, it is about learning how to transgress boundaries and establish cognitive and emotional connections beyond the limitations of one's own culture or even that of the target culture. It involves more than near native linguistic proficiency levels, it also involves the ability to negotiate, to mediate differences and interpret language and actions that escape simple translation.

> The intercultural speaker is not bound to specific cultures or languages but is competent in mediating across multiple borders. It is for this reason that intercultural competence is increasingly defined as a global competence: the ability to be 'at home in the world'[…] Unlike the learner who is taught specific linguistic and cultural knowledge in preparation for encounters with a specific new culture, the intercultural speaker or mediator is able to thrive in multiple situations: he/she is globally competent.[…] The globally competent intercultural speaker is at home and happily mobile in this increasingly borderless world. (Wilkinson, 2012, 296, 298)

Since this mediation and negotiation of difference cannot happen in the absence of a common language, intercultural competence acquisition usually falls within the competencies foreign language tutors must teach, as it has been emphasized by the updated version of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (2020). The document highlights the importance for students nowadays to have specific linguistic skills coupled with pluricultural and plurilingual competence plus mediation abilities to ensure a rounded, holistic training and preparation for today's labour market. They need to have the "capacity to deal with 'otherness' to identify similarities and differences, to build on known and unknown cultural features, etc. in order to enable communication and collaboration" (CERF 2020,124). The "willingness to act as an intercultural mediator" and the "readiness and capacity to expand linguistic/plurilinguistic and cultural/pluricultural awareness through an attitude of openness and curiosity" (CERF 2020,124) are traits that language teachers are expressly

encouraged to develop in their students by this famous European linguistic guideline. This tight connection between language and culture has also been underlined by Monica Antonello (2023) in her analysis of English as a lingua franca of transcultural communication:

> Language and culture are conceived of as two interrelated complex systems that are continuously negotiated in interaction and cannot be described or categorized a priori, they emerge trough the speaker's linguistic and cultural practices and thus are closely bound to the context in which these practices are performed. (Antonello, 2023, 49)

According to Jane Wilkinson, if languages are identity markers, then: "language learning and intercultural speaking are transformative and do give rise to changes in identity, and [...] the specific languages being learned and spoken are formative in shaping that identity. [...] This understanding concomitantly grants learners agency in shaping their own identities and imbues languages (specific languages) with a transformative power." (Wilkinson 2012, 306) This powerful statement highlights how an interculturally competent foreign language speaker may personally benefit from an enlarged understanding of the world, may develop new connections with outsiders even beyond the scope of the professional activities and interactions.

If intercultural experiences are life-altering, affecting both tourists and locals, and the authentic pluricultural communication is interactive and participatory, the language teacher must pay attention to carefully evaluate not only the intercultural competence (often described as a host of abilities needed to perform appropriately when dealing with people from a different cultural background), but also the intercultural performance. Performance in such interactions implies "flexibility, humour, patience, openness, interest, curiosity, empathy, tolerance for ambiguity, and suspending judgements, among others". (Fantini, 2012, 393)

Developing proficient intercultural communication and interaction skills is vital in the hospitality industry where tourists and hosts often belong to divergent cultural backgrounds and where the guests' holiday choices and the hosts' attitudes towards the sojourners can be heavily influenced by how close or distant, they perceive the other culture to be from their own. Wishing to pursue familiarity and avoid potential conflicts on the tourists' side and desiring to offer a warm welcome without imprinting on the values of a foreign culture on the locals' side are common attitudes to be found in intercultural exposures.

> Perceived cultural and linguistic differences between themselves and their hosts might be viewed as potentially discomforting, even alienating or threatening, and can form the basis of prejudice. These emotional, or affective

elements of attitudes towards the culturally different can influence tourists' choice of holiday destination (e.g. avoiding certain countries or regions seen to be "too different") or type of accommodation (e.g. choosing a large hotel complex with hosts who speak their language) […]. Divergent attitudes might also be discerned in the perspective of the locals. For some, tourism can be threatening and viewed as corrosive of local cultural traditions and languages. For others, contact provides an opportunity not only for earning money by meeting tourist demands, but also for the preservation of their minority languages / ethnolinguistic communities and for intercultural and language learning. (Jack &Phipps, 2012, 537, 538)

If ignorance and prejudice-based obstacles are to be overcome, future tourism specialists need to improve their specific knowledge of other cultures' traditions, habits, lifestyles, beliefs, etc. with punctual information that will help them avoid cultural blunders. At the same time, they must be aware of how 'untranslatable' language, context-based stories and actions can be 'interpreted' for the tourists; to help create a common ground where both hosts and visitors alike can build mutually profitable and emotionally fulfilling interactions. Mastering mediation skills and the intricacies of intercultural verbal and non-verbal communication can help future tour guides, hotel managers, concierges, travel agents, restaurateurs increase their business profitability and market their destination to its true value. Knowing how to navigate the treacherous waters of pluricultural space can also help balance the uneven power relations that are established between the usually poorer hosts and the richer tourists. This occurs by mitigating tensions, reducing prejudice and discrimination, improving the economic and social development of local communities in a fair and conflict-free manner.

We can better understand how this works by investigating the concept of culture and cultural interaction first from a theoretical perspective. Ingrid Piller (2012) underlines the permeable membranes of each culture and the fact that to some extent each culture is an 'imagined community' which is interconnected with others and therefore in constant flux. There are no clearly defined boundaries (not for characterizing individuals anyway) and most intercultural miscommunications are actually linguistic in nature, which makes them more manageable through an increased language proficiency – just what ESP teachers love to hear!

Whether culture is viewed as nation, as ethnicity, as faith, as gender, or as sexuality, all these 'cultures' have one thing in common, they are imagined communities. […] That means that members of a culture imagine themselves and are imagined by others as group members. These groups are too large to be 'real' groups (i.e.) no group member will ever know all the other group members. Therefore, they are best considered as discursive constructions.

> That means that we do not have culture, but we construct culture discursively. […] The obvious point is that, given the state of connectiveness of our world, no culture exists in isolation. […] 'Culture' is in a constant state of flux and cross-fertilization. Given that each of us belongs to many cultures in this sense, and that all these combinations are slightly different, it is thus possible to argue that, in this sense, all communication is intercultural. […] Some misunderstanding that are considered 'cultural' are in fact linguistic misunderstandings. (Piller, 2012, 5, 7, 9)

On the one hand, Piller (2012) and Gumperz (2005) emphasize linguistic proficiency in an international foreign language as a solution to intercultural miscommunication, showing how a mere matter of intonation falling and rising may cause misunderstanding and poor customer relations. Yet the latter, Gumperz (2005), emphasizes how socio-cultural norms affect all levels of speech production and interpretation, because understanding meaning is more than understanding individual words and the linguistic ties between them.

On the other hand, Janet Holmes (2012) focuses on understanding other people's etiquette and behavioural norms and not using our framework for interpreting foreign cultures. Politeness, in her view, is pragmatic, requires a context, it can only be evaluated by assessing others' behaviour in relation to societal norms (as we know them, that's why our background knowledge and open-mindedness are important). According to her, "meaning is co-constructed, and hence politeness is a matter of negotiation between participants. Interaction is regarded as a dynamic discursive struggle, with the possibility that different participants may interpret the same interaction quite differently". (Holmes, 2012, 211) The accent still goes on the fluid, unhinged nature of intercultural interaction that needs to be constantly negotiated or at least mediated.

The next question would be how can a tourism expert know how different cultures interpret various types of interactions? How can a hospitality student solve a conflict triggered by a cultural blunder? Stella Ting-Toomey (2015) shows that solving conflicts depends on the type of communication and cultural traits different countries/nations have, connecting her findings to cross-cultural investigations like that of Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010). She exemplifies her statement with the differences between individualism-based societies that emphasize the importance of individual identity and rights over those of group identity, vs. collectivistic communities that put group obligations over individual needs.

> For individualistic, LC [low context] communicators, the bargaining resources in conflict typically revolve around individual pride and self-esteem, individual ego-based emotions, and individual sense of autonomy and power. For

collectivistic, HC [high context] interactants, the negotiation resources in conflict typically revolve around relational "face" maintenance and group harmony, group-oriented status and self-esteem, face-related emotions, and a reciprocal sense of favors and obligations. (Ting-Toomey, 2015, 357)

The famous six-cultural dimension analysis of various countries provided by Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010) is probably the most user-friendly paradigm when it comes to showing students how to approach cultural differences, sources of misunderstanding and conflict. According to the authors of *Cultures and Organizations, Software of the Mind. Intercultural Cooperation and Its Importance for Survival* (2010), people are culturally conditioned since early childhood through the informal and formal education they receive from their parents, teachers, through the influence their neighbourhood, workplace and community have on them. This is visible in the cultural traits they adhere to in an unconscious manner. That's why, on a grand scale, individual exceptions apart, people belonging to a certain nation would behave similarly due to a shared, common, cultural pattern. Following Geert Hofstede's landmark study carried out initially in-house at IBM on employees of different nationalities (study completed later by G.J. Hofstede and M. Minkov and validated by other studies' similar results), a large-scale table of cultural variables has been proposed.

The cultural variables illustrated in Hofstede's study point to differences between cultures measured on six dimensions: power distance, collectivism vs. individualism, femininity vs. masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long term orientation vs. short-term orientation, indulgence vs. restraint. Understanding that people from various countries around the world have different values which inform their behaviour and interactions, can be easier if, for example, as illustrated in *Figures 2a* and *2b,* we compare the cultural values that Romania has with those of the United Kingdom for example. The existence of a topic-related website - https://www.hofstede-insights.com – provides the digital natives of the Z generation with an easy tool to navigate and help them grasp cultural differences.

Knowing how to interact with visitors from Asian countries and how to behave when visiting African or South American communities is essential for future tourism students. Anticipating correctly the interaction with members of the out-group can help us navigate culture shock because, "in a way, the visitor to a foreign culture returns to the mental state of an infant, in which the simplest things must be learned over again. This experience usually leads to feelings of distress, helplessness, and hostility toward the new environment." (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010, 384) Considering that "globalization by multinational corporations and supranational institutions […] meets fierce local resistance because economic systems are not culture free" (Hofstede,

Hofstede and Minkov, 2010, 24), we can see why mastering these cultural differences and their interplay is also key to understanding the economy of the 'global village' and to finding a suitable and rewarding career, despite current frictions and incongruities.

Figure 2a. Illustration of a country comparison tool for Hofstede's six cultural dimensions.
(Source : https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison-
tool?countries=romania%2Cunited+kingdom)

The works mentioned in this theoretical background point to the complexities of ICC and to the necessity, for the language teachers mostly, to build in their students strong linguistic skills reinforced with optimal ICC and mediation abilities. They should emphasize the need for openness to diversity, curiosity for the new social practices and the new stories of other cultures. Above all, students should remember that in their encounters with alterity, meaningful interactions and successful tourism careers are the result of a tight collaborative process between hosts and guests.
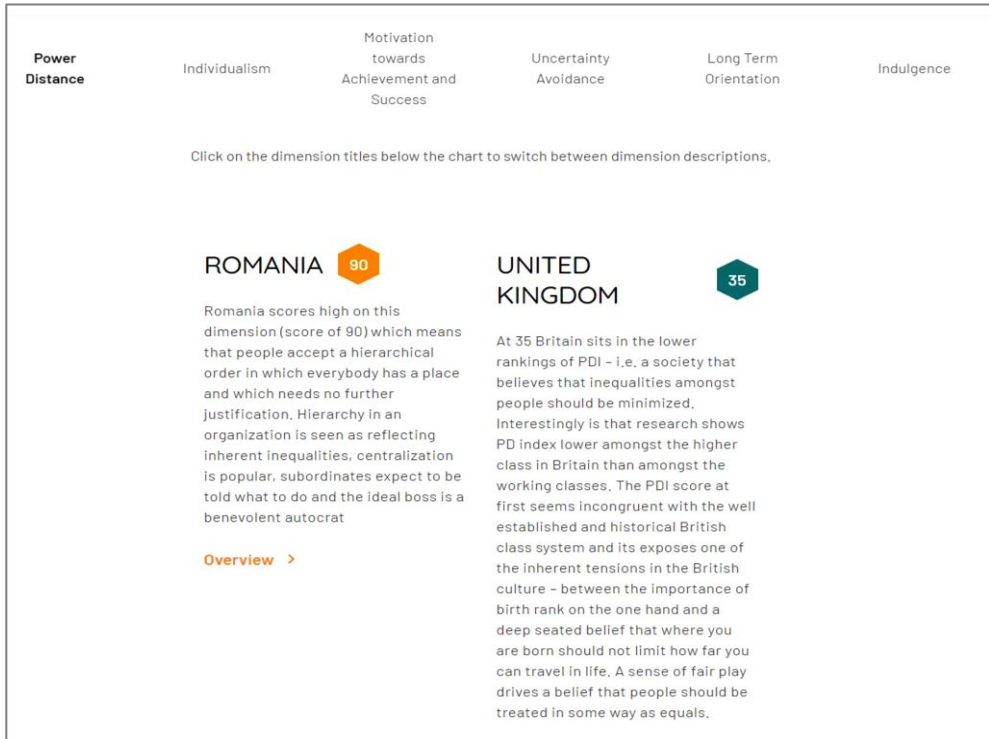
Figure 2b. Illustration of a country comparison tool for Hofstede's six cultural dimensions – here a detail about the **Power Distance** values for Romania and the UK. (Source : https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison-tool?countries=romania%2Cunited+kingdom)

The Study

While communication skills are the bread and butter of specialized foreign language courses, the focus on the intercultural side of communication is more of an exotic ingredient in most Romanian universities, with some notable exceptions. Courses focusing on the development of intercultural communication skills are rare and most often, such abilities or even basic notions are taught occasionally, most often by language teachers, whenever the topic of their courses or isolated reading / listening / speaking activities point to this direction. Some universities still offer their tourism students courses in the culture and civilization of various peoples, yet those are primarily directed toward the acquisition of historical facts, theoretical notions and do not target the development of interactive abilities for connecting with foreign people. In

view of this context, the development of intercultural communication skills seems to fall within the responsibilities of the foreign language teacher who could dedicate some time and attention to raising the students' awareness in this respect. If course tutors are aware of the need to focus on ICC skills as well during their ESP courses, besides the regular language and specialized vocabulary acquisition, less investigated have been the students' opinions on the validity of such an endeavour and on the specific means teachers could use to develop the types of ICC skills students consider they would use most in their future jobs. Considering that at the core of the teaching process are the students, and that the teaching needs to be directed towards preparing them for integration in the labour market, we have thought necessary to focus on the students' perception of their need for ICC skills/ competencies and the form this should take in order to really help them get an optimal preparation for their future jobs. Consequently, the present study tries to investigate the students' opinions regarding the importance of intercultural communication skills for their future professional path and the particularities of an improved Tourism English curriculum that would address this need.

Data Collection and Analysis

The current article analyses the results of a quantitative questionnaire that was sent to 1st year students specializing in the Geography of Tourism (at the Faculty of Geography) and 2nd year students specializing in Cultural Tourism (at the Faculty of History) from Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. The survey was carried out online, using the Google Forms format. It was addressed to the 130 students enrolled in the two specialisms at the beginning of the academic year and received 80 responses. The study was conducted over a period of two weeks in November 2023 and comprised a quantitative questionnaire based on 16 multiple-choice questions. For statistically processing the results of the survey, we have used the SPSS software to determine the possible K means clustering showing groupings of similar variables (testing for possible associations or correlations gave no statistically valid results). Also, a more simple, descriptive analysis of the results accompanied by graphs is presented further on.

Sampling

The sociometric measurements of the target group reveal that the great majority of respondents are very young high-school graduates, 18-20 years old – 85%, the rest being aged between 21-24 years old, and a comfortable majority

are female – 61%. Regarding their linguistic background, overwhelmingly they have started studying English at a very young age: 28 respondents while in kindergarten, 32 while in primary school. Only 14 respondents have started studying it in secondary school, 3 in high school and 2 declared having started its study at university. Besides English, most have also studied French – 60%, German – 47%, Italian – 6% and Spanish – 6%, 1 respondent also mentioned having studied Japanese and another one Portuguese. Regarding their mother tongue, out of 80 respondents, 57 declared it is Romanian and 29 Hungarian, resulting that 6 respondents are bilingual since they have chosen both options. These data reveal that our students have a very solid linguistic background because most of them have studied at least two foreign languages, English even from early childhood, while 1/3 of them can speak both Romanian and Hungarian with (relative) ease. Taking into account these findings, the language barrier should not be a problem for them when interacting with foreign people. Regarding their exposure to foreign cultures, we have found out that the great majority – 66 respondents have already travelled abroad while only 14 respondents have yet to do that.

Main Findings

1. Statistical interpretation of the survey's results

K-means clustering is a common technique for dividing a dataset into K unique, non-overlapping groups or clusters. As a prototype for the cluster, each data point is a member of the cluster with the closest mean. The procedure seeks to minimize the sum of squared distances between each point and its designated cluster centroid, often known as the within-cluster variance. K centroids are randomly initialized at the start of the process. The cluster centres are first estimated by these centroids. Next, depending on a distance metric - typically the Euclidean distance - each data point is assigned to the closest centroid. The dataset is divided into K clusters in this step. The mean of all the data points allocated to each cluster is then used to compute the centroids, representing the new cluster center. Up to convergence, the final two phases are iteratively performed while changing the centroid locations and cluster assignments. When the centroids' changes decrease to a certain level or the assignments stop changing, convergence is reached. We use the Elbow Method to determine K, the right number of clusters.

Based on the survey questions, we have focused on the following variables:

- **Previous Interactions with Foreign Tourists/Friends/Colleagues**: different ratings of attitudes, including worry about cultural differences, language obstacles, and curiosity, among others.
- **Importance of Good Intercultural Communication Skills**: required for jobs in tourism, education, management, sales, public administration, professional and personal development, study abroad, and other fields.
- **Boosting Intercultural Competence**: The suggested approaches outside of university education.
- **Components of Intercultural Communication:** Crucial competencies recognized as essential for tourism professionals.

The variables "average number of languages spoken" and "travel experience" were also included in the dataset for the cluster analysis in order to aid in the definition and distinction of the clusters. Based on the closeness of the respondents' replies to all of the included variables the K-means algorithm then clustered the respondents. These characteristics, which represent varying degrees of exposure to and comfort with cross-cultural interactions, assisted in defining and differentiating the clusters.

To determine the ideal number of clusters, we first used the Elbow Method. Around three or four clusters, the elbow method graph has a discernible bend, indicating that this may be the ideal number of clusters for the data.
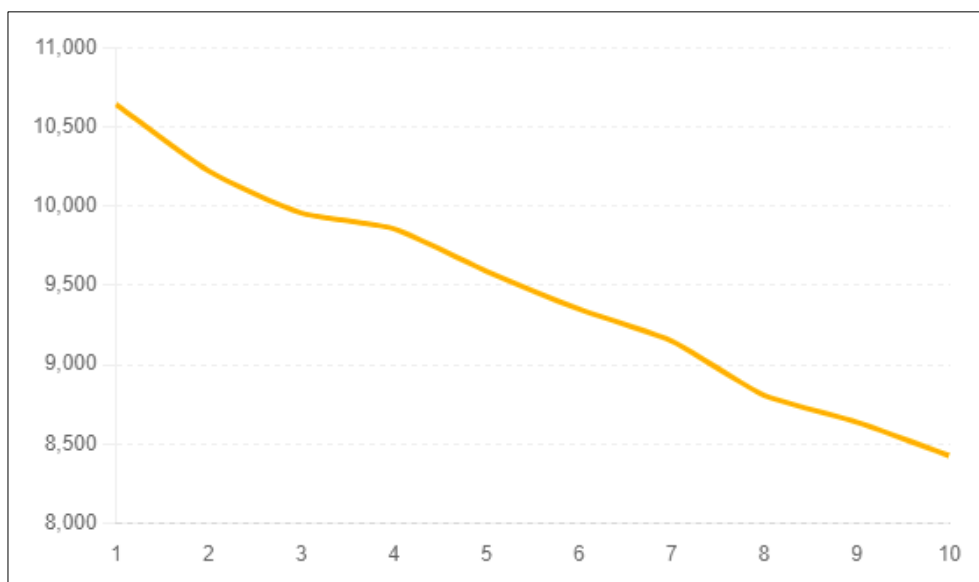

Figure 3. Elbow method for optimal number of clusters

In order to find groups of students who have given similar answers about their preferences and intercultural communication skills, we have grouped the data into four clusters. The number of languages spoken and travel experience seem to be the main differentiators across the clusters, with Cluster 1 being notable for having the largest average number of languages spoken.

Table 1. Table showing the 4 clusters of the survey.

	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4
Average Number of Languages	1.26	2.00	1.00	1.00
Travel Experience	81.8%	100%	100%	100%

The following are the thorough explanations for each cluster, which highlight important attitudes and ideas about intercultural communication:

Table 2. Table describing each cluster, which highlights important attitudes and ideas about intercultural communication.

	Moderately Experienced Travelers	Highly Proficient Multilinguals	Confident Communicators	Cultural Enthusiasts
Language Anxiety	Mostly uncomfortable with language barriers.	Mostly uncomfortable, but better adapted.	High discomfort due to language barriers.	Moderate discomfort, similar to Cluster 1.
Cultural Diversities	Generally uncomfortable with different looks and cultures.	Less discomfort compared to Cluster 1, showing more adaptability.	Significant discomfort with different looks and cultures.	Significant curiosity and eagerness to learn about other cultures.
Curiosity and Comfort	Show moderate curiosity and comfort in intercultural interactions.	High comfort and curiosity in interactions, eager to learn more about different cultures.	High levels of curiosity but significant challenges due to cultural differences.	High levels of comfort and curiosity in intercultural settings.
Importance of Skills	Strong belief in the necessity of intercultural communication skills for personal and professional development.	High emphasis on the necessity of intercultural skills for studying abroad and professional growth.	Moderate to high recognition of the importance of intercultural skills for personal and professional development.	Strong belief in the necessity of intercultural skills, particularly for studying abroad and professional growth.

These clusters illustrate varying degrees of expertise, comfort, and perception in relation to intercultural communication, ranging from highly proficient and comfortable individuals to those facing notable difficulties. This division can be useful when customizing educational curricula or cross-cultural training projects.

2. Tourism students' openness to intercultural interaction stemming from intellectual curiosity and the desire to travel.

If the sociometric findings discussed above indicate that most of our students have travelled abroad, we realize they took part in intercultural interactions outside their fixed culture and have at least a latent curiosity about foreign people and their culture. This interest can well have its roots in the intellectual curiosity that comes with studying tourism and wanting to travel rather than from their own personal experiences of having interacted considerably with foreign friends and colleagues. In the age of online communication that opens borders but diminishes personal interactions, when it comes to friends from other countries, 27 respondents out of 80 mention that they don't have any foreign friends and 22 say they have foreign friends they keep in touch with online, but they have also met face-to-face. Fifteen students keep in touch with their foreign friends but have never met, while 16 have foreign acquaintances but they don't keep in touch. When it comes to foreign school/ university/ work colleagues, most students – 49, mention not having met anybody this way, while 21 of the respondents met their foreign colleagues at school or university, just 6 respondents met them at work. The purpose of these questions was to identify the degree of familiarization students might have with prior intercultural communication outside the field of tourism, and their receptiveness for communicating with foreigners based on their personal experience.

When it comes to their openness for traveling to a foreign country where their exposure to new cultures and peoples will be at maximum, our tourism students welcome it with open arms, even if some of them may feel a little anxiety facing the unknown as illustrated in *Figure 4*. More than a third (33 respondents) view the prospect of international travel as "relaxing, fun and enjoyable", an almost equal number (27 respondents) consider it "fascinating but also a little frightening because of the new environment / people / language", and 19 respondents regard it as "relaxing and enjoyable but only if I travel together with my family or close friends from home". Only six students mention that they are curious about it, but they haven't had that opportunity yet. None of them consider international travel "boring and a waste of time" or something they "must do because of their job/ studies, without being keen on it".
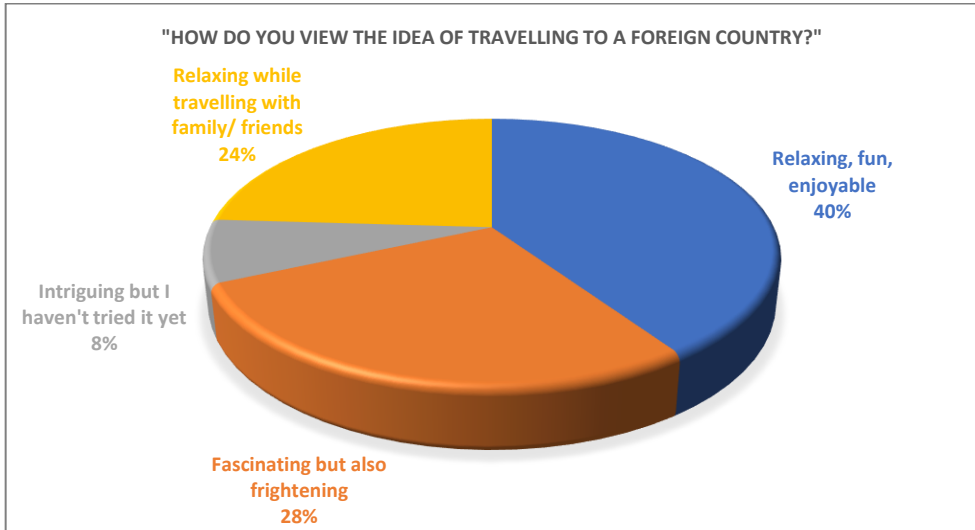
Figure 4. The way Tourism students perceive the idea of travelling to a foreign country.

The students' responsiveness to the idea of travelling to foreign countries obviously is correlated with their academic specialization, Tourism, where curiosity about and interest in foreign peoples and cultures is mandatory. Their slight anxiety to travel abroad, especially on their own without familiar people around them, may be a result of their young age, of not having travelled anywhere without their close relatives before coming to college. If they find this new environment a little frightening, as we will see later in the survey, it will be mostly due to linguistic barriers rather than the strangeness of foreign people or cultures.

3. Tourism students' positive attitude and openness to intercultural interactions and communication

Based on their previous interactions with foreign friends / colleagues / tourists, the interviewed students consistently indicated that they have a positive attitude towards meeting and interacting with people belonging to other cultures, either in their home country and abroad, as illustrated in *Figure 5*. Asked about the existence of a possible anxiety or lack of comfort in interacting with foreigners and its level of intensity on a Likert scale (1 – not at all, 2 – moderately so, 3 – very much), most students (42 respondents) considered it was due to the language barrier in a moderate way, 9 of them considered this was very much the case while 29 had no problem with this at all. Regarding

their possible anxiety towards the outsiders' dissimilarity in terms of appearance (clothes, skin colour, body language) almost all the students (74 out of 80) said they have absolutely no problem with this, and only 6 were moderately rendered uncomfortable by it. A rather similar answer was given about the anxiety that might have been triggered by the foreigners' different culture (religion, system of values and beliefs): a comfortable majority of 66 students mentioned they have no problem at all with it and the rest of 14 only a moderate one. For these two questions regarding their disturbance regarding the outsiders' difference in terms of appearance or culture, no student picked the "very much" variant.
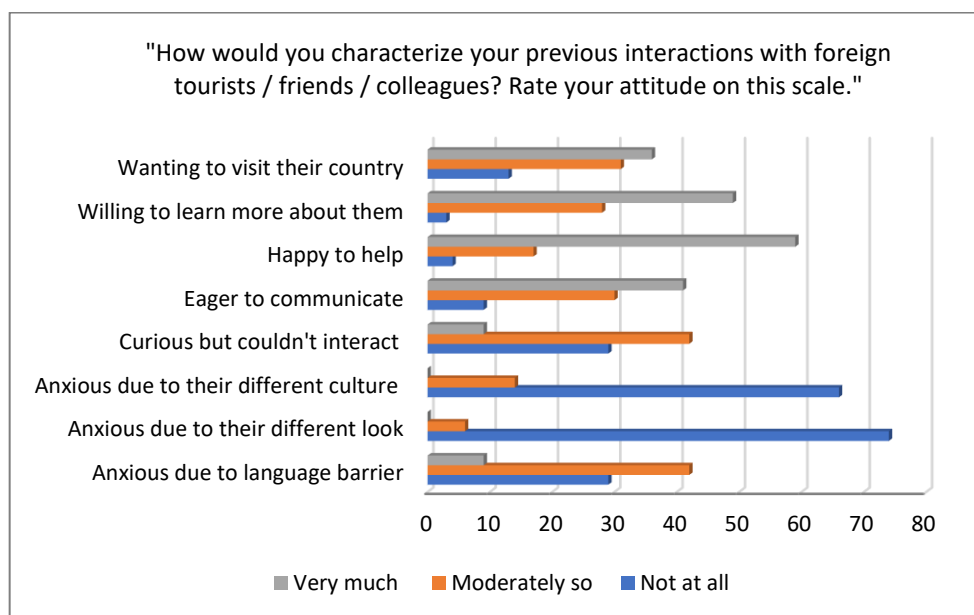

Figure 5. The students' attitude towards interacting with foreign tourists / friends / colleagues.

On the contrary, from the questions asked we can notice that students are curious and eager to interact with foreign people, to learn more about them and their culture. Half of the respondents (42 students) are moderately curious about outsiders and want to interact with them, but they couldn't do that due to the language barrier. Again, half of them (41 students) felt very comfortable in this intercultural exchange and were eager to communicate, while 30 of their colleagues felt only moderately so. A comfortable majority (59 respondents) felt very happy to help the foreigners with information or directions regarding Romania or their city, while only 17 felt moderately so. More than half (49

students) admitted being very curious about the outsiders and being willing to learn more about their country or culture as a result, and only 28 felt moderately so. When it comes to being so satisfied with their previous interaction that it triggered in them the desire to visit that foreign country, an almost equal number of students indicated being very satisfied – 36 respondents and 31 of them picked being moderately convinced of this.

Summing up, we can say that our tourism students do not feel anxious about the differences they might come across in interacting and communicating with foreign people; the only apprehension some have is due to linguistic barriers, the difficulty in speaking one another's language or an international one. (From the *Sampling* part of the article we can notice though that the respondents have a very comfortable linguistic background education that should facilitate easy communication on their side). Counteracting this obstacle, the students declare their openness and curiosity towards interacting with outsiders and willingness to learn about their culture and country, maybe even while visiting it.

4. Intercultural communication skills are essential for a career in tourism

Regarding their professional future and the necessity of mastering intercultural communication skills, almost all students admit that for a career in the hospitality industry this is a necessity: 75 respondents out of 80 agree with this very much, only 5 consider it moderately important. Out of 80 respondents, consistently over 50 students have mentioned that having good intercultural skills is "very important" nowadays also for a career in teaching (54 students), a career in sales (56 students), a career in management (59 students) or a career in public administration (53 students). Over half of the students questioned indicated that such skills are "very important" for a "good professional development in any domain" (47 respondents), as well as for "a good personal development" (50 respondents) and "continuing your studies abroad" (60 respondents). Considering the importance these skills have for the students' further academic and professional development in tourism, and a fulfilled personal life, it was important to find out next where and how they can be best enhanced. Is it the English teacher's duty to highlight them or are they a matter that even specialism teachers can touch upon?

In the course of our investigation, the participants to the opinion poll mentioned that some elements of intercultural communication – i.e. how to communicate / interact with foreigners – have been studied or practiced before in high-school as mentioned by 48% of the respondents. A mere 18% mentioned they have heard of this only at university during the English course while 31% indicated they have never studied this before. None of the students mentioned

studying intercultural communication at university during other foreign language courses or during their specialism courses. Only 1 respondent noted that he/she also studied this at university during a "Culture and Civilization" type of course. Considering these results, one can infer that teaching and improving students' intercultural communication skills falls into the attributions of the English language teacher, since their specialism teachers or other language teachers rarely touch upon these matters.

Asked to indicate their top three choices for the place where they should learn more about intercultural communication, an overwhelming number of students, 71% representing 57 respondents picked a surprisingly pragmatic and informal choice – "we can learn this by travelling abroad". This probably comes as a continuation of the "practice makes learning better" approach many of our students have, almost all of them having already travelled abroad and having interacted with foreign people. Considering they are tourism students, this should not come as a surprise, travelling for them being the instrument they use to understand the world, to explore it, to make a living. Their second option for learning more about intercultural communication was "during the English course" picked by 67% representing 54 respondents, while 47 students mentioned they can learn these skills "informally by interacting with our foreign friends". Only 35 students mentioned the need for learning intercultural communication during their specialism courses. At the other end of the spectrum, just one student picked the option that further studying these skills "is not needed in my opinion".

While the great majority of our students is convinced that mastering intercultural skills is vital today in a globalized world, especially for a job in tourism, many realize that they can improve these abilities using other methods besides academic study and training. Asked to pick their top five choices for improving their intercultural competence besides studying this at university, an overwhelming majority of our students, 80% chose "watching documentaries about new countries and their history/culture", 75% indicated they would prefer to learn these skills by "travelling to foreign countries for holidays", 72% also preferred "reading articles on the internet or watching online travel blogs", for 56% their fourth choice was "listening to audiobooks / podcasts". On the fifth place, an equal number of 42 respondents indicated that either "studying in foreign countries" or "living and working in foreign countries" would be an ideal way to improve their intercultural interaction with sojourners. These choices can be indicative of the preferred pragmatic approach tourism students have towards first-hand interaction with foreigners as indicated by previous responses to other survey questions. They also point towards the strong visual learning and multimedia component that generation Z students are inclined to favour in their approach to formal education. While these tools and activities

can be applied to informal education as well (as our students seem to suggest through their answers), several studies - Huber & Reynolds (2014), Kostyrya et al. (2022) - have emphasized that ICC competence can best be achieved in formal settings as well through real or virtual educational mobility (mobility stays, real or virtual (classroom exchanges), blogs, video-conferences, e-learning platforms, as well as watching movies, reading books and journals.

Considering the last results of the survey which indicate that teaching about intercultural communication and enhancing this competence with tourism students falls within the responsibilities of the ESP teacher, one has to prioritize the elements that must be taught, given the reduced number of hours that the syllabus allocates for specialized English in the students' program. As illustrated in *Figure 6*, students indicated that their top five skills to master would be: 1) knowing how to greet and welcome foreign people – as picked by 70 respondents, 2) knowing how to give specific information to foreign people – as indicated by 62 respondents, 3) knowing how to help foreign people by offering solution to their problems – as preferred by 61 students, 4) knowing how to behave when you visit foreign countries – as mentioned by 51 respondents, and last but not least, 5) mastering specific information on new cultures (about their history, religion, language, values and beliefs systems) – as chosen by 50 students.
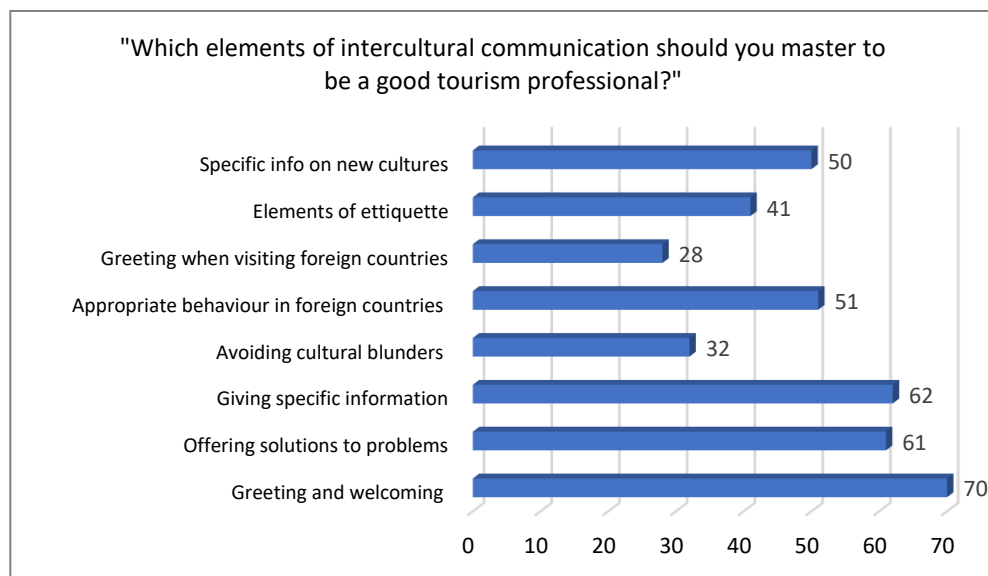

Figure 6. Elements of intercultural communication students should master to be a good tourism professional.

All the above-mentioned skills are very pragmatic in nature and domain-related, therefore our tourism students will have to master these if they desire a successful career in tourism. Knowing how to have a first interaction that can set the tone, knowing how to help sojourners and how to behave in a new country are essential for the performance of any tour guide, hotel receptionist or even for a travel agent. It's to be noted that elements that are somewhat theoretical in nature – specific cultural information, elements of etiquette, avoiding cultural blunders and elements of sartorial knowledge are not considered priorities by future tourism specialists. Their preference is consistently directed towards performance and the customer service facet of intercultural communication and interaction, as they should be in such a people-oriented industry! It seems that as teachers we are more concerned with raising our students' awareness of cultural differences, developing in them the right *attitudes* for encountering the Other, transmitting the necessary *knowledge* while our students are more concerned with the *skills* and the *actions* that make a rounded intercultural communication competence. As ESP teachers we need to remember that our duty is not necessarily to teach a certain subject or some skills or specific knowledge, but first we need to teach *students*, to prepare them for their future profession, so their perspective on what they need to learn really counts.

Conclusion

Contemporary students are 'citizens of the world' through the interconnectedness provided by the new electronic media and communication methods, by the easiness with which they travel from one corner of the planet to another, by the rapid access to information, education and consumer products originating in countries they have never been to. Interacting, communicating with outsiders is a necessity and even a daily event for most tourism students nowadays. This early exposure to difference obviously facilitates their understanding of various cultures from around the world and opens their mental horizon for the real interaction with foreigners they will deal with in their future careers. Intercultural competence is still seen as mostly a new type of communication students have to master. It is usually assumed by several stakeholders (higher education providers, students, even recruiters or employers,) that foreign language tutors can and must assume the task of raising the students' awareness towards the intercultural communication and its benefits. Training students in this respect had long been one of the goals of the foreign language courses (even if for only one language - culture component at a time). However, educating tourism students towards being prepared to

meet and interact with a diversity of tourists from all corners of the world would require more time and resources than ESP language courses can regularly provide. Despite limitations, most ESP teachers are equipped for this task, mastering several languages to perfection and having an in-depth understanding of at least one foreign culture. With a careful realignment of the curriculum to suit this goal, or even better, with a specially dedicated course, preparing hospitality students for an international career in such a cosmopolitan domain can be within grasp.

The results of our analysis have shown that tourism students too are aware of the need to master intercultural communication skills for their future professions. Their perception on what precise kind of skills/ competence they need is heavily influenced by a pragmatic vision brought about by their realisation that the hospitality industry focuses primarily on customer relations and satisfaction. If students are to thrive professionally in any domain, especially one as globalized as tourism, they need to break language and cultural barriers to effectively communicate, interact, solve problems, and aid a plethora of tourists and fellow specialists from around the world. Succeeding in doing this means they will be able to achieve customer satisfaction, maybe even informally promote their destination, they will find new career perspectives – and that is no mean achievement in a very competitive industry and ever-changing labour market.

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