Teaching in an intercultural context: potential difficulties and tips

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Internationalisation is receiving increasing attention in higher education all over the world. Compared to ten years ago, the number of non-Belgian students taking bachelor and master programmes at Flemish universities and universities of applied sciences and arts has increased by around 89% (De Witte et al., 2021). This reality is also being reflected in the values fostered by higher education institutions. At the University of Antwerp, internationalisation plays an explicit role in our educational vision, which has a strong focus on the acquisition of intercultural competences.

This teaching tip aims to **raise awareness among lecturers and educational support staff** of the potential **difficulties when working and communicating with students whose cultural backgrounds** differ from Flemish culture. Difficulties require solutions, so we also provide **tools** for teaching and supporting students in an intercultural context.

Cultures: a few basic insights

It's not possible to equate a culture with a particular nationality or country. There's no such thing as Belgian or American culture – after all, there are many more cultures than there are nationalities (an estimated 8000). It's also important to know that cultural differences are not innate but learnt, either directly or indirectly, through customs, habits, behaviour and rules. Neither does a culture always manifest itself clearly. Cultural differences in food and clothing, for example, are easily visible, but other aspects – like thinking and feeling – often remain under the radar. These hidden aspects can cause breakdowns in communication between people of different cultures, which is precisely why it's so interesting to examine these hidden, extra challenging aspects. Finally, it is important to bear in mind that cultures are dynamic and therefore change over time (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2016).

Potential difficulties and tools

It would be impossible here to list all of the dos and don'ts involved in working and communicating with students from other cultures or to attempt to explain *all* the customs of *all* cultures. Such a list would be endless. Instead, we explore a number of potential difficulties, or barriers, and link them to tools and solutions.

In what follows, we discuss **seven potential barriers**, based on LaRay Barna (1997). These are: **(1)** fear and culture shock, **(2)** assumptions about similarities and differences, **(3)** ethnocentrism, **(4)** stereotypes and prejudices, **(5)** non-verbal misunderstandings, **(6)** language differences and **(7)** intercultural conflicts.

(1) Fear and culture shock

When international students arrive at their host institutions, there's a lot they have to deal with. They don't know what to expect, they haven't settled in yet, they miss the stability of 'home', and they have to get to grips with all kinds of practical issues like housing, discovering the city, getting to know people, and so on. After an initial phase of euphoria, all of these uncertainties and problems that students experience on arrival can create anxiety and a sense of loneliness. Incoming students may therefore experience **culture shock** (Oberg, 1954). The graph below illustrates this phenomenon.
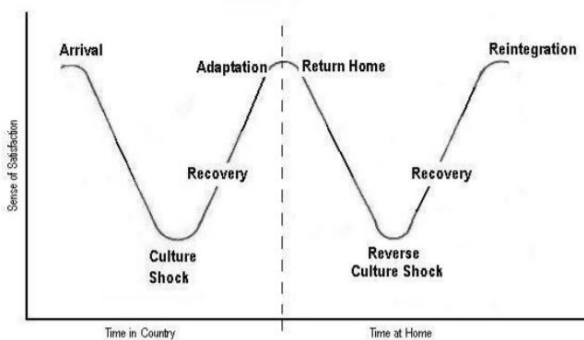
W-curve proposed by Gullahorn & Gullahorn (1963), retrieved from https://exchangeervaringen.sites.uu.nl/2019/11/26/cultureshock-in-oslo/

While culture shock is well known, it has also been the subject of **criticism**. Some claim, for example, that when the host culture is similar to the student's own culture, culture shock is experienced less, or not at all.

The theory around culture shock should encourage teachers and support staff to be aware of the possibility that international students may feel worse, become withdrawn, stop attending classes and so on as the academic year goes on. Try to approach any questions you receive and problems you experience with incoming students in the context of culture shock.

*In order to prevent fear and culture shock, it is important to **provide extra support and information to students who come from different cultural backgrounds**. Before the first lesson, for example, you could email students to clarify when and where the first lesson will take place (perhaps you could attach a campus map), the format and content of the first lesson, and any additional information they may need (e.g. a link to the Blackboard course).*

*Check the **language settings** of the **online learning environment** in advance. If it is in Dutch by default, help students to switch to English.*

Also ask students how they are doing regularly. Of course, this doesn't just apply to students from other backgrounds, but also to local students. Doing this will help you keep your finger on the pulse and detect potential problems earlier. For example, if a holiday is coming up, you can ask students what their plans are (e.g. are they going back to their countries of origin?).

*The department in charge of internationalisation can also play an important role in welcoming and supporting incoming students. For example, organising an **informal get-together** can definitely help students and staff get to know each other better and detect any problems early on.*

The tips mentioned above relate to the creation of a positive classroom climate. Find out more in this teaching tip (2020).

(2) Assumptions about similarities and differences

It's easy to assume that our education system is similar and equal to those of incoming students, but that's often not the case. In an international group, students' **prior knowledge** may vary considerably (e.g. a narrower or even broader focus on the study topic). One way to check students' prior knowledge is through pre-assessment. You can find out more about this in this teaching tip (2021). **Evaluation**, too, is carried out in various different ways around the world. Oral exams, for example, are not used for evaluations in many countries. Besides differences in prior knowledge and evaluation methods, the **perception of plagiarism** and the referencing of academic sources may also differ from culture to culture. More information on plagiarism can be found in this teaching tip (2016; in Dutch). Finally, diversity also exists among **educational cultures**. Key considerations include the degree of hierarchy/distance between teachers and students, which may in turn affect the degree of **active participation** – this leads to differing expectations about student participation in lessons. There are also differences when it comes to negotiating marks. While mark negotiations are normal in some countries, this isn't the case in Flanders.

*Below is an illustration of the **differences between two educational cultures**.*

Western educational culture: central ideas include critical thinking and reflection, debate and discussion, free choice

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and responsibility, and open communication. Active participation and taking the initiative are key elements. The 'distance' between teachers and students is generally small.

An educational culture based on a pyramid system (e.g. in some Asian cultures): central ideas include information transmission and listening, observation, following instructions and implementation. In this system, people are not used to taking the initiative or participating actively. Students expect clearly defined tasks that they can then carry out (top-down dynamics). Hierarchy and status are important. The distance between teachers and students is large. Besides assuming that there are similarities when there are in fact differences, lecturers and support staff might also assume there are differences when there are actually similarities. The above examples about prior knowledge, evaluations, plagiarism and educational culture also apply here.

Paying too little or too much attention to the differences between the host and home cultures in an educational context means that teachers and support staff are in danger of failing to see where the difficulties actually lie. We can counter this by **not simply assuming that something or someone is similar or different without checking**. For example, you could ask students how education is typically organised in their home cultures. It's also important to communicate clear expectations to all students (e.g. about participation in class, how they will be evaluated, how to address you, etc.), so that everyone – taking cultural differences into account – knows what they are working towards and how.

(3) Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism means thinking too much from the perspective of our own cultural frameworks and considering everything from our own cultures to be normal. The term **cultural myopia** is sometimes used to describe it.

A lecturer set a group assignment in which students from different countries and cultures would work together through Facebook. The lecturer incorrectly assumed that all of the channels available in Flanders are also available in other countries. Nothing was further from the truth, as the group included Chinese students. These students did not have access to Facebook, but this was only pointed out in the later stages of the assignment.

*The lecturer could have avoided this incident by paying more attention to the **cultural bias** in their programme component. You can identify bias by regularly checking whether you're including enough insights and experiences from other cultural perspectives. For example: How often do I approach the content from a Western perspective, and how often do I consider non-Western perspectives? Do I know where my own biases lie? How often do I consciously reflect on the characteristics of the students I have in my class?*

The example above makes it clear that cultural bias can have an effect on how you teach. To avoid this kind of cultural bias, try to **be more aware of the diverse characteristics of your student group and consider how those characteristics might affect your teaching**.

Cultural bias can also influence your **subject matter**. Then, it involves mainly offering content from a Western perspective, while non-Western perspectives are hardly touched upon (e.g. by mainly referring to Western research). Once again, the solution lies in becoming more aware of your own approach.

Regardless of whether the cultural bias lies with the teaching style or the subject matter, it is useful **to check whether you're including insights and experiences from other cultural perspectives on a regular basis**. Make use of input from your diverse student group. Be aware, however, that a single student or small group of students cannot represent an entire culture.

(4) Stereotypes and prejudices

Stereotypes and prejudices can also represent potential difficulties. The two concepts are sometimes used interchangeably, but actually have different meanings. Whereas stereotypes may be either positive or negative, prejudices are always negative in nature. Prejudice therefore goes hand in hand with dislike, discrimination or hatred towards a particular group of people.

Most students are naturally inclined to work together with students they consider culturally similar to themselves. As a result, Flemish students might be reluctant to work in groups with international students, and you might see culturally homogeneous groups forming in your classes. You can counter this by thinking carefully about group composition for group assignments and by organising informal activities with a good mix of students from different cultural backgrounds. For example, you could agree with your students to always speak English, even during breaks. Want to know more?

Read the ECHO teaching tip 'Creating heterogeneous groups (2019; in Dutch)' or 'How to put students in groups for assignments (2018; in Dutch)'.

(5) Non-verbal misunderstandings

Non-verbal cross-cultural communication can cause various misunderstandings. While there are of course some universal non-verbal expressions, like laughing and crying, there are also major differences worldwide in the non-verbal expression of, for example, anger and uncertainty. Even the most established forms of non-verbal communication in Western cultures can have completely different meanings in other cultures. **Negative and positive emotions are not always clearly recognisable across different cultures**. Examples include showing interest in the subject matter, but also expressions of doubt about the choice of study programme. Some other examples of non-verbal communication that differ across cultures, and non-verbal misunderstandings that arise from cultural differences:

Hand gestures:
Some incoming students will be less inclined to raise their hands to give answers or ask questions.
After all, different cultures use different gestures to indicate that the person wants to ask a question.
Pointing at students with the index finger is considered disrespectful in some cultures.

Physical distance from the teacher:
While the 'typical' Flemish student often sits in the middle or at the back of the lecture theatre or classroom, it sometimes happens that incoming students from certain cultures choose to sit at the front.
Other international students might not dare come up to the teacher or assistant (e.g. to ask questions), because this would involve having to get too close to the teacher.

Concept of time:
Here in Belgium, time is linear, but there are cultures in which time is seen as cyclical. In addition, we often use schedules and plans which are then implemented. Other cultures create more general plans and implement them with great flexibility. And there are plenty of cultures that live less by the clock than we do. This may affect whether or not students arrive in class on time or respect deadlines.

Eye contact:
In some cultures (e.g. Asian and Latin American), avoiding eye contact is seen as a sign of respect. Staring is seen as an act of aggression or provocation there. This situation is different in Arabic cultures, where staring at one's interlocutor is a sign of respect. Avoiding eye contact in oral exams might be seen by Western lecturers as a sign of uncertainty on the part of the student. As a result, they may offer hints and tips more quickly in order to encourage the student to come up with an answer. However, this obviously has consequences for the awarding of grades.

Paralanguage:
Non-verbal elements of language, such as tone of voice, intensity and stressed words, can also lead to false interpretations or cause misunderstandings. For example, American students – who can be very articulate and expressive – may be judged to be better during an oral examination than, say, Thai students, who speak very softly. Being softly spoken is often interpreted as not knowing the subject matter or being doubtful about the answer.

Silences:
In some cultures, silence is interpreted as a sign of respect and politeness. There, you only talk when you have something important to say. Asian students, for example, might therefore give minimal answers in oral exams or group assignments. In other cultures, silence can be seen as a sign of stage fright or cold feet.

Clothing and dress codes:
There are very clear cultural differences in how students dress. This is reflected, for example, in the choice of a suit rather than a sweater when taking an oral exam.

Here again, clear instructions and agreements are important. Bear in mind that it will not be equally comfortable for all students to – for example – sit at the front of the room or participate actively in the lesson (e.g. raising their hands). Try to handle this carefully, so that all students feel sufficiently safe during the lesson, in the programme and at the institution.

(6) Language differences

In addition to all of the potential difficulties mentioned above, language can also be a stumbling block. Although classes for international students are often taught in English, this does not mean that all students will have sufficient command of the English language or that they will be able to understand all of the content. Some possible language problems in intercultural communication are:

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- **Vocabulary inequivalence**: Sometimes there is no word for a certain concept in another language. Different languages have different numbers of words available to express the same ideas.

- **Grammatical and syntactical inequivalence**: Different languages have different grammar rules. Some students might not have mastered the grammar of a language – such as English – which can lead to misunderstandings (e.g. 'book a place' versus 'place a book').

- **Idiomatic inequivalence**: Some sayings (e.g. 'break a leg' and 'know something by heart') cannot be translated easily and may not exist in other languages. As a result, shades of meaning may be lost. You should try not to assume that all students know and understand such sayings, so be careful when using them in class.

- **Conceptual inequivalence**: Certain words may have different conceptual meanings in other cultures or countries. Consider the word 'democracy', for example. In Europe, this has more to do with the 'separation of powers', while in America it has more to do with the concept of 'freedom'. The word 'plagiarism' also has a different meaning here than in China.

To take the first step towards avoiding these kinds of language problems, it is a good idea to draw up a glossary for all students – including Flemish students – in which the central concepts of the course unit are explained.

(7) Intercultural conflicts

If your student group is multicultural, there is always a risk of intercultural conflict. Often, such conflicts have to do with a lack of understanding and unfamiliarity with each other's cultures. The solution lies in **discussing and exposing the ethnocentrism described above**. From there, attempts can be made to resolve the conflict. Try to **understand each other's frameworks and look for parallels or similarities**. In addition, you could also create awareness of the potential pitfalls of intercultural communication.

> *The University of Antwerp's Faculty of Design Sciences developed a **self-study pack on Intercultural Communication**. The pack was part of an internationalisation@home project: an international, interdisciplinary workshop week in which students (local students and incoming Erasmus students) worked together in groups under the supervision of international visiting lecturers.*
>
> *The aims of the self-study pack are to provide insight into intercultural communication, to create awareness of potential pitfalls in intercultural communication and to offer tools for dealing with intercultural conflicts. Students are required to work through the pack prior to the workshop week.*
>
> *UAntwerp staff can find out more in this good practice description (in Dutch) on the Education Info Centre.*

Finally, it is always a good idea to **communicate** (proactively) **about the prevailing educational culture in one's own institution** in order to avoid misunderstandings and conflicts. Think about evaluation methods, expectations regarding active participation (see also this teaching tip about the culture of activation), the prevailing feedback culture, the extent to which students and staff can communicate openly and critically with each other, and so on.

You can then explore **the characteristics of your own teaching environment**: your way of teaching and the role of activating education in it, expectations with regard to group work, approach to deadlines, where students can turn with questions, how to contact you, and so on.

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Want to know more?

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ECHO session

One-off session on intercultural communication – by Kim Boudiny, Nele Simons and Wannes Heirman of UAntwerp (taught in Dutch). You can find the course materials here.

ECHO teaching tips

Plagiarism (2016; in Dutch)

How to put students in groups for assignments (2018; in Dutch)

Creating heterogeneous groups (2019; in Dutch)

Positive vibration, yeah! A positive classroom climate (2020)

Differentiated teaching in higher education (2021)

Diversity-sensitive teaching (2022)

Only for UAntwerp staff

Self-study pack on intercultural communication (for students; in Dutch) - developed by Nele Simons and Kim Boudiny of UAntwerp