

## EXTENSION OF CROSS –CULTURAL AND SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATION COMPETENCES IN EFL CLASSES AT UNIVERSITY

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**Abstract.** *The article aims to analyze the interrelation and extension of cross- cultural and sustainability communication competences at universities. Foreign language learning offers exclusive opportunities not only to develop basic foreign language skills, but also develop cross-cultural and sustainability communication competences. The article overviews the importance of cross- cultural and sustainability communication on the theoretical level as well as introduces their manifestations on the empirical level via students' answers. The research performed in Vytautas Magnus university, in which the respondents studying English (B1 – C1 level) expressed their opinions on the importance of the development of cross- cultural and sustainability communication competences. The results of the research demonstrate that students need more knowledge about cross - cultural and sustainability communication competences during their EFL classes at university. Moreover, it is challenging for pedagogues to embed cross – cultural and sustainability communication content, strategies and innovative methods of teaching/learning in foreign language classrooms. The research findings demonstrate the importance to search for innovative ways how to implement cross – cultural and sustainability communication discourse in EFL classes at universities.*

**Keywords:** *cross-cultural and sustainability communication, competence, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), university*

### **Introduction**

Foreign Language learning at university plays a significant role in the attainment and manifestation of cross – cultural communication skills which helps to achieve desired results for communication and personal development. The interactions taking place between people in the globalised world testifies to the fact that culture dimension plays a crucial role for successful communication to take place. There has been an ongoing discussion on how to help students be more adaptable to the new environment and more focused on sustainability discourse and cross – cultural communication. What is more, any society expects its education system to prepare people for living in an internationalized culture and globalised economy in which the acquisition of cross - cultural communication competence is clearly desirable. Highlighting the place of EFL in achieving this goal it can be stated that EFL requires an understanding of the role that language and culture play in the construction of environmental, social, economic, institutional, cultural, religious and emotional systems. Furthermore, cross- cultural communication refers to person's ability to understand people from various cultures and to engage with them in effective cross- cultural communication. Developing skills and attitudes acquiring certain knowledge can enable to increase understanding with people from different cultures. In order to achieve one's notion of the sustainability communication it might be referred to the necessity and desire to fulfil the needs of extension of competences aiming to professional career, social status, and/or other personal achievements. Drawing on the concept of sustainability communication, which is based on learners' needs, facing the challenges in the professional and personal life and highlighting the fact what are individuals' aims, as well as

on how sustainably learners act to reach their foreseen goals, it is significant to figure out if learners, who have some targets, are able to establish a possession of certain level of cross – cultural and sustainability competences to communicate and overcome obstacles in order to reach their goals. This need, ability, capacity and activity well as moral values are essential components related to an inner part of a competence, which combined together could enable a successful performance and communication possible. Therefore, it is important not to limit the development of competences to their cognitive elements, but learners should be informed about internal elements of a desired competence, too. Therefore, pedagogues have a very important mission to do in empowering learners to contribute to a more sustainable world while equipping them with the ideas of sustainability and cross-cultural communication as a forceful and useful tool. The sustainable development paradigm ensures a concrete context of university mission and vision signifying a new stage of study quality achievement. Following Talloires' Declaration in 1990<sup>1</sup> a sustainable university was defined, and since 1990 several declarations and innovations on the conception of a sustainable university in which a sustainable development and sustainability communication curriculum at higher education system have been formulated and agreed. Moreover, based on developments by European Commission (2017)<sup>2</sup> and researchers' on sustainability communication (Godeman, Michelsen, 2011)<sup>3</sup> and social constructivism (Filho, Caeiro, Jabbour, Azeiteiro 2013; Wiek, Iwaniec, Childers, 2014)<sup>4</sup>, (Filho, 2015)<sup>5</sup> studies in which activities of institutions, their structure, formal rules and informal rituals as well as interrelations between higher education institutions and their importance were analyzed. A university is an organizational unit which foresees and ensures university sustainable development via sustainability communication at all institutional levels. The university carries out social, economical, environmental policy and performs other activities related to the improvement of infrastructure and the learning environment for students and staff.

### **Theoretical framing of cross-cultural and sustainability communication**

Aiming to equip students with the possibility to extend their cross – cultural and sustainability communication competence is a big challenge of universities. When presenting the study programmes it is important to introduce students with the concept of cross – cultural and sustainability communication competence, its elements, teaching methods and learning

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<sup>1</sup>Talloires Declaration (1990) 21/04/2021 [ulsf.org/wpcontent/uploads/2015/06/TD.pdf](http://ulsf.org/wpcontent/uploads/2015/06/TD.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> European Commission (2017) Recent Developments in European Higher Education Systems. European Commission staff working documents (SEC, 1063 final). Retrieved 21/04/2021 from <http://ec.europa.eu/education/pub/pdf/higher/modernisation.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Godeman, J.; Michelsen, G. (2011) Sustainability Communication – an Introduction. *Sustainability Communication*. 3 – 39. Springer International Publishing.

<sup>4</sup> Filho, L.W.; Caeiro, S.; Jabbour, Ch.; Azeiteiro, U., M. (2013) *Sustainability Assessment Tools in Higher Education Institutions*. Springer International Publishing.

<sup>4</sup>Wiek, A.; Iwaniec, D.M.; Childers D. (2014) Studying, teaching and applying sustainability visions using systems modelling. *Sustainability*. ISSN 2071 – 1050, No. 6, 4452-44695 doi:10.3390/su6074452.

<sup>5</sup> Filho, L.W. (2015) Education for Sustainable Development in Higher Education. *In Transformative Approaches to Sustainable Development at Universities*, 3 – 10. Springer International Publishing.

strategies that could be used to provide effective cross-cultural communication competence development through sustainability discourse in EFL learning processes. Drawing on Flowerdew (2013)<sup>6</sup> the content of sustainability communication discourse is connected with communicative (native and foreign language skills), cross-cultural (foreign language skills and knowledge about different cultures) personal (ability to manage internal and external elements), as well as core competences (IT, mother tongue, mathematics and etc.). Therefore, cross-cultural and sustainability communication components are strongly influenced by social and mass media and has a variety of characteristics which are demonstrated interacting with people from different cultures. It is obvious that communication is the act made by one or more persons by sending and receiving messages that are showing respect, tolerance and empathy, occur within a context have some effects and provide some opportunity for feedback.

Moreover, „the following professional competences demonstrated by the executives in labour market especially knowing of foreign languages, possession of global vision, and creative attitude towards situation” are highly emphasized and valued (Blaskova, Adamoniene & Petrauskiene, 2017, p. 51)<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, cross-cultural communication, whether it is intrapersonal (with oneself), interpersonal (with one or two others), with small or big groups of people refers to of how a message is made. Moreover, the manifestation of cross-cultural communication can be very diverse, e.g. when a Lithuanian student communicates with a Russian student in English or a Russian student communicates with an Italian student in Russian there are so many ways to express the message and to be understood correctly, too. Therefore, extension of cross-cultural and sustainability communication competence could be seen contribution at the individual level to societal well-being; for example, by facilitating a policy of multiculturalism, antiracism by improving the integration of ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and thus by supporting social cohesion. Cross-cultural communication refers to culture, traditions, mentality, history and innovations in modern life of any society. For this reason, it could be claimed that there are some perspectives that can help deal with cross-cultural and sustainability communication challenges in EFL classes keeping in mind that language, being one of the most important elements of culture, is not static, it changes together with languages of different nations. Moreover, it could be stated that learning foreign languages and cultural modes of life of various nations should be a life long learning activity.

EFL teaching has the medium and a long-term goal to assist students not only to improve their foreign language skills, but also to acquire basic knowledge about cross-cultural and sustainability communication, its ideas, interrelations and, what is crucial, the translation them into actions. Teaching EFL at university aims at developing and enhancing cross-cultural communication via sustainability discourse that would allow students to improve their cross-cultural communicative competence interacting in both private and working life.

## Methodology

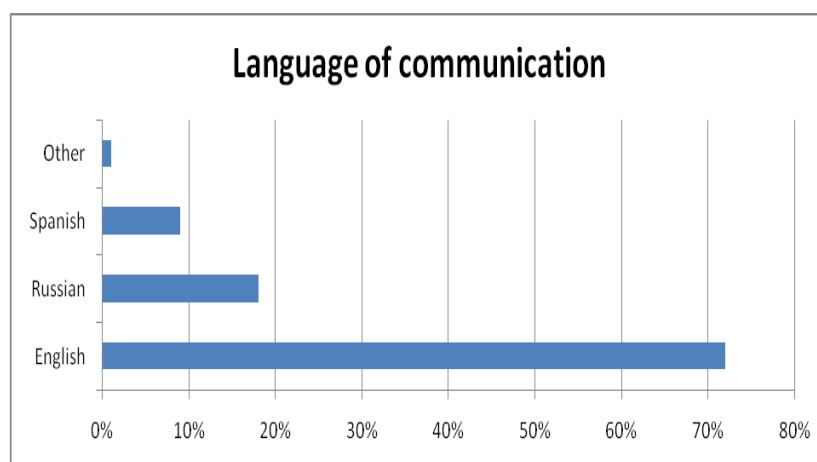
The research was planned and performed in Vytautas Magnus university, in which 107 respondents studying English (average age of participants was 22 years old) in various levels (B1–C1) expressed their attitudes on cross-cultural communication and sustainability

<sup>6</sup> Flowerdew, J. (2013) *Discourse in English Language Education*. NY: Routledge.

<sup>7</sup> Blaskova, M.; Adamoniene, R.; Petrauskiene, R. (2017) Appliance of public senior executives competences for municipality activity efficiency development // *Engineering economics = Inžinerinė ekonomika*. Kaunas : Technologija. ISSN 1392-2785. eISSN 2029-5839. 2017, Vol. 28, iss. 5, p. 575-584. DOI: 10.5755/j01.ee.28.5.17743. [Scopus; CEEOL – Central and Eastern European Online Library; Social Sciences Citation Index (Web of Science); IBSS; Business Source Complete] [Citav. rod.: 0,709, bendr. cit. rod.: 1,766, kvartilis: Q3 (2017, InCites JCR SSCI)] [CiteScore: 0,94, SNIP: 0,589, SJR: 0,341, kvartilis: Q2 (2017, Scopus)]

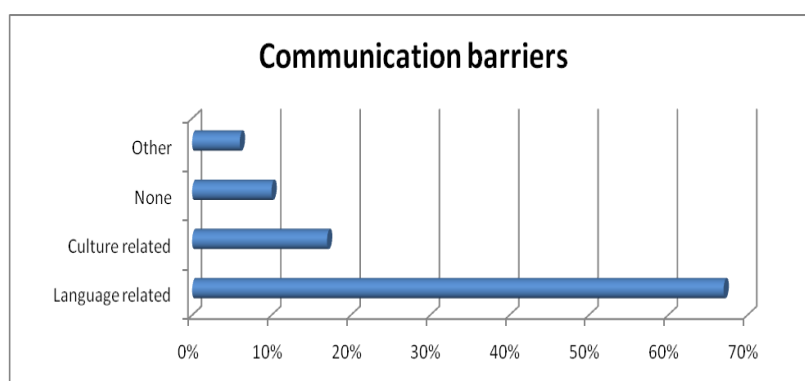
communication as well as about the methods which could be useful for their cross – cultural and sustainability communication competence development. Students’ view point on the importance of cross-cultural and sustainability communication discourse was analyzed, after quantitative research had been performed at Vytautas Magnus university (VMU) in 2020. The data obtained from the questionnaire survey was made using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). Following the statistical analysis, the findings of the study were investigated, synthesized and summarized using descriptive analysis.

The respondents were students, who were learning the English language in the Bachelor and Master study programs at VMU. The aim of the study was to find out students’ opinions and feelings about cross- cultural and sustainability communication as well as to express their ideas about its purposefulness and usefulness during the EFL studies at Vytautas Magnus university. Totally, 107 respondents were mostly first year female (60%) and male (37%) students. Most of the students were 18-21 (57%) year-old studying in bachelor study programme, and 22-25 (37%) 26 (9%) year old students from Master study programme. The students were asked to answer about their demographic data and 5 closed questions about: the ways and methods of their communication, the most often used language of communication, cross – cultural communication barriers, feelings and emotions that hinder communication, the most often used means of communication and the most useful topics aiming to find out students’ opinions about cross – cultural and sustainability communication in EFL classes at university. The question about demographic data also included info about students native country. The results of the study show that the majority of the students come from Europe (72%.) France, Italy, Spain, from Asia (15%) China, India, Japan, Kazakhstan, South Korea, as well as other countries (10%) Afganistan, Brazil, Nigeria, Rusia, and Ukraine. The results show that 72% of students communicate with other students in English, 15% of the respondents – Russian, 9% of the students use the Spanish language for communication, and only 1% communicate in other languages - Chinese, Japanese and Korean.



**Figure 1. Students’ answers about the language of communication**

The answers about cross – cultural communication barriers show that students’ communication is hindered basically due to the lack of linguistic intelligence. This is an interesting finding that main cross – cultural communication barriers are related to cultural, cognitive and linguistic proficiency which are three significant pillars in learning languages.



**Figure 2. Students' cross- cultural communication barriers**

The majority of the students (57%) state that cross - cultural communication barriers arise mainly because of the lack of the language skills: such as active listening and speaking. The students indicate that the main barrier of speaking is being afraid of making grammar and pronunciation mistakes. The minority (17%) of the students indicate that culture-related issues complicate the process of communication, which may be due to different cultural aspects and behaviour. For example, some students from China prefer a silent way of learning and do not like to be asked to share their opinions in front of all the group. Similarly, 10% percent of the students claim that they have no barriers in cross- cultural and sustainability communication, which means that students feel free to express their attitudes and are not afraid of speaking and having some cultural misunderstanding. Only 6%, of the students indicate that there are other personal - psychological communication issues such as speech impediment, hearing problems and etc. which hinder their linguistic performance and communication.

To the question about the most popular communication methods used in EFL classes, the results show that students prefer smart phones and text-messaging for communication. The use of smart phones is the fastest and smartest way of communication nowadays and are widely used in online classes lately. 91% of the students choose smart phones as their main media for communication, 80% of the students prefer texting as they enjoy having a 24/7 access to their phones and find it very easy to type messages instead of speaking directly to someone. Only 5% of the students use regular letters of communication and, although this way of communication is considered to be old-fashioned, there are still students who like it. A similar result can be seen in the case of email usage that has been chosen by 69% of the students as they also prefer this method of communication for their academic and work career purposes.

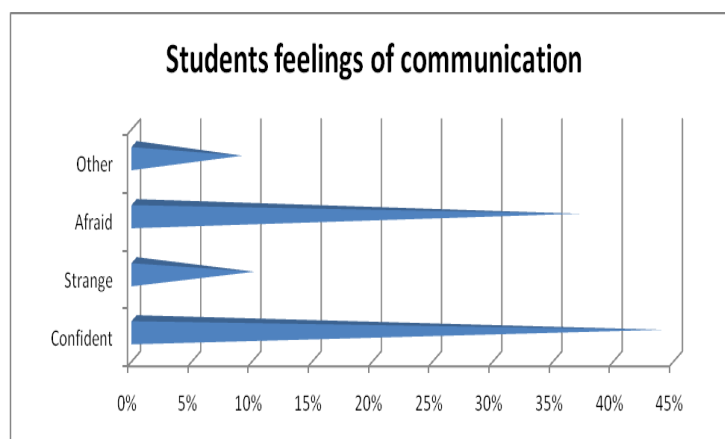
**Table 1. Students' answers about social media tools for communication**

Answer	Yes	No	Other
Internet	45%	22%	33%
Viber	68%	9%	23%
TV	8%	59%	33%
Video games	26%	30%	44%
Youtube	36%	43%	21%

The table 1 shows students cross –cultural and sustainability communication using technologies, which is explicit that Viber (68%) is one of the most popular means for communication, because majority of students can have video communication with their friends

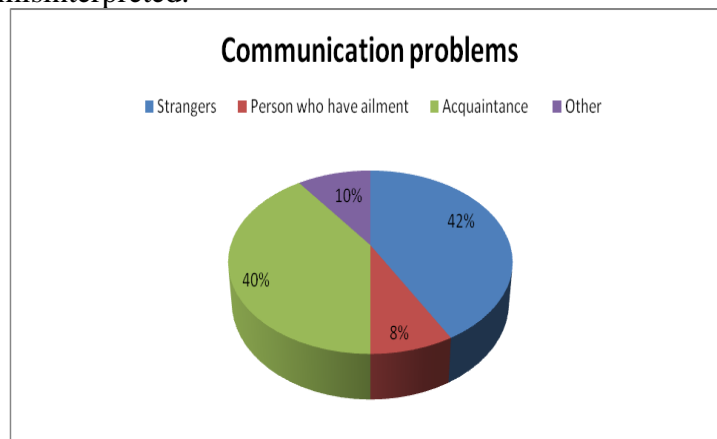
and family members in every part of the world for free. Youtube and video games, such as Kahoot, have been indicated by 36% and 26% of the students as a useful way of sending a video clip, a game or song to everyone to whom they wish to communicate. The least popular way of social communication media is TV (8%) because now students find and share all necessary information using their smart phones whenever they need.

To the question how students feel while communicating in different cultural environment, the results show that they feel self- confident (44%), whereas some are afraid to speak in public (37%), because of cross-cultural misunderstanding and failures in front of others. 10% of the students say that while communicating cross- culturally with people from different countries they can understand verbal, but can't comprehend nonverbal language. 9% of the students indicate that during cross – cultural communication they experience feelings such as embarrassment, shame, fear and guilt. Therefore, extension of sustainability communication competence in this respect would be a useful tool to overcome those obstacles.



**Figure 3. Students' feelings experienced in the process of communication**

The last question in the survey was what people students find the most difficult to communicate with, and the results are also similar to the previous question. 42% of the students answered that the most difficult is to communicate cross- culturally with people, whom they don't know, not only in social media, but also in classes, because during the lockdown there's no face-to- communication. They indicate that they feel uncertainty, fear and anxiety that they might be misunderstood and misinterpreted.



**Figure 4. Students opinions about cross-cultural and sustainability communication**



For the same reasons even 40% of the students find it challenging to communicate with acquaintances as the topics about cross- cultures and sustainability are rather difficult to talk about to them. The study shows that 8% of the students have problems communicating with people who have psychological, speech impediment and other problems, 10% of students indicated that they do not have enough knowledge about cross – cultural and sustainability communication as well as competences development.

### **Interpretation of findings**

Those most important findings, which were defined, revealed that education of cross – cultural and sustainability communication is not the phenomenon which is taken for granted, but on the contrary, has to be developed by pedagogues and supported by students at universities. Moreover, the acquisition of cross-cultural and sustainability communication competences via English language instruction and learning is the privileged experience gained while studying at universities. Therefore, a favourable impact of foreign language learning with integrated content of cross-cultural and sustainability materials and teaching/learning methods into English A1 – C1/C2 level curriculum could be viewed as an innovative approach to foreign language instruction at university. The theoretical significance of the study lies in that the education of cross- cultural and sustainability communication is interrelated and interdisciplinary which expands the spectrum of foreign (English) language pedagogy and promotes extension of students‘ cross-cultural and sustainability communication competences. The practical significance of the research is that it addresses students‘ needs not only for the education of cross – cultural and sustainability communication, but also its practical implementation in the pursuit of their academic and personal careers. The results obtained during the research treatment of the integrated cross – cultural and sustainability communication into the syllabus of English A1 –C1/C2 level at VMU validate the necessity of cross-cultural and sustainability competence development. Embedding sustainability communication content and using innovative methods of EFL (English) instruction, pedagogues are encouraged to update their teaching strategies with innovative cross – cultural and sustainability communication approach.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

The findings of the conducted study reveal the interrelation of cross- cultural and sustainability communication as well its complexity, diversity and multidisciplinarity.

The findings demonstrate the necessity of the extension of cross – cultural and sustainability communication competences.

The findings of conducted study reveal that EFL, English learning in particular, makes a positive impact on students‘ understanding of the significance of cross-cultural and sustainability communication competence acquisition.

The findings of the conducted study show that students comprehend cross-cultural and sustainability communication competences as invaluable assets and necessary tools to take away from university which are useful for their personal and career development.

The findings of the conducted study show the importance of students and language teachers‘ involvement in cross- cultural and sustainability communication development activities.

The findings of conducted study enable us to recommend updating EFL A1- C1 level syllabus with cross-cultural and sustainability communication elements that would be a way forward for greater achievements in this endeavour.

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