

The Impact of Linguacultural Environment of Russian Universities on Academic Performance of Foreign Students

© Acheampong Akwasi, Adagbor Abraham Afure, Nyuma Kelvin, Svetlana V. Latysheva

*Irkutsk National Research Technical University,
Irkutsk, Russian Federation*

Abstract. Many foreign students do not consider the issues of communication when planning their study in a school abroad. When selecting a country to go or a university to enter, they do not realize the contribution that a foreign linguacultural environment will add to their studies. This contribution is based not only on educational programmes they select and the language of their delivery, but also on a language and a culture that dominate in the region they will live in. Native language is an influential factor when planning to study in a foreign university regardless of the language of study, as it plays an important role measuring the levels of students' satisfaction of their academic performance, and it also improves students' daily lives on campus. In Russia, many foreign students do not consider their native language when planning their study in the country. Due to this, many students feel unhappy or uncomfortable when they see that everything is in Russian words, there is no translation and the shocking thing is that the major part of university environment is Russian. This work is aimed at estimating the influence of lingua-cultural environment on academic performance of foreigners and at searching the solutions to make their adaptation more effective.

Keywords: cross-cultural communication, adaptation, acculturation, foreign students, academic performance

Влияние лингвокультурной среды российских университетов на обучение иностранных студентов

© А. Акваси, А. А. Афуре, Н. Келвин, С. В. Латышева

*Иркутский национальный исследовательский технический университет,
г. Иркутск, Российская Федерация*

Аннотация. Большинство иностранных студентов не задумываются о проблемах коммуникации, когда планируют учебу в зарубежном вузе. При выборе они не осознают важность языкового и культурного контекста, в котором им придется проходить обучение, и не думают о том, какое влияние лингвокультурная среда окажет на образовательный процесс. При этом речь идет не только о языке, на котором реализуется их программа, но и о языке и культуре, которые доминируют в том регионе и учебном заведении, куда они отправляются. Необходимо учитывать специфику влияния родного языка и культуры при выборе программы обучения в зарубежном вузе, независимо от языка ее реализации. Лингвокультурные факторы являются определяющими критериями уровня удовлетворенности студентов их академической успеваемостью, а также успешностью в повседневной жизни. Выбирая российские университеты, многие молодые люди не учитывают факторы влияния родного языка на этапе выбора программы. Поэтому во время адаптации и аккультурации испытывают стресс и дискомфорт, когда все коммуникации происходят исключительно с использованием русского языкового кода. Среда российских вузов формируется в русскоязычном контексте, что является шоком для иностранных обучающихся. Данная работа направлена на изучение степени влияния лингвокультурного контекста университета на успеваемость иностранных студентов и поиск способов повышения их языковой адаптации.

Ключевые слова: межкультурная коммуникация, адаптация, аккультурация, иностранные студенты, академическая успеваемость

The key questions that the paper addresses are the following: why is it important to study country's native language and what role does a country plays when planning to study abroad? Our research information is based on primary data collected from foreign students' surveys and track records, and secondary data originated from primary data interpretations including the review of previous research on cross-cultural and intercultural communication and adaptation

in academic contexts. The primary data are the collection of the questionnaires to solicit information from international students in Irkutsk National Research Technical University conducted in the period of spring semester between February and April of 2022.

The design of this study represents a cross sectional descriptive analysis ensuring that the data obtained give appropriate answers to the research questions and enables to examine the

impact of communication in study abroad using the case of foreign students who study at Irkutsk Research National Technical University (INRTU). This experience-based approach provides the opportunity for a logical structure of the inquiry into the problem of study.

The research belongs to the multidisciplinary sphere, and it encompasses language-based, cultural and psychological studies. Thus, cross-cultural psychology studies the development and display of human behaviour in the contact between cultural populations. When arriving in a foreign country to join an academic programme, students began to take part in intercultural contacts that results in both cultural and psychological changes in the situation when they may experience discomfort or frustration of feeling a minority [1]. The issue appear relevant as there has been developed a set of approaches to address migratory processes justifying the need to study the psychological acculturation of the host and immigrant populations through a model adapted to the social context in which they develop [2], [3].

At the cultural level, collective activities and social institutions become altered, and at the psychological level, there are changes in an individual's daily behavioural repertoire and sometimes in experienced stress [4]. Academic performance involves both levels, and it makes the examined phenomena complex and ambiguous. Various research findings show that there are large variations in how people acculturate and in how well they adapt to this process [5]. The problems are related to the concepts of integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization, and all approaches display two major perspectives: psychological well-being and sociocultural competence.

International students and scholars on campuses in Russian universities constitute a complex, diverse, and rapidly growing population. For instance, INRTU has more than 500 foreign students, and they must be served effectively to improve their academic performance. Numerous studies examine cultural differences with a focus on communication processes to develop recommendations to accommodate cross-cultural differences in information services [6].

Among important finding, there is one relevant hypothesis that there is a correlation be-

tween how individuals acculturate and how well they adapt. Often those who integrate (defined as being engaged in both their heritage culture and in the larger society) are better adapted than those who acculturate by orienting themselves to one or the other culture (by way of assimilation or separation) or to neither culture (marginalization) [7]. The idea of mutual adaptation is becoming more influential [8].

For the university context, that means that academic performance of foreign students depends on the balance between their native lingua-cultural backgrounds and the new foreign environment they begin to experience. On the one hand, native language plays an important role in study abroad, and most of the non-colonized countries do not embrace foreign language more than their native language as compared to the colonized countries as versa. On the other hand, at the stage of planning studies abroad, it is recommended to consider the dominated language in the country of study either native or official language because language barrier can affect the quality of life for all the involved and can also cause fear of being judged.

In order to approve this correlation, we estimated the psychological state of INRTU foreign students. For this purpose, we conducted discursive analyses of written texts introduced by them at their language classes to share their experience of travelling to Russia.

The majority of texts reveals positive emotions of students combined with fears and discomfort, as we see in the first example:

Example 1.

My heart is filled with joy to share with you my first experience.

The scariest part after your visa is traveling for the first time by flight.

The most challenging thing students think about is that

1. ***I may not be stranded at the airport.***

2. ***Where am I going to sleep in case the trip involves transit?***

From this abstract, we can see that the use of superlative forms and passive constructions makes the impression that the speaker has no control over the situation. This seem to be the major reason of his discomfort, as he appears to be the object of uncontrolled outer impacts. The lack of experience makes him feel unconfident

and worried, and to prevent his personality from negative emotions he needs to obtain more experience. The repetition of the word proves the relevance of taking more responsibility for his life.

The second example represent the process of obtaining control, compare:

Example 2.

*After sharing my journey, you understand **how to get over those stereotypes.***

***I began** my journey on the 8th December 2021 at Kotoka international airport (Accra-Ghana) and it was a transit journey to Egypt, to Moscow, and to my final destination, Irkutsk.*

***I took** Egypt Air from Ghana at 12pm and arrived in Cairo at 9pm; **they gave me a visa** on arrival because **they offered me a hotel** (Le Passage hotel) outside the airport to relax or sleep, and **they gave me supper and breakfast** the next morning before **we continued** our journey the next day, December 9th. **We took off** from Cairo at 9am and landed in Moscow at 4pm with my hoodie and jacket **to battle the weather.** It was 16 below degrees Celsius at that time, and **I had not experienced the snow** yet because I was still in the airport.*

Here, we observe the use of active voice and detailed descriptions mentioning precise data and clear sequences of events. All these characteristics prove that the speaker really experienced this and has gained control over the situation, but this control is not total. The use of a metaphor 'to battle the weather' reflects the next source of his discomfort. As for the semantical element of war in the metaphor, it reflects an attempt to overcome this difficulty by obtaining more experience.

In the third example we see two relevant aspects. The first one is related to the climate problem making the speaker feel extremely uncomfortable, as his native climate is absolutely different, so his discomfort results from physical reactions. The second feature shows his psychological state and the reflection of the speaker represented by the social context of the situation that was also negative and hurting:

Example 3

*The immigration process took a couple of hours and **I finally** got my immigration card to continue my journey. I spent a couple of hours in the airport waiting for my next check-in with S7*

*airline to Irkutsk. After the check-in, we had to convey us through a bus to the flight and that is where I had **my first encounter with the snow.** On **the queue to the bus**, I started to freeze, so quickly **I had to run from the queue** to the bus and **everybody was looking at me** but **they could see I was a foreigner and not well dressed** for the winter and **indeed I was not well dressed** with no winter boots, scarf and no proper hand gloves.*

The status of an alien or a stranger who is not familiar with the local climate and is not wearing appropriate clothes is the reason of stress combined with physical suffering from the cold winter snowy weather. The lack of experience resulted from being different makes the speaker feel uncomfortable. Being recognized as a foreigner, he opposes himself to the group of locals who feel good and confident. This pattern is common for various situations, and it creates the perspective of disadvantageous circumstances that may lead to negativity that should be prevented.

One of the most effective methods helping to overcome the pattern of negativity is humour, as the fourth example shows:

Example 4.

*We took off at 9pm Moscow time and landed at Irkutsk at 8am on December 10, and **one funny thing happened** when the flight was about to land. They announced the weather was 21 below Celsius, and I thought I didn't hear it right, so I asked someone what they just said the weather was, and he repeated the same and I asked to myself "**today be today if I don't die I won't die again.**" This phrase is a translated version from **my local dialect**, so I waited to be the last passenger to get out of the flight **with the mindset** of running to the bus to escape the queue.*

*Finally, the school representative was there waiting for me to be picked up to the hostel with no stranded and offered a room to rest for the next day to complete my registration. I was so tired that I asked the rep **if all this heavy snow here would melt before summer** and I am now experiencing a hot summer with the stereotype that Russia is always cool.*

The speaker uses a piece of his original culture in the form of an idiom that creates an ironical view to overcome his fears. We also can see

that his cognition begins to adjust to a new environment and find a reasonable solution to the problem.

As it follows from the diagram representing the survey conducted at Baikal School of BRICS among international undergraduate and graduate students, foreigners (127 respondents) use various methods to increase their motivation in order to overcome discomfort, fears and difficulties related to studying in the international school of the Russian university. Using a positive thinking approach proves to be the most effective method (48 % of respondents) that includes humorous viewing the problems, searching funny and unusual things in native and foreign languages, comparing and contrasting languages, focusing on obtaining new experience and broadening cognitive horizons.

Another popular option (30 % of respondents) for increased motivation is based on reasoning, as international students generate rational basis for their academic performance. Having analyzed the arguments presented by foreign students at their language class, it becomes obvious that they share academic values and professional growth as a basis for their future, so academic performance is a major part of their motivation.

Example 5

5.1. *Students of Russian go on to great careers. Former students of Russian are now working or have worked as engineers at NASA's Johnson Space Centre, at banks operating in international markets, in the Peace Corps, in*

major accounting firms (in Russia and in the US), in large and small law firms, in press offices in Russia, Europe and America, in the State Department and Commerce Department of the federal government, teaching English in Russian high schools, for non-profit agencies such as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the National Foreign Language Centre, or the US-Russia Business Council. Some former Russian students have worked for the American Council of Teachers of Russian and the International Research and Exchange Board (IREX) both in the US and in Russia.

5.2. *Studying Russian helps you enter post-graduate programs. Students who study Russian have a high rate of acceptance for graduate study in law school, business school, medical school, and other professional programs.*

5.3. *Russian is an important language for science and technology. According to a recent study, the number of publications in the sciences is highest for English, with Russian second. This is the case for chemistry, physics, geology, mathematics, and biological sciences. Russia always has had a rich tradition in sciences, from Mendeleev to recent achievements in mathematics. The Soviet tradition of creating scientific towns and scholarly communities is giving way to a system of entrepreneurship backed by state agencies and private-sector start-ups. Innovations in computer programming, software engineering, and information technology are coming out of Russian government agencies and private firms.*

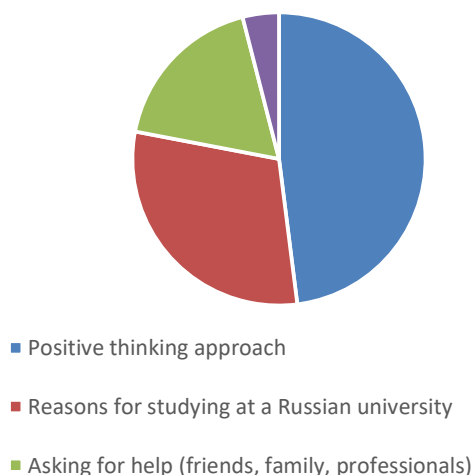


Fig. 1. Methods to increase motivation

5.4. Russia is to be known with high level of security and technology which generate impact in study computer scientist and engineering. Examples: Alexander Popov invented radio in 1895, Fyodor Pirotsky invented the electric tram, Vitalik Buterin creator of Ethereum in 2013, Pavel Durov creator of telegram, etc.

5.5. Russia is the first or second country with most borders, due to it spans with both the European and Asians continents. Study in Russia is a popular choice for students with a wide variety of interests, be they literature, art, history or Russian language studies. International students in Russia will receive a high-quality education in culturally diverse environment which helps in management studies (international business).

Significantly fewer respondents prefer to use the Internet as a source of inspiration and ask for help to stay motivated.

Summarizing the data analyses, we can conclude that international students of INRTU are ready to adapt, as their academic performance is deeply related to this process, and they appreciate Russian academic traditions and scientific achievements. To identify the directions of further cross-cultural communication development, we conducted another poll at

Baikal School of BRICS among international students that was aimed at proposing recommendations to improve communication skills and adaptation of foreign students. All the proposals were announced and estimated to make the final list of improvements including the following:

1) The administration of the university (international department) should have a policy on intensive Russian language. With this policy the administration can reschedule their admission date or calendar for the international students with no Russian language background, to start their admission process earlier and organize an intensive three-month language course before the main semester admissions begins. By doing this, student pays more attention on their core subjects then non-core subjects when beginning their course or program, so with this policy students will arrive in Russia (university) with basic knowledge in Russian language.

2) Students together with teachers should create a group platform for international students on either for posting daily Russian common conversation, phrases and translation to improve foreign students' Russian vocabulary. Fig. 2 shows such didactic materials that can be posted on this platform.



Fig. 2. Didactic materials for an international media platform

Precisely because of the existence of this phenomenon in modern student life it became necessary to find ways to adapt to new learning conditions. Sociocultural (or intercultural) adaptation is a process for students to comply with a new cultural environment, as well as with the result of this process. Usually, the internal side of adaptation is distinguished, which is expressed in a sense of satisfaction and fullness of life, and its external side, which is manifested in the participation of the individual in the social and cultural life of the new group [9]. Adaptation is necessary both for foreign students, who have to join a new team, with a quite different worldview, mentality, their own cultural characteristics, as well as to learn how to live in a foreign country, understand and respect its traditions; and for students of the host university, for

whom it is also certainly important to plunge into culture of their guests, to give them a hospitable and friendly welcome. Studies show that ethno-national acceptance of foreign students, awareness of their motivation in teaching and learning process, their access to the culture of the host community, contribute considerably to their effective adaptation [10].

Moreover, students share the language barrier. Even in the conditions of using one language, for example, English, there may be difficulties associated, first of all, with the fear of communicating in a non-native language. All this can adversely affect educational processes, and therefore, there is a need for promoting quick and painless adaptation to a multicultural academic environment.

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Информация об авторах / Information about the Authors

Acheampong Akwasi,
Student,
Baikal Institute of BRICS,
Irkutsk National Research Technical University,
83 Lermontov St., Irkutsk 664074,
Russian Federation,
veroonyx@mail.ru

Ачеампонг Акваси,
студент группы МДБб-21-1,
Байкальский институт БРИКС,
Иркутский национальный исследовательский
технический университет,
664074, г. Иркутск, ул. Лермонтова, 83,
Российская Федерация,
acheampongakwasi12@gmail.com

Adagbor Abraham Afure,
Student,
Baikal Institute of BRICS,
Irkutsk National Research Technical University,
83 Lermontov St., Irkutsk 664074,
Russian Federation,
abrahamafure@gmail.com

Nyuma Kelvin,
Student,
Baikal Institute of BRICS,
Irkutsk National Research Technical University,
83 Lermontov St., Irkutsk 664074,
Russian Federation,
kelvinnyuma1099@gmail.com

Svetlana V. Latysheva,
Associate Professor of Department of Humanitarian
Sciences,
Baikal Institute of BRICS,
Irkutsk National Research Technical University,
83 Lermontov St., Irkutsk 664074,
Russian Federation,
lasveta1@yandex.ru

Адагбор Абрахам Афуре,
студент группы МДБб-21-1,
Байкальский институт БРИКС,
Иркутский национальный исследовательский
технический университет,
664074, г. Иркутск, ул. Лермонтова, 83,
Российская Федерация,
abrahamafure@gmail.com

Нюма Келвин,
студент группы ЭПАб-21-1,
Байкальский институт БРИКС,
Иркутский национальный исследовательский
технический университет,
664074, г. Иркутск, ул. Лермонтова, 83,
Российская Федерация,
kelvinnyuma1099@gmail.com

Светлана Владимировна Латышева,
доцент,
Департамента гуманитарных наук,
Байкальский институт БРИКС,
Иркутский национальный исследовательский
технический университет,
664074, г. Иркутск, ул. Лермонтова, 83,
Российская Федерация,
lasveta1@yandex.ru