UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

Intercultural Communication, a key to integration

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Abstract

Gothenburg University is a culturally diverse place and students come to study in this university from almost all parts of the world with very different cultural backgrounds. Difficult relationships and dialogues and following it misunderstandings can occur if the students are unprepared to handle these differences. The problem occurs when the students of different cultural background are not able to communicate and interact in a meaningful way in their large and diverse classrooms. Accordingly they find their social lives hard and their process of integration gets much longer than expected. Many international students face challenges and hinders in integrating into the Swedish academic environment. Intercultural communication might be a way to facilitate integration of foreign students. This paper studies the relationship between intercultural communication and integration by studying the case of Iranian students in Gothenburg University.

Key words: culture, communication, integration, university students, intercultural communication

1. Introduction:

Globalization is not a new phenomena but the ongoing process certainly creates new situations with new requirements. Unprecedented interconnection caused by the development of technology and transportation has interconnected four corners of the world in the least possible time. People are connected to each other much easier than a few decades ago. The development of communication technology and transport industry has facilitated connections and communications and helped the decision of migration more feasible. One of the most significant faces of globalization is migration. Long time ago people had only heard of international trading (Goldin, 2006) but migration and movement among people crossing borders has become a tangible procedure of globalization. People migrate to different countries and with a variety of aspirations and reasons and under diverse conditions (King, 2002). In fact migration has become an easier decision today. Castles and Miller (2009) claim that mobility has become much easier due to cultural and political changes making migration into a central dynamic within globalization. Similarly Apastergiadis (2000) believes that migration in its endless motion has surrounded and pervaded almost all aspects of the society. However what make migration more interesting is the identities and cultural backpacks that people carry with them to new lands.

Most people in the world are now connected with each other through different means of communication which has not only crossed borders but cultures in a more expanded level. It is now hard to find culturally homogenous societies today which beside the fascinating picture of diversity, creates issues to help daily life in such situations effortless and efficient. We now live in a rapidly changing time and in such a climate intercultural communication takes on special significance since it offers tools to help negotiate about religious and ethnic differences, hate crimes and many other related issues (Martin & Nakayama 2010).

There are two main issues accompanying migration which is under great consideration in the multicultural societies; integration of immigrants and intercultural communication. While immigration to new homelands has become frequent the process of integration has reached the higher positions in the host countries' policies for dealing with 'outsiders' in order to have a coherent and a stable society. Nevertheless this aim is not achieved without the existence of tolerance and respect to other cultures which in turn creates a high position for 'intercultural communication' in diverse societies. In other words, what makes the process of integration

possible and is of great importance in facilitating the hard procedure of integration is 'communication' being as crucial as integration itself.

Though there is a considerable effort done by the governments to integrate a newcomer, yet there is a significant difference between what is in the policies and what is actually been experienced and practiced in daily life. As Flam and Beauzamy (2008) discuss, the everyday encounters between the 'foreigners' and the 'natives' affects the way immigrants think and feel about themselves, which shows how quality of communication can affect a multicultural society.

Sweden as my focus in this study, among all other hosting countries has made considerable efforts in helping the immigrants to integrate. Runblom (1994) believes Sweden has shifted from a policy of Swedishness, stressing cultural and ethnic assimilation to a multicultural model that officially allows and invites cultural diversity. Considering Sweden's diversity in the recent years, there has been numerous studies done on different related areas, yet one of the neglected areas that have been less considered is the intercultural communication quality among the diverse population. One of the interesting societies which could be of a great importance for study is the diversity of students in the universities specifically the University of Gothenburg. Students and their teachers come with their different languages and dialectics each come from their own educational, cultural and social background which adds to the diversity of classrooms.

This paper intends to study the quality of intercultural communication and its consequences on the integration of Iranian students in the University of Gothenburg. This study is trying to illustrate the quality of intercultural communication between Iranian students and other students within Gothenburg University. Seeking out the relationship between intercultural communication and integration, the paper is organized within three main parts. I start with the definitions of the concepts used in this paper. The second part discusses briefly about Iranian cultural characteristics based on the theorists' classifications of culture. Finally the paper ends with a discussion of how intercultural communication is observed within a culturally diverse environment as Gothenburg University.

1.1: Aim of Research:

The main aim of this research is to seek how intercultural communication can help integration of foreigners, with focus on international students in Gothenburg University. In fact the study

aims to investigate the relationship between intercultural communication and integration. Under this study I try to find out the quality of intercultural communication among students in the University of Gothenburg. This is done by revealing the experiences and narratives made by Iranian students. Though the focus of this study is on Iranian students yet there will be instances where other foreign students' experiences will be disclosed to show the diversity and cultural differences within the university. Despite the fact that complete understanding of intercultural communication quality in such a big context as Gothenburg University is not possible, yet I pursue to uncover the experiences of a group of international students in this case Iranian students, to have a picture of how intercultural communication is practiced in such an international and diverse milieu and have a small contribution in creating the idea for more expanded studies under this topic in diverse societies.

1.2: Objective:

My interest in this topic originates from personal experience in communicating with people in culturally diverse societies. Living in a multicultural society and observing the vast cultural differences provided the idea of going deeper into the ways of communication between different cultures and consequently choosing Gothenburg University as my place of study. While being a member of this university as a student among students coming from many different cultural backgrounds inspired me to study the quality of communication among them. I chose this topic as my interest by taking into account how would this quality of communication help the 'newcomers' or 'foreigners' integrate into the small society of Gothenburg University. Finally, through this study I intend to make a contribution to raise the level of awareness, understanding and tolerance among students with different cultural backgrounds. This term (different cultural backgrounds) includes both Swedes and other foreign students, in order to have an even more pleasant, interesting and appealing environment in the multicultural Gothenburg University.

1.3: Research Questions:

Based on the aim and objective of this study the research question is:

- How can intercultural communication help foreign students integrate?

1.4: Delimitations:

 Being from the same group and sharing the same cultural background and experiences may be an advantage of understanding the Iranian students deeply. Yet this cultural closeness may

also cause disadvantages of disregarding certain observations due to cultural similarities.. The study is done on six Iranian students who have come to Sweden between the periods of stay between one to three years so the conditions may change after several years of stay. Meanwhile the patterns of communication may change based on the individual's qualifications and personality and consequently their success in building relationships and finding their way in a more rapid style. Therefore this study cannot claim to have a comprehensive overview of the Iranian students' communication quality with other students of other cultural backgrounds. However this research can make a contribution in raising the issue of intercultural communication in a multicultural milieu such as Gothenburg University.

Finally as a self critic, the few number of informants in this study, could not be a representative of all Iranian students. Nevertheless, this study could be considered a worthy topic for further investigation in providing informed approach and rational decision making in integration policies and raising competency in intercultural communication.

1.5: Outline of the thesis:
In order to fulfill the task of this research, this paper is organized in three sections. The first part is dedicated to background information and introduction. The second part is given to definitions and categorizations. The third part is the interviewee experiences and analysis followed by a conclusion

2. Theoretical Discussion:

Though it is hard to have a consensus on the definition of globalization yet almost all existing definitions include trans-boundary flow of people, capital and information (Asgari et al., 2010). Migration to Europe is not a new process but as Koser and Lutz (1998) believe the recent flow has a character that distinguishes it from the previous form and referred to as 'new migration'. The new migration consists of people with dissimilar cultures with different individual capital and reasons other than only economical reasons for migration. The growth of cultural diversity in the receiving countries has caused a situation where certain researches as Vertove (2005) call it 'super diversity'. One of the areas that is internationalized to a great extend is the universities in mainly developed countries. The influx of international students in different Western countries during the recent decades has brought diversity into universities and consequently raised problems of communication among these culturally diverse students (Guo & Chase 2010). Two main topics intertwined with migration are 'integration' of the

newcomers and 'communication' among culturally diverse groups of people. As Allwood (1999) believes communication among people of different cultures can lead to misunderstandings due to the expected patterns of communication based on one's own culture on the behavior of others. He further suggests that in order to have a better insight about differences and similarities between different cultures, it is interesting to provide descriptions of patterns of communication of a particular culture.

2-1: Important concepts and their definition in this study:

2-1-1: Communication:

Allwood (1985) defines communication as the sharing of information between people with different levels of awareness and control. The word 'awareness' and 'control' carry an important feature of this sharing of information which at times may not be intentional and may have roots in cultural patterns and practices but can lead to understandings or misunderstandings. The other definition belongs to Martin and Nakayama (2003) that communication is a symbolic process where reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed. Oetzel (2008) believes that cultural differences produce differences in communication style that can vary across cultures and can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretation of communication behaviors. These misunderstandings can also occur due to expectations of communication in a certain culture which is not fulfilled by the counter party (Ibid).

2-1-2: Culture:

Culture is defined by many researchers in different fields of social sciences and hereunder comes several of the existing definitions. Li and Karakowsky (2001) define culture as the collective deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, roles, relations and material objects acquired by a group of people through generations. It is a way of life of a group of people and the beliefs and values that they accept without thinking and are passed to them through communication and imitation from one generation to another (Ibid). Hofstede (1984) defines culture as the mental programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from another. Lederach (1995) believes that culture is the shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people

for perceiving, interpreting, expressing and responding to the social realities around them. Damen (1987) expresses culture as learned and shared human patterns or models for living that pervades all aspects of human social interaction and it is mankind's primary adaptive mechanism. Allwood's (1985) definition of culture is characteristics, common in a group of people which are learnt and not given by nature that provides a number of properties that organize the individual's life. Zimmermann (2012) claims that culture is the characteristics of a particular group defined by language, social habits, cuisine, religion, music and art.

2-1-3: Cultural classifications:

Cultures are classified and categorized through certain factors. One of the most popular classifications is done by Hofstede (1983) who believes that cultures are characteristically different. His categorization is based on primary cultural differences within which cultures could be placed and recognized. His classifications of cultures are:

- Power distance: Within this category the less powerful members of the society accept and expect that power is distributed unevenly. In power distance cultures power sets the level of distances where the powerful tries to maintain the distance and the less powerful struggles to decrease the distance.

- Uncertainty avoidance: This category of cultures reflect the level of uncertainty tolerance among the people of a society and the extent to which people try to avoid uncertainty which is usually done by laws and regulations and other types of social controls.

- Individualism vs. Collectivism: Individualism is the character of a society where individuals are mainly responsible for themselves and their immediate family. Whereas in collectivist cultures the individual is born into a society of networks where people after birth are integrated into a strong and cohesive groups of people that protect and support each other throughout life time.

- Masculinity vs. Femininity: Cultures that are classified as masculine are those where gender roles are clearly distinct. In such cultures men are tough and material success oriented whereas women are tender and connected with quality of life. On the contrary in feminist cultures gender roles overlap and men and women are both expected to be tender and connected with the quality of life.

- Long vs. Short term result oriented: Long term result oriented cultures are persistent and have a strong work ethic and respect hierarchy. Whereas short term oriented cultures expect immediate and quick result.

Ting-Toomy (1998) classifies cultures as direct vs. indirect. Within this classification cultures can be more explicit or implicit and communicators' disclosure intentions differ very much. In direct cultures communicators disclose much of the information with precise verbal and communication. On the other hand in indirect cultures much of the information is implicit and through non verbal communication left to the counterpart to understand.

Hall (1976) defines cultures as high context or low context in which the individuals are more implicit or explicit making major differences in patterns of communication. Based on this classification high context cultures are known as more implicit and require less detailed information. They usually consider things to be understood by bodily communication and facial gestures and believe that things should be understood and interpreted by the receiver rather than being completely informed in detail. Whereas in low context cultures detailed information is required and given in order to consider a communication meaningful and complete. Low context cultures are know to be more explicit and usually are combined with bodily communication and facial gestures. Maintaining these basic differences in mind can help the intercultural communicators have a better understanding of different cultures and their patterns of thinking and behavior.

2-1-4: Intercultural Communication:

Allwood (1985) defines intercultural communication as the sharing of information between people of different cultures with different levels of awareness and control. Intercultural communication is defined by Ting-Toomy (1999) as a symbolic exchange process where people of different cultures negotiate shared meanings in an interactive situation. Teng (2005) emphasizes that intercultural communication is the ability to effectively interact with people of different cultures. The other definition is by Just (2004) who discusses intercultural communication as the symbolic creation of shared meaning that ties the individual with different people that enables contact and which could be maintained, altered or perhaps disconnected. Klein and Chen (2001) believe that intercultural competency develops self reflection, gathering information about your own and the others cultures, appreciating similarities and differences using cultural resources and acknowledging the quality and value of all cultures. Intercultural communication is also defined by Bennet (2003) as the ability to interpret communication styles which include verbal and non verbal language, signs and gestures and customs.

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2-1-5: Cultural Intelligence:

Plum (2007) defines cultural intelligence as the ability to act appropriately in a way to make one understood and be able to build relationships in situations of cultural diversity and where cultural differences are important. This intelligence is not based on the participants' thought or intention but on the encounter's judgment Cultural intelligence is being able to create shared understanding among all participant cultures which enables all parties to get on with their work. Plum (2007) continues that cultural intelligence has three dimensions; cultural engagement, cultural understanding and intercultural communication. He further mentions about intercultural engagement which is about the ability to handle your emotional reactions and those of others while realizing that the reactions may be culturally conditioned and do not mean the same thing in both cultures.

2-1-6: Integration:

There is a German phrase that says, 'integration takes place locally' and this phrase has become the well known say in the German debates on integration of immigrants (Shubert et al. 2010). Political and scientific discourses have come to a conclusion that it is the local and neighborhood setting that serves as the starting point for integration processes, in the most basic levels where joint culture life is discussed and agreed upon (Ibid). Based on Costoui (2008) integration was previously known as the removal of differences between the minorities and the bigger society in which the minorities were expected to adopt the values of the host society. However, today integration is understood as the incorporation with equal rights of all ethnic groups (Ibid). Olwig (2011) believes that integration of immigrants into the new societies helps a newcomer enjoy social and economical mobility and therefore as Castles and Miller (2009) claim most modern states and societies have made considerable efforts for immigrants to achieve cultural integration.

2-1-7: Friendship:

One of the concepts that I found interesting and compulsory to be find is the concept of 'friendship'. There can be a great difference in the perception of 'friendship' in different cultures and also differently defined and conceived by different personalities and individuals. Therefore in order to have a basic and common understanding of this concept is necessary to be able to compare Iranians and Swedes in building 'friendships'. Oetzel (2008) in his article mentions about a research that was done by Collier (1991) on the meaning of friendship

among different college students.   The results of this study showed that different students with different cultural background had a different perception of the concept 'friend'. Based on this study African Americans believed that friendship is importance in problem solving. Mexican Americans defined friendship as support and expression of feelings. On the other hand White Americans mentioned friendship as freedom in expression of feelings. As we can see the basis seems the same yet there are differences in perception of friendship from different cultural perspectives. It is the same with the concept of 'intimacy' which is differently defined in different cultures but as Oetzel (2008) mentions the results show that strangers are least intimate followed by acquaintances, friends and best friends. He refers to Baxter and Montgomery 1997, who believe that openness and closeness are two essential factors in creating intimacy between people but the important and delicate management is to handle the level of openness in the right place. Examples show that too much openness in first meetings may show an opposite result and have negative effect on the counterpart. According to Oetzel this management of openness and closeness dialectic is very much dependant to cultural norms and practices.

3. Methodological Discussion:

Merriam (2009) believes that practitioners in social sciences who deal with every day concerns of people's lives and have interest in their practice or improving their practice tend to ask reasonable questions which are best approached through qualitative research. On the other hand Wertz (2011) claims that qualitative knowledge of human affairs and mental life has been a part of the human sciences since its institutionalization in 19th century. Similarly I refer to Creswell (2009) that says qualitative research is a way for exploring and understanding the meaning that individuals ascribe to social problems. He continues that qualitative research involves data collected through questions and procedures and inductive data analysis from particulars to general themes.

This study adopted a case study and is undertaken through ethnographic research on Iranian students in Gothenburg University accomplished by six interviews. The interviews consisted of personal backgrounds such as age, gender, study field, scholarly background and international life experience. Further the interviewees were asked to narrate any special coincidence or miscommunication leading to misinterpretations or misunderstandings. The qualitative data is gathered through semi structured interviews and participant observation during the study which I found suitable to form a strong background for this thesis. I used

semi structured interviews since my study was based on narratives and experiences of participants around the topic of intercultural communication which gave me the opportunity to study my participants from 'inside'. One of the strongest points of this study is that most of the participants had an academic idea about 'communication', 'culture', 'intercultural communication' and the consequences of miscommunication. Therefore the information they provided as their experiences and instances of miscommunication was based on the academic understanding that they had about 'communication' and 'intercultural communication'. However I provided necessary information without any kind of biases to the participants if at any instances required.

Interviewees were chosen from female and male students who came to Gothenburg University one year ago. Considering my aim of research which was to reveal the direct connection between intercultural communication and integration of students, I chose to categorize my informants into students from communication program and others.

My interviewees were assured that their information would be used anonymously without mentioning their names anywhere in this paper. I also offered to let them see the result of my work in order to comfort their worry. My thesis also consisted of gathering data through observing and comparing Iranian students to other foreign students in terms of their differences in perceptions of friendship and patterns of communication. Finding informants for this study was not very hard since we were mostly classmates and I found them very cooperative and we had a deep and open discussion about this issue.

Though my group of participants was a diverse group in the sense of educational background and previous experiences of living abroad yet the common ground for this research was their narratives and experiences as Iranian students entering Gothenburg University almost the same time. Brettell (2003) claims that narratives intertwine experiences of failure and success into a whole and drawing conclusions help to explain choices enabling the ethnographer understand how people make sense of their world. Being accustomed to Iranian culture and attitude I was able to understand their feelings and experiences. Meantime having the chance of being with them provided the basis of friendly discussion and a better grasp of their experiences. Thus another factor that could be considered as supportive to this study and helped me to find pure information with actual and original outcomes is that I was not in a position of power compared to the participants. The study is based on narrative research since

it focuses on the narratives and experiences of intercultural communication. I try to understand their quality of communication with others from other cultures and examine how the intercultural communication among students can raise chances of integrating into their new study place. The information shared during this study and the interviews, provided the chance to observe in which areas of communication improvement is needed. Thus as a result I can claim that such studies can raise important issues which are strong enough for further and deeper studies.

4. Profile of participants:

The group of Iranian students as participants under this study was not considerable in number due to shortage of time and limitations of this paper. However with the few numbers, there was a chance to precisely observe their way of communication with others and the feedback they received beside the information that they provided during the interviews. This small group of informant provided the possibility to go deep into their experiences and come to conclusions. Although they were only six participants but they were a diverse group with different educational back ground and previous life experiences. They consisted of four girls and two boys. Their age was around twenty five to thirty and spoke English fluently. Their family status was five married and one single. Their educational background was also diverse since four of them were from the communication department with linguistics or social sciences background education and two from the computer software department. They came to Sweden almost about the same time and lived here as students for a year or two. My specific focus was on their experiences of cultural clashes or misunderstandings during their first year of attendance in Gothenburg University.

4-1.Iranian Culture based on Hofstede and Hall's classification of culture:

Based on Hofstede's (1983) classification of cultures we can analyze Iranian culture as a strictly hierarchically structured culture where power distances are clearly visible and those who are powerful are more respected and usually have the right to make the final decisions. It is a collective society and people usually feel responsible towards friends and family. People feel safe since they feel themselves in a supportive community that is expected to give a hand and be supportive even without requesting for help or support. When it comes to *uncertainty avoidance* it is more likely to say that Iranians try to avoid uncertainty through rules and regulations though not always strictly obedient to rules! In Iranian culture gender roles are

clearly visible and men are expected to be tough, material oriented and more powerful socially and legally. Considering short term and long term result orientation we can consider Iranian culture as long term oriented and it is usually the stable future which is considered important rather than getting quick results. On the other hand based on Hall's (1976) high context and low context categorization of cultures we can consider Iran as a high context culture. In Iranian culture there seems to be no need of detailed information and the information is received based on the understanding of the receiver and it could be known as more implicit in this category. Based on Ting Toomy's (1998) classification of cultures to direct / indirect cultures we can place Iranian culture in the indirect class since in Iranian culture communication is more implicit and preferred to be more indirect. In other words being direct is at times considered to be rude and impolite and information especially negative answers or views are often preferred to be indirectly shared or not at all mentioned.

Based on the WVS [1] Iranian culture could be analyzed as above based on the information provided in different study areas. On the other hand the information provided in WVS proves the vast difference between Iranian and Swede culture especially socially and family wise.

4-2.   Swedish culture:

Barinaga (1999) believes that the choice between choosing to look after 'one self' or taking care of the 'other' positions a culture within the line of 'Collectivism and Individualism'. He further mentions the one of the striking things from an immigrant view when coming to Sweden is the positive connotation of the word 'ensamhete' has and which shows the degree of individualism. Basd on Hofstede (1980) and Trompenenaars (1993) Sweden is known as one of most extremely individualist cultures. Similarly Allwood (1999) claims that Swedish patterns of communication and cultural behaviors, reveal a high degree of self sufficiency which leads to personal independence.

4-3.   Iranian Students' Experiences in Gothenburg University:

When it comes to studying abroad young students are tremendously excited since there is a perception in their homelands that studying in the developed countries is much better from different perspectives. It not only helps to improve learning and increases education due to developed facilities and updated scientific literatures but also helps a young student to learn a

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[1] World Value Survey: Online data analysis

lot about the environment and people who he/she meets. This could not only help them experience a new life style but also creates better opportunities for achieving better positions in the society. Iranian students are not exceptional to this understanding and usually leave their families and homeland to create such opportunities for better living either back in their homeland or somewhere else in the world. Most universities in the world encourage admission of students from different countries and one of their reasons is to enrich their campuses with different cultural perspectives which will automatically change the practices and dominant beliefs that define the life of those institutions (Reyes 2013). Although this claim is true that there will be some changes but the extent to which this change will allow the students to practice their ethnic and cultural identity is under consideration. However, there are instances that people do not want to communicate interculturally and simply consider themselves as 'different'. Due to this dynamics many students can have negative intercultural experiences ranging from misunderstandings to physical violence (Martin & Nakayama 2010). In fact intercultural communication could be frustrating, confusing and distressing (Ibid). Therefore it is not only the students who need to understand issues of culture and diversity but also the educators need to be trained to deal with such issues in order to handle the discussions skillfully in classrooms (Singh 2009). Intercultural communication helps newcomers find themselves more wanted and accepted which leads to higher motivations rather than being avoided and neglected which can cause segregations and inefficient performance.

4- *Findings and Discussion:*

Considering the short time I had for interviews and analysis for this study, I just pointed to the important factors and those aspects of communication that I considered important and relevant for addressing the problem ie; the connection between intercultural communication and integration.

My first question after introduction from my interviewees was to give me a picture of their perception of friend. As Oetzel (2008) believes there are differences in the perception of friend among people from different cultures. Therefore it was important to me to have an understanding of what is 'friendship' from their view and what do they expect from a friend. Almost all the answers were more or less the same. They perceived a friend as a person who is there when ever you need and will be a companion in your joy and difficulty. A person you expect to be a helping hand even if you do not ask for it. And a friend is a person who you feel comfortable to share your ideas and feelings.

When I asked them about their experience of having a Swedish friend there were different answers to this question. Four of my informants believed that they have friendly communication with Swedes but certainly not the friendship we consider as a friend. It is just a group work and there will be nothing further. In fact they are sometimes even reluctant to say hi.

"I was so glad to be in a group with non-Iranians because I thought it's a good way to get more close to others and a group work could be a basis for closer relationships but though we had a lot of fun and gathering for the group work, but to my surprise this was ended right here and may be some of my group mates also ignored me in a way to not even say a simple hi!"

The other two believed that there are deep differences between them and it seems hard to be able to make friendly relationships.

".......well my kind of relationship or expectation of a friendly attitude is totally different from them and this may cause misunderstandings before getting to know each other's culture."

The four students that were quite communicative with Swedes were from the communication program and the other two were from other programs. In fact the students in the communication program had a better view of communicating with their Swedish classmates than the other two. This was due to the instructions provided in this program. Communication teachers asked the students to sit in groups of different nationalities and cultural backgrounds and ask each other about their background and personal introduction. This practice in the communication program facilitated the building of connections. Whereas in other programs, as the other two informants mentioned, this was not a dominant practice and students had to find their own ways to start communicating with others. This was hard for the Iranian students since students were not so willing to communicate with 'others' and preferred to have their own groups with similar cultural background. Therefore this process in a way leaded to having friends of their own culture or very similar to their culture rather than being able to have friends of different cultural backgrounds. Many students find themselves rejected or unmatched or even not welcomed with the groups of students or perhaps friendships already built since they are not taken into consideration.

'I tried to match my self with group mates that were not Iranian since I truly wanted to make friends and learn a lot from them but whenever we were supposed to choose group mates for a group assignment when I asked them to include me in most cases they would say that they already have their own group.

One of the Iranian students, a 24 years old girl, mentioned that she was so excited to be in Gothenburg University and among so many young girls and boys from different parts of the world that she was initiating a communication with everyone she found at hand. She said:

'One of my exciting moments while choosing to study abroad was that I would find the possibility of communicating with people of other parts of the world and be able to find friends from other cultures and this was one of my reasons for traveling abroad. But I was a bit shocked when I came here things were a bit different from what I thought. My perception of communicating with others was what I had experienced in Iran but here people were not so happy to be reached out for initiating a friendship.'

 This was not so acceptable to others and her very friendly attitude somehow annoyed the others who expected a more reserved and distant manner in communication. This can be referred to what Hofstede (1983) mentions in classification of cultures as individualist or collectivist. In this case the Iranian girl belongs to the Iranian collectivist culture where people communicate even with strangers without hesitation whereas in the individualist Swedish culture (Hofstede 1980, Trompenenaars 1993, Baringa1999, Allwood 1999) people are a bit more reserved for initiating a communication and try to keep distances.

In the Iranian culture helping others even with studies and papers among students is a frequent act. In fact when it comes to helping others in the classroom or in writing papers it is very common to seek help from others if we face a difficulty or just suggest provide help to those who we assume to be in need of our help. Whereas one of my informants had an experience of group work where she had difficulties with writing her part because of her English language weakness and because she did not have any prior experience in writing papers like what is expected in Sweden. However when she mentioned her problem there was no sign of help or any reaction from her Swedish group mates which again can be referred to Hall (1976) high context vs. low context cultures where all information is not explicit. In this case the Iranian culture is high context since she thought just by letting others know about her problem she

would receive an offer for help but there was no feedback as she expected. It could also be that based on Iranian collectivist culture, it is assumed that when people working in a group face difficulties the others try to give a hand even if she does not directly ask for it.

Friendship is another concept which is defined and perceived differently in different cultures and this difference exists between Iranians and Swedes. Finding friends is not a difficult task in Iranian culture since people are very communicative and social and usually enjoy talking to strangers. Iranian people belonging to a collectivist culture are known to be talkative as Lewis (2006) describes people belonging to a collectivist culture. So friendships are built very easily in Iranian culture and thereafter follow certain expectations which may not match the Swedish culture very much. An Iranian boy who was in the software department intended to invite some of his newly found Swedish friends to his apartment for dinner and drink so that they could become closer and become friendlier. To his surprise not all of those who were invited accepted to go and even among those who went to the party and had a very joyful evening together did not seem as friendly the next day. In other words, those who were in his dinner party and he assumed to be his friends, the next day were just ordinary classmates. They did not think in the same way as he did and were just assuming the party as a gathering and that was it. Based on the research done by Oetzel (2008), Baxter and Montgomery 1997 and Colleri (1991), their findings proved that friendship and intimacy have different meanings and perceptions across cultures and therefore can lead to misunderstandings. Oetzel (2008) also believes that intimacy and friendships are built and created through different levels of openness and disclosure which is again different within different cultures and too much openness might even cause avoidance from the other party.

My other informant a 28 year old girl who assumed other group mates' after doing their assignments together and spending so much time together were now friends but it was not at all as she expected because soon after the assignment they hardly noticed her presence.

Iranian culture assumes respect to others as an important factor especially when it comes to power relations. Whereas respect has a different meaning in Sweden and people are in fact respecting others by not bothering them. This is about how Iranian students based on their culture have learnt to obey and respect the teacher no matter what and teachers are supposed to be called by their pronoun titles, whereas in Sweden people are addressed with their first name which was hard to practice at the beginning for Iranians. Based on Hofstede (1983)

classification of culture Iran is within the category of a culture where power relations are dominant and people are respected for their positions and power. My informant says:

'It was hard for me to address my teacher with first name at first and this was sensed by others who found it funny that I was feeling uneasy. So I somehow felt bad and unconfident when I wanted to talk to my teachers in front of others. It took me some time to get used to it.'

Allwood (2009) refers to differences in cultures in addressing people which is a sign of respect in certain cultures and addressing people with their first name, especially people with higher positions is impolite. Whereas in certain cultures like Sweden this is not a usual way of addressing people and everyone is used to just first name.

One of my findings is that though there is a great difference between Iranian culture and social behavior in terms of communication and Sweden yet they can communicate quite will even though they may not become close friends. One of my informants said:

After several weeks and at times embarrassments I tried to find out how Swedes communicate and expect you to communicate with them. However I decided to find search for close friends within my own culture. I found it hard to understand them when they came in and even ignored you and the next day they said a friendly 'Hi!'

As Bennet (2003), Klein and Chen (2003) discuss about intercultural competency, it is essential to first have a good understanding about our own culture and finding similarities and differences with other cultures. In fact it is important to understand and appreciate differences and similarities to be able to have a mutual understanding in a positive atmosphere. On the other hand there are positive instances where Iranian students did not have any problem with their Swedish classmates since those students were very open to diversity and differences. This helped the Iranians as new comers to find themselves comfortable in communicating with those Swedes since they were not only interculturaly competent but also social and open as their individual personality. In fact this ease in communication can help them a lot to perform better in class especially in their presentations since they found more self confidence. My informant insisted that it was a great experience being in such a culturally diverse classroom in the communication program where she could communicate and find so many good friends. She believed that all she knew about Swedish society and about academic expectations in Gothenburg University was through the good friends she had been able to find. She says:

'It is not that they were exactly acting and saying as what I expected and at times their behavior could be assumed as an insult in my culture but it was not hard to understand that they did not mean such a thing and it was just cultural difference.'

Therefore as could be seen in the experiences and as Allwood (1999) claims finding more about self and others' cultures and behavioral patterns can be the first steps towards a meaningful and pleasant intercultural communication. However the important role that personal characteristics play in an interpersonal communication could not be ignored in intercultural communication competency. As Martin and Nakayama (2010) mention in their findings that beside the intercultural communication competency it is the individual's personal characteristics in both parties that play an important role in building relations since at times it is the individual who thinks is different and would like to be open to communication with others. Yet on the other hand if the individual is willing to communicate with others without bringing cultural differences into consideration then intercultural communication competencies can have positive and satisfactory results.

5- *Conclusion:*

As a result, we could understand that intercultural communication can contribute in the integration of immigrant students. The question is how does this happen? People of different cultural backgrounds may have different understandings and ways of communicating with others. These differences can cause misunderstandings or lack of understanding leading to ethnocentrism and xenophobia with stereotyping ideas about other cultures. Many of the international students face challenges and barriers in integrating into the new academic environments at least in the first year. These challenges and barriers in their ability to communicate with others and build relationships could lead to isolation, marginalization, low self confidence (Guo & Chase 2010) and consequently unsatisfactory performance. Reye (2013) believes that when the feel of belonging to a school is challenged often students of minority show decline in academic motivation and achievement. This claim has a direct connection to what Olwig (2011) believes that integration into the new societies helps a newcomer enjoy social mobility. Intercultural communication competency can not only serve as a bridge among different cultures but also contribute in raising understandings, belonging and familiarities with different ways of living and thinking. Mallet et al. (2011) define belonging uncertainty as experiences arising as a result to lack of social connection and two main factors that can lead to this sense are racial and ethnic identification. If we refer to

Shubert et al. (2010) that 'integration takes place locally' and in the most basic levels where joint culture life is discussed and agreed upon, then we can understand how intercultural communication can raise understandings and lead to this basic level of integration. Similarly Costoui (2008) says that integration is no more the removal of differences between minorities and the bigger society but incorporation with equal rights. This claim is related to what Just (2004) claims about intercultural communication as the symbolic creation of shared meaning that ties the individual with different people and enables contact and which could be maintained, altered or perhaps disconnected.

The processes of exchange of ideas and perspectives within a culturally diverse classroom could be considered as initial steps towards sustainable integration of immigrant students. This personal connections and communications without considering cultural differences create a basis for better learning and cross cultural understandings. Oliha (2012) claims that one of the reasons that intercultural communication is learnt is to promote inter group understanding and intercultural communication competency. She continues that in this way we emphasize the importance of history, context and knowledge of the other and this type of scholarship is not merely a good idea but an organizing imperative. It is believed that there is no such list of things to be done as an intercultural communicator although prescribed reactions may help not to forget that communication is science and art (Martin & Nakayama 2010). However communication among people with diverse background is the understanding, accepting and respecting others with their cultures and ethnicity rather than just considering them 'different'. This is not just expecting the host or the new comer to change or understand differences, but it is a two way competency that leads to preferred results for both parties enabling a more flexible and pleasant atmosphere. As we could see since students from the communication program had adequate information about intercultural communication, they found it easier to build relations that helped them to integrate into the academic society of the Gothenburg University.

This study was based on communication experiences of a culturally different group of university students at Gothenburg University. The intention was to encourage interaction and communication of students with different cultural backgrounds in order to facilitate integration of foreign students in Sweden. Knowing the importance of communication competency in human interaction, I suggested intercultural communication as a key to integration of foreign students with the support of the existing theories and the data provided

by the interviewees. In fact the aim of this study is to highlight the importance of intercultural communication competency in culturally diverse situations such as universities. Accordingly the aim was to raise possibilities of building connections and creating instances of understanding the 'other' rather than avoiding. This will not only create a more cheerful atmosphere but also a means of better academic performance for the new comer. In fact this process can happen by obtaining self confidence, motivation and gaining the information one may need for better and more expected performance. Consequently my findings showed that students within the communication program found it easier to communicate with others and ask questions and guidance from their Swedish classmates. However for others in the other programs, it was hard to create such connections and relations and found it more difficult to insert into the academic society.

Therefore, considering the large cultural diversity within the universities today it is highly suggested to place an intercultural communication introductory course at the beginning of the academic year. Through this course students will not only be introduced to university's academic norms and expectations but also will find a chance to find more information about each other and may become a basis for further relations and friendships.

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