

Communication Barriers Between Latvian and Indian Students in Higher Education

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Abstract - The internationalization of higher education has increased interaction among students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In Latvia, the presence of international students creates opportunities for intercultural learning while also presenting challenges for communication and social integration. This conceptual article examines communication barriers between Latvian and Indian students in higher education, with particular attention to linguistic differences, culturally shaped communication styles, stereotypes and prejudice, and social integration challenges. The discussion draws on established intercultural communication perspectives, particularly Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions and Hall's high-context and low-context communication framework. The analysis indicates that communication difficulties cannot be explained by language proficiency alone. Differences in expectations concerning directness, interpersonal distance, classroom participation, relationships, and interpretation of verbal and non-verbal communication may also contribute to misunderstanding. These barriers can influence students' confidence, participation, academic collaboration, and social integration. The article argues that higher education institutions have an important role in reducing such barriers through intercultural communication training, peer mentorship, mixed-nationality academic activities, language support, and inclusive teaching practices. As a conceptual study, the article does not claim to measure the prevalence of these barriers among students directly. Instead, it provides a theoretical basis for future empirical research using surveys, interviews, and observation.

Keywords - Intercultural Communication; Higher Education; Latvian Students; Indian Students; Communication Barriers; International Students; Social Integration; Cultural Differences

1. INTRODUCTION

Globalization and the internationalization of higher education have transformed universities into increasingly multicultural environments. Students from different national, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds now share classrooms, participate in group assignments, and develop academic and social relationships. This diversity can support cultural exchange, knowledge sharing, and global learning, but it can also create communication difficulties when students bring different expectations about language, interaction, and social behavior (European Commission, 2020).

Communication is central to successful participation in higher education. Students need to communicate with lecturers and classmates, contribute to classroom discussions, cooperate in group work, give presentations, and build informal relationships. When communication is affected by differences in language proficiency, communication norms, or cultural expectations, misunderstandings may occur and students may become less willing to participate (Gudykunst, 2005).

The interaction between Latvian and Indian students provides a useful context for examining these issues. The two groups may share the same academic environment while bringing different educational experiences and culturally shaped expectations to interpersonal communication. Such differences do not apply uniformly to every individual; rather, cultural frameworks can help identify tendencies that may influence communication and require further empirical examination (Hofstede, 2001).

This article addresses the following research question:

2. CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This article adopts a conceptual, literature-based approach. It synthesizes established literature and theoretical frameworks concerning intercultural communication, cultural differences, language-related difficulties, prejudice, and student integration. The purpose is to organize these perspectives into a framework for understanding possible communication barriers between Latvian and Indian students in higher education.

The analysis is interpretive rather than empirical. No survey, interview, experiment, or observational dataset is used to estimate the frequency or statistical significance of communication barriers. Consequently, statements about Latvian and Indian communication should be understood as theoretically informed tendencies rather than generalizations about every student. Future empirical research is required to test the relationships identified in this article.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

Hofstede (2001) proposed that national cultures can differ across dimensions including power distance, individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation. These dimensions provide a framework for examining how cultural expectations may influence interaction.

Within this framework, India has traditionally been characterized by relatively higher power distance, which may place greater emphasis on hierarchy and authority. In educational settings, this may influence how comfortable students feel when questioning teachers or expressing disagreement. Latvia is generally characterized by lower power distance and stronger emphasis on individual autonomy in comparison with India (Hofstede et al., 2010). However, cultural-dimension scores should be treated as broad analytical indicators rather than descriptions of individual students.

The individualism–collectivism dimension is also relevant. Indian social contexts have often been described as placing substantial value on relationships and group harmony, whereas Latvian contexts may place relatively more emphasis on personal autonomy and independence (Hofstede et al., 2010). Such differences may influence approaches to teamwork, conflict, personal space, and relationship-building.

3.2 Hall's High-Context and Low-Context Communication

Hall (1976) distinguished between high-context and low-context communication. In high-context communication, meaning may depend substantially on context, relationships, non-verbal cues, and shared understanding. In low-context communication, messages tend to be more explicit and meaning is communicated more directly through words.

This framework can help explain why two students may interpret the same interaction differently. A student who expects meaning to be inferred from context may consider highly direct communication unnecessarily blunt, while a student who expects explicit communication may interpret indirectness as uncertainty or lack of clarity. These differences can produce misunderstandings even when students communicate in the same language.

4. MAJOR COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

4.1 Linguistic Barriers

Language is one of the most visible barriers in intercultural encounters. English frequently functions as a common language in international higher education, but students may differ in fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, accents, and confidence in spontaneous conversation (Crystal, 2003). These differences can affect seminars, classroom discussions, group projects, presentations, and informal social interaction.

A student may understand written academic English well but experience difficulty in fast-paced conversation. Similarly, pronunciation or regionally influenced expressions may require additional effort from listeners. Communication difficulty can therefore exist even when students have sufficient overall English proficiency. Repeated difficulty may reduce confidence and increase language-related anxiety, which can further discourage participation (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994).

4.2 Differences in Communication Style

Communication style extends beyond language proficiency. Cultural expectations can influence the use of gestures, tone, emotional expression, directness, personal space, and approaches to disagreement. Existing intercultural communication literature suggests that Indian communication may sometimes place greater emphasis on relational warmth and contextual understanding, while Latvian interaction may more often be experienced as concise or reserved (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988; Hofstede et al., 2010).

Such differences can lead to inaccurate interpretations. For example, reserved communication may be interpreted as unfriendly even when no negative intention exists, while expressive communication may be perceived as overly personal or intrusive. These interpretations can reduce willingness to initiate or maintain intercultural relationships (Spencer-Rodgers & McGovern, 2002).

4.3 Stereotypes and Prejudice

Stereotypes can influence intercultural communication by shaping expectations before meaningful interaction takes place. Preconceived assumptions about nationality, language, culture, or behavior may affect how individuals interpret ambiguous situations and whether they are willing to communicate (Allport, 1954).

International students may encounter assumptions about their language ability, cultural background, or behavior. At the same time, students from the host culture may also be subject to assumptions by international students. When such expectations become fixed, they can increase social distance and reduce opportunities for genuine intercultural exchange (Stephan & Stephan, 2000).

4.4 Social Integration Challenges

Communication barriers can also contribute to limited social integration. International students may develop friendship networks primarily with co-nationals or other international students, particularly when opportunities for meaningful interaction with local students are limited (Berry, 2005).

Potential contributing factors include limited opportunities for interaction, preference for familiar social environments, communication anxiety, fear of misunderstanding, and concern about rejection or negative evaluation. Over time, these factors may contribute to parallel student communities and reduce opportunities for intercultural learning and social cohesion (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001).

5. POTENTIAL IMPACT ON ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION

Communication difficulties may influence academic participation as well as social relationships. Students who are uncertain about how their communication will be received may hesitate to ask questions, participate in discussions, or contribute to collaborative assignments (Andrade, 2006).

6. INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Higher education institutions can play an important role in reducing intercultural communication barriers and developing students' intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006). Institutional responses should not focus only on correcting international students' language skills; they should also support local students and staff in understanding intercultural differences.

7. DISCUSSION

The literature and theoretical frameworks discussed in this article indicate that communication barriers are multidimensional. Language is important, but it is only one part of the communication process. Students also interpret directness, silence, disagreement, emotional expression, personal space, and social relationships through culturally shaped expectations.

For Latvian and Indian students, these differences may become particularly visible in classroom participation and group work. A student who is accustomed to stronger hierarchical expectations may communicate with academic staff differently from a student who expects greater informality and direct participation. Similarly, different expectations concerning social interaction may influence whether students interpret an interaction as friendly, distant, respectful, or intrusive.

Importantly, these frameworks should not be used to label students according to nationality. Individual personality, previous international experience, language proficiency, field of study, and the specific university environment can all influence communication. The value of cultural theories is therefore analytical: they help generate questions and hypotheses that can later be examined through empirical research.

8. CONCLUSION

Communication barriers between Latvian and Indian students in higher education are multidimensional and may arise from linguistic differences, culturally shaped communication styles, stereotypes, and challenges in social integration. These factors can influence classroom participation, group collaboration, confidence, and the development of intercultural relationships.

The analysis demonstrates that sharing a common language does not automatically guarantee effective intercultural communication. Successful interaction also requires awareness of different communication expectations, openness to alternative perspectives, empathy, and opportunities for meaningful contact. Universities can support this process through intercultural training, peer mentorship, inclusive teaching, language support, and activities that bring local and international students together.

Because this article is conceptual, its conclusions should not be interpreted as measurements of the experiences of all Latvian or Indian students. Further research should use surveys, semi-structured interviews, and observational methods to examine the

prevalence and intensity of the barriers identified here. Comparative research involving other international student groups and European host countries could also determine which barriers are specific to the Latvian–Indian context and which are more general features of international higher education.

What are the major communication barriers between Latvian and Indian students in higher education, and how may these barriers influence academic and social integration?

Key Potential Academic Effects

- Lower participation in classroom activities
- Reduced engagement with course material
- Difficulty contributing to team-based assignments
- Lower academic confidence and self-efficacy
- Fewer opportunities to develop local and intercultural friendships

Recommended Institutional Measures

- Intercultural communication training for students and academic staff.
- Peer-mentorship programmes connecting local and international students.
- Mixed-nationality group assignments designed to encourage meaningful cooperation.
- Cultural exchange activities and structured social events.
- Academic and conversational English support for students who need it.
- Faculty development on inclusive and interculturally responsive teaching.

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