

MYKOLAS ROMERIS UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF PUBLIC GOVERNANCE AND BUSINESS
MANAGEMENT AND POLITICAL SCIENCE INSTITUTE

SUHAYRA SARWAR

**INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES IN ACADEMIC
GROUP PROJECTS AT MRU: A CASE STUDY**

Master's thesis

Supervisor:

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Adomas Vincas Rakšnys

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Santrauka

Šiame magistro baigiamajame darbe analizuojami tarpkultūrinės komunikacijos iššūkiai, kylantys įvairiakultūre akademine grupinėse veiklose Mykolo Romerio universitete. Temos aktualumą lemia didėjantis studentų mobilumas ir augantis poreikis veiksmingai bendradarbiauti kultūriškai įvairiose studijų aplinkose. Tyrime sprendžiama problema – komunikacijos barjerai, kurie riboja vienodą dalyvavimą, sukelia nesusipratimus ir silpnina komandinių užduočių kokybę. Darbo tikslas – suprasti, kaip kultūriniai skirtumai formuoja komunikacijos procesus akademine komandose. Uždaviniai apima pagrindinių komunikacijos kliūčių identifikavimą, kultūrinių normų įtakos sąveikai analizę, skaitmeninių įrankių vaidmens įvertinimą ir veiksmingų tarpkultūrinio bendradarbiavimo strategijų paiešką. Tyrime taikytas mišrus metodas – kiekybinė apklausa ir pusiau struktūruoti interviu, leidžiantys atskleisti tiek bendras tendencijas, tiek gilumines studentų patirtis. Rezultatai parodė, kad komunikaciją apsunkina kalbiniai sunkumai, skirtingi bendravimo stiliai, kultūriniai lūkesčiai dėl hierarchijos, emocinė įtampa ir neaiškios institucinės gairės. Nustatyta, kad technologijos iš dalies padeda bendradarbiauti, tačiau taip pat sukuria naujų nesusipratimų, kai dingsta tono ir konteksto informacija. Darbas suskirstytas į penkis pagrindinius skyrius: įvadą, literatūros apžvalgą, metodologiją, tyrimo rezultatus ir diskusiją su rekomendacijomis. Išvados pabrėžia, kad sėkmingam bendradarbiavimui įvairiakultūre komandose būtinos bendros taisyklės, refleksyvi praktika, tarpkultūrinės kompetencijos ugdymas ir stipresnė institucijų pagalba.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: tarpkultūrinė komunikacija, įvairiakultūre komandos, akademinis bendradarbiavimas, komunikacijos barjerai, kultūriniai skirtumai, tarpkultūrinė kompetencija, kultūrinis intelektas, skaitmeninė komunikacija, kalbiniai sunkumai, aukštasis mokslas.

Abstract

This thesis analyses intercultural communication challenges that arise in multicultural academic group projects at Mykolas Romeris University. The topic is relevant due to increasing global student mobility and the growing need for effective collaboration in diverse learning environments. The research addresses the problem of communication barriers that limit equal participation, create misunderstandings and reduce the quality of teamwork in culturally mixed groups. The aim of the thesis is to understand how cultural differences shape communication practices in academic teams and the objectives include identifying the key communication barriers, analysing how cultural norms influence interaction, examining the role of digital tools in communication and exploring strategies that help students collaborate more effectively. A mixed-method approach was applied, combining a quantitative survey with semi-structured interviews to capture both broad patterns and deeper individual experiences. The results show that language difficulties, contrasting communication styles, cultural expectations about hierarchy, emotional pressures and unclear institutional guidelines all contribute to communication breakdowns. Technology supports teamwork to some extent but also creates new misunderstandings when tone and context are lost. The thesis is structured into five main chapters: introduction, literature review, methodology, findings and discussion with recommendations. The conclusions highlight that successful multicultural teamwork requires shared norms, reflective practice, intercultural competence development and stronger institutional support.

Keywords: intercultural communication, multicultural teams, academic collaboration, communication barriers, cultural differences, intercultural competence, cultural intelligence, digital communication, language challenges, higher education.

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INTRODUCTION

Topic Relevance

As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, universities and academic institutes welcome international students from all across the globe. Students get the opportunity to gather in academic teams from different countries and backgrounds. This diversity gives student teams great opportunities to learn from each other. It is a chance to share unique perspectives and experiences. These mixed environments are healthy and enhance creativity among students. At the same time, they also cause problems when people communicate with each other. Dowdall et al. (2021, p. 393) highlights that misunderstandings happen due to different communication styles. Communication is much more complicated than just words. The way people express themselves and interpret meaning differs between cultures. Despite these challenges, students continue to learn new ways of problem-solving and conflict management. This builds a stronger sense of belonging in the academic community.

By improving soft skills like flexibility, critical thinking and digital literacy, involvement in multicultural educational programs promotes intercultural understanding and equips students to operate in the global labor market (Chen & Hu, 2023; Nguyen, 2021). Therefore, it is essential to understand these communication problems and develop institutional strategies to improve effective cross-cultural collaboration.

Topic Novelty

This paper will be a fresh contribution to the growing body of literature in intercultural communication because it focuses specifically on academic projects in the multicultural environment of Mykolas Romeris University (MRU). This study focuses its investigations on the real-life experiences of student teams who actively participate in creating academic projects, which is different from many other studies that have generally addressed intercultural competence or communication issues in multicultural teams in businesses or in general learning environments. Students from different parts of the world such as Asia, Africa and Europe contribute to the research by narrating their experiences of working in multicultural teams. The study analyzes how difficulties with intercultural communication arise in the course of ongoing project interaction and how these difficulties affect team dynamics. By combining qualitative and quantitative data, insights are drawn from experiences rather than theory alone. Students also share

suggestions for MRU about the improvements they would like to see in order to make their experience smoother and more supportive.

The thesis sheds light on the latest research and practical case studies. It also examines the role of technology, specifically the use of AI translation tools in hindering or facilitating communication in academic teams. The study provides a timely contribution given MRU's rapidly increasing international student body, making the findings relevant for current and future institutional strategies.

Problem Statement

Higher education institutes all over the world have adopted English-Medium instruction (EMI) as a common practice because it has aided in internationalization efforts to bring students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds together in cooperative learning settings, There are still many barriers to communication, even though this encourages intercultural education. It has been established that second-language competency and communication in the host nation are critical to international students' academic and social adjustment success (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023). Collaboration challenges, lesser involvement and miscommunication in group tasks are mostly caused by language comprehension, expression and communication style variations. These kinds of impediments could hurt students' self-esteem, make it harder for them to study and break apart groups.

Research aim

The main aim of this study is to explore the international students experience intercultural communication in MRU's academic project teams and to suggest ways to make collaboration more effective.

Research Objectives

The objectives of the research are as follows:

1. Identify the most important issues faced by students when they are working together in group projects at MRU.
2. Examine how cultural differences affect teamwork, academic performance and communication in group projects.
3. Evaluate how MRU's current academic environment and support systems help or hinder effective intercultural communication.
4. Investigate the strategies used by students to adapt, communicate and work effectively in multicultural group projects.
5. Develop actionable recommendations and institutional strategies to promote integration and collaboration for international students.

Research methods

The study uses both theoretical and empirical research methods to evaluate the challenges faced by international students at MRU. The theoretical part of the thesis includes the analysis scientific literature and comparison of the views of different scholars. It covers the key intercultural frameworks of communication such as Hofstede, Trompenaars, Hall, Byram and Kim. This literature study helped identify the important concepts of the topic under study as well as guided to the development of the research instruments later on. A case study method was used to focus specifically on MRU as a multicultural academic environment. The empirical part of the study applies a mixed methods approach in order to evaluate both measurable patterns as well as students' lived experiences in the university. A quantitative survey of 140 international students was conducted and 10 semi-structured interviews from students of even different cultural backgrounds were taken. Interview findings and conclusions were drawn from coding method (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and quantitative data was analyzed with the help of bar charts and percentages.

Significance of the Study

This research gives a voice to international students by highlighting their experiences and concerns. It helps MRU understand the specific communication barriers faced by their diverse student body and the findings offer practical insights that can reduce misunderstandings and improve the overall teamwork. It also prepares future MRU students to work more effectively in multicultural teams. This research reveals gaps in existing support systems for international students at MRU. Besides MRU, it also adds value for policymakers on improving internationalization in Lithuanian higher education. Overall, this study lays a strong foundation for future research on multicultural teamwork and integration in universities and academic environments. It encourages institutions to reflect on their current practices and consider new strategies for supporting learners.

Scope

The study does not attempt to represent all Lithuanian universities but instead offers a detailed case study of MRU. The geographical scope covers MRU's Vilnius campus, where the majority of international courses are offered. MRU also has campuses in Kaunas and Marijampole which were not a part of this case study ("About MRU," 2025). The timeframe of this case study is during the academic year 2024-2026. International students enrolled in master's programs taught in English are the prime focus as they represent a culturally diverse group. This study focuses on the intercultural communication challenges experienced by the student teams, particularly within the context of academic projects.

Limitations

The research relies on a limited sample size. Interviews were conducted from ten international students at MRU, which do offer in-depth insights but the results cannot be generalized to the entire international student population at MRU or to higher education institutions in Lithuania. Participants' responses may vary depending on their personality, cultural background, or level of adaptation. The answers are also influenced by human constraints such as memory, emotions, or personal interpretation. Different group sizes in assignments and projects may affect the experiences as well. It is worth noting that local Lithuanian students are not a part of this study, who also participate in project teams. The study captures insights from a single period. Intercultural communication evolves over time and challenges change as new students enroll.

Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is structured into three main chapters, in addition to introduction, conclusions, references and appendices. The introduction outlines the overall framework of the study. It presents the background of the research, the specific context of Mykolas Romeris University, the problem statement, the research aims and objectives, the significance and novelty of the study, as well as its scope and limitations. The first chapter highlights the theoretical foundations of the topic. It reviews relevant literature on intercultural communication, cultural diversity and academic teamwork. The second chapter describes the research methodology, detailing the qualitative case study approach, participant selection, data collection through interviews, ethical considerations and the chosen analytical methods. The third chapter presents the empirical findings and connects them to the theoretical concepts discussed in the literature. The next chapter summarizes key discussions and the concluding section then states the key findings and offers recommendations for students, faculty and administration at MRU.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Theoretical Foundations and Key Concepts in Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication refers to the exchange of information and meaning making between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. For the deep understanding of intercultural communication, we should view the theoretical foundations involved as well as key concepts. Researchers have recognized the consistent patterns through systematic cross-cultural research in different cultures shaped behavior and values. Each culture is unique and possesses its own values and ethics that define how people in that culture act and build relationships. To study the case of MRU, we must understand the underlying foundations of previous scholars and thinkers which include studying classical theories, cultural dimensions and contextual communication models to comprehend the concept that why people behave or think in a certain way. Once the people of different cultures communicate with each other, their thoughts and behaviors influence it. After comprehending such classical theories, cultural dimensions and communication models assist to explain why people from various cultures think and behave in a different way. This foundation is fundamental for exploring intercultural dynamics in academic and professional settings, such as at Mykolas Romeris University.

Hofstede (2011) was the first researcher who developed his theory in which he proposed six major dimensions of culture that explain how different societies and cultures think and behave across the world. His theory became a foundation for understanding intercultural communication for the generations to come. He believed that cultures act like mental programming, a woven system of beliefs that shapes how people act and react in organizations and social settings. This is why people from different cultures communicate differently. Hofstede (1980) conducted a very large-scale study where he analyzed survey data from more than 100,000 IBM employees across 50 countries, which led to the six dimensions that he proposed:

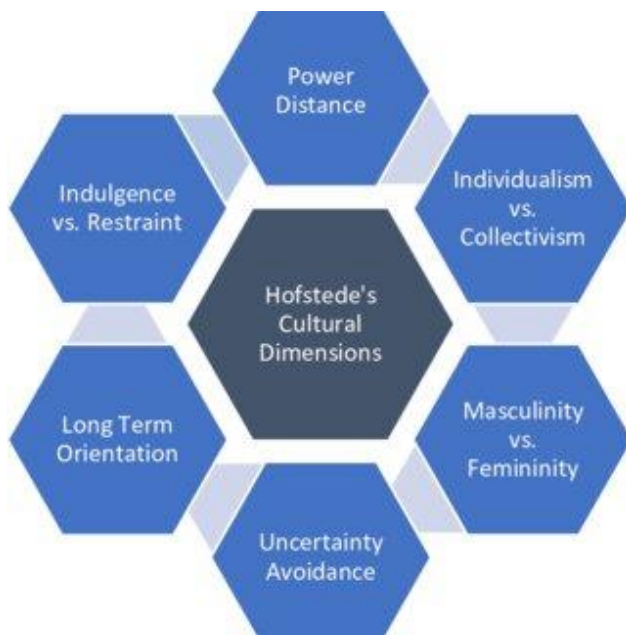


Figure 1. Hofstede Cultural Dimensions (1980)

Power distance: societies and people in different cultures accept unequal power distribution and authority. In high power distance cultures, people tend to follow the orders of people in authority without questioning. They respect hierarchy and formal titles. But people in low power distance cultures do not believe that some people have more authority than others. Rather they treat everyone more equally regardless of position or power. Open discussion and debates are encouraged and questioning authority is encouraged.

Individualism vs. Collectivism: this theory defined whether people prioritize personal goals or group goals. An individualistic society focuses on individual achievement and personal success. They would rather have self-reliance as opposed to a collectivist society where people make decisions considering the group as a whole.

Masculinity vs. Femininity: It is the cultural preference for quality of life versus achievement and competitiveness. A masculine society holds clear differences between male and female roles. They focus on winning and competition whereas feminine cultures value modesty and caring relationships. They are also flexible with gender roles and usually have more women in leadership roles.

Uncertainty Avoidance: It measures how comfortable a society is with ambiguous or unpredicted situations. A society that has high uncertainty avoidance will generally prefer established guidelines and create rules to avoid any uncertainty or unknown situations. A culture with low uncertainty avoidance, on the other hand, is more likely to stay relaxed and flexible with rules and procedures. They tend to welcome change and innovation.

Long-term vs. short-term orientation: Hofstede added this dimension with the help of Michael Harris Bond. He explains that long-term oriented cultures value patience and perseverance for future benefits whereas short-term oriented cultures want quick results and are less patient.

Indulgence vs. Restraint: Hofstede added the sixth dimension in 2010 with Michael Minkov in which he proposed that high indulgence cultures encourage enjoyment and fun whereas restraint cultures follow strict norms and values. The former is more permissive about lifestyle choice whereas later tends to follow more regulated behavior and allows fewer personal freedoms.

Hofstede (2011) showed that these dimensions interact with each other to create a cultural profile. For high individualism often correlates with low power distance because both value equality and personal freedom. We can explain why students from the various cultural backgrounds experience communication if we investigate these dimensions as an interconnected web. Students from high power distance cultures might expect to be in teams while others might want equal participation. Also, individualism against collectivism explains why some students rank personal grades but others focus on group success. Understanding these differences offers a perspective for analyzing the communication conflicts that frequently arise in multicultural academic teams.

An alternative framework was proposed by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2011) which engaged on how people address cultural problems in real life situations. Hofstede's dimensions offer systematic categories for sighting the cultural values, but Trompenaars' theory exhibits how these values affect interpersonal dynamics. Both theories differ from each other up to a limit but also reinforce each other at the same time. These theories provide a comprehensive comprehension of how culture influences communication and leadership styles. Trompenaars and Hampden (2011) established that their framework was useful in situations where the cross-cultural settings take place such as international education and organizational etc. Professionals as well as students often experience conflicting cultural expectations in these environments, that's why Hofstede's proposed model seems to be a more suitable. Seven dimensions were proposed as follows:

Trompenaars Cultural Dimensions

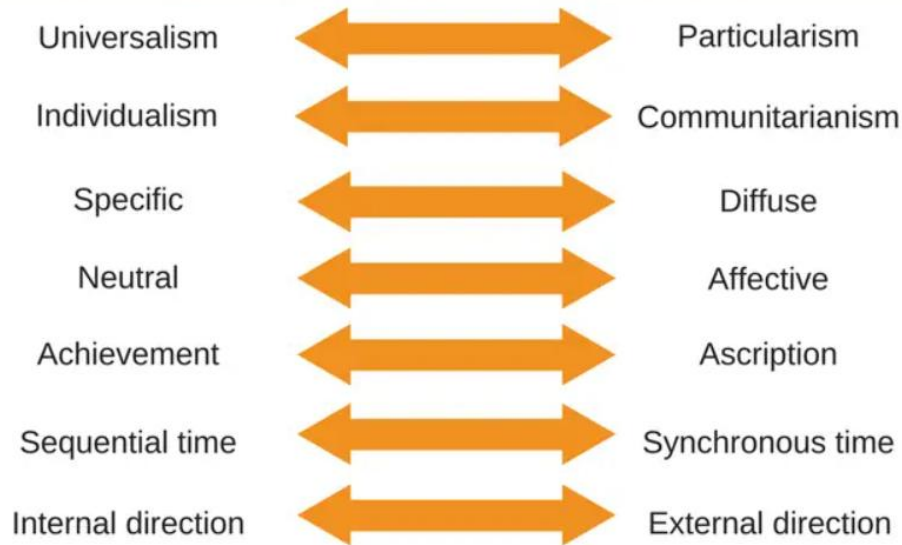


Figure 2. Trompenaars Seven cultural dimensions (1997)

Universalism vs. Particularism:

This explains either these rules can apply equally to everyone or depend on definite situations and relationships.

Individualism vs. Communitarianism: This dimension is similar to Hofstede’s dimension, which not only engaged with values but also focused on real behavior, not just values.

Achievement vs. Ascription: It describes either status comes from what you achieve or from who you are which means that factors such as education, family, age affect your social behavior.

Specific vs. Diffuse: It is the degree to which people keep personal and professional lives separate from each other.

Neutral vs. Affective: It is a measure of whether people show emotions openly or keep them hidden in different cultures.

Sequential Time vs. Synchronous Time: It measures whether people do things one at a time or handle multiple things simultaneously.

Internal Direction vs. External Direction: It is the degree to which people in a society believe they control their environment or are being controlled by it.

This model gained popularity because it addresses situations where people interact with people from other cultures in real world settings. This mostly happens in corporate environments or universities where

students come from different cultural ethnicities and regions. MRU is one such institute and hence Trompenaars' theory helps us better understand the case of its students.

Although both models gain popularity, Hofstede's model received some amount of criticism. Gerlach and Erikson (2021) questioned the ideas of Hofstede stating that cultural dimensions are not consistent and cannot always predict behavior in a reliable manner. They proposed that Hofstede's model tends to oversimplify complex cultures and reduces them to a few dimensions. They also believe that modern cultural identities have a hybrid nature and a limited study of IBM employees might not represent the entire population. This criticism questions the Hofstede's model and its deterministic nature. For certain dimensions, re-evaluations of Hofstede's data revealed no link between original and modified scores and the updated scales' internal consistency was poor. While the specific work by Gerlach and Eriksson (2021) focuses on Hofstede, their criticisms are applicable to other dimensional models, including Trompenaars'.

Alqarni (2022) also reviewed Hofstede's model and criticized that it does not account for intra-cultural variety and the global identities shaped by migration and globalization of the world. He proposed that the model is still useful, but only when applied with reflexivity and contextual sensitivity but it serves as an incomplete tool for cross-cultural educational research. Despite criticisms, Hofstede's work remains the most widely used framework, Modern scholars view these theories as starting points, not absolute truths.

Table 1. Comparison of Hofstede's and Trompenaars' cultural dimensions

	Hofstede (1980,2011)	Trompenaars (1997)
Key focus of analysis	Patterns like individualism, power distance etc	How people solve cultural problems in their interactions
Why cultural differences arise	Differences arise from value systems learned early in life	Differences arise from different approaches people use to resolve workplace issues
Relevance for intercultural teams	Explains broad tendencies in communication and hierarchy	Helps understand misunderstandings during task collaboration
Strength	Offers a methodical perspective to predict expectations for leadership and conflict.	Helpful in analyzing daily conflicts

limitation	Overgeneralization of cultures	Categories can overlap or shift depending on context
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These cultural frameworks can't show the full complexity of how people behave, but they still help to notice patterns that repeat in many societies. The models explain why some people prefer structure while others want more freedom and why certain groups see hierarchy or teamwork in different ways. When looking at these ideas together, it becomes easier to understand why people communicate differently or expect different things during group work. The theories also show us that cultural differences are not random, they come from long history and shared experiences. This understanding makes a smoother step into the next part, where the focus is on how these differences appear in real communication.

Communication Contexts and Models in Intercultural Interaction

Edward T. Hall (1976) introduced three major concepts: context, space and time in order to better understand communication across different cultures. He was an anthropologist who provided practical frameworks for understanding the dynamics of intercultural communication in action. His theory of high-context versus low-context culture measures how much meaning is expressed through words versus context and nonverbal cues. In high-context cultures, people in a society rely on implicit, indirect communication and context matters more than explicit words. Nonverbal cues like facial expression, gestures and silence are very important as relationships are built upon shared understanding. People are expected to 'read between the lines and make meaning out of a dialogue. This kind of social behavior is prevalent in different regions of the world including Africa, Latin America, some Asian countries like China and Japan, as well as many Middle Eastern countries. In contrast, countries such as the United States, Germany, Australia and Scandinavia are seen as having low context cultures. Such societies have the communication in direct and explicit which means that it only depends on the verbal messages rather than contextual elements. That is why when the high context students work with low context students, they can easily misinterpret each other. For example, when the former might show a minor hint about disagreement through indirect communication, but the latter might miss it and assume everything is fine. On the other hand, a low context student can be very direct with his criticism that can hurt a high context student who values politeness and civility.

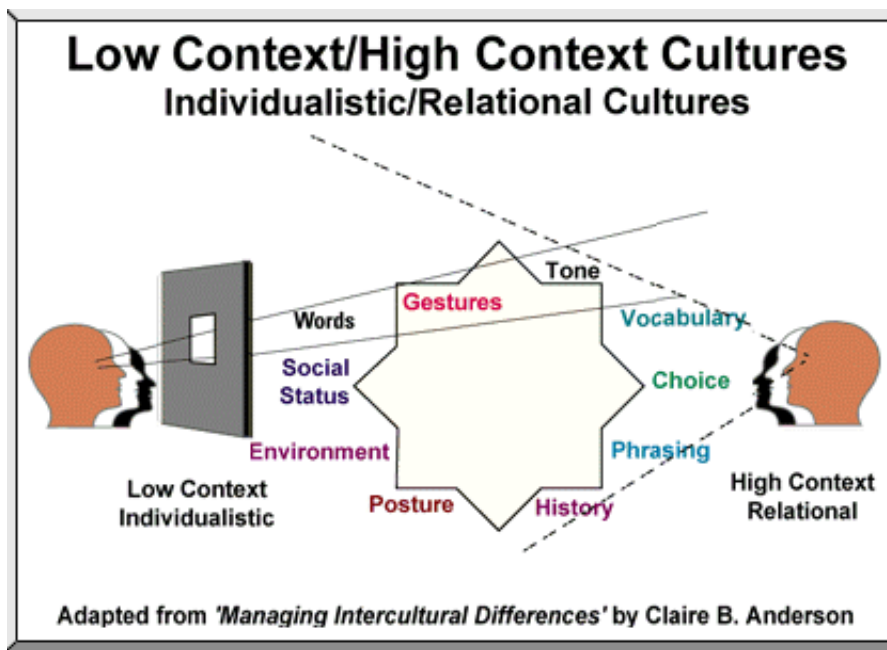


Figure 3. Hall’s high/low context communication diagram (1976)

The theory of proxemics was developed by Hall (1966) which demonstrated that people from different cultures feel comfortable at different distances from each other. In some cultures feel more relaxed in more distance between the individual such as while others comfortable with closer proximity. Contact cultures from the Mediterranean, Middle East and Latin America feel more comfortable standing close to each other and often use touch in communication. Northern European countries like Lithuania, Latvia and parts of Asia avoid unnecessary physical contact and maintain a considerable distance. A Japanese person might stand closer to an American than an American is comfortable with, due to different cultural needs for personal space.

Hall (1983) distinguished between monochronic and polychronic time orientations. People tend to focus on one thing at a time in a monochronic culture, viewing time as linear and a resource to be scheduled and managed. Punctuality is highly valued in such regions. Polychronic cultures, handle multiple things at once and human relationships and interactions are often valued over strict schedules or deadlines. Western cultures often incline towards monochronic time, while Eastern cultures tend to prioritize social events and gatherings demonstrating a polychronic culture. If an academic project has monochronic students, they get frustrated when polychronic students are late to meetings or miss deadlines, which is more of a cultural act rather than a lack of seriousness in their academics.

Table 2. Characteristics of high and low context cultures

	High context cultures	Low context cultures
Style of communication	Indirect or implied message	Direct and explicit in nature

Dependence on nonverbal cues	Relatively high	minimal
Conflict style	Avoidance to keep peace	Confrontation for clarity
Example areas	Japan, Korea, Middle East	USA, Germany, Scandinavia
Potential issues that can arise	Misreading, silence and light hints	Rudeness or bluntness sometimes causes problems

According to William B. Gudykunst's (2005) Anxiety-Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory, effective intercultural communication depends on managing two important factors: anxiety (the emotional discomfort and worry in unfamiliar situations) and uncertainty (the confusion about others' behavior and intentions).

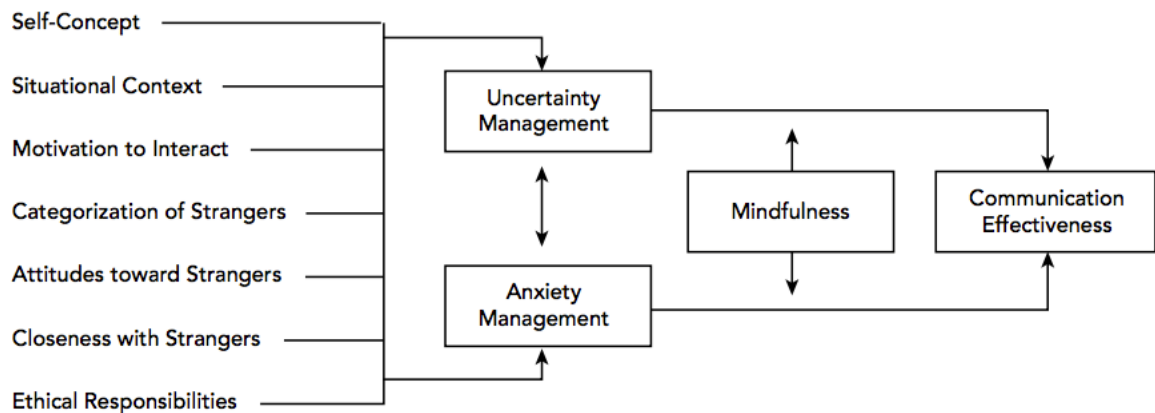


Figure 4. Gudykunst's Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) model (1995)

This theory demonstrates how individuals can improve understanding and reduce miscommunication. An individual tries to avoid communication in an intercultural environment and rely on stereotypes as they feel nervous and scared because of anxiety. A person feels entirely lost and overconfident due to huge uncertainty. To communicate successfully, it is necessary to create a balance between both. Gudykunst (1995, 2004) proposed a key solution in which one needs to focus on the conversation and should adjust the behavior based on the feedback that helps to alleviate the anxiety and uncertainty. Keep an eye on new information and noticing when you're making stereotypes can significantly improve communication. In academic environments, students must deal with various cultural variations along with handling the pressure of deadlines, group dynamics and academic achievement which make these frameworks particularly relevant. After understanding the described theoretical foundations, it can help both

students and instructors identify that communication challenges in academic projects are not personal failures but natural consequences of cultural differences.

These ideas show that communication is shaped by much more than only the words somebody say. Cultural differences in silence, time, personal space or emotional expression can change the meaning fast, even when people think they are being clear. The models also show how misunderstandings can grow when people use different social signals without noticing it. Paying attention to these things helps to understand why cross-cultural communication usually needs more patience and more checking for clarity. This background makes it easier to see how these differences show up in daily interactions and why they become important in teamwork.

Theories of Intercultural Competence and Adaptation

Intercultural competence is the ability to change your behavior and assessment to effectively communicate and work together in diverse environments. An important work of Michael Byram (1997) demonstrated a model of five interconnected dimensions known as savors that were constructed based on intercultural communicative expertise.

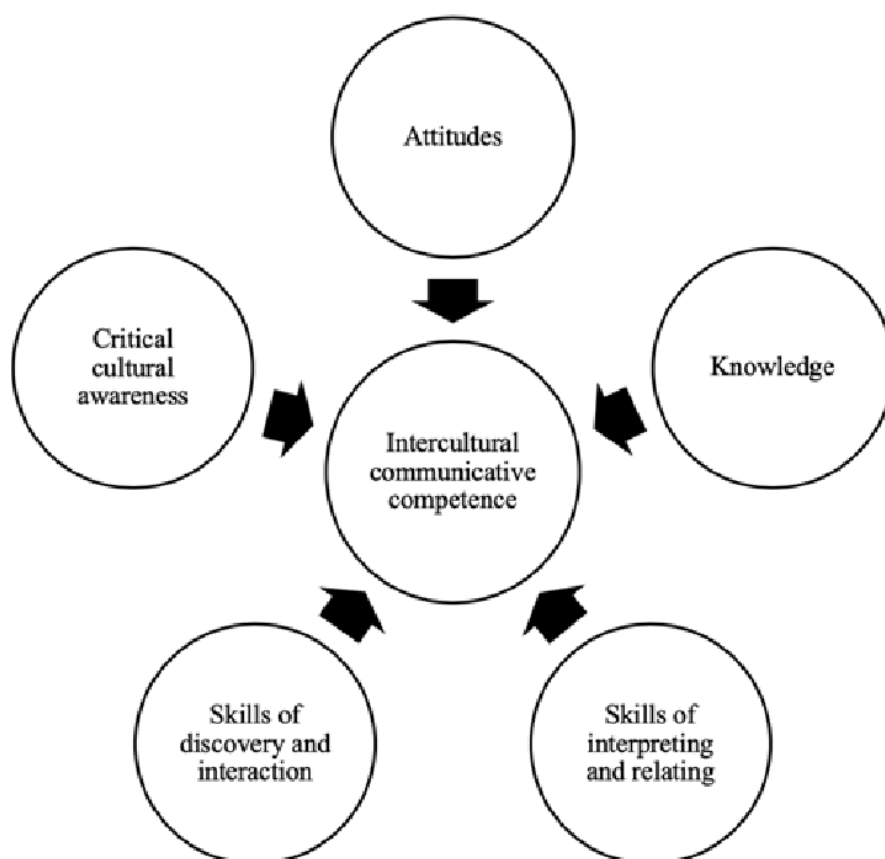


Figure 5. Byram's (1997) framework for intercultural communicative competence

These begin with savoir (attitudes), which is the readiness to seek out and participate in new cultural experiences rather than believing that one's own culture is the only valid perspective. Next comes savoir comprendre (knowledge) which engages the cognitive ability to interpret cultural perspectives and practices in context. Savoir apprendre/faire has the capacity to attain new knowledge about a culture and create an interpretative system for formerly unfamiliar meanings. The dimension of savoir contains authentic knowledge about other cultures, including their historic and social contexts. Conclusively, savoir contain the critical cultural awareness which facilitates individuals to evaluate different cultural views ethically, recognizing power changing aspects and their own role in cross-cultural encounters. Byram's model discloses that intercultural competence acquires through active engagement and the readiness to challenge presumptions, making it applicable to student's group where they are constantly decoding messages and undertaking misinterpretations. Despite Byram's model remaining influential but Hoff (2020) further extend it to include critical consciousness and ethical responsibility that make it relevant to 21st century classrooms. Rather to focus on skill development alone, Hoff argued the examination of underlying power dynamics and systematic inequalities.

The theory of Cross-Cultural Adaptation by Young Yun Kim (2001) also holds worth.

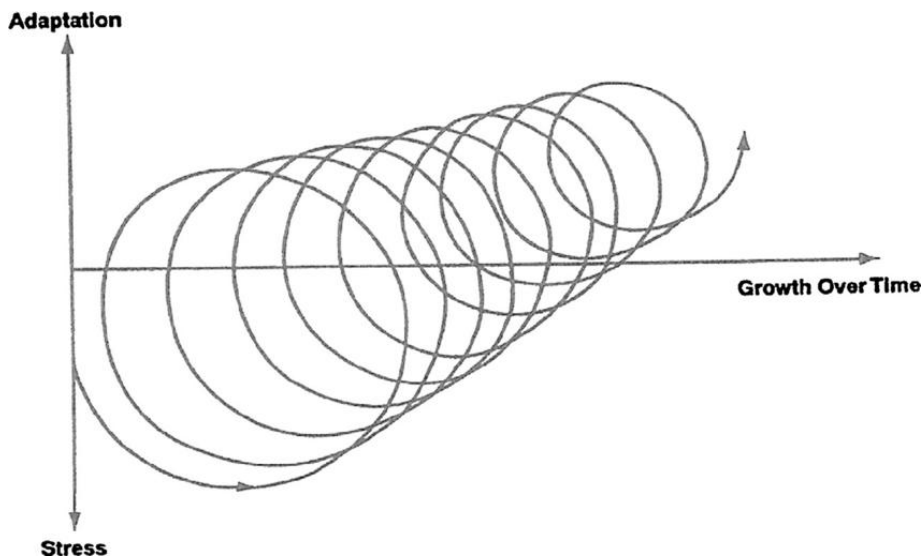


Figure 6. Young Yun Kim's adaptation cycle (2001)

According to Kim, the adaptation is not only linear, but it also involves repetitive cycles of stress and growth. Individuals develop intercultural competence through the adjustment of psychological and

functional adjustment to new cultural environments where the host communication competence plays the key role in adaptation. This is relevant to the case of international students at MRU because the initial communication difficulties often reduce with the passage of time and familiarity with the environment develops. Modern perspectives suggest that people are not limited to a single cultural identity, but they draw on various cultural frameworks which shift with context. Hong and colleagues (2000) described it in the Dynamic Constructive Approach. According to this approach the MRU’s international students are not solely ‘Japanese’ or ‘German’ or ‘Lithuanian’, but rather they have seen as individuals who dynamically draw on multiple cultural influences depending on the situation. Ang and Van Dyne (2008) developed Cultural Intelligence (CQ) theory that provides practical ways for the assessment and development of specific intercultural competencies as students work together. CQ identifies where linguistic, emotional, or behavioral support is required and provides resources to address those ranges.

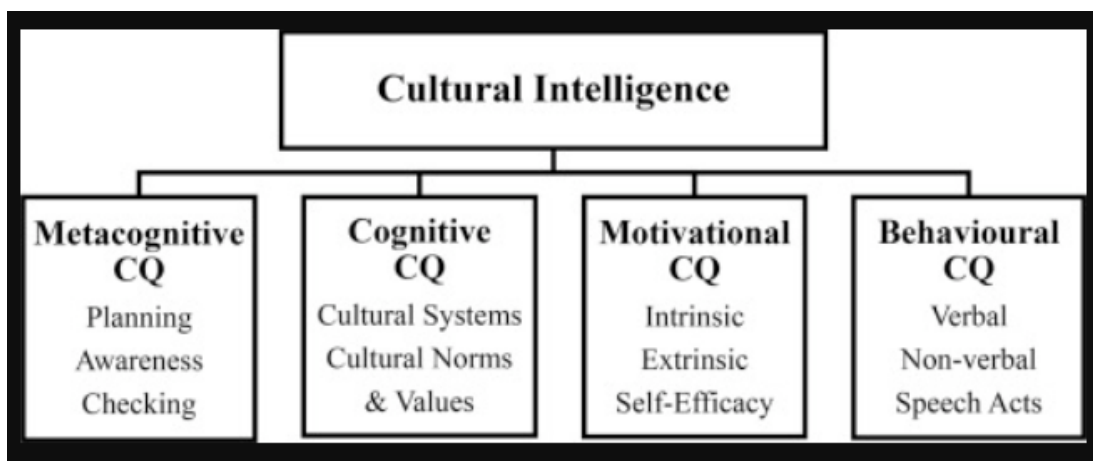


Figure 7. Cultural Intelligence (CQ) Model – Earley & Ang (2003)

Table 3. Comparison of Intercultural Competence and Adaptation Models

Model	Focus	Strength	Main limitation
Byram (1997)	Emphasizes the development of critical cultural awareness, open attitudes, cultural knowledge and the	Beneficial for educational settings because it explains how communication skills grow through reflection and repeated exposure.	less appropriate for real time cross-cultural interactions where people must adjust quickly

	capacity to understand and relate meanings.		
Kim (2001)	Stress adaptation growth cycle	Gives an explanation for how time gradually build resilience in cultures	provides less guidance on useful communication skills that may help students in everyday teamwork.
Cultural Intelligence (Earley and Ang, 2003)	Breaks intercultural competence into cognitive, motivational, behavioral CQ. (what we know, how motivated we are and how flexibly we act).	The components can be measured easily and can be developed through training.	focuses more on skills development than on cultural depth

These theories show that learning to communicate across cultures is not a fast or easy process. People adjust slowly and sometimes they don't notice how their behaviour is understood by others until problems appear. The adapting process can feel uncomfortable and it doesn't always go in a straight line, but with time people become more confident in new cultural situations. The theories also remind that adaptation is personal and different people find their own ways of dealing with unfamiliar environments. This understanding gives a more real picture of how communication skills develop over time and prepares the discussion for how these changes affect teamwork and everyday interactions.

1.2 Peculiarities of Intercultural Communication within Academic Environments

Characteristics and Dynamics of Academic Project Teams

As in 2025, an academic environment is a dynamic space in which formal teaching and learning takes place through technology with hybrid learning models as well as emotional support, along with inclusive design to fulfill the diverse student requirements (SpaceStor, 2025).

According to Stahl et al. (2010), fundamentally the academic project teams deviate from traditional classrooms as they are goal oriented, time-bound and involve active cooperation. These diverse teams can overtake homogenous teams completely as they bring diverse thinking methods which can lead to innovative problem-solving. This idea is also supported by Čuhlová (2023) because in this way a culturally diverse student team having one unique strength, communication style and capabilities. At one side this variation within teams enriches the group, but it also requires careful collaboration and management. According to Čuhlová (2023), the success of teamwork not only depends on individual capabilities, but it also depends on how well a team manages the cultural differences. It means the success of academic multicultural project teams significantly relies on leadership roles. In multicultural team, each expects leadership differently such as in hierarchical cultures, students want strong authority with a clear path to follow but in egalitarian cultures, the students want everyone to participate equally in decisions (House et al. 2004 – GLOBE study). A good leadership according to Northouse (2023), recognizes these expectations and adjusts their behavior appropriately. The most effective leadership creates a safe environment where all the team members feel respected and heard, regardless of their cultural background.

According to Guillen-Yparrea and Ramirez-Montoya (2023), students who experienced intercultural communication developed more intercultural competence than the students who only studied it theoretically. It was observed that students in multicultural settings were forced to understand different points of view and develop empathy through necessity. For example, when students make presentations or write the research paper, they combine their work needs to compromise on various aspects like the structure, tone and design of their work. These compromises show what different cultures value. It could be hierarchy, scheduling, or responsibility division. Nguyen (2021) also studied how international students develop intercultural competence through academic collaboration. He noted that students tend to integrate in academic teams faster with the help of supportive peers.

This explains how student teams work very differently from usual classroom situations, because everyone brings their own cultural habits into the group. Teamwork becomes a mix of useful ideas but also some confusing moments when people don't understand each other so well. Students handle leadership, communication and work styles in different ways and this creates small tensions inside the group. Sometimes people react in a way that others don't expect and it slows down the cooperation. The section shows that teamwork depends on how much students try to adjust to each other, even when they don't always manage it perfectly. This makes it clearer why group projects can become complicated even when everyone is trying hard.

Challenges and Adaptation Strategies

On one side Hwang (2025) recognizes the cultural differences exist in communication while Chen & Hu (2023) explain specific barriers that result from these differences. According to Hwang (2025), that same behavior can be misinterpreted differently as the different communication contexts create different meanings. On the other hand low-context cultures use precise words rather than implications. Their way of communication focuses on clarity rather than politeness. This straight behavior could be misinterpreted in communication with a person of high-context culture who depend on implicit understanding and subtle cues. These communication styles are neither better nor worse but they are just different. Chen and Hu (2023) take this idea further by examining the barriers that arise in such situations. They explain how these differences create real problems. Out of these problems, a major problem to be observed is limited or incapable English language proficiency. The language barrier creates the fear of participation in students' mind due to making mistakes while communication creates anxiety. This fear creates withdrawal and it eventually leads to isolation. According to Chen and Hu (2023), soft skills like critical thinking, digital literacy, cross-cultural awareness and emotional resilience can be helpful to address these barriers.

But Göçen (2025) shifts focus from external barriers such as communication styles and language to internal reactions. In his work, Emotional Intelligence and Intercultural Empathy, Gocen studies the role of emotions in multicultural team dynamics which is often overlooked. He identifies that emotions inclined to create complication in already existing barriers. Therefore, intercultural empathy and emotional intelligence play critical role for the success of the team, but if small miscommunications are look through, they can accelerate into emotional disputes. For example, if a person feels disrespected due to a cultural misunderstanding, he might take it as personal attack. However, it is important to look at the situation from another culture's worldview and respond with empathy. Teams with emotionally intelligent members who could recognize 'different' behavior from 'bad' behavior manage conflicts better and maintain stronger relationships despite cultural differences.

While Göçen (2025) shows that emotions matter, House et al. (2024) and Hoff (2020) explain why students behave differently. Hoff explains how hierarchical cultural values shape learner behavior in educational settings. He notes that societies that respect authority and do not question or challenge it, do so because they believe disagreement would seem arrogant or disloyal. Asking questions or doubting the leader is viewed as disrespectful. It is important to note that this shyness is not a personality trait, it's a value system. In academic teams, students from hierarchical backgrounds are unfairly judged for behaviors that are culturally appropriate. House et al. (2024) highlighted the concept of power distance previously given by Hofstede (1980) and explained that high power-distance students expect clear authority while low-

distance students expect equal voice and leaders who listen to everyone. This accounts for unequal participation as some students remain silent unless invited to speak while others speak freely.

Guillen Yparrea & Ramirez-Montova (2023) identified the institutional gap that acts as a barrier in intercultural communication. Universities subconsciously believe that exposure to diversity builds competence development automatically. They do not allocate the required resources to teach intercultural competence and students are left to figure it out on their own. Without active support, students continue using their own cultural frameworks to make meaning out of situations which give rise to problems. Sabet and Chapman (2023) studies what specific support systems are missing in educational institutions for multicultural teams and what support international students need. He identified that most universities lacks mentorship programs and training. When the right support is provided, students can manage challenges. Hwang (2025) identified), overcome the barriers Chen & Hu described, develop emotional intelligence Göçen emphasized and succeed despite the power dynamics House et al. and Hoff explained.

This means that misunderstandings in student groups come from many places, not only from language issues. One behavior can feel normal for one culture but look strange for another, so people read each other wrong without meaning to do it. Some students feel scared to speak, while others speak too direct and don't realize it makes the group uncomfortable. Emotional reactions mix with cultural habits and it makes the teamwork feel heavier than expected. Students try to adapt, but this adaptation also bring more pressure on them and sometimes create more stress. The main idea is that even when everyone try to work well together, cultural differences still get in the way and make the process harder.

1.3 Analysis of Key Barriers and Their Impact on Intercultural Interaction

Language Barriers and Misunderstandings in Academic Teams

One of the key barriers in intercultural communication is language. Even when a common medium of instruction such as English is used, misinterpretations are likely to happen due to the hidden cultural differences. Ye (2024) explains that language barriers go much deeper than vocabulary and grammar as they are only superficial elements. The real barriers are in unspoken rules. For example, what counts as polite varies dramatically by culture. Intended meaning sometimes gets lost or distorted even when everyone speaks in English because meaning-making is culturally embedded in people. Ye also points out that a literal translation of polite phrases can unintentionally alter tone. A sentence may be modest in a particular language but might sound excessively formal, or even sarcastic, in another. Once misunderstandings add up, group members will retreat to culturally homogenous sub-groups with the sense of safety in communication.

While Ye (2024) shows us that language barriers exist at a deeper cultural level, Bukhari et al. (2022) shows that the consequence of these barriers is that students withdraw from participation because of fear. It was noted that graduate students with lower English proficiency are often reluctant to take on leadership roles even when they know the content and are smart. Highly capable students remain silent due to the fear of embarrassment because they feel like it is safer to stay quiet than to risk humiliation.

Xu & Shapii (2025) observed how linguistic insecurity affects relationships and group cohesion in multicultural teams. When an individual's lack of language fluency leads to anxiety, it creates a psychological distance between local and international students where the latter start feeling like an outsider. Once a team member starts to feel left out, it weakens the interpersonal connection among team members and reduces collaboration quality of the overall group project. The irony is that this happens to intelligent and capable people, not because they lack ability, but because language creates a perceived identity of 'outsider' in their minds. This identity damage is separate from language skill.

Xu and Bt. Shapii show that emotional resilience and open-mindedness play a more decisive role in successful adaptation than language ability alone. It is better to the team establish shared norms such speaking more slowly or regular paraphrasing what others use frequently. Partners should give support and open discussions about language differences that help to increase attachment in an academic group. This way, everyone can follow as well as contribute equally.

Language difficulties often shape teamwork in ways students don't notice at first. A polite sentence from one culture can sound too sharp or too formal in another and these small shifts slowly change how people feel during group discussions. When confusion keeps repeating, many students start choosing to speak only with peers who share similar ways of talking, because it feels safer and less tiring. The fear of saying something wrong creates long silences, even from students who actually understand the work very well. Over time, this silence turns into distance inside the group and the teamwork loses some of its trust and flow. These patterns help explain why even motivated teams sometimes break into smaller circles and why cooperation becomes heavier with every misunderstanding.

Influence of Cultural Norms and Values on Communication

According to De Leersnyder et al. (2022), culture influences how people act and communicate in a group, even if they don't realize it. It defines how messages are encoded and decoded, how people show disagreement and who feels comfortable in speaking first. If the differences of culture are being noticed then the teamwork becomes easy but when But if these cultural of differences are ignored, then the team members are prone to feeling distant and confused. In MRU's multicultural groups, understanding that someone's behavior comes from their culture and not their personality can turn conflict into a chance to

learn from each other. It means that if an institution frames diversity as an asset, its members will work together in a better way. On the other hand, if the same institution considers diversity as a problem, members will retreat into cultural groups.

It has been noticed by Sherefetdinova (2023) that people understand others' behavior through the lens of their own beliefs and social norms that means everyone has a cultural template for 'normal behavior'. When someone behaves in different way, we tend to evaluate them against our template which means that we understand through our frame, but not their frame. According to Perminova & Shenderuk (2025), cultural differences that stem from hierarchical beliefs, appear clearly in academic projects. Such happens especially in task sharing and leadership. According to Yet Tang and Zhang (2023) that these challenges can become opportunities for international students to develop stronger intercultural companionships if divergent values are acknowledged and discussed rather than avoided. It is better to create space for informal discussions or sharing cultural stories and perspectives can build trust and empathy. This shows that acknowledging differences isn't always divisive, it can be utilized as a tool for bonding. This relationship development enables better cooperation within the team.

Another cultural variable is emotional expression (Furcsa & Szaszko, 2022). The way people express different emotions are easily susceptible to misunderstanding. This is because people across the globe learn to express emotions in a variety of ways. It is important to develop intercultural sensitivity to recognize that these expression differences are cultural, not personal. According to Furcsa & Szaszko, cooperation weakens when people assume negative intentions. Teams with higher intercultural sensitivity don't let misunderstandings escalate into conflicts. This is relevant in student teams as well where students with higher intercultural sensitivity adapt more easily to new communication styles and are less disturbed by uncertainty. It is to be noted that intercultural sensitivity can be developed through institutional support and reflective practice (He et al. 2023).

Different cultural values quietly sit behind every reaction in a team, even when students are not thinking about culture at all. One person hears direct speech as honesty, another hears it as attack, while silence can mean respect for some and disinterest for others. When these hidden rules are not named, people start judging each other's character instead of noticing the value systems behind the behavior. Over time, this makes participation feel unfair because some students are seen as confident leaders and others as passive, when in reality they are only following different cultural scripts. Recognizing these invisible norms gives the group a chance to turn confusion into learning instead of letting it grow into long term tension.

Non-verbal Communication Differences and Their Effects

Nonverbal cues, such as body language, tone of voice, facial expressions and gestures, contribute significantly to people's understanding of one another during conversation (Anjum et al. 2025). Anjum et al. (2025) found that students create a sense of belonging and connection by the use of nonverbal rituals and patterns. These could be greeting patterns, eye contact behaviors, personal space maintenance, or gesture patterns. When these nonverbal patterns match, people feel a sense of familiarity. This helps build group identity. Different nonverbal rituals can create distance or exclusion where people feel like outsiders because the group does not reflect similar codes. This sense of belonging or alienation affects confidence and teamwork.

Luna Alexandra (2025) presents a similar viewpoint as Anjum et al. (2025). She notes that confusion arises as a result of misinterpretation of nonverbal cues. For example, smiling in some cultures is seen as a gesture of friendliness and agreement whereas in other cultures, it is used to mask disagreement or used only in formal settings. Similarly, some gestures like a thumbs up, OK sign, or pointing can mean opposite things in varying cultures. In Asian or African cultures, direct eye contact is likely to be judged as rude, confrontational, or disrespectful whereas it is a sign of confidence, respect and honesty in Western cultures.

While Luna Alexandra (2025) gives us specific nonverbal differences, Uzun (2020) goes deeper into the concept of proxemics. He focuses on Hall's concept of proxemics and studies how physical distance carries social meaning. People have different 'comfort zones' for physical distance depending on the culture they come from. Southern Europe, Middle East, or Latin America are examples of high-contact cultures where touch is normal and friendly. They are comfortable with close proximity whereas in low-contact cultures like North America or Northern Europe etc. it is believed as penetration of personal space (Uzun, 2020). This displays that even physical space has cultural meaning. Depending on culture, body postures hold different meanings like leaning back, crossing arms, or slouching etc.

Ye (2024) identified as another key nonverbal channel is tonal differences that how something is said, affects meaning as much as what is said. Same words but different tones sound angry, happy, sad, or confused. In multicultural teams, tone misinterpretations create emotional distance. Sheretdinova (2023) shows that silence itself carries different cultural meanings. In some societies, silence reflects respect and sympathy, while in others it may be considered sarcastic.

In online environments nonverbal communication becomes even more challenging as according to Aririguzoh (2022), the visual and spatial clues that individuals use to sense agreement or emotion are commonly seen missing or lost in online meetings. At MRU, online meetings are becoming common, international students face further challenges as they must manage the loss of nonverbal cues that would have typically helped bridge misunderstandings.

Table 4. Understanding Nonverbal Communication Differences

Nonverbal communication	Interpretation differences	Scholars
Silence	Means agreement in Japanese cultures vs disagreement in western cultures like USA	Sherefetdinova (2023)
Tone	Neutral tone is seen as rude in some cultures because it has no ups and downs of voice	Ye (2024)
Physical distance	Contact vs. non contact cultures	Uzun (2020)
Gesture	High gesture intensity seen in African/Middle Eastern cultures vs reserved behavior in East Asian regions	Anjum et al. (2025)
Eye contact	Seen as a respectful thing in West vs seen as a disrespectful thing in Asia	Luna Alexandra (2025)

Small gestures, distance, eye contact or even silence carry messages that people from another culture may not be able to read correctly. A friendly smile, a casual touch on the arm, or a long pause in conversation can completely change meaning when it crosses cultural borders. When classmates misread these signals, they do not only misunderstand the message but also the person behind it, which can hurt trust and sense of belonging. In group projects, this means that some students feel warmly welcomed while others quietly feel out of place without knowing exactly why. Paying attention to nonverbal codes and being willing to ask what they mean gives teams a safer ground to work from, especially when communication already feels fragile.

Time Orientation Conflicts in Intercultural Collaboration

Hall (1976) defines that the cultures across the world vary considerably in how they understand and use time, which can possibly easily lead to misunderstandings within multicultural academic teams. Hall make the discrimination between monochronic and polychronic time orientations. Cultures prevalent in regions such as Canada, Japan and the United States are generally considered monochronic. They prefer a valuing schedules, structured approach, punctuality and approach to complete the task at the specific time.

In polychronic cultures, relationships often take priority over deadlines. Multitasking is very common phenomena in which time is seen as flexible and fluid. As the result of it, when the individuals of both culture collaborate in academic projects, one side of team work with punctuality and same expect form the other group both they are usually more relaxed with time. This gives rise to problems among team members.

Hall's framework offers a useful conceptual basis for discussing time orientation how a time orientation can become a resource of intercultural conflict. Amoah et al. (2022) used empirical studies from African and Middle Eastern student groups to investigate the practical misunderstandings that arise from this problem. The African and Middle Eastern student groups and found that team members from polychronic backgrounds are comfortable while handling multiple tasking simultaneously but monochronic peers interpret this as inefficiency or lack of commitment. As a result, problems include missed meetings, rescheduled deadlines, multitasking during group work etc. If these problems go unaddressed, these tensions can gradually undermine trust and wellbeing.

Perminova & Shenderuk (2025) found subtle, unspoken differences, such as how degree of strictness to follow the deadline which result in persistent breakdowns in group morale. Over time, recurring frustration can cause teams to underperform despite being technically successful. Kamal Bharain et al. (2023) observed how time orientation tensions even become more prominent in digital environments, which are especially increasing centrally for international academic work. He found that even a short delay in responding virtual communication can be misinterpreted as indifference. Shereftdinova (2023) gives a different and a rather positive perspective about differing time orientations. He challenges the monochromic assumption that fast isn't always equal to efficiency. Polychronic cultures often use shared time such as taking time to greet or talk to peers before tasks and these builds trust and social cohesion among members. Monochronic cultures may experience these rituals as a waste of time, when, in fact, they are essential to successful collaboration in some contexts, if seen as an opportunity.

Different views of time quietly shape how students judge each other's seriousness and reliability. For some, being early and following a strict plan is a sign of respect, for others, staying flexible and adjusting plans for people is more important than the schedule. When these expectations clash in one team, delays or rescheduling are easily taken as laziness or disrespect, even when nobody actually intends that. The result is that frustration grows on both sides and teamwork starts to feel emotionally heavy, not only technically difficult. When groups openly talk about their time habits and set shared rules, these cultural differences lose some of their power to damage trust and instead can become just another thing the team learns to navigate together.

Academic Writing and Presentation Style Differences across Cultures

One of the invisible dimensions of intercultural communication challenges in academic teams and specifically group tasks is the varying writing styles and presentations. Schartner et al.2023 examined how students from different cultural backgrounds present research findings, including video recordings, self-evaluations and peer assessments. He found that while West academia expects demonstrative and expressive work, students from Asian or Eastern European regions adhered to formal, academic language and were less expressive.

Li & Gong (2023) also observe the cultural shock some students face in the West since they were trained in regions where authority is not questioned or critiqued. Western academia looks at lack of questioning as lack of critical thinking. He found that students eventually adapted to the new writing style through the first year of their education. In the meantime, they pass through stages of confusion and anxiety of what's expected from them academically. Gradual awareness about new norms helps them integrate both styles into their work. Li and Gong (2023)discovered that students' own cultural writing values don't disappear. Instead, bicultural students develop a hybrid style, which actually makes their writing more nuanced than their monocultural peers. Teams that embraced style differences scored 20 % higher than homogeneous-style teams.

Xiao & Chen found that when team members openly discuss their writing values before starting teamwork, the quality improves by 35% compared to teams that assume everyone writes the same way. His study examined the comparative analysis of different writing structures and argumentation patterns of students enrolled in an institution with the same medium of instruction, English. The study revealed that individualistic and collectivist writing tendencies differ in nature. The former tends to be more argumentative in nature because the West values critique as intellectual rigor. The latter avoids absolute claims and uses a hedging language such as 'it might be argued that'. They prefer group harmony over individual intellectual standout.

Ye (2024) notices that accent and tone affect competence perception. His study is mentionable in this regard because he analyzed how teachers rate identical presentations recorded in 5 different tones. Same content had completely different evaluations. A native speaker with a flat tone is perceived as knowledgeable but unmotivated. A non native speaker with enthusiastic voice is perceived as trying hard but is seen as less competent. This barrier is learnable and correctable with guidance. Success in navigating these writing styles and presentation differences depends more on emotional strength and cultural awareness than on writing skill alone (Xu & Bt. Shapii, 2025).

Mouassine and Fatmi (2025) argue that the mainly real university strategy was not only correcting grammatical errors but rather creating opportunities for international and domestic students to share and

their different writing traditions to each other. This peer teaching model built both linguistic competence and intercultural empathy. Mouassaine and Fatmi illustrate that institutions play a key role as well. Writing and communication workshops help multilingual students gain confidence and participate more actively. With appropriate guidance, it was observed that a substantial improvement was observed in writing quality.

Table 5. Key Communication Barriers identified from existing literature

Identified communication barrier	Summary	Scholars who reported
Language proficiency issues	Varying fluency, difference of accents and linguistic fatigue	Ye (2024), Bukhari et al. (2022)
Conflict due to cultural norms	Differences in politeness, assertiveness in tone, hierarchy differences	Hoff (2020), House et al. (2004)
Misunderstanding of nonverbal communication	Gestures, body language and tone vary in cultures	Luna Alexandra (2025), Anjum et al. (2025)
Time orientation differences	Monochronic vs ploychronic cultures	Hall (1976), Amoah et al. (2022)
Different presentation or academic writing styles	Varying structure of writing documents, different style of argumentation and expressiveness	Li and Gong (2023), Schartner (2023)

Writing and presentation styles do more than decorate a project, they decide whose voice sounds professional and whose work feels out of place. Students trained in direct, expressive traditions may seem confident and creative, while those from more formal traditions risk being seen as too stiff or too quiet, even when their ideas are equally strong. Teams then spend long hours editing documents and rehearsing slides, not only to fix grammar but to hide these style gaps so the final work looks clean enough. This hidden labour usually falls on the most fluent or confident writer, which adds extra pressure on them. When teams treat style differences as resources instead of mistakes, they can build a combined way of writing and presenting that reflects more than one culture at the same time.

1.4 The Role of Technological Tools in Overcoming Intercultural Communication Challenges

In the modern world, digital tools and platforms have become a necessity for virtual collaboration across geographic boundaries. The importance of digital communication became more important during the pandemic of 2020 when the remote interaction became only way to communicate from behind the screens. Ever since, students have become accustomed to work together online for group project and academic tasks. It also serves as an opportunity for developing intercultural communication (Shadiev et al. 2020). Their study, involving over 300 students from multiple countries, highlights the positive potential of online environments, noting several advantages for multilingual and cross cultural interaction. Multilingual communication is supported by digital platforms features like real-time translation and text based chat. Written communication provides students with time for reflection before responding, such element is missing in physical communication. In this way students are free to adjust the group meeting time in their own pace and available time zones that suit them well. Digital learning is not just a tool to facilitate communication, but it also reshapes the way that the students experience cultural interaction. Xudoyberdiyeva and Arshad (2025) explore how these platforms can create more inclusive spaces. Students can use avatar, profile pictures and display names that reflect their cultural identity. Group chats can include cultural celebrations and informal social bonding.

The benefit of digital collaboration is not only confined to formal tools such as Teams, Google Meet, Zoom etc. Informal social media platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram and LinkedIn also play a significant role in facilitating intercultural student friendships and community building (Kumar & Nanda, 2024). The use of these tools is very significant because it does not require any formality, allowing peers to interact casually which helps them to develop better understanding of each other. It also provides opportunities for storytelling and shares cultural perspectives. On platforms like Instagram and WhatsApp, students exchange cultural memes and jokes. The students who have strong informal ties also perform better academically. Cultural awareness lowers their anxiety during participation. Hence, intercultural competence is not developed only in formal academic settings, it is developed through relationship building.

It is common practice to use translation tools when students face difficulty in conveying something complex. Lavrenko (2024) studied the role of translation as a technology that helps connect students in classroom as well as build cultural competence. He found that translation tools are most effective when used as support, not replacement. For example, when students are insecure about their English skill, writing assistants can help them in catching the errors and correct errors that helps reduce the anxiety about participation. Ning Li (2025) reveals that when students compared human and machine translation, they gain a deeper awareness of how culture shapes language and meaning. Consequently, if translation tools are used critically, they become the tools for cultural deep learning rather than just for language translators.

Digital communication can cause nonverbal communication to lose. McEwen and Lui (2021) noted that digital communication loses 60 to 93% of nonverbal information that necessary for accurate understanding of the intended message. They also believe that technology plays its part in learning, face to face interaction builds genuine intercultural competence that digital environments struggle to facilitate. Lavrenko (2024) also highlights some other limitations of translation tools that might miss cultural nuances and idioms when sentences are translated literally which may be grammatically correct but culturally inappropriate responses. Since it is just a technological tool, it might sound robot or insensitive at times. Finally, we can say that technology is very good supportive tool, but it cannot solve all the problems alone. Its effectiveness depends on its smart use and the recognition of its inherent limitations.

Digital tools changed the way students talk with each other, giving some comfort to people who usually struggle in face to face situations. Online chats let students think a bit longer before replying and translation tools help them express ideas they cannot say fast in English. Even with these benefits, messages often lose tone and emotion, so misunderstanding becomes easier. Students sometimes depend too much on apps and this makes the communication feel a little distant or empty. Humor, small feelings, or polite signals get lost and people don't always realise it. The whole teamwork becomes a mix of help and confusion, where technology makes things easier in one moment and harder in the next. These patterns show how digital tools are useful, but they cannot replace the careful attention that real conversation needs.

1.5 Analysis of Effective Strategies and Pedagogical Practices for Intercultural Communication

Intercultural competence (IC) and cultural intelligence (CQ) help individuals to adapt their communication styles and reduce problems in multicultural academic environments. Various researchers describe these terms in different ways. In 2019, Fantini and Tirmizi (2006) described IC as the combination of knowledge, attitudes and behavior, believing that it can be developed and improved through guided learning. Deardroff (2020) presents a slightly different perspective, intercultural competence is a continuous process that builds through reflection. It is a willingness to change overtime. The importance of ongoing practice as well as feedback is needed to refine these skills. Similarly, Hajor et al. (2017) also proposes that competence grows naturally through daily negotiation among team members. Participation in diverse groups like collaborative classroom projects naturally leads to acquiring these skills. De Hei et al. (2020) performed team based research and obtained that collaborative projects are effective tools for intercultural learning because they turn abstract cultural theories into practical skills. The former described ideas support the of Rogers and Farson (1987), who

demonstrated that cross cultural awareness requires active listening. Raza and Awang (2020) further also explained this view by accentuating the role of leadership in developing a climate of knowledge sharing, where numerous perspectives are valued equally.

The dynamic model of CQ developed by Earley and Ang, summarized by Northouse (2023), demonstrates that awareness, motivation and flexible actions are all required for true intercultural competence. They suggest that intercultural competence is about treating differences as strengths rather than barriers. Overall, scholars agree that success in multicultural academic teams does not come from removing differences. It is developed through time, patience and curiosity.

Academic institutions perform a major role in developing cultural awareness among students. Several scholars have proven this through multiple research across the world. According to Ruben, De Lisi and Gigliotti (2017), intercultural communication improves most in institutions where leaders promote dialogue and create a positive culture for intercultural learning among students. They compared universities with different leadership styles and support systems. In campuses where mentorship was encouraged through institutional help, intercultural competence was seen to be formed. Their approach is like Northouse's (2023) leadership model, which exhibits leaders who show empathy to students from different cultures, helps them to feel safe and respected.

Tilovatova (2024) reveals that when students reflect on their own assumptions and openly share their ideas or points of view with their peers, they can challenge stereotypes more effectively. Intercultural competence can also be strengthened through technology. Although Connaughton and Shuffler (2007) and Broesch et al. (2020) caution that digital tools alone are not sufficient, the effectiveness of these tools depends on ensuring that all participants engage actively and communicate equitably.

Together, these studies suggest that true intercultural development requires structured collaboration and conscious awareness. This can be supported by inclusive practices and responsible use of technology.

Intercultural skills grow slowly when people have chances to work together, reflect on their habits and understand how others think. Many researchers show that these abilities develop better through practice than theory, especially when students take part in real teamwork where different views meet each other every day. Leadership and institutional support also influence how safe students feel to share ideas or question their own assumptions, which makes the learning deeper. The idea that cultural differences should be treated as strengths appears again in many studies and it gives a more hopeful view of how teams can grow over time. When students listen actively, show curiosity and stay patient during misunderstandings, they build the kind of trust that theory alone cannot teach. Intercultural competence then becomes not a skill

you finish learning, but something that keeps expanding as people interact, reflect and adapt in shared spaces.

2. METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Sampling

This research design uses sequential explanatory mixed methods design to examine intercultural communication challenges among international students at Mykolas Romeris University (MRU). A mixed methods framework was used because communication issues in multicultural academic teams include both quantifiable patterns and personal lived experiences. Creswell and Creswell (2023) explain that mixed methods research is suitable when neither quantitative nor qualitative methodologies can entirely capture the complexity of a phenomenon. This case study has both relational and cultural aspects to it, making it necessary to integrate numerical findings with narrative insights. Quantitative data were collected through a structured survey to identify trends. The survey results showed interesting patterns, like how often people misunderstood each other because of multiple cultural factors. These patterns gave rise to the need for a deeper look into each factor. Hence, a secondary research of qualitative nature was conducted. This comprised of semi-structured interviews, to interpret the survey patterns in detail. This design aligns with Bryman's (2016) argument that explanatory mixed methods enhance the validity of findings by allowing qualitative narrative to clarify the meaning behind the quantitative trends. This case study of MRU is a detailed and in-depth examination of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2018). The university's multicultural environment, which contains students from more than 45 nationalities, makes it an ideal case for exploring cross-cultural communication (Mykolas Romeris University, 2024).

As for the research population, MRU had 757 international degree-seeking students from more than 45 countries in 2023 and the number of study programmes taught in English had increased from 17 (2019) to 30 (2023) as per a report published by the university in 2024 (Mykolas Romeris University, 2024). The total percentage of international students in MRU was found to be 13.25% according to the report.

These students come from many different parts of the world, such as Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Europe. ("Asian Center," n.d.; Mykolas Romeris University, 2024). Erasmus exchange students also made up part of the population and added to the variety of the sample. This diverse group of people is the basis for studying how people communicate in academic groups.

To find the right sample size, Paniotto's formula was used for finite populations (Paniotto, 2023).

Paniotto formula:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e^2)}$$

Given that,

$N = 757$ (total number of international students)

$e = 0.05$ (using standard margin of error)

$$n = \frac{757}{1 + 757(0.05^2)}$$

$$n = \frac{757}{1 + 757(0.0025)}$$

$$n = \frac{757}{1 + 1.8925}$$

$$n = \frac{757}{2.8925}$$

$$n \approx 261.6$$

A 5% margin of error was applied in the calculation as this threshold is a widely accepted standard in quantitative social science research. (Creswell, John W.; Creswell, J. David, 2023). Using $e = 0.05$, the sample size was calculated to be 262 minimum respondents. With limited participation, 140 valid survey responses were collected from the university's international student body. Numerous social science studies permit smaller samples when the research is exploratory and underpinned by qualitative triangulation (Saunders et al., 2021).

Qualitative Sampling and Data Collection Instruments

For qualitative sampling, participants were selected purposively. Data were collected through semi structured interviews that were conducted between 25 October and 15 November 2025. The interviews were taken online via Microsoft Teams and the dialogue was recorded. Ten international students currently enrolled in English taught programs at MRU participated in the interviews. These candidates represented distinct national and cultural backgrounds from seven different home countries. The participants represented seven national and cultural backgrounds:

1. Azerbaijan (2)
2. Kenya (2)
3. Pakistan (2)
4. Ukraine (1)
5. Belarus (1)
6. Kazakhstan (1)
7. Nigeria (1)

This cultural diversity ensured the inclusion of communication styles from Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Africa and South Asia, facilitating a more profound thematic interpretation. The sample size aligns with qualitative research guidelines for thematic analysis, as 6–12 interviews generally yield adequate depth (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The literature review was thoroughly studied and based on the themes identified from existing studies, a self designated questionnaire was developed on Google Forms. This questionnaire consisted of four different types of measurement scales.

1. Ordinal scale questions such as age groups and the number of times students worked in multicultural teams were included.

2. Likert scale statements addressed these themes: language barrier, confidence in communication, misunderstandings caused by accents or fluency, comfort expressing ideas to culturally different team members, participation dynamics in groups, the use of digital tools, institutional support, humor and cultural sharing, time management and punctuality differences.

3. Nominal scale questions about nationality, gender and observed communication issues were used.

4. The final question was a multiple response nominal scale ('select all that apply'), where each option was coded as a binary variable to capture the presence or absence of specific communication issues during teamwork.

To make sure the questions were clear and informative, five international students tried out the survey first. Small changes were made to the phrasing depending on what they said. The last version of the survey was then sent out online to MRU student groups and networks for overseas students. The survey was also sent to MRU support via email to ensure the survey reached Erasmus students specifically.

Survey responses were studied to explore themes and recurring patterns among international students. Based on those themes, semi structured interview questions were formulated. The questions were kept open ended and allowed participants to share personal experiences. Interviews were scheduled with the

participants and conducted online via Microsoft Teams, which is a common digital collaboration tool used in MRU. The interview discussions lasted 20 to 30 minutes.

All interviews were recorded with the consent of the participant and later transcribed for analysis of answers. To keep the anonymity of the participants, interviewees were given the names E1–E10. Questions focused on moments of misunderstanding, language barriers, nonverbal communication issues, experience with digital tools, time management conflicts and strategies that helped overcome differences.

Data Analysis Techniques

For quantitative data analysis, the online survey was open for two weeks. Students were invited through:

1. MRU program groups
2. International student WhatsApp groups
3. Personal contacts
4. Student ambassadors

Participation was completely voluntary. No personal identifying information was collected. A total of 140 valid responses were received. Survey data were then downloaded and extracted in Microsoft Excel. It was analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques. It is recommended in studies where the goal is to observe patterns, distributions and frequencies within data (Saunders et al., 2021). Percentages and frequencies were calculated and these indicators helped identify patterns. Visualizations were generated in the form of horizontal bar charts. The quantitative findings were later compared and connected with the qualitative interview insights, allowing the results to be supported, clarified, or contrasted using themes identified in the literature review.

For qualitative data analysis, Braun and Clarke (2022) method was used to analyse the qualitative data. The study required this method because it needs to identify patterns of meaning and subjective experiences. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six phases:

Familiarisation: Interview transcripts were read multiple times to understand participants's perspectives. Meaningful statements were highlighted after careful analysis.

Coding: The statements that related to communication barriers were underlined and short label were assigned to the interview excerpts that 'coded' their meaning.

Searching for themes: developing themes by grouping similar codes. For example, 'same language preference' and 'same group formation patterns' became 'linguistic clustering'.

Reviewing themes: Some themes were merged or renamed for clarity. Any inconsistencies were adjusted.

Naming of themes: all themes were clearly organized and named into categories. Subcategories were created where needed. Each theme included:

- a short description
- a subcategory
- at least one supporting interview quote

Final report: producing the report by connecting interview themes with survey patterns and trends and linking everything with theoretical concepts.

Research Validity and Reliability

To ensure the content and research validity, the questions for qualitative and quantitative research were developed from the theoretical framework mentioned in the literature review, along with data from previous studies on intercultural communication challenges. The important theories that contributed to the development of questions include intercultural competence theory (Deardorff, 2020), anxiety/uncertainty management theory (Gudykunst, 2004), cultural intelligence (Earley & Ang, 2003) and Hall's high/low context communication model from theoretical chapter. To make sure the questions were clear and informative, the draft of the interview questions were reviewed by the supervisor and five international students, their modifications has improved the wording and made it more appropriate for the study's context. Similarly, six international students tried out the survey first and small changes were made to the phrasing depending on what they said. Internal consistency was ensured through logical grouping and clear conceptual alignment of the Likert items, consistent with Saunders et al. (2019). For qualitative analysis, reliability is attained by systematic coding process and comparing the results with the theoretical framework.

Ethical Considerations and Transparency about AI use

The study follows the rules and regulations provided by MRU and complies with the university's ethical guidelines. All participants were well aware of the purpose of the study and interviews were taken after informed consent. They were also informed of their right to withdraw at any stage. Later, all the interview transcripts were coded with anonymity and no names or personal details were revealed in the findings.

Interview recordings and all other digital files were stored securely on cloud and were only accessible by the researcher. Sensitivity of topics such as cultural misunderstandings was handled with respect. Participants' mental and emotional well being was ensured during the interviews. These procedures

follow standard ethical guidelines recommended in social sciences research (British Educational Research Association, 2018).

MRU's guidelines about academic integrity requires that the researcher acknowledges the use of Artificial Intelligence tools. For this study, AI assistance was used for the following purposes:

1. Grammar refinement
2. Understanding complex academic literature
3. Calculation of Paniotto formula for sample sizing

AI was not used to generate any research data, or produce findings. All analysis and interpretations were completed by the researcher.

3. DATA ANALYSIS AND EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

3.1 Analysis of Interviews

The interview data were analysed thematically and the themes are presented using tables for clearer interpretation. To ensure anonymity while still acknowledging cultural background, each interviewee was assigned a coded identifier. The coding is as follows:

E1= Kenya

E2 = Kenya

E3=Pakistan

E4= Pakistan

E5= Azerbaijan

E6 = Azerbaijan

E7= Belarus

E8= Ukraine

E9= Kazakhstan

E10= Nigeria.

This coding system preserves confidentiality while allowing the analysis to consider how cultural background may influence communication patterns, perceptions and challenges.

Language barriers and communication difficulties

Theme / Category	Subcategory	Representative Quote
Language proficiency and fluency variations	Accent and pronunciation challenges	“Sometimes misunderstandings happen because of (...) accent differences – the way people pronounce some words is not the way it may be anticipated.” [E2]
	Formulation and processing difficulty	“Sometimes it was really hard to pick, like, correct words to describe something, or just to formulate my thoughts (...) English is my third language.” [E9]

	Regional proficiency variation	“We have a better level of proficiency in English. But if we have our fellows from — Bangladesh, they have quite a lower level of proficiency in English.” [E1]
Communication barriers	Difficulty in interpretation	“Sometimes I didn’t fully understand (...) but I didn’t want to stop them. So I just noted.” [E4]
	Linguistic fatigue	"After speaking in English for too long, my brain gets tired and I cannot express my ideas clearly anymore.” [E7]
Participation dynamics	Unequal participation due to language	“Some people are very active and confident while others contribute only when they’re asked to contribute (...) If you cannot ask me a question, I will not answer you anything.” [E2]

Interviews revealed that language difficulties were a major communication challenge, as highlighted by Ye (2024). Students frequently mentioned accent differences, fluency levels and difficulty expressing ideas. These findings mirror Ye (2024)’s ideas as he noted that linguistic differences go deeper than just vocabulary. Bukhari et al. (2022) and Xu & Shapii (2025) also argue that English proficiency is strongly linked to communication anxiety, causing students to withdraw or participate unequally. They contribute less than they are capable of. This pattern was clearly reflected in the interview narratives. Those with stronger English fluency tended to dominate discussions, while less fluent speakers only contributed when they were directly asked to provide an input. Some students may have contributed less because continuous mental effort was required to communicate in non native language, as narrated by one participant. The interview quote by E9 showed that cognitive load increased when the student tried to communicate in English.

Students from Kenya (E1 E2) have more daily English use so they feel more confident but they still face accent issues when talking with classmates from Pakistan (E3 E4) or Azerbaijan (E5 E6) where English

is mostly classroom based so the the pronunciation and rhythm feel different which create confusion. These backgrounds make some students talk too much and some talk too little because the mental work is not equal. Students from African regions share English more in social life so they enter discussions quickly and students from Central and South Asian regions pause more because their brain is busy translating inside. Students from Belarus (E7) feel strong very fatigue because their English learning is more formal very so long conversations drain them fast. Students from Kazakhstan (E9) speak English as a third language so they need extra time to form words so the pressure becomes heavy. This creates very imbalance in group talk because confidence is tied with the type of English environment each region grows up with so contribution levels depend more on background than ability.

Same culture communication preferences and linguistic clustering

Category	Subcategory	Representative Quote
Same language preference	Linguistic comfort	“I prefer Russian-speaking peers because English feels limiting (...) there’s something missing when we talk only in English.” [E7]
	Language based exclusion	“All of them speak Russian. So because I’m not speaking Russian (...) they should just kick me out.” [E10]
In-group formation patterns	Natural clustering due to language	“In our group (...) we had different group of people who were already separated, like people from Africa (...) stick together and people from post Soviet countries also stick together.” [E9]
		“In the beginning I communicated only with my people, but it changed (...) I realized everyone has something valuable to contribute.” [E8]

Many students can be seen agreeing that same language and same culture clustering happens at MRU. Participants’ responses depict that they were more comfortable communicating with peers who spoke a shared language such as Russian (E7) Some noted that English felt ‘limiting’ or emotionally less authentic.

This behavior reflect what Ye (2024) describes as the comfort of shared cultural scripts. Students that shared a common language grouped together and this made other students feel left out (E10). Students also observed visible clustering patterns in their teams, with African peers tending to work together and post Soviet students forming their own groups. Hall’s high/low context theory also helps explain why students felt ‘something missing’ when communicating only in English, as culturally embedded cues do not translate easily through a lingua franca. Sherefetdinova (2023) also notes that people interpret behavior through their own cultural lens, which can unintentionally reinforce in-groups when students feel misunderstood by those outside their culture. The findings are also supported by Guillen Yparrea and Ramirez Montoya’s (2023) argument that students rely on familiar cultural frameworks to navigate uncertainty, which can unintentionally deepen divides within teams. For some students, the clustering patterns started to fade as time passed. This suggests that intercultural learning can develop once initial anxiety decreases.

Students mostly stayed with people who shared their language because it felt safe so clusters formed fast. Post Soviet students like Belarus Ukraine Kazakhstan (E7 E8 E9) stayed together because Russian is easy for them and African students like Kenya Nigeria (E1 E2 E10) stayed with each other because their speaking style matches. Students from Pakistan (E3 E4) sometimes felt outside because they could not join these language groups. These patterns show students follow the place where language feels natural and the pressure is low.

Participation Anxiety and Communication Style Differences

Theme/Cateogry	subcategory	Interview quote
Participation patterns	Passive engagement style	“Some people are very active and confident while other contribute only when they’re asked to contribute (...) If you do not ask me a question, I will not answer you anything.” [E2]
	unequal participation	“If you know how to put your ideas into words, you will probably say more than other people. So it means like you have much more responsibility.” [E8]

Hierarchy participation	in	Power distance	“Some people (...) have more authority or (...) seem to make more decisions than others, usually those who speak English very well.” [E6]
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The findings revealed that participation in teams varied. As E2 narrated that some peers were more outspoken and tended to dominate others, so they spoke more while the rest remained quiet. Hence participation patterns differs in different cultural backgrounds. This is possible because Hoff (2020) explained that some students are socialized not to question authority or speak without being invited as this action is disrespectful. E8 expressed that unequal participation occurred because some students could express their ideas more clearly than others. This aligns with the ideas of Xu & Shapii (2025) that linguistic fatigue reduces spontaneous participation among less fluent peers. E8 also narrated that responsibility increased for a fluent speaker as peers assume they are more expressive with words. Hofstede’s concept of power distance helps explain how communicative competence leads to perceived authority.

Category	Subcategory	Representative quote
Direct vs. indirect communication	Low context directness causing misinterpretation	“Some students spoke very quickly, very directly (...) Which at first felt like criticism, but later I understood it was (...) normal for them.” [E4]
	High context cultures prefer indirect communication	“People from Korea or Japan will not say no directly (...) they were too shy to offend me.” [E8]
	Misinterpretation of directness	“Whenever I shared an idea, she interpreted it as offensive (...) as if I was personally challenging her.” [E3]
	Gesture intensity variation	“Some people present very quickly (...) others speak slowly and carefully (...) the audience experience was different depending on who presented.” E5]
Nonverbal communication	Varying expressiveness	“Some African classmates were expressive using like hand gesture and

		speaking very energetically. If you talk about the Asian classmates, (...) more reserved.” [E4]
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The interviews revealed clear contrasts in communication styles. Some students initially interpreted the directness of other students as harshness or criticism. As E4 described their experience, a misunderstanding occurred due to the varying communication style of their team member. A student (E8) from Europe described that their peers from Asia (Korea/Japan) were very reserved and avoided direct communication or confrontation. They practiced this in order to maintain peace inside the team. But E3 experienced that when they engaged in direct communication with their peers from another cultural background, it was misinterpreted as aggression or a personal challenge. E3 stated that they were only trying to express their idea openly. Sherefetdinova (2023) supports this finding, as they noted that cultural filters shape emotional interpretation. The differences in all these communication styles can be explained by Hall’s Context Theory, where some cultures prefer direct communication while others value politeness.

Students from Azerbaijan (E6) wait for invitation because their culture teaches respect for authority and students from Pakistan (E3 E4) hold back to avoid sounding too direct. Students from Belarus (E7) get tired quicker in long English talk so they slow down. These habits make participation unequal without anyone doing it on purpose. Students from different regions speak in different ways so the group talk becomes uneven. Students from Kenya (E2) talk more because their style is open and fast while students from Ukraine (E8) speak less because forming ideas in English feels heavy.

Nonverbal communication misunderstandings

Category	Subcategory	Representative quote
Tone sensitivity	Perceived coldness from tone	Someone asked ‘Did you finish the work?’ and I felt they were upset (...) but looking back, it was a normal question (...) my brain interpreted their tone as criticism. [E6]
	Facial expressions confusion	“Sometimes people nod, but it doesn’t mean yes or no (...) You need verbal clarification, facial features cannot help you.” [E8]
Digital text paralinguistic loss	Punctuation cultural meaning variation	“I don’t put a dot at the end on WhatsApp because in my country, it means anger (...)

		different expectations about what punctuation means.” [E8]
	Varying expressiveness	“Some African classmates were expressive using like hand gesture and speaking very energetically. If you talk about the Asian classmates, (...) more reserved.” [E4]

Nonverbal communication such as tone sensitivity or facial expressions sometimes caused misunderstandings among students, as revealed by the interview responses. E6 noted that they later realized what they had misunderstood as criticism was actually just a neutral message from their team member. Cultural background influences how tone is emotionally interpreted (Hall’s Context Theory). A student’s brain may automatically attribute negative emotion based on tone patterns that are unfamiliar in their culture. Another respondent, E8, felt confused because of facial expressions such as nodding. These nonverbal cues did not translate well across cultures. Luna Alexandra (2025) and Anjum et al. (2025) note that such confusions occur because different nonverbal cues can hold different meanings across cultures. Nodding does not universally mean “yes”; in some cultures, nodding shows politeness or engagement without agreement. E4 described how some African peers were more expressive with their hand gestures, while others were not. Neither style is better or worse, but the difference makes more expressive students appear more engaged. E8 also narrated a miscommunication they experienced in digital communication. They explained that the use of a period (.) signals anger or formality in their culture but is neutral in others. This behaviour is explained by Aririguzoh (2022), who notes that digital environments worsen misunderstandings by removing tone and body language that would normally clarify meaning.

Nodding also confuse students because in some countries like Azerbaijan (E5 E6) nod is yes in other places it is only polite listening so the meaning gets mixed. Online chat also becomes messy because a dot looks too serious for some students from Eastern Europe like Belarus (E7) and for students from African or Western style backgrounds it is normal writing so the message feels different. All these small things make communication heavy and people think the other person is upset when they are not. Students from different places understand tone and face in different ways so misunderstandings happen a lot. A student from a post Soviet region like Belarus (E7) or Ukraine (E8) maybe hear a flat voice and think it is criticism because in their culture tone feels more serious. A student from Pakistan (E3 E4) can read emotions too fast from voice so a normal message feels negative. Students from African countries like Kenya (E1 E2) or Nigeria (E10) use more hand movement and more open face so others feel they are more active but it is only their style.

Time Orientation conflicts and deadlines management

Category	Subcategory	Representative quote
Monochronic vs. polychronic patterns	Flexible timeline perspective	“Some people were like delaying, you know, because we have so much time. And for me, I didn’t really like it (...) If we can just be done (...) within couple of days.” [E8]
	Planning preference variation	“So the first few meetings felt a bit confusing because everyone approached discussion differently. Some wanted detail plans, others wanted to start quickly.” [E4]
	Deadline approach differences	“In my bachelors studies form my country (...) we can finish after the deadline and nobody cares. But here everyone is stressed about meeting it exactly.”
Institutional effect	Professor controlled compliance	“When we have a strict regulation from our teacher, everybody will be on time (...) but when it’s just group decided, people are more flexible.” [E7]

Students from different regions handle time in different ways so planning becomes confusing. Students from Ukraine (E8) like to finish tasks fast while students from Pakistan (E4) prefer slower start or flexible planning so the team rhythm breaks. Students approached planning, deadlines and time management within their international teams differently. Hall’s conflicting monochronic and polychronic time orientations appeared in academic teams as well, as some students wanted rapid completion of tasks to maximize efficiency while others were more relaxed. This was noted by E8 and caused frustration for them. E4 narrated that some peers wanted detailed plans while others wanted to get started right away. This may be because monochronic cultures prefer detailed schedules and step by step task completion, whereas polychronic cultures adjust their work as they go. The interviews also revealed that institutional structure

can resolve time orientation differences. When the professor imposes strict deadlines, all students follow the schedule regardless of cultural background. This creates temporary monochronic behavior even among polychronic students. This shows that time orientation is not a fixed personality trait but a cultural response to context. Sherefetdinova (2023)'s insight about shared rituals is relevant here, as he argues that institutional strictness can create a unified cultural norm within the team.

Students from Belarus (E7) follow deadlines only when the teacher sets strict rules because in their home system group decided deadlines feel more relaxed. Students from Azerbaijan or Kazakhstan (E5 E9) shift between both styles because they grew up with mixed scheduling habits. These differences make the team move in different speeds because each region learns time and deadlines in a different cultural way.

Writing and Presentation Style differences

Category	Subcategory	Representative quote
Writing style variation	Formal vs casual styles	“Some people write formally (...) others write more casually (...) we had to agree on a style for the final document.” [E2]
	Integration burden	“It took really long time to edit everything (...) make sure the whole document read as if one person wrote it. [E4]
Presentation delivery variation	Gestures and expressiveness	“Some teammates used a lot of body language when presenting (...) Indian for example, use a lot of head movement when they speak you know (...) Asian classmates, (...) more reserved.” [E10]

There is a direct writing style clash among students. Some students (likely from Western backgrounds) write more casually or assertively, while others (likely Eastern) write more formally. Schartner et al. (2023)'s research shows that writing styles differ significantly between Western and non Western academia. Both styles are correct in their own contexts, but the differences clearly exist.

Negotiations take place regarding which style should be used. E4 captures the labor that goes into editing the work for style coherence. Li Gong (2023) revealed that students initially experience confusion and anxiety when encountering new writing norms but later develop a hybrid writing style. This integration process is effortful, but teams eventually achieve quality improvement. E4 also showed the varying style of body language when different students are presenting in front of the class. They narrated a personal observation that Indian students use a lot of body gestures and head movements when explaining something, while other classmates, like Asians, used fewer body movements and were more reserved. This gesture intensity and expressiveness variation in presentation delivery sometimes causes teachers and peers to rate the same intellectual content differently based on delivery style (Ye, 2024). Xu and Shapii (2025) argue that emotional and cultural awareness matter more than matching expected expressiveness.

Presentation delivery changed from group to group because students from Indian and African backgrounds used more gestures and open movement and students from East Asian or post Soviet regions were more calm and reserved so the classroom energy never looked the same. These patterns made it clear that no single style felt correct for everyone because each region carried its own idea of what good writing or good presenting should look like. Students showed very mixed writing and presenting habits so the group work kept shifting in tone. Students from African regions often wrote in a more relaxed way while students from South Asian regions leaned to more formal careful writing so the final document felt uneven until they edited it many times.

Digital tools and the role of technology

Theme / Category	Subcategory	Representative quote
Platform effectiveness	Instant communication	“We are always using like WhatsApp for direct fast exchanging of information and it helps (...) instant communication.” [E7]

		<p>“I collected so many funny stickers from our WhatsApp class group chats (laughs).” [E8]</p>
	Collaborative editing benefits	<p>“Google Docs work best because everyone could add it together (...) we could see changes in real time.” [E4]</p>
	Time for composition	<p>“Yeah, it was really helpful. Well, with text communication, (...) I had time to translate in my head in my own language first (...) not rushed like face to face meetings.” [E9]</p>
	Regional platform preferences	<p>“For me, in Kazakhstan we are using telegram pretty often, like as often as WhatsApp, but the thing is like when I was suggesting it in our group chat, apparently some of people didn't use it at all, or some of them had like issues with that.” [E9]</p>
Digital communication challenges	Tone distortion in translation	<p>“Sometimes translation tools changes the tone of the message (...) making them sound more serious than intended.” [E4]</p>
	Context loss in written communication	<p>“Miscommunication can happen because (...) text (...)</p>

		missing nonverbal cue(...) you cannot see if someone is joking or serious.” [E8]
	Internet connectivity issues + messages lost in fast moving chats	“Sometimes had internet issues and in WhatsApp messages, sometimes messages got lost in the chat because it moves faster.” [E4]
	Emotional impact	“I was kind of really, really upset (...) it was kind of little bit noise in the class. It was a drama (...) feeling excluded.” [E10]

Digital communication tools played a significant but complex role in facilitating teamwork among international students. Many participants described platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram and Google Docs as essential to fast and efficient coordination. Digital communication also provided linguistic benefits. E9 shared that written communication allowed time to think, translate and compose responses more carefully. According to Shadieff et al. (2020), written communication reduces linguistic anxiety by allowing non-native speakers more processing time. Lavrenko (2021) adds that translation support combined with reflection time reduces the anxiety that multilingual students feel about participating in real-time communication. Instant messaging apps like WhatsApp are fast and allow speedy communication as opposed to email-based conversations that take longer. Vikas Nanda (2022) shows that informal platforms help community building as peers share jokes and memes. E8 shared that they collected a lot of funny stickers from their WhatsApp groups that they shared with their multicultural team members.

The disadvantage of digital communication is, that it removes the nonverbal communication (McEwen and Lui, 2021). One student described this problem [E8] saying that you cannot tell whether the other person is joking or serious. E10 stated a very specific conflict where they texted a joke in the WhatsApp group during class and one of the group members took it very seriously because of a cultural difference, which created drama in the class. Sherefetdinova (2023) states that people interpret others' messages through their own cultural understanding. Aririguzoh (2022) shows that without contextual clues

in digital communication, students assign meaning to small things like punctuation marks or tone, which can lead to misinterpretation.

Technical problems can disrupt communication as well. Kamal Bharain et al. (2023) identifies that internet connectivity issues can cause messages to get lost or disappear in fast moving chat threads. One participant described experiencing these technical problems. Another problem they mentioned is that messages can get lost or disappear in fast moving chat threads. One participant (E9) also revealed that different regions have different platform preferences. They prefer Telegram in Kazakhstan, but other students felt uncomfortable using it when they recommended it due to unfamiliarity with the platform. Durdon Arshad (2025) shows that platform choice reflects cultural identity and regional digital culture, which explains why adopting a new platform can feel challenging for some team members.

Some regions prefer WhatsApp while others use Telegram or other apps so not everyone felt comfortable on the same platform. Text communication helped some students think and translate slowly in their own language but it also caused problems because tone and jokes get lost. Fast chat groups made messages disappear and internet issues made people feel left out. Digital tools helped the work move fast but also created small misunderstandings because people from different regions read messages in different ways.

Personal Adaptation and Intercultural Competence development

Theme / Category	Subcategory	Representative quote
Competence development	Integration with time	“In the beginning I communicated only with my people, but it changed (...) I realized everyone has something valuable to contribute.” [E8]
	Language choice management	“I try to like change the word. I try to replace it with much simpler word. So it will make sense because I realized that (...) especially for non native people, it's quite hard to know every

		slang, even for me because sometimes I talk to people who use different like slangs (...) so I use simple words.” [E6]
	Openness and broadening perspective	“Working with different cultures made me less conservative and more open minded (...) I’m more willing to try different ways of doing things.” [E9]
	Comfort with linguistic imperfection	“Yeah, so I’m not stressed about perfect English now (...) communication is about understanding, not perfect grammar.” [E6]
	Speaking slowly to adapt	“I start speaking more slowly (...) I feel I speak fastly but other not understand what I’m trying to say. So I try to speak more slowly using simple words.” [E4]

Over time, international students develop both intercultural competence and practical strategies for effective working in multicultural teams. As E8 explained, they had extended contact with other team members over time rather than only communicating with people from similar cultural backgrounds. Young Yun Kim (1988, 2001) explains that this adaptation happens through repeated cycles of stress and learning. Guillen Yparrea Ramirez Montoya (2023) found that students in multicultural teams build stronger intercultural competence than those who only study it in theory. De Hei et al. (2019) shows that collaborative projects teach practical intercultural skills through necessity rather than abstract learning. Students narrated the different practices they adopted to become more understandable to their fellow peers and to understand

their peers more effectively. Some students stated that they try to speak more slowly or use fewer slangs that others are not familiar with. Xu & Shapii (2025) identifies that open mindedness and the willingness to adapt communication to accommodate others promotes relationship building as well as competence development. Tang & Zhang (2023) adds that when speakers deliberately slow down and simplify their language, it signals respect and inclusion, which builds trust within the team.

One student narrated that they are not so worried about perfecting their English; they just try to get their message across in the best possible way. This reflects Xu & Shapii (2025) finding that acceptance of linguistic imperfection matters more than grammar perfection. Students who move away from perfectionism and toward pragmatism experience lower anxiety and participate more actively. Working with different cultures made students less conservative and more open minded. Byram (1997) calls this "savoir etre", the willingness to engage with new cultural experiences rather than assuming one's own culture is the only valid way. Hoff (2020) adds that intercultural competence involves examining power dynamics and challenging one's own assumptions. Through practical teamwork, students naturally develop intercultural competence and cultural intelligence, becoming more open to diverse approaches and developing stronger relationships with peers from different backgrounds.

Many students stopped worrying about perfect grammar and focused more on being understood. Some even slowed down their speaking so others could follow better. These small changes show that intercultural competence grows through practice not theory and students learn to soften their habits so teamwork becomes easier. At first many stayed only with their own group because it felt safe but with time they started mixing more and learning that other styles also work. Some students began using simpler words because they realized slang and fast talking confuse classmates from other regions. Others became more open minded because they saw different ways of doing tasks.

Perceived Institutional Support

Theme	Subcategory	Representative quote
Perceived institutional support	Lack of guidance	“Honestly I don’t think the university provides enough support in this area. There aren’t specific trainings, workshops, or guidance for intercultural teamwork.” [E5]
	No promotion of events	“I think there is a breakdown in communication

		between (...) the international office and the international students (...) events organized but not promoted.” [E1]
	Abandoned feeling	“No one explains you this stuff (...) you are on your own (...) you’re like a child who (...) going to kindergarten and have to really like, realise it all yourself.” [E8]
Recommended support	Freshman preparation	“You know, I think freshmen should be told that (...) you will work with different people (...) you are going to meet these new people (...) they’re not like you and they’re not like your country mates (...) Yeah, preparation matters.” [E8]
	Curriculum integration	“Intercultural communication should be part of the curriculum atleast in the beginning (...) not optional, mandatory for everyone.” [E10]

Many students report that universities do not provide enough institutional support for intercultural competence development. Guillen Yparrea Ramirez Montoya (2023) explains that many universities assume exposure to diversity alone will build intercultural competence among students, but this assumption is not true, as shown in the interview results. Sabet and Chapman (2023) also found that most universities lack mentorship programs, which is a critical missing piece. One student shared that there is a lack of communication between the international students office and international students. Northouse (2023) explains that leaders who show empathy to students from different cultures help them feel safe and respected. The communication breakdown between the international office and students reveals a lack of

empathetic leadership and understanding of how to reach international students effectively. Sabet and Chapman (2023) specifically identify that missing mentorship programs create a sense of isolation. This is evident in an interview where one student stated that they feel like a kindergarten child left alone to struggle and figure out everything themselves. Mouassine and Fatmi (2025) found that the most effective university strategy is creating peer teaching opportunities where students discuss different cultural approaches with each other. Peer mentorship would transform the "figure it out yourself" experience into guided learning supported by senior students.

Students were asked to provide recommendations for change and they suggested that freshmen should be mentally prepared about what they are about to encounter. Tilovatova (2024) reveals that when students think about and challenge their own stereotypes before entering multicultural teams, they are better prepared. Early orientation addressing cultural differences before group projects begins will be effective in preparing students for upcoming challenges.

Students acknowledge that the university does arrange events and informal gatherings, but they are not promoted sufficiently, so students do not attend. One student also stated that intercultural communication should be part of the curriculum at least in the beginning, preferably as a mandatory rather than optional course. . Some believed intercultural communication should be taught early because students come from different cultures and think differently so preparation would make teamwork less confusing. Students felt the university did not guide them enough so many had to figure things out alone. Some felt abandoned because there was no clear explanation about how to work in multicultural teams so they entered projects unprepared. Many wished for a simple orientation or mentorship system so new students know what to expect.

3.2 Quantitative Analysis

Overview of Survey Results

A total of 140 students participated in the survey formulated to assess intercultural communication experiences in academic group projects at MRU. These were all international students and demonstrate substantial cultural diversity.

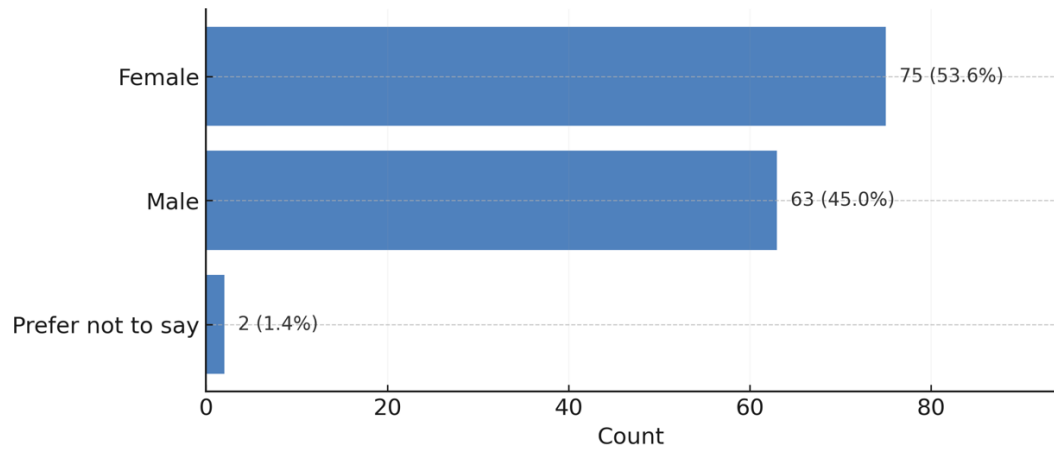


Figure 8. Gender Distribution (n=140)

Gender can affect communication styles and team dynamics, according to research on intercultural communication, which makes this gender balance crucial. 140 international students from Mykolas Romeris University participated in the survey. According to the gender distribution, two students (1%) chose not to reveal their gender, while 75 students (54%) identified as female and 63 students (45%) as male. Hofstede (1980, 2011) and House et al. (2004, 2024) claim that masculinity femininity dimensions differ throughout cultures and influence group communication. The sample exhibits a fairly balanced gender representation, with a little female predominance.

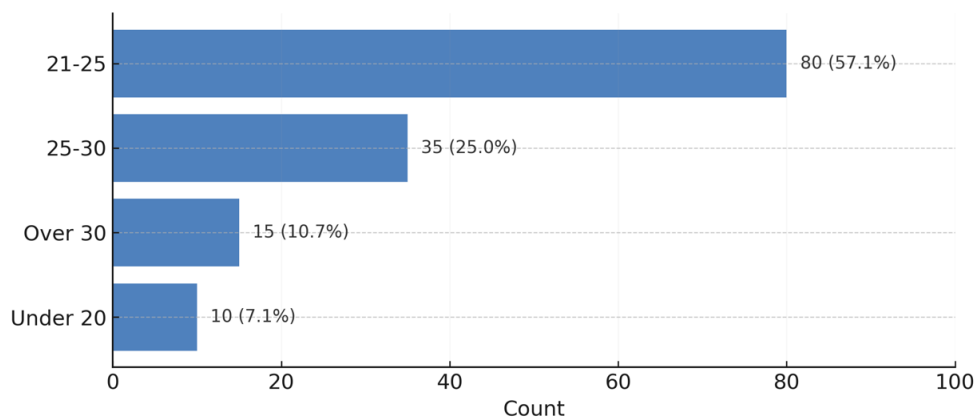


Figure 9. Age Distribution (n=140)

The age distribution of responses shows that most of the students who were asked are in the average university age range. Older students and working professionals often possess greater intercultural experience and unique communication styles compared to younger, traditional age university students

(Young Yun Kim, 1988, 2001). The sample is mostly made up of people between the ages of 21 and 30, with 82% of respondents in this age group. The biggest group in the sample was 80 students (57%) who were between the ages of 21 and 25. A large number of students were a little older, as shown by the fact that 35 of them (25%) were between the ages of 25 and 30. Fifteen students (11%) were beyond the age of thirty. Seven percent of the pupils, or ten, were under 20 years old. This age distribution is essential for understanding the dynamics of intercultural communication.

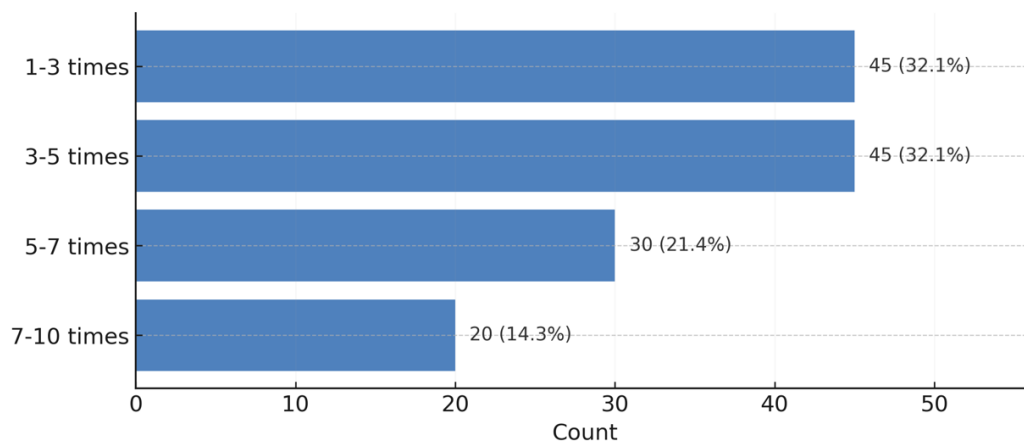


Figure 10. Experience with Multicultural Group work (n=140)

The people who took the survey had different amounts of experience working in multicultural groups before. This analysis is significant for understanding the evolution of multicultural communication skills. Young Yun Kim (1988, 2001) and Guillen Yparrea Ramirez Montoya (2023) contend that the development of intercultural competency necessitates consistent contact and exposure over time. Only 20 students (14%) had worked in multicultural groups seven to ten times, while 30 students (21%) had done so five to seven times. Specifically, 45 students (32%) had worked on multicultural group projects one to three times and 45 students (32%) had worked on them three to five times. The bulk of the students had little to no experience with diversity in academic teams, as these two groups together make up 64% of the sample. This distribution shows that most of MRU's foreign students have only worked together with people from other cultures at least five times. Most of the people who answered the survey seem to be in the early stages of learning about other cultures.

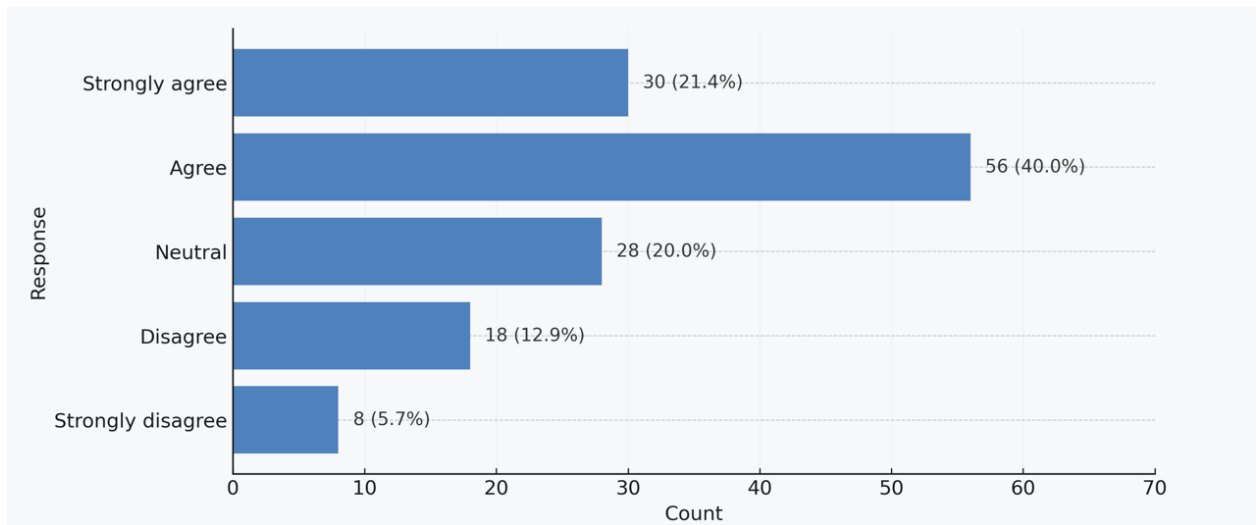


Figure 11. Communication confidence with different cultural backgrounds (n=140)

When asked how confident they were about talking to people from different cultural backgrounds for the first time, the people who answered had different levels of confidence. According to Byram (1997) and Deardorff (2006), confidence in cross cultural interactions is a key component of intercultural competence. Gudykunst (1995, 2004) notes that fear of foreign cultural circumstances obstructs communication. This survey shows that universities need to keep helping all students learn how to be competent in other cultures. The data suggests that while over 60% of international students have developed foundational confidence through their experience at MRU, nearly 40% still experience uncertainty or anxiety in cross cultural communication. To break this down, a total of 86 students (61.4%) said they were confident, with 56 students (40.0%) agreeing and 30 students (21.4%) strongly agreeing. 28 students (20.0%) were neutral and 26 students (18.6%) objected or strongly disagreed, which shows that they were quite anxious about communication.

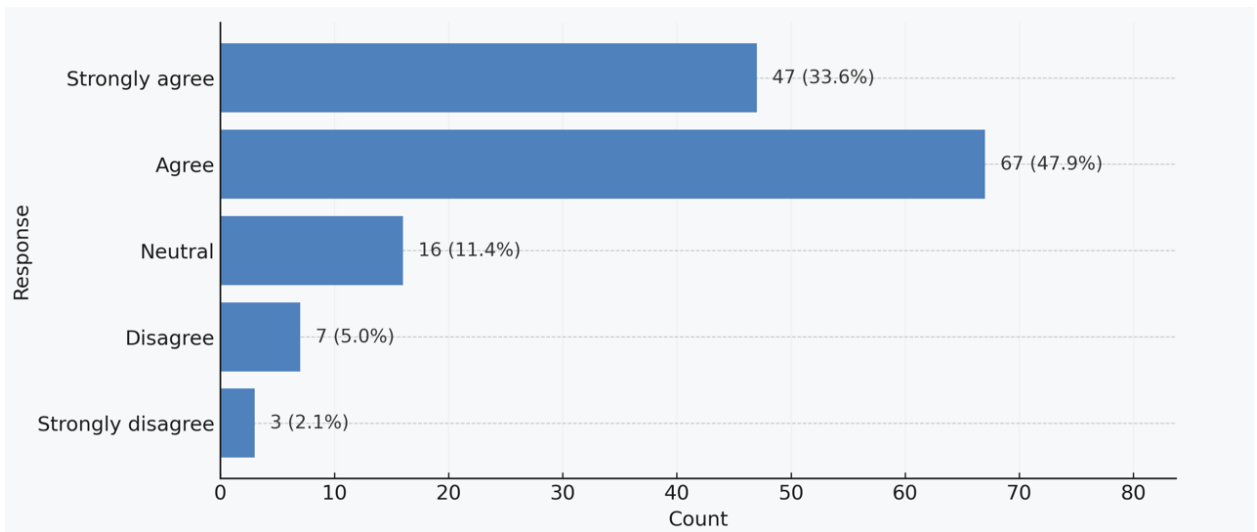


Figure 12. Experienced language and accent misunderstandings (n=140)

A large number of respondents said that language and accent misunderstandings happen a lot in multicultural teams. 114 students (81.5%) agreed or strongly agreed that they have had these kinds of miscommunications. Of them, 47 (33.6%) strongly agreed and 67 (47.9%) agreed. Only 10 students (7.1%) disagreed with this statement, while 16 students (11.4%) didn't care. This widespread consensus correlates with the findings from the qualitative interviews, which indicated that communication is significantly hindered by accent and language challenges. Accent variation and language proficiency deficiencies are prevalent among international students in multicultural teams, as indicated by the significant incidence of reported misconceptions (81.5%).

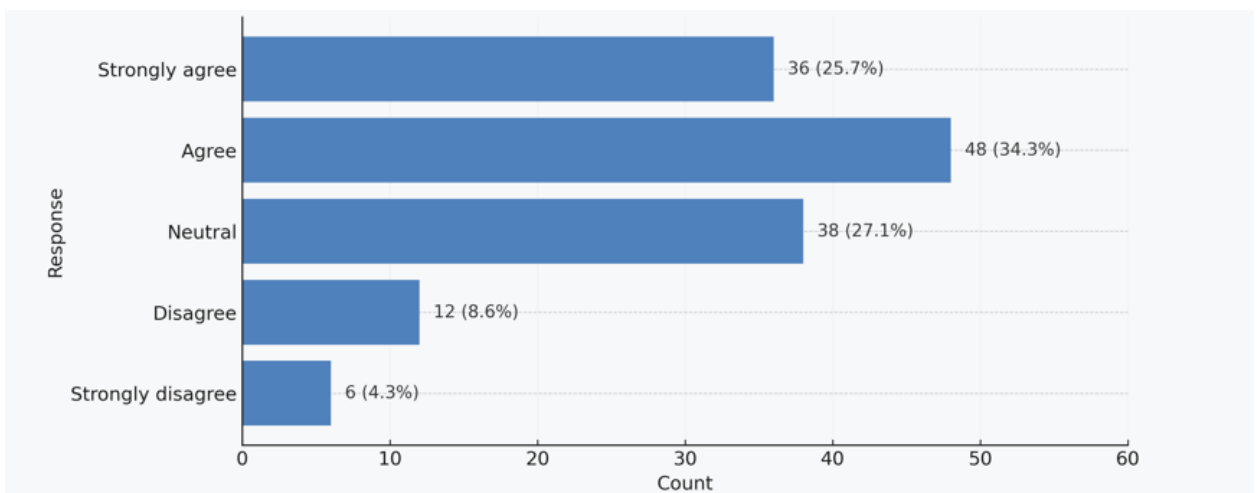


Figure 13. Comfort sharing ideas with same culture peers due to language (n=140)

Over half of the students who answered (84 students, 60.0%) claimed that language issues helped them feel more comfortable talking about views with peers from the same culture. Of those, 48 (34.3%) agreed and 36 (25.7%) strongly agreed. 18 students (12.9%) disagreed and a significant 38 students (27.1%) remained undecided. This study strongly supports the qualitative subject of same group formation and language based grouping. Students are drawn to peers from the same culture because of language barriers, which is what the interviews showed. The notable neutral and disagreeing groups suggest that not all students employ this clustering method. It indicates the varied coping strategies for language anxiety among international student teams.

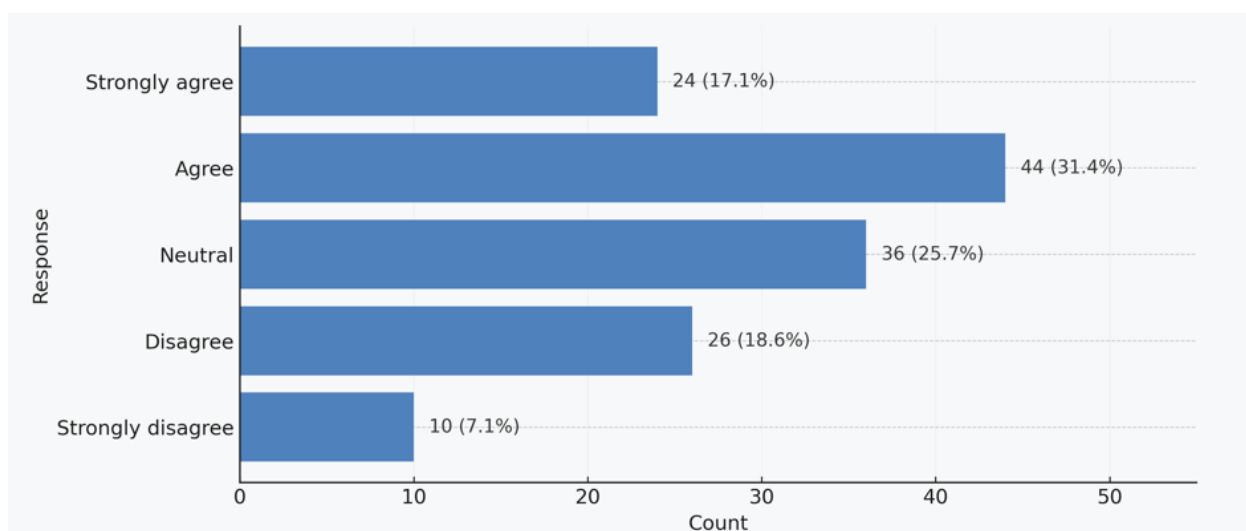


Figure 14. Participation anxiety in intercultural discussions (n=140)

Almost half of the students (68 students, 48.5%) said they were worried about taking part in multicultural group talks. Of those, 44 students (31.4%) agreed and 24 students (17.1%) strongly agreed. At the same time, 36 students (25.7%) disagreed and 36 students (25.7%) kept neutral. This outcome supports the qualitative issue of intercultural anxiety. Gudykunst (1995, 2004) illustrates that fear regarding foreign cultural contexts hinders communication and leads pupils to refrain from engagement. Quantitative research supports this pattern, indicating that more than half of overseas students have participation anxiety in multicultural environments. The significant disagreement group (25.7%) suggests that certain students have developed confidence due to prior experiences. These conflicting outcomes from quantitative research, along with the qualitative research, indicate that international students exhibit varying degrees of communication anxiety.

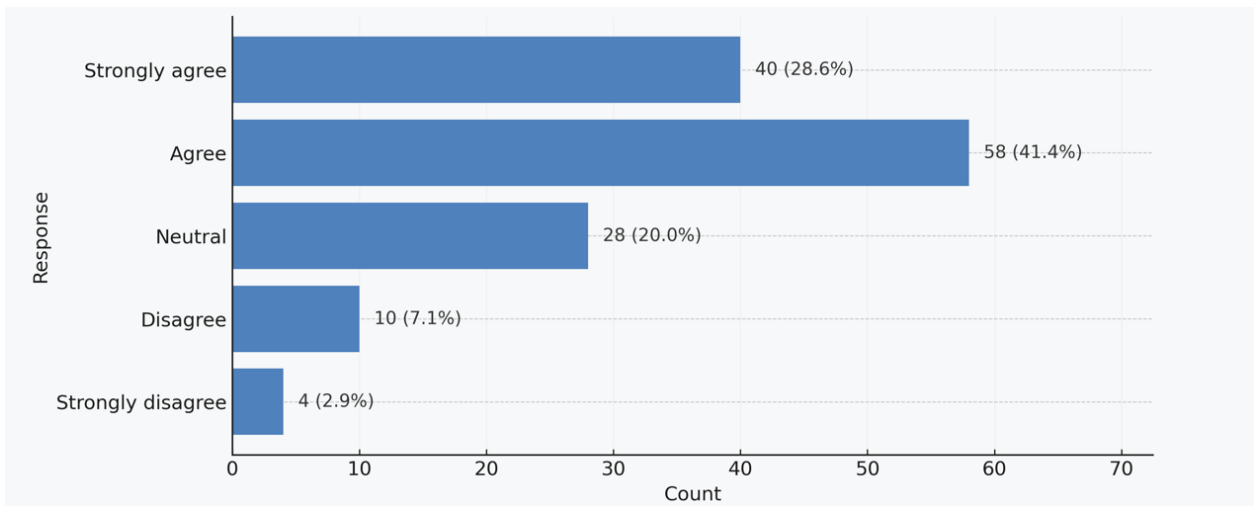


Figure 15. Digital tools help team communication effectively (n=140)

The research results showed that most students considered that employing digital technology may help teams talk to each other better. As shown in Figure 5, most of the people who answered (58, or 41.4%) agreed or strongly agreed (40, or 28.6%) that digital platforms made it easier for them to communicate with each other on group projects. Only 28 respondents, or 20.0% of the participants, indicated neutrality, signifying neither substantial support nor dissatisfaction. Only a tiny number of people who answered had negative opinions: 10 (7.1%) chose "disagree," and 4 (2.9%) chose "strongly disagree." About 70% of the people who took part had a positive view of digital technology in general. This shows that online platforms were very important for helping multicultural teams work together and share knowledge.

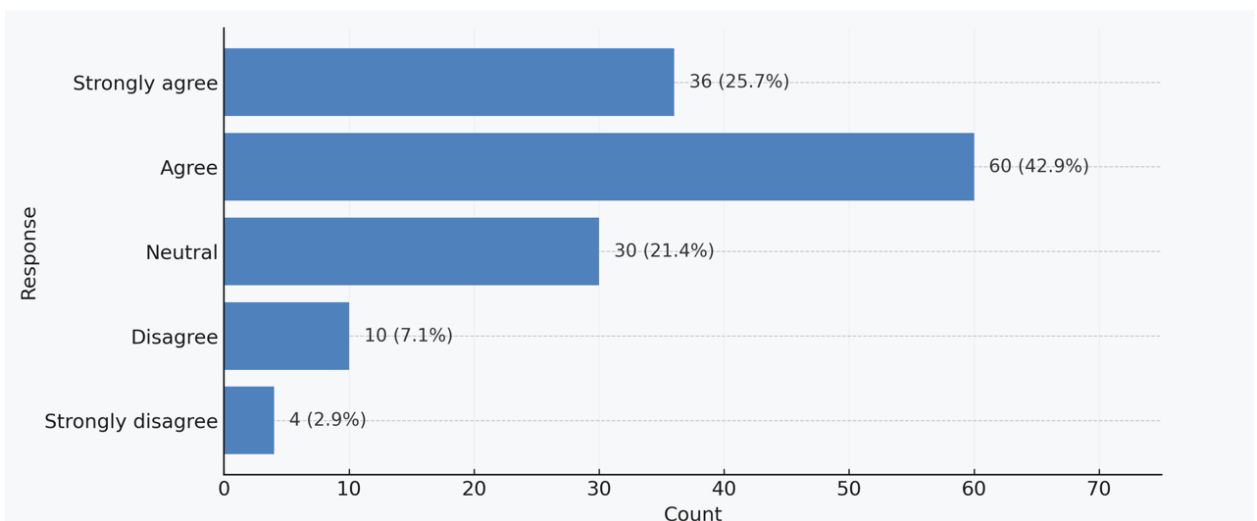


Figure 16. Changing communication style to fit team (n=140)

Most of the students indicated they adjusted how they talked so that they would blend in better with their teammates. Tang & Zhang (2023) and Xu & Shapii (2025) say that students who are flexible and open minded in how they talk to others are better at working together and building good collaborations across cultures. As shown in Figure 6, most of the people who answered (60, or 42.9%) agreed or strongly agreed that they changed the way they talked when they worked in multicultural groups. Only 30 people (21.4%) answered "neutral," which means they were either adapting to the environment or doing so moderately. Only a tiny number of people disagreed: 10 (7.1%) chose "disagree" and 4 (2.9%) chose "strongly disagree." In total, more than 69% of participants stated they had deliberately adjusted the way they communicated. This suggests that students who work in culturally diverse teams often practiced being flexible and adaptable. International students actively develop adaptive strategies in response to cultural diversity, as demonstrated by the frequent changes in communication styles. The quantitative result that 68.6% of students consciously change how they communicate supports the qualitative topic of strategic planning. Interview data also revealed students' preference for simpler terminology, a moderated pace of speech and linguistic simplification.

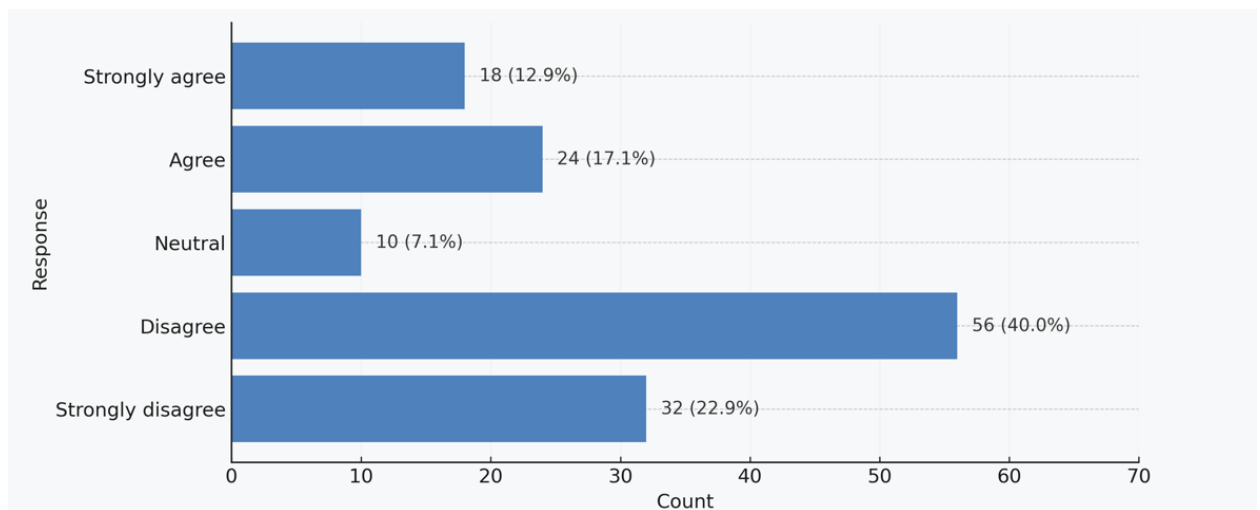


Figure 17. University offers adequate support for multicultural teamwork (n=140)

People said they were very unhappy with how well the university encourage multicultural teamwork. A total of 88 students (62.9%) either disagreed (56 students, 40.0%) or strongly disagreed (32 students, 22.9%) that the university provides enough help. Only 42 students (30.0%) agreed or strongly agreed. Of those, 24 students (17.1%) agreed and 18 students (12.9%) strongly agreed. Only 10 students (7.1%) stayed neutral. This quantitative conclusion strongly supports the qualitative topic of deficits in institutional support. The fact that over two thirds of international students say they don't get enough help shows that the university needs improvement in this regard. This is in line with what students said in interviews: they felt

abandoned, didn't have somebody to guide them and didn't get good contact from the international office. It shows that institutional support for intercultural teamwork is a big need that has to be solved right away.

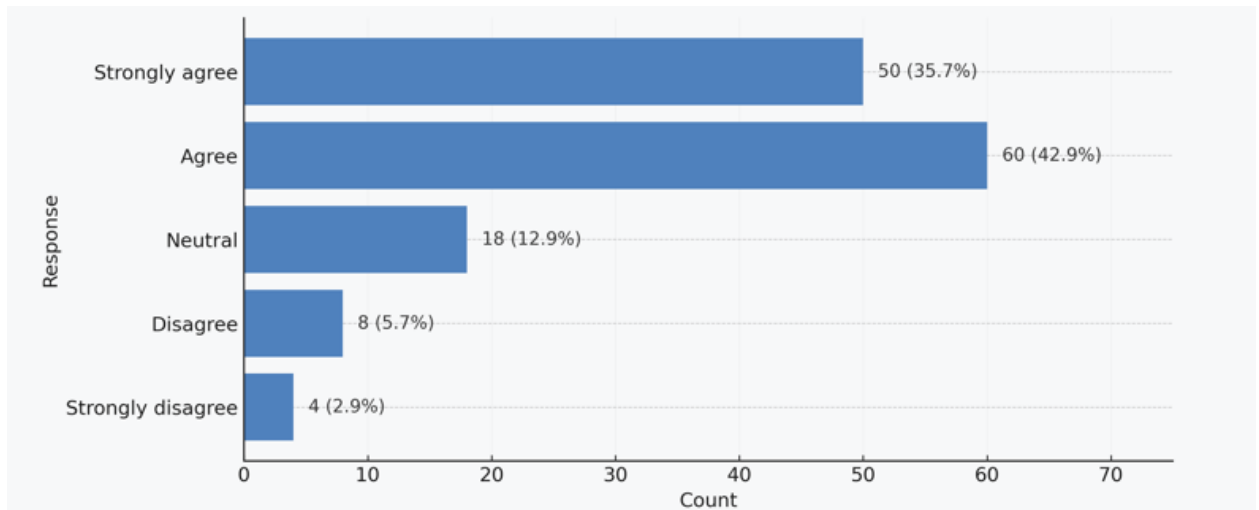


Figure 18. Struggle to communicate due to English proficiency differences (n=140)

The overwhelming majority (78.6%) agree that proficiency gaps make it harder to communicate. A large number said they had trouble communicating because of discrepancies in their English skills. A total of 110 students (78.6%) either agreed (60 students, 42.9%) or strongly agreed (50 students, 35.7%) that they had trouble communicating because of deficiencies in their language skills. Only 12 students (8.6%) disagreed and 18 students (12.9%) stayed neutral. This quantitative conclusion strongly supports the qualitative notion that a lack of English competence is a major obstacle to communication between cultures. The strong opinion that proficiency disparities produce communication challenges validates the qualitative findings about language anxiety, accent misunderstandings and the tendency of students to cluster with same language classmates. Students who were interviewed talked about specific language problems they were having. Some said they were trying to speak more slowly since they think others don't comprehend their faster speech. Another person said they "try to replace words with much simpler ones" so that people who don't know English as a first language may understand what they're saying..

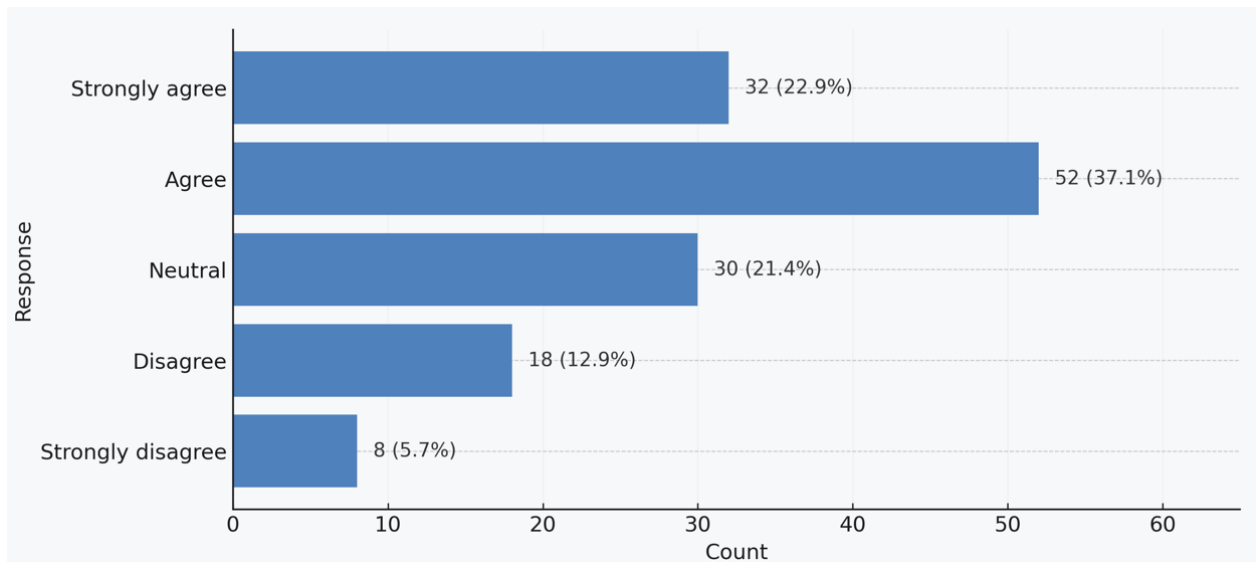


Figure 19. Jokes and humor misunderstood in Multicultural teams (n=140)

The study results show that people from different cultures typically didn't get the jokes in multicultural teams. Figure 9 shows that most of the people who answered (52, or 37.1%) either agreed or strongly agreed that jokes and funny comments were often misunderstood. These categories together show that over 60% of the people who took part said they had misunderstandings relating to comedy. Another 30 respondents (21.4%) chose indifferent, which suggests that only some students went through this in certain scenarios. A smaller number of people disagreed with the statement: 18 (12.9%) said they disagreed and 8 (5.7%) said they strongly disagreed. This correlates with the interview findings. One student who was questioned (E10) talked about a time when they texted a joke during class that a teammate took seriously because of cultural differences, which caused tension in the group. Another student said, "You can't tell if someone is joking or serious" without nonverbal indicators like tone of voice or facial expressions.

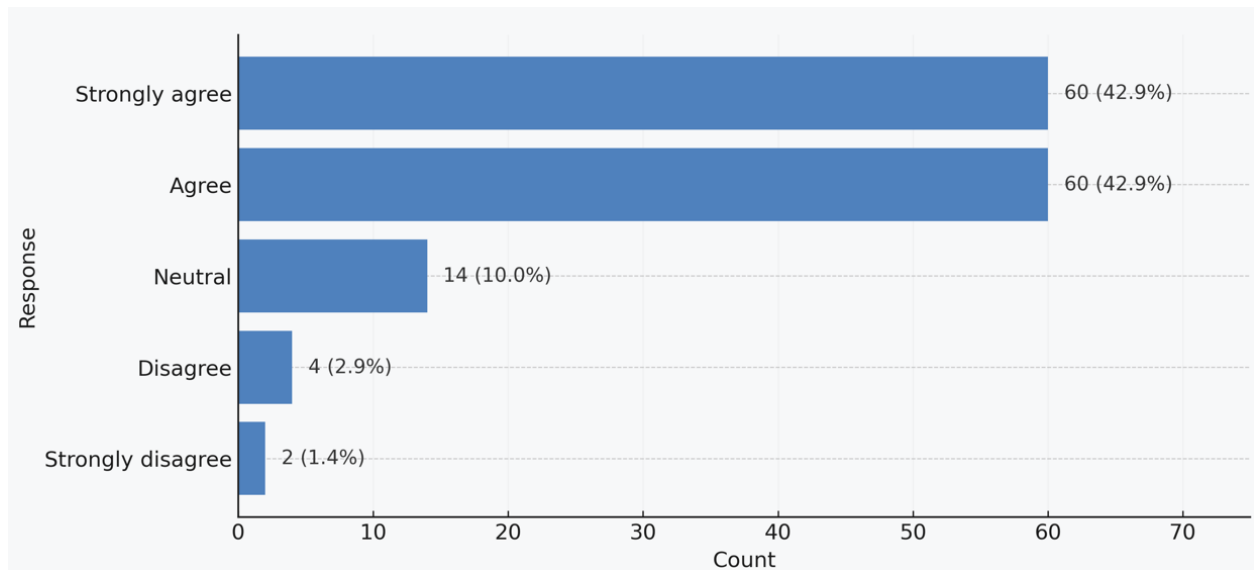


Figure 20. Eager to learn about other cultures from teammates (n=140)

Most of the people who answered said they were excited to learn about other cultures from their teammates. In total, 120 students (85.8%) either agreed (60 students, 42.9%) or strongly agreed (60 students, 42.9%) that they wished to learn from cultural differences. Only 14 pupils (10.0%) stayed neutral, while only 6 students (4.3%) disagreed. The fact that 85.8% of international students are eager to learn shows that they are well motivated from within. This study supports the qualitative theme that working in a multicultural team is a great way to learn. One student who was interviewed (E8) said that at first they only talked to people from their own culture, but then they "realized everyone has something valuable to contribute."

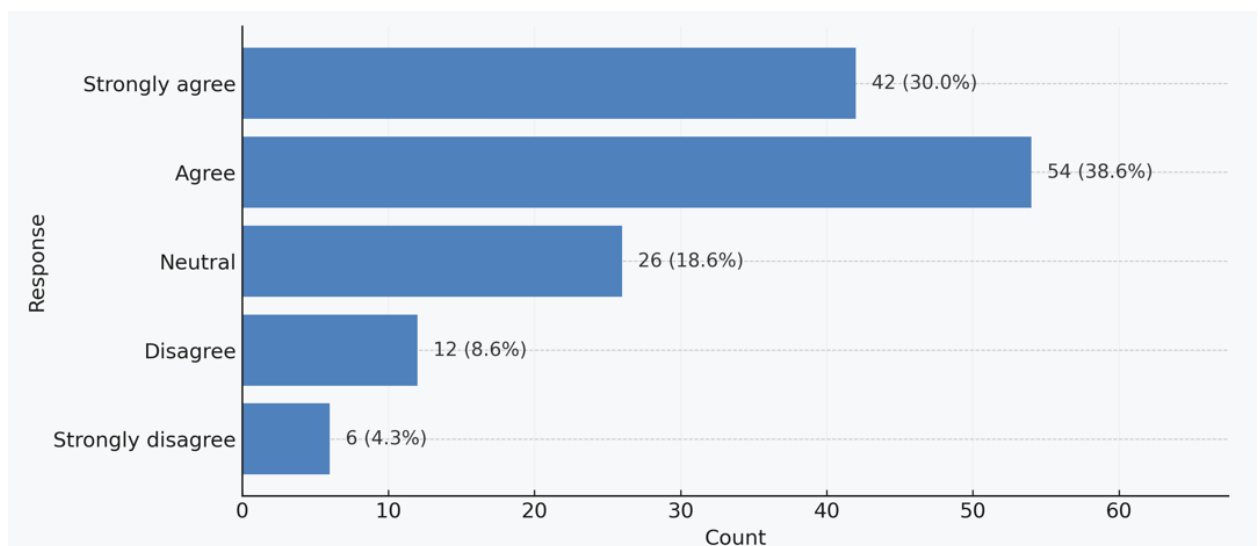


Figure 21. Translation tools reduce naturalness (n=140)

A large majority of people (68.6%) agreed or strongly agreed that translation tools make communication less natural. A total of 42 students (30.0%) highly agreed and 54 students (38.6%) agreed that utilizing translation software makes real conversation less real. Only 18 students (12.9%) disagreed and 26 students (18.6%) stayed neutral. This finding shows that there are problems with using technology to communicate between cultures. Translation technologies can help people who don't speak the same language understand each other, but they can also make things more official and formal.

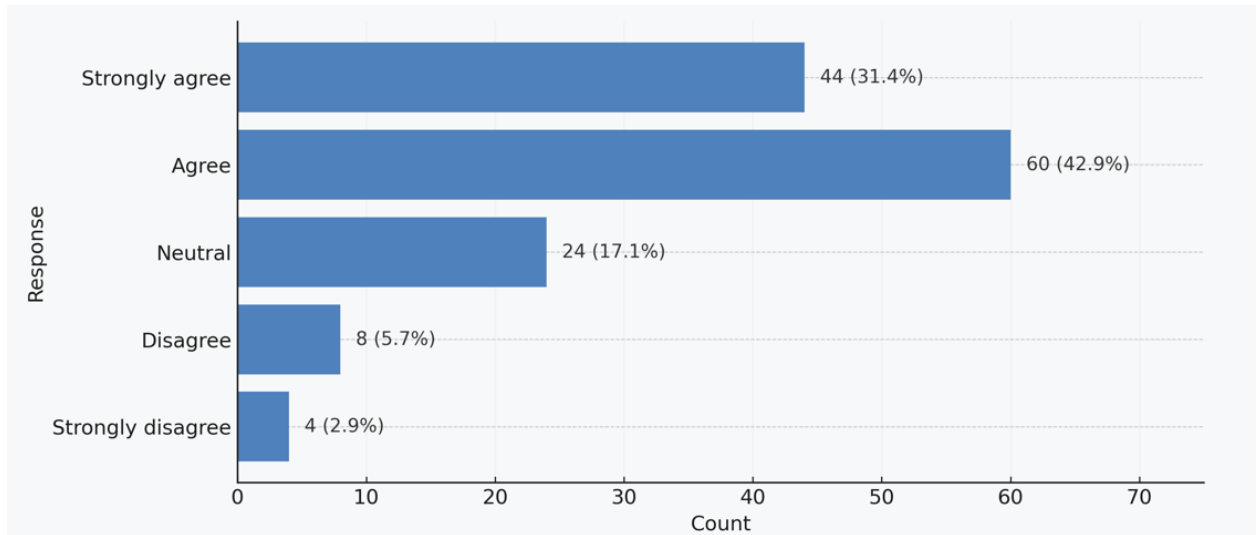


Figure 22. Different time attitudes cause team tension (n=140)

A significant majority of respondents (74.3%) indicated that time culture conflicts are almost always a problem in multicultural teams at MRU. Hofstede (1980, 2011) says that cultures have different views on time. A total of 60 students (42.9%) agreed and 44 students (31.4%) strongly agreed that cultural differences about being on time and meeting deadlines cause problems. Only 12 students (8.6%) disagreed, while 24 students (17.1%) didn't have an opinion either way. This result is consistent with cultural aspects theory. One student who was interviewed said that there were difficulties when colleagues put various things first in their work together. This suggests that when team members have different ideas about timetables and priorities, it can affect how the team works together. Setting clear team rules regarding deadlines and work expectations could help eliminate major drivers of conflict by addressing these disparities.

DISCUSSIONS

This study finds that intercultural communication challenges in academic teams are interconnected rather than isolated issues. Each barrier amplifies the other. When a student is tired of using language (cognitive barrier), they may go back to peers who speak the same language (social barrier). This stops them from learning about different ways of communicating (knowledge barrier), which stops them from developing adaptive strategies (competence barrier).

A significant contradiction in the data is between students' self reported confidence and their actual experiences. While 61% students feel confident communicating with their peers from different cultural backgrounds, 81.5% encounter misunderstandings due to language differences. The interview data shows that students equate confidence with the willingness to try rather than expecting effective communication. Students reported feeling 'confident' not because they believed communication would be effortless, but because they possessed general language skills and willingness to participate. E1 spoke that their team had very good communication dynamics and it was a significantly smooth collaboration experience. Yet they also acknowledged that their Bengali teammates 'have quite a lower level of proficiency in English'. This relates to the finding that despite 48.5% students experience participation anxiety, they still report confidence. This is the fear of communication 'quality'. Students frequently adapt to their environment by modifying their speech because they realize that simple expressions are more understandable for their non native peers. 68.6% students consciously change their communication style to fit in the team. Students hold two contradictory states. They believe they 'should' be able to participate, yet fear the consequences of doing so.

Some challenges appear to stem from personality differences but are actually a collision between monochronic and polychronic time systems. This is illustrated by E8's experience with teammates who, while operating under different time orientations, faced challenges when there were no established guidelines. E7 identifies that firm institutional regulations force teams to adhere to timelines, shifting their behaviours to align with monochronic expectations. Thus, conflicts arise not from inherent cultural traits but from the absence of supportive team norms. Students struggle to establish these norms independently. Hence, the institution lacks investment in creating an effective team structure, which compels students to generate coordination frameworks themselves.

70% of students view digital tools for team communication positively, yet 68.6% feel that translation tools reduce the naturalness of communication. This contradicting result indicates that students value the digital platforms they are using, not because they serve as the solutions to their communication issues, but

to maintain workflow despite unresolved communication challenges. E9 appreciated written communication when using digital tools because it gave them ‘time to translate the words in their head’. This undoubtedly reduced the pressure of real time interaction for the student. But it is interesting to note that it increases the reliance on asynchronous communication rather than promoting the development of intercultural competence. An evidence of this is a narrative from the interviews when a student’s text in WhatsApp chat was misunderstood, causing a relational problem. Technology serves as a temporary fix rather than a comprehensive solution since they students acknowledged that translation tools compromise communication quality. This suggests that when universities prioritize digital tools for overcoming intercultural communication challenges, they may unintentionally imply that students should avoid confronting cultural differences directly.

Writing style differences create significant challenges for students collaborating on final documents, as they must conform to a unified style when presenting. This leads to extensive editing efforts. While literature suggests hybrid writing benefits, qualitative data indicates that the responsibility for reconciling diverse writing styles often falls on students, typically the most linguistically strongest writer. This imposes a cognitive burden on them to integrate varying educational backgrounds. Various presentation style differences result in differing evaluations of identical content. Students from expressive cultures receive pressure to temper their expressiveness to align with perceived professionalism. More reserved students feel the burden to adopt a more expressive style in order to appear ‘engaged’. The 68.6% of students who ‘changed their communication style to fit in with their team’ includes not only adaptive linguistic choices but also modification of body language and emotional expression. The intellectual and psychological cost of this adaptation remains unquantified.

Linguistic fatigue, which appears to be one of the major barriers to communication, represents cognitive injustice. It leads to exclusion from intellectual engagement, as E7 narrated their experience of mental exhaustion after prolonged English use, which isn’t their first language. This multitasking of language translation and pronunciation management creates inequity in intellectual participation. Data show that 78.6% of individuals struggle because of English proficiency disparities. But 60% of students prefer peer interaction within a similar culture. This comparison of data tells us that students naturally gravitate towards environments that restore cognitive justice. There is a positive aspect. 85.8% of students are eager to learn from each other, with 68.6% adapting communication styles. This shows their recognition of the importance of teamwork.

An interesting insight emerges when we compare the results of the quantitative findings and qualitative findings about perceived institutional support. 62.9% perceive that the university provides

insufficient support for multicultural teamwork. Interview results deepen this concern by indicating that support is not absent altogether but rather invisible or inaccessible. MRU organizes regular events for the social and emotional well being of its students, but the lack of promotion of these events limits student participation. The notifications of these events are mostly received via email newsletters, but students usually ignore formal emails. Visual promotion of these events is missing, which is highlighted in the interview narratives. Students also express a lack of specific trainings and guidance for intercultural teamwork, with comments highlighting a disconnect between the international office and students. This indicates that institutional resources do not reach students when needed, particularly at the onset of group projects.

This research covers significant patterns regarding the adaptation experiences of international students at MRU. It still operates under limitations. The limited sample under study (10 interview participants) lacks the ability to define all experiences, so does the limited quantitative sample (n=140). Questions remain regarding the correlation between initial participation anxiety and work quality and whether same language speaker groups integrate over time. While barriers to adaptation are documented in this study, their impact on academic performance remains unmeasured.

Notably, students exhibited changes in perceptions. E4's interpretation of directness as criticism changed. Similarly, E6's developed tone sensitivity. E8's clustering pattern diminished. An essential inquiry remains regarding the adaptability of international students. Is there a consistent path from isolation to integration, as seen with E8, or do some remain in isolation? While 60% initially felt more comfortable with same culture peers, it is unclear how many transition, or whether specific institutional strategies can aid these changes.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Identification of communication barriers: The study confirmed that linguistic variation is a major factor contributing to the challenges students face in multicultural teams. Less fluent English speakers (78.6%) expend way more effort which appears to be a cognitive burden. This causes systemic exclusion from intellectual engagement in class. On the other hand, students with linguistic strength bear the burden of participating more as their peers assume their linguistic ability reflects higher overall knowledge. Along with language problems, nonverbal communication was also found to be a barrier. This appeared specially in digital communication where tone of the message is missing. Humor and jokes were another challenge in digital communication because it was sometimes misunderstood. Time related issues arose when students from different cultural backgrounds prioritized deadlines differently. Differences in writing and presentation styles complicated the final output as well. It took time and effort for students to integrate all the different styles of work into one unified final document.

2. Impact of cultural diversity on team dynamics: In academic teams, cultural norms are the source of participation anxiety (reported by 48.5% students). Rather than being a psychological problem, it was found to be an issue based on cultural expectations about how one should speak in group settings. Students from high power distance cultures were found to be silent out of respect for authority. It was also discovered that 60% students were found to prefer interaction with same language groups and it is not just a social preference, it reflects their need for pursuing cognitive justice.

3. Evaluation of institutional environment and support: The main challenge when it comes to institutional support is not that it is completely absent. The responsiveness of existing structures needs improvement. Students noted the lack of institutional support not because events are not arranged by the university, but because they are not promoted enough. They also noted a gap between international office and students' voices. They expressed feeling abandoned. Although support systems are in place, they do not effectively reach students. Communication between the university and students was found to be weak. It was also found that poor deadline management and time related issues stem more from lack of institutional effort than from cultural differences. When professors set clear deadlines, students from different time orientations align their behaviors together. Thus, the root of the conflict lies in the lack of clear, shared norms rather than cultural factors. 85.8% of students express eagerness to learn about other cultures, indicating a natural development of intercultural competence despite institutional lacking. This understanding arises from repeated reflection. If institutional support aligns with student motivation, remarkable results could be achieved.

4. Investigation of adaptive strategies: One important linguistic strategy students adopt in multicultural teams is that they consciously put effort to change their communication style and fit in their teams. This includes simplifying their words, slowing down the pace of speech, avoiding culturally specific idioms or humor that might not be easily translated. They also modify their tone according to the situation. Students create safe space for them by in-group formations and lowering cognitive load. About 70% of students viewed communication platforms positively for successfully completing their tasks in group projects. Collaborating online gave them time to translate their thoughts well in their mind before putting them forward in front of their peers. Many students also reported learning over time with repeated experiences. Students employ a combination of linguistic, social, technological and reflective strategies to perform well in academic teams although these strategies come with emotional or cognitive burden at times.

5. Recommendations for institutional strategy: A very high percentage of students (85.8%) expressed eagerness to learn about other cultures from their team members and 68.6% reported actively changing their communications styles to integrate better. This is an opportunity for the university to help students in adaptation. Connecting students' existing motivation with targeted institutional strategies is very likely to address the existing problems and resolve them over time. The university should be clearer about communication of available activities and should focus on promotion of events through multiple channels to reach more students. Providing structured guidance about intercultural teamwork during orientation or in class must be compulsory. International students office should be more responsive about actual students' needs and more effort needs to be put towards making them feel heard.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for students are as follows:

1. Students should support their teammates with English difficulties. As some students reported, they alter their way of speaking to talk more slowly and clearly. In group work, students must invite the quieter members to share their ideas and engage in teamwork. While doing so, they must give them time to think and show empathy towards each other. This will reduce the anxiety of speaking correct or fluent English. Slangs and idioms should also be avoided if some team members lack strong English skills. Showing support toward teammates not only builds friendship and harmony within the group, but also helps develop intercultural competence over time when practiced consistently.

2. Students should feel free to ask questions for clarification if misunderstandings occur. This helps avoid emotional impact caused by a misperceived tone or gesture. Simple questions like ‘can you explain it one more time?’ or ‘Sorry I could not quite catch that, could you repeat it more slowly?’ help understand each other better and avoid confusion. Over time, these habits build trust, because team members see that clarification is normal and welcome, not a sign of weakness. Using emojis also intentionally when appropriate shows friendliness when using social platforms to communicate.

3. Digital tools should be used wisely. For complex or sensitive topics, communication methods such as video calls or voice notes should be used as they convey tone and nuance. Text messages are more likely to cause confusion about the intention of the message as it lacks tone.

4. Students should recognize and respect the diverse approaches to time, deadlines and planning among team members. It should be acknowledged that these factors are cultural differences rather than personal shortcomings. It is important for team members to communicate their preferences regarding task completion early in the project. The students can decide whether they prefer to finish ahead of deadlines or work closer to them. Team should establish coordination and appoint internal milestones with everybody’s consent. The timeline should be realistic and accommodate all perspectives. Adjusting expectations as a group will help minimize frustration.

Recommendations for faculty and lecturers are as follows:

1. Since students perform better when instructors establish well defined deadlines, this practice should be encouraged for lecturers. Instructors should clearly communicate their expectations regarding punctuality and late submissions. This clarity helps students from different backgrounds adapt to academic norms related to timing, minimizing potential misunderstandings. Students should be asked to submit

anonymous feedback about their teamwork experience at the end of the project so that the lecturer can grade the students more fairly.

2. Teachers can encourage turn taking during group discussions in class to ensure that every student has a chance to speak. Rotating leadership roles in teams can also be beneficial, as it gives each member an opportunity to lead and contribute ideas. Teachers can also use icebreaker activities at the beginning of group work to reduce communication anxiety. These approaches create a more inclusive classroom environment and students are more likely to participate actively.

3. To avoid in-group formations, the professor should assign groups randomly so that students do not repeatedly choose teammates from their own cultural background. If a professor notices that the same cultural groups are forming multiple times in a row, they can gently encourage students to work with a more diverse mix of classmates. This will help prevent cultural clustering. By promoting intercultural interacting using this practice, students are more likely to gain more experience collaborating with peers from different regions. Over time, this repeated exposure will not only strengthen students' cultural awareness but also improve their overall teamwork skills.

Recommendations for MRU administration are as follows:

1. MRU should introduce short workshops on intercultural communication to help students learn how to manage multicultural teamwork. These workshops can include insightful lessons about different cultural communication styles and offer strategies for handling misunderstandings. They can also address common issues students face, such as communication anxiety, particularly for those who are less confident in English. The aim of these workshops should be to enhance students' awareness and adaptability. They should help students build confidence, ultimately improving the overall quality of collaboration in group work at MRU.

2. The university should create a concise "Multicultural Teamwork Guide" for students to access. This guide would cover key concepts such as the differences between direct and indirect communication styles, clarify the significance of gestures and nonverbal cues and offer practical tips for inclusive participation. It would also provide strategies for structuring teamwork meetings effectively. The guide should aim to promote cultural understanding and collaboration among students from diverse backgrounds.

3. MRU can offer training sessions for teachers to help them better understand cultural communication barriers that students face in multicultural teams. These sessions should focus on practical strategies such as mixing students from diverse backgrounds, encouraging equal participation and guiding teams on how to communicate respectfully and clearly. Instructors can also play an active role in promoting

the “Multicultural Teamwork Guide” created by the university, ensuring that students read and apply its principles during group work.

4. MRU can establish an annual survey to track the experiences of international students, specifically with regard to multicultural teamwork. This survey will help monitor communication challenges as well as cultural integration patterns within the university’s diverse student population. By collecting this valuable feedback each year, MRU can observe behavioural patterns and develop effective strategies accordingly. The survey will also help determine whether previous improvements are working. An annual survey will give international students a platform to voice their concerns and suggestions. These regular insights will support the university in adapting its policies and strengthening the overall academic and social experience for international students.

5. MRU could also consider publishing studies and presenting its findings at academic conferences. This approach not only highlights MRU’s implementation efforts but also positions the university as a leader in encouraging and developing strategies for international students. By sharing real examples of what works and where improvements are needed, the university can contribute valuable knowledge to the field of international higher education.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A. Survey questions

This short survey is part of my Master's research at MRU.

It explores how students from different cultures communicate and work together in multicultural teams

at the university.

Your answers are completely anonymous and will only be used for research.

It takes about 5–7 minutes. Thank you for sharing your experience honestly!

1. What is your nationality?

2. What is your gender?

Mark only one oval.

Male

Female

Prefer not to say

3. What is your age?

Mark only one oval.

Under 20

21-25

25-30

Over 30

4. How many times have you worked with international students in group projects at MRU?

Mark only one oval.

1-3 times

3-5 times

5-7 times

7-10 times

5. I felt confident communicating with students from different cultural backgrounds when I was new.

Mark only one oval.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

6. I have experienced misunderstandings due to language or accent differences in the beginning.

Mark only one oval.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly agree

7. I feel more comfortable sharing my ideas with people from my own culture than with people from other cultures because we speak the same language.

Mark only one oval.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

8. In group discussions, I sometimes stay quiet because I'm unsure how my opinion will be received by students from other cultures.

Mark only one oval.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree
Strongly Agree

9. Digital tools (e.g., Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp, Google Docs) help my team communicate effectively.

Mark only one oval.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

10. Sometimes I feel like I have to change my behavior or communication style to fit in with my team.

Mark only one oval.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

11. My university offers enough guidance and support to help students work effectively in multicultural teams.

Mark only one oval.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly agree

12. Despite English being the common language, team members still sometimes struggle to communicate due to different levels of fluency, accents, or expressions.

Mark only one oval.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly agree

13. Jokes and humor are sometimes misunderstood in multicultural teams.

Mark only one oval.

14.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

14. If I find a funny meme or Instagram reel/tiktok reel about my culture, I share it with my friends from different cultures as well.

Mark only one oval.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

15. I am eager to learn about other cultures from my team mates.

Mark only one oval.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

16. Using translation tools (e.g., Google Translate) make communication less natural or cause misunderstandings.

Mark only one oval.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

17. Different attitudes toward time (deadlines, punctuality, flexibility) sometimes cause tension in group work.

Mark only one oval.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

18. Do you have open discussions about each other's cultures in the team?

Mark only one oval.

Sometimes

Yes

No

Appendix B. Interview Questions

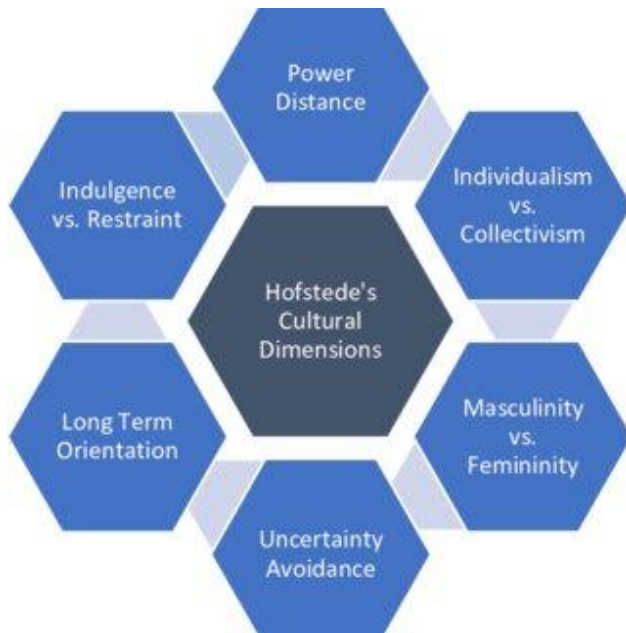
1. How long have you been studying at MRU? Can you describe a group project where you worked with students from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds?

2. How would you describe the overall communication dynamics within that team? For example, participation, decision-making, and feedback?

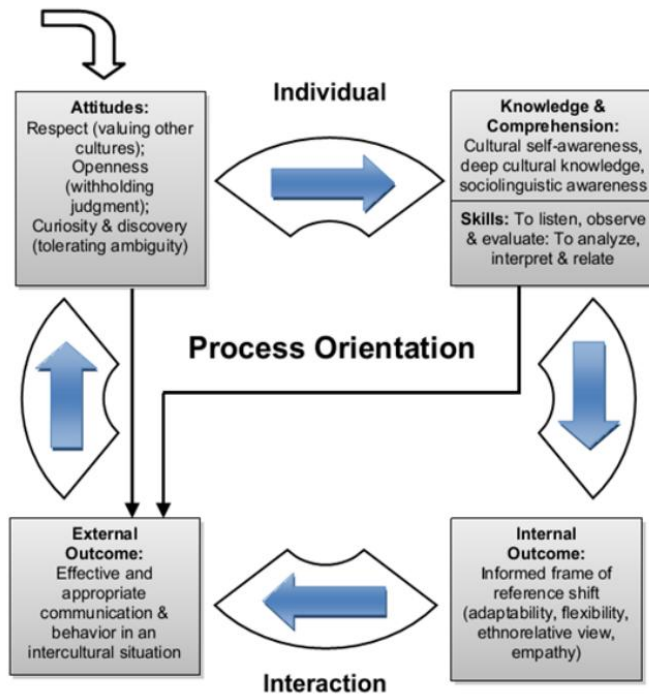
3. What kinds of misunderstandings or communication difficulties tended to appear when your team worked together?
4. In your experience, how did cultural norms or communication styles influence how team members interacted?
5. How would you describe the role of language differences in your group?
6. Can you walk me through a moment when tone of voice, or body language affected how you understood someone's message?
7. How would you describe your team's approach to planning, deadlines, and time management?
8. How did different writing or presentation styles shape the final outcome of your project?
9. What role did digital tools (WhatsApp, Teams, Google Docs, etc.) play in your teamwork?
10. How did your team navigate communication barriers, misunderstandings, or cultural differences?
11. What strategies did YOU personally adopt to adapt your communication style?
12. Looking back, how would you describe any personal changes in the way you communicate with culturally diverse peers?
13. What advice would you give to new international students joining multicultural teams?
14. How would you describe the support provided by MRU or instructors for multicultural teamwork?
15. What additional forms of support or training do you believe would improve intercultural communication?
16. Can you share an experience that felt difficult or uncomfortable when working with someone from a different cultural background?

ANNEXES

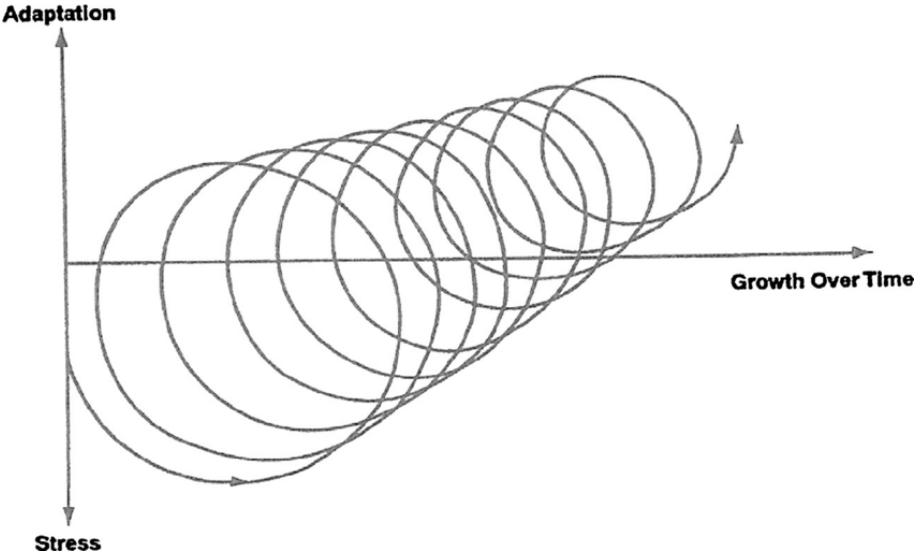
Annex A. Hofstede's cultural dimension table (1980)



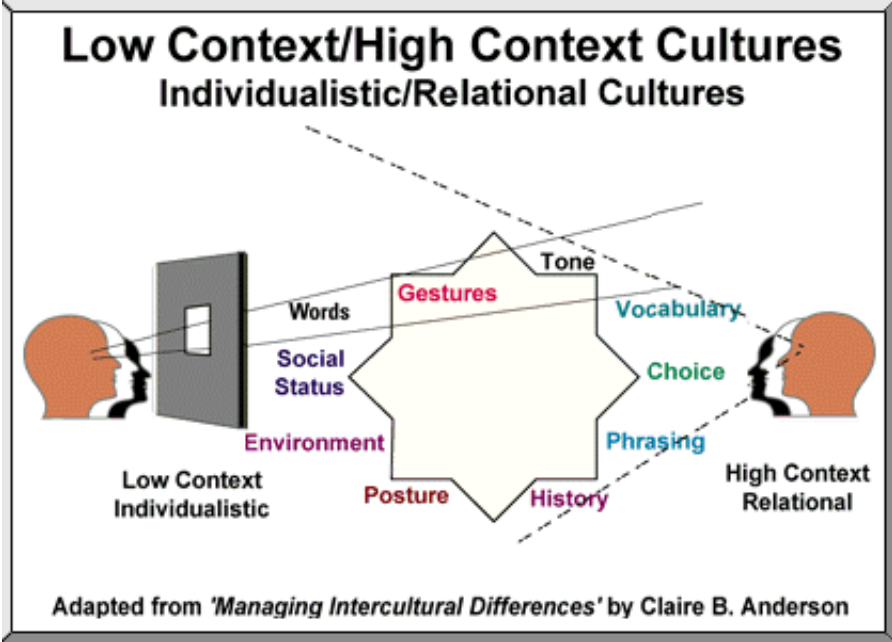
Annex B. Deardorff's intercultural competence model (2006)



Annex C. Young Yun Kim's adaptation cycle (2001)

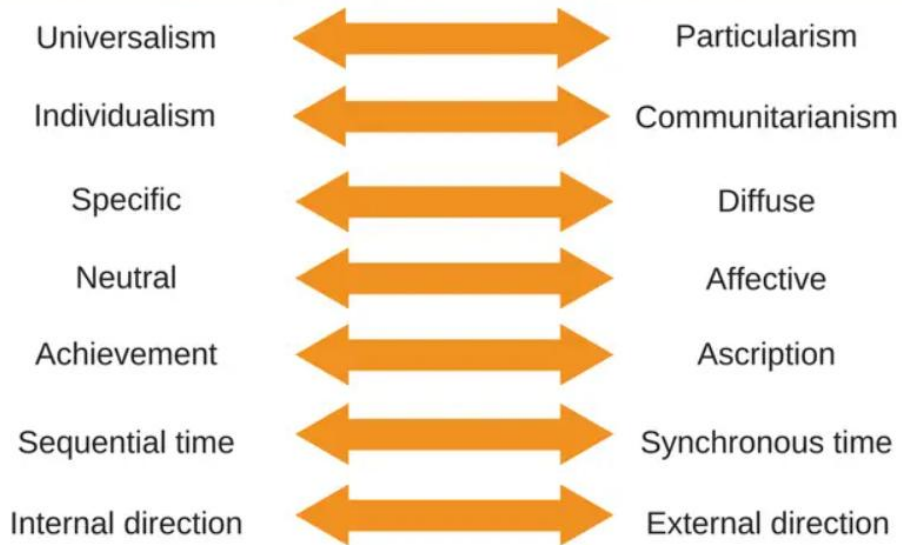


Annex D. Hall's high/low context communication diagram (1976)

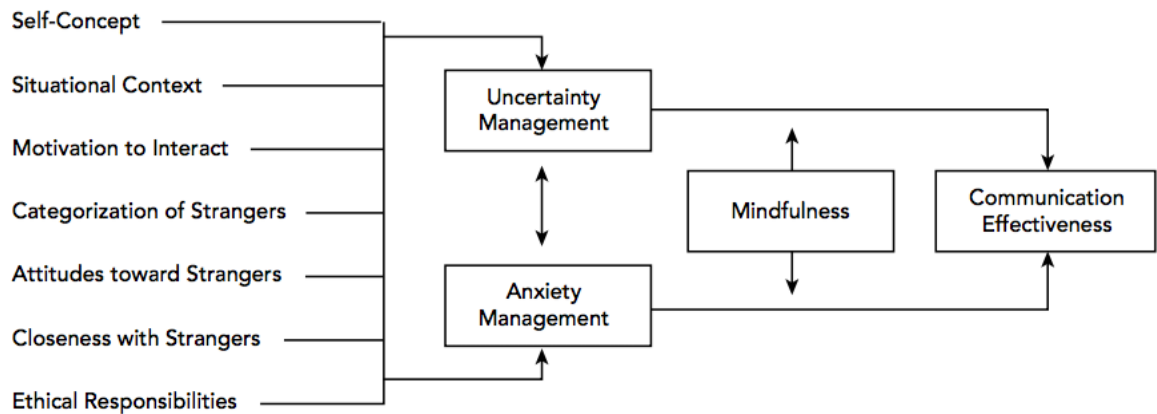


Annex E. Trompenaars 7 cultural dimensions (1997)

Trompenaars Cultural Dimensions



Annex F. Gudykunst's Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) model (1995)



Annex G. Cultural Intelligence (CQ) Model – Earley & Ang (2003)

