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## A study of foreign students' intercultural experiences at Lithuanian University of educational sciences

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### Abstract

In different cultural context integration into academic and socio-cultural life of a university, language and other differences impose serious problems on each foreign student. Successful adaptation of the newly admitted students in a different cultural context is treated as one of the prerequisites for development of intercultural competence. The purpose of this study is to reveal the experience of foreign students, which is related to developing intercultural competence of pre-service music teachers. A qualitative research strategy was chosen for this study, using semi-structured written student reflections. The sample of the research included 36 foreign Master's degree students (Chinese), who chose studies at Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences (Music Education). The results of qualitative content analysis as an outcome of qualitative diagnostics have revealed the factors (educational, psychological, cultural, individual) influencing intercultural competence of future music educators (foreign students). The research was carried out in 2014–2016.

Keywords: Foreign student, future music educator, intercultural competence, experiences, reflection.

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## **1. Introduction**

The rapid process of globalization poses serious challenges in developing intercultural competence (Portera, 2014; Spitzberg & Changon, 2009). An intercultural dialog and communication in multicultural environment become the most appropriate way of democratic communication (Galkin et al., 2015). The aforementioned competence is particularly significant to music educators evaluating current changes in global society, perception of culture and educational environment.

The trends in international development of higher education are best reflected in international openness (The Order of the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania "On the Approval of the Action Plan for 2013-2016 on the Promotion of the Internationality of Higher Education", 2013). The trends in higher education development are best expressed in the constantly growing demand for higher education all over the world. Internationalisation is one of the key priorities in development of higher education in the European Union countries. Next to the aims of mobility promotion, the implementation of joint study programmes and development of study programmes in foreign languages as well as collaboration with other world regions are applied. The process of study internationalisation necessitates globally engaged and interculturally competent music teacher education (Zhang, 2016).

Learning abroad is not only a physical change of the environment for a student but also overstepping of geographical, cultural, social, intellectual and emotional limits (Cushner, 2009). Successful process of learning abroad is linked with favourable educational environment (Douglas et al., 2014; Russell et al., 2010). In the beginning of their studies at a foreign higher education institution students have to cope with numerous challenges, such as language difficulties, visa applications, financial pressures, accommodations. They have to adapt to requirements of the new institution and the new learning environment, changed social relations, to perceive themselves as a member of a new community and to establish value-based relation with the institution (Sheridan, 2011). The process of adaptation as well as the quality of studies are defined by certain academic standards (objective criteria) and compliance of academic services with the students' needs, which evokes their (subjective) satisfaction (Maunder et al., 2013). Researchers interested in cross-cultural adaptation have examined the psychological phases people go through when entering a foreign culture, the traits that contribute to adjustment in a new culture, and the process of becoming an intercultural individual (Staley, 2014).

Many research studies on intercultural competence have been conducted all over the world lately (Portera, 2014; Spitzberg & Changon, 2009). Despite the abundance of studies on intercultural competence, Lithuania lacks research that aims to analyse the experience of foreign students as representatives of alien cultural, social and institutional context, which enables to better learn and reveal the role of aforementioned factors analysing the development of intercultural competence (Barton et al., 2015; Virgailaite-Meckauskaite, 2011). The current research targets at contribution to empirical data accumulation studying the aspects of the problem, which has been underresearched in Lithuania, i.e. the importance of integrating personal experience (feelings, behavioural or learning difficulties) of a foreign student developing intercultural competence at university. The article presents one part of the longitudinal inquiry, which serves as basis revealing peculiarities of developing intercultural competences in music education studies.

### **1.1. Problem statement**

Therefore, the research problem is formulated as the following research question: how foreign students reveal (self-) development of intercultural competence reflecting on their personal

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experiences and what factors and conditions would increase possibilities of (self-) development of their intercultural competence?

### **1.2. Purpose of study**

The purpose of study is to reveal the peculiarities of developing intercultural competence of foreign students (future music educators) by reflecting their personal experiences.

## **2. Methods**

### **2.1. Sample**

The sample of the research consisted of 22 first and 14 second year Master's degree students (Chinese), who chose studies at Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences (Music Education). The duration of foreign students' academic experience differs: from 6 months (students enrolled this academic year) to 1,5 years (students already living in Vilnius and studying in Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences). The students participating in the study (23 females and 13 males) were coded as S1, S2, S3.....and S36.

### **2.2. Data collection**

A qualitative research strategy, using individual semi-structured written student reflections, was applied (Rushton & Suter, 2012). The reflection encompasses the methods of introspection and retrospection that are of particular importance for revealing one's personal experience in a different socio-cultural context of a new country (Boucenna & Charlier, 2013). The research participants were free to choose the number of such situations to describe and to provide specific examples.

### **2.3. Data analysis**

The content of the written reflections was analysed on the basis of qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014). It is stated that the text provided by the participants in the research is considered as the material for qualitative content analysis, which represents the process of reflection regarded as an essential aspect of experiential learning. The obtained results allow to identify peculiarities of the specific context, where the research participant is active in, and to establish the needs for development of competencies on the basis of the above mentioned. The research ethics was grounded on the principles of goodwill, voluntarism and confidentiality (Miller et al, 2012).

### **2.4. Limitations of the qualitative research**

The limitation of this research is that the non-probability sample was chosen and the obtained results cannot be generalised but they are useful disclosing the possibilities and variety of development of intercultural competence.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

Upon the analysis of the students' reflections on their international experiences, 4 qualitative categories (educational, psychological, cultural, individual factors) were distinguished, which can be subdivided into two groups (themes) – positive and negative experience acquired in Lithuania (see: Table 1).

**Table 1. Results of Analysis of Foreign Students' Written Reflections**

Positive experience	Category	Negative experience
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Study abroad</li> <li>• Educational environment</li> <li>• Educational activities</li> </ul>	Educational factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor skills of the foreign language</li> <li>• Writing theses</li> <li>• Gaps between academic expectations of students and lecturers</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educational interaction between the lecturers and students</li> <li>• Creation of positive climate</li> <li>• Giving and getting feedback</li> </ul>	Psychological factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear, worry, distrust experienced by the student</li> <li>• Unfulfilled expectations</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foreign language skills</li> <li>• Involvement in musical cultural activities</li> <li>• Experience of communicating with lecturers from different culture</li> </ul>	Cultural factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of communicating with students from different culture</li> <li>• Dormitory rules and their observation</li> <li>• Eating habits</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gaining of new experience</li> <li>• Personality (self-) development</li> <li>• Professional improvement</li> </ul>	Individual factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of self-confidence</li> <li>• Incompatibility of wishes and personal abilities</li> </ul>

### **3.1. Positive Experience of (Self-) development of Foreign Students' Intercultural Competence**

The educational system, which empowers students' studying, embraces competency-based, psychological, didactic, organisational and material conditions. It was determined that intercultural competence was largely affected by the **educational factors**, such as studies abroad, an educational environment, as well as educational activities. It is clear that foreign students, who study in Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences, encounter new kind of academic activity organisation, new learning methods and roles of students and lecturers:

- S1 *Though the number of theoretical classes in Master studies is not high, we still have to learn independently a lot, to go to library, to browse the internet and to look for necessary literature sources. Lecturers in Lithuania require not reproduction of knowledge but its comprehensive analysis, generalisation and reflections of acquired experience.*
- S8 *In Chinese universities and schools traditional teaching, a lot of theory and homework prevail.*
- S21 *We (Chinese) mainly lack foreign language skills (understanding, reading, writing, communication). And these are the skills to be improved mostly while studying in Lithuania.*
- S30 *Lecturers in Lithuania are highly professional and innovative. They are interesting, creative and encourage their students also to become the same. All this highly motivates for attainment of better academic results.*

In the category **"Psychological factors"** three sub-categories are singled out: educational interaction between the teacher and students, creation of positive climate, giving and getting feedback. Analysing the experiences acquired by foreign students during their studies in Lithuania, the importance of lecturer-student interaction to development of intercultural competence was revealed:

- S3 *The communication between students and lecturers in Lithuania is very open, close and sincere.*
- S18 *During lectures university teachers create positive atmosphere, apply principles of partnership*

*pedagogy based on collaboration, dialogue and confidence.*

- S19 *They are able to evoke interest in their study subject, "to sparkle" them and to apply various activating teaching and learning methods.*
- S25 *The most vivid positive experiences are related to preparation of a music performance project (concert). Lecturers suggested organising a musical event (concert) of works by Lithuanian and Chinese composers. They helped us to choose the music compositions, encouraged us to make decisions ourselves. This would have never happened in China.*
- S27 *Participation in the concert, seeking mastery in music performance, good evaluations enhanced satisfaction with music studies in Lithuania, provided more opportunities for improvement and self-expression.*
- S34 *University teachers creatively managed all the stages of concert organisation, inspired us to involve into presentation of the composition and we experienced the joy of performing music. They were sincerely happy about our progress.*

It is likely that partnership communication (based on creativity and interactivity) with lecturers may have influence on deeper expression of intercultural competence of foreign students.

The following sub-categories were singled out in the category "**Cultural factors**": foreign language skills, involvement in musical cultural activities, ability to communicate with representatives of other culture. Foreign students acknowledge that:

- S6 *<...> the biggest obstacle in the beginning of studies in Lithuania was insufficient command of the English language.*
- S13 *Too little time and attention to foreign language skills were allocated to foreign language learning as early as learning at school (in China).*
- S16 *All the classes in Lithuania are held in English and this is not easy for us.*
- S36 *It is good that we were provided with opportunities to additionally improve foreign language skills as well as to study Lithuanian.*

It is obvious that the use of foreign language has become a real challenge to students. Seeking to attain higher academic results and to join the new culture, linguistic competency becomes essential (Virgailaite-Meckauskaite, 2011). Though foreign students evaluate their foreign language skills rather low, seriously learning students significantly improved their English language skills at the end of their studies.

Involvement in musical cultural activities is linked with activities that focus on personal and professional needs (Wang, 2016). It can be assumed that active musical cultural activities encouraged students to get acquainted with culture of another country as if "from inside", i.e. through the experience of musical cultural activity:

- S15 *Interpretation of music compositions and participation in musical cultural activity (projects, events, concerts) as well as in educational trips in Lithuania, communication with students and teachers from other countries established an opportunity to learn Lithuania and its culture as if "from inside.*
- S22 *<...>more musical cultural events, projects, educational trips!*

The category “**Individual factors**” contains three sub-categories: gaining of new experience, increase of professional motivation, personality (self-) development and professional improvement. It should be noted that learning of a foreign country occurs through the values internalised in own culture, which enable foreign students to obtain new experience linking and comparing own cultural values, attitudes and behaviour patterns with those of foreign culture identifying and acknowledging differences:

- S4 *I wanted to study in Europe, to learn another country, its culture, to travel and to learn foreign languages.*
- S12 *Lithuania tempted with professional and cultural aims.*
- S19 *People in Lithuania are very friendly, they speak good English, which is not characteristic of our people.*
- S31 *We have already got acquainted with some Lithuanian students at university and have become friends. We frequently cook national dishes of both countries and treat each other.*

According to foreign Master's degree students learning in Lithuania, a music educator, who seeks to improve and successfully adapt in contemporary multicultural society, has “to learn the variety of world music”, “to envisage the links between the native and foreign cultures”, “to nurture national identity”. Students think that it is very important “to be interested in everything”, “to be open”, “flexible”, and “to be able to adapt”, “to constantly improve own professional and personal abilities”.

### **3.2. Expression of Negative Experiences of (Self-) developing Intercultural Competence of Foreign Master's Degree Students**

The study found that, in adapting to the new academic environment, the foreign (Chinese) students at Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences encountered various academic, cultural and daily life difficulties, such as language barriers, writing theses, student dormitory regulations and their observation and eating habits. However, it is necessary to emphasise that only a very small number of students associate own experiences with negative experiences. According to Ting-Toomey (2009), intercultural conflicts arising from the lack of intercultural competence (differences between the groups and their socio-cultural misunderstanding). Students encounter interculturally incompetent behaviour, especially in relation to the affective dimension of intercultural competence, and it is a lack of intercultural sensitivity, adaptability and empathy (Lukesová, 2015).

Having coped with the aforementioned situations, the foreign students acquired experience in solving the encountered intercultural problems and consolidated their intercultural competence:

- S3 *After arrival in Lithuania, we were surprised that female and male students live in the same dormitory (?). Initially, it evoked certain misunderstandings and conflicts (not all the Lithuanian students, especially boys, were friendly with us)...*
- S11 *A lot of problems were faced making attempts to observe the rules of student dormitory (they are very strict in Lithuania).*
- S17 *Eating habits also differ...*
- S29 *<...>we would like a closer cooperation with Lithuanians and students from other countries, more joint events and trips. Classes in Master studies are organised separately for Lithuanian and Chinese groups and we really hardly know each other.*
- S35 *Lithuanian students are not satisfied that almost all the music classrooms for practical*



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*classes are taken by us. The university teachers are unhappy that we do not return the classroom keys on time and they cannot deliver lectures...*

The foreign students went through the period of adaptation to the alien cultural medium in a different way (Russell et al., 2010):

S5 *We arrived in Lithuania with a group of Chinese students. We were received and taken care of by a coordinator from China. Therefore, we did not experience huge fears, challenges, stress or loneliness at all.*

S13 *One student arrived much later (due to visa issues) than we did. She needed time to adapt, she kept asking us where, who and how. But a week or more passed and everything normalised”.*

The foreign students indicated the major challenges encountered during their studies in Lithuania – poor foreign language skills and writing theses:

S14 *“<...> the major barrier is insufficient command of the English language. This impedes free communication with lecturers and students from other countries, prevents from obtaining new knowledge of the study subject, and makes reading, writing and discussing difficult.*

S22 *Various written works, preparation and presentation of course projects, Master's theses cause another challenge, which is also related to weak English language skills.*

S33 *I have never written any research papers or conducted any research on professional activities before. This is new and causes stress: will I succeed? Am I able to write?.*

The comparison of the results obtained during our research with those of similar works by other authors revealed that foreign (Chinese) student face similar academic difficulties (Zhang, 2009; Zhou & Todman, 2008).

The category **“Individual factors”** contains three sub-categories: lack of self-confidence, incompatibility of wishes and personal abilities. It can be noticed that modesty and critical self-assessment are characteristic of foreign students (Chinese). They evaluate own personal qualities as requiring improvement: *<...> we do our best to perform assignments on time and carefully we still lack confidence in themselves and personal abilities, creativity, openness to innovations”*. The Master's programme students from abroad mentioned that *“the biggest problem is inborn modesty and reticence, disadvantages of personal abilities. The insufficient command of the foreign language was an obstacle”*. Also they doubt themselves noticing that they lack confidence in themselves: *“I doubted myself and my abilities choosing the musician's profession. I did not want to disillusion my parents. They kept encouraging me to continue my studies. The musician's profession demands tremendous efforts and studies abroad made everything even more complicated (because of fear, lack of information, insufficient self-confidence, foreign language, moderate abilities)”*.

The results of the conducted research allow to conclude that written reflections enabled foreign students to reflect on own personal experience accumulated during studies at Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences. This also contributes to a deeper self-perception as well as understanding of own learning and future professional activities, to self-confidence and openness to otherness. On the other hand, not only formal learning and attendance of classes are referred to as factors of intercultural competence development but also being in a different environment, meetings with new people, self-knowledge and learning of own culture result in building up of intercultural competence and personal development.

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Generalising, it is possible to state that the case of intercultural competence development of music educators (foreign Master's degree students) chosen for analysis is only one in the context of professional training. It is worth mentioning that the study subject of music education is very distinctive and distinguished by specific methods of artistic-musical world cognition. Therefore, intercultural competence of music educator acquires specific features both due to specifics of artistic expression and their links with educational activities. They predetermine peculiarities of (self-) development of intercultural competence.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Studies abroad are considered to be a priority educational factor for developing intercultural competence of foreign students (future music educators), which encourages learning of other cultures, confirms importance of foreign language skills and opens a path towards personal and professional improvement. Such studies are best consistent with situations and problems of real intercultural encounters and, therefore, development of intercultural competence can be expected. Targeted organisation of the educational process in the host institution and the cultural contexts of the host country acquire utmost importance.

It was determined that intercultural competence was largely affected by educational, psychological, cultural and individual factors. Generalising experiences gained by the Master's degree students foreigners (future music educators') the academic environment and participation in musical cultural activities has the most considerable impact on intercultural competence development of music educators.

The research revealed experienced problem situations (academic, cultural, daily life) of foreign students, which appeared during studies in real environments of intercultural interaction. The most significant challenges regarding academic studies in a foreign educational institution are related to poor skills of foreign languages and writing theses.

Following the research results, it can be stated that educational environment in Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences is sufficiently oriented towards the contemporary learning paradigm and empowers foreign students to develop their intercultural competence. The revealed educational factors make the basis for the development of intercultural competence of pre-service music teachers and further scientific investigation.



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