AN EXPLORATION OF INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE: CASE STUDY

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Abstract:
This paper is underlain by the stringent need to raise intercultural awareness and foster intercultural competence in contemporary environments increasingly marked by multiculturality. First, it focuses on the key role played by intercultural awareness and intercultural competence and on their impact on language. It also explores other significant concepts, i.e., intercultural speaker, intercultural communication competence and critical interculturality. The case study explores several elements connected to intercultural awareness and intercultural competence among non-philological students (e.g., multicultural profile, intercultural experiences, attitudes towards diversity, stereotypes/ prejudices, etc.). These data provide information about the students' intercultural awareness and intercultural competence, and represent the foundation for further improvement of the ESP curricula.

Keywords:
Intercultural awareness, intercultural competence, intercultural communicative competence, non-philological students, ESP/ EFL.

Introduction

The vital part played by intercultural awareness and intercultural competence in the multicultural environments delineated by globalization and by the fast-paced technologization of communication is undeniable. Knowledge by itself – no matter how wide and thorough – often proves insufficient in such environments deeply marked by diversity. Not only does poor communication, in general, trigger misunderstandings and/ or misinterpretation of messages (Nadrag, 2022), but in multicultural contexts attention to various culturally-embedded elements is paramount. A small, ill-

timed or misplaced gesture, a seemingly innocent but misinterpreted word can endanger friendly or diplomatic relationships, overturn business agreements, entail legal trials or even incite to verbal or physical violence. International communication should be adapted to cultural differences, such as those connected to behavioral peculiarities of material values, non-verbal and paraverbal language, use of time, attitudes towards others' language(s), etc. (Nadrag, 2019). Therefore, the need to raise intercultural awareness as early as possible, and to foster intercultural competence both in formal and informal contexts has become increasingly stringent.

Theoretical background

The literature abounds in heated debates about the impact of culture and intercultural issues on language. For instance, Duranti (1997) argues that culture is inseparable from language itself, and that cultural differences should be directly engaged with through language use. Similarly, Scollon and Scollon (2001) emphasize that culture can be explored in terms of different discourse systems, i.e., groups with their own communicative norms, modelled by gender, age, profession, ethnicity, geography, requiring interdiscourse awareness. Fantini (1997) insists that foreign languages furnish access to new ways of perceiving the world, as they enable the exploration of alternative forms of communication, the comprehension of cultural misconceptions and the experience of perspectives otherwise inaccessible via one's mother tongue. In Bryam's opinion (1997), intercultural competence is a vital component in this regard.

Although cultural awareness and intercultural competence are closely related, scholars argue that these two notions are not interchangeable. Winkelman (2005) explains that the former refers to recognizing and comprehending various cultural values, beliefs, behavior patterns and social practices, while also reflecting on one's own cultural background, which thus fosters cultural diversity, avoids stereotypes and encourages openness towards other ways of life. Not only do people learn about other societies, traditions, history and social realities, they also critically examine their own culture (Zarate, 1982).

In its turn, intercultural competence involves the ability to create and sustain efficient relationships (Fantini, 1997), to effectively manage

interactions among people with differing perspectives, emotions and behaviors (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). This notion is described by Achieng (2023) as stretching beyond simple awareness, as it involves the ability to apply cultural understanding in real interactions by adapting in an appropriate manner and building meaningful relationships with people inhabiting different cultural environments. Scholars such as Deardorff (2019), Byram (1997) and Dypedahl (2019) profess that interculturality contributes to the development of the attitudes, knowledge and skills for constructive interaction across differences, whether in nationality, age, profession or political viewpoint. Therefore, the literature demonstrates that cultural awareness furnishes the foundation, while intercultural competence encompasses the practical skills underlying successful communication and meaningful relationships across cultures (Heggernes, 2022).

Intercultural competence also encompasses the comprehension of, engagement with, and adaptation to people from various cultures, fostering multiple perspectives and reflective learning (Deardorff, 2011). For this purpose, it is fostered by the collaboration between language and culture educators, which, in turn, requires the integration of communicative and cultural elements to equip learners for effective interactions across cultural boundaries (Achieng, 2023). These ideas have paved the path towards the concept of "intercultural speaker" – promoted by scholars such as Byram and Zarate (1997) and Sercu (2002) – capable of mediating between cultures and transforming encounters into genuine intercultural relationships. This concept impacted language teaching, influencing the shift from the native speaker model and simple bilingualism – challenged by research in TESOL, applied linguistics and intercultural communication – to the intercultural communicator, focused on negotiating differences between linguistic and cultural communities (Zheng and Gao, 2019). For instance, as far as EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and ESP (English for Specific Purposes) teaching is concerned, the focus should not fall on addressing only American and British languages and cultures, given in particular the present-day status of *lingua franca* held by the English language. The literature encourages that diverse cultures should be taken into consideration, language variations should be acknowledged, and ethnocentric and stereotypical perspectives should be avoided, as culture itself is a dynamic, multifaced and contextually

constructed phenomenon (Galante, 2023; Bennett, 1993). European frameworks, such as the CEFR and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages emphasize the key role of intercultural awareness and intercultural competence, which nurtures the understanding of others' cultural perspectives, relating them to their own, and acquire self-awareness (Byram et al., 2002; Barrett et al., 2014).

Another interesting concept related to intercultural competence is "critical interculturality", explained by Torres Escobar (2024) as an endeavor to question power dynamics, social hierarchies and cultural assumptions via critical thinking. In this scholar's perspective, critical interculturality goes beyond surface-level culture, as it targets a deeper comprehension of cultural paradigms and sociocultural realities, in order to appreciate diverse paradigms, avoid stereotypes, reflect on one's own identity, and nurture empathy. In this regard, interculturality is delineated as a process, as a transformative tool that challenges inequality and entrenched power structures (Torres Escobar, 2024). A somewhat synonymous concept engendered by the literature is critical cultural awareness, defined as the ability to evaluate perspectives, practices and products across cultures using explicit criteria; this type of awareness underpins cultural citizenship, which connects intercultural competence with responsible participation in the global society (Byram, 2009; Byram, 2012).

The notions of cultural awareness and intercultural competence are tightly connected with intercultural communication studies, which emerged in the early 1970s, as a field dealing with interactions where people bring difference life experiences shaped by their group's shared knowledge and values (Samovar and Porter, 1972). In this respect, it is worth mentioning Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence (1997), which is based on five key dimensions, labelled in French as "savoirs": knowledge of self and others, interpreting and relating skills, curiosity and openness, discovery and interaction skills, and critical cultural awareness. Thus, intercultural communicative competence seeks to create balanced interactions, where learners are positioned on equal terms, acknowledge their own identities and comprehend those of others, which entails efficient communication and meaningful relationships (Byram et al., 2002; Galante, 2023). By integrating cultural understanding with practical communicative

skills, this framework shapes both language teaching and assessment, and guides the intercultural speaker to perceive differences, mediate between cultures and navigate multiple linguistic and cultural identities (Byram, 2009; Zheng and Gao, 2019).

According to Florés-Montaño et al. (2022), the implementation of intercultural communicative competence contributes to the negotiation of cultural differences and encourages respectful communication across diverse contexts; it also aligns with broader social goals, such as multilingualism, inclusion and recognition of marginalized cultural groups. When analyzing Byram's intercultural communicative competence based on the aforementioned "savoirs", Galante (2015) notices that it emphasizes cultural relativism, empathy, curiosity and awareness of cultural identity; it also helps learners identify misunderstandings in intercultural interactions, explain conflicting interpretations and take steps towards the improvement of communication. Moreover, she states that when applied in language teaching contexts, this approach enables students to critically explore both their own culture and others', learning to tackle differences in communication styles, such as body language or interaction norms. Practical, respectful and meaningful interactions based on efficient intercultural competence require self-reflection, decentralizing one's own cultural assumptions and approaching other cultures from an ethno-relative perspective (Galante, 2015).

In addition, in higher education, a key role is played by student mobility, which creates multicultural opportunities where cultural understanding involves – among many others – the promotion of empathy and global citizenship, thus stretching beyond mere language instruction (Achieng, 2023). The integration of intercultural approaches in such inclusive environments, marked by linguistic and cultural diversity, enhances communication and learning, promotes the reflection on intercultural encounters, acknowledges power relations and the value of different cultural orientations (Byram, 1997).

Although widely endorsed by organizations such as ACTFL, UNESCO and the Council of Europe (Galante, 2015), some scholars such as Zheng and Gao (2019) draw the attention to the fact that some intercultural competence models may not fully apply in societies marked by strong traditional values or unified local identities. They warn against two important

risks that can be entailed in such contexts. First, too much emphasis on the deconstruction of cultural boundaries can lead to superficial openness, where shared cultural traits are ignored and understanding remains shallow; second, members of less dominant cultures may undergo through reversed ethnocentrism, which involves judging one's own culture by external standards and feeling inferior, thus weakening local cultural identity (Zheng and Gao, 2019). In order to avoid such risks, the aforementioned scholars highlight the importance of maintaining and affirming local and home culture before cultivating a global intercultural identity.

In their turn, Florés-Montaño et al. (2022) emphasize that, despite the improvements triggered in EFL teaching by the intercultural communicative approach, attention should also be paid to other instruments that foster deep intercultural relationships. They also mention that the particular features of each education system should also be taken into account when implementing the communication approach. Overall, the growing interest in intercultural awareness and intercultural communication mirrors the intensity of the globalizing trend and the urgency to acquire the abilities that ensure the successful navigation of today's world, which is both diversified through intercultural contact, and diverse in terms of its multicultural composition.

Case study. Research methodology

The case study described in this paper is part of a wider (questionnaire-based research) survey performed in the academic year 2024-2025 with another colleague, i.e., Lavinia Nădrag, from the Faculty of Letters of Ovidius at University of Constanta. The questionnaire applied in this research encompassed multiple-choice and open-ended questions that aimed at outlining the students' multicultural profile, gathering information about their intercultural experiences, and identifying their attitudes towards diversity. It should be noted that the subjects were not required to provide their personal data, as the questionnaire was filled in anonymously. While my colleague was interested in the students enrolled at the Faculty of Letters (she will publish her study in a separate article), my research focused on non-philological students (more specifically, students from the Faculty of Applied Sciences and Engineering, the Faculty of Law and Administrative Sciences and the Faculty of Dentistry).

My study aimed to explore several elements connected to the intercultural awareness and intercultural competence of non-philological students, such as their multicultural profile, their attitudes towards social inequity, their understanding of stereotypes and prejudices, their perspectives on the integration of peers endowed with exceptional abilities, and the assessment criteria they apply to their teachers (i.e., whether they evaluate them based on their gender and ethnicity or on professionalism and competence). The findings of this research will provide a clearer picture of the status of intercultural awareness and intercultural competence in the academic environment, among non-philological students, and will contribute to the improvement of the ESP curricula in this regard.

Findings and discussions

Taking into account that the number of the students who agreed upon answering the questionnaire varied from one faculty to another (Faculty of Law and administrative sciences – 7; Dentistry – 17; and Applied Sciences and Engineering – 10), I was especially interested in their answers related to their perception of differences in terms of races, ethnic groups, religions, LGBT+ and cultural groups; therefore, attention was paid to the qualitative side of the research, not to the quantitative one.

As far as the demographical data are concerned, out of the 34 students, most of them (31) are between 18 and 25 years old; 2 respondents are between 26 and 36 years old, and only 1 is above 36 years old. 26 are female and the remainder are male. 33 are Romanian citizens, while one student is from the Republic of Moldova. Moreover, 33 identify themselves as Caucasian and one as Carpathian Dacian. The distribution of students per ethnic groups is as follows: 31 are Romanian, 1 is Turkish, 1 is Tartar and 1 is Moldavian. These data show that the research group is highly homogeneous, the ethnic and racial diversity being minimal, which represents a limitation to this study. Thus, the findings of this research are not generalizable, but applicable mainly to young Romanian university students, mostly female. The age when respondents became aware of the existence of multiple races/ ethnicities/ social classes/ religions/ disabled people/ LGBTQ+ communities differs to a large extent; the answers have been systematized in the table below:

Table 1. Age when the respondents became aware of the existence of multiple races/ ethnicities/ social classes/ religions/ disabled people/ LGBTQ+ communities

Age span	Number of answers
0-5 years old (kindergarten)	3
6-10 years old (primary school)	6
11-14 years old (secondary school)	13
15-18 years old (high school)	7
Over 19 years old (adulthood)	1

Source: author's own processing

The answers have been grouped in age spans because some responders gave approximate ages as the question itself included a variety of groups: "At the age of 13-14 i finally started to understand something, till then i only knew they existed"; "In the middle school, around 10 years old"; "around 10". It is noteworthy that some respondents became aware of the existence of racial, ethnic, social, religious and/ or sexual diversity at a very young age. The circumstances in which the respondents became aware of the existence of these diverse groups differ a lot. The answers grouped in the table below show that the educational environment as well as the Internet and (social) media play a very important part in raising intercultural awareness.

Table 2. Circumstance in which the respondents became aware of the existence of multiple races/ ethnicities/ social classes/ religions/ disabled people/ LGBTQ+ communities

Circumstance	Answers
Educational institution	"At school" (2 answers), "school" (3 answers), "In high school", "Highschool", "In history class"
Family, friends, community	"Social awareness"; "friends"; "Was a student in a different city"
Internet and (social) media	"Internet" (4 answers), "From TV", "Internet, tv, social media, movies", "On social media", "From media", "Social media such as YouTube and news outlets"
Mixed circumstances	"through friends and social media mostly", "watching tv" "From my family and TV", "I saw disabled people in the street and all sorts of people on tv"

Self-awareness/ by oneself	"I went outside", "I'm bisexual", "I understood that we are all equal. It doesn't matter what color you are, what weight or height, it matters what and how you think."; "I saw 2 boys kissing in the street."

Source: author's own processing

29 students have colleagues of different races/ ethnicities/ religions, etc. They mentioned races/ ethnicities/ nationalities such as Negroid, Arabic, Syrian, Syrians, Greek, Turkish, Jewish, Gypsy. They also referred to religious diversity by stating that they have Muslim, Christian and Jewish colleagues. Some of them also mentioned sexual diversity: "LGBT" and "gay(s)". Three students highlighted this diversity by stating: "I have many foreign friends, of different ethnicities and with different religions"; "I HAVE colleagues of different races, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation. To sum up, we have few of everything", "I have colleagues with different religions but i dont know the names".

When asked where they met them, their answers encompassed a wide range of circumstances. Most respondents mentioned the educational environment, i.e., school, high school, college, faculty, university, "in classes", "in academic settings, during breaks". One respondent said that "They come to study in Romania", while another mentioned the diversity of teachers' ethnicities and religions as well: "We were classmates and we had teachers of different ethnicities and religions". Few answers referred to the professional environment ("work") and one respondent stated that they became aware of the existence of such diversity while travelling ("When I was travelling"). Six respondents mentioned mixed circumstances: "Grupuri de prieteni comuni, la liceu și chiar la anumite competiții sportive"; "You saw them everywhere"; "Work place and school"; "Since I was born"; "Work, friends"; "I met them due to uni classes but not only. Some of them are studying in the same university and i see then on the hallways, some of them at the library, in the city . Every where , constanta its an entire spectrum of colours."

They described their relationships with diverse races/ ethnicities/ social classes/ religions/ disabled people/ LGBT+ communities as either positive (good, very good, great, friendly) or neutral; no respondent described their relationships as negative.

Table 3. Types of relationships with diverse races/ ethnicities/ social classes/ religions/ disabled people/ LGBT+ communities

Type of relationship	Number of answers
Strongly positive (very good, great)	5
Positive (good, friendly)	19
Neutral (colleagues, neutral, ok)	6
Negative	0

Source: author's own processing

Some respondents provided details about their relationships, emphasizing their positive nature: "i'd say we're friendly and we get along well"; "I think i have a good relationship. I help them and they help me when i need"; "I m not so close to all of them, only few because i didn't have the chance, not because I've been tired and i was rejected; "A good one, we understand each other well"; "I don't have any problems, we're on friendly terms"; "I would say that i got along with them pretty well". 31 students stated that their relationship with another group did not affect them in any way, while 3 others admitted that it affected them. When asked to provide further comments, those who responded furnished positive feedback: "Interacting with other groups can help me learn about them and improve my general knowledge"; "There is place in the world for everybody. Just because you are different, it does not mean that you are not special"; "I don't judge them"; "Why would it affect me?". One student, however, confessed having suffered sexual abuse: "I got molested by some homosexuals".

33 students consider people from other groups equal to them, and only one see them as superior. 20 students consider that they have very rich colleagues. They labelled their relationship with them in a positive manner; only one student described their relationship in a negative manner: "honestly I'm not very fond of them, usually rich people have a tendency to view themselves as superior. i've never really liked arrogant people so i try to keep my distance".

Table 4. Types of relationships with rich colleagues

Type of relationship	Number of answers
Strongly positive (very good, great)	1
Positive (good, friendly)	13
Neutral (colleagues, neutral, ok)	4
Negative	1

Source: author's own processing

Two students provided details about the positive relationships with their rich colleagues: "A good one, we understand each other well"; "We are friends from high school or middle school and i don't care about how much money they have i only care about them like personality".

14 students have very poor colleagues. 12 labelled their relationships with these colleagues in a positive manner, as very good, great, respectful, good, friendly, and one said that they don't have such colleagues ("I don't have").

Table 5. Types of relationships with poor colleagues

Type of relationship	**Number of answers**
Strongly positive (very good, great, respectful)	3
Positive (good, friendly)	9
Neutral/ non-existent	1
Negative	0

Source: author's own processing

Some respondents even furnished further details about their relationships, suggesting their admiration, empathy and similar experiences or ways of thinking: "I respect them cause most of them work really hard. And when i can help i help"; "A good one, we understand each other well"; "I like poor people, not because I m a marxist, but because I know how is to rain in your house"; "We agree with each other". 18 students have thought about whether they can help them, and provided various suggestions in this regard, shown in the table below.

Table 6. Suggestions to help poor colleagues

Type of relationship	**Number of answers**
Material/ financial support	"Give them money and whatever and something"; "Take them to eat somethings with my money"; "in high school we used to collect money and food for very poor people"; "Give them gifts on Christmas".
Spiritual support	"Fiind deschisă la sfaturi și conversații prietenoase"; "I try to include them in my friend groups so they don't feel alone"; "Work opportunities or advice"; "Maybe just be more responsive in general in case they need help with college work. Any money related to help would be an insult."

Mixed support	"I'm not a rich person nor a poor one, i am a student on a budget. But it's not always about money. I do have the initiative to help them in school, i like to share my food with everyone, and things that they seem to need on the moment"; "Giving them mental support and asking them what kind of things they aren't possessing to see if i cand provide it for them".
Unspecified	"i would have liked to help them, but they dropped out of school"; "With everything i can do".

Source: author's own processing

Respondents said that their poor colleagues can be helped by state institutions ("Statul și asociațiile destinate", "The state, the Ministry of Education", "The authorities, implementing better welfare programs and other such methods"; "Funds"), friends and members of the academia ("My friends, the teachers", "Higher institutions such as school or associations", "school"), members of the society, in general ("The capitalist society"; "Everyone", "Anyone who wants to", "Everyone can that has a better financial situation"; "Just other people in general, maybe the professors can be more responsive").

23 subjects of the study believe that they have "genius" colleagues at school; 28 respondents believe that such colleagues should not learn in separate classes for gifted students, but in regular ones. 14 students stated that they know some prejudices/ stereotypes about a certain race/ ethnicity/ religion/ culture. They were also asked to give examples of such prejudices or stereotypes. Their answers are systematized in the table below. It should be noted that almost all prejudices/ stereotypes mentioned by the respondents are negative; only one can be categorized as mixed, as the respective student also presents some positive aspects despite the prejudices s/he mentions about Roma people.

Table 7. Examples of prejudices/ stereotypes mentioned by the students

Type of prejudice/ stereotype	**Answers**
Positive	-
Neutral/ mixed	"I think everyone knows stereotypes for all types of races and ethnicities, but I don't think they apply in a university environment. For example, gypsies have the most negative sterotypes of all, but obviously, a well dressed gypsy student in a college environment and

	willing to learn is obviously integrated well into society and is like any other romanian, not like the stereotypical ones that steal, scam, and marry at 12 in a tent"
Negative	"I m a Christiam, and people look mad on me when I tell them"; "here in Romania, I'd say the gypsy community is the most hated. there are a lot of stereotypical jokes about them, like how they steal or other silly stuff"; "Some common stereotypes include portraying all Muslims as terrorists, oppressive towards women, or inherently violent"; "Regarding the lgbt groups i am more concerned because we are not accepted at all"; "About money, or racial comments like how insistent arabs can be"; "That Muslim women must be submissive"; "I saw that usually, in Romania, roma people are discriminated because most of them do not act properly in society"; "The roma people being seen as theaves and murderes, sometimes even as uncivilised brutes."

Source: table processed by the author of this study

28 students see no issues concerning multiculturalism being tackled in lectures and coursebooks. Two respondents provide further information in this regard: "we learn general information about our own race"; "In high school books I had a few pages that talked about cultural differences". Therefore, 24 students think that there should be explicit references to multiculturalism in coursebooks, syllabi, curricular and extracurricular activities. Six respondents also furnish further comments concerning this aspect. While some comments highlight the importance of multiculturalism (e.g., "Two countries with McDonald don't never go to war"; "Because in life we meet many people and we should get to know each other so that we don't put ourselves in uncomfortable situations by doing things that are offensive to another culture while they might not be offensive in our own culture"), others just state the need for its insertion into the curriculum (i.e., "They should teach me more about other cultures") or emphasize the necessity to implement it in a

responsible manner (i.e., "If such measures were to be implemented, they need to be properly researched, and not "half-baked" measures"). Another comment stresses its uselessness in an environment that already promotes multiculturalism (i.e., "They wouldn't because I was raised in an environment that made me not be racist"), while one respondent thinks that interactions in multicultural environments have a greater impact and that the implementation of multiculturalism in the curricula would have an opposite effect, leading to positive discrimination (i.e., "I feel like the best example for multiculturalism would just be for people to interact in person and see form an opinion that way. If I'm being lectured and overadvertised about diversity and multiculturalism, it would undermine the concept of equality by treating other ethnicities like fragile people that need special treatment").

14 students have had teachers of a different race/ ethnicity/ religion/ sexual orientation, etc. than themselves. Some of them furnished further positive or neutral comments such as: "Great guys everybody"; "I have never thought about the race, religion, sexuality of my teachers"; "She's asiatic i guess"; "They are absolutely great as teachers"; "At the moment, i do not have teachers of different race/ ethnicity, etc. but i had in middle and high school".

30 students stated that they rate teachers based on their competence and professionalism. 33 respondents said that they do not assess their teachers in terms of race. 30 students stated that they do not rate their teachers based on their gender, but 3 respondents said that they do. When asked about the criteria that they use in order to assess their teachers, students mentioned kindness, professionalism, classroom management skills, teaching skills and teaching style (e.g., "The way they are teaching"; "How well they teach us and if they are on time"; "How good they are at explaining the subject we are studying"; "Ability to teach, of course"; "The way they manage the classroom and pass on information"; "only depending on the skills"), sense of humor, punctuality, attitude towards students ("on how they treat students").

Three respondents provided more elaborate explanations about the ways in which they assess their teachers. Besides teaching style and abilities, one of them also mentioned supportiveness and use of

interactive methods: "I also rate my teachers based on how clearly they explain concepts, how supportive they are when I have questions, and their ability to keep the class engaged through interactive methods". Interestingly, another respondent assesses teachers based on the relationship between the difficulty of subject matter and the complexity of the exam: "I rate my teachers based on how easily they teach their subject and how complex their exams are. If they teach something difficult and are usually not clear, they should give an easy exam". The third answer mentions criteria such as the teacher's involvement, their attitude towards students, their understanding in certain circumstances, and the impact that their personality has on the student's opinion of the subject being taught: "I rate my teachers based on their implication And based on the attitude that they give us during classes, the understanding they give us when something doesn't go as planned" […], And how their personality can change my opinion about a subject in a good way".

Only 4 students think that female students in their class are favored over male students by the teaching staff or that the male students or other students are favored. Two respondents provide further details in this regard: "some teachers make jokes insinuating the girls are less intelligent than the boys"; "At some teachers you can see these preferences". Two respondents added final comments to the questionnaire. One of them said that s/he enjoyed filling in the questionnaire (i.e., "It was a pleasure to answer"), while the other expressed his/her discomfort engendered by the lack of institutional support for LGBTQ+ students: "I wish Ovidius University would do something regarding the lgbt rights. I don't feel so comfortable and i m not the only one. I m not asking for something huge, i am asking for something that could raise awareness on this issue". This student does not demand major policy changes, but small awareness raising initiatives, which indicates a desire for recognition, inclusion and improved visibility of LGBTQ+ rights and safety in the academic environment.

Conclusion

Although the respondent group has a highly homogeneous nature, which represents a limitation in terms of generalizability, the study is

still able to furnish a relevant and interesting picture of mainstream student attitudes. The findings illustrate that the non-philological students who responded to the questionnaire display, in general, tolerant and equality-oriented attitudes, as most of them describe their relationships with members from other cultural groups as positive or neutral. Nevertheless, despite this inclusive social climate, almost all students gave examples of negative stereotypes and prejudices, especially targeted at Roma people and Muslims. This evidences that prejudices still haunt the students' environments.

Moreover, they report early awareness of diversity (e.g., some of them became aware of it as early as kindergarten or primary school). However, their intercultural awareness and intercultural competence is modelled by informal exposure (mainly by the media, online environments and social interactions with classmates, friends, family and members of the community) rather than by structured academic training. The findings also emphasize the respondents' tendency to assess their teachers based on professionalism and competence rather than on gender or ethnicity, which suggests their lack of overt discrimination in academic assessment. Merit-based assessment standards are thus prioritized by the respondents.

On the other hand, most students consider that multiculturalism and intercultural competence are not sufficiently tackled in formal education. They militate for their inclusion in the curricula, thus drawing the attention to the gap between social realities and academic training.

The LGBTQ+ comment at the end of the questionnaire implies that, despite the reported positive attitudes towards diversity, tolerance does not automatically involve social inclusion as well, as some students still feel uncomfortable. Therefore, a stronger institutional and curricular support for multicultural awareness and intercultural competence is felt necessary, in particular regarding marginalized groups. In this regard, institutional visibility and protection should be enhanced via more explicit multicultural/ intercultural and inclusion-targeted educational strategies and activities.

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