



## ORIGINAL PAPER

# National Identity And Intercultural Communication in the Teaching of Romanian as a Foreign Language

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### Abstract:

In the context of globalization, intercultural communication and national identity have become indisputably relevant and increasingly important. They approach a new problematic horizon with multiple implications in an interdisciplinary manner. Within the teaching of Romanian as a foreign language, there are complex interactions between students from different parts of the world, a phenomenon that can produce profound changes in the identity structure of culture and national identity. Foreign students who come to Romania to learn the Romanian language meet more and more frequently in the space of interculturality carrying with them different cultural equipment, and the non-conflicting management of these differences is a great challenge. The respect of foreign students coming to study in Romania for the cultural variety encountered is an important aspect of the subsequent social, cultural and identity interaction between them. Socialization transmits and consolidates ways of communication, behavioral patterns based on functional rules, considered important for a particular community. When interacting with multiple cultures, foreign students and more, assimilate individual characteristics, experiences, and cultural elements from each, including the host country. Thus, intercultural communication has reopened the file of perennial themes of social thought, such as the unity and diversity of cultures, the relationship between us and others, ethnocentrism and cultural relativism, the crisis of identities and their redefinition under the combined pressure of many factors.

**Keywords:** *intercultural communication, national identity, foreign students, diversity, differences.*

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### **Introduction**

In the complex process of globalization that we are going through as humanity, the issue of preserving cultural identity becomes a necessity, because there is really a danger of cultural homogenization, of the emergence of the phenomenon of cultural and psychological disintegration, both for individuals and for societies.

Understanding the implications of cultural diversity represents one of the challenges of the contemporary world, constituting one of the main objectives of a new orientation within the globalization process. So, it seems necessary to decode some basic notions about culture: "The totality of material and spiritual values created by mankind and the institutions necessary to communicate these values" (Coteanu, 1996: 248); to subculture: "Culture of social groups and subgroups within an ethnic community" (Coteanu, 1996: 1032); to multiculturalism: "The existence of several cultures within the same country" (Coteanu, 1996: 660); to interculturality which represents the interaction between several cultures that coexist in the same environment, the exchange and mutual recognition of values, traditions and ways of life.

Intercultural communication aims at a positive approach to differences, aims at the formation of positive and active attitudes towards other cultures, with the following effects: developing the skills of foreign students to know and value other cultures; developing the skills to recognize and positively evaluate differences and diversity; the development of positive behaviour and attitudes towards people from other cultures; developing the skills to recognize inequalities, injustices, racism, stereotyping and prejudices; the development of the feeling of solidarity and the desire to express it through action.

A problematic element in the current context for each nation, arising as a result of this phenomenon of globalization, is the preservation of national identity. National identity is defined through culture and citizens feel the need to have certain material and spiritual elements, certain traditions and customs to define their belonging to a certain nation. National identity is not an innate trait but is essentially socially constructed (Anderson, 1991: 133).

A good understanding of the world through the prism of national identity refers to a shared culture of the past, present and future. In-group solidarity and the exclusion of "others" is a crucial feature in the creation of national identity. The reaffirmation of identity issues appears as a specific tendency of the deepening of the phenomenon of integration of foreign students and also of the processes it generates. The problem of the national identity of foreign students who come to study in Romania is also a problem of the countries from which they come to integrate easily in the globalization process.

Nowadays, culture offers an unlimited field for contacts between different communities, for interpersonal relations and consequently mutual influences, fertile exchanges, but also for potential conflicts. Human rights norms must help us see in which legal space culture can manifest itself in its various forms, different cultures can express themselves, which guarantees and which legal institutions exist or should exist to make possible respect, protection and the realization of these events.

Globalization has made intercultural communication an inevitable fact. Today's world is subject to rapid changes, the interaction between people takes on new dimensions. Contact and communication with other cultures are the dominant characteristics of modern life. Intercultural communication means direct interaction between foreign students from different cultures. Intercultural communication involves

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much more than understanding the norms of a group, it involves accepting and tolerating the differences between foreign students who have come to learn the Romanian language, not only at the level of language and traditions, but also of the approach to certain behaviours specific to certain life situations, certain contexts economic and political seen through the eyes of national identity.

Article 6 of the Romanian Constitution talks about the right to identity:

"(1) The State recognizes and guarantees to persons belonging to national minorities the right to preserve, develop and express their ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity.

(2) The protection measures taken by the state to preserve, develop and express the identity of persons belonging to national minorities must comply with the principles of equality and non-discrimination in relation to other Romanian citizens" (Constituția, 2022: 7).

### **The challenges of intercultural communication and national identity for foreign students**

National identity is one of the facets of human identity. The identity of a foreign student or an individual in general does not consist only in the data from the ID card or passport but also in the data of the people from which he comes, of the national territory within which he completed his cultural evolution in such a way that when he steps on the territory of another country and is in contact with other cultures and traditions, a true cultural exchange, intercultural communication is created.

The cultural diversity of the participants in the courses of teaching the Romanian language as a foreign language to foreign students does nothing but deepen certain problems related to their adaptation to new cultures and traditions, to new ways of communication and understanding. Foreign students who come to our country and are in permanent contact with a new culture and language but also with other colleagues belonging to other countries and other customs, have a tendency to lose their cultural specificity, to move away from their traditional background, generator of the feeling of national identity, precisely from the desire to integrate more quickly in a new socio-cultural context. Many of the foreign students come with the idea of settling in our country after finishing their studies, and then they somehow feel obliged to understand our culture and traditions, to adhere to them, even if for them the differences are major. And here we can give as an example, the foreign students from the Arab world, who have certain traditions, especially religious ones that they do not give up even after a socio-professional integration in the territory of our country, being much less flexible than other foreign students from other countries territorially and traditionally close to our country, such as: Bulgarians and Serbs.

National identity plays an important role in defining us in relation to others from other cultures and nationalities, because through it we express our dignity, our essence, the fact that we belong to a territory and a people. Economic, political, social and even psychological aspects can have major implications in the discourse on an individual's national identity.

The problem is not in the construction of a national identity by foreign students but in keeping and preserving it, because once they arrive in a foreign country they feel constrained to a certain extent to become flexible from this point of view for a better adaptation to the new world in which they want to integrate. So, "national identity represents the relationship that a citizen of a country has with it, a relationship attested from a legal point of view. (...) National and ethnic identity become relevant identities

in an intercultural context, because only then does it become obvious how behaviour is influenced by one's own culture, thus having a series of effects on the communication of identity. What seemed normal and self-evident in living "at home", becomes an individual trait in a foreign culture, (...). National identity is similar to other collective identities such as religious, professional or ethnic identity. It is expressed through feelings of belonging, through identification with other members and differentiation from others, but its particularities are linked to the specifics of the national community, the nation being the one that determines the character of the national identity. (...) National identity can be understood as a collective cultural phenomenon, a concept that includes a specific language, feelings and symbolism, a series of intense feelings towards one's own country" (Drăgușin, 2014: 20-21).

We can say that national identity is born from the individual's need to identify, to have an emotional connection with another person, always being part of a group, as is the nation. Always when we have foreign students in the preparatory year of the Romanian language from the same country, or of the same religion, or speakers of the same language, they form a group, and they behave relatively uniformly and are understanding towards each other, but sometimes they distance themselves and consider any other different group.

Social and cultural integration is considered today more and more as a process of communicative integration, in which the degree of tolerance towards certain groups increases by initiating certain linguistic and discursive practices and abandoning other linguistic practices. Consequently, a process of initiating cultural change can be done by changing these discursive determinants through cultural policies. Identity has an enormous influence in intercultural communication, often causing misunderstandings and communication problems between foreign students. Thus, assumptions can be made about a certain cultural group by attributing the same characteristics to the person in question, ignoring their individual aspect and bringing to the fore ideas and experiences obtained on the basis of the knowledge we have from different sources, or even as a result of interaction direct in a particular moment and context between us and that group or individual belonging to a different culture.

Silvia-Diana Šolkotović emphasized in an article the statements of the American researcher John Rawls who said that: "preserving national identity is a real antidote against the drift towards: a market society", thus becoming vital the importance of preserving identity pluralism (Šolkotović, 2016: 197).

In the field of intercultural communication, an attempt is made to demonstrate the importance of an education that incorporates elements of interculturality, so that students have a concrete basis, necessary in intercultural contacts, to develop their cultural sensitivity and self-perception. A very good example in this sense is the Erasmus educational program, through which there is an exchange of students between universities in different parts of Europe, with the aim of training them to become more tolerant, to know other education systems, other language systems and trying to integrate into the culture and traditions of another country. Our country also participates in this type of programs, so the question arises whether the foreign students who have arrived here experience changes in their sense of national identity or their perception during the time they are in this country. Thus, the need to deepen the understanding of the concept of national identity, to observe the transformations undergone by it in the case of foreign students who live for a certain period of time in another cultural environment and the

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repercussions that experience has on the feeling of being foreign, to observe the way in which national identity interacted with other types of identifications.

From what the foreign students who come to Romania to study say, there is a certain reluctance and perhaps certain expectations related to a country and a people that they only know from television, from other people's stories or from books:

"I came to Romania in November and it was a new event for me, because it is the first time I leave my country to countries in Europe." (Emad, Jordan)

"This year I am in the preparatory year. After finishing high school I decided to start University in Romania. I've never been away from my family and I didn't know what it's like to go out on your own. (...) Here I met many Albanians and stayed only with them. I didn't know Romanian at all because I only spoke Albanian all the time. (...) Now I have many Romanian friends and I learned Romanian with them." (Armidjona, Albania)

"After finishing high school, I decided to start my studies at the University of Craiova. The first year is about the Romanian language and Romanian culture and civilization. At first it was a bit difficult for me but I'm adapted now. This year was one of my most beautiful experiences, I met a lot of people, I visited new places." (Tea, Albania)

"I am a student in the preparatory year and I am learning the Romanian language. I came to Romania in March. Difficult language for me but interesting. The university is great and I lost myself in it. I need to study fast for college. I learned some words like: Good morning!; Goodbye!; Thanks!; Good evening!; How are you?; Very nice. In the end, the experience is good and Romania is very beautiful." (Aseel, Syria)

"I started the preparatory year in October 2021. (...) From March it started to be better for me and with language learning. I met the Romanians and was more in contact with their language and culture. I understood that I like Romania as a country where I want to continue my studies." (Avenir, Albania)

"I hope to see myself improving business relations, especially between Bangladesh and the European Union. Educating in Romania, learning its culture and customs will allow me to achieve my goal of joining our government agencies." (Israfil, Bangladesh)

The international experience of foreign students who come to study in Romania provides the context conducive to the activation of national identity, through contact with people from other continents and other countries. At first glance, from the statements of foreign students after a first impact with a new country and new colleagues from different countries, it follows that there are always at least two sources of identification, only in the first phase students who do not adapt from the beginning feel the national identity as the only identity, but then they also develop other types of identities. There are therefore, in addition to the national identity, other types of identities that will develop in parallel, without eliminating the first one, namely the international identity, because foreign students are international students, and the group identity, because there is a group of foreign students at the preparatory year of the Romanian language to which they belong. No student kept the national identity as the only identity, however, there is a basic international and group identity, which appears in students who integrated more easily, faster and did not have time to feel the national identity in particular. There is an explanation for this, namely the bond between the

foreign students who came to study in Romania, meaning common interests, activities, events, which is actually the trigger for the feeling of belonging and unity of the group.

In general, in the preparatory year of the Romanian language there is a group of multi-ethnic students, belonging to different cultures and traditions, with different national or religious identities, who must understand and support each other in a foreign country whose language, culture and traditions must adapt.

It is often difficult, but the fact that the culture and traditions of Romania are discussed in class, emphasizing the culture and traditions of the countries from which each foreign student comes, makes the latter feel well received in -a country that will "adopt" them for a longer or shorter period of time and sometimes for life. From the discussions with the students, the hardest thing is for them to feel assimilated by the country where they come to study, because in the class group they have that feeling of common effort, understanding and tolerance, all having the same goal of learning the Romanian language.

When foreign students come to study in Romania, they feel like they are part of an international group, of a community where national diversity is defining, cancelling the feeling of "being a foreigner" in another country. The international student identity emerged as a substitute for the foreign citizen identity, giving students the sense of belonging they needed to feel comfortable, "like a family," as many of them put it. Another type of identification is with the local people, after a period of assimilation of the language and culture of the country where they are studying, foreign students get to develop friendships with the locals and integrate into their families during various events and specific holidays. The depth to which the identification with the locals reached depended to the greatest extent on the degree of openness of the students and the interest in knowing the respective culture and on the other hand on the interest and receptivity of the locals.

The acute sense of national identity when a student is in a foreign country also occurs as a result of preconceptions, of anticipating a certain behaviour of others towards your nationality, or of a strong religious upbringing as in the case of the Arabs, who it makes them attach only to those who belong to the same religion and detach themselves from others. However, the students' openness to accepting the new culture when they come to a foreign country is great, and the culture shock is inevitably felt all the more intensely as the elements of differentiation are more obvious, and this is where the necessary intercultural communication can intervene. Due to the intercultural environment, which triggers a need for compensation and homogenization with other nationalities by reactivating one's own identity, there are cases where foreign students speak a common language. Spanish, for example, was spoken during breaks between classes by two students, one from Costa Rica and one from Venezuela, feeling glad to be able to use a common element that reminded them of their national identity and 'home'.

The purpose of intercultural communication, in addition to the practical, economic aspects that have led to the meeting between cultures since their birth thousands of years ago, is also one of introspection, self-discovery and full understanding of the self. However, although it presents many positive effects at the level of personal development, the increased contact between cultures in the long term presents risks both at the global level and at the level of direct contact between different cultures within the Romanian language as a foreign language course. It is well known that: "For an effective communication between groups or individuals belonging to different cultures, it is necessary to be aware of one's own stereotypes and to overcome

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them, thus creating a meeting space based on common values that ensure the functioning of a real dialogue" (Lăpădat, 2020: 141).

However, intercultural communication is of particular importance, as it has become a necessity in conditions where people are more and more often involved in situations of contact with other cultures, as is the case with foreign students. By means of intercultural communication mediated by contact with other cultures, through the exchange of views foreign students could realize what is specific to their culture and became aware of certain things that they had not even noticed before.

Intercultural communication researches those elements of culture that particularly influence the interaction between members of two or more cultures when they come into contact (Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, 2010: 8). It is produced by the interpenetration of two essential elements: culture and communication, which influence each other against the background of different social contexts and within existing power relations (Martin, Nakayama, 2010: 85). Nakayama and Martin (2010) present a "structure" necessary for understanding intercultural communication consisting of four components: culture, communication, context and power, considering that the definition of these concepts is essential for understanding the phenomenon of intercultural communication. Culture is not innate, but learned through interaction, observation and imitation. There are other sources that act since childhood, such as proverbs, fairy tales or traditional stories, folk art. Culture is transmitted from generation to generation and is based on symbols contained in verbal, non-verbal or iconic language, being changeable, dynamic, adaptive, but at the same time preserving a basic structure formed by essential values and conceptions of life. Culture has an ethnocentric character, most of the time involuntarily, due to the way in which it is transmitted, focusing rather on the elements of one's own culture (Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, 2010: 9-12).

Culture is learned through the behavioural patterns observed in the socialization process, being inherited over generations; intercultural communication analyses in particular the relationship between culture and human personality, culture being the expression of the identity of some societies, nations or other entities. Culture is not only a social product but also a component of lifestyle through the values, ideas and behavioural patterns it generates. It is practically in a constant circuit: culture is born within society through the interaction between individuals against the background of pre-existing cultural baggage, generating in this interaction new elements that contribute to the process of continuous redefinition. We must be aware that: "One of the main objectives of intercultural education is to prepare people for a better perception, acceptance and respect for cultural differences. Individuals are never without a cultural background. They have certain conceptual tools that end up functioning as distorting prisms if they try to look at and understand other cultures only through them" (Lăpădat, 2020: 140).

The influence of culture is reflected at the level of communication especially through cultural values that express deeply rooted beliefs at the level of consciousness about what is good or bad, moral or immoral and from which conflicts often arise when they are not understood by both parties. There is a variability of communication according to culture, communication between people belonging to different cultures can be carried out differently depending on several factors, including religion, gender, social level, etc.: "The intercultural perspective proposes a communication competence based on the ability of the interlocutors to correctly identify and use cultural aspects in linguistic interactions. (...) Social relationships are especially important in the process of

learning a foreign language, as they provide us with images and essential information about attitudes, values and the social behaviours that we need to know when we are in a position to interact with a native speaker" (Lăpădat, 2020: 143).

A common element for foreign students that arouses a strong sense of national identification are holidays, because they are spent with other foreign students from the same country or religion and because they represent a strong differentiator from other cultures. Being a moment with a strong spiritual charge, linked most of the time to moments spent with family and friends, to the observance of some traditions and customs practiced since childhood, the presence of people who shared the same values was essential for strengthening the feeling of identification, of belonging to certain specific rituals and traditions. The identification was also amplified by relating to others, because observing the differences, for example religious, foreign students can feel the nationality as a concrete part of the identity, because: "Religion still remains a defining component of the European public space even if, in the vision imposed by modernity, it must be a strictly private option, and its presence in the public space is no longer legitimate. This is because the thoughts and feelings developed in the private sphere of the individual inevitably lead to actions and practical consequences in the public sphere" (Carp, 2005: 972).

So, among the sources of activating the national identity of foreign students, we can mention the people of the same nationality with whom, for example, more intense moments from a spiritual and emotional point of view were shared, such as holidays, or different activities, meetings, etc. were organized and people from other cultures, which gave the opportunity to highlight differences and similarities, cultural particularities in general. A student's participation in courses in a foreign country, in addition to the natural personal development it entails, can only lead to a strengthening of identity on all levels, both personal and social, thus including national identity. Awareness of the peculiarities related to one's own nationality is a consequence of intercultural communication in the case of most foreign students, they become much more aware of their national identity.

### **Conclusions**

Intercultural communication has become a condition of development and a lifestyle for today's man, not only for foreign students who come to study in a foreign country. Moreover, educational exchanges and the possibility of studying in another country are just one of the elements that stand as proof of the intensification and importance that intercultural communication has today.

The shaping of the national identity of foreign students depends a lot on the external environment and the relationship to others, to those we consider different from us, the differences we find between the group of belonging and the other groups. National identity is a hot topic because it calls into question one of the most important elements of civilization, the differentiation between cultures. From the point of view of identity formation, indeed the contact of foreign students with people of another culture for a significant period of time, months, even years in the case of those studying at Romanian universities, represents a challenge for maintaining social identity, so and the national one. However, this challenge is perceived as a contribution to the development and definition of identity, on all three levels, personal, self and social identity, and not as a disturbance. Thus, "what deserves the greatest attention is the fact that national identity is not only an exacerbated ideological manifestation of attachment to the country, but is a product of the psyche, which is born at its level and influences it together with the



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entire complex of elements which form it: emotional (attachment) and cultural (traditions, customs, language, etc.). So, the way in which the national identity is transformed has a great influence on the general state of the individual, on the state of mind, self-esteem, etc. and it reflects on the society of which it is a part" (Drăgușin, 2014: 46).

Starting from the complex understanding of European history, cultural integration could contribute to better knowledge and reconciliation between people, through political and cultural symbols that can create bonds helping them to better understand their identity. Although cultural diversity is a value in itself, its valorisation also includes other dimensions of a different nature, such as economic and social. The recognition of cultural diversity as well as its valorisation in the future entails the need to develop, adopt and promote specific policies to value it.

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