

# Intercultural Communication in Health Care

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## *Abstract*

*All interpersonal communication contains possibility of ambiguity and misunderstanding, but possibilities of misunderstanding and poor communication become much greater when we communicate throughout a cultural boundary. Intercultural communication makes easier social interaction and mutual understanding of different culture representatives. Nowadays new demands are being made on health care professionals to demonstrate appropriate transcultural sensitivity. They should be able to communicate with clients who speak different languages and come from distinct cultural backgrounds. We dealt with a language proficiency of future health care professionals, motivating factors to learn foreign languages and their practical using. In our study we also claim a few recommendations for effective intercultural communication.*

## **1. Introduction**

English is the language of globalisation - of international business, politics, diplomacy, computer technology, but nowadays it influences all spheres of the human life and health care as well. Languages are not only a medium of communication enabling nations to speak to each other. They are also symbols of culture and identity. In language learning intercultural awareness is often talked about as if it was the “fifth skill”, the ability to be aware of cultural relativity following reading, writing, listening and speaking. We cannot learn a foreign language if we do not have an awareness of its culture. To understand the differences of other cultures we should understand culture itself and then compare them. Therefore as Kramsch (2001: 205) points out it is essential to have cultural awareness as well as intercultural awareness.

All interpersonal communication contains the possibility of ambiguity and misunderstanding. We know that possibilities of misunderstanding and poor communication become much greater when we communicate throughout a cultural boundary. Intercultural approach is based on a concept of culture that takes into consideration that different cultures are structurally related to each other. The aim is to develop an intercultural and communicative competence and a competence that enables the learner to function as a mediator between two cultures and to use the target language as a contact language with people who use this language as the first language. Multiculturalism of the European society is getting deeper and deeper thanks to the migration of people as well as the more extensive tourism. Opening the European gate helps us know foreign countries culture better and get new opportunities for intercultural communication. Intercultural communication makes easier social interaction and mutual understanding of different culture representatives. According to Mastiliakova et al. (2002) intercultural communication will be effective if both participants understand the meaning of given information. It can be a useful tool which minimizes different views and barriers among representatives of different cultures. However, as Nádaská and Lišková (2006: 21) point out in communication there are also situations of objective reality called communication barriers which enter the communication process and break it down. As the nursing profession and the national health system tend to address request of delivering health care to a multiethnic clientele as the new demands are being made on health care professionals to demonstrate appropriate intercultural sensitivity. They

should be able to communicate with patients/clients who speak different languages and come from distinct cultural backgrounds.

Health care professionals in our country often meet the patients/clients from different cultures and they need to communicate with them to provide the adequate care for them. An ability to communicate well belongs to the most important knowledge of each health care professional and a social contact is an unreplaceable part of health care profession. Even though people, who communicate with each other, speak the same language, their communication behavior can be culturally different. Familiarization with history, customs, traditions, attitudes to health and disease creates the base of multicultural approach in the treatment of the different culture representatives. They should be able to communicate with clients who speak different languages and come from distinct cultural backgrounds. According to Horňáková (2006) learning foreign languages and their practical using in specific medical terminology as well as understanding communication etiquette is an important tool of changes in providing health care.

## 2. The Aim of the Work

The empirical part of this study tries to estimate if the future health care professionals are prepared to treat clients from different cultures and provide proper care for them. Then we supposed that a language barrier can be the barrier of mutual communication and we wanted to find out the language knowledge of respondents and its practical using. We also focused on the feeling of improving the professional language knowledge and motivating factors for learning a language.

## 3. Methods

Our survey was carried out in a group of 116 respondents of both sexes (84 women and 32 men) at the average age 35 in January – February 2008. The respondents were the university full-time and part-time students at the Faculty of Health, University of Prešov in Prešov. We used the method of questionnaire.

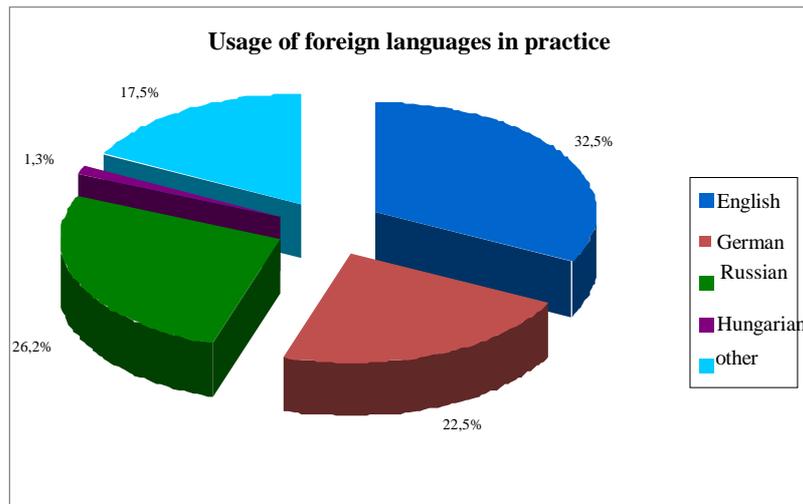
## 4. Results

We present only some most important results in charts and graphs.

Understanding the professional terminology	Number of respondents (n = 116)	Percentage
yes	113	97%
no	3	3%

*Chart 1 Necessity of understanding professional terminology (in a foreign language)*

We found out that almost all respondents think (97%) that it is necessary to understand the professional foreign terminology in their practice, 3 % of them did not consider that it was important to understand it.



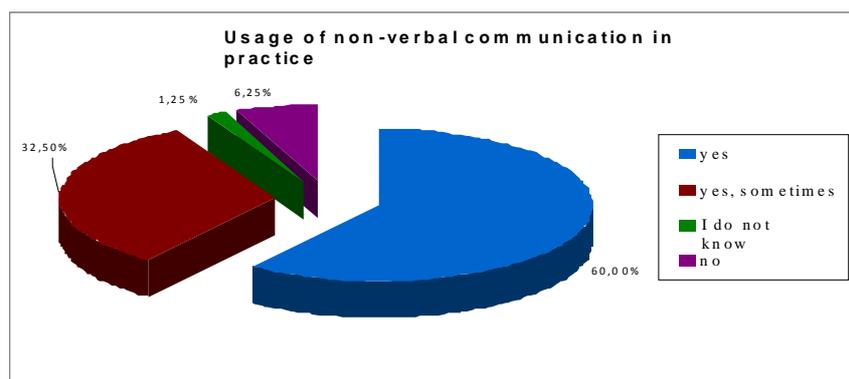
Graph 1

The most often used foreign languages in practice were: English language (32,5%), Russian (26,2%), German (22,5 %), Hungarian (17,5 %), other language (1,3%).

Usage of verbal communication in practice	Number of respondents (n = 116)	Percentage
many times	14	12%
more than once	56	48%
only once	21	18%
never	25	22%

Chart 2 Usage of verbal foreign language communication in practice

12 % of respondents answered that they used knowledge of verbal foreign language communication in practice many times, 48 % more than once, 18 % only once and 22 % never used any foreign language in practice.



Graph 2

60% of respondents used non-verbal communication in their work with different culture representatives. 32,5% of respondents used it, but not always and 1,25% of respondents did not know to present it. 6,25% of respondents did not use non-verbal communication at all. Most respondents can use non-verbal

communication in interaction with different culture representatives and it can help them in solving some problems with verbal communication.

Ways of improving professional knowledge	Number of respondents (n = 116)	Percentage 100%
the Internet	28	23%
professional literature	19	15%
TV and radio	13	9%
meeting a foreigner	6	7%
no way	50	46%

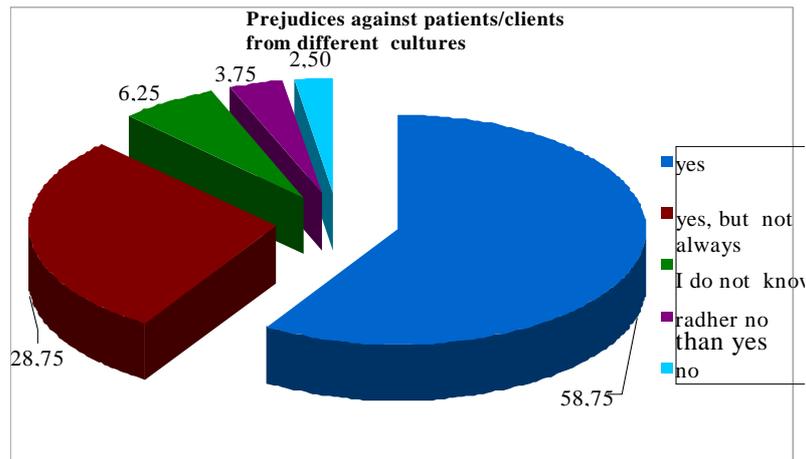
*Chart 3 Ways of improving professional language knowledge*

Next we found out that respondents received their professional knowledge in foreign languages and tried to improve it by using the Internet (23%), studying the professional literature (18%), watching TV and listening to the radio (12%) and contacting foreigners (7%), but unfortunately 40% of them did not try to improve their professional knowledge at all.

Motivating factors	Number of respondents(n = 116)	Percentage 100%
working in the field of study	43	37%
better financial possibilities	39	34%
possibility to speak a foreign language	23	17%
higher qualifications	7	8%
career development	4	4%

*Chart 4 Motivating factors for learning a professional language*

Our respondents answered that the most motivating tool for learning foreign language was a possibility to work abroad in their field of study (37%), 34% answered that they learned foreign languages because they can get better financial possibilities in future, 17% of respondents learn because they can communicate in other languages as their mother tongue, 8% answered that they wanted to get higher education and 4% of respondents learned languages for their career development.



Graph 3

2,5% of respondents answered that they showed prejudices against patients/clients from different cultures, 28,75% answered also positively, but not always, 3,75 % answered that they rather did not show prejudices than yes and 58,75 % of respondents did not show any prejudices. 6,25% of respondents did not answer the question.

#### 4.1 Recommendations for Effective Intercultural Communication

Long time ago a communication ability was considered to be something natural what we do not need to learn. It should be an important part of professional activity of all health care professionals. They should know and respect a communication etiquette and therefore we claim some recommendations for effective intercultural communication in health care profession as followed:

- it is necessary to have enough time for each client from different culture
- find a language for communication
- use simple words and expressions which different culture clients will understand and avoid medical terminology as much as you can
- speak slowly and clearly, repeat words more times and require the same from different culture clients
- health care professionals should learn words for basic communication in a language of different culture client and use them adequately
- suppose possible prejudices and check the meaning of understanding
- take your time to express yourself, not to be in a hurry
- use smiling, gestures, pictures for better understanding
- notice the non-verbal communication expressions of different culture clients
- find compromise solutions, tolerate cultural varieties and ethics
- help your clients express their feelings, ideas, opinions and needs
- add schemes, drawings, communication cards and others
- be patient and tolerant to all non-verbal expressions of different culture clients
- verify understanding basic information
- use numbers to give the date
- listen to a client from different culture
- encourage a client from different culture to express their feelings, ideas, opinions and needs
- use foreign language dictionaries and an interpreter if it is necessary

## 5. Conclusion

We can conclude that intercultural communication plays an important role in providing health care. As a consequence of the fact that the population of the European Union nations is becoming culturally more diverse, there is an urgent need to develop intercultural communication skills. Since the health care professionals have been working closely with patients/clients from different cultures, it is very important to learn how to develop intercultural therapeutic relationships.

We have found out that the role of intercultural communication in health care is not only communication with a client from different culture, but respecting the customs, religion and life values and also knowledge about biological differences. Acceptance differences in people and displaying a non-judgmental attitude are an essential part of health care professional work to communicate successfully throughout different cultural groups. It is useful to know in what way we are different and why it is so, not only for providing health care, but also from our personal point of view because we travel abroad or meet foreigners at home.

In future foreign languages are expecting to be used more often in health care profession and health care professionals should learn to decode non-verbal expressions of different culture clients, their traditions, customs, religions and lifestyles as well. Health care professionals should be always engaged in a dynamic dialogue to improve intercultural communication, avoid language barriers and respect all patient specifications and needs because people and their health conditions are in the centre of health care attention to save a human life.

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