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Olena Ihnatova

Vinnitsia Mykhailo Kotsiubynskyi State Pedagogical University, Vinnitsia, Ukraine

Larysa Drobakha-Simonova

Vinnitsia Mykhailo Kotsiubynskyi State Pedagogical University, Vinnitsia, Ukraine

Dmytro Matiuk

Vinnitsia Mykhailo Kotsiubynskyi State Pedagogical University, Vinnitsia, Ukraine

The Students' Experience of Intercultural Communication

Abstract

The article deals with the phenomenon of intercultural communication. Presented are the results of the survey method aimed at analysing the level of formation of intercultural competence of Ukrainian VSPU students living abroad. Differences and similarities in the students' intercultural communication experience have been revealed by comparison. The ranking method was used to classify the obtained data when analysing the students' life experiences abroad. The research results were presented graphically in charts and tables using descriptive statistics.

Keywords: *intercultural communication, intercultural competence, culture, tolerance*

Introduction

Challenges of the 21st century include global changes requiring non-standard approaches to solving the problems faced by humanity, and they also directly affect the state of the education sphere. At the same time, the problem of historical continuity and preservation of the national and cultural identity of the new generation acquires exceptional importance. The acceleration of the European integration process took place after the beginning of Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine. The EU decides on the country's accession according to special

procedures. At the same time, Ukraine is courageously fighting for its right to be a democratic country. In the context of modernity, education plays a major role in strengthening the cultural influence of European integration, expanding the rights and opportunities of participants in the educational process. It allows young professionals to choose their own goals and achieve them while respecting the democratic process and the rights and freedoms of others. In the framework of European integration processes, the issue of intercultural communication takes on special importance and contributes to strengthening international cooperation in educational and scientific activities.

The research aims to study the peculiarities of intercultural communication in education, analyse the level of formation of intercultural competence of Ukrainian VSPU students living abroad, and identify successful intercultural communication.

Theoretical Framework

The success of intercultural communication between people depends not only on knowledge of the language and national characteristics. Language is only a necessary prerequisite for communication, in which a sense of style, the general mood of communication, and the characteristics of a certain culture play an important role.

Many scientists have studied the concept of intercultural communication.

Intercultural communication describes the phenomenon between representatives of different cultures. Intercultural communication is an exciting field of study in organisational communication; it refers to communication between people of two different cultures (Chen & Starosta, 2005); is a symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual process in which people from different cultures create shared meanings (Lustig & Koester, 2010; Hurn, 2013); refers to the influence on communication behaviour when different cultures interact together. Thus, intercultural communication can be considered as communication unfolding in symbolic intercultural spaces (Arasaratnam, 2013).

Important features of speech culture are appropriateness, correctness, significance, accuracy, sufficiency, logic, clarity, emotional expressiveness, brevity, simplicity and imagery, purity, and saturation (Alred et al., 2002). Knowing the language of another country is an important part of intercultural communication and the first step in establishing a successful exchange between representatives of different countries and cultures. In the era of globalisation, the modern world is experiencing significant changes in all areas of social development. Despite these changes, different nations continue to preserve their

cultural traditions. This precious treasure is reflected in the people's language (Drobakha, 2019).

The leading principles of intercultural communication (freedom of choice, freedom of self-expression, equality, tolerance, and mutual respect for human dignity) underlie the educational process and democratisation of society. Benedek (2013) noted that the freedom of educational choice is reflected in the manifestation of creativity of participants in the educational process.

The analysis of scientific research by domestic and foreign researchers made it possible to clarify the meaning of "tolerance" and determine the role of intercultural communication in this process. Kirchner et al. (2011) define tolerance as "willingness to respect individuals or certain groups, as well as their basic values and behaviour through coexistence". Galeotti (2015) defines tolerance as an individual's ability to productively communicate with others, respecting their freedom and uniqueness. Tolerance is also a valuable component of multicultural competence. (Hjerm et al., 2020). At the individual level, tolerance has several meanings: 1) acceptance and openness, not imposing one's own views; 2) personal belief in the equal value and dignity of everyone, objective perception of points of view and views that differ from one's own (Ihara & Yamamoto, 2012).

Research Background

Vinnitsia Mykhailo Kotsiubynskyi State Pedagogical University became a partner university of the School of Humanities of the University of Mannheim in 2022. Thanks to the agreement, the students obtained the opportunity to study under the academic mobility programme abroad, which the partner universities began to implement in the spring semester of 2023.

Since students from all over the world study at the University of Mannheim, the first week of their stay is entirely devoted to personal acquaintance between the representatives of different countries and cultures. Acquaintances, receptions and events, especially for foreign students, help to make the beginning of a new environment for living and studying as pleasant as possible. The intercultural competence acquired earlier at the native university contributes to interesting communication of our students in the international circle and easy interaction between students from different countries.

Studying in Germany allows the students to get acquainted with the culture and customs of this country. For this purpose, the University of Mannheim offers special courses during the semester for exchange students. These are language courses on the one hand and country and culture courses on the other hand. Country and culture courses (German Language and Culture Courses)

are in English from A1 to C1. These levels correspond to the Common European Recommendations (CER). In such courses, it is possible to deepen not only the knowledge of the German language but also the level of intercultural competence by comparing the culture of the native country with that of Germany. In summer, the students can participate in a preparatory German language course at the International Summer Academy.

In addition to attending German language courses, the students can study other foreign languages. For example, Spanish, Turkish and Chinese language courses are offered as part of the Studium Generale, organised by Service und Marketing GmbH. Multilingualism is one of the forms of implementation of the language policy of the EU member states at the University of Mannheim.

Research Methodology

The research methodology corresponds to the purpose of the work. The authors used theoretical, empirical and statistical methods to obtain comprehensive results. Among the theoretical methods, the descriptive-analytical method was used to describe and analyse new conceptual and methodological approaches in the study of intercultural communication. The inductive method allowed us to move from specific observations of coverage of intercultural issues to systematisation and generalisation of the main principles of intercultural communication. The deductive method was used to identify the strategies for successful intercultural contact.

The empirical research methods included the survey method, where the answers to the questions were received in written form. Differences and similarities in students' experiences regarding intercultural communication and adaptation abroad were established with the help of the comparison method.

Organising the survey aimed at determining the level of formation of intercultural competence of Ukrainian VSPU students who planned a long-term stay abroad, we put forward two statistical hypotheses:

- 1) the self-determination of the level of intercultural competence by the students before going abroad (January 2022) and after a long-term stay abroad (during a year) will remain similar;
- 2) the self-determination of the level of intercultural competence by the students before going abroad (January 2022) and after a long-term stay abroad (during a year) will differ significantly.

The survey aimed to determine the level of formation of intercultural competence of Ukrainian VSPU students, who planned a long-term stay abroad. The survey involved 2 stages: 1) before going abroad (January 2022) and 2) after a long-term stay abroad (during a year).

The first two questions contained descriptive and comparative answers.

1. Acquaintance with the representatives of other countries. What nationalities have you met, and what languages do they speak?
2. The ability to compare one's own culture with another culture. What do you remember after your first communication with foreigners? What differences with your home culture did you notice?

After that, the students had to answer questions 3, 4, 5, and 6, where they shared their experience of living abroad. The answers to these questions were presented as a diagram (Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4).

3. What intercultural misunderstandings or conflict situations have you experienced? Were you able to understand each other?
4. Stereotypes and reality. Have you ever noticed the difference between stereotypes about a certain nation and their real life?
5. How often have you experienced culture shock?
6. Could you live and study abroad for a long time? If not, why?

Among all the analysed answers to question 7, the main factors of successful adaptation in a foreign country were identified, as shown in the diagram (Figures 5 and 6).

7. What factors, in your opinion, are important for successful adaptation in a foreign country?

Questions 8, 9, and 10 contained elements of self-reflection. At the end of the survey, the students independently determined their level of formation of intercultural competence from insufficient to very high. The results of determining this level are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

8. What non-verbal means of communication have you learned while communicating with foreigners?
9. What is national identity, in your opinion?
10. Considering your answers to the previous questions, how do you evaluate your level of intercultural competence? Choose one of the options: – insufficient, – elementary, – sufficient, – high, – very high level.

In order to increase the validity of the conclusions, statistical research methods were used. The ranking method was used to classify the obtained data in a certain sequence (decreasing or increasing indicators), for example, during the analysis of students' life experiences abroad or cultural shock factors. The research results were presented graphically in diagrams and tables with the help of descriptive statistics. In order to obtain statistical data on determining the arithmetic mean weighted of the level of the students' intercultural competence, the corresponding formula was applied at each stage of the survey:

$\bar{x} = \frac{\sum x_i f_i}{\sum f_i}$, where \bar{x} is the average level of the students' intercultural competence;

x_i – variants of the feature to be averaged;

f_i – the frequency, which shows how many times the I-value occurs in the total.

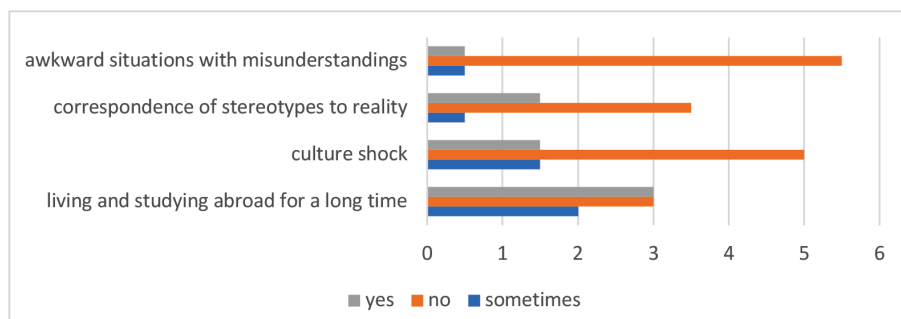
After obtaining the average value at each stage (before and after a year abroad), the students' intercultural competence dynamics was determined using comparison.

Results

The survey involved 60 Faculty of Foreign Languages students who are now forced to stay abroad with their relatives and friends because of the war or are currently studying under academic mobility programmes abroad. The survey was used to determine the level of intercultural competence these students had developed during their 1,5 stay abroad.

The first stage of the survey (January 2022) showed (Fig. 1) that the majority of the surveyed students (57%) had no experience of a long stay in a multicultural society abroad at that time, and some students had little experience of staying in a multicultural society for a short period (2–3 weeks) (32%), some students have never been abroad (11%). At the same time, the students noted that they had experienced online communication with the representatives of other countries (61%). Analysing this experience, only 37% of the students noted that the stereotypes about the representatives of different countries with whom they communicated were true.

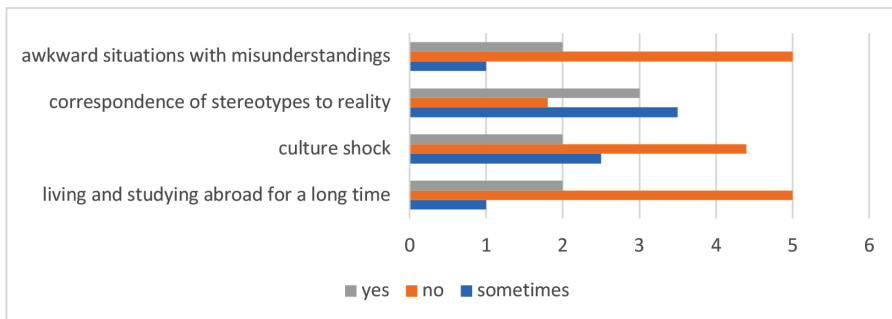
Fig. 1. Life experience in a multicultural society



In the second stage of the research, a survey was conducted, considering the experience gained by the students during their long stay abroad.

According to the survey results on the experience of living in a multicultural society abroad (Fig. 2), the majority of the respondents (60%) did not experience awkward situations with misunderstandings, some students (25%) had inconveniences with the cuisine of another country or meals, and 15% of the respondents sometimes noted uncomfortable situations, connected with lateness, free behaviour of young people in public places and the widespread culture of nudism in some countries. Besides, the stereotypes about this or that nation did not always fully correspond to reality. Only 42% of the respondents noted this correspondence, as opposed to 58% who claimed that in real life abroad, people are somewhat closed and reserved, as there are problems with punctuality, security and bureaucratic red tape.

Fig. 2. Life experience in a multicultural society abroad

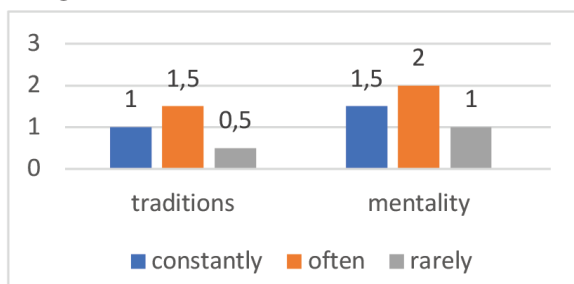


According to the survey, only 34% of our students did not experience culture shock (Fig. 2). 44% of the remaining respondents were constantly experiencing it, while 22% only occasionally. Such results also explain the respondents' willingness to live and study abroad for a long time (Fig. 1). 43% of the respondents are ready to live and study abroad for a long time, whereas 36% of the students agree to live abroad for the period of their study and vacation. However, 21% of the respondents cannot imagine further living and studying abroad, as they feel homesick.

When identifying the most common factors of culture shock, the first stage identified the following: traditions and mentality (Fig. 3). Because the students had no experience living in a multicultural society for a long time, they reported only single cases of culture shock. Among the surveyed students, the major-

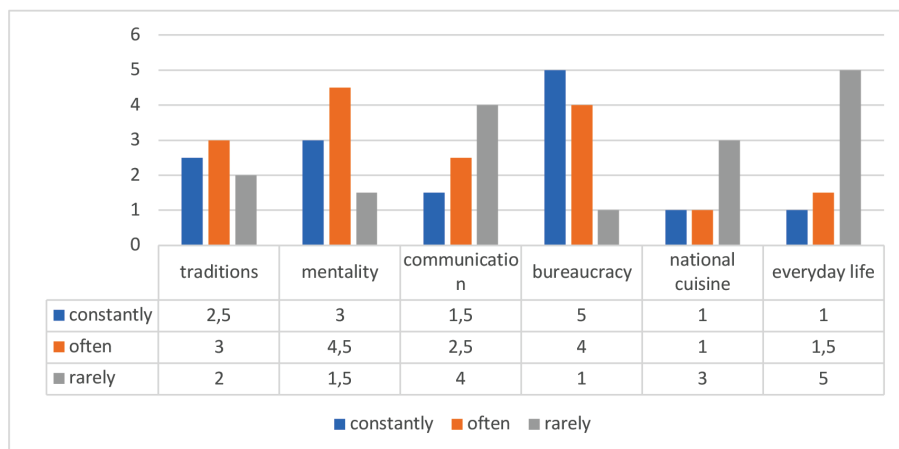
ity (74%) did not have sufficient experience of culture shock; 14% experienced culture shock more often due to traditions, and 12% – due to mentality.

Fig. 3. The most common culture shock factors



The second stage of the survey revealed a broader list of the most common situations or factors (Fig. 4) when students experienced culture shock. These included cultural traditions, mentality, communication problems, bureaucratic red tape, national cuisine and household factors.

Fig. 4. The most common culture shock factors abroad



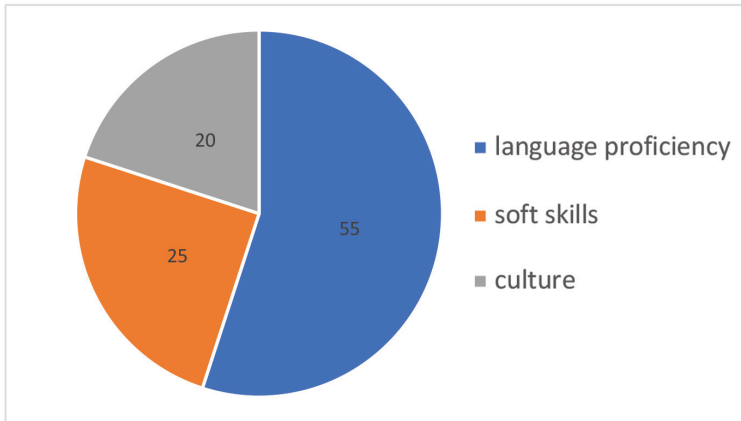
As can be seen from Figure 4, the students *constantly* experienced culture shock with a bureaucratic red type (36%), peculiarities of mentality (21%), and traditions (18%). A smaller number of students *constantly* experienced misunderstandings in communication (11%), with the traditions of national cuisine (7%) and everyday life (7%).

In the answer category «often» (Fig. 4), we find mentality (27%), bureaucracy (25%) and traditions (18%). Then, the students noted that they were often shocked by misunderstandings in communication (15%), everyday life (9%) and national cuisine (6%).

A certain part of respondents *rarely* (Fig. 4) experienced culture shock in everyday life (30%), communication (25%), and national cuisine (18%); and the indicators regarding the factors of tradition (12%), mentality (9%), bureaucracy (6%) naturally turned out to be lower, since these factors constantly play an important role in the formation of culture shock.

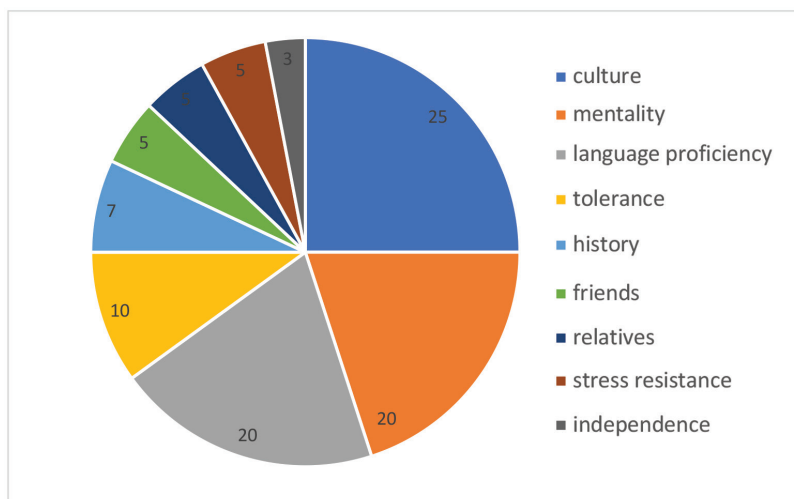
At the first stage of the survey, before the students went abroad, it was found that the main factors of adaptation in a foreign country were language proficiency (55%), well-developed soft skills (25%), and awareness of the culture (20%).

Fig. 5. Factors of successful adaptation in a foreign country



In the second stage of the survey, the students indicated more factors of successful adaptation based on their experience of living in a multicultural society abroad. Among the main factors of successful adaptation in a foreign country (Fig. 6), students attributed knowledge of culture (25%), understanding the mentality (20%), language proficiency (20%), and tolerant attitude to other nationalities (10%). In addition to the main factors, the respondents also noted knowledge of the history of the host country (7%), having friends (5%), living with relatives (5%), stress resistance (5%), and independence (3%).

Fig. 6. Factors of successful adaptation in a foreign country



At the end of the first stage of the survey (Table 1), the students were asked to determine their level of intercultural competence. The majority of the students identified their level as «elementary» (62%), some students as «insufficient» (23%), some students as «sufficient» (10%), and only 5% identified their level of intercultural competence as «high».

Table 1. Determination of the level of intercultural competence

Level of intercultural competence	Number of respondents	Total number (%)
very high	0	0%
high	3	5%
sufficient	6	10%
elementary	37	62%
insufficient	14	23%

In the second stage of the survey, the students independently determined their level of intercultural competence (Table 2). The majority of the respondents (77%) determined their level to be sufficient, 7 respondents (11%) considered their level to be high, 4 students (7%) were convinced of their very high level, and only 3 persons determined their level of intercultural competence to be elementary (5%).

Table 2. Determination of the level of intercultural competence

Level of intercultural competence	Number of respondents	Total number (%)
very high	4	7%
high	7	11%
sufficient	46	77%
elementary	3	5%
insufficient	0	0%

At the final stage of the research, the arithmetic mean of the weighted average of the students' level of intercultural competence was calculated.

In the first stage, this indicator was determined according to the formula. The level of intercultural competence corresponded to the following scale: very high – 5 points, high – 4 points, sufficient – 3 points, elementary – 2 points, insufficient – 1 point.

$$\bar{x}_1 = \frac{4 * 3 + 3 * 6 + 2 * 37 + 1 * 14}{3 + 6 + 37 + 14} = \frac{118}{60} = 1,96$$

\bar{x}_1 – the average level of students' intercultural competence was 1,96.

This figure increased at the second stage:

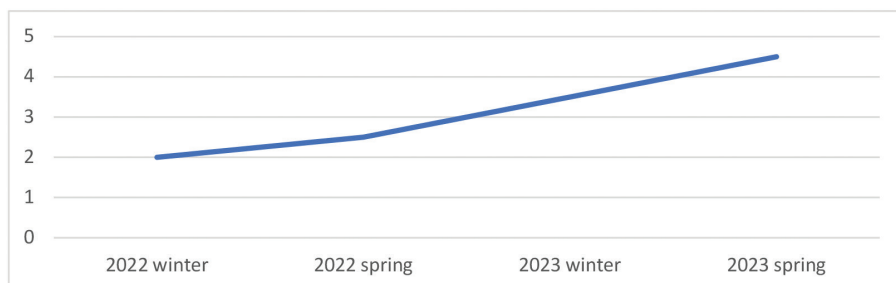
$$\bar{x}_2 = \frac{5 * 4 + 4 * 7 + 3 * 46 + 2 * 3}{4 + 7 + 46 + 3} = \frac{192}{60} = 3,2$$

\bar{x}_2 – the average level of students' intercultural competence was 3,2.

The dynamics of growth of students' intercultural competence was revealed after comparing the two arithmetic averages weighted by each stage of the study. This indicator is 1,24.

According to the data obtained, we have found a significant increase in the students' intercultural competence level in 2022–2023 (Fig. 7), which supports our hypothesis about the influence of the natural environment on the formation of this competence during the students' stay abroad.

Having compared the results of the students' self-determination of the level of intercultural competence by the students before going abroad (January 2022) and after a long-term stay abroad (for a year), we can see that the second statistical hypothesis is confirmed.

Fig. 7. Dynamic of the level of intercultural competence

Discussion

Studying the various fragments of linguistic pictures of the world allows us to consider different cultural reflections of the people's worldview. When such a study involves a comparative analysis, it already expands the boundaries of understanding several different language pictures of the world (Drobakha, 2021). While studying the course «Intercultural Communication», the students master the basic principles of intercultural communication and develop the skills and abilities to apply the acquired knowledge in various situations in intercultural contact.

Nowadays, in wartime, the stay of a certain number of students abroad is mainly related to experiencing stress because of the war in Ukraine. Along with online studies at our university, these students attend integration courses in Germany, Belgium, England, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Lithuania. Besides, they actively participate in volunteer activities abroad aimed at helping Ukrainian refugees. Some students help prepare the necessary documents, and some teach language courses for adults and children from Ukraine. It was still appropriate to analyse the formation of intercultural competence among these students even under such difficult circumstances because their communication with the representatives of other cultures does not take place in Ukraine, but rather in other states. We have much experience in the interaction of VSPU with foreign partners, but it cannot be compared with the experience of directly staying abroad and living in a certain language environment.

According to the results of the questionnaire, the students from Ukraine met the representatives of the majority of the European countries, as well as the representatives from the USA, South American countries (Columbia, Mexico), Asian countries (Afghanistan, India, China, Korea, Palestine, Syria, Turkey,

Thailand, Japan). Considering the multicultural nature of the society, communication between the representatives of different nations takes place in English, German, French, Italian, Dutch and Turkish. While meeting the representatives of different nationalities, our students noted that the representatives of different cultures spoke not only their first languages but also the different languages of the European Union countries quite well. Multilingualism unites the representatives of different cultures and promotes open intercultural communication.

Comparing their own culture with the cultures of other nationalities, the respondents noted that from the first days, they noticed differences in mentality, customs, and traditions. However, this did not prevent communication with residents, some of whom could be reserved and closed, while others, on the contrary, were open and friendly. Sometimes, the students noticed a difference in the value system. Ukrainian culture places the highest value on family, while, for example, the values may differ in Germany. Among friendly people abroad, the respondents met many older people who lead a rich active lifestyle, travel a lot, and interestingly spend their free time. Despite the cultural differences, most students (60%) did not experience any special situations with misunderstandings. 25% of the students had to get used to the national cuisine or eating habits. For example, in some countries, it is not appropriate to leave food for later. Eating the cooked dishes in one setting is recommended, and even the first dishes are prepared for one meal because the next day, they may be considered unfit for consumption. People abroad often buy ready meals in a supermarket and reheat them at home or eat in a café. Some respondents (15%) noted such unpleasant situations as being unpunctual, uncontrolled behaviour of young people in public places and an unacceptable culture of nudism.

The mentioned uncomfortable situations and many other events of everyday life destroyed the established stereotypes about other people among the students from Ukraine. As a result, 66% of young people experienced real culture shock, 44% of them constantly, and 22% sometimes. A high level of bureaucracy, different mentalities, and cultural traditions were attributed to the main factors of culture shock experienced by the students. Moreover, the main factors, such as problems in communication, adaptation to national cuisine, and solving household issues, are also indicated. Despite some misunderstandings or culture shock, 79% of the surveyed students agree to live abroad. Among them, 43% are ready to live and study abroad for a long time, and 36% are ready to stay abroad for a period of study or vacation. Such readiness is explained by the survey results, where the majority of the students (77%) defined their level of intercultural competence as sufficient, 11% – as high, 7% – as very high and only 5% – as elementary.

The preconditions for quick adaptation and successful studying abroad of our students include a sufficient level of foreign language, studying methodology courses according to international programmes and mastering the course «Intercultural Communication». The course «Intercultural Communication», taken by the students at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, covers the theoretical foundations of intercultural communication and the formation of practical skills to achieve a positive result of intercultural communication. Notably, among the main factors of successful adaptation in a foreign country, our students noted tolerance towards other nationalities.

Conclusions

In order to ensure democratic intercultural communication in education, it should be based on such principles as freedom of choice, freedom of self-expression, mutual respect for human dignity, equality and tolerance. After all, the cultural process of exchanging information, feelings, and opinions of representatives of different cultures is important. Effectiveness is ensured by social and spiritual consolidation in society, the creation of high-level international communication, and the formation of intercultural interaction skills. Therefore, mastery of foreign languages, knowledge of the cultural characteristics of the peoples of the world, the ability to correctly form the trajectory of communication, and mastery of intercultural communication skills are an integral part of the professional activity of teachers, future specialists in pedagogical specialities, scientists, graduate students, etc. (Ihnatova, 2022; Kolomiets et al., 2022; Lazarenko, 2022).

Based on the analysis of the level of formation of intercultural competence of Ukrainian VSPU students living abroad, one can note that most of the respondents (77%) have it on a sufficient level. Definitely, the students have enriched their experience of intercultural communication while staying and studying abroad. Having found themselves in a multicultural society, young people faced a disparity between stereotypes and real life. The students noted that some stereotypes exist specifically for tourists and do not always characterise one or another nation. Someone used to idealise a certain nation, but in everyday life, he/she discovered people who were not without flaws, which concerned, for example, punctuality, security, and bureaucratic red tape. Experiencing culture shock had both positive and negative effects. Some respondents got better acquainted with the culture and began to understand the mentality of other people in this way. On the contrary, other respondents experienced even despair and depression, which sometimes continue to accompany them while living and studying abroad.

Based on their experience, 43% of the respondents are ready to continue their long-term stay and study abroad because they successfully adapted to the realities of a certain country. Successful intercultural communication identified in our research relates to the knowledge of culture, language and behaviour of the representatives of different nations, fostering a tolerant attitude towards foreign cultures, readiness for communication in different situations and gaining practical experience through familiarity with the traditions and customs of different countries. The results of our research will be an important integral part of the content of the course «Intercultural Communication», which is taught at VSPU and will provide an understanding of the processes in modern European society and strengthening the cooperation between Ukraine and the EU in the field of educational policy.

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AUTHORS

OLENA IHNATOVA

Vinnitsia Mykhailo Kotsiubynskyi State Pedagogical University, Vinnitsia, Ukraine

E-mail: oihnatova@vspu.edu.ua

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1523-0266>

LARYSA DROBACHA-SIMONOVA

Vinnitsia Mykhailo Kotsiubynskyi State Pedagogical University, Vinnitsia, Ukraine

E-mail: ldrobacha@vspu.edu.ua

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3578-9737>

DMYTRO MATIUK

Vinnitsia Mykhailo Kotsiubynskyi State Pedagogical University, Vinnitsia, Ukraine

E-mail: dmatiuk@vspu.edu.ua

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-8263-8483>