

PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES TO TEACHING COMMUNICATION IN MULTICULTURAL ACADEMIC CONTEXTS: INSIGHTS FROM INTERNATIONAL AND ERASMUS STUDENTS

Elena Museanu*

Abstract

In the context of internationalization in higher education, teaching communication to culturally and linguistically diverse groups requires pedagogical flexibility and intercultural awareness. This paper examines the challenges and opportunities associated with teaching communication courses to international and Erasmus students in English-medium instruction (EMI) environments. It discusses how variations in cultural norms, communicative styles, and academic expectations shape classroom interaction and learning outcomes. Drawing on qualitative observations and reflective teaching practice, the study identifies strategies that promote intercultural competence, inclusivity, and learner engagement. The analysis highlights the role of active learning, experiential tasks, and culturally responsive teaching methods in fostering meaningful communication across cultures. The findings contribute to ongoing discussions on pedagogical innovation and the development of global competences in higher education.

Keywords: intercultural pedagogy, internationalization, Erasmus mobility, communication, English-medium instruction, multicultural learning, higher education

JEL Classification: I20, I21, Z10, Z11.

1. Introduction

The internationalization of higher education has significantly transformed academic environments, bringing together students from diverse linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds. English-medium instruction (EMI) has become a central component of this process, particularly within international and Erasmus mobility programs. While EMI facilitates academic mobility and global knowledge exchange, it also poses substantial pedagogical challenges, especially in courses that focus explicitly on communication skills.

Teaching communication in multicultural academic contexts requires more than linguistic competence; it demands intercultural sensitivity, pedagogical adaptability, and an awareness of how cultural norms influence interaction, participation, and meaning-making. International and Erasmus students often enter host institutions with differing expectations regarding classroom discourse, teacher–student relations, and acceptable communicative

* Elena Museanu is Associate Professor at the Romanian American University in Bucharest. E-mail: elena.museanu@rau.ro.

behaviors. These differences can affect students' engagement, confidence, and learning outcomes.

This article explores pedagogical approaches to teaching communication in multicultural academic settings, with a particular focus on international and Erasmus students enrolled in EMI programs. Drawing on reflective teaching practice and qualitative classroom observations, the study examines recurrent challenges and proposes strategies aimed at fostering intercultural competence, inclusivity, and active participation.

2. Internationalization and English-Medium Instruction (EMI) in Higher Education

Internationalization has become a strategic priority for universities seeking to enhance academic quality, global visibility, and intercultural learning opportunities. Student mobility programs, such as Erasmus+, play a crucial role in facilitating cross-border education and cultural exchange. Within this framework, EMI has emerged as a dominant instructional model, particularly in non-Anglophone countries.

While EMI enables access to international curricula, it also introduces linguistic and pedagogical tensions. Research has shown that students' proficiency in English does not necessarily equate to their ability to participate effectively in academic communication, particularly in discipline-specific or interaction-intensive courses (Dearden, 2015). Moreover, EMI classrooms often amplify disparities between native and non-native speakers, potentially affecting participation patterns and classroom dynamics.

From a pedagogical perspective, EMI contexts require instructors to balance content delivery with language support, while remaining attentive to intercultural differences in communication styles and learning conventions (Kirkpatrick, 2018). These considerations are particularly salient in communication courses, where interaction, discussion, and oral performance are central learning objectives.

Moreover, EMI courses necessitate deliberate scaffolding of both language and content. For instance, instructors can provide glossaries of discipline-specific terminology, pre-task discussions, and structured participation frameworks to support students' comprehension and engagement. Such scaffolding ensures that learners are not only able to understand academic content but also to actively contribute to discussions, group projects, and presentations, bridging gaps between linguistic proficiency and academic performance.

Finally, the EMI environment offers unique opportunities for developing students' *transversal skills*, such as intercultural awareness, adaptability, and collaborative problem-solving. By incorporating interactive methods—such as debates, peer teaching, and collaborative research tasks—educators can foster

an inclusive classroom culture that values diverse perspectives and leverages multilingual and multicultural competencies as assets rather than obstacles. These strategies enhance both language development and students' preparedness for global academic and professional contexts.

3. Communication, Culture, and Academic Interaction

Communication is inherently shaped by cultural norms, values, and expectations. In academic contexts, these norms influence how students interpret tasks, engage in discussions, and negotiate meaning. Hall's distinction between high-context and low-context cultures remains relevant in understanding variations in communicative behavior, particularly regarding directness, turn-taking, and the expression of disagreement (Hall, 1976).

International students may come from educational cultures that prioritize teacher-centered instruction, accuracy, and deference to authority. In contrast, many Western academic environments emphasize student-centered learning, critical thinking, and active verbal participation. Such mismatches can result in silence, reluctance to speak, or perceived disengagement, especially in communication-focused courses.

Previous studies have highlighted that silence should not be interpreted solely as a lack of competence or motivation, but rather as a culturally mediated communicative choice (Jaworski, 1993). Understanding silence as a meaningful aspect of interaction allows educators to adopt more nuanced and inclusive pedagogical responses.

Furthermore, communication in multicultural academic settings is shaped not only by cultural norms but also by students' previous exposure to specific rhetorical conventions and discourse practices. For example, students from high-power distance educational systems may be hesitant to challenge ideas presented by instructors or to openly debate peers, perceiving such behavior as disrespectful. Conversely, students from low-power distance contexts might expect active engagement and frequent questioning. Recognizing these differences allows instructors to design classroom activities that scaffold participation, such as structured turn-taking, guided discussion prompts, and explicit modeling of academic argumentation, which can reduce cultural misunderstandings and encourage equitable participation.

In addition, instructors can leverage culturally responsive communication strategies to enhance students' engagement and learning outcomes. These strategies may include incorporating examples from diverse cultural contexts, acknowledging multiple ways of expressing reasoning, and encouraging reflection on personal communication styles. Activities such as small-group discussions, peer presentations, and intercultural problem-solving tasks provide safe opportunities for students to practice adaptive communication. By integrating these approaches, educators can foster an environment in which

silence or cautious participation is understood as part of a learning process, ultimately supporting both linguistic development and intercultural competence.

4. Challenges Faced by International and Erasmus Students

International and Erasmus students encounter multiple challenges when participating in communication courses delivered in English. Linguistic insecurity is among the most frequently reported obstacles, particularly in relation to speaking fluency, pronunciation, and the use of specialized vocabulary. Fear of making mistakes or being negatively evaluated can significantly inhibit oral participation. A significant source of communicative hesitation in EMI contexts is students' limited control of specialized academic and professional vocabulary. As specialized lexis plays a central role in structuring disciplinary discourse, insufficient familiarity with terminology can hinder both comprehension and production in academic interaction. Bidu-Vrănceanu (2002) emphasizes that specialized vocabulary is dynamic and context-dependent, requiring not only lexical knowledge but also an understanding of its functional use within specific communicative situations. For international and Erasmus students, the pressure to use discipline-specific terminology accurately often intensifies anxiety and contributes to reduced oral participation in communication-focused courses.

In addition to language-related difficulties, students often struggle with unfamiliar academic conventions, such as interactive seminars, group discussions, and oral presentations. These challenges are compounded by cultural differences in communication styles, including attitudes toward assertiveness, self-promotion, and public speaking.

Qualitative classroom observations indicate that students from similar cultural backgrounds may cluster together, limiting opportunities for intercultural interaction. Time constraints, large class sizes, and uneven levels of English proficiency further complicate the instructor's efforts to engage all learners equally.

Furthermore, some students experience *cognitive overload* when processing both content and language simultaneously. In communication-intensive tasks, such as group discussions or presentations, students must manage multiple demands: understanding the topic, formulating ideas in a second language, and adhering to academic norms. This dual cognitive load can result in hesitation, shorter responses, or complete silence, even among students with relatively strong English proficiency.

Another challenge is *affective barriers*, including anxiety, fear of judgment, and low self-efficacy. For example, students may avoid volunteering answers or contributing to debates if they anticipate being corrected publicly or if they perceive their peers as more fluent. These affective factors interact with

linguistic and cultural variables, creating complex patterns of participation that require careful pedagogical attention.

Finally, instructors must consider *practical and contextual constraints*. Large class sizes, limited opportunities for individualized feedback, and rigid curricular structures can prevent students from practicing and receiving support in speaking activities. Innovative solutions, such as rotating group roles, peer mentoring, or the integration of online discussion platforms, can help mitigate these constraints, fostering more equitable participation and supporting the gradual development of confidence and communicative competence.

5. Reflective Teaching Practice as a Methodological Framework

This study adopts a reflective teaching practice approach, grounded in systematic observation and critical self-reflection. Reflective pedagogy emphasizes the instructor's role as an active learner, continuously evaluating the effectiveness of teaching strategies and adapting them to students' needs (Schön, 1983). Data informing this analysis derive from longitudinal classroom observations, informal student feedback, and reflective teaching notes collected across several academic years in communication courses taught to international and Erasmus students. While the study does not aim for statistical generalization, it offers context-sensitive insights into recurring patterns and pedagogical responses.

Reflective teaching practice allows instructors to identify patterns of student participation, silence, and interaction that might otherwise go unnoticed. For instance, by maintaining detailed observation notes on which students actively contribute during discussions or group tasks, teachers can detect trends linked to cultural background, language proficiency, or prior educational experience. These insights inform the adaptation of teaching strategies, such as restructuring activities, providing additional scaffolding for complex tasks, or introducing alternative participation formats like small-group discussions or think-pair-share exercises.

Moreover, incorporating student feedback into reflective practice enhances the instructor's understanding of classroom dynamics. Informal surveys, post-activity discussions, or anonymous feedback forms can reveal students' perceptions of difficulty, anxiety, or engagement barriers. For example, feedback might indicate that certain role-play scenarios are too linguistically demanding, prompting the instructor to pre-teach relevant vocabulary or provide model dialogues. This iterative process ensures that pedagogical adjustments are responsive, evidence-based, and tailored to the specific needs of international and Erasmus learners.

Finally, reflective teaching practice can be operationalized through structured self-reflection and peer observation. Instructors may regularly review recordings of their own lessons, noting how questions are posed, how wait-time

affects student responses, and how culturally diverse students navigate participation. Peer observation allows colleagues to provide constructive input on engagement strategies and intercultural sensitivity. Together, these reflective processes create a continuous feedback loop, enhancing teaching effectiveness and promoting a classroom environment that supports active participation, confidence-building, and intercultural learning.

6. Pedagogical Strategies for Enhancing Participation and Engagement

6.1 Active Learning and Experiential Tasks

Active learning methodologies have proven effective in promoting student engagement in multicultural classrooms. Role-plays, simulations, case studies, and problem-based tasks encourage experiential learning and reduce the pressure associated with formal speaking performance. By focusing on meaning-making rather than linguistic accuracy, such tasks create a low-anxiety environment conducive to participation.

Experiential activities also allow students to draw on their diverse cultural and academic backgrounds, enriching classroom interaction and fostering mutual learning. When carefully scaffolded, these tasks support both linguistic development and intercultural awareness. For example, students can simulate international business meetings, academic conferences, or cross-cultural negotiation scenarios, which require them to apply discipline-specific vocabulary, adapt communication styles, and respond to culturally diverse interlocutors in real time. Such structured tasks make classroom learning dynamic while promoting critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Additionally, reflective debriefing after experiential tasks can consolidate learning outcomes. Students can analyze their performance, discuss challenges encountered, and receive targeted feedback on both language use and intercultural interaction. This reflection helps students internalize effective communication strategies, understand the impact of cultural differences on interaction, and build confidence in speaking English in academic contexts.

6.2 Small-Group Work and Collaborative Learning

Small-group discussions offer a less intimidating context for oral interaction, particularly for students who are reluctant to speak in plenary settings. Collaborative learning promotes peer support, shared responsibility, and negotiation of meaning, which are essential components of communicative competence.

In multicultural groups, structured collaboration can facilitate intercultural dialogue and challenge stereotypes. Clear task instructions and rotating group roles help ensure balanced participation and prevent dominance by more proficient speakers. For instance, assigning roles such as discussion leader, note-taker, or timekeeper allows all students to contribute meaningfully while practicing different aspects of communication and leadership.

Moreover, integrating peer assessment and peer feedback into collaborative tasks encourages critical evaluation and reflective thinking. Students learn to articulate constructive feedback, justify their perspectives, and negotiate differences in interpretation or approach. These processes not only enhance linguistic and cognitive skills but also promote empathy, intercultural understanding, and collaborative problem-solving.

6.3 Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally responsive teaching acknowledges students' cultural identities as valuable resources in the learning process. In communication courses, this approach involves validating diverse communicative styles, encouraging multiple perspectives, and explicitly addressing intercultural differences in academic discourse.

By integrating culturally diverse examples, case studies, and discussion prompts, instructors can enhance students' intercultural competence and self-awareness. Reflective activities, such as journals or guided discussions on communication norms, help students recognize how culture influences behavior, participation, and interpretation of messages. For example, students may compare norms regarding disagreement, turn-taking, or directness in different educational cultures, promoting critical reflection on their own communicative assumptions.

Furthermore, culturally responsive strategies include designing *inclusive participation mechanisms*, such as think-pair-share, online discussion boards, and moderated debates, which accommodate diverse learning preferences and comfort levels. By providing multiple avenues for expression, instructors can ensure that all students have opportunities to engage meaningfully, regardless of confidence, language proficiency, or cultural background.

Finally, combining active learning, small-group work, and culturally responsive teaching creates a *synergistic effect*. Students experience meaningful interaction, receive targeted feedback, and develop adaptive communication strategies in authentic, supportive contexts. These strategies collectively foster engagement, participation, and the gradual acquisition of both linguistic and intercultural competencies essential for success in EMI and multicultural academic environments.

7. Assessment and Feedback in Multicultural Communication Courses

Assessment practices play a crucial role in shaping students' willingness to participate. Overemphasis on accuracy and formal correctness may discourage risk-taking and spontaneous communication. Alternative assessment methods, such as formative feedback, peer evaluation, and reflective journals, can support learning while reducing performance anxiety.

Constructive feedback that focuses on communicative effectiveness rather than error correction helps students build confidence and develop pragmatic

competence. Transparency in assessment criteria is particularly important for international students unfamiliar with local academic standards.

In addition to formative and peer-based assessment, *task-based evaluations* can enhance participation and motivation in multicultural classrooms. For example, students may be assessed on their ability to contribute meaningfully to group discussions, role-plays, or presentations, rather than solely on linguistic accuracy. This approach encourages risk-taking, promotes collaborative learning, and recognizes diverse communicative strengths. Rubrics that clearly define performance expectations, including aspects such as clarity of argument, engagement with peers, and effective use of discipline-specific terminology, provide students with concrete guidance and reduce anxiety associated with ambiguous evaluation standards.

Furthermore, *continuous and reflective feedback loops* strengthen students' learning outcomes and intercultural competence. Structured post-task discussions, instructor comments on group interactions, and reflective journaling enable learners to critically analyze their own performance and identify areas for improvement. These strategies also allow educators to address misunderstandings rooted in cultural or linguistic differences, helping students develop both self-awareness and adaptive communication strategies. By integrating assessment and feedback into everyday classroom activities, instructors create a supportive environment where students are encouraged to experiment, collaborate, and gradually build confidence in intercultural and English-medium communication.

8. Developing Intercultural Competence through Communication Teaching

Intercultural competence has become a key learning outcome in internationalized higher education. Communication courses provide a natural context for developing this competence, as they engage students in interaction across cultural boundaries.

Intercultural competence involves not only knowledge of cultural differences, but also attitudes of openness, curiosity, and empathy, as well as skills of interpretation and adaptation (Byram, 1997). Pedagogical approaches that encourage reflection on intercultural encounters help students develop these dimensions in an integrated manner.

In communication-focused courses, intercultural competence is further developed through guided interaction and structured communicative tasks that require students to negotiate meaning and adapt their discourse to culturally diverse interlocutors. Practical classroom activities can include:

- *Role-plays simulating international professional contexts*, such as business meetings, academic presentations, or project negotiations. Students assume specific cultural or professional roles and must communicate effectively

while respecting differing cultural norms, practicing both verbal and non-verbal strategies.

- *Case study analyses from multiple cultural perspectives*, where student groups examine real-world scenarios, such as marketing campaigns, organizational dilemmas, or public policy issues. Each group presents their findings, highlighting how cultural assumptions influence decision-making, communication strategies, and problem-solving approaches.

- *Intercultural debates on ethical or social issues*, structured to encourage students to articulate arguments from diverse cultural viewpoints. This activity not only develops public speaking and critical thinking skills but also fosters empathy and understanding of alternative perspectives, helping students recognize implicit cultural assumptions in communication.

- *Collaborative projects requiring cross-cultural coordination*, such as designing a virtual international workshop or producing a multilingual report. These tasks require negotiation of roles, consensus-building, and adaptation to different working styles, providing hands-on experience of intercultural teamwork in authentic academic and professional contexts.

Moreover, reflective and feedback-oriented activities consolidate intercultural learning. Students can maintain *learning journals* to document challenges, strategies, and emotional responses during intercultural interactions; participate in *peer-feedback sessions* to assess communication effectiveness and teamwork; or engage in *post-task reflective discussions* where cultural norms, communicative choices, and interaction outcomes are analyzed. These applied exercises help learners connect theory to practice, internalize culturally responsive communication strategies, and develop confidence, adaptability, and ethical awareness. As a result, students are better prepared for effective engagement in diverse academic, professional, and international environments.

9. Discussion

The findings of this reflective analysis suggest that teaching communication in multicultural academic contexts requires a shift from uniform pedagogical models toward flexible, student-centered approaches. Silence and reluctance to speak should be interpreted within broader linguistic and cultural frameworks, rather than as individual deficits.

Effective pedagogical strategies combine active learning, collaborative tasks, and culturally responsive teaching, supported by inclusive assessment practices. Such approaches not only enhance participation but also contribute to the development of global competences essential for students' academic and professional trajectories.

Furthermore, the discussion highlights the central role of the instructor as a mediator between linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical dimensions of learning in multicultural classrooms. In EMI communication courses, teachers are

required to balance content objectives with language support while remaining sensitive to students' diverse educational backgrounds and communicative expectations. This mediating role involves not only adapting teaching strategies but also explicitly addressing implicit academic norms, such as expectations regarding participation, argumentation, and interaction. By making these norms visible and negotiable, instructors can reduce ambiguity and empower international and Erasmus students to engage more confidently in classroom discourse. In this sense, pedagogical flexibility and reflective practice emerge as key factors in transforming multicultural classrooms into inclusive learning spaces where diversity is leveraged as a pedagogical resource rather than perceived as an obstacle.

Conclusion

The increasing presence of international and Erasmus students in English-medium instruction (EMI) programs has reshaped the pedagogical landscape of higher education, particularly in courses that focus on communication skills. This paper has argued that teaching communication in multicultural academic contexts requires a deliberate shift toward flexible, inclusive, and culturally responsive pedagogical approaches.

The analysis has shown that students' silence, reluctance to participate, or uneven engagement should not be interpreted simplistically as a lack of motivation or competence. Rather, these behaviors are often rooted in linguistic insecurity, differing academic traditions, and culturally shaped communication norms. Recognizing these factors enables educators to design learning environments that acknowledge diversity while supporting students' communicative development.

The pedagogical strategies discussed—active learning, experiential tasks, small-group collaboration, and culturally responsive teaching—have been identified as particularly effective in fostering participation and intercultural dialogue. When combined with formative assessment and supportive feedback practices, these approaches help reduce anxiety and encourage meaningful interaction among culturally diverse learners.

Moreover, communication courses represent a key space for developing intercultural competence, understood as an integrated set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for effective interaction in global academic and professional contexts. By engaging students in reflective and collaborative communicative practices, instructors can facilitate not only language development but also intercultural awareness and adaptability.

In conclusion, pedagogical innovation in multicultural communication teaching is essential in the context of internationalized higher education. Continuous reflective practice, sensitivity to students' backgrounds, and openness to methodological adaptation are crucial for ensuring inclusive,

effective, and ethically grounded teaching. Future research could extend these findings through empirical investigations incorporating student perspectives and longitudinal data, further refining pedagogical models for communication in multicultural academic environments.

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