

Verbal Barriers to Effective Intercultural Communication: A Case Study of International Students in Hungary

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Abstract-

In the past years, the number of international students admitted to Hungarian higher education institutions increased rapidly. Students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds encounter several challenges in the new host country. Therefore, the main purpose of the present study is to shed light on intercultural communication experiences by international students in Hungary with particular attention to the verbal communication barriers. The participants of the study were 75 foreign students, who are studying at Hungarian universities. All of them are second language (L2) speakers of English except for one student, who is an English native speaker. Data collection was conducted through survey questionnaires and interviews. The results show that verbal communication is the main barrier that participants experience while communicating with people with various cultural backgrounds. Moreover, the analysis reveals these verbal communication barriers arise for different reasons, such as speaking different mother tongues, not speaking a shared language fluently, using wrong words, and foreign accent.

Keywords-*intercultural communication, verbal communication, barriers of communication, international student.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The number of students enrolled in tertiary education outside their country of citizenship has risen dramatically within the last decade. Students who participate in study-abroad programs aim to experience different cultures and languages and to enhance their education by adding an international perspective. Concerning Hungary, the number of study-abroad programs and student mobility has increased rapidly in the past seven years. According to the Tempus Public Foundation (TKA) figures in 2019, 38,422 international students were enrolled in the Hungarian Higher Education Sector. Studying in an intercultural context helps students to develop foreign language fluency, openness to diversity, intercultural communication competence, critical thinking skills, and flexibility and openness in novel situations (Behrnd & Porzelt, 2012; Clarke III, Flaherty, Wright, & McMillen, 2009; Jackson, 2008; Williams, 2005). Furthermore, students are interested in studying abroad because they recognize the need to experience multicultural and multiethnic contexts to

understand the world's languages, cultures, and business methods, as well as to increase their skills as citizens in a growing, borderless, global economy. However, previous literature has revealed different intercultural communication challenges, which are encountered by international students in different contexts. One of these challenges is verbal communication with people from different cultural backgrounds. Such intercultural interaction challenges are due to language and cultural differences. For these reasons, the present study intended to examine the effects of verbal barriers on university international students' intercultural communication when immersed in the Hungarian culture.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies in intercultural communication have been well documented by scholars who are interested in the multidisciplinary fields of applied linguistics and communication studies (Kim & Gudykunst, 1988; Porter & Samovar, 2004; Gudykunst W. B., 2003). Intercultural communication generally means communication between individuals from diverse national cultures and it is restricted to face-to-face communication (Gudykunst W. B., 2003). Language contributes to communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds. In intercultural encounters, newcomers tend to experience difficulties in communication and understanding during conversations due to the fact that they speak different first languages. Language is a major barrier to studying abroad, especially in non-English speaking destination countries (Bajzát, 2017; Keles, 2013). This is not just because the host language is not their mother tongue, and often it also follows from the traditional language-teaching methodologies, which focus on analyzing and studying the grammatical rules of the language (Sawir, 2005), rather than on using the target language for real communicative purposes. Thus, foreign students may not be equipped well for their new social environment. When it comes to talking about intercultural communication, misunderstanding and communication difficulties, due to language barriers and cultural distance, are never far away. A typical example would be an intercultural communication title such as *When cultures collide* (Lewis, 1996). In his book, Lewis claimed that our own culture and language affect the ways in which we organize our world, think, feel and respond. In an intercultural context, it is substantially difficult for non-native speakers to communicate with native speakers due to unfamiliar accents, idioms, slangs and speed (Sovic, 2009). If their language skills are slightly rusty or they are not as fluent as they should be, serious problems in understanding can emerge. Clinging to one meaning of a word or phrase in the foreign language regardless of the context or connotation is the worse language problem (Barna, 1994). For the locals, speaking a different language decreases their degree of comfort and desire to interact with the internationals (Peacock & Harrison, 2008). For both groups, cultural differences lead to problems such as lack of background knowledge, shared interests (Henze & Zhu, 2012; Holmes, 2005; Yuan, 2011), and higher level of uncertainty and cross-cultural anxiety (Peacock & Harrison, 2009; Spencer-Oatey, Dauber, Jing, & Lifei, 2017). Students often find it difficult to understand each other or to find out common topics (Spitzman, 2014; Volet & Ang, 2012), which lead to a superficial conversation (Holmes, 2005; Sovic, 2009). When individuals cross their cultural group and communication with culturally different groups, the individuals' situational uncertainty or ambiguity may increase leading to difficulties or challenges in interaction (Gudykunst W. , 1998; Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, Intercultural interaction: A multidisciplinary approach to intercultural communication, 2009). In addition, the rhythms of the city where the higher education institution is located have their own linguistic manifestations,

thus metrolingualism offers an insight into the local linguistic realities (Hortobagyi, 2017). In another study by Redmond & Bunyi (1993) on international students attending a university in the Midwest United States, it was revealed that making friends with locals can be of considerable help to international students in effective communication, adaptation, social integration and lowering stress. Bodycott and Lai (2012) found that international students can overcome problems such as communication difficulties and cultural distance by increasing flexibility and adaptability particularly in a multicultural environment. In addition, the educational level and the acquisition of a host country's language (Scott & Scott, 1989) have been reported to be contributing to the socio-cultural and psychological adaptation during living in a foreign country (Jayasuriya, Sang, & Fielding, 1992). Mastery of the host country's language is a potentially important predictor, in particular for international students moving to Hungary, due to the huge linguistic differences between Hungarian and their languages.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

When foreign students arrive in a new country, they are taking an intercultural crossing journey, where they realize that they are different. Often times, they also experience various challenges, especially in communication. Going further, the case of international students in Hungary is unique in its nature. Thus, the current study is seeking to discover the opinions of international students in Hungary towards intercultural communication experiences with particular attention to the verbal communication barriers.

Sampling

The sample for the present study was made up of 75 international students at Hungarian universities. Male participants form (46.7%) of the sample and (53.3%) are females (figure 1). The period that the participants had spent in Hungary is a range of 3 months to 3 years. The foreign students, who came from 23 countries, participated in responding to the questionnaire of the study. The goal was to include students from different cultural backgrounds in order to get various perspectives to enrich the efficiency of the current study. Most of the participants who responded to the questionnaire came from Jordan (17 students) and Syria (13 students). Some of the participants arrived from Tunis (7 students), Algeria (4 students), China (4 students), Russia (4 students), Pakistan (4 students), Indonesia (4 students), Turkey (3 students), and Mongolia (2 students). Finally, there was one student from each of the following countries: United States of America, Ecuador, Egypt, Ethiopia, Georgia, Palestine, Kalmykia, Iran, Nigeria, Iraq, Mexico, Kazakhstan, and Germany.

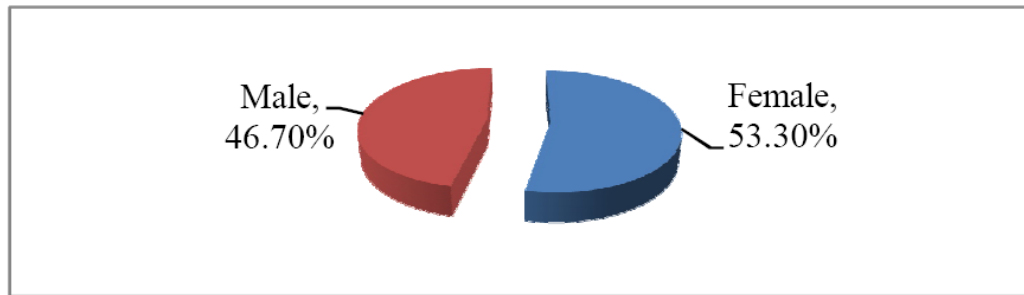


Figure 1: Gender of participants

As shown in figure 4.3, the largest share (57%) of the participants reported that their mother tongue is Arabic. For 7% Russian is their mother tongue. The Chinese language is present with an average percentage of 5% while Turkish with 4%. Pashto, Bahasa Indonesia, Indonesia, Spanish and Mongolian mark 3%. English, Azeri-Turkish, Urdu, Hausa, Amharic, Georgian, Kazakh, Punjabi and Deutsch are present with average percentage of 1%. One participant reported having two first languages, namely Arabic and French.

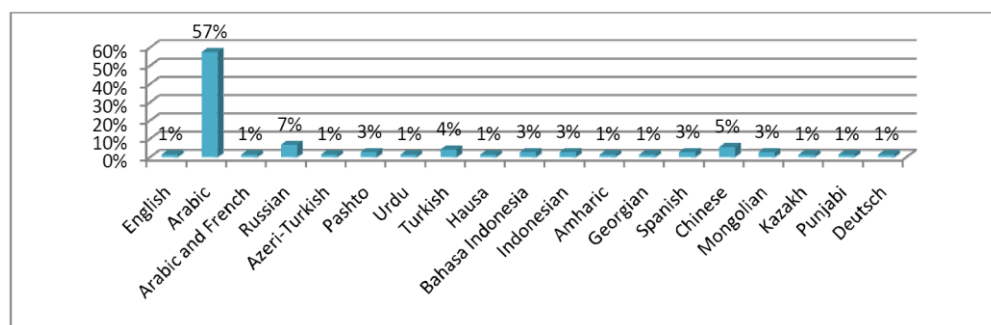


Figure 2: Mother tongue of participants

Figure 3 corresponds to respondents' current degree of study. 75 participants, (13.3%) are undergraduate, 30.7% are PhD students. More than half (56%) of them are Master students.

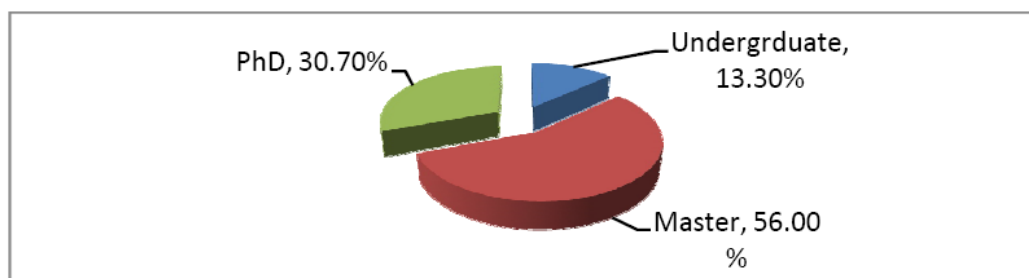


Figure 3: Participants' current degree of study

For the interviewing method, 10 participants from the University of Pannonia were interviewed, 9 females and 1 male. The interview group involved individuals coming from Tunisia, Indonesia, Russia, Jordan,

Syria, and Iran. The researcher had talked to all participants face to face and then sent them the questions via social media.

Instrument

Data collection was conducted through questionnaire and interviews. The purpose of using a questionnaire is to produce statistics through the processes of data collection and analysis, to discover the findings to questions, to have confidence that the sample is unbiased and the data produced are more likely to be accurate, and to ensure that the process is more consistent across all participants (Fowler, 1988). The semi-structured questionnaire consisted of three main parts. Part one included questions regarding demographic data such as gender, nationality, first language, and degree of study. Part two consisted of two questions regarding the frequency of using the mother tongue and English as a language for communication. This part is constructed using Likert scale of frequency (always, often, sometimes, rarely, never). Part three was composed of different statements and the respondents were requested to rank them by checking on the category of the Likert Scale of Agreeing (ranked from 1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree). The researcher found that the data collected from the questionnaire did not provide sufficient information. Therefore, the researcher decided to mix two data-gathering techniques: questionnaire and interview. Interviewing examines life experiences in order to understand and assign meaning to these experiences (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000). It provides information on the human side of an issue, which includes behaviors, beliefs, opinions, and emotions, and meanwhile it reflects on how people experience a given research issue (Mack, Woodsong, MacQuenn, Guest, & Namey, 2005). There are two interview questions to elicit responses from international students about their experiences studying in Hungary and their views about intercultural communication barriers. Note that the names of the interviewees will not be mentioned in order to protect their personal privacy.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following section presents the results of the research. The first part shows the results of the questionnaire. The second part reveals the students' opinions about the barriers to verbal communication which were presented in the interviews.

1. Questionnaire

In this section, graphs based on a five-point Likert scale ranking of agreeing (strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, and strongly agree), were used to show the participants' views. The participants were asked to give their views towards seven statements based on a five-point Likert scale ranking of agreeing. These statements are: 1) It is difficult to communicate with people with various cultural backgrounds. 2) My communication skills have improved a lot since I became a student at this university. 3) I can communicate with locals in Hungarian. 4) International students sometimes misunderstand each other during discussions due to the fact that they speak different first languages. 5) When communicating with people who speak different first languages, I feel like there are communication barriers between me and them. 6) I find it challenging to communicate with locals in English. 7) Speaking in the same language (using a shared

language) can overcome the misunderstandings in intercultural communication. Each paragraph included in this part of the questionnaire will be discussed below illustrating the average percentage of the participants' perception of the effects of verbal barriers on the participants' successful communication.

Statement 1

The following figure displays the average percentage of the respondents' attitude towards the statement which points to the fact that dealing with individuals from different cultures is difficult.

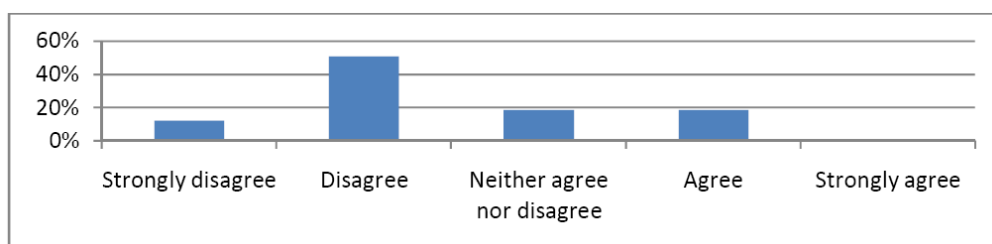


Figure 4: Participants' answers to the sentence that communication with people with various cultural backgrounds is difficult

Figure 4 shows that there is a negative view of the fact that communication with people with various cultural backgrounds is difficult. 9 (12% of the respondents) selected "strongly disagree" as a reply to the question. 38 (50.7% of the respondents) disagree but to a lesser degree. 14 (18.7% of the sample) agree with the statement. "Neither agree nor disagree" was selected by 14 (18.7%).

Statement 2

The following figure shows the average percentage of the respondents' attitudes towards the statement that their communication skills improved since they became students at Hungarian universities.

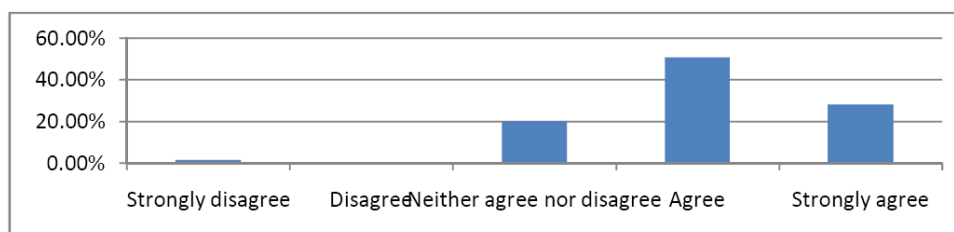


Figure 5: Participants' answers regarding the statement that their communication skills improved since they became students at Hungarian universities

As shown in figure 5 there is a positive view of the fact that participants' communication skills improved since they became students at Hungarian universities. 21 (28% of the respondents selected "strongly agree" as a reply to the question. 38 (50.7% of the participants) agree but to a lesser degree. Only 1 (1.3% of the sample) strongly disagrees with the statement. "Neither agree nor disagree" was selected by 15 (20%).

Statement 3

The following figure corresponds to the average percentage of the respondents' views towards the statement that they can communicate with locals in Hungarian.

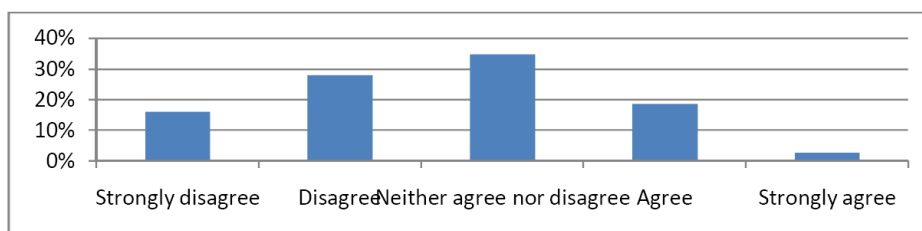


Figure 6: Participants' answers to the statement which states that I can communicate with locals in Hungarian

In figure 6, 21 (28%) of participants disagree that they can communicate with locals in Hungarian. 12 (16%) strongly disagree with this statement, showing neutrality from 26 (34.7%) and selecting agreeing by 14 (18.7% of the respondents). Strongly agree was selected by 2 (2.7%).

Statement 4

The following figure corresponds to the average percentage of the respondents' views towards the statement that speaking different first languages leads to a misunderstanding during conversations between international students.

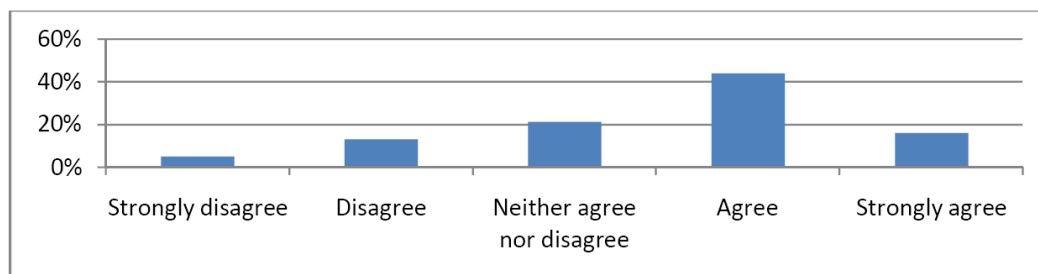


Figure 7: Participants' attitudes towards the statement that international students sometimes misunderstand each other during discussions due to the fact that they speak different first languages

Figure 7 reveals the average percentage of the participant's reaction to the statement that due to speaking different first languages, sometimes international students misunderstand each other during conversations. 4

(5.3% of the respondents) strongly disagree with this statement. 10 (13.3% of respondents) disagree but to a lesser degree. 12 (16% of the participants) selected “strongly agree”. 33 (44% of the sample) agree with the statement, while 16 (21.3%) selected “Neither agree nor disagree”.

Statement 5

The following figure corresponds to the average percentage of the respondents’ views regarding the statement that when communicating with people who speak different first languages the participant feels that there are communication barriers between them.

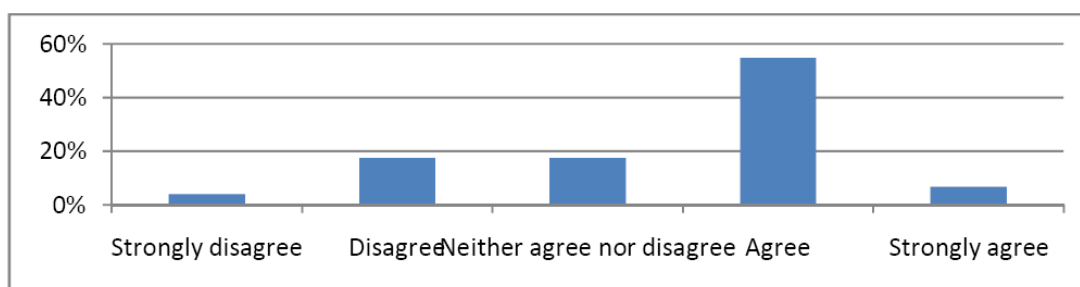


Figure 8: Participants’ attitudes towards the statement which argues that when communicating with people who speak different first languages, I feel like there are communication barriers between me and them.

In figure 8 only 3 (4% of the respondents) strongly disagree that there are communication barriers between them and individuals who have different mother tongues. 13 (17.3% of the respondents) disagree with the statement. 5 of them (6.7%) totally agree, while 41 (54.7%) agree that they feel that there are communication barriers between them and people with different first languages. 13 (17.3%) selected “Neither agree nor disagree”.

Statement 6

The following figure reveals the average percentage of the participants’ perspective towards the statement that it is difficult to communicate with locals in English.

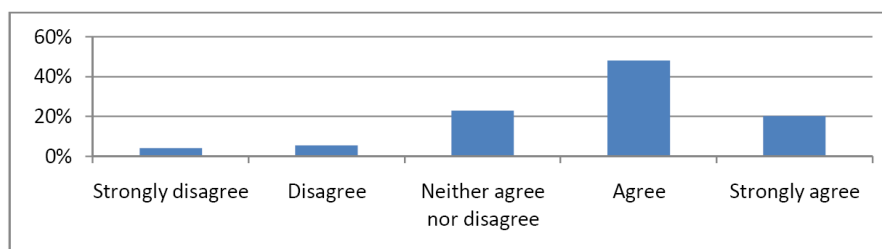


Figure 9: Participants’ perspectives towards the statement which states that I find it challenging to communicate with locals in English

As shown in figure 9, 15 (20% of the respondents) strongly agree, and 36 (48%) agree that they find it challenging to communicate with locals in English. Only 3 (4% of them) strongly disagree and 4 (5.3%) disagree with the statement. 17(22.7%) of the population selected “neither agree nor disagree”.

Statement 7

The following figure corresponds to the average percentage of the participants’ perspective towards the statement that using a mutual language can get over the misunderstandings in intercultural communication.

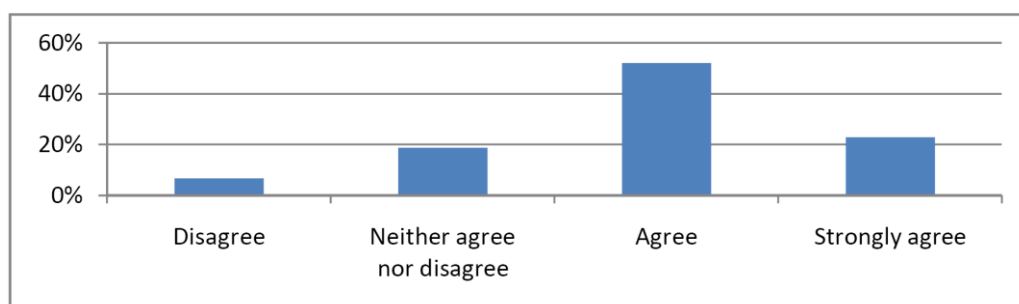


Figure 10: Participants’ attitudes towards the statement that speaking in the same language (using a mutual language) can overcome the misunderstandings in intercultural communication

In figure 10, respondents’ attitudes towards the statement that speaking in a mutually intelligible language can overcome the misunderstandings in intercultural communication is positive. 17 (22.7%) strongly agree with this statement. 39 (52%) agree to a lesser degree. 14(18.7%) of them show neutrality, while 5 (6.7%) disagree.

2. Interviews

For the interviewed students, living in a new country was a mind-opening experience. It offers the opportunity for them to learn another culture, express themselves in another language, meet new people, and experience various social environments. However, students faced different challenges during their living in Hungary.

2.1 Interacting with locals

Hungary was a new country for students to settle in, find social networks, learn a new language, and adjust to a socio-cultural environment. All interviewed students found difficulties to communicate with the locals. The interviewees mentioned that they experience these difficulties due to the fact that most of the locals do not speak English. Here is an example from a Tunisian female student: “The interaction is a little bit difficult especially in the markets or while shopping as the majority of the locals don’t speak English but they are friendly and most of the time they do their best to help us”. A female participant from Russia also mentioned:

“Locals do not really speak English, it’s hard to explain my thoughts in shops and in the street, and they expect foreigners to speak Hungarian”. A student from Jordan mentioned that not only due to the fact that the locals do not speak English, but also students do not speak Hungarian, as he said the following: “Interaction with locals is very difficult and challenging I try to use my Hungarian but I am not very good at it and they don't understand much English, so mainly we use body language”. A Russian female participant had a similar view: “I think it’s sometimes difficult due to the lack of Hungarian knowledge in me and their lack of English knowledge”. A participant from Iran mentioned that learning Hungarian helps her to interact with the locals: “My interaction with locals was not easy at first but now it’s better since I have learned some Hungarian language”. In order to express their thoughts, some students at times had to refer to a dictionary or the Internet or use non-verbal communication, as a Syrian participant said the following: “I am not communicating a lot with local people due to the language barrier. Most of them don’t speak English. When I have a question I translate it to Hungarian then I ask them”. A student from Indonesia shared a similar view by saying: “I interact with locals based on my experience. Firstly, they are so friendly, sometimes they forgot or didn’t know some English words. They’re using sign language and this made it easy for us to communicate. On the other hand, some local people were worried to communicate with a foreigner, because of lack of English”. A student from Jordan said: “My interaction with locals is limited in nature. I haven’t built deep or strong relationships yet. I interact with locals to facilitate my studies and daily activities. The experiences I have been through so far have been positive. Although I still can’t speak the language yet, I can communicate in English or through body language”. Some students think that the locals are not interested to talk with foreigners, as is reflected by the answers of two participants. One of them said: “I don't feel they are talkative or interested in talking to foreigners so I have very few interactions with the locals. Some of these interactions were nice and friendly in nature but some were really bad and unpleasant”. The other student stated: “It is hard to have communication with locals, they seem like they don’t accept others regarding their cultures”.

2.2 Communication challenges

Students from different cultural backgrounds and with different first languages have to encounter several cultural challenges and difficulties in the new host country. The majority of the interviewed students mentioned that language and cultural differences are the main two challenges that they experience when communicating with people from other countries. A Jordanian participant revealed the challenges that she encountered while staying in Hungary by saying: “Language and culture, I have found that it is not easy to communicate with others particularly when there is no shared language, also culture plays an important role in influencing communication; some people deny communication with others just because they are from a different culture”. Another participant shared the same view: “Cultural difference is the main challenge some people need a lot of personal space while others don't even have the space concept. Also, the language is one of the main challenges especially when people are not fluent in English”. A respondent from Jordan said: “Some words and expressions in my mother tongue are hard to explain or translate to people from other cultures. People from other cultures face the same situation too. Also, in some cultures touching and getting close to others in conversations is normal, in my culture this is not acceptable”. A Syrian female mentioned the challenges that she faced by stating: “Language and tradition”. A participant from Iran said: “The main challenge is the

language and sometimes cultural differences and I can feel the bias and nationalism everywhere I go in the whole of Europe, even Asia". A female participant from Jordan mentioned that not only language is a challenge but also the norms of making conversation by saying: "Sometimes language or the differences in norms of how a conversation should be carried out". Due to living in a multicultural environment, the students have good information about other cultures. A Tunisian female reflected in her response: "In fact, a larger number of an international student here have some ideas about different culture so every one respect the culture of the other, but as the native language is not the same it happens that we misunderstand each other". An Indonesian student shared his positive view the following way: "Communicate with the people from other countries, that's would be fantastic, because I've practiced my speaking in English or tried to speak up their native languages, not all about language but I've known about a new culture, countries directly from the resources. It was challenging for me because we different dialects even though in English. But so far so good for me". On the other hand, two participants mentioned that they didn't encounter challenges when communicating with people from other countries. One of them, a female from Russia, said: "I haven't experienced the challenges when communicating with people from other countries". The other student shared this view: "I don't have challenges in communication with people from countries or cultures; every misunderstanding is caused only by personal reasons of me or my interlocutor. I never face a cultural problem".

V. DISCUSSION

In the current study , based on questionnaire data analysis , the average percentage of the respondents agreeing that they feel that there are communication barriers between them and people with different mother tongues equals to 61.4%. In addition , 60% of the participants agree that international students sometimes misunderstand each other during discussions due to the fact that they speak different first languages. The average percentage of the respondents agreeing that speaking in the same language (using a shared language) can overcome misunderstandings in intercultural communication equal to 74.7%. While 62.7% average percentage of the population disagree that communication with people with various cultural backgrounds is difficult. 44% of the respondents disagree that they can communicate with locals in Hungarian. Whereas, 78.7% of respondents agree that their communication skills have improved a lot since they became students at Hungarian universities , and 68% of the participants agree that they find it challenging to communicate with locals in English. The findings of the current research agree with Bajzát 's (2017) study results which stated that verbal communication is "a great barrier in intercultural communication , especially conversing with Hungarian people in English". The findings of the current study indicate that international students encounter verbal communication barriers due to a) speaking different mother tongues, b) not speaking a shared language fluently , c) using wrong words, and d) a foreign accent . Moreover, another communication barrier is explained in the responses to interview questions where the participants sampled demonstrate that the lack of Hungarian knowledge leads to miscommunication with the locals .

VI. CONCLUSIONS

As mentioned before, the current study is a comprehensive overview of intercultural communication in a study abroad context. The main purpose of the research has been to highlight intercultural communication experiences by international students in Hungary with particular attention to the verbal communication barriers. The study has a number of limitations. The first was that only a few international students at the University of Pannonia accepted to conduct the interview, the second limitation the need to conduct interviews in a foreign language for the researcher and the interviewed students. The outcomes of the study highlight the verbal communication barriers that participants experience while communicating with people with various cultural backgrounds. On the other hand, many participants mentioned that speaking English is helping them to communicate with people from various countries. The research conducted on international students in Hungary in the field of intercultural communication is limited. Thus, it is recommended that more effort be made to study this group and the impact the experience of studying abroad has on them.

Data Availability

The data of the questionnaire and the interviews are available in the annex of the master's dissertation and can be sent to the reader on request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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