



EPiCUR
EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY

INTERCULTURAL SKILLS

A COLLECTION OF TESTIMONIES FROM EPICUR
STUDENTS, ALUMNI, STAFF AND ENTHUSIASTS
ON INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES

Université

de Strasbourg

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EPICUR

EPICUR is an Alliance of 9 universities across Europe bringing together more than 300,000 students and 40,000 staff of multiple nationalities and offering courses in the 7 languages of the alliance: Danish, Dutch, English, French, German, Greek, Polish and in many others. It belongs to the first generation of European Alliances to pilot a new way of intensifying collaboration among Higher Education institutions through the creation of a European University.



Intercultural skills

Keen to know how to promote language learning among its students, EPICUR conducted in spring 2021 an alliance-wide survey to understand the incentives for its students to learn a new language. The results showed that the main motivation is the job opportunities mastering languages provides.

EPICUR believes that learning new languages goes hand in hand with developing intercultural competences. Through EPICUR, students and staff have the opportunity to study and to work in an international, multilingual and multicultural environment. This allows them to develop and perfect not only their language proficiency but also their intercultural skills on a daily basis. These competencies are highly valued on the job market and provide students with increased job opportunities.

Booklet

In order to raise awareness of the link between language learning, development of intercultural skills and employability, EPICUR interviewed students, alumni, staff and professionals from its respective regions to collect their views on the topic. This booklet offers the reader a collection of testimonies around the following three questions:

- What are intercultural competences?
- How does one acquire intercultural competences?
- To what extent are these skills an asset when looking for a job?



What are intercultural competences?

Our interviewees' definitions and examples



JOHANN

Junior professor in intercultural pedagogy



In my vision I will rather talk about THE intercultural competence in the singular. This is important for me because it is a very complex competence that will depend on the individual, i.e. **it will not be the same for each person depending on their personalities, needs, objectives and the context** in which they find themselves. So this competence is above all useful for knowing how to adapt, how to react in an appropriate way in different contexts that could be described as intercultural. An intercultural context is a context of encounter in the broadest sense of the term, because for me

cultures are very varied. Indeed, you are not only defined by your national culture, we often talk about French or German culture, how to interact well with someone of another nationality. But I don't see it like that, I think that we also have a family culture, a professional culture, a disciplinary culture, etc. Depending on the person or people with whom we work, we may also have a different culture. We interact, we adapt and it is this **ability to adapt and to be more and more at ease in an intercultural context** that best defines the intercultural competence for me.

I often quote Jean-Claude Kaufmann to my students: "We have a thousand different facets of ourselves that allow us to adapt to events". I like this quote because it shows that we are complex beings and it is the management of this complexity that is intercultural competence.

SARAH

Student in natural resources management



In my opinion the intercultural competence is the ability to function in international, intercultural settings, basically across cultures. It allows someone to **understand, comprehend and respond appropriately to different cultural contexts and viewpoints**. This ability is of great value, especially in today's globalized world where working with people coming from different cultural backgrounds and/or cultures is not the exception but the norm. I think one great example to understand how intercultural competence works in practice is taboo topics. **What is considered taboo to talk about in one culture may be part of the everyday conversation in another**. For example asking someone about how much they earn is seen as rude where I come from, but an expected question somewhere else in the world. Encountering such situations leads to more flexible, open-minded and understanding human beings.





ALEKSANDRA

Student in language and literature



Intercultural competences are the ability to communicate with people from different cultures, with respect of their traditions and customs. In general, it is a very abstract aspect, but in practice, it is really important: **so usually it includes culture-specific knowledge, sociolinguistic awareness, openness, curiosity and respect.** Sometimes we need these skills even when communicating with people from our own culture, because we are all so different. In addition, from time to time it can be seen even within wone country (tacit division of the country into south and north or west and east) or culture (differences between the cultures of Spanish-speaking countries, for example), and just the diversity of types of individuals.



TINE

Career and employability consultant



I understand intercultural competences as the ability to interact and communicate with people that are different from yourself – be it nationally, professionally, personally, etc. So, **the intercultural perspective is broader than just being from different countries and speaking different languages.**



PRZEMYSŁAW

Student of Polish studies



I think, it means **to be understood by others and to understand others.** I think the most efficient way to improve our intercultural skills is the real contact with people speaking a different language and from another culture. However, to do so you will need to have some basic knowledge that you can get from lectures or classes, for example language, history or cultural courses.



ISABELLE

English teacher



I would say it's **the ability to communicate and behave appropriately with people from different cultures** and backgrounds. It means understanding and adapting to those people. So in this part, **we need tolerance, empathy, adaptability,** which are important intercultural skills, according to me. Language proficiency, of course, is an important part as well, I cannot deny it being an English teacher myself. We have all heard about awkward situations due to linguistic misunderstanding or attitudes that led you to embarrassing situations.



What are intercultural competences?

Our interviewees' definitions and examples



FILIO
Lecturer in literature



SZILVIA
Director of Hungarian studies



Intercultural competences are **linguistic and extra-linguistic skills**, which allow people to communicate effectively with interlocutors of different cultural backgrounds so that they can function appropriately across different sociocultural contexts. Within a multi-cultural and/or a multi-lingual work environment, for example, intercultural competences could range from **our ability to convey the intended meanings to solve a specific problem** during a meeting, to our agility towards other cues, very much culturally influenced, such as body language, gestures, proximity, eye contact, and so on. The interplay of these skills achieves successful communication, but they also ensure that no one feels 'threatened' in an interaction or marginalized in any fashion. Our ability to proficiently speak a language does not necessitate that we have intercultural competence, even though language and culture are very much intertwined. The extralinguistic skills need to be acquired also, much like the linguistic ones.

First of all, let me quote Mike Byram, one of the most well-known experts on this question. According to his model, the three key elements of intercultural communicative competence are **attitudes, knowledge and skills**.

Interculturally competent persons are characterised by their **curiosity and openness** as well as their knowledge about other languages and cultures. Furthermore, they have acquired skills in interpreting behaviours, values and beliefs different from their own and they are also able to relate to these behaviours, values and beliefs. Finally, they have developed skills of discovery and interaction as well as **critical cultural awareness**.

I particularly like this model as it describes in detail which aspects belong to the intercultural communicative competence. The model can help us to identify our strengths and weaknesses and to improve ourselves.





ANTONIOS
Student in school of English



Contrary to what most people might think, intercultural competence is a practiced concept dating back to the early days of humankind, from the coexistence of ancient hostile civilizations to the great transatlantic explorations and from the unsaturated trade routes to the everlasting ethnic migrations.

It is the **ability to adapt and integrate to the given environment** developing a solid knowledge of the appropriate and acceptable behaviors and attitudes of the target culture. But it can also be the flexibility and the sensitivity to work effectively by recognizing and accepting the differences that unite and link the diverse cultures, the awareness that communication is the result of mutual compromises between pluralities who are willing to engage in a dialogue. These are all aspects of the phenomenon we call intercultural competences.

TO SUM UP

Intercultural skills are not specific skills but a set of abilities closely associated with interpersonal communication. They are useful in your daily life, whether it is in the personal, academic or professional sphere. They could be linked with the ability to demonstrate open-mindedness, to shift perspectives and to overcome cultural boundaries. Finally, intercultural skills also allow you to benefit from cultural diversity, to embrace flexibility, to demonstrate understanding, acceptance and inclusion.



How does one acquire and develop intercultural skills?

How are these related to language skills?



QUENTIN

French-German professional integration officer

Université
de Strasbourg



SIMONETTA

Student in plurilingualism

Université
de Strasbourg

You acquire these competences by remaining open to the new, curious, attentive, and ready to put one's habits into perspective when in contact with others. These qualities are important when travelling, for example, or when living in a country whose codes you have not yet mastered. **Careful observation** allows you to understand them and to take them into account in the relationships you form with members of this new society. It also allows one to detect global trends in their ways of doing and thinking, without making them general rules. **Learning foreign languages** is also a very effective way of honing intercultural skills, because every language is the primary tool with which its native speakers develop their thoughts, express them, and integrate into the society of their language group. Thus, when learning Japanese, for example, one practices speaking with innuendo, handling the unspoken language that characterizes the Japanese way of communicating: one learns to omit the grammatical subject and to deduce who one is talking about from the context, or to elaborate so-called «hanging phrases» to implicitly signal to the interlocutor that he or she can speak again and possibly express a different opinion. In this way, we gain a deeper understanding of how native speakers reason and behave. We grasp the subtlety of native thinking, and at a certain level of mastery, we begin to think like a native speaker. Moreover, one feels different when one speaks a foreign language, because the syntactic structure of the foreign language forces one to construct one's thoughts differently, and when one also adopts its musicality (intonation, accent, rhythm), this inevitably rubs off on the energy one gives off, and brings out other facets of one's own personality.

Iwould say, it depends. It depends on the individual itself. We often hear the expression that intercultural competences are not for everyone and that people have to be mentally prepared to achieve them. And I partly agree with this. For me, **as well as with any other competence, we have to acquire it gradually through our intercultural experiences.** However, it is true that sometimes individuals are initiated to the intercultural reality, but it does not mean that a person has to be initiated to successfully produce intercultural competences.

In my opinion, several situations could help you develop these skills. In the first place, modern societies have a melting pot of cultures sharing the same territory. Globalization is a key reality nowadays. This is why cultures are connected in many ways and it makes it almost impossible to ignore another culture (through gastronomy, Internet, products, music, etc.). Of course, there are different contexts where you can improve and use your intercultural competences. Studies introduce you to the complexity of these skills and the workplace could be an interesting field where you can use your intercultural skills. All these cultures and/or intercultural aspects have to be expressed with the powerful tool in communication: language. **This means that language skills are an essential part of intercultural exchanges.**





CHARLÈNE
Educational consultant



I do believe that these skills **can be acquired gradually**, led by a deep curiosity, interest and respect for what is different or still unknown. The more we diversify our environments (at work, in our personal life, in our studies), the more we can develop these abilities. But it is not enough.

Indeed, I am sure that these skills can be strengthened as a result of **training or mentoring in an empowering environment**. It would facilitate reflexivity where someone can question himself and the evolution of his conceptions. In the confrontation to the other, he could find techniques to resolve conflictual situations, become aware of these skills and meanwhile empower them.

TOMASZ
Dean of the Polish and philology faculty



While most people would think that intercultural competences are necessarily an innate human trait you might get frustrated and question yourselves when it comes to employing them unconsciously in a culture-specific context. What life teaches us, is that intercultural competences, while related to cognitive, adaptive, and behavioral skills is not merely dependent on natural traits per se but it is learned the way a language does; through excessive input, real exposure, and authentic contact with the various cultures and their people.

By now, I assume that you can understand **the link between intercultural competences and language**. None of these two is prescribed, nor are they to be seen as isolated phenomena opaque to the human condition and experience. Instead, **both are mobile processes that acquire their value in context and performance**.



CAMILLE
Educational coordinator



Intercultural competences are both natural and acquired: **we all have them in us to different extents**, but above all they are something to be worked on. They are acquired through our encounters and our professional experiences. **It is something that is developed and reworked over time and that we are never stop learning**. For example, I developed my ability to adapt by going on an Erasmus stay abroad, then by doing my first professional internship in a German-speaking context, but also during an internship in a Parisian foundation. The language aspect was not present in the last case but being in a new context still allowed me to develop these skills.



How does one acquire and develop intercultural skills?

How are these related to language skills?



SARAH

Student in natural resources
management



Intercultural competence just like most skills in life is an **acquired skill that can either grow stronger or become weaker if it is not exercised properly**. Just like a muscle!

The easiest way to acquire some intercultural competence is to **take a deep-dive into another culture**, preferably a culture that is drastically different than your own culture. Going on an exchange semester and getting to know locals, working in other countries, learning a new language and finding a native speaker to practice with and learn more about the culture surrounding the language, are just a few ways how one can go about deepening and/or acquiring intercultural competences. A necessary ingredient if one wants to be successful acquiring intercultural competences is open-mindedness and the willingness to always question one's own beliefs.

Our thoughts, the way we interact with others, how we integrate ourselves into society are all drenched with the culture and the beliefs of the culture we grew up in. It's important to remember that just because we see the world one way does not mean everyone else does the same or that everyone will understand why we act, speak and do as we do. Just as we do not understand others actions all the time.

Patience is key! An easy way to start with the development of intercultural competences is to **simply observe the people around you**, especially when you are on holiday. Are they eating everything on their plate? How are they talking with the shopkeeper? Do they tip and if so, how much? To go further, another major influence regarding intercultural competence is languages. Language skills help to understand

the context of a situation better. Some interactions are rather subtle and can only be really understood when one not only learns about the culture these interactions are happening in, but is able to speak the corresponding language as well. Take politeness for example and how to address people that are older than you or in positions of authority. In the English Language the word "you" is used to address someone no matter their rank, if you are speaking directly to them (Example: Good afternoon, what may I do for you today?). In the German language a different word is used to address someone older and/or in a position of authority. Instead of the word "du" (English: you), the formal version of "Sie" is used. This has an impact on how we interact with others, how much distance we put in relationships and says something about trust level as well. **An observer immediately has a deeper understanding of the relationship between people** without having to know either of them and without having to listen if first names or surnames are used in conversation. As you can see language matters!

Some things furthermore do simply not translate into another language, some words and their meaning simply exist just in one language and can only be described in a roundabout manner when using language. One just has to think about proverbs. Even how we see the world is partly shaped by the language we are speaking. Some cultures do not have a word for red, red for them is expressed as orange. What about traffic lights then? Traffic lights where I am from are red, orange and green. What about a culture that classifies red as orange? Are they using completely different colors?





NORA
EPICUR Project officer



Intercultural skills can be developed through interaction with people from different cultural backgrounds. During studies this can be **an exchange semester, tutoring activities, an international internship or by interacting with peers** from different countries or cultural backgrounds. Learning another language also helps improving intercultural competences as language is the tool to express yourself and the voice of culture. I personally acquired intercultural competences through various stays in different countries. The first one – Algeria – being the most important to me. The (northern) Algerian culture is influenced by their religion. Once, a friend asked me, why I wouldn't convert to Islam, as I share the same values as Muslims. That was one of the key moments when I understood how closely related the Algerian and Austrian cultures are. We share the same core values of respecting and caring for one another. Knowing that and at the same time appreciating the cultural differences and respecting them, especially when living in a different country, helps to connect to different cultures, to find friends and – in my case at least – finding a second home.



ANNA-MARIE
Student in Market & Management Anthropology



I think that everyone can obtain intercultural competences when living abroad, learning a foreign language, and most importantly **being open to having his / her personal beliefs and opinions challenged by others**. I believe that learning a foreign language, and especially the language of the country you are living in, is crucial for the development of the intercultural competences, as it makes it possible for expats to truly connect to locals, integrate within the society, and overall to not being trapped in the expats' bubble. Furthermore, it's been pointed out by many scientists that language affects greatly our understanding of the world around us. This can be easily demonstrated by the fact that many languages (including Czech) do have a formal manner of speaking, which is expected to be used while speaking with somebody outside of your closest social circle. Therefore, in this case, it is evident that an expat speaking Czech will understand the social relationship within the Czech society more than the one that does not speak Czech.

TO SUM UP

Intercultural skills can be acquired in many different ways such as learning about different cultures and languages, studying or working abroad, evolving in a multilingual or intercultural environment, etc. The key is to have a sensitive approach and awareness of other cultures and your own culture, to be able to question yourself, to analyse the situation in its context and to know yourself and your own identity.

To what extent are these skills an asset when looking for a job?

How are they beneficial in the workplace?



TINE

Career and employability consultant



In general, intercultural skills are valued by organizations as they represent a more general ability to work with others, and this is seen as one of the most important skills of the 21st century (e.g. the 4 C's: Communication, Collaboration, Creativity, Critical Thinking). It also makes the daily work tasks as they are often not individual tasks, but require interaction and communication with colleagues and business partners as well as other organizations. When it comes to CV and interviews, then we usually advise students and graduates to **activate these types of skills if and when it makes sense in relation to the specific opportunity**. Also, it is a good idea to consider where in the CV it makes sense to place the part of intercultural competences – is it in the profile text, about the personal competences or as part of the educational and/or professional experiences? That depends on the individual. **In relation to interviews, it is always a good idea to give examples of situations, tasks and contexts where you have developed or used intercultural competences**, so that it becomes concrete and adaptable for the interviewing organization.



FILIO

Lecturer in literature



Having intercultural skills, the ability to adapt to and adopt linguistic and extralinguistic features, is an important asset; especially in a globalized economy where being able to function and communicate successfully with interlocutors of different cultural backgrounds is central to any employee and company alike. **When applying for any position, pointing out the different cultural contexts that one has been a part of**, maybe also their experience in different educational institutions, could be **an indicator of intercultural competence**. Which then, in daily tasks in the work environment, could 'translate' into a smoother collaboration between employees and, subsequently, the creation of a competitive, competent team.



NORA

EPICUR project officer



I started working in EPICUR because I had a lot of experience with international and intercultural work. Without my prior activities I wouldn't have been the right person to work in such an international context. For most job interviews so far, people were more impressed by my international work than with my professional work. I once worked at a start-up with nearly no technical equipment. Through my stay in the Gambia, I learned how to improvise with low equipment and could use my acquired out-of-the-box thinking to solve a technical problem in the Austrian start-up.

At my current job as project officer in EPICUR, I need to communicate daily with people from different cultural backgrounds. **Having intercultural skills are key for my job and are always a benefit in every job as globalization and internationalization are increasing.**





SZILVIA

Director of Hungarian studies



We live in a globalised world where we cannot afford to pretend that other languages and cultures simply do not exist. The myth of self-sufficiency and self-reliance of nations, countries and regions is largely outdated. Under these circumstances, **it is not a luxury but rather a necessity to learn new languages and to familiarise ourselves with other cultures.**

We can however easily realise that speaking the same language does not guarantee mutual understanding. On the contrary: sharing a language may lead to the erroneous impression that we also share beliefs, values and ways of doing things. You may have experienced yourself that **relations, be it in business, education or private life, can go wrong if partners have a common language but fail to understand one another at deeper levels.** It is therefore no surprise that so many intercultural guides have been written in the last decades. Most of these books are destined to business people for business is the area where unsuccessful communication has measurable effects; it is associated with missed opportunities and money loss. But business is not the only domain where intercultural competence is highly appreciated. Encounters between languages and cultures are common in all domains of our (real or virtual) lives: companies and organisations in every sector of the labour market are looking for people who speak more than one language and are familiar with more than one culture.

I would like to finish my answer with two concrete suggestions that can help you prepare for the labour market: Lesser taught European languages in combination with widely spoken ones may also be an asset. However, a few words in these languages will not be enough. **You need to be able to master these languages at least at B1 level in order to catch the interest of potential employers.**

Beside indicating your proficiency level in your CV, **you should also mention any projects that you have carried out related to the languages you speak.** For example, if you have conducted interviews, participated in a theatre play, made a video, organised an exhibition, attended a summer school, be sure to enlist these achievements. They tell a lot about your commitment, reliability, proactivity, organisational skills and work ethics.

To what extent are these skills an asset when looking for a job?

How are they beneficial in the workplace?

JOHANN

Junior professor in intercultural pedagogy



The intercultural competence is important when looking for a job, because the company culture is an important element: find out about the company you are applying to, try to **find out how it works, what its values are, do they correspond to you?** All of this is part of the cultural and intercultural reflection, because **at the time of a job interview, you will try to adapt to this culture, to show that you have understood it in order to convince the person in front of you.** At the same time, it is a question of using the intercultural competence developed throughout one's career to be at ease during the interview, which means stepping out of your comfort zone.

But this competence is especially useful once in the workplace, since whatever the company or institution in which you are going to work, there will always be team relations, a relationship with clients, unexpected encounters, etc. and each person will have a different way of dealing with these, of approaching his or her work, each will have his or her own culture: being aware of this and **being able to adapt according to the visions and needs of each person will be a real asset in the company.** But to do this, you have to make an effort, because not everything comes with a snap of the fingers, everyone's culture is an iceberg whose submerged part should not be neglected. Intercultural competence therefore also means **making the effort to discover what we do not see directly** in the other person in order to better understand his or her behaviour and reactions and thus adapt better.

At the same time, this work will allow us to reflect on ourselves. We will sometimes be surprised or shocked by a particular remark or action, these are cultural shocks. Reflecting on, understanding and formalising this phenomenon will enable you to develop your intercultural competence and to be increasingly at ease in new intercultural contexts.

Developing intercultural skills on a daily basis is therefore preparing your weapons to be able to leave your comfort zone.





CAMILLE

Student in applied foreign languages

Université
de Strasbourg

These social skills are essential nowadays for any kind of job. It is not unusual to see in a job offer that a special personality is required to fit with the job, when actually it deals with social skills that you may find in any job offer: intellectual curiosity, openminded, dialogue...

When these social skills go hand in hand with language skills, it constitutes a double asset to highlight on a CV or during an interview **showing how you can manage to switch from a culture to another** keeping these social skills and adapting them so that it will become intercultural competences. In the workplace it will help to communicate more easily with your colleagues for instance if you do not have the same personalities or the same way to work, because you may find common grounds to provide a collective effort.

Moreover, in a foreign country, you will feel that you fit in because you have the same “work skills” and speak the same language. In the daily life, such competences enable to make your work tasks flow better and **you will be prepared to receive critics and to analyse** them thanks to your openness and to your critical thinking. These cross-cultural competences should be trained on along the life in all the spheres even different from the work life.

TO SUM UP

Intercultural competences appear to be a crucial skill-set in today's global workplace where employees are more likely to interact with people from different cultures and countries and people who have been shaped by different values, beliefs and experiences. This skill-set might also be useful in less intercultural environments because it gives employees a better understanding of their workplace and co-workers and helps them adapt to new work environments and prevent culture shock, while enhancing their cultural awareness, knowledge, and practical skills.





We would like to thank all those who provided us with their testimonies on intercultural competences. Their diverse experiences and perspectives as students, alumni, staff or professionals helped to define intercultural competences, their relevance and usefulness in the work environment but not only. Intercultural competences are indeed the gateway to dialogue, tolerance and inclusion - all of which are essential to a more open and tolerant world.





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