

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE OF ESP STUDENTS

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Abstract. *Bearing in mind the importance of international communication, globalisation, student mobility and employability, the readiness to use language properly in different social and cultural contexts has become a major priority. It comprises a wide array of skills that make up what is known as intercultural competence. It might be defined as a set of abilities and qualities necessary for understanding of and communication with other people, no matter whether they come from different countries or not. This paper aims to investigate the understanding of and attitudes to intercultural competence of ESP students in Poland and Serbia. Since we live in the age of globalisation, it seems it ought to be quite important for all students to become interculturally competent. Therefore, we also attempted to analyse various factors influencing students' attitudes such as their national background or experience abroad. The results present a set of issues to be addressed by ESP teachers, as well as similarities and differences observed for Polish and Serbian ESP students. The implications for further research as well as limitations of this study are stated.*

Key words: *intercultural competence, ESP*

1. INTRODUCTION

Intercultural competence is a fresh construct. With the onset of globalization and increased mobility of representatives of practically all cultures of the world the distinct features that these cultures have come to be acknowledged. For some their diversity has been the driving force for actions aimed at preserving them in an unchanged form and appreciating them as they are. For others, the differences among cultures have been a concern as they were said to be the reason for difficulties in communication in multinational classrooms, workplaces, scientific conferences or political meetings. In the area of ESP teaching, as well as teaching foreign languages in general, the issue has been receiving much attention recently. A lot is also being said about the way it should be approached. The question we attempted to answer in our research was what the problem looks like in our ESP classes and what factors influence it.

2. DEFINING THE TERMS

Although a lot has been written on this competence, a comprehensive definition of the concept cannot be provided. This competence is somehow closely connected to intercultural communication which is referred to as ‘communication between people with different cultural backgrounds’ (Chi 2015), comprising three important elements: ‘contact (communication) between different cultures (inter-), and the cultural differences should make a difference in the process’. In other words, contact, different cultures and cultural differences are of great significance when it comes to intercultural communication. It is observed that both the medium (e.g. email, social media, face to face), and cultural differences (including e.g. nationality, ethnicity, religious belief, gender, age/generation, geographical region, political ideology, body (dis)ability, sexual orientation, etc.), make a difference in the process of communication (Chi 2015). Therefore, it is assumed that almost every interaction may be identified as intercultural if there are some cultural factors that differentiate the participants of an act of communication (Chi 2015).

The question that arises here is whether we may look at any communication in the classroom as at intercultural communication bearing in mind that students do come from different backgrounds, religious beliefs, gender, age, geographical region, sexual orientation, etc. Byram (1997, 70-71) makes a difference between intercultural competence and intercultural communication competence, claiming that in case of intercultural competence, individuals are able to communicate in their own language with people from other countries and cultures, whereas in the case of intercultural communication competence they can interact with people from other countries in a foreign language. However, later on Byram et al. (2002, 5) defined intercultural competence as the ‘ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and their ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality’.

For the purpose of this paper we shall adhere to intercultural competence understood as “the ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills and attitudes that lead to visible behaviour and communication that are both effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions” (Dearsorff, D.K. 2009, 242). Since the definition refers to the terms ‘culture’ and ‘intercultural’, we understand culture as defined by Herbig (1998, 17) who sees it as “the sum of a way of life, including expected behaviour, beliefs, values, language and living practices shared by members of a society. It consists of both explicit and implicit rules through which experience is interpreted”. It was also concisely summarized by Geert Hofstede (2001, 24), as a “programming of the mind”. Communication in this research is concerned with all forms of sending, decoding and interpreting messages, whose meaning is dependent on co-construction of the underlying sense by all the interlocutors involved (Galanes & Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009).

3. AN INTERCULTURALLY COMPETENT PERSON

Since the agents involved in intercultural interactions (people) are the object of investigation it seems important to determine their main features that contribute to either success or failure in communication, where some differences in culture can be observed. Kealey, as early as in 1990, reports on various competence profiles, one of which is the “Profile of the Interculturally Effective Person” (IEP) produced by a group of researchers working for the Canadian Foreign Service Institute, Center for Intercultural Learning (2000). Following the IEP definition, an interculturally effective person has three main attributes (2000, 4):

- an ability to communicate with people in a way that earns their respect and trust, thereby encouraging a cooperative and productive workplace that is conducive to the achievements of professional or assignment goals;
- the capacity to adapt his/her professional skills (both technical and managerial) to fit local conditions and constraints; and
- the capacity to adjust personally so that s/he is content and generally at ease in the host culture.

Unlike earlier models and skills classifications, IEP also includes a list of skills and personal attributes of interculturally effective persons:

- adaptation skills
- attitude of modesty and respect
- understanding of the concept of culture
- knowledge of the host country and culture
- relationship-building
- self-knowledge
- intercultural communication
- organizational skills
- personal and professional commitment.

Deardorff (2011) draws conclusions on the basis of five regional reports prepared for UNESCO (Dragičević Šešić & Dragojević, 2009; Grimson, 2011; Holmes, 2009; Steyn, 2009; Youssef, 2011). She puts together a list of skills and competences which appear to be the most necessary to attain intercultural competence:

- Respect (“valuing of others”);
- Self-awareness/identity (“understanding the lens through which we each view the world”);
- Seeing from other perspectives/world views (“both how these perspectives are similar and different”);
- Listening (“engaging in authentic intercultural dialogue”);
- Adaptation (“being able to shift temporarily into another perspective”);
- Relationship building (forging lasting cross-cultural personal bonds);
- Cultural humility (“combines respect with self-awareness”).

Whichever authority we might want to adhere to, it is clearly visible that a culturally competent person ready to undertake any intercultural communication in the classroom needs to be a confident yet flexible person, aware of their own identity and of the possible areas where the identities of other participants of interaction might differ. What seems indispensable as well is the willingness to respect the differences and an ability to instill the same spirit in their interlocutors. The success of an interaction is always dependent on both (or all) sides of the interaction, so it is important to bear in mind that the above mentioned qualities need to be nurtured in every society.

4 THE COMPLEXITY OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

Encompassing such complex issues as human nature, culture and communication, intercultural communication is an enormous area, accurately represented in the form of a tree in Figure 1 below. The above mentioned areas constitute just the roots of it, with intercultural

dialogue accompanied by cultural diversity and human rights stemming from them and constituting the main trunk of the tree. Then come various activities that need to be undertaken to ensure that the issues mentioned above get to be enacted in real life: clarifying, teaching, promoting, supporting and enacting intercultural competences. It is thanks to these actions that we can eventually observe all the desirable phenomena listed on the leaves, e.g.: intercultural responsibility, intercultural literacy, cultural shifting, intercultural citizenship, conviviality, creativity, liquidity, contextualization cues, multilingualism, disposition, emotions, knowledge, intercultural communicative competence. Some of the leaves are still empty as intercultural competence, just like a tree, is a living and changing construct that keeps adjusting to and incorporating constantly emerging contexts worldwide.

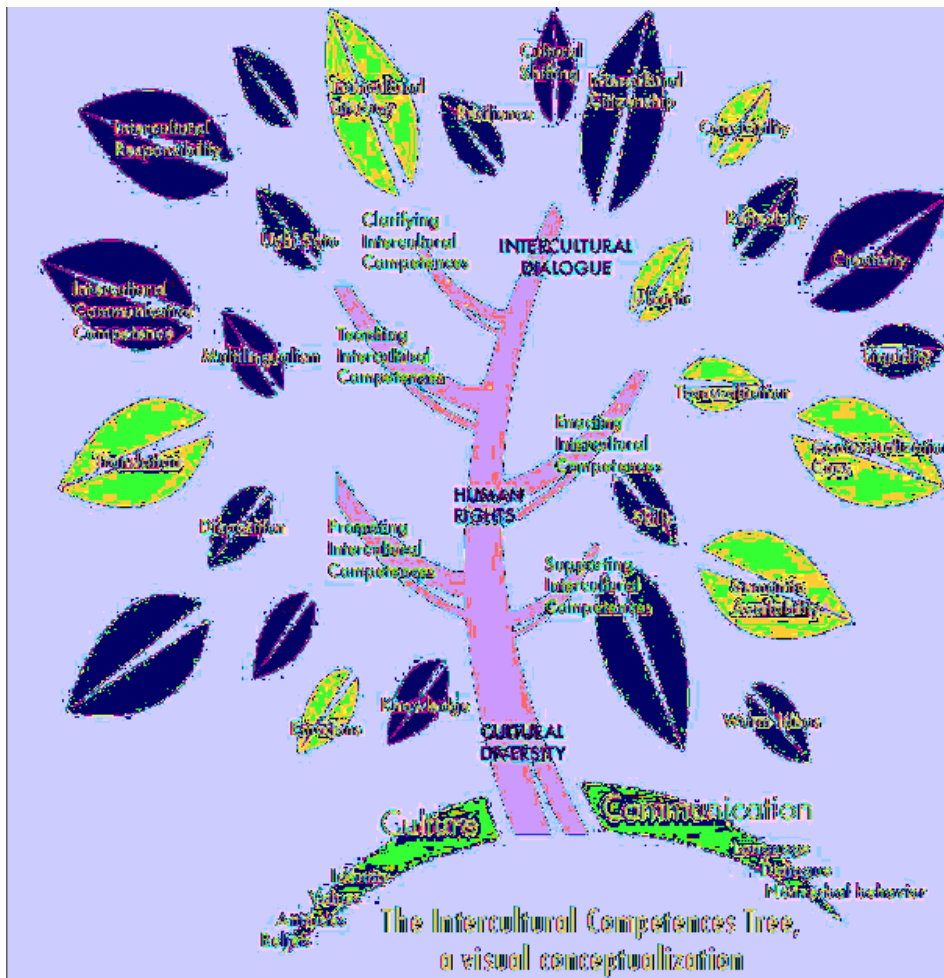


Figure 1 Intercultural competence tree (UNESCO 2013)

5. PROBING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE OF ESP STUDENTS

Being as complex as described above, intercultural competence is hard to be assessed. However, researchers have been trying to develop instruments that assessed it in various contexts (Sinicrope et al. 2007, 24, Fantini, 2000, 2006). Fantini (2006, 12) proposed the definition of intercultural competence as “a complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from one’s self”. On the basis of the definition, Fantini listed the following components: characteristics of intercultural competence, domains of intercultural competence (relationships, communication, and collaboration), dimensions of intercultural competence (knowledge, attitude, skills, and awareness), language proficiency, and developmental level. However, concluding his research, Fantini (2009, 464) admits, that “assessing intercultural competence also requires using a variety of different techniques and strategies”. He gives possible examples of such instruments

- Closed and open-ended questions
- Objective strategies that involve scoring (e.g., matching items, true/false questions, multiple-choice questions, cloze or gap-filling items)
- Oral and written activities (e.g., paraphrasing, translation, essay)
- Active and passive activities
- Individual and interactive activities in pairs or groups
- Dialogue, interviews, debate, and discussion
- Demonstrations, poster sessions, role-plays, and simulations
- Structured and unstructured field tasks and experiences
- Questionnaires that require self-evaluation, peer evaluation, group evaluation, and/or teacher evaluation.

Deardorff (2009, 477) wonders whether, given the variety of the contexts where the assessment could take place, assessment of intercultural competences is practically feasible: “Can intercultural competence be assessed? This question generates a variety of responses, including from those who feel it is simply not possible to assess intercultural competence.” The answer at which he arrives in the end is positive. He warns, however that we need to adjust the tools and methods to our context and our definition of the construct.

5.1. The study

Bearing the above-mentioned restraints, in order to find out about students’ awareness, as well as their understanding and attitudes towards intercultural competence, we carried out research, comprising a Polish and Serbian group of students. The Serbian group consisted of first-year students at the University of Belgrade, Faculty of Agriculture. The group of Polish students included first, second and third year Nursing students and second and third year Chemistry students. The questionnaire was administered to both groups at the same time. Students were asked to fill in the questionnaire on-line on a voluntary basis and they were informed that the results of research would be used for scientific purposes only. We recorded 97 responses in total (See Figure 2). The Serbian group comprised 63 responses, and the Polish group provided 34 responses. The questionnaire is still available on-line for inspection (but it is closed for editing) at: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1EipIGoZcXBFTo8SBWiE16U3fBinOC_5rYGGTqH4iV68

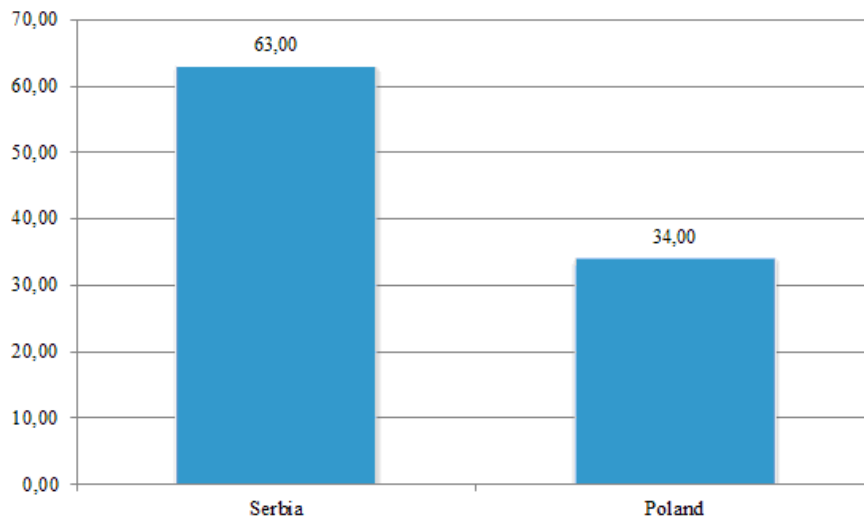


Figure 2 The country of origin

5.2. Findings and discussion

As for gender, the distribution was almost equal in both groups with female participants constituting a slight majority (54%) in case of Serbian respondents and a vast majority (85%) among Polish ones (see Figures 3 and 4). The difference is due to the fact that the majority of Polish respondents come from the Nursing Department which has a very small population of male students.

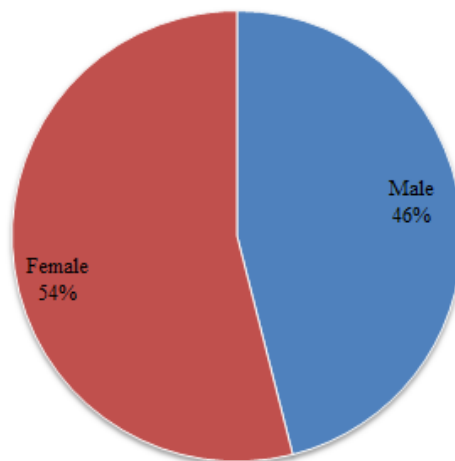


Figure 3 Gender of Serbian respondents

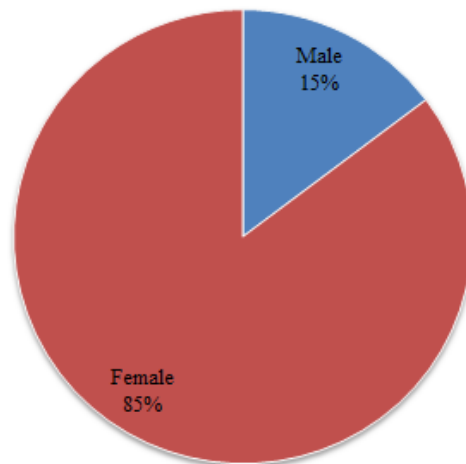


Figure 4 Gender of Polish respondents

Regarding the age of the respondents, we see that the Serbian respondents were generally younger than their Polish counterparts (See Figure 5). It results from the fact that the survey was carried out among first year students in Serbia and among second and third year students in Poland.

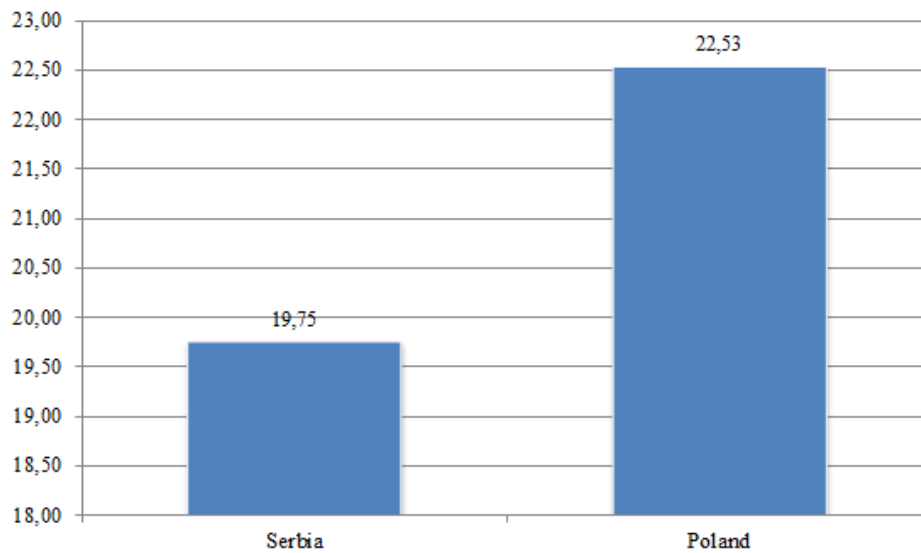


Figure 5 Age of respondents

When it comes to going abroad and whether this is important to them, we noted very slight differences between the two investigated groups. Slightly more Polish respondents have been abroad, but both groups generally believe it is important to visit other countries (see Figures 6 and 7).

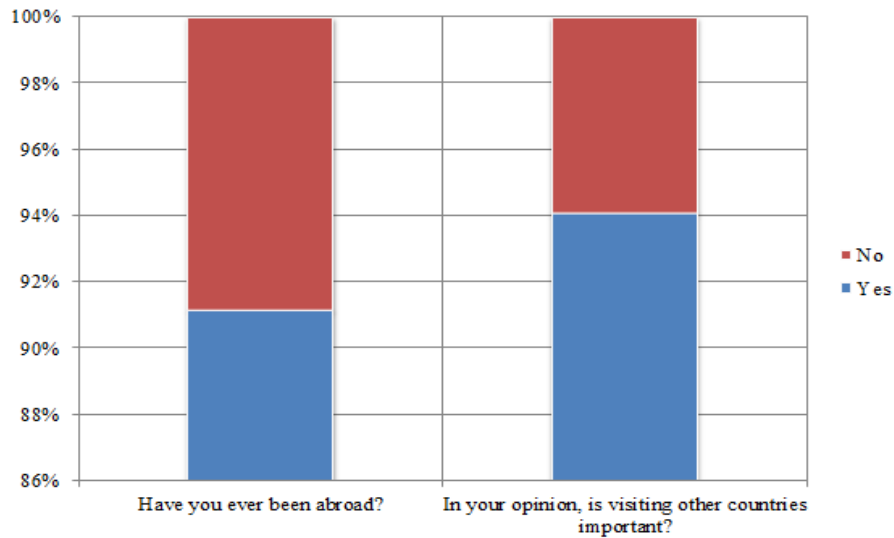


Figure 6 Polish respondents' attitudes towards going abroad and importance of visiting foreign countries

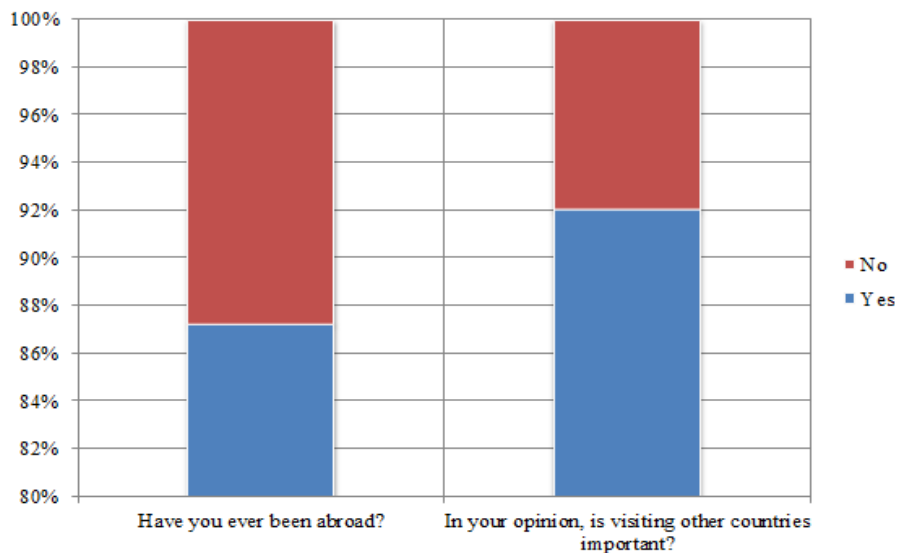


Figure 7 Serbian respondents' attitudes towards going abroad and importance of visiting foreign countries

The questionnaire also needed them to explain their reasons for going abroad. A vast majority choose 'sightseeing' as their only reason for going abroad, with very few answers making any reference to 'getting to know other cultures'. When they choose 'work' they most probably meant seasonal work, which does not ensure much exposure to the culture of an institution where they might be expected to work after they graduate.

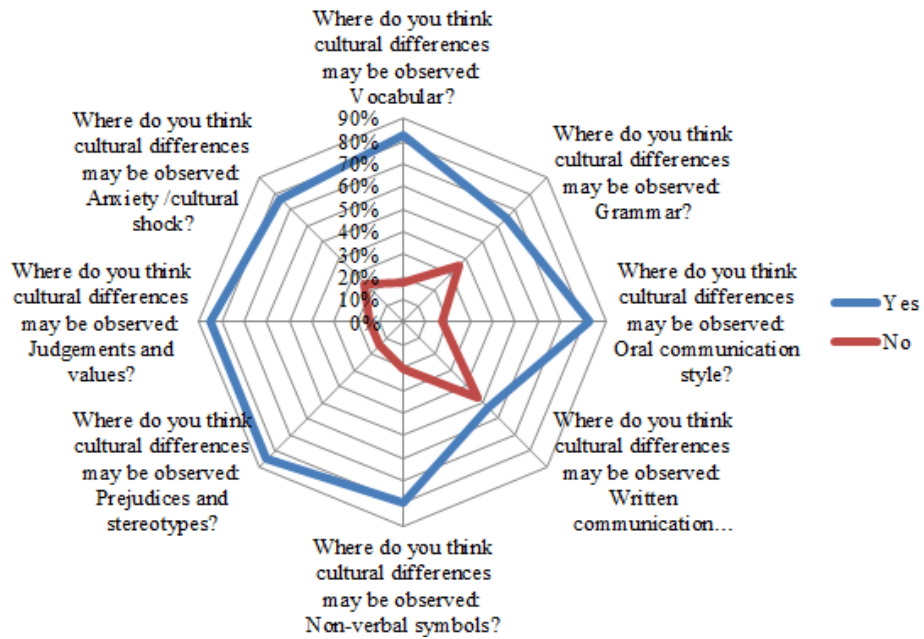


Figure 8 Polish respondents' attitudes towards cultural differences and where they can be observed

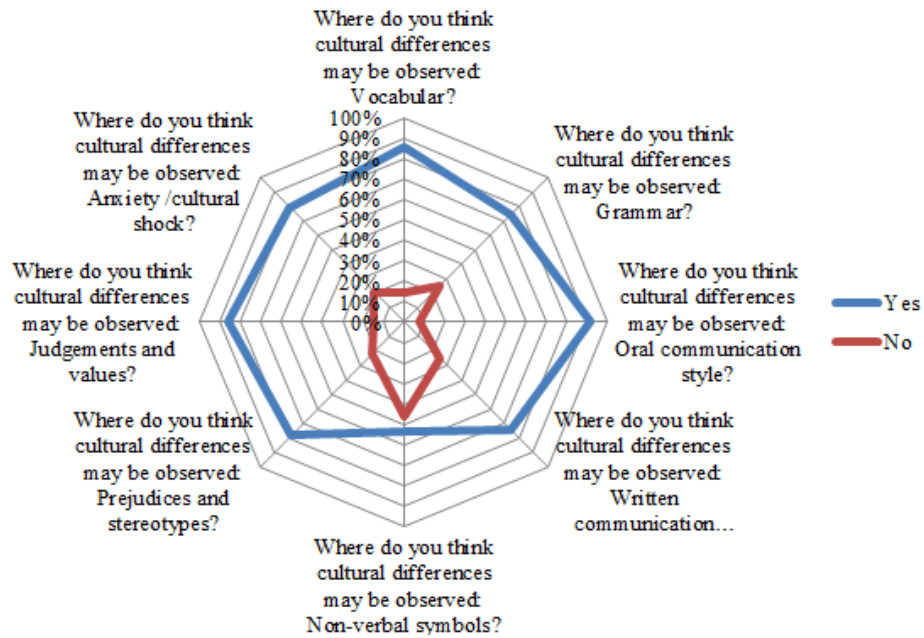


Figure 9 Serbian respondents attitudes towards cultural differences and where they can be observed

Regarding the questions on cultural differences and where they can be observed, we noticed various answers. Interestingly, in both groups the highest scores are observed in answers to questions concerning judgments and values as well as prejudices and stereotypes. As can be seen from Figures 8 and 9, Polish respondents have answered these questions very high (85%) Serbian respondents scored slightly lower here with 77% for prejudices and stereotypes and 85% for judgments and values. The lowest scores were noticed for non verbal symbols in case of Serbian respondents and for written communication in case of Polish respondents. The latter also do not think grammar is an area where cultural differences could be observed.

5. CONCLUSIONS

As it can be seen for the data gathered, students, regardless of the age, gender and country of origin, perceive cultural differences as an issue. They expect to encounter them in a number of areas in everyday life and clearly connect them with a foreign language as both of the groups scored high on Vocabulary being an area where cultural differences are observable. They demonstrated that they see the importance of travelling abroad and finding out about other cultures, but they hardly associated their journeys with getting to know the culture of the foreign country. On the one hand, it is positive information for us as teachers of English for Specific Purposes - we have managed to make our students aware that they should expect differences among cultures. On the other hand, there seems to be an urgent need to introduce a systemic approach showing our students where exactly the differences may be expected and how to deal with them so they could feel confident working or living in a multinational community in the future.

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