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Interculturality in Higher Education

Putting Critical Approaches into Practice

Edited By ***Melodine Sommier***, ***Anssi Roiha***, ***Malgorzata Lahti***

Chapter 4

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Student experiences of critical multilingual and intercultural communication competence assessment in higher education

Abstract

In this chapter, we present multilingual and intercultural communication competence (MICC) as a situational and contextual process. The aim of this qualitative, empirical study is to understand the students' perceptions of assessing MICC as a holistic phenomenon that does not represent an ethnocentric world view and considers the role of language use in interaction. We look at assessing MICC as a process of giving and receiving feedback rather than as a summative assessment. The data consist of 74 texts on assessment written by university students. The understanding of the contextual and situational nature of MICC was enhanced through a process that participants considered as 'lengthy and at times challenging'. The combination of self- and peer feedback enabled students to see MICC as both situational and a life-long process. The interpretative nature of MICC became evident through peer assessment, providing the students with a view of the situation through other's eyes. Students faced challenges in developing understanding of multilingual and intercultural communication as well as in seeing formative assessment as a tool for learning. For higher education contexts, we suggest developing MICC as a part of the whole curriculum.

Key words: Multilingual and intercultural communication competence, assessment for learning, students' perceptions on assessment, situational and contextual nature of multilingual and intercultural communication competence, self- and peer assessment, feedback

Introduction

There is a large amount of scholarly discussion on intercultural communication competence (ICC), and many have sought to clarify the concept (e.g., Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Deardorff, 2009; Holliday, 2016; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Definitions and terminology have much in common but considerable variation remains. For example, whether ICC is seen as a trait, a skill, or a performance outcome is very much still debated (Griffith et al., 2016). Furthermore, since the introduction of the more critical approach to intercultural communication, there is also a need to move away from models and definitions of ICC that rely on national culture groups and singular cultural identities toward a fluid, dynamic, contested nature of cultures, multiple cultural identities, and intercultural interactions (Dervin, 2010; Ferri, 2014; Martin & Nakayama, 2015; Olbertz-Siitonen, 2021). Besides, many of the definitions and models of ICC have also been criticised for being overly focused on individuals and relying too heavily on self-reporting methods while ignoring language as a part of ICC (Martin & Nakayama, 2015).

In this chapter we present a definition of multilingual and intercultural communication competence (MICC). Our aim is to focus on students' perceptions of the self- and peer assessment process of MICC. We begin by introducing the concept of MICC that considers the role of language and linguistic resources within ICC. After establishing the theoretical foundations of MICC, we continue by drawing up and emphasising the viewpoints that we consider of importance for higher education (HE) needs. As the final part of the theoretical frame, we elaborate our approach concerning the assessment of MICC. After a short

introduction to the study method, we present the context. The aim of this chapter is to highlight the experiences and thoughts of those who are conducting the process of assessing the MICC. Therefore, our study presents university students' reflections on the assessment process of MICC as a contextual and situational phenomenon as well as representing a fluid understanding of culture and intercultural communication. In the conclusion, we briefly summarise the aspects to be considered when developing the assessment for HE and propose ideas for the future research. Finally, we discuss the limitations of the study.

Multilingual and intercultural communication competence

Languages and language use have often had a minority role in definitions and studies of intercultural communication (Martin & Nakayama 2015). Some scholars, however, emphasise the importance of language and of language use within ICC (e.g., Dervin & Liddicoat, Ferri, 2014; 2013; Piller, 2017). For Piller (2017), multilingual practices and practical or ideological language choice are a crucial aspect of intercultural communication. We see that languages are constituent not only of cultures, but of perceptions of cultures and that people also make sense of themselves and others with languages (Dervin & Liddicoat, 2013). People understand the world and communicate about it in their own way of using languages.

Language is at the same time personal and communal (Dervin & Liddicoat, 2013). This specific aspect of languages as constantly evolving and changing but being unified by societal needs is present simultaneously. Bakhtin (1981) described this aspect as the heteroglossic nature of languages. Because of this heteroglossic aspect, language practices are characterised by two contradictory forces: one working towards the unification and standardisation of the language and the other towards diversity, change and creativity of language use (Pietikäinen & Dufva, 2013).

When people use languages or, more precisely, linguistic or semiotic resources, they encounter the two sides of a phenomenon. In that sense, the languages used are consistent with slower, longer cultural-historical timescales and/or traditions of making sense but the situation of language use (i.e., languaging) is a one-time phenomenon, contextualised and bound by time and space (Thibault, 2011). Blommaert (2010) defines 'the capacity to achieve understanding in communication' as 'the capacity to lift momentary instances of interaction to the level of common meanings' (p. 33). In our view, the aspect of language use is crucial in intercultural communication. Furthermore, we follow Blommaert's terminology when defining the multilingual communication competence. For us, the emphasis is on the ability to use the *multilingual repertoires* and *resources* that one has appropriated in previous communicative situations and modalities (see Blommaert, 2010).

We see multilingual and intercultural communication competence (MICC) as an interpretation of an individual's communicative and interactive linguistic and semiotic repertoires and resources being used use in a given situation and context. This interpretation of effective and appropriate communication is made by the individuals who interact. MICC is based on interaction and evolves as a continuous process.

The definition above is grounded in four underlying theoretical assumptions. First, MICC, like ICC, is processual (Deardorff, 2017) and 'a lifelong developmental process or way of "becoming" and "being"' (Blair, 2017, p. 112). Second, MICC is situational and contextual. There are considerable differences in the approaches on contextuality of communication competence. When competence is viewed as a trait, and from a dispositional stance, communication competence is seen as somewhat stable and as relying on personal characteristics or traits that rarely change or vary from one situation or context to another (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002). In contrast, we see competence from a situational stance, and this means that an individual's communication competence can vary depending on the situation,

context and/or other discussants, and on the goals of the discussion (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002). The same behaviour can be perceived as an appropriate expression of competence in one context but is subject to negative evaluation in another (Blair, 2017). Contextuality also means that competence is linked to how individuals socially position themselves in interactions, and to their awareness of such positioning (Martin & Nakayama, 2015).

Third, MICC is an interpretation of both appropriate and effective interaction in each situation, not forgetting the ethical aspects of communication. In Koester and Lustig's (2015) words: 'competent intercultural communication is not something one *does* but rather something that one is *perceived to be*. One's motivations, knowledge, and skills lead to a context-specific *impression* that desirable outcomes (effectiveness, appropriateness, and perhaps satisfaction) have been achieved.' (p. 20). Here appropriateness means that interaction partners perceive the communication as legitimate and fitting to a given social context and relationship. Effectiveness in turn, refers to how interaction partners can achieve preferred or desired outcomes of social interaction (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002).

Literature reviews have highlighted that ICC consists of components or elements in the three domains (e.g., Gregersen-Hermans, 2017; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Thus, our fourth underlying theoretical assumption is that elements of MICC include attitudes/motivational factors, knowledge and skills which are all interrelated. The aim is not to be 'an intercultural performer' who simply applies the skills, knowledge and attitudes gained in intercultural training in different contexts (see Ferri, 2014). However, we see that attitudes, knowledge and skills related to MICC can be enhanced through educational experience and they are in use when recognising the appropriate and effective way to act in a given context, situation and relationship (Borghetti, 2017; Pakdel, 2011). MICC is a subjective interpretation of skills, knowledge and attitudes, not an intrinsic feature possessed by someone. It is 'an inference, not an ability' (Spitzberg, 2015, p. 25), and as such a malleable construct that may

be developed through education and/or experience (Borghetti, 2017), and improved in higher education (Gregersen-Hermans, 2017; Olbertz-Siitonen, 2021). When we see MICC as something to be developed and enhanced, the question of assessment surfaces.

Assessing MICC

The assessment of ICC has been widely discussed. Simultaneously with the development and validation of standardised measurement tools (e.g., Chen & Gabrenya, 2021), some scholars have questioned the assessment of ICC (e.g., Borghetti, 2017). Our views are in line with those, who believe that despite ICC being a complex phenomenon, it still can be learned, developed, and assessed (Deardorff, 2017; Fantini, 2009; Olbertz-Siitonen, 2021). Since different approaches to the assessment of ICC represent different views of it, we need to clarify our approach to assessing ICC that also entails multilingual elements.

Our definition of MICC relies on the process at the core of the phenomenon and highlights its contextual and situational nature. The only ones able to assess what is effective and appropriate in a given situation and context are the ones participating in that interaction (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005; see also Olbertz-Siitonen, 2021). Instead of a summative assessment or standardised measurements, our approach encompasses formative assessment and assessment for learning, which originate in the theoretical approaches of Vygotsky and his followers such as Leont'ev (1978) and Engeström (1987). These theories imply that learning is situated, contextual and cannot be separated from action and thinking. The most important aspects to consider are the processes of sociocultural activity, including the active participation of people in socially constituted practices.

Our assessment for learning approach focuses on two main elements: (a) the involvement of students in the assessment process and (b) feedback, which hopefully prompts student engagement and action (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005). Two assumptions underlie the development

of MICC assessment: formative feedback practices enhance students' self-regulation in learning so that they become active agents in their own development (Heritage, 2018), and the ultimate purpose of the assessment is to support learners in becoming self-directing (Costa & Kallick, 2004).

The development of MICC assessment took place in two phases. First, we defined the concept and its elements as is recommended if planning assessment for educational purposes (Deardorff, 2014). The second phase was to involve students who were conducting the assessment and giving and receiving feedback on their MICC.

The first stage of developing the assessment of MICC started with a literature review to get acquainted with possible definitions (extensive summaries for ICC, see Griffith et al., 2016; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). As a result, our definition of MICC evolved. Moving from a definition of MICC to assessing means that learning objectives must be clear, coherent, and consistent (Dervin & Hahl, 2015). We applied the categorisation often defined as a construction with cognitive, behavioural and affective dimensions (e.g., Gregersen-Hermans, 2017; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Here, as the elements of MICC, we talk about *skills* when referring to the behavioural dimension, *knowledge* when referring to cognitive dimensions, and *attitudes* and *motivation* when referring to its affective dimensions. The current literature contains an abundant listing of MICC elements, so we chose to use the following criteria in narrowing down the appropriate elements for the given context. Dervin and Hall (2015) point out that some contemporary theories of ICC rely on concepts such as national culture and identity (see also Holliday, 2016). For this reason, the first criterion was to rule out definitions and elements reflecting an essentialist view. Second, we simplified possible overlapping elements by combining them, and added elements related to multilingual communication competence. Third, we ruled out those elements that were labelled as personality traits, as we apply the situational stance on communication (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002).

Finally, we ended up with a selection of 23 elements and a reminder that these different elements are overlapping and intertwined. The 23 elements include attitudinal and motivational elements, knowledge and skills (Appendix 1). Elements were broken down to more descriptive learning outcomes so that the students can have a more concrete idea of what is meant by, for example, *flexibility*. To give an example, the attitudinal and motivational element of flexibility was broken down into four learning outcomes: (a) willingness to adapt one's communication to the context, situation and other participants; (b) willingness to question existing generalisations, stereotypes and prejudices; (c) willingness to take complexity into account and to avoid generalisations; and (d) willingness to possess a differentiated view of different forms and types of plurilingualism. As an element of skill, flexibility and adaptability were divided into five more detailed learning outcomes: (a) ability to adapt one's verbal and nonverbal communication according to the situation, context and participants; (b) ability to consider multiple perspectives; (c) ability to process and react to new and novel information; (d) ability to adapt language use to new situations and to formulate thoughts in different ways: and (e) ability to shift between languages in order to have the situational flexibility and adaptability to contribute to understanding and the participation of members with diverse multilingual and multicultural profiles.

Context and methodology

The aim of our study was to understand students' perceptions of the self- and peer assessment process, so the next stage was to involve the students. The context is a middle size university in Finland and an elective course called Fundamentals in multilingual and intercultural communication. The course offers a theoretical and practical framework for enhancing students' knowledge of and competence in intercultural and multilingual communication. The course consists of 36 hours of lectures, group work, and an individual assignment. Our

pedagogical structure within the course focuses on learning through preparation, engagement, evaluation and reflection (Holmes & O'Neill, 2012). But in contradiction to Holmes and O'Neill's (2012) model of developing ICC, we did not build our assessment on the expectation of meeting a previously unknown 'Cultural Other'. Instead, we had in mind what Olbertz-Siitonen (2021) calls a naturalistic inquiry in intercultural education, which aims at not relying on experts in national cultural profiles, nor cultural attributions or categorizations, but encourages students 'to notice and discuss the meaning of culture as it dynamically surfaces in interaction' (Olbertz-Siitonen, 2021, p. 52). On completion of the course, the students are expected to understand and be able to discuss fundamental issues in intercultural communication, such as identification, stereotyping and processes related to multilingual interaction, and also understand that different languages encode different world views and that communication itself is relative.

At an early stage of the course, we informed the students that they would reflect on their own MICC and participate in giving and receiving peer feedback on their MICC. We also told that this process was not included in the summative assessment of the course. Because of the complex nature of the assessment (Watling & Ginsbury, 2019), we aimed at clear instructions and clarifications between the self- and peer assessment for learning done with the help of the MICC model and the assessment of learning by the teacher. Both authors were involved in teaching the course, but only Kokkonen was responsible for the summative evaluation and grading.

To prepare for the formative assessment, we provided students with relevant information and knowledge regarding MICC and assessment in general. Involving those being assessed is important (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005), and we aimed at enhancing students' self-regulation (Holmes & O'Neill, 2012) through activities where students were asked to select those elements of MICC they found to be relevant in the given context and write their own

descriptions to help them observe and analyse as well as describe interaction they considered to be competent.

In the engagement phase, students were working in diverse groups of four to six students representing different disciplines, ages, genders and nationalities. The group work was a six-week project on stereotypes in communication. We gave students weekly instructions for meetings where they worked on their projects, as well as engaged in different social activities, such as a shared meal or meeting in a café. The explicit and verbalised aim was to enhance and facilitate trusting relationships among the students, which are crucial for feedback and assessment that enhances learning (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005; Watling & Ginsburg, 2019).

In the reflection phase, students were asked to complete a self-assessment and peer assessments (feedback) by using the criteria they had selected earlier and focusing only on the interaction which took place during the group work. Here the students were to reflect critically on their encounters by drawing on their experiences. Since many ICC models and assessment tools are criticised for overly relying on self-reporting methods (Koester & Lustig, 2015), we decided to include self- and peer assessment in order to ensure that the multiple interpretations of an individual's communication competence come to the surface. This, we hoped, would also enable students to share their interpretations, negotiate meanings and clarify expectations in a dialogic feedback process (Hawe & Dixon, 2017).

The individual assignment for the course was a learning diary. As a part of this assignment, students wrote a text of one page where they reflected on and analysed their experiences and thoughts about the self- and peer assessment. This part of the learning diary was left out in the summative evaluation of the course. Students gave their consent to use this part of the assignment as data. We used these data to discuss students' experiences and thoughts about the assessment. It consists of 74 texts from 74 students who participated in the course in 2018, 2019, and 2020. According to the university registration system, students represented

nine different nationalities, their ages varying between 20 and 50 years, with most of the participants being between ages 20 and 25. The students represented different academic fields, from mathematics to sports and education, just to name a few.

Analysis

In our analysis of the 74 student texts on self- and peer assessment, we aim to describe the declination of main patterns in the data as well as to allow variability within these patterns to show. For this purpose, we applied qualitative content analysis, the key characteristics of which were the systematic process of coding, examining meaning and the provision of a description of the social reality through the creation of themes (Frey et al., 2000).

Students' texts were analysed using ATLAS.ti, which helps in organising and coding the data. First, we conducted thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), developing a preliminary codebook with emergent codes for analysis (e.g., time used in assessment, relational challenges, wording; Creswell, 2009). Next, all relevant data were connected for each code, then potential themes were searched for and codes were gathered into themes (e.g., challenges in assessment, perceptions of the phenomena being assessed, learning through assessment; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Even though we were not conducting an ethnographic study, as teacher-researchers we aimed at being reflective and ethical throughout the process, aware of the double roles we had in the classroom and when analysing the data (Nikkanen, 2019). The reflective texts used as our data were extracted from the learning logs prior to assessment of the course work (evaluating) and prior to the analysis of the data. This also helped us to analyse these texts from a greater distance since at that stage they were handled without personal information, and it was almost impossible to say which text was from which student.

Results

The coded data are used to illustrate how students experienced the MICC assessment process as part of their learning. The results of the study are organised thematically. First, we discuss how students reacted to and reflected on the assessment of MICC as a novel phenomenon and process. This section includes the challenges as well as the learning points students reported in their texts. In the second part of the results, we discuss the embraced but also contested situational and contextual nature of the phenomenon. Finally, we discuss assessment and MICC as processes that need time and resources to develop.

Assessing MICC as a new phenomenon for the students

The students selected which MICC elements were part of their self- and peer assessment. Despite this, the data show that students found some elements more challenging to observe and analyse than they did others. These were, for instance, tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity, critical thinking, and sensitivity to differences. One student wrote:

> The easiest ones were things like language skills, listening skills, etc. that were very apparent in conversation, whereas things like tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity were much more difficult to rate.

One explanation that the students gave for these difficulties was that they had not explicitly discussed the element in question during their group meetings. A student explains:

> We were supposed to give feedback on stereotypes and feelings in communication, and this was difficult. Because conversations regarding these themes were usually short since we had a task at hand and needed to get back to doing the group work.

Many felt an inability to assess something that had not been explicitly discussed during their group meetings. This seemed to stem from the student being unable to analyse the actual interaction within the group meetings. Instead of analysing and reflecting on the interaction within the group, students expected a person to explicitly acknowledge and disclose that they, for example, had stereotypes and applied them in their conversation. In these cases, students based their peer feedback on what was explicitly said in the group meetings, rather than on their observations and analysis of the interaction.

This challenge of analysing interaction, of course, is not very different from any other self-reporting method in the assessment of ICC. This highlights the question of what competences are needed in reflecting on and analysing interaction in order to provide feedback for learning. The analysis reveals that those students who had difficulties in reflecting on the elements of MICC reported having little to no previous experience of analysing interaction for feedback purposes.

Assessment is dependent on the language and linguistic resources of those conducting the assessment. The reflective texts showed that several students were concerned about their languages skills when assessing others' communication:

> I really feel sorry for my groupmates because…my language skill was not enough to understand them, I felt I could not evaluate them properly.

Regardless of the interpretation of their own language competence, many participants saw language skills as well as listening skills as the elements they found easy to observe and analyse. For example, one student wrote, 'It was easy to evaluate their language skills, because we spoke in English.' What is notable in the previous excerpt is the student's choice of words. They used the word *evaluation*, despite the lengthy discussions before the peer feedback on using assessment as a formative tool and not as assessment of learning. It could just be a matter

of word choice, linguistic transference or the fact that students were discussing different approaches to assessment for the first time during this course and were not familiar with the terminology.

What is even more controversial in the excerpt is another choice of words, namely that of 'speaking in English'. The MICC elements focus mainly on multilingual and intercultural communication competence, not on competence in one specific language. One of the challenges for students could have been that the ideas of repertoires, resources and multilingual communication in general were new approaches to the students.

Despite the challenges in the assessment of MICC, the majority of the students considered that assessment enhanced their self-regulatory learning or at least gave them some useful feedback on their interaction within the group work, as the following excerpt illustrates:

> For me, the approach to assess oneself and one's peers is very valuable. Assessing myself helps me to reflect on my learning process. Assessing others focuses my attention towards the behaviour of others and provides a possibility to learn from them because I learn to see how others approach situations.

In addition to the outsiders' view on one's communication, those who considered assessment as beneficial pointed out several things they had learned, including enhancing their ability to reflect on and observe their own communication as well as the behaviour of others and gaining confidence. One student wrote how 'nice feedback from my group members boosted my confidence in using English and encouraged me to participate even more.' The assessment also helped the students to reflect on and verbalise their own MICC as well as to clarify and summarise their own learning goals, as one student stated: 'I learned to put words on some things I experienced.' More importantly, through the self- and peer assessment process, students also learned to be more self-directive:

> What we have learned in this course through the group work and assessments is not about grades, it is about learning from situations and developing from this for life.

The contextual and situational nature of MICC

The analysis reveals that assessing MICC as a contextual and situational phenomenon was appreciated but also contested by the students. What became evident from the data is that some students struggled in making a distinction between personality traits and MICC as a contextual and situational phenomenon, as the following excerpt illustrates:

> I describe myself as a quiet person. I do my best to engage, but these kinds of, I suppose you would say, personality quirks, are difficult to change, even when one is aware of them. [---] the things that I could improve on are things that I have been working on for years now. The difference between now, and let's say a decade before is quite big and I do owe a lot of it to things like this course that have pushed me out of my comfort zone. Feedback is always valuable after all, even if you can't use it right now, it's something that you can carry with you and use for future reflections on yourself and your progress.

This excerpt also illustrates the critical point that assessing performance in a given situation as a one-off activity does not take into consideration possible development and progress in competence. Perceiving the assessment of performance as a one-off activity could, at worst, become a discouraging experience in learning. Thus, the dual nature of MICC being an interpretation as well as a process ought to be explained in detail to those giving and receiving feedback.

As a summary, the analysis shows that MICC can be seen as both: situational and contextual interpretations made visible by the feedback from peers, as well as a process that might also be dependent on individuals' personal traits and characteristics. There are scholars who have, for example, considered personality traits as a variable influencing communication competence (e.g., Yeke & Semerciöz, 2016), but we still need more theoretical as well as empirical discussion for researchers to grasp how personality traits relate to MICC. What we do know on the basis of this study is that self-reflections are to be included in the assessment process to ensure that the overall development process is visible and acknowledged.

Our final point in relation to the contextual nature of MICC is illustrated in those parts of students' texts where they are commenting on group work as the context of the assessment. Some students were not always aware of what exactly they were asked to assess: the group work in general or MICC as a separate thing. A student commented on this by writing:

> I could not give me good feedback because I felt I had not contributed in the group but I did not want to get a bad evaluation because I have done so much better than other group work.

In this extract, the student confirms the notion that MICC cannot be separated from content. If one is assessing MICC in group work, what is relevant in group communication and group work in general is embedded in the process of assessment. On a positive note, the two could also be seen as being intertwined, as one student observed:

> By evaluating the intercultural communication competence of my group work members, I also started to think more carefully about our group work and how I personally performed in the group work in terms of intercultural communication competence.

However, this also highlights the question of how much students should know about groups and group communication in general in order to give feedback on MICC taking place in group contexts. In addition, many had no previous understanding nor experience of assessing multilingual and intercultural communication, thus the feedback they were able to give each other remained on a surface level. One student wrote:

> When I was giving feedback myself, I also found it hard to give specific examples which may have made my assessment for the others also somewhat superficial.

There were many new concepts students needed to internalise, not just new content on multilingual and intercultural communication in general, but also about MICC, assessment of MICC and, for many, assessment in general. This raises a question concerning the amount of cognitive input that students would need to be able to observe and analyse the manifestations of MICC in communication.

Assessment and MICC as processes

What clearly enhanced the assessment process and overall learning on the course was the positive atmosphere many students noted in their texts. The great majority of the students found it valuable that they were asked to pay attention to building their interpersonal relationships. This helped the student to feel more confident in giving and receiving feedback:

> At the beginning it was awkward because we had to spend time together, but we didn't know each other. So, we started to find common points and activities we could have together. It got easier meeting after meeting. This also helped us to trust each other and give constructive feedback in the assessment.

Some students complained that the whole process of assessment took too much time and they also talked about the emotional load they felt in the assessment. One participant wrote the following:

> It took me a long time to write the feedback. It was difficult to find the exact examples for everyone. Because evaluating was difficult for me, I see how sometimes just giving everyone the same reasoning and grade could be easy, and there's also the emotional level of giving feedback to people you have just got to know to.

As illustrated also in the previous quote, one of the major challenges for the assessment relies on the relational level of giving and receiving feedback. Despite the six-week project work and assignments aimed at developing and enhancing students' interpersonal relationships, many felt they would have needed more time together in order to give comprehensive and constructive feedback to each other. As one student wrote, 'I think that it is hard to evaluate group members when you have met just a couple of times.'

The data show that high-quality assessment conducted in a trusting atmosphere and in a detailed manner that enhances learning takes time and resources. This is very much in line with studies that show that committing time and resources to learner support helps establish trusting, longitudinal relationships between teachers and learners, which in turn feeds into more consistently useful feedback (Watling & Ginsburg, 2019). Building relationships takes time. Students also need time to internalise the possible new concepts and wordings they had been writing themselves at the early stages of the process.

Conclusion

Our aim was to develop the assessment of MICC in the context of HE by following Deardorff's (2014) call to improve intercultural competence assessment and examples of best practices. We do not claim that we have presented *the best* practice of assessing MICC in an HE context, but the study highlights some fundamental elements when developing assessment of MICC in the given context.

Despite the challenges, which included time, difficulties in observing and analysing interaction, and verbalising the feedback, MICC and its assessment offered students a critical and holistic perspective where MICC was treated as a flexible, situational and contextual phenomenon. The students were able to define for themselves the elements of MICC they considered relevant in the given context. The freedom in choosing the elements also provided them with the possibility of autonomy to negotiate interculturality and cultural identities. Second, self- and peer feedback together offered a frame of seeing MICC as situational as well as a lifelong process. Moreover, the combination of self- and peer assessment provided the students with a view of the situation through the eyes of others. On the other hand, the students' comments on personality traits as a part of MICC challenged our preconception of MICC as only a contextual and situational phenomenon. The need to integrate the two approaches into the same framework requires further investigation.

We believe that when an assessment approach is chosen carefully and the purpose of the assessment is shared, it provides information that can guide educational practices and enrich learning processes (Fantini, 2009). What needs to be taken into consideration are the competences that students need in reflecting on and analysing communication. Those students who had previous experience in doing so in various situations and contexts reported fewer challenges in assessing MICC in general. To ensure effective and appropriate feedback, students with less experience should have more opportunities and support when learning how to assess communication. In addition to these changes, our findings suggest there should be

more time and resources devoted to self- and peer assessment. The students worked with their groups for six weeks, yet many felt they had not had enough time with their groups to complete the assessment appropriately. At the same time, some students felt too much time was spent on assessment, since it was not the only topic of the course.

As a solution for the HE context, we recommend that the assessment and development of MICC should be considered as a part of holistic curriculum development and not just as an issue for one single course (Gregersen-Hermans, 2017). This integration, however, requires that the faculty has (a) an understanding of MICC and some level of expertise in multilingual and/or intercultural communication and (b) the motivation to integrate it to the curriculum in order to guide students (Deardorff, 2014; Dervin, 2010). Moreover, the successful blending of assessment and feedback requires organisational commitment to a culture of improvement rather than to a culture of performance (Watling & Ginsburg, 2019). How exactly this blending can be done calls for more examples of best practices.

The limitation of the study is that it drew on one intercultural context of a particular higher educational institution. The sample was also limited to students who were interested in developing their multilingual and intercultural competence, since participation in the course was voluntary. This study offers some understanding of how the students attend to the feedback they received, but not on how the feedback is acted upon. These two elements, also mentioned by Gibbs and Simpson (2005) as conditions for feedback that enhances learning, would require further investigation. There is clearly a need for empirical studies on issues of how students use and benefit from the feedback they receive. As one of the participants wrote: 'I am a believer in the idea that all feedback is precious, but its true value comes from what you end up doing with it.'

Key takeaways

- Multilingual elements are fundamental parts of a holistic and critical understanding of intercultural communication competence.
- Students need to have knowledge, skills and motivation to observe, reflect on and assess multilingual and intercultural communication from a critical perspective.
- Self- and peer assessment offer an opportunity to see MICC as a lifelong process, as well as an interpretation of effective and appropriate communication that is situational and contextual.
- Assessment for learning enhances the critical understanding of MICC as a lifelong learning process.
- Developing MICC and its assessment at HE should be part of the whole curriculum, not a separate course or training.

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Appendix 1: Titles of the elements included in MICC

Attitudes and motivational elements
Respect and interest/openness towards diversity
Empathy
Motivation and willingness to engage in interpersonal relationships / communication situations with culturally different people
Flexibility
Awareness of cultural interpretations and judgments
Confidence in culturally and linguistically diverse settings, situations and relationships
Attitudes toward languages and linguistic repertoires
Cognitive elements
Knowledge about communication, languages, multilingual repertoires, different perspectives on languages
Knowledge and understanding of the complexities of culture, language and related concepts
Knowledge and understanding of aspects of power in intercultural and multilingual communication
Knowledge about one's own cultural values, norms, and behavior
Knowledge about stereotypes and how they are manifested in communication
Knowledge of what evokes strong feelings and how to manage them, such as uncertainty and ambiguity
Knowledge of elements and principles of communication in diverse settings and contexts
Knowledge of language diversity, multilingualism and plurilingualism
Knowledge about languages and language learning
Skills

Flexibility and adaptability
Emotion regulation
Interpersonal communication skills (in order to create and maintain social networks / interpersonal relationships)
Skills to reflect and analyse one's own and others' communication
Critical thinking skills
Language skills
Multilingual skills