INVESTIGATING FACTORS ENHANCING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: FROM STUDENTS' WRITING TO TEACHERS' PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

Intercultural communication constitutes a research field with an increasing interest within the Greek context, as the Greek classes are characterized to a great extent by a cultural- and linguistic- diversity. This study aims at investigating linguistic-elements used by students as a key-factor affecting intercultural written communication between Greek students and students coming from other countries. Effectiveness in intercultural communication is a multifaceted factor which is dependent both on the use of intercultural communication strategies and on the way that speakers/writers modify their utterances in terms of either softening or intensifying their speech as well. More specifically, through this research attempt was made to record internal modifiers, linguistic elements which act either as downgraders (mitigators), aiming to soften the act or as upgraders aiming to intensify the coerciveness or urgency of the act performed by the speakers. Towards that goal, a subject of 150 students (11-12 years of age) was urged to influence a pen-friend from another cultural environment, as regards to taking up a new sports-activity while the scripts of the students underwent investigatory qualitative research. Following the qualitative analysis of the students' pieces of writing, it was revealed that students made an extensive use of a) downgraders like the marker 'please', consultative devices and subjectivisers as well as b) upgraders such as overstaters and time intensifiers. With respect to the fact that employing modification within the context of social interaction among people from different cultural backgrounds is of utmost importance, it is necessary the students to get familiarized with the significance of modification in their discourse and be encouraged to make use of modifiers which empower their communication within and outside the school context.
Key words: *communication strategies; intercultural communication; Greek education; young learners.*

INTRODUCTION

In the era of multiculturalism and multilingualism, effective communication among the citizens has constituted a crucial factor not only for daily exchanges but also for the inclusion of people from different cultural backgrounds in the host country. Indeed, the Council of Europe has promoted basic principles for this peaceful coexistence of the European citizens underlining that it is of utmost importance to promote and achieve an intercultural dialogue.

As it is mentioned in the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue of the European Council (2008), "*Intercultural dialogue is an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups belonging to different cultures that leads to a deeper understanding of the other's global perception.*" Indeed, the main objective is related to people's peaceful and constructive co-extistence in a multicultural world developing at the same time a sense of community and belonging. In this way, the prevention and resolution of conflicts can be achieved through enhancing the respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

Within this framework, fostering effective intercultural communication among people within a pluralist environment is a priority and a research focus as well. In particular, various researchers and scientists from the scientific field of intercultural communication (Byram, 1997) have proposed that people should develop their intercultural communicative competence as a life-long competence that will facilitate their interactions.

Although communication competence is related to the person's ability to act in a second/foreign language in an effective way linguistically, socio-linguistically and pragmatically (Council of Europe, 2001), intercultural communication competence broadens it to incorporate intercultural competence/skills (Byram, 1997; Chen & Starosta, 1998). In addition, intercultural communication is a process of meaningful and realistic interpersonal interaction, including the awareness of cultural contexts and the appreciation of the cultural aspects of both the person's own language and a second language (Dinas & Griva, 2017; Council of Europe, 2016).

Hence, education which constitutes the basis for the personal and societal development through its members should focus on fostering intercultural competent students whose role of whom which will be appreciated and valued not only within the school context but the society as well, as future citizens. Towards that, several studies and action researchers have been carried out aiming to shed light on the characteristic of students' intercultural communication develop intercultural communication strategies (Griva & Papadopoulos, 2017; Papadopoulos, 2018).

THE STUDY

The objectives of the study
Appreciating that intercultural communication among students from different cultural backgrounds is and should be a research area of utmost importance, the aim of this particular study was to investigate and delve into the modification employed by the students in their written communication. More specifically, attempt was made to record internal modifiers, i.e. linguistic elements which act as

-   *downgraders/mitigators* used to soften the act performed by the speakers/writers;

-   *upgraders* aimed at intensifying the coerciveness or urgency of the act performed by the speakers/writers.

It is worth mentioning that internal modification is further distinguished between syntactic modification and lexical/phrasal modifiers. This particular study examined the lexical/phrasal downgraders and upgraders but syntactic modification was beyond its scope.

Methods and Procedures

The present study examined and focused on the amount and type of internal modification that students' scripts include. More specifically, students were urged to write a letter to their pen-friends from another cultural environment and recommend them to take up a new sports-activity while the scripts of the students underwent investigatory qualitative research. Hence, 'data came from authentic interactions…available for analysis without the presence of the researcher biasing the data collection process' (Herring, 2002, p. 145).

Scripts data and subjects

The written communication data consisted of 150 scripts which were produced by Greek students between 11-12 years of age as well as A1+ language levels according to the CEFR. In particular, the students were urged to influence a pen-friend from another cultural environment, as regards to taking up a new sports-activity. The subjects of the study were primary education students and the cluster sampling was utilized for this study.

The following table (Table 1) presents the students' distribution based on their gender. More specifically, the male students constituted 48% of the total sample while the females the 52%.

Table 1

Students' distribution based on their gender

Gender	Frequency	Percentages
Male	72	48,00%
Female	78	52,00%

As regards to the students' distribution based on their age, the table below (Table 2) presents the frequency and the percentages of the students. In particular, most of the students (54.60%) were 12 years old while the 11-year old students constituted the 45.40% of the total sample of the study.

Table 2

Students' distribution based on their age

Age	Frequency	Percentages
11	68	45.40%
12	82	54.60%

In order to address the ethical issues in relation to such a study, students completed informed consent forms, which explained that their scripts would be stored for analysis and that no personal information would be revealed. In addition, it is worth mentioning that respecting Articles 13 and 14 of the United Nations on the Rights of Children, children have the right to freedom of conscience and to express their views and to disseminate them in any way orally or written.

It was therefore, considered preferable to focus on maintaining ethics to the full extent as the purpose of the study and its further utilization may bring about benefits to the students. Hence, there has been a great deal of effort to keep ethics in this study, respecting anonymity both of the participating schools and of the names of the students involved in the study.

Scripts analysis procedures

The analysis of the students' scripts was carried out with regard to use of internal modification (lexical/phrasal downgraders and upgraders). Concerning the modification use, the classification which was employed for the codification of the modification of the collected scripts was based on Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) and Edmondson (1981). It is worth mentioning that such classification was utilized in various studies (see Blum-Kulka, 1985; Blum-Kulka and Levenston, 1987; Trosborg, 1995; Hassall, 2001; Achiba, 2003; Schauer, 2004, 2009; Barron, 2006; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2008, 2009; Woodfield and Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010).

The classification schemes for lexical/phrasal downgraders and upgraders are presented below in the following tables (Table 3, Table 4).

In order to ensure the effective recognition of the internal modifiers, three different raters, experienced in written discourse and communication, were employed in this study. Based on the above classification, the raters had to recognize and note the internal modifiers downgraders/upgraders that were used by the students. Last, it is worth mentioning that the period of the whole research procedure was about four months.

Table 3

Internal modification: the classification scheme – lexical/phrasal downgraders

Name	Explanation	Devices
Marker 'please'	"An optional element added to a request to bid for cooperative behavior" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989:283).	'please'
Consultative devices	"expressions by means of which the speaker seeks to involve the hearer directly bidding for cooperation" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989:283).	'would you mind', 'do you think', 'would it be all right if, 'is it/would it be possible', 'do you think I could…', 'is it all right?'
Downtoners	"modifiers which are used by a speaker in order to modulate the impact his or her request is likely to have on the hearer" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989:284).	'possibly', 'perhaps', 'just', 'rather', 'maybe', 'by any chance', 'at all'
Understaters/hedges	"adverbial modifiers by means of which the speaker underrepresents the state of affairs denoted in the proposition" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989:283).	'a bit', 'a little', 'sort of', 'a kind of'
Subjectivisers	"elements in which the speaker explicitly expresses his or her subjective opinion vis-à-vis the state of affairs referred to in the proposition, thus lowering the assertive force of the request" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989:284).	'I'm afraid', 'I wonder', 'I think/suppose'
Cajolers	"conventionalized, addressee-oriented modifiers whose function is to make things clearer for the addressee and invite him/her to metaphorically participate in the speech act" (Sifianou, 1992:180).	'You know', 'You see…'
Appealers	Addressee-oriented elements occurring in a syntactically final position. They may signal turn-availability and "are used by the speaker whenever he or she wishes to appeal to his or her hearer's benevolent understanding" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989:285).	'Clean the table dear, will you?………….ok/right?')

Source: Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011).

Table 4

Internal modification: the classification scheme – upgraders-intensifiers

Intensifier	"Adverbial moodier that stresses specific elements of the request" (Schauer, 2009:91)	- I *truly/really* need this extension. - I had *such a* high fever
Time intensifier	"employed to emphasise the temporal aspect of the speaker's request" (Schauer, 2009:91)	- as soon as possible - urgently - right now
Overstater	"Exaggerated utterances that form part of the request and are employed by the speaker to communicate their need of the request being met" (Schauer, 2009:91)	- I'm in *desperate* need of material for my essay.

Source: Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011).

RESULTS

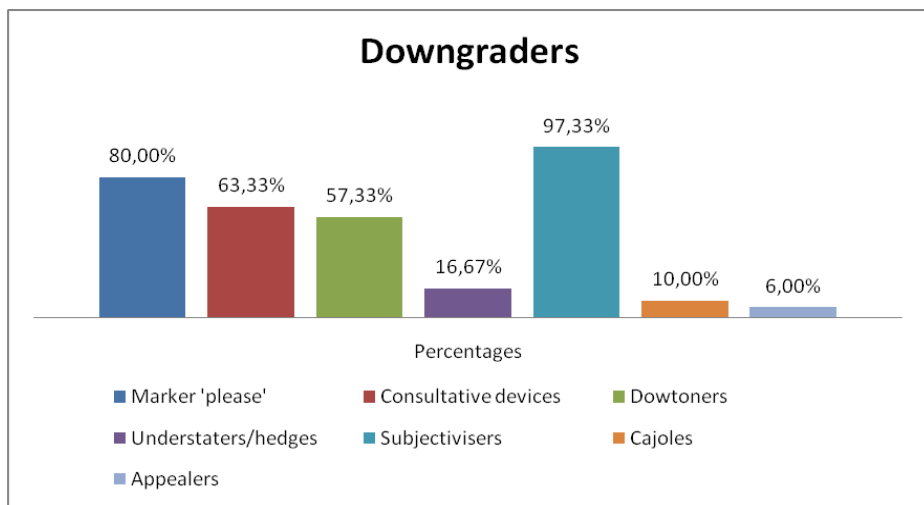**Internal Modification – Downgraders/Mitigators**

Following the quantitative analysis of the students' scripts, the following table (Table 5) summarizes the internal modification – downgraders/mitigators used by the students in their attempt to encourage their pen-friends to take up a sport with passages from the students' scripts.

Table 5

Downgraders/Mitigators Use

Dowgraders	Percentages	Indicative Sample
Marker 'please'	80,00%	Can you follow my advice *please*?
Consultative devices	63,33%	*Do you think* it would be interesting to start playing football?
Dowtoners	57,33%	It is *possibly* one of the best sports for you
Understaters/hedges	16,67%	You can spend a *little* time to do it
Subjectivisers	97,33%	*I believe* that it is a good choice for you
Cajoles	10,00%	*You know* everyone plays basketball
Appealers	6,00%	Start tennis, *ok*?

Judging from the following graph (Graph 1), the results indicated that the majority of the students were familiar with the use of any lexical/ phrasal modification for downgrading the effect of their discourse. The majority of the students made use of subjectivisers (97.3%) and the marker 'please' (80.0%). A lot of students employed also consultative devices (63.3%) and dowtoners (57.3%).

Graph 1. Percentages of downgraders occurrence

Internal Modification – Upgraders

As far as the use of upgraders by the students engaged in this study, the qualitative analysis of their scripts showed that they also employed several internal modifiers of this type. The following table (Table 6) presents the upgraders that were recorded in the students' scripts along with the percentages of occurrence and sample passages taken from the scripts.

Table 6

Upgraders Use

Upgraders	Percentages	Indicative Sample
Intensifier	75,33%	You *really* need to do this sport.
Time intensifier	97,33%	You have to go to the gym *immediately*!
Overstater	80,00%	You are in the *worst* body situation.

Moreover, the following Chart (Pie-Chart 1) presents the percentages of upgraders occurrence. It is obvious that the majority of the students made use of time intensifiers (38%) while many of the subjects employed intensifiers (32%) and overstaters (30%).

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Teachers can utilize various educational tools in their attempt to empower their students' intercultural communicative profile. Research conducted at national and international level has shown that students show great interest in the:

- ***folk-stories*** coming from various cultural backgrounds (Papadopoulos & Griva, 2016), as a variety of different materials and visual aids, such as

pictures, flash cards, videos and, authentic objects can be used with the aim of fostering a multisensory environment which attracts the students' attention and stimulate their interest. It should be noted that the students show great interest in the intercultural stories and dramatization processes, which capture their attention and increase their motivation in a friendly and relaxing environment, which allows the learners to develop their social and communication skills.

and game-based activities (Griva & Semoglou, 2015) which simulate real-life situations communication and interaction. This context encourages students to use the language to communicate with the 'other' classmates having the same of different cultural and linguistic background (Griva & Chostelidou, 2012). Game-based activities combined with stories, constitute a basic incentive even for the most timid students to use the target language. Indeed, through games they get the opportunity to express their views as well as their feelings (Hansen, 1994). Moreover, playful activities encourage students speak, or even communicate with a limited vocabulary, heartening non verbal communication (Desiatova, 2009).
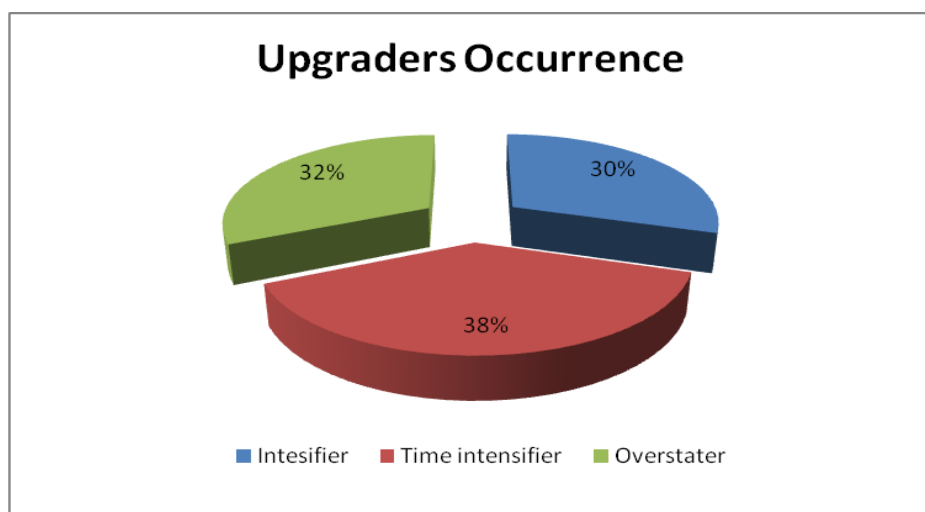
Pie-Chart 1. Percentages of upgraders occurrence

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This particular study delved into the communication of Greek students with their pen-friends from other cultural contexts. More specifically, it examined the types of internal modification focusing on dowgraders and upgraders in their scripts in an attempt to shed light on the use of modifiers as a factor enhancing the effectiveness of the intercultural communication in writing.

The vast amount of the students appeared to have been familiar with employing modifiers in their written discourse while there has been recorded a significant variety in the use of both dowgraders and upgraders. Bearing in mind that effective intercultural competent speakers are the ones who can act successfully at a linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic level, it can be concluded that such modifiers can constitute important elements that contribute to the effectiveness of interaction among people with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Through the analysis of the students' scripts and based on their choices, it can be revealed that the Greek primary education students included various modifiers in their written discourse in an attempt to become more effective in persuading their pen-friends to take up a sport. It is worth stating that since intercultural communication is becoming a part of lives in a multilingual society, within the educational process, the principles and practices of intercultural communication should be taken into serious consideration by the teaching faculty of school. It is up to all the teachers to design and implement educational programs that will empower the students' intercultural communication. In recent studies, employing persuasive strategies within the framework of intercultural communication was proved to be a key-factor for the effectiveness of this interaction (Papadopoulos, 2018). Hence, it is important that students to be further encouraged for making use of appropriate modifiers that will enhance their interactions.

Last, teachers can utilize various educational tools in their attempt to empower their students' intercultural communicative profile such as folk-stories coming from various cultural backgrounds (Papadopoulos & Griva, 2016), game-based activities (Griva & Semoglou, 2015) that simulate real-life situations communication and interaction. This context encourages students to use the language to communicate with the 'other' classmates having the same of different cultural and linguistic background (Griva & Chostelidou, 2012).

Undoubtedly, the area of intercultural communication has still plenty of room for further research. As students' interactions offer valuable authentic data, it is hoped that more studies will focus on examination of students' spoken and written communication in order to expand the inquiry scope of communication tendencies in this linguistically and culturally diverse world.

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ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ ЧИННИКІВ МІЖКУЛЬТУРНОЇ КОМУНІКАЦІЇ: ВІД СТУДЕНТСЬКОГО ПИСЬМА ДО ВИКЛАДАЦЬКОЇ ПРАКТИКИ

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Міжкультурна комунікація є науковим напрямом, який набуває значення у грецькому контексті, оскільки грецькі класи характеризуються значною мірою культурним та мовним розмаїттям. Дослідження спрямоване на вивчення лінгвістичних елементів, що використовуються студентами, як ключового фактора, що впливає на міжкультурне письмове спілкування між грецькими студентами та студентами з інших країн. Ефективність у міжкультурній комунікації є багатогранним фактором, який залежить як від використання стратегій міжкультурної комунікації, так і від того, як мовці / письменники змінюють свої висловлювання з точки зору пом'якшення або посилення модальності свого мовлення. У цьому дослідженні автором зроблена спроба реєструвати внутрішні модифікатори, лінгвістичні елементи, які діють або як понижувачі або як пом'якшувачі, що спрямовані на покращення акту спілкування, та на посилення примусової або термінової дії виступаючих. Дослідження проведено на основі експерименту, у якому взяли участь 150 учнів (11-12 років). Завданням респондентів було під час листування з друзями з іншого мовного культурного середовища переконати їх взяти участь у новій спортивній діяльності. Зразки їх листів стали експериментальним матеріалом для здійснення якісного дослідження. Результати аналізу листів студентів показали, що вони широко використовують різні модифікатори: а) маркери, такі як понижувачі «будь ласка», консультативні та суб'єктивні; б) модернізатори перенапруги та підсилювачі часу. Зважаючи на те, що застосування модифікацій в контексті соціальної взаємодії між людьми з різних культурних середовищ є надзвичайно важливим, необхідно ознайомлювати студентів з важливістю модифікації в розмовному дискурсі і заохочувати їх використовувати модифікатори для розширення можливості спілкування в межах та поза межами шкільного контексту.

Ключові слова: грецька освіта; міжкультурна комунікація; молоді люди; стратегії спілкування.