

## THE ROLE OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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The Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev "On the Development Strategy of Uzbekistan" mentions cardinal improvement of the quality of general secondary education, promotion of in-depth study of foreign languages, informatics and other important and popular disciplines. However, teaching English in today's multicultural contexts requires more than just linguistic proficiency; it demands a nuanced understanding of diverse cultural norms, values, and communication styles. This realization underscores the significance of intercultural competence development among students in higher education institutions who aspire to become English language teachers.

The term "intercultural interaction" is defined by a respectful attitude towards representatives of other cultures, the demonstration of tolerance, including racial, national, and religious tolerance, and a willingness to work in a foreign language environment. [1; 214] It encompasses not only linguistic proficiency but also a deep understanding and appreciation of cultural differences, the ability to communicate sensitively across cultures, and the capacity for empathy and adaptation. Uzbek researcher G'ulomov highlights the importance of integrating national and global cultural elements in teaching English, demonstrating that this method helps expand students' perceptions of both national and international cultures [3]. For future English language teachers, possessing a high level of intercultural competence is indispensable, as it equips them to create inclusive and culturally responsive learning environments, tailor instructional strategies to meet the diverse needs of learners, and foster cross-cultural understanding and empathy among their students.

Building on the importance of intercultural competence in language learning, Byram created a well-respected model that identifies key skills. These skills include interpreting and relating cultural information, actively discovering and interacting with new cultures, and developing critical awareness of your own culture and others. Byram's framework highlights the many aspects of intercultural competence and why it's essential for language education.

Not only does Byram's model highlight the importance of intercultural competence, but scholars like Fantini [2; 76] have also contributed to the field. Fantini emphasizes the link between language and culture, arguing that understanding culture is essential for true communication skills (communicative competence). Fantini's work argues that language teachers should include cultural content and focus on intercultural understanding. This equips students with the skills they need to succeed in our interconnected and multilingual world.

The iceberg metaphor, popularized by various theorists, depicts culture as a two-part entity. The visible tip represents "Culture with a capital C" – the tangible expressions like art, music, and literature. The submerged portion, however, symbolizes "culture with a small c" – the invisible bedrock of values, beliefs, and behaviors that shape a society.

The intercultural approach to language learning embraces the significance of both aspects of culture and their intricate relationship. Just as the iceberg's invisible mass forms the foundation for the visible portion, a society's underlying values and beliefs form the basis for its cultural expressions. Music, traditions, and literature all reflect these deeper elements.

Today's foreign language instruction goes beyond simply presenting the surface-level features of a culture. It delves deeper, aiming to understand the foundation upon which these expressions are built. Culture can only be truly grasped when we consider the visible and invisible aspects as a unified whole. Focusing solely on the visible elements risks perpetuating stereotypes and clichés, as these outward representations often lack the context provided by the underlying cultural values. Students would only experience the otherness of a foreign culture and but not understand its motivations. Consequently, a definition of culture today considers "a whole way of life" [5; 66]. The traditional notion of a single, monolithic national culture no longer suffices. This approach overlooks the rich tapestry of multicultural societies and the diverse subcultures that

exist within them, such as youth culture. Consequently, foreign language classrooms must acknowledge and explore themes of race, class, age, and gender, as these factors all contribute to a society's cultural makeup.

Furthermore, if we view culture as encompassing the entirety of a group's way of life, it becomes clear that it is not static. Societies and their members are constantly evolving, and while historical influences play a role, communication styles can vary greatly between someone from the 1950s and someone from today. In essence, contemporary understandings of culture recognize it as a dynamic and multifaceted construct, characterized by heterogeneity (diversity), multiple layers, and continuous evolution.

The growing consensus among language scholars regarding the importance of culture in the classroom has made it a central focus of foreign language pedagogy. This emphasis is further supported by the realities of our interconnected world. Direct and indirect interactions between cultures, facilitated by the exchange of products and social networks, are on the rise. People from diverse backgrounds are increasingly living, working, and learning together. Globalization has permeated schools, and preparing students for this globalized world is a vital role of education, including language instruction. The intercultural approach to language teaching offers a valuable framework for achieving this goal.[7]

There's been a significant shift in recent years, with key international and national resources for language teachers placing a strong emphasis on developing intercultural competence (IC) in their classrooms. This includes the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) and national standards. While these resources provide in-depth definitions of IC, they fall short by failing to offer practical guidance on methods and resources for achieving it.

This lack of concrete implementation strategies has become a major criticism of the intercultural approach itself. Teachers are left feeling overwhelmed, tasked with achieving a goal for which the curriculum offers little practical support. A survey of recent publications on IC doesn't offer much solace either. While several scholars have proposed guidelines or general principles, most focus on broader language teaching principles rather than delving specifically into the intricacies of the intercultural approach.

Intercultural communication competence (ICC) is crucial for both teachers and learners, equipping them with the knowledge, attitudes, skills, and cultural awareness necessary to navigate the complexities of communication across cultures. By developing ICC, learners gain the ability to critically analyze and compare their own cultural beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors with those of others. This fosters effective communication, where information can be conveyed clearly and appropriately in diverse cultural contexts

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