

## IMPROVING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

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### SUMMARY

Intercultural competence and intercultural communicative competence are very important notions which can have huge impact on the cultural component of a foreign language curriculum. Intercultural competence and intercultural communicative competence are considered as an essential part of conceptualization of the cultural dimension in foreign language teaching. One of the challenges of incorporating intercultural communicative competence into foreign language teaching and learning is to move from the recognition of intercultural competence as a model of teaching to the practical applications. This can be due to the fact that teachers do not have sufficient knowledge of the theory behind the concept and consequently, have difficulties to implement the curriculum requirements with regards to intercultural communicative competence into their teaching. Besides, intercultural communicative competence plays an influential role in affecting students' attitudes, socio-linguistics skill and communicative competence in the real life. It has been observed that many foreign language learners have not succeeded in real communication with foreigners despite their rich linguistic knowledge. Therefore, this article aimed to emphasize the shift from linguistic competence to intercultural competence in foreign language teaching, the role of culture and intercultural communicative competence in teaching context and practical examples that could improve intercultural communicative competence in foreign language teaching and learning in classroom context.

**Keywords:** *Intercultural competence, intercultural communicative competence, linguistic competence, culture, foreign language teaching and learning.*

### INTRODUCTION

As a response to the acknowledgement of social and cultural significance in language teaching, a revolutionary concept of intercultural competence (IC) and intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has emerged over the last two decades. Research have followed the emergence of this conception contributed to the development of a theoretical framework and practical applications for ICC. The purpose of developing ICC in all fields of education, and particularly in foreign language teaching and learning is to increase international and cross-cultural acceptance and tolerance among learners. Teaching ICC does not only entail acquainting learners with knowledge about different cultures, but also with a set of practices that necessitate knowledge, skills and attitudes, including critical cultural awareness, which teachers should incorporate in their classroom practice by advocating cultural and linguistic relativity. The

intercultural element in the foreign language teaching and learning has become of a great concern not only for linguists or policy makers but also for teachers. Currently, the field of the foreign language teaching and learning encounters the inevitable process of globalization and technological expansion which is also reflected in the development of foreign language curricula around the world.

Recently, the linking of language and culture in the foreign language classroom has been focused by many scholars [1], [2]. While language proficiency lies at the heart of language studies, it is no longer the only aim of language teaching and learning. Research on ICC underscores the importance of helping and guiding students to engage and collaborate in a diverse society by understanding how to interact with people from other cultures in appropriate ways. Those who want to become an intercultural competent speaker need to express both communicative competence in that language as well as particular skills, attitudes, values and knowledge about a culture.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

**Linguistic competence to intercultural competence in foreign language teaching and learning**

It has been recognized that even a marginal exchange of information between speakers of different languages requires the presence of the people's identity and culture [3]. Thus, during the past few decades we have observed a major change in the character of the objectives in foreign language teaching (FLT). There has been a shift in importance from linguistic competence through communicative competence to the current emphasis on IC. Practical applications of theoretical findings in the field of ELT include a wide variety of methods such as: The Classical Method, The Grammar Translation Method, The Direct Method, and Audiolingual Method, which regard a language as a system of hierarchically arranged, rule-governed structures [4]. In the late 1950's Noam Chomsky established a number of objectives and language theories that have been applied and developed in language teaching practice. Those objectives highlighted the study of language as a system independent from any particular context [5]. In his study Chomsky argues against the sterility of behaviorism and claims that the nature of language and process of language acquisition can only be explained in terms of genetically transmitted language faculty [6]. This rejection of behaviorism in language learning contributed to rejection of the Audiolingual Method and implementation of so called Cognitive Code Learning in English language teaching [4]. In the 1970's, representing a major change of emphasis, Hymes presents the concept of communicative competence which arises mainly as a conjunction of two independent developments: that of Chomsky's transformational generative grammar, on the one hand, and the ethnography of communication, on the other [7]. Hymes objects to Chomsky's narrow conception of linguistic competence and acknowledges the relations between language and culture [6]. Hence, the term competence has become

central in relation to linguistic change. As Hymes points out, whenever scholars have called attention to an aspect of linguistic ability other than the narrowly grammatical issues, they have frequently labelled it a kind of competence, for instance, literary competence, rhetorical competence, narrative competence, or sociolinguistic competence [8, p.272]. In other words, teachers understood that it was insufficient to teach students to only produce grammatically correct phrases, they also needed to use these phrases in actual communicative situations.

**Culture in the foreign language classroom**

Culture has always been part of foreign language teaching. For most of the time modern languages have been taught, if and how culture should be part of language teaching has been discussed by many theorists and many perspectives and approaches have influenced the general argument. Different ways of defining culture and its relation to language have been reflected in different theories and approaches in FLT. As pointed out by Larzén (2005), the relationship between language and culture is extremely complex. "This is due to the fact that on the one hand language is an integral part of culture, but on the other hand it is an expression of culture" [9, p. 27]. Lustig (2003) accords with this observation by saying: "Culture is a learned set of shared interpretations about beliefs, values, and norms, which affect the behaviors of a relatively large group of people" [10, p. 27]. In his opinion those shared interpretations establish the very important link between communication and culture. Kramersch contributed to the discussion about teaching language along the cultural fault line by recognizing that culture in language learning is not an extendable fifth skill, tacked on to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading and writing. She argues that culture is always in the background right from the day one, "making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative skills and challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them" [11, p. 1]. Kramersch also proposed reversing the traditional view of

language teaching as the teaching of forms to express universal meanings [11]. Byram et al. (1994) in their study claim that we cannot be teachers of language without being teachers of culture and vice versa [12]. The cultural aspect in language learning over time developed into a significant part of language teaching methodologies leading to different implications for language teaching objectives.

### **Intercultural communicative competence**

Byram depicts someone who gains skills in intercultural communicative competence as an individual who is successful in: building relationships while speaking the foreign language of the other participant; negotiating how to effectively communicate so that both individuals' communicative needs are addressed; mediating conversations between those of diverse cultural backgrounds; and continuing to acquire communicative skills in foreign languages [1]. This final characteristic stresses that when an effective intercultural communicator learns to interact with those from a specific culture, a foundation of language and culture learning has been built, and that individual is more likely to continue to gather linguistic information from other cultures in order to broaden her spectrum of intercultural encounters. Gaining intercultural communicative competence is about more than simple exchanges, rather it centers on building relationships and engaging in communication even when the participants involved do not share the same worldview [1]. A successful intercultural learner seeks out opportunities to meet individuals from diverse cultures in order to share information through communication in a foreign language. The focus shifts from preparing students to communicate without error in order to survive a foreign culture to communicating openly in order to build relationships so that they can thrive in a foreign culture. When the teaching of intercultural communicative competence includes models of reciprocal relationships in which students play the role of a "social actor", students experience the mutual discovery of another language and culture, and language classrooms become places where students and teachers consider questions of values and

morals, which can ultimately promote the notion of democracy [3].

### **INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM – IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The activities represent a variety of approaches to teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence based on recognized theoretical frameworks on interculturality. By including and combining such activities in the foreign language curriculum, both teachers and students are supposed to reflect how their attitudes, knowledge, and language skills can affect their intercultural experiences. As a result, students will gain an understanding of how to enter into intercultural situations with an open mind, resulting not only in more successful communication, but in building meaningful relationships with target language speakers.

### **Attitude exploration**

It is vital for students to consider their preconceived ideas and attitudes before entering into the intercultural competence process. The OSEE tool by Deardorff was created in order to help learners analyze their attitudes toward others at the beginning of the intercultural process [13]. OSEE stands for Observe what is happening, State objectively what is happening, Explore different explanations for what is happening and Evaluate which explanation is the most likely one. This level of OSEE requires students to have sufficient background knowledge of the culture in question, or more specifically the cultural situation being observed [14]. This may also be an appropriate time to allow students to work together as anthropologists engaging in research and investigation as they explore the cultural viewpoints. By promoting communicative activities such as conversations, dialogues, role-plays, skits, and scenarios, the teacher creates an environment in which the concepts of intercultural communicative competence can be practiced.

### **Cultural transformation**

It is important to provide evidence of growth to students so that they can see the benefits of the intercultural process. One simple way to do

this is to gather students together around a large piece of paper on the first day of a new cultural unit of study and ask students to share words and ideas that quickly come to mind in relation to the topic [4]. In relation to Model of ICC, this activity provides time for learners to record and consider their preconceived attitudes toward citizens of another culture [1]. The goal of the activity is to open students' eyes to the fact that many of their perceptions are not based on factual information. As the teacher provides adequate time for gaining knowledge about the target culture while encouraging students to make meaningful connections between the home and target culture, learners begin to experience the process of identity transformation. This activity provides many opportunities for students to gain skills in comparing and contrasting two distinct cultures.

#### ***Objects exploration and collection***

When objects related to practices of the target culture are presented alongside open-ended questions to students in a foreign language classroom, an opportunity is created in which learners gather information independently in order to become more knowledgeable about cultural practices and beliefs. This activity presents a model representation of the teacher working as facilitator in the classroom while students do the work of evaluating information about the target culture [15]. In this context, learners are given the task to gather material outside the classroom in relation with the cultural topics they have agreed to work with. Learners are recommended to collect material from a variety of sources including photocopied information from different printed materials, pictures, video or DVD scenes, recorded material like interviews to native speakers, excerpts from the internet and the like. The good thing of this activity is that learners' cultural awareness is further increased through having to question themselves what is culturally representative of the given topic. Once learners have collected all the material, they are required to hand it in to the teacher and report about it.

#### ***Tandem e-mail learning***

Tandem e-mail learning has been regarded as an effective activity to promote cross cultural dialogue while it is also a means of engaging learners in extended writing in a motivating way [16]. The idea is that two native speakers of different languages help each other to learn each other's language through the use of e-mail, communicating 50% of the time in each other's language. Once all technical aspects have been solved, learners are first introduced themselves and they are then requested to engage in a written dialogue based on a given cultural topic of the project. For in-class work, learners are requested to bring into the class the printed copy of all e-mail exchanges in order to prepare a brief report in which they synthesize how the topic discussed in the e-mail conversations is represented in the partners' culture. For such an activity, learners are encouraged to follow Kroll's suggested sequence of steps from the setting of an assignment to the point at which the learners submit the complete text including, preparation for the given task, drafting and feedback, which may be repeated as many times as needed prior to submitting the final written work for evaluation [17].

#### ***Designing stories***

It is another activity type that could be used to promote learners' cultural imagination through writing. Here the teacher collects some magazines and first selects a variety of pictures that depict people in strange situations in the target culture, and then divides the class into small groups making each group responsible for describing what is happening in a particular picture. Once the groups have had the chance to generate their own opinion about what is happening in the picture and the group leader has informed the rest of the class, learners have to retell the story either individually or in groups, making sure the written account is coherent and cohesive [18]. Likewise, learners' cultural imagination can be promoted through writing by selecting passages with cultural misunderstanding. Ideally, passages should be narrative texts with different paragraphs each leading toward the intercultural

misunderstanding. Typically, the teacher covers all but the first paragraph in which the situation is presented and learners are then asked to read this first paragraph and continue the story in the way they think is most likely. In such a process, learners should be encouraged to plan, draft and revise as many times as needed before it is ready for submission [19].

### **First words**

It involves showing participants several different pictures and eliciting the first word or phrase that comes to their minds. The words or phrases given cannot be simple descriptive words. The goal is to collect honest responses of what participants think or believe about what or who they see in the image, and oftentimes responses reveal certain misconceptions, biases or even prejudices that participants may not have even been aware they were holding onto. This activity is called “Evaluate, Analyze, Describe” [20], [21], or “EAD,” as it is most commonly referred to. This activity is based on the D.I.E. (Describe, Interpret, Evaluate), one of the first intercultural communication exercises developed. This open communication will allow for self-reflection and growth in ways that will promote openness, understanding, and respect for different cultures.

It is obvious that intercultural communicative competence is significantly important in foreign language teaching in Vietnam and Vietnamese learners have more and more chances to be involved in intercultural communication. This study is also particularly important for the English major students at Thai Nguyen University because it yields a number of educational implications. Teacher education programs should include cultural aspects in their curricula, such as a course on intercultural communication or the combination of linguistic aspects with cultural issues of teaching the four skills, in order to equip prospective teachers and students with intercultural awareness and intercultural competence. Teachers can be provided with examples of how language and culture teaching can be integrated, and encouraged to explore

alternative ways of culture teaching. Once language teachers become more knowledgeable and competent regarding this issue, they will eventually be more able to integrate cultural practices in their teaching. Teacher development programs may also help teachers realize the opportunities to enhance prospective and teachers’ intercultural competence inherent in experiential learning activities.

### **CONCLUSION**

Developing learners’ intercultural communicative competence has long been among the major goals of foreign language instructional programs. In this paper, taking the intercultural competence and intercultural communicative competence as the point of departure, we have presented a sampling of activities for helping learners to communicate fluently and appropriately in the target language and culture. When intercultural communicative competence is an integral part of the language classroom, learners experience how to appropriately use language to build relationships and understandings with people of other cultures. They can examine their own beliefs and practices through a different lens, negotiate points of view different from their own, and gain an insider’s perspective of another culture in real life. As a final remark therefore, we hope that the activities proposed in this paper may help learners see language learning not merely as language practice but as an intercultural communicative activity.

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## TÓM TẮT NÂNG CAO NĂNG LỰC GIAO TIẾP GIAO VĂN HÓA TRONG DẠY VÀ HỌC NGOẠI NGỮ

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Năng lực liên văn hóa và năng lực giao tiếp giao văn hóa là những khái niệm rất quan trọng có thể có tác động lớn đến thành tố văn hóa của một chương trình ngoại ngữ. Năng lực liên văn hóa và năng lực giao tiếp giao văn hóa được coi là một phần thiết yếu trong khái niệm hóa việc tích hợp văn hóa trong dạy học ngoại ngữ. Một trong những thách thức của việc kết hợp dạy năng lực giao tiếp giao văn hóa vào dạy và học ngoại ngữ là chuyển từ việc công nhận năng lực giao văn hóa như là một mô hình giảng dạy sang việc áp dụng chúng vào thực tiễn. Điều này có thể do giáo viên không có đủ kiến thức về lý thuyết và do đó gặp khó khăn trong việc thực hiện các yêu cầu về tích hợp việc tăng cường năng lực giao tiếp giao văn hóa trong việc giảng dạy. Bên cạnh đó, năng lực giao tiếp giao văn hóa đóng một vai trò quan trọng ảnh hưởng đến thái độ, kỹ năng ngôn ngữ - xã hội và năng lực giao tiếp của sinh viên trong cuộc sống hàng ngày. Có thể thấy rằng nhiều người học ngoại ngữ đã không thành công trong giao tiếp thực sự với người nước ngoài mặc dù họ có kiến thức ngôn ngữ phong phú. Do đó, bài viết này nhấn mạnh sự thay đổi từ năng lực ngôn ngữ sang năng lực liên văn hóa trong dạy học ngoại ngữ, vai trò của văn hóa và năng lực giao tiếp giao văn hóa trong giảng dạy và các ví dụ thực tiễn có thể nâng cao năng lực giao tiếp giao văn hóa trong dạy và học ngoại ngữ trong lớp học.

**Từ khóa:** *Năng lực liên văn hóa, năng lực giao tiếp giao văn hóa, năng lực ngôn ngữ, văn hóa, dạy và học ngoại ngữ.*

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