

ENHANCING STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH THE PROCESS OF LANGUAGE LEARNING

Abdullayeva Shahzoda Narzillayevna

assistant teacher, Department of Uzbek and Foreign Languages

Tashkent Institute of Textile and Light Industry

shahzodanarzullaqizi@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to identify definite approaches for integrating intercultural education components into the academic curriculum across various subjects. The specific domain chosen for experimentation is English Teacher Education, catering to both pre-service (BA) and in-service (MA) students, as well as postgraduate students in Economics. The student sample comprises BA students majoring in English Philology, MA students in English, French, and Romanian Philology, and MA students pursuing Business Administration in Tourism and Services. By the conclusion of the semester, students and teacher trainees successfully grasped multiple intercultural facets.

Keywords: *Intercultural education; Teacher trainees, Cross-curricular approach; Language education.*

Introduction

Undergraduate students, especially those in teacher training programs, often receive minimal formal training in intercultural education during their university studies. The limited exposure usually comes from participation in exchange programs, particularly Erasmus+ study or placement initiatives, providing practical experience and training in navigating diverse cultures. In light of globalization, labor market dynamics, and the evolving expectations of new generations, students, particularly

future teachers, require a foundational understanding of intercultural education alongside their linguistic education.

As the workforce becomes increasingly global and dynamic, prospective teachers need to be equipped with the basics of intercultural education to adapt to diverse cultural contexts they may encounter. Their successful integration into the professional realm demands a comprehensive grasp of different cultures. Additionally, cultivating awareness of diversity, fostering openness toward ethnic tolerance, promoting anti-racism, and embracing social and professional inclusiveness are essential for a thriving international career.

To meet these demands, university education should integrate intercultural education components throughout the curriculum. This inclusive approach aims to utilize various pedagogical instruments to achieve education "for all." Despite constraints posed by institutional policies, such as time and space limitations, teachers, especially language educators, play a crucial role in incorporating specific knowledge and skills to enhance students' intercultural competence. Adopting a culture-bound philosophy of education is particularly relevant for language teachers in effectively addressing these challenges.

Literature Review

In the past thirty years, there has been an ongoing discourse among practitioners and researchers in the fields of linguistic and intercultural education. This discourse advocates for an 'intercultural approach' to second language teaching, prompting a reevaluation of the underlying assumptions about the functions of language and the broader objectives of language education. The contemporary communicative methods applied in second language teaching primarily view language as a tool for overcoming information gaps.

Communicative language learning, within this framework, proposes that as learners navigate a series of information gaps, they will organically enhance their linguistic competence and skills. The ultimate aim is for learners to reach a proficiency level comparable to that of native speakers. This perspective signifies a shift in the

paradigm of language education, emphasizing not only the transmission of linguistic knowledge but also the development of intercultural competence through language learning.

Culture has often been underestimated in language teaching, despite sustained efforts to emphasize its importance, particularly in the United States. Stern (1992: 206) observed that integrating the cultural component into language teaching has proven challenging in practical implementation. In many cases, cultural content has been systematically excluded from teaching and learning materials. Pulverness (1996: 7) analyzed the situation in English language teaching.

The most important goal of an intercultural approach to language education shouldn't be so much *native speaker competence*, but rather an *intercultural communicative competence*' (c.f. Byram, 1997). Intercultural communicative competence encompasses the ability to understand the language and behaviour of the target community, and explain it to members of the home community – and vice versa. To put it differently, an intercultural approach trains learners how to be 'diplomats', capable of viewing different cultures from a perspective of informed understanding. This aim effectively comes to supersede the long-standing, if ever achieved, objective of teaching learners to attain 'native speaker proficiency. Nevertheless, it is but natural that an essential aim of an intercultural approach still remains language development and improvement, though this goal is closely complemented by the equally important aim of intercultural understanding and mediation.

Research Methodology

The chosen experimental area for this study was English Teacher Education, encompassing both pre-service (BA) and in-service (MA) students, along with postgraduate students of Economics. The participant sample comprised 28 BA students of English Philology, 21 MA students of English, French, and Romanian Philology, and 17 MA students in Business Administration in Tourism and Services. The research employed elements of contrastive lexical analysis, emphasizing stylistic devices to derive cultural and social nuances between Romanian and British English.

A pedagogical experiment was conducted throughout a semester, and the results were compared across the three groups of undergraduate and postgraduate students. At the beginning of the semester, students received a test focusing on metaphorical language and a questionnaire assessing intercultural knowledge and attitudes. Additionally, teacher trainees were given an extra questionnaire targeting pedagogical knowledge. After explicit training in both linguistic and intercultural aspects, the students underwent a follow-up test and questionnaire, assessing the same knowledge and skills.

The intercultural knowledge and attitudes questionnaire included 10 multiple-choice questions on stereotypes of different nationalities and seven questions addressing students' attitudes on topics such as facing challenges, inquisitiveness, risk-taking, self-confidence, self-awareness, foreign languages, and international career aspirations. The metaphorical vocabulary test aimed to identify students' knowledge of business metaphors, distinguishing between culture-bound and universal expressions.

During the English classes, explicit training in intercultural education was integrated, with a focus on analyzing metaphors, idioms, and similes related to different countries. Various teaching methods, including debates, case studies, role-plays, poster/advertisement design, and story/script writing, were employed. Group work and home/field assignments were emphasized throughout the learning process.

Findings and Interpretation

The conclusive data indicated that, initially, students across all three groups possessed limited knowledge regarding cultural differences or methodologies for teaching culture. Nevertheless, a willingness to acquire more insights into diverse cultures was identified, despite potential inter-ethnic resistance. By the semester's conclusion, both students and teacher trainees demonstrated an enhanced understanding of various intercultural aspects relevant to the involved cultures. A notable positive outcome was the significant improvement in their linguistic

knowledge. Teacher trainees expressed enthusiasm about initiating English teaching with a focus on intercultural perspectives.

The correct answers that students gave initially were mostly related to the significance of time for German people or space for Latin origin people. More specific questions, such as dress or colour codes remained unanswered. A significant improvement was registered after the experiment, which proved that students acquired more knowledge about different cultures' peculiarities.

The outcomes of the English vocabulary pre-test and post-test indicate a notable increase in the students' knowledge over the semester.

Regarding the attitudes questionnaire administered at the experiment's commencement and conclusion, it is evident that explicit training in language and culture significantly enhances students' attitudes toward interculturality. Particularly noteworthy is the substantial improvement among MA students in Business Administration in Tourism and Services, who displayed heightened interest and openness toward foreign languages, particularly English.

Given the age range of the students (21-25 years old), the inclination to face challenges emerged as a characteristic aspect of their personality. However, initial interest in other cultures, habits, and traditions was not widespread. A considerable lack of self-awareness was observed, with students showing limited concern for their own identity and a relatively low level of non-judgmental acceptance of otherness. Unexpectedly, there was a notable disregard for the possibility of pursuing an international career, especially among Business Administration in Tourism and Services students, despite the nature of their academic program.

Philology students, constituting a unique group due to the dual concentration of academic programs, exhibited varied interests, with some primarily focused on Romanian language and literature, displaying less enthusiasm for foreign languages.

Conclusion and recommendation

In summary, the experiment underscored students' willingness to incorporate intercultural education elements across their academic courses, with a pronounced

interest in English language courses. Notably, English teacher trainees demonstrated openness to integrating cultural aspects into their teaching practices. The recommendation arising from these findings is a call for all teachers across diverse subjects to identify suitable pedagogical approaches for incorporating intercultural education aspects into their classes. This proactive measure aims to equip students with the necessary tools for success in an increasingly globalized world and to effectively navigate the challenges of the evolving professional landscape. Emphasizing the early integration of intercultural education, particularly in primary and secondary schools, is crucial. English teachers at these levels play a pivotal role in nurturing learners toward an intercultural, global citizenship mindset.

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