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The Role of Teaching Foreign Languages in Developing Intercultural Competence

Nataliia OBERSTE-BERGHAUS

[1] Doctor of Philosophy in Philology, Lecturer of German as a Foreign Language, Language Center, Osnabrück University, Osnabrück, Germany, nbajluk@gmail.com, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0520-6660

Abstract: *In the contemporary global landscape marked by intensified cross-cultural communication, the proposed research explores the critical role of teaching foreign languages in fostering intercultural competence. Recognizing the indispensability of cultural sensitivity in the world distinguished by diversity, the study delves into the transition within German as a foreign language (hereinafter – GFL) teaching from a focus on communicative competence to the pursuit of intercultural communicative competence. The investigation underscores the importance of equipping learners with competencies extending beyond linguistic proficiency, encompassing sociocultural understanding and universal practices. The former employs a comprehensive review of literature and research findings to reveal the multifaceted dimensions of intercultural competence, including cultural knowledge, communication skills, awareness, empathy, and adaptability. Examining effective teaching strategies, such as integrating authentic materials, fostering learner autonomy, and providing reflective learning opportunities, the study emphasizes the transformative role of educators in creating meaningful intercultural learning experiences. However, challenges in teaching intercultural competence are acknowledged, including limited exposure to authentic contexts, cultural biases, and the need for inclusive classroom environments. The study advocates for continuous professional development for educators, offering insights into potential solutions and future directions in foreign language education. In conclusion, the research highlights the pivotal role of foreign language education in developing intercultural competence and calls for ongoing collaboration among educators and researchers to overcome challenges and advance the field. The prospects for further study involve experimental research on teachers' and learners' practices in developing intercultural competence in GFL classrooms. This study contributes substantially to the discourse on intercultural competence, offering valuable insights for educators and policymakers seeking to enhance global citizenship through language education.*

Keywords: *teaching foreign languages, intercultural competence, cultural awareness and sensitivity, teaching strategies, continuous professional development, foreign language education.*

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Introduction

The contemporary global era has been marked with the intensification of cross-cultural communication. The latter plays a crucial role in establishing efficacious global contacts and fostering international dialogue. Cross-cultural engagement allowed people to be "more exposed to experiences and shared beliefs unknown before" (Myronova et al., 2022, p. 354). It has emerged as an inseparable aspect of human existence and activity, entailing an increased focus on intercultural understanding. In today's globalized world, "distinguished by cultural variety" (Ghaemi & Soltani, 2023, p. 62), cultural sensitivity plays a pivotal role in international integration.

Learning is regarded as "a process of appropriation in the habitus over time of the knowledge of and ability to use the external, objective world" (Scollon, 2002, pp. 136-137). In this respect, implementing sociocultural aspects and universal practices in academic settings and teaching foreign languages is necessary to facilitate effective interaction across different countries. Csillik (2019, p. 2) notes that the latter is "deeply tied to hidden networks of meanings, values, and expectations that we still do not fully know or comprehend". Therefore, it implies the mutual exchange of cultural worldviews.

In the realm of English as a foreign language teaching, there has been a radical shift from the focus on communicative competence to the pursuit of intercultural communicative competence (Gu, 2016, p. 254). The transition demonstrates a greater appreciation of the communicative component within the intercultural interaction context. The former is far beyond merely transmitting information, human knowledge, and ideas. As Bahlai et al. (2019, p. 56) maintain, intercultural communication entails the participants' engagement in taking actions, perceiving each other's perspectives, and actively striving to establish mutual understanding. Thus, teaching foreign languages now plays a dominant role in developing intercultural competence, whereby learners, along with language skills, are equipped to navigate cultural intricacies and establish meaningful connections across diverse contexts.

Regardless of many research works on the issues of intercultural communication skills development in academic settings (Zhou, 2011; Bouchard, 2017; Nerubasska et al., 2020; Novita & Purwati, 2021; Eddy, 2022), the subject is still open to debate and raises questions to be faced immediately. To address the scholarly gap, the proposed study aims to

examine the ways of developing intercultural communicative competence in foreign language teaching practices.

By delving into the scientific area in question, the research intends to shed light on effective teaching strategies enhancing intercultural understanding and cross-cultural dialogue among German as a foreign language learner. Therefore, the study is of utmost significance, as it contributes substantially to the field of foreign language instruction. Furthermore, it provides remarkable insights for teachers seeking to develop intercultural competence within the German classroom.

In contemporary times, characterized by heightened cross-cultural communication, the study contributes to the field by delving into the dynamic landscape of foreign language education, particularly focusing on the development of intercultural competence. While existing literature recognizes the importance of intercultural communicative competence, this research brings forth a nuanced perspective by emphasizing its multifaceted nature, encompassing cultural knowledge, communication skills, awareness, empathy, and adaptability. The **novelty** lies in its comprehensive analysis of effective teaching strategies, including the integration of authentic materials, cultural content, and learner autonomy, fostering experiential and reflective learning. Furthermore, the research underscores the significance of continuous professional development for educators to enhance both their intercultural competence and pedagogical practices. By addressing challenges such as appropriate assessment methods and cultural biases, the study contributes not only theoretical insights but also practical guidance for educators, positioning intercultural competence as a fundamental objective in foreign language instruction. Future directions, including the incorporation of technology and comprehensive teacher training, are proposed to further advance this dynamic and evolving field. The proposed research establishes a robust foundation for experimental investigations into the practices of developing intercultural competence in GFL classrooms, thereby paving the way for continued progress in foreign language education.

Cultural Awareness and Understanding in Language Learning

The pursuit of cultural awareness and understanding in language learning has emerged as a crucial aspect of contemporary education. Ghaemi and Soltani (2023, p. 62) noted that "the majority of communication failures are the result of a poor degree of intercultural communicative competence, if not a complete lack of it." The scholars emphasize the importance of equipping oneself with the necessary knowledge and competencies to

navigate diverse cultural contexts efficiently. Likewise, Gözgenç (2019, p. 22) states that "language environment should expand the circles of successful intercultural communication as a requirement of a healthy interaction with others in a global context."

Intercultural competence goes far beyond language proficiency and incorporates a comprehension of sociocultural norms and values. Similarly, Lee et al. (2023, p. 2) draw attention to the questionable treating "native-like proficiency as the only goal for second language learning". The researchers believe that language proficiency alone does not guarantee effective intercultural communication. Moreover, context-specific information is crucial in fostering interaction among representatives of different cultures. Thus, educational institutions and language learners must broaden language learning objectives and prioritize the development of intercultural competence as an integral component of communication skills.

Foreign language teaching is always placed within a definite context. Consequently, the nature of the intercultural communicative competence required is partly dependent on context (Byram, 2020, p. 29). By considering the contextual factors, instructors can tailor their methodologies and foreign language teaching approaches to develop their students' intercultural competence in a way that properly aligns with the particular linguistic, cultural, and social settings they happen to navigate. Therefore, intercultural competence can be regarded as a dynamic and adaptive phenomenon requiring cultural-sensitive methodologies and practices in foreign language instruction.

Kusiak-Pisowacka (2018, p. 137) highlights the significance of building awareness of a person's native culture as "a crucial element of building intercultural competence". People come from unique cultural backgrounds and express culturally-shaped beliefs, values, and convictions. Furthermore, interacting with an individual from an alien culture, they "bring to the situation their knowledge of the world which includes in some cases a substantial knowledge of the country in question and in others a minimal knowledge, of its geographical position or its current political climate" (Byram, 2020, p. 42). Understanding their culture can enhance cognition of how their cultural perspectives affect cross-cultural dialogue.

Self-awareness helps students to approach intercultural communication with empathy and sensitivity, making them open to cultural differences. In the same vein, Bouchard (2017, p. 19) claims that intercultural competence presents "the ability to deal with difference, an ability which in large part entails managing one's own value judgment when facing difference." Focusing on its development and acquisition in academic

settings can ultimately enrich and foster effective cross-cultural communication and collaboration.

Fantini (2019, p. 30) presents a perspective on the process of acquiring "a new cultural competence in another language-culture" (Fig. 1).

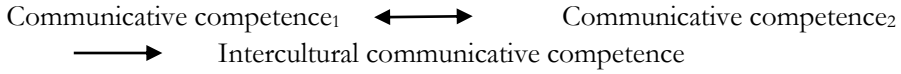


Fig. 1. *Interaction of communicative competence$_1$ and communicative competence$_2$*
Source: Fantini (2019)

Fig. 1. demonstrates that any form of immersion in a different language-culture initiates an "intercultural" contact. The latter, in turn, leads to an "intercultural" process. Thus, intercultural interactions are of dynamic nature and each act of immersing oneself in a new language-culture enhances cultural understanding, sensitivity, and social adaptation. While language plays an essential role in facilitating communication, the "intercultural" contact lies in the more profound understanding and appreciation of the culturally embedded context.

Byram's (2020) components of communicative competence establish a substantial conceptual framework for developing language proficiency beyond mere linguistic abilities. The model highlights the multifaceted nature of communication, recognizing that language learners need to possess not only linguistic knowledge but also sociocultural and strategic competences to effectively engage in intercultural interactions (Fig. 2).

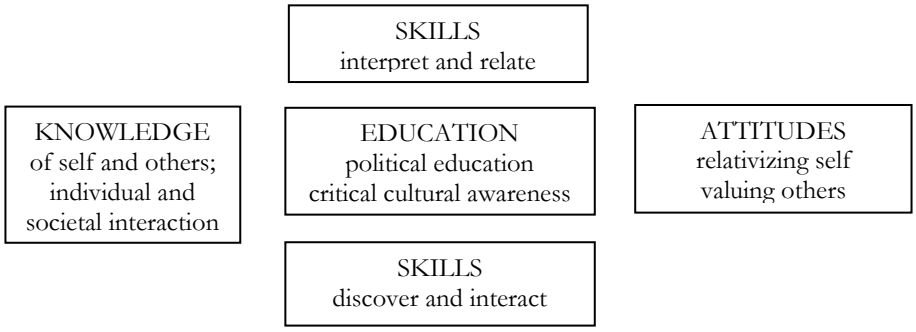


***Fig. 2**: Dimensions of intercultural (communicative competence)*
Source: Byram (2020)

The components of knowledge, education, attitudes, and skills of interpreting and relating, discovery, and interaction unlock the potential to be acquired through experiential learning and reflective practices, avoiding

teachers' intervention. However, when these components are acquired under the teacher's guidance, the learning process is transformed into a broader educational philosophy.

The study by Deardorff (2006) sheds light on the specific skills contributing to the development of intercultural competence. The former points out the emergence of several vital skills, such as analyzing, interpreting, and relating, as well as listening and observing. Furthermore, the scholar maintains that "cognitive skills emerged, including comparative thinking skills and cognitive flexibility" (Deardorff, 2006, p. 248). This insightful research informs foreign language instructors about the importance of incorporating skill-based approaches fostering analytical thinking, emotional intelligence, adaptability in intercultural communication, and learner autonomy. By recognizing and addressing the role of these critical skills, efforts can be directed toward equipping individuals with the necessary cognitive tools to engage successfully in intercultural interactions. Thus, the instructor is called upon to design unique foreign language teaching and learning modes.

In "Common European Framework of Reference for Languages", the Council of Europe (2020, p. 114) highlights the significance of mediating communication descriptors for various stakeholders, including teachers, trainers, students, and professionals. The former are relevant to learners seeking to enhance their awareness and competence in cross-cultural communication. These aspects of sociocultural competence will help students "achieve better outcomes in their communicative encounters in a particular language or languages, particularly when there is an intercultural element involved" (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 114).

Regarding the scholarly research reviewed so far, it is clear that there is an evolving perspective in foreign language teaching, highlighting the importance of balancing the linguistic and intercultural components. In this respect, Ivenz & Klimova's claim (2022, p. 137) that "the linguistic part of foreign language education should be equal to the intercultural part of foreign language education" is justifiable. The new concepts put forth advocate for a more comprehensive approach recognizing the significance of integrating intercultural understanding alongside language learning. The perspective aligns with the growing recognition of language knowledge as insufficient for successful cross-cultural interactions, underscoring the students' need to develop the necessary skills to navigate cultural differences and build meaningful connections in a globalized world.

Approaches to Teaching Intercultural Competence in Foreign Language Classrooms

Acquiring intercultural knowledge is an intricate process that involves "a new approach not found in traditional language lessons" (Reid, 2015, p. 939). The complexity of the concept stems from diverse cultural dimensions such as social norms and values, human beliefs and convictions, communication styles, and even non-verbal cues. As a result, traditional foreign language classes are no longer plausible regarding intercultural competence development. Hence, instructors should introduce a novel approach in their teaching practices, focusing on cultural awareness, sensitivity, and other related aspects.

Firstly, teachers "act in a context-sensitive, location-specific manner, recognizing the social, linguistic and cultural background of their learners" (Hall, 2017, p. 100). Their primary task is to incorporate culturally multifarious materials, such as authentic texts, fiction, and multimedia resources. The latter expose students to different perspectives, values, and social settings. This immersion helps learners appreciate cultural diversity and fosters their understanding of sociocultural contexts.

Secondly, instructors should engage students in meaningful intercultural interactions through collaborative projects, discussions, debates, and role-plays. Dombi (2021, p. 21) claims that in a foreign language teaching context, appropriateness is associated with language learners' native-like sociolinguistic and sociocultural competence. Creating opportunities for peer interaction based on different cultural backgrounds ensures the exchange of ideas, develops empathy, and cultivates intercultural communication skills. Consequently, teachers equip their students with the necessary knowledge and skills to resolve potential cultural clashes and conflicts. The latter can be effectively achieved by offering practical guidance and modelling real-life intercultural communicative acts.

Additionally, teachers can encourage immediate feedback and reflection, involving critical thinking about cultural stereotypes, biases, and prejudices. In the seminal work, Hall (2017, p. 100) points out that the learner's socio-political consciousness addressed in the classroom is viewed as "a catalyst for identity formation and social transformation." The critical analysis of cultural representation and potentially challenging concepts for interpreting helps to promote deeper insights into cultural complexities, tolerance, and sensitive attitudes toward alien cultures.

Bouchard (2017, p. 20) states, "moving from 'native' to 'intercultural' speaker requires looking at the language learner first as a complete individual with cultural knowledge." Implementing study abroad programs and cultural

exchanges contributes to students' immersive experiences in target language cultures. The former allows them to boost their language proficiency, practice using their communication skills in authentic contexts, and develop firsthand cultural understanding.

Since teachers have "a strategic position in every educational process" (Köşker & Gülmez, 2018, p. 159), building "a bridge between the similar and the different, between the inside and the outside, and between the far and the near" (Köşker & Gülmez, 2018, p. 159), their perpetual professional development is crucial. Providing training to educators on intercultural competence pedagogy and sensitivity enhances their ability to create inclusive and culturally responsive learning environments.

By implementing these strategies in language classrooms, teachers can remarkably reinforce intercultural competence and develop the necessary skills, attitudes, and knowledge to communicate and engage respectfully and effectively in diverse cultural settings.

Challenges and Future Directions for Teaching Intercultural Competence in Foreign Language Education

Intercultural competence is an indispensable skill in foreign language teaching in the 21st century, "vital for intercultural speakers of today" (Tuzcu Eken, 2019, p. 609). Developing intercultural competence in GFL classrooms is a dynamic and continuous process, facing numerous challenges in today's globalized world. Since teachers strive to prepare learners to navigate diverse cultural landscapes, it is urgent to critically examine the major challenges and provide precise directions for effective language instruction. By addressing them, educators can introduce novel approaches and dramatically enhance the development of students' intercultural competence.

Eddy (2022, p. 7) claims that the use of the language demands not only memorizing rules and drilled linguistic patterns but is polished "through exploration, participation, creation and reflection, via varied and novel interactions of intercultural experience along the lifespan." Thus, the primary challenge in developing intercultural competence in GFL classrooms concerns the limited exposure to authentic contexts. The latter can result from employing traditional teaching methods which focus mainly on language acquisition and often overlook the ample opportunity for learners to be engaged in meaningful cross-cultural interaction. This conspicuous lack of immersion into authentic context hinders the development of realizing cultural diversity and makes students helpless in dealing with intercultural issues in real-world settings.

Another significant challenge is the miscomprehension of stereotypes, prejudices, and biases, leading to serious cultural clashes and misunderstandings. Byram (2020, p. 45) states that "without questioning one's own and valuing others' experience, interpreting and relating them is likely to be value laden and biased." In this respect, cultural literacy plays a crucial role since language learners who come across alien cultural elements risk enduring extreme hardship in communicating meaning to native speakers. Moreover, they tend to judge other cultures depending on their value system and orientations in the ambient world. As a result, students formulate their unshakeable beliefs and convictions, disregarding the real value of the target cultural concepts and norms. Overcoming these fervent beliefs requires a conscious effort on the part of educators to create a safe and inclusive learning environment, fostering students' critical reflection on stereotypes, biased attitudes, and prejudices.

The issue of evident disrespect to other cultures may be deeply rooted in not facilitating an appropriate environment and developing emotional intelligence. Belly (2018, p. 103) argues that such difficulties "may affect the attitudes and perceptions of the language learners." Therefore, creating a supportive learning environment that encourages respect, tolerance, empathy, cultural awareness, and sensitivity is imperative to nurture positive attitudes among language learners. By fostering cultural diversity and promoting intercultural dialogue, instructors can help learners develop a deeper appreciation for other cultures, avoiding ethnocentrism. The former also require well-developed emotional intelligence and highlights the significance of self-awareness and empathy. Emotional intelligence helps students recognize, control, and manage their emotions and respond adequately to other people's emotions. By cultivating it, teachers can help learners develop the capacity to navigate cultural differences with sensitivity and respect, minimizing the likelihood of disrespectful behavior.

Garcia (2022, pp. 30-31) maintains that intercultural competence contributes to establishing cross-cultural contacts and fosters "unions amid diversity." However, the scholar believes its integration into curriculum requires strengthening and thorough attention. Limited instructional time can be listed as the principal drawback of effective intercultural competence development. Furthermore, assessment methods need to be aligned with the goals of intercultural competence, requiring innovative approaches that evaluate students' abilities to navigate and communicate effectively across cultures.

Eddy (2022, p. 15) outlines seven guiding principles to address the aforementioned challenges and design a plausible language curriculum:

1) it should unfold and scaffold key tasks of meaningful practice by incorporating intercultural perspectives and interdisciplinary content;

2) creative and unforeseeable activities substitute memorization of language structures and forms;

3) the primary tasks immerse students into unique situations and contexts;

4) tasks should be differentiated based on complexity degree, regardless of the subject matter;

5) learners act as mediators in meaning construction;

6) problem-solving is the goal of each task's completion and benefits the community and world;

7) learners are free to implement a unique repertoire, prioritizing functional flexibility over native-like accuracy.

Modern Information and Communication Technology is an indispensable tool in implementing pedagogical instruction. The former involves "the use of purpose-designed intercultural courseware, culture webquest tasks, e-journals, concordances, web projects, and forms of internet communication, including chat and online communicators" (Marczak, 2014, p. 132). Their integration in GFL classrooms offers exciting benefits for teaching intercultural competence. Various digital tools, free online platforms, video conferences, and virtual reality enable students to connect with target language speakers and directly engage in virtual intercultural exchanges. Technology can also facilitate the exploration of diverse cultures, provide access to authentic resources, and draw on collaborative learning experiences that transcend physical boundaries. Learners can develop their intercultural communication skills in real time, fostering cultural understanding and global citizenship.

Regarding teachers' preparedness, future directions should include comprehensive intercultural competence training and professional development programs. The latter should encompass theoretical and practical aspects of intercultural communication, cultural sensitivity, and pedagogical strategies. Cuartas Álvarez (2020, p. 77) states that "there is a call for teachers to explore alternative ways to continue their professional development, and at the same time, to seek ways to make intercultural communicative competence become an integral part of their own language teaching experience." Thus, teachers can teach intercultural competence only when they are provided with reasonable opportunities for professional development (Kostyrya, 2022, p. 40). Their intercultural skills "have the potential to enrich their identity in social, academic, and professional lives" (Eren, 2023, p. 29). Training programs can equip language instructors with

the necessary knowledge, skills, and strategies to foster intercultural understanding and facilitate meaningful intercultural interactions in the GFL classroom. As a result, they can act as language experts, facilitators, and role models, creating creative, inclusive environments and promoting collaborative intercultural learning.

Teaching intercultural competence in foreign language education is a dynamic and evolving field. By embracing student-oriented approaches, educators can develop learners' knowledge, skills, and attitudes to thrive in an interconnected world. As foreign language education continues to adapt to the changing needs of learners and society, it is crucial to embrace these future directions and continually innovate in teaching intercultural competence.

Conclusion

The proposed paper has explored the pivotal role of teaching foreign languages in developing intercultural competence. A comprehensive analysis of existing literature and research findings shows that foreign language education plays a crucial role in equipping learners with the necessary competencies and attitudes to navigate and engage in intercultural interactions effectively. By emphasizing the importance of intercultural competence and recognizing it as a fundamental objective of foreign language instruction, educators can create meaningful learning experiences that go beyond linguistic proficiency.

The findings of this study highlight that intercultural competence encompasses various dimensions, including cultural knowledge, intercultural communication skills, cultural awareness, empathy, and adaptability. Effective teaching strategies and approaches that promote intercultural competence have been discussed, such as incorporating authentic materials, integrating cultural content, fostering learner autonomy, and providing opportunities for experiential and reflective learning. Moreover, this research emphasizes the need for continuous professional development for educators to enhance their intercultural competence and pedagogical practices. By equipping teachers with the necessary tools and training, they can effectively guide learners toward intercultural understanding and competence.

However, it is vital to acknowledge the challenges and limitations in teaching intercultural competence, such as appropriate assessment methods, addressing cultural biases, and promoting inclusive classroom environments. Further research and collaboration among educators and researchers are needed to overcome these challenges and advance the field of intercultural competence in foreign language education.

The prospects for further study concern the experimental research with teachers' and with learners' practices of developing intercultural competence in German classrooms. By virtue of the fact that, the key results related to the areas ON learners' and their environment and not WITH learners'.

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I, Nataliia OBERSTE-BERGHAUS, hereby declare that I am the sole author of this paper and take full responsibility for its content. All the research, analysis and writing presented in this work are my own. I have neither received nor sought unauthorized assistance in producing this paper. Any errors, omissions, or opinions expressed in this paper are solely my responsibility.

Limitations of the research

Despite the comprehensive exploration of the role of teaching foreign languages in developing intercultural competence, this study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the research primarily focuses on German teaching practices, and the findings may not be universally applicable to other language education contexts. The cultural aspects and communicative challenges may vary across different language groups, necessitating further research in diverse linguistic settings. Secondly, the study primarily relies on existing literature and research findings, which might limit the depth of the analysis. While the literature review provides a robust foundation, the absence of direct empirical data collection may restrict the study's ability to capture real-time classroom dynamics and variations in intercultural competence development. Finally, the research predominantly draws on Western perspectives and experiences.

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