

# The Acceptance and Recognition of Cultural Diversity in Foreign Language Teaching

## Yabancı Dil Öğretiminde Kültürel Çeşitliliğin Tanınması ve Kabul Edilmesi

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### Abstract

Since we live in a multilingual and multicultural world, people having diverse cultural backgrounds are beginning to interact with each other more than ever. Therefore, in the study, the notions of cultural diversity, cultural awareness, intercultural competence and cultural dimension have been introduced. According to these concepts, people see and interpret things around themselves in different ways. What may be considered an appropriate act in a culture may not be considered so in another because when two or more people from diverse cultures try to communicate with each other, problems may arise due to their differing personal and social lives, customs and traditions, world views and so on. This is mostly because of the different foreign languages and cultures the interlocutors possess. Hence, learning and teaching a language requires having knowledge about another culture. In order to be a competent language learner, it is crucial to know the cultural context of which the language is a component. To do so, culture has to be incorporated into foreign language teaching. This can be achieved by helping the students overcome barriers that would hinder the growth of intercultural competence. Also, the teachers should help their students to gain an insight into different cultures. The learners should be aware of the fact that there are various cultures to be accepted, recognized, tolerated and respected other than theirs.

**Key Words:** Culture, cultural diversity, cultural awareness, intercultural competence, intercultural dimension.

### Özet

Çok dilli ve çok kültürlü bir dünyada yaşadığımızdan dolayı, çeşitli kültürel geçmişleri olan insanlar birbirleriyle şimdiye kadar olduğundan daha fazla etkileşim içinde bulunmaya başlamıştır. Bu yüzden, çalışmada, kültürel çeşitlilik, kültürel farkındalık, kültürlerarası yeti ve kültürlerarası boyut kavramları tanıtılmıştır. Bu kavramlara göre, insanlar çevrelerindeki farklı yollarla görür ve yorumlar. Bir kültürde uygun olan bir davranış başka bir kültürde uygun olmayabilir. Çünkü çeşitli kültürel geçmişleri olan kişiler birbirleriyle iletişim kurmaya çalıştıklarında, kişilerin sahip oldukları farklı kişisel ve toplumsal yaşamlar, gelenek ve görenekler ve dünya görüşlerinden dolayı problemler ortaya çıkabilir. Bunun en büyük sebeplerinden biri farklı dillere ve kültürlere sahip olmalarıdır. Bu yüzden, bir dili öğrenme ve öğretme diğer kültür hakkında da bilgi sahibi olmayı gerektirir. Yetkin bir dil öğrencisi olmak için, dilin içinde bulunduğu kültürün de kazanılması gerekir. Bunu gerçekleştirmek için ise, kültür dil öğrenimi sürecine dâhil edilmelidir. Yabancı dil öğretmenleri, öğrencilerine kültürlerarası yetilerini geliştirmelerini engelleyebilecek engelleri kaldırmalarına yardım etmelidir. Öğretmenler, ayrıca, öğrencilerine çeşitli kültürlere bakış açısı kazandırmalı ve kendi kültürleri dışında tanınacak, kabul edilecek, hoş görülecek ve saygı duyulabilecek başka kültürler olduğu gerçeği konusunda da bir farkındalık kazandırmalıdır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Kültür, kültürel çeşitlilik, kültürel farkındalık, kültürlerarası yeti, kültürlerarası boyut.

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## Introduction

The development of technology has made it clear that different opinions around the world may meet each other and bridge the produced gap. The ability to communicate with other members of society necessitates the reconsideration of one's thoughts and beliefs.<sup>1</sup> Thus, in a world in which national boundaries are being eroded and where cultural diversity is experienced within nations, the relevance of cultural awareness and intercultural dimension for education policy is beyond question<sup>2</sup>.

## Cultural Diversity and Awareness

Foreign-language educationists have long considered encouraging the learners to have an interest in, knowledge about and tolerance towards foreign cultures, peoples and countries<sup>3</sup>. Foreign-language teaching always includes at least two languages and cultures, namely the learner's own culture and language on the one hand and a foreign culture and language on the other. Therefore, it seems natural to try and raise awareness in learners that people speaking other languages may also organize and perceive the world in ways different from their own.

"Knowledge, awareness and understanding of the relation (similarities and distinctive differences) between the world of origin and the world of the target community produce an intercultural awareness." It is also important to emphasize that intercultural awareness fosters an awareness of both regional and social diversity. "It is also enriched by awareness of a wider range of cultures than those carried by the learner's L1 and L2. This wider awareness helps to place both in context." Intercultural awareness also covers an awareness of how each community appears from the perspective of the other, often in the form of national stereotypes.<sup>4</sup>

Cultural awareness should be drawn away from a monocultural perspective and into a broader view of the world by becoming aware of cultural variety and by breaking down stereotypes.<sup>5</sup> It becomes central when we have to interact with people from other cultures. People see, interpret and evaluate

- 1 Georgia Lazakidou-Kafetzi vd., "Intercultural Competence via Collaborative Tools", *Proceedings of the third WSEAS/IASME International Conference on Engineering Education*, Vouliagmeni, Greece, 2006, 193-196, p. 193.
- 2 Nicolas Sola - James Wilkinson, "Developing Intercultural Competence", 2007, September 25, 2009, [http://www.ece.salford.ac.uk/proceedings/papers/04\\_07.pdf](http://www.ece.salford.ac.uk/proceedings/papers/04_07.pdf), p. 42-52, p. 42.
- 3 Lies Serçu, "Autonomous Learning and the Acquisition of Intercultural Communicative Competence: Some Implications for Course Development", *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2002, p. 61-74, p. 62.
- 4 Council of Europe, *A Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*, Strasbourg, Council of Europe 2001, p. 103.
- 5 Gail Ellis, "Developing Intercultural Competence with Children in the English Language Class", 2004, September 28, 2009, [http://www.counterpoint-online.org/doclibrary/british\\_council/download/179/Thresholds-1-Gail-Ellis.pdf](http://www.counterpoint-online.org/doclibrary/british_council/download/179/Thresholds-1-Gail-Ellis.pdf), p.2.

things in different ways. What is considered an appropriate behavior in one culture is frequently inappropriate in another one. Misunderstandings arise when someone uses their meanings to make sense of their reality.<sup>6</sup> We may not be aware of our cultural dynamics. Our experiences, our values and our cultural background lead us to see and do things in a certain way. Sometimes we have to step outside of our cultural boundaries in order to realize the impact that our culture has on our behavior.

### Degrees of Cultural Awareness

According to the four steps related to the degrees of cultural awareness<sup>7</sup>, the levels of cultural awareness that reflect how people grow to perceive cultural differences can be listed as follows:

**1. My way is the only way** - At the first level, people are aware of their way of doing things, and their way is the only way. At this stage, they ignore the impact of cultural differences.

**2. I know their way, but my way is better** - At the second level, people are aware of other ways of doing things, but still consider their way as the best one. In this stage, cultural differences are perceived as source of problems and people tend to ignore them or reduce their significance.

**3. My Way and Their Way** - At this level, people are aware of their own way of doing things and others' ways of doing things, and they choose the best way according to the situation. At this stage, people realize that cultural differences can lead to both problems and benefits, and are willing to use cultural diversity to create new solutions and alternatives.

**4. Our Way** - The fourth and final stage brings people from different cultural backgrounds together for the creation of a culture of shared meanings. People dialogue repeatedly with others, create new meanings, new rules to meet the needs of a particular situation.

People from diverse cultural communities try to encode and decode the verbal and nonverbal messages into comprehensive meanings.<sup>8</sup> This obviously emphasizes the influence of cultural variability and diversity on communication. There is no doubt that when two or more people of different cultural backgrounds attempt to communicate, cultural barriers to communication often arise due to the differences in their patterns of life, social style, customs, world view and so on. This is often the case when the interlocutors share a foreign language.

6 Stephanie Quappe - Giovanna Cantatore, "What is Cultural Awareness, anyway? How do I build it?", 2005, September 10, 2009, <http://www.culturocity.com/pdfs/What%20is%20Cultural%20Awareness.pdf>, p. 1.

7 Quappe – Cantatore, *a.g.m.*, p. 2.

8 Nguyen Thi Mai Hoa, "Developing EFL Learners' Intercultural Communicative Competence: A Gap to be Filled?", *Asian EFL Journal*, Vol. 21, Teachers Articles, Article 1, 2007, 122-139, p. 126.

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## Intercultural Competence and Dimension

In general, intercultural competence is the ability to successfully communicate with various groups of people from diverse cultures. Intercultural competence can be identified as the body of knowledge and skills to successfully interact with people from other ethnic, religious, cultural, national, and geographic groups.<sup>9</sup> When someone has a high degree of intercultural competence, s/he is able to have successful interactions with people from different groups. People must be curious about other cultures, sensitive to cultural differences, and also willing to modify their behavior as a sign of respect for other cultures.

Intercultural competence is the ability to see relationships between different cultures critically. People who acquire this ability are conscious of their own perspective, of the way in which their thinking is culturally determined, rather than believing that their understanding and perspective is natural.<sup>10</sup>

An interculturally competent person can be defined as someone who can cross borders and can mediate between two or more cultural identities. The “intercultural speaker”<sup>11</sup> is not a cosmopolitan being who floats over cultures, much like tourists tend to do. Rather, s/he is committed to turning intercultural encounters into intercultural relationships. He or she is not satisfied with a view from the outside, with marveling at differences and at what seems exotic and intriguing about another culture. An intercultural speaker is determined to understand, to gain an inside view of the other person’s culture, and at the same time to contribute to the other person’s understanding of his or her own culture from an insider’s point of view.

The components of intercultural competence are knowledge, skills and attitudes, complemented by the values one holds because of one’s belonging to a number of social groups. These values are part of one’s social identities. The foundation of intercultural competence is in the attitudes of the intercultural speaker and mediator:<sup>12</sup>

- Intercultural attitudes; curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one’s own. This means a willingness to relativise one’s own values, beliefs and behaviors, not to assume that they are the only possible and naturally correct ones, and to be able to see how they might look from an outsider’s perspective.

- Knowledge; the knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in one’s own and in another’s country, and of the general processes

9 Mitchell, R. Hammer, Milton, J. Bennett, and Richard Wiseman, “Measuring Intercultural Sensitivity: The Intercultural Development Inventory”, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 27, no. 4, 2003, 421 – 443, p. 422.

10 Georgia Lazakidou-Kafetzi vd., *a.g.m.*, p. 194.

11 Serçu, *a.g.m.*, p. 64.

12 Michael Byram vd., *Developing the Intercultural Dimension in Language Teaching: A Practical Introduction for Teachers*, Language Policy Division, Council of Europe, Strasbourg 2002, p. 11.

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of societal and individual interaction. So knowledge can be defined as having two major components; knowledge of social processes and knowledge of illustrations of those processes and products. The latter includes knowledge about how other people are likely to perceive you and supplies information about other people.

No teacher can have or anticipate all the knowledge which learners might at some point need. Indeed, many teachers have not had the opportunity themselves to experience all or any of the cultures which their learners might encounter, but this is not crucial. The teacher's task is to develop attitudes and skills as much as knowledge, and teachers can acquire information about other countries together with their learners; they do not need to be the sole or major source of information. Skills are just as important as attitudes and knowledge, and teachers can concentrate as much on skills as upon knowledge.

- Skills of interpreting and relating; ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one's own.

Because neither intercultural speakers/mediators nor their teachers can anticipate all their knowledge needs, it is equally important to acquire the skills of finding out new knowledge and integrating it with what they already have. They need especially to know how to ask people from other cultures about their beliefs, values and behaviors, which because they are often unconscious, those people cannot easily explain. So, intercultural speakers/mediators need skills of discovery and interaction.

- Skills of discovery and interaction; ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction.

Finally, however open towards, curious about and tolerant of other people's beliefs, values and behaviors learners are, their own beliefs, values and behaviors are deeply embedded and can create reaction and rejection. Because of this unavoidable response, intercultural speakers/mediators need to become aware of their own values and how these influence their views of other people's values. Intercultural speakers/mediators need a critical awareness of themselves and their values as well as those of other people.

- Critical cultural awareness; an ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures. It is not the purpose of teaching to try to change learners' values, but to make them explicit and conscious in any evaluative response to others. The role of the language teacher is therefore to develop skills, attitudes and awareness of values just as much as to develop acknowledge of a particular culture or country.

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Foreign language learners who hope to carry out intercultural interactions effectively must be equipped with this set of abilities to be able to understand and deal with the dynamics of cultural differences because of the inseparable relationship between foreign language learning and intercultural communication.<sup>13</sup>

Communicative Language Teaching endeavors to teach how to communicate in a foreign language and believes that this may lead to intercultural understanding, tolerance and harmony among different cultures. It failed however on two counts. Firstly, by not having fully recognized the links between language and culture, it did not provide an approach to depicting culture in language use though it did promote the teaching of culture as adjunct knowledge to language. Secondly Communicative Language Teaching did not see that learning about another culture was not enough to promote understanding among the cultures. For this, the awareness of one's own culture is necessary.<sup>14</sup> Intercultural language teaching however can turn the promises of the Communicative Approach into practices by recognizing and acting at the level of practice on the three dimensional aspects to intercultural competence: learning about cultures, comparing cultures and intercultural exploration.

Intercultural theorists and researchers have identified specific behaviors, values and attitudes related to intercultural competence. Some of the most important qualities include the following:<sup>15</sup>

- Tolerance for Ambiguity: Every educational setting has some level of ambiguity. The ambiguity increases exponentially when training cross-culturally. The trainer who is rigid and has unyielding allegiance to his or her training plan, who cannot tolerate unexpected changes, or who is frustrated by students not on track will be ineffective.

- Maintain Personal Cultural Identity: One of the greatest mistakes we can make is to try to an extreme, to fit into a foreign culture such that we try to be something we are not. We must have a clear sense of our own cultural identity. Cultural identity refers to the sense we have of our own attitudes, values, beliefs, style of communication, and patterns of behavior.

- Patience: Few qualities are as important for the cross-cultural trainer as patience. There are inevitable delays and are as of miscommunication when educating cross-culturally and our response can make the difference of

13 Nguyen Thi Mai Hoa, *a.g.m.*, p. 128.

14 Chantal Crozet, Anthony Liddicoat, *The Challenge of Intercultural Language Teaching: Engaging with Culture in the Classroom, Striving for the Third Place: Intercultural Competence through Language Education*, Bianco, J.L., Liddicoat, A.J. and Crozet, C. (Eds), The National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia 1999, p. 113.

15 David, A. Livermore, "Intercultural Competency: A Look at the Relationship between Learning and Culture and the Competencies Needed in the Cross-cultural Training Setting", *Sonlife International Forum*, Elburn, Illinois, 1998, 1-14, p. 10.

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whether these become barriers or further stimuli for learning. Patience is truly a virtue in intercultural education.

- Enthusiasm and Commitment to Content: The level of our enthusiasm and commitment for the content, for the learners, and for the entire training experience can make all the difference in the learner's ability to succeed. Our role is to be able to motivate training participants through our own enthusiasm and commitment to ministry and to the harmony.

- Interpersonal Communication: Though more important among some cultures than others, strong interpersonal skills are absolutely necessary for effective intercultural education.

- Lifelong Learner: Openness to learning from the experiences of those we train is vital for our effectiveness. We must be interested in the backgrounds and experiences of the learners and we need to be willing to learn along with them.

- Empathy: We must acquire a sense of how the students are feeling about the training given their own cultural orientations and backgrounds. Empathy is not only a quality we need to use in relationship to students but also a quality we should seek to transmit to them personally.

- Sense of Humor: Anyone who has had much experience in across cultural setting will attest to the value of a sense of humor in coping with the stresses and pressures of intercultural contexts. Learners who can laugh at themselves and see the humor amidst frustrating circumstances will have an easier time adjusting to the cultural challenges. We can use tactful, well-timed humor to break the tension of intercultural education.

Intercultural competence has become a wide ranging concept and language teaching cannot claim to be the only way to achieve it.<sup>16</sup> However foreign language teaching can certainly claim to be the most complete and versatile tool available to understand and to experience how language and culture shape one's and others' world views. Understanding how worldviews come into being is a core aspect of intercultural competence.

The intercultural dimension in language teaching aims to develop learners as intercultural speakers/mediators who are able to engage with complexity and multiple identities and to avoid the stereotyping which accompanies perceiving someone through a single identity. It is based on perceiving the interlocutor as an individual whose qualities are to be discovered, rather than as a representative of an externally ascribed identity. Intercultural communication is communication on the basis of respect for individuals and equality

16 Chantal Crozet, Anthony Liddicoat, and Lo Bianco, *Intercultural Competence: From Language Policy to Language Education, Striving for the Third Place: Intercultural Competence through Language Education*, Bianco, J.L., Liddicoat, A.J. and Crozet, C. (Eds), The National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia 1999, p. 11.

of human rights as the democratic basis for social interaction.<sup>17</sup> So language teaching with an intercultural dimension continues to help learners to acquire the linguistic competence needed to communicate in speaking or writing, to formulate what they want to say/write in correct and appropriate ways. But it also develops their intercultural competence, such as their ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and their ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality.

An intercultural speaker also needs an awareness that there is more to be known and understood from the other person's perspective, that there are skills, attitudes and values involved too, which are crucial to understanding intercultural human relationships. As a consequence, the best teacher is neither the native nor the non-native speaker, but the person who can help learners see relationships between their own and other cultures, can help them acquire interest in and curiosity about otherness, and an awareness of themselves and their own cultures seen from other people's perspectives.

Studying a language must include significant learning about another culture.<sup>18</sup> Students cannot truly master language until they have also mastered the cultural context in which the language occurs. Cultural learning enables students to discover that there are multiple ways of viewing the world, which can ultimately help them to participate in a world that is increasing and becoming a global village.

It has to be borne in mind, however, that the need in culture teaching arises for more than mere imparting of knowledge; culture must now be taught implicitly and explicitly. In this sense, it has now become a necessity to shed light and highlight three crucial elements:

To raise awareness of one's identity and of the existence of difference

To enhance understanding of self and others

To foster appreciation of otherness<sup>19</sup>

Presenting learners with multiple perspectives will promote a dynamic view of cultures, and help learners understand that all cultures are continuously influenced by other cultures and cannot be considered in a territorialized way, as being bound to a particular geographical part of the world or as locked within the boundaries of a particular nation state.<sup>20</sup> Presenting cultures as un-

17 Byram vd., *a.g.e.*, p. 9.

18 Abdel Latif Sellami, "Teaching Towards Cultural Awareness and Intercultural Competence: From What Through How to Why Culture is?", Paper presented at the *annual meeting of teachers of English to speakers of other languages*. Vancouver, BC, Canada, 2000, p. 2.

19 Michael Byram, *Cultural Studies in Foreign Language Education*, Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1989, p. 25.

20 Sercu, *a.g.m.*, p. 69.

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bounded and as related to other cultures may also bring power relationships that exist within and between cultures more to the forefront.

## Conclusion

The intercultural dimension of foreign-language education is about more than teaching communicative competence and, in addition, passing on an extensive body of information about the foreign cultures which tend to be associated with the foreign language one is teaching. The acquisition of intercultural communicative competence, of course, requires that one increases one's familiarity with foreign cultures, with one's own culture and with the relationships between cultures.<sup>21</sup> It is high time that language educators also realized that speaking a foreign language always means entering a cultural world that may to a lesser or a larger extent be different from one's own. Therefore, all language education should always also be intercultural education. Culture teaching should help the learners to develop an intercultural competence that leads to empathy, openness and understanding vis-a-vis the target culture and its people.<sup>22</sup> Developing the intercultural dimension in language teaching involves recognizing that the aims are: to give learners intercultural competence as well as linguistic competence; to prepare them for interaction with people of other cultures; to enable them to understand and accept people from other cultures as individuals with other distinctive perspectives, values and behaviors; and to help them to see that such interaction is an enriching experience.<sup>23</sup>

As we live in a multicultural world, it is most likely that people from various countries and cultures perceive the world differently. Intercultural competence helps people from diverse cultures to gain knowledge about how other people live, exchange information and see the world around them. Thus, people are in need of tolerating and appreciating beliefs, ideas, lifestyles, cultural traditions that are mostly different from their own. For effective foreign language teaching, the teachers should help the learners be aware of the cultural differences and develop their intercultural competence.

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21 Sercu, a.g.m., p. 72.

22 Sellami, a.g.m., p. 12.

23 Byram vd., a.g.e., p. 6.

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