

## DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN AN EFL CLASS

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**Rezumat:** *Articolul abordează problema dezvoltării competenței interculturale la lecțiile de limba engleză și subliniază importanța acesteia în societatea modernă globalizată. Pentru o mai bună înțelegere a conceptului cheie, în articol se prezintă o privire de ansamblu asupra definițiilor „culturii”, se definește termenul „competență interculturală” și se enumeră componentele acestuia.*

*Avem convingerea că elementele culturale, fiind incorporate într-un curriculum bine structurat, pot fi implementate sistematic pe parcursul diferitelor etape de învățare a limbii. Cunoașterea unei limbi nu presupune doar stăpânirea vocabularului, a gramaticii și a regulilor de ortografie. Cele mai reușite lecții de limbă engleză oferă cursanților oportunitatea de a învăța atât cultura, cât și limba țării anglofone.*

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *cultură, componente culturale, produse, practici, perspective, competență interculturală, cunoștințe, abilități, atitudini.*

*Introduction.* The ability to communicate with representatives of different cultures has always been a valuable asset, be it in the past times, when people only started engaging in commercial and political negotiations, or in modern ones, when many boundaries have been removed and we are able to travel for business, education or entertainment. Modern societies become interwoven and interdependent. This interdependency is a major characteristic of the world that we presently live in, and the future promises even greater interconnectivity, requiring increased cultural knowledge and language abilities [10, p. 2].

The concept of intercultural education has become popular on the European stage after Michael Byram's models of cultural competence (CC) and intercultural competence (IC) were adopted by European education policy makers at the beginning of the 21st century. Since that time, international organizations like UNESCO, the Council of Europe and the European Commission have declared officially its importance and issued declarations and strategies on international or national levels. Some countries, including Moldova, have reformed their education systems and included intercultural education in

the national curricula. Thus, in the Republic of Moldova, the National Curriculum for Foreign Languages includes four specific competences two of which are: the linguistic competence (CS 1) and inter-/ pluri-cultural competence (CS4) [4, p. 5].

*Terminology and definitions.* The language and culture are closely connected and this connection has been demonstrated by Kramersch (1993), who identified three ways in which the two are bound together. First, language expresses cultural reality; second, language embodies cultural reality; and third, language symbolizes cultural reality. In this light, teaching language is inseparable from teaching culture [7, p. 78]. Likewise, Brown views the relationship between language and culture as inseparable, very important and delicate. „*A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture*” [2, p. 12]. Any communication occurs within culture therefore, it is essential to understand what is understood by the term *culture*. For the past fifty years, researchers have come up with their own definitions of culture. Thus, in the 1980s, Halverson referred to culture as the „big C” (history, geography, literature, etc. subjects defined as culture) and „little c” culture (less visible elements like religion, language, etc.) [5, p. 327].

These categories are still applied to culture today, only their scope is broadened: for example, under the „big C” category come art, architecture, music, dances, travelling and tourism, popular culture, etc., while under „little c” category come communication styles, cultural norms, behaviours, beliefs, etc. For Kramersch culture is „*a common system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, and acting*” [7, p. 10].

Holló and Lázár’s classification (2000) is to some extent similar to Halverson’s categorization of culture. They group the elements of culture into: civilization (history, geography, literature, values, customs, institutions, etc.), behavior and speech patterns (functions, speech acts, body language, ways of socializing), and discourse structures and skills like logic, figures of speech, linking and connecting ideas, developing and supporting arguments in written and spoken texts [6, pp. 4-8].

For Moran (2001) this „*cultural phenomenon involves tangible forms or structures (products) that individual members of the culture (persons) use in various interactions (practices) in specific social circumstances and groups (communities) in ways that reflect their values, attitudes and beliefs (perspective)*” [8, pp. 25-26]. His interpretation of culture is very much in line with the American 3Ps model of culture presented in the *National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project* in 1999. According to them, culture „*includes the philosophical perspectives, the behavioral practices, and the products – both tangible and intangible – of a society*” [9, p. 46]. A definition that summarizes best most of the definitions is the one given by UNESCO in the Conceptual and Operational Framework issued on intercultural competences. Drawing on previous official documents (*Declaration on Cultural Policies*, 1982 and *Universal declaration on cultural diversity*, 2001), UNESCO interpret culture as „*a set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of a society or social group, encompassing all the ways of being in that society; at a minimum, including art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions, and beliefs*” [12, p. 10]. The term *intercultural communication competence* was first coined by Byram (1997) in late 1980s and early 1990s and was further developed as a model of intercultural competence. An important feature of Byram’s

model is the opportunity given to language learners to reflect on their native language and culture through their experience with the target language and culture [3, p. 52]. Intercultural competence refers to the active possession by individuals of qualities which contribute to effective intercultural communication, and can be defined in terms of three primary attributes: *knowledge, skills and attitudes*.



Figure 1. Constituent elements of Intercultural Competence. Adapted from Deardorff 2006

Intercultural attitudes (*savoir être*): curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own. This means a willingness to relativize 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 who has a different set of values, beliefs and behaviors. Consideration for the others, active listening, or showing that they are appreciated and valued are especially important to create lasting relationships with people with different beliefs and values. Openness and curiosity refer to the willingness to move beyond our comfort zone.

Knowledge (*savoirs*): of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction. Thus, 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, as well as some knowledge about other people.

When we refer to culture, defined as the beliefs, values and norms of a group of people, that influence individuals' communication behaviors, more categories of knowledge can be considered:

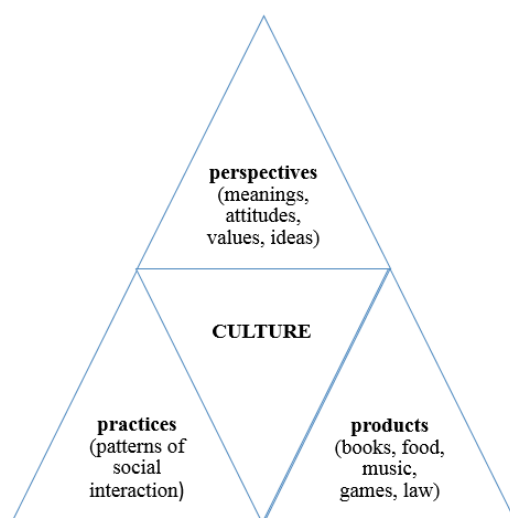
- sociolinguistic awareness;
- cultural self-awareness;
- culture-specific knowledge;
- deep cultural knowledge.

Skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*): ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one's own. Skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*): 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. Such skills as observing, listening, analyzing, evaluating, interpreting, and

relating are the key abilities used for processing the acquired knowledge. Also, essential to the development of intercultural competence is critical self-reflection [3, p. 57].

With these three saviors, all interrelated and interdependent, EFL intercultural learners should build an additional savoir that Byram (1997) calls critical intercultural awareness, which is the ability to evaluate perspectives, practices, and products in one's own and others' culture. If the key attitudes, knowledge, and skills are acquired, empathy, flexibility and adaptability will be achieved. As a result, individuals will become able to respond to the other person according to his/her expectations. The effectiveness of communication would be the result of the number of skills and knowledge acquired.

Another model of learning a culture has been developed in the USA in the National Standards Project in the late 1990s. The relationship between the three components of culture in this cultural framework is presented in the form of a triangle. This is done with the intention to show clearly how „the products and practices are derived from the philosophical perspectives that form the world view of a cultural group” [9, p. 47].



*Figure 2. Modified 3 Ps model of culture from National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1999*

The 3Ps approach to teaching culture has shifted the focus from only learning about products and practices in culture 2 (C2) to another level of understanding, i.e. a deeper look at the values, belief and attitudes of the world that members of that culture hold. This is a challenge to both teachers and learners since perspectives are intangible and usually, they are rarely included in course books.

ACTFL Culture standards facilitate the process of understanding the link between the products and perspectives, and the practices and perspectives of C2. It is this interrelationship between the 3Ps that help learners to understand the target culture better. Although learning culture is not the central focus in an EFL classroom, it has a vital role in language acquisition. As one of the 5 Cs in the framework of the World-Readiness Standards, it is interrelated with communication and comparisons. To be able to communicate effectively, i.e. to possess good cultural competences, students need to develop insight into the nature of both L2 and C2. They study examples of the language to look into and explain the products – perspectives link or practices – perspectives link,

they also make comparisons between the target culture and their own culture (C2/C1) [1, p. 6].

*Strategies to develop intercultural competence in an EFL classroom.* Many EFL classrooms have failed to incorporate intercultural topics to prepare learners to become part of a global society because teachers mainly teach surface culture (products) such as festivals, tourist destinations/landmarks, celebrities, and typical food. However, these visible aspects of culture will never prepare learners to encounter cultural identity, difference, and culture shock in real communication.

In Other words, what is necessary to improve is the understanding of cultural practices, such as various patterns of behavior and ways of interaction of the members of a given society. This can be done by integrating various products into the EFL class, for instance, pieces of literature, music, art, movies, news, video spots, etc.

Interestingly, learners at all levels of language study have a strong desire to understand movies in the target language. Most movies, whether short or full, are rich in linguistic contents and cultural backgrounds and provide a great variety of authentic speech and language in context. If carefully chosen in terms of difficulty, length, and simplicity, movies become stimulating materials that can be used across all levels of language development for C2. Thus, to avoid learners' lack of motivation to read long, often difficult and sometimes boring literary works, teachers can find on YouTube abridged screen versions of literary works foreseen by the curriculum.

By proposing learners to watch an extract from a classical movie, the teacher will create an atmosphere close to that of the target culture. Moreover, by watching different film adaptations, made in different periods of time, learners will be bombarded with visual illustrations of cultural practices of the characters on the screen, which otherwise they find difficult to detect while reading. While watching, learners can try to relate some of the practices of the target culture with the characters' beliefs, values, etc. and compare/contrast these with their own perspectives.

Another useful strategy is 'guiding' the learners through the 3P model of culture and the set of questions that accompany it.

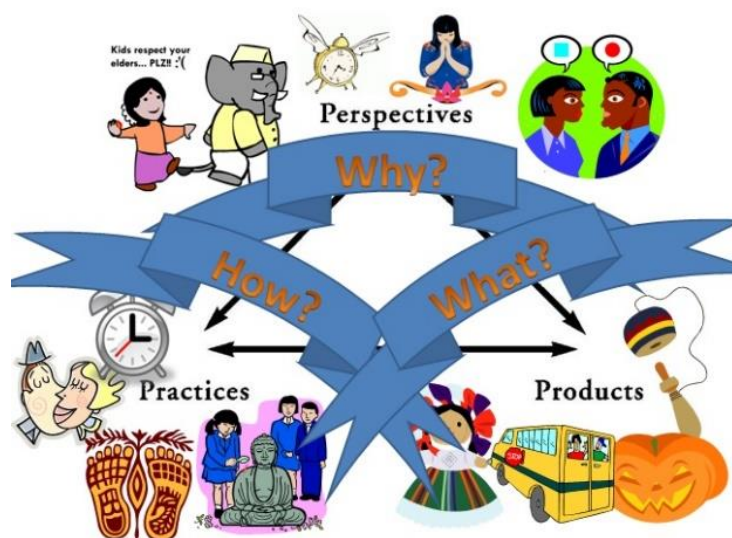


Figure 3. 3Ps of Culture: Products, practices, perspectives

As one can notice, the Culture triangle is comprised of three components. While working with a printed text and its screen adaptation, the teacher can guide learners' attention asking them to carry out the following tasks individually, before participating in a group discussion.

Thus, based on O' Henry's short story *The Gift of the Magi* and its screen adaptation, learners can deepen their knowledge about the American society and values of people living in the USA at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

- Cultural products correspond to the question „What?“;
- Learners identify two types of tangible products in the present context – a film and a short story, both of which are authentic sources of information about the society;
- Cultural practices correspond to the question „How?“;
- Learners represent norms of discourse, address and respect; the use of body language (gestures and non-verbal forms of communication); socially appropriate behavior in dating, getting engaged, culture of making presents, etc.;
- Cultural perspectives correspond to the question „Why?“;
- Learners present attitudes, beliefs and values in the society on social position/rank, property, education, politics, marriage.

Relating products to perspectives: students use the language as a means of communication to investigate, explain and compare/contrast some scene/ extract from the work. Working in pairs or small groups, students reflect on C2 culture by making comparisons between the target culture and their own culture.

Relating Practices to perspectives: again, students use the language for communicating meaning with the purpose to look into the practices used by the characters in the dialogue and connect them with their values, beliefs on rank, property, education and marriage in the society. In pairs, students compare and contrast the studied culture and their own in order to reflect on C2.

To round off the learning experience, the students are asked to write a modern interpretation of the same in-law interrogation scene (220 – 250 words), post it on a blog and comment on a peer's work.

Where students possess adequate vocabulary and greater ability to control language, discussions are effective ways for student to acquire cultural knowledge. Carefully coordinated with the intensive and extensive reading programs and given sufficient time, materials for organized discussions provide rich opportunities for learning the higher elements and including customs, ideas, ethics, traditions, and values of the target culture as well.

*Conclusion.* Considering the realia of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the ability to speak a foreign language fluently does not necessarily guarantee the learner's ability to communicate effectively with representatives of different cultures.

Knowledge of grammar rules, extensive vocabulary or the ability to write accurately will not be very useful in the absence of the skills allowing the learner to cooperate, listen actively, display interest and curiosity for the counterpart's point of view, along with willingness to understand their beliefs and values.

It is the teacher's task to integrate culture concepts and develop intercultural competence skills in the EFL class, by using various types of educational materials.

Culture elements, when embodied in a properly developed and organized curriculum can be systematically implemented all along the different stages of language growth.

Cultural content can be integrated in almost any lesson, it can be taught based on any material, be it news, literature, music or painting. It will add value to the lesson taught as learners are most likely to remember it. It takes years to become linguistically proficient in a language, whereas a cultural fact can be learned in an instant in the classroom. At the same time, students may forget the rules of subject – verb agreement, but retain knowledge and interest learned in a culture class.

At different stages of language learning, any single culture experience learned in one class is duplicated and reinforced in subsequent activities in other stages such that, for example, a simple knowledge of another region's food habits in the initial stage leads to an understanding of the people's health customs and values in the latter part of the curriculum.

To conclude, I'd like to reintegrate the idea that mastery of a language is not simply mastery of vocabulary as well as grammar and spelling rules. The most successful language learner learns both culture and language together.

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