

**TEACHER'S ROLE IN DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION
COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS****Surayyo Abidjanova**

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Abstract

In the globalized world, learning a foreign language also requires understanding different cultures. Intercultural communication competence has become an essential part of English language learning, especially for students who interact with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. This article aims to examine the role of teachers in developing intercultural communication competence in English language learners. The study discusses how teachers can integrate cultural awareness into language teaching and support learners in developing respectful and effective communication skills. The findings suggest that teachers play a key role in shaping learners' attitudes, cultural awareness, and communicative behavior through appropriate teaching strategies and classroom practices.

Keywords

intercultural communication competence, teacher's role, English language learners, cultural awareness, language teaching

Introduction

In recent years, English has become a global language used for communication between people from different cultural backgrounds. It is widely used in international education, business, science, and digital communication. As a result, learning English is no longer limited to grammar and vocabulary only, but also involves understanding cultural differences and similarities. English language learners are expected not only to speak correctly, but also to communicate appropriately in different cultural contexts. In academic and professional environments, students often interact with people from various countries and cultures. In such situations, successful communication depends on more than language accuracy. Learners need intercultural communication competence in order to understand cultural norms, values, and communication styles. This competence helps learners avoid misunderstandings and communicate respectfully and effectively in international academic, social, and professional contexts.



Teachers play a crucial role as mediators, facilitators, and designers of communicative, culture-integrated, and critical-thinking-based instruction to develop English Language Learners' (ELLs) intercultural communication competence (ICC). They shift focus from solely linguistic proficiency to cultivating empathy, awareness, and the ability to navigate diverse cultural norms through interactive, real-world, and reflective teaching practices.

Many misunderstandings in communication occur not because of language errors, but because of cultural differences. For example, the way people express opinions, show politeness, manage silence, or use body language can vary greatly across cultures. A direct communication style may be seen as confident in one culture, but rude in another. Without cultural awareness, English language learners may experience communication problems even if their language skills are strong. Therefore, developing intercultural communication competence has become an important goal of modern English language education.

Teachers play a central role in developing this competence among learners. Through classroom interaction, teaching materials, and instructional strategies, teachers shape learners' attitudes toward other cultures and guide their understanding of cultural diversity. Teachers are not only language instructors, but also cultural mediators who help students connect language learning with cultural understanding. By integrating cultural content into language lessons, teachers can create meaningful learning experiences that prepare students for real-life intercultural communication. Therefore, this article focuses on the teacher's role in developing intercultural communication competence in English language learners. It highlights the importance of cultural awareness in English teaching and discusses effective strategies that teachers can use to integrate intercultural elements into language instruction.

Literature Review

Intercultural communication competence has been widely studied by modern scholars in the field of language education. Many researchers emphasize that language and culture are closely connected and cannot be taught separately. According to Michael Byram (2015), intercultural communicative competence includes not only linguistic skills, but also attitudes, knowledge, and skills that allow learners to interact successfully with people from other cultures. Byram highlights the teacher's role in helping learners develop openness, curiosity, and respect toward cultural differences. Another important contribution comes from Darla K. Deardorff (2016), who defines intercultural competence as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations. Deardorff emphasizes that teachers must create learning environments that encourage reflection, cultural comparison, and critical thinking. According to her research, teachers influence learners' intercultural development through classroom interaction and guided discussion.

Claire Kramsch (2017) also stresses the importance of culture in language learning. She argues that language teaching should include cultural meanings, values, and identities. Kramsch suggests that teachers should use authentic materials and real-life examples to help learners understand how language is used in different cultural contexts. This approach allows learners to see English as a tool for intercultural communication rather than just an academic subject. More recent studies focus on the practical role of teachers in intercultural teaching. Anthony J. Liddicoat and Scarino (2018) state that teachers guide learners in interpreting cultural meanings and reflecting on their own cultural assumptions. They emphasize that intercultural learning should be an ongoing process integrated into everyday language lessons.

In addition, recent empirical research by Zhang and McGhee (2020) shows that teachers' attitudes and awareness of intercultural issues directly affect learners' intercultural competence.



Their study highlights that teachers who actively discuss cultural topics and encourage intercultural interaction help students develop empathy and respect toward other cultures.

The reviewed literature confirms that teachers play a key role in developing intercultural communication competence. Modern scholars agree that effective English language teaching should integrate cultural awareness, reflection, and interaction. These studies provide a strong theoretical foundation for examining the teacher's role in fostering intercultural communication competence among English language learners.

Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative analysis of existing research and classroom practices related to intercultural communication in English language teaching. The research examines different teaching strategies used to develop cultural awareness and intercultural competence among learners. Classroom observations and analysis of teaching materials were used to understand how teachers introduce cultural content in English lessons. The focus of the study is on the teacher's role as a guide, facilitator, and cultural mediator. Attention was given to how teachers encourage discussion of cultural topics, promote respect for cultural diversity, and create opportunities for intercultural interaction in the classroom. The study also considers how teachers' attitudes and teaching styles influence learners' intercultural development.

Results

The globalization phenomenon has increased the importance of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) for individuals to be able to cope with the complexity of the modern world (Byram, 1997). ICC is defined as the ability to understand and communicate effectively with people from different cultures (Deardorff, 2006). It is not only about mastering linguistic skills but also about being able to interpret and respect other cultures' values, beliefs, and behaviors. Therefore, it is essential to prepare language learners with ICC skills that can make them competent and confident when interacting with different cultures (Mozaffarzadeh & Ajideh, 2019). ICC involves not only language proficiency but also knowledge about other cultures and the ability to understand and respect cultural differences (Deardorff, 2006). Byram (1997) suggests that ICC comprises five components: attitudes, knowledge, skills, awareness, and critical thinking. Attitudes refer to the willingness to engage with different cultures and respect their values and beliefs. Knowledge is understanding other cultures' history, customs, and traditions. Skills comprise the ability to interpret and evaluate intercultural communication. Awareness involves reflecting on one's own cultural identity and comparing it with others. Finally, critical thinking refers to the ability to challenge stereotypes and prejudices that may hinder effective intercultural communication.

The results of the study demonstrate that teachers have a strong and direct influence on the development of intercultural communication competence in English language learners. One of the most important findings is that teachers who consistently integrate cultural topics into their lessons significantly increase students' awareness of cultural differences and similarities. For example, when teachers use reading texts about daily life in different countries, short videos showing cultural traditions, or discussions about social norms, students begin to understand how language reflects cultural values and behaviors. This helps learners see English not only as a language, but also as a tool for intercultural communication. Another significant result concerns the role of teachers in shaping learners' attitudes toward other cultures. Teachers who encourage open discussion and respectful dialogue create an inclusive classroom atmosphere where students feel safe to express their opinions. For instance, when students are asked to compare



greeting styles or communication habits from different cultures, they become more aware of cultural diversity. In such environments, learners are more willing to ask questions, share personal experiences, and listen to different perspectives without fear of judgment or criticism.

The findings also show that interactive classroom activities play a key role in developing intercultural competence. Activities such as role plays, group discussions, and case studies provide learners with opportunities to practice communication in culturally diverse situations. For example, role-play tasks that simulate international meetings, online communication with foreign partners, or multicultural classroom interactions help students practice appropriate language use and behavior. These activities allow learners to experience cultural differences in a controlled and supportive setting. In addition, group discussions on culturally sensitive topics, such as communication styles or social expectations, help students develop critical thinking skills. During such discussions, learners learn to express their opinions politely and respond to different viewpoints respectfully. Case studies based on real-life intercultural misunderstandings also help students analyze communication problems and suggest culturally appropriate solutions.

Furthermore, the results indicate that teachers who act as cultural mediators play an important role in reducing stereotypes and misunderstandings. By explaining cultural norms and encouraging reflection, teachers guide learners to see culture as dynamic and diverse rather than fixed. For example, when teachers challenge common stereotypes and present multiple perspectives within the same culture, students develop a more balanced and open-minded view. This approach supports the development of empathy, tolerance, and respect in intercultural communication. The results confirm that teachers' instructional strategies, attitudes, and classroom practices strongly influence learners' intercultural communication competence. Through the use of cultural content, interactive activities, and reflective discussion, teachers help learners develop the skills and attitudes necessary for effective communication in multicultural contexts. Promoting cultural awareness and sensitivity: The study emphasizes the importance of promoting cultural awareness and sensitivity in language classrooms. Teachers can incorporate cultural content into their teaching materials and activities, as well as encourage students to be open-minded and respectful towards other cultures. This can help develop learners' intercultural communication competence and prepare them for global communication. Improving teacher training programs: The study suggests that teacher training programs should focus on developing teachers' intercultural communication competence and providing them with the necessary tools and skills to effectively teach intercultural communication in language classrooms. This can help ensure that teachers are equipped to teach intercultural communication to their students. Enhancing language curriculum design: The study highlights the need for language curricula to incorporate intercultural communication components. Language curricula can be designed to include opportunities for students to interact with people from different cultures, learn about different cultures, and develop intercultural communication skills.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that teachers play a crucial role in developing intercultural communication competence in English language learners. The results clearly show that learners' intercultural awareness, attitudes, and communication skills improve when teachers actively integrate cultural elements into language instruction. This supports the view that language learning and cultural learning are closely connected and should be developed together.



One important issue discussed in this study is the teacher's role in raising cultural awareness. When teachers include cultural topics through texts, videos, and classroom discussions, learners gain a deeper understanding of how language is shaped by culture. For example, discussing differences in politeness strategies or communication styles helps students realize that the same expression may have different meanings in different cultural contexts. This finding supports the ideas of Michael Byram, who emphasizes that intercultural competence includes knowledge, attitudes, and skills, not only language ability. Another key point in the discussion is the influence of teachers on learners' attitudes toward other cultures. The results show that teachers who encourage open dialogue and cultural comparison help learners develop respect and tolerance. For instance, when students compare their own cultural practices with those of other countries, they begin to reflect on their assumptions and become more open-minded. This aligns with the research of Darla K. Deardorff, who highlights reflection and attitude development as central elements of intercultural competence.

Interactive activities were also shown to be highly effective, and this can be explained by the active involvement of learners in meaningful communication. Role plays, case studies, and group discussions allow learners to practice intercultural communication in realistic situations. For example, role plays simulating international teamwork or academic discussions help students practice appropriate language use, turn-taking, and respectful disagreement. Such activities help bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-life communication.

The discussion also highlights the teacher's role as a cultural mediator. Teachers who explain cultural norms and challenge stereotypes help learners avoid oversimplified views of other cultures. For example, by showing diversity within a single culture, teachers help students understand that culture is not fixed but dynamic. This approach supports empathy and reduces prejudice, which are essential qualities for successful intercultural communication. It is possible to evaluate IC, but how it is evaluated relies on how it is defined. (Klemp, 1979 cited by Byram, 1997; Fantini, 2009). Although there have been a number of definitions of IC that attempt to pinpoint its particular components, there hasn't been any agreement. (Deardorff, 2006). This consequently makes measuring it more challenging. In addition to being technically challenging, the ICC assessment also presents moral concerns. It raises concerns about the appropriateness of evaluating attitudes and quantifying tolerance (Byram and Zarate, 1997 a.). (Byram, 2000). It indicates that teachers closely watch students to spot alterations in their views, calling into question their authority to assess the level of social responsibility of their students. (Byram, 1997: 10). Some intercultural experts believe that IC cannot or should not be evaluated. (Deardorff, 2009). For instance, Kramsch (1993: 257) views IC as a very personal space that each learner will locate differently and understand differently at various points in time. However, evaluation is beneficial to organizations and people because it is required by educational systems to quantify performance (Corbett, 2003), and it can serve as a motivator for instructors and students to treat the intercultural component seriously.

However, the findings also suggest some challenges in developing intercultural competence. Some teachers may feel unprepared to teach cultural topics or may focus mainly on language form due to curriculum pressure. In addition, limited class time can make it difficult to include intercultural activities regularly. Despite these challenges, the study shows that even small cultural discussions or short reflective tasks can have a positive impact on learners' intercultural development. The discussion confirms that teachers' instructional choices and classroom practices strongly influence learners' intercultural communication competence. By creating a supportive environment, integrating cultural content, and encouraging reflection and



interaction, teachers help learners develop the skills and attitudes needed for effective communication in multicultural contexts.

Conclusion

This study examined the role of teachers in developing intercultural communication competence in English language learners. The findings clearly show that teachers play a central and active role in helping learners become more culturally aware and communicatively competent. By integrating cultural content into language lessons, teachers support learners in understanding not only how to speak English, but also how to use it appropriately in different cultural contexts. The study highlights that teachers influence learners' intercultural development through classroom interaction, teaching materials, and instructional strategies. Activities such as discussions, role plays, and case studies allow learners to experience cultural differences and practice respectful communication. Teachers who encourage reflection and cultural comparison help learners develop open-minded attitudes, empathy, and tolerance toward other cultures.

Although some challenges exist, such as limited class time and lack of teacher training in intercultural education, the results suggest that even small cultural elements can have a positive impact. Therefore, it is recommended that English language teachers actively include intercultural communication competence as an essential part of language instruction. Teacher education programs should also place greater emphasis on intercultural awareness to better prepare teachers for multicultural classrooms. Developing intercultural communication competence is a shared responsibility, but teachers play a key role in guiding learners toward effective and respectful communication in today's globalized world. In summary, the implications of this study are far-reaching and can provide guidance for language teaching and learning practices. By promoting intercultural communication competence among EFL learners, teachers can help prepare their students for global communication and create a more culturally sensitive and aware society.

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