# Մանկավարդություն և դասավանդման ճեթոդիկա

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## STRATEGIES OF RAISING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE IN EFL CLASSROOMS
### (On a sample from a Greek classroom setting)[1]

Intercultural communication competence (ICC) has been increasingly popular in English language teaching in recent years. However, since there are no instructional design frameworks to integrate intercultural content into EFL teaching, not all English language educators are familiar with the strategies of raising ICC in their classrooms. Therefore, the main goal of this study is to come up with strategies for promoting intercultural communication competence in EFL classrooms. The following study provides some theoretical background of ICC and describes current models for dealing with intercultural communicative competence.

Qualitative descriptive research was employed using a survey

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[1] The article is presented on the basis of the materials discussed during the annual student conference held on March 2, 2023 at Eurasia International University. // Հոդվածը ներկայացվում է 2023 մարտի 2-ին Եվրասիա միջազգային համալսարանում տեղի ունեցած ուսանողական ամենամյա գիտաժողովի ընթացքում քննարկված նյութերի հիման վրա:

method. The survey was carried out among students at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and Eurasia International University to be notified about their knowledge, attitudes, and work in intercultural settings. Participants were 52 students from 16 countries. The evidence showed that the students had a high awareness of ICC and were able to suggest strategies dealing with different linguistic and communicative challenges.

**Keywords:** Intercultural communication competence, EFL classroom, Strategies, International setting, Awareness.

**Introduction**

The globalized world with the rise of the Internet has made it essential for learners to be more interculturally competent communicators. Many interpersonal and sometimes even international issues are results of bad communication or lack of intercultural communication competence (ICC). In order to avoid frequent misunderstandings stemmed from cultural diversity we need to adopt innovative methods and approaches in current classrooms. The ICC model of teaching in EFL classrooms encourages learners to work toward broader cultural understandings and coexistence in current challenging world. The awareness and practice of intercultural communication have become essential and imperative skills in the contemporary world.

In this day and age, a plethora of educational, particularly language teaching policies focus on promoting international understanding and world peace. Therefore, intercultural communication competence should be integrated into educational institutions to meet the current needs of the 21st century classroom. ICC equips learners with the ability to contrast cultures, different cultural beliefs, behaviors, and meanings since the awareness of others avail to develop an understanding of a wide range of cultural issues and a positive attitude towards foreign countries and their cultures.

English language learning as a second (ESL) or foreign language (EFL) brings along the familiarization not only with the language but also with the culture of another country. Hence, interaction in the language classrooms becomes cross or intercultural as it inevitably includes an integration of the target culture of any individual. For a language learner, getting to know cultures is a difficult undertaking. Knowing about a culture entail understanding the distinctions, similarities, and uniqueness of any cultural element, and manifests itself as cultural awareness.

The study may greatly contribute to the rise of awareness of both students and teachers in EFL classrooms about the prominence of the improvement of intercultural communicative competence. The survey conducted at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH) and Eurasia International University of Armenia (EIU) might provide insightful information on how to work with multicultural classrooms effectively. Every year these universities welcome students from different parts of the world and sign cooperation agreements with other universities

in the world.

The general objective of the action research was to propose feasible and conducive strategies to foster ICC in EFL classrooms. The specific objectives were:

- To refer to the theoretical foundations of ICC to promote the intercultural communicative competence of students in EFL classrooms.
- To assess the existing situation of the intercultural communicative competence of students of AUTH and EIU to contribute its multicultural experience to the study.
- To offer a set of tasks to develop the intercultural communicative competence of students in EFL classrooms.

**Literature Review**
**Intercultural Communication Competence**

The inherent component of ICC is the concept of culture. Since culture is largely responsible for the development of our individual and social realities, as well as our particular repertoires of expressive actions and meanings, it is essential to perceive culture per se (Porter, R., Samovar, L., 1994, pp. 19–20).

Intercultural communication scholars refer to the theory with a dynamic outlook and do not believe that culture can be measured nor that cultures share universal attributes. Hence, theorists emphasize that culture and communication shift along with societal alterations and theories should consider the constant shifting and nuances of society (Aneas, Maria Assumpta; Sandín, María Paz, 2009).

Despite the attempts of many studies to define intercultural communication competence, a cohesive theory and conceptualization has not been created yet.

The main reason for that is taking into account various definitions suggested by different scholars may sometimes trigger controversial issues.

Intercultural communication refers to the direct and spoken interactions among individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, intercultural communication competency encompasses the abilities and skills that enable people to initiate encounters with people from diverse backgrounds, analyze differences, effectively manage potential conflicts, and set up relationships with people from varied backgrounds.

Intercultural competence is closely connected with the ability to operate effectively across cultures, to think and act correctly, and to interact and collaborate with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, whether at home or abroad. In an increasingly globalized society, where we are more likely to contact with people from different cultures and countries who have been molded by diverse values, beliefs, and experiences, intercultural competence is a useful skill. (Leung, 2014).

In this vein, Taylor (1994) considers intercultural competence as a transformative process in which a person develops adaptive ability and changes his or her lifestyle in order to effectively understand and adjust with the needs of another culture. It implies that intercultural competency is viewed as a continuous internal personal

process rather than a result.

Irrespective of considerable number of definitions of the given term "competence" suggested by different scholars, this paper will focus on this concept as a holistic system, a set of properties, qualities, and states of an individual necessary for effective performance of professional activity.

In Byram's book the role of the language teacher has been described as that of a "professional mediator between foreign languages and culture" (Byram, Risager, 1999). Vernier et al. (2008) the teaching of culture as a fifth skill for language learners that "enhances students' overall learning experience."

**Tasks and Intercultural Learning Procedure**

Integrating the various facets of teaching language in context, Kramsch (1993) describes the following goals of foreign language learning and teaching:

1. communicate appropriately with native speakers of the language;
2. get to understand others;
3. get to understand themselves in the process (p. 183).

Through the tasks learners access and understand language data, that is, "socially and culturally situated texts". The key properties of task design according to Candlin (1987) include input (data), roles, settings, actions, outcome (goals), monitoring, and feedback (pp. 11–12).

Therefore, the tasks presented in this study are brainstorm, the guessing game, interview, story, role play, presentation, representation, Sorrell's Intercultural Praxis model activity, mediation, and pluricultural tasks, blog exchange, and exploration of cultural artefacts. All these tasks intend to promote intercultural communication competence in EFL classrooms and are considered to be very practical and flexible for any teaching context. They not only enable learners to engage in the exploration of specific cultural characteristics, but they also provide them with the tools they need to act as mediators between different cultural realities, promoting intercultural communication competence in the most diverse cultural contexts.

Additionally, the exercises emphasize interactional spoken communication and need practical language skills, such as popular phrases and idioms. They allow learners to express themselves in their own unique way. Furthermore, they broaden learners' intercultural understanding while also meeting their needs and interests.

Furthermore, they combine communicative competence and intercultural communicative competence, the two aspects that make a learner a perfect mediator within the teaching and learning process of a foreign language, and apply the four language skills at the same time, combining communicative competence and intercultural communicative competence.

**Research Questions**

1. What strategies are effective to promote intercultural communication competence in EFL classrooms?

2. Which tasks are more productive in the context of ICC?
3. What kind of challenges do students experience in a multicultural environment?
4. What are the bases for the ideally intercultural competent classroom?

**Research Methods**

Qualitative descriptive research was employed using a survey method. Since this survey strives to examine students' attitudes towards and experiences of intercultural communicative competence a questionnaire was determined to be a good fit. The survey of attitudes and experiences of intercultural communicative competence carried out in this paper was therefore conducted through an online Google Form questionnaire. The questionnaire was directed at students at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and Eurasia International University of Armenia comprising total of 22 questions. The complete questionnaire can be seen in Appendix A1. The latter contains different forms of questions (multiple questions, one short answer and two long answers). The very research consisted of three main stages: the selection of the participants, the process of data collection, and the data analysis.

**The Selection of Participants**

The selection of the participants included students from the Department of Foreign languages at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and EIU of Armenia. The participants were selected based on their experience of ICC and willingness to volunteer in the current study. The participants were 52 students (consisting of 43 females (82.7%) and 9 men (17.3%)). It is important to highlight that the participants are from different cultural backgrounds (Armenia, USA, UK, Greece, Bulgaria, Catalonia, Chechnya, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Spain, Czech Republic) which contributes to the multicultural nature of the study.

**Results and Discussions**
**What strategies are effective to promote intercultural communicative competence in EFL classrooms?**

The majority of students were able to respond to this question, demonstrating their thorough knowledge of the ICC and insightful consideration of their own intercultural experiences. All of the students who took part in the survey stated that they were exposed to intercultural dialogue on a regular basis. Furthermore, many of the participants are exchange students, they believe that ongoing connections and multicultural collaborations with other institutions, such as exchange programs, workshops, and webinars, can pave the way to increase awareness of ICC.

They contend that identifying the tendency for people to categorize and generalize others based on stereotypes and making an effort to overcome this

barrier would be helpful in the scope of intercultural dialogue. It is emphasized that using stories from many cultures is an important strategy for introducing pupils to the diversity of the world since engaging stories encourage empathy and, as a result, improve intercultural communication skills.

According to the students, presenting an environment that is open and cooperative while maintaining a neutral background can help learners share and learn about various cultures where all students feel valued, respected, engaged in the process of learning.

In addition, students confirmed that presentations and guessing games are excellent exercises for addressing the problems, myths, and shared values that we frequently encounter in multicultural settings. Below are the following suggestions made by the students for promoting ICC in EFL classrooms:

- Making lessons interactive and student–centered.
- Having more non–formal events.
- Sharing personal experience and role play.
- Multicultural events, debates, actual communication.
- Field trips.
- Adapting diversity in your classrooms.
- Creating a tolerant environment in the EFL classrooms.
- Employing culturally responsive pedagogy.
- Promoting cooperative learning, teamwork, focus on linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic skills.
- Presentation of phonological systems of every language, daily communication through an interlanguage.
- Listening to English interviews and conducting them by themselves.
- Talking about every student's country, religion, and culture, discussing the differences and similarities between them.

## What are the bases for the ideally intercultural competent classroom?

The aim of this needs analysis inquiry was to test the students' general comprehension of interculturally competent instruction and their capacity to evaluate its efficacy. It should be noted that 98.1% of the participants had experience with cultural diversity, and when asked how they would rate their intercultural communication skills, 38.5% responded "high" and 30.8% – "very high." Although the criteria the students are using to evaluate their ICC is vague, this indicator can provide some useful information about their level of cultural awareness and prior exposure to intercultural education.

To the question "What are the bases for the ideally intercultural competent classroom?" students answered by suggesting one important factor which is embracing various cultures in the classroom and developing a diversity–focused learning environment. A classroom where everyone is represented and everyone

recognizes their roles. A place where everyone can share their thoughts and feelings without having a fear of criticism.

The students present a model of an ideal interculturally competent classroom where there is no racism or other form of discrimination, everyone is treated equally regardless of their cultural or religious beliefs, and where all methods/ tasks are used to create a diversity of more enjoyable ways of learning. The majority of the students mentioned that an intercultural competent classroom is the one, where the learning environment is more responsive and inclusive to the learners' needs and educational expectations placed upon them by external factors. Learners show mutual respect to each other without insulting any different culture. Everyone appropriately behaves, acts, and co-operates with people from different cultural backgrounds.

And finally, the students expressed agreement and approval on the effectiveness of having a classroom full of international students who value collaborative learning and cascading their knowledge.

### Which tasks are more productive in the context of ICC?

The tasks that have been more or less frequently employed at the educational institutions of the participants are shown in the following chart.

Which of the following tasks have been more commonly used in your education institution?
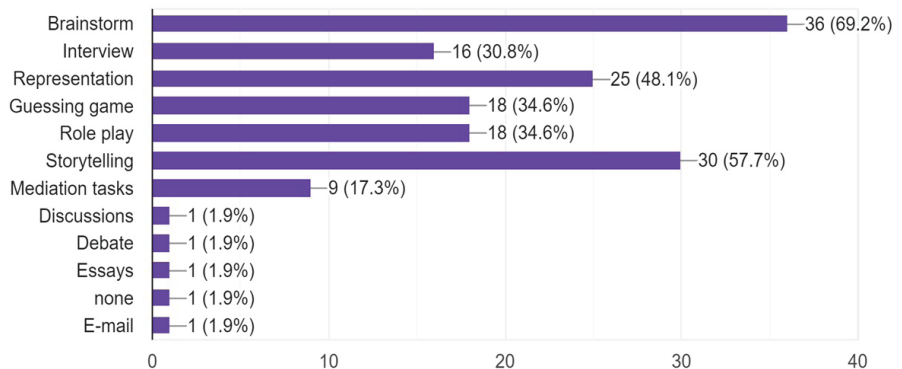52 responses



Fig.1.

According to the chart, many of the students were exposed to brainstorming (69.2%) and storytelling (57.7%) tasks and activities. This is understandable given that those tasks can occasionally be used to foster communicative competence even in non-multicultural settings, so they are not necessarily indicators of ICC. Representation (48.1%) is another activity that the students cite, and they equally value Role Play (34.6%) and the Guessing Game (34.6%).

According to the graph, it is clear that some students still have little to no exposure to some really beneficial and interactive tasks, such interviews (30.8%) and mediation exercises (17.3%). Interestingly enough, other students did, however, mention the assignments and tasks that were utilized in their EFL classes, such as talks, debates, essays, and email assignments.

Another key point to take into consideration is the productivity of the above–mentioned tasks.

Hence, the findings revealed that comparing aspects of the students' own culture with those of the target culture is an efficient and practical way of developing cultural awareness for students discover similarities and differences between their own and the target language culture which leads to common understanding and tolerance.

### What kind of challenges do students experience in a multicultural environment?

With the development of multiculturalism to break down cultural barriers between the learners, this question seeks to address the hindrances that might occur in a multicultural context. The primary challenges students encounter in multicultural contexts are depicted in the following graph:

What kind of challenges do students face in a multicultural environment?
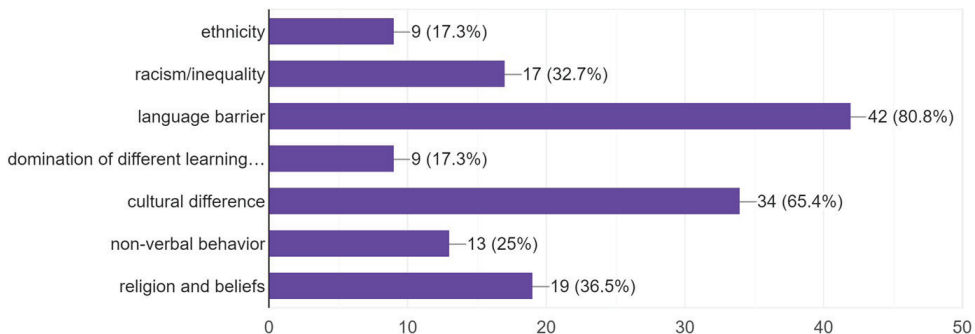52 responses



Fig.2.

The language barrier (80.8%) and cultural diversity (65.45%) are cited by the majority of students as the major difficulties in multicultural education. This underlines once more the significance of integrating culture and language instruction, demonstrating that in order to be interculturally competent, one must also develop cultural awareness. It is clear that even the most successful students with strong communicating skills may lack intercultural communication skills.

Religion and beliefs (36.5%), racism/inequality (32.7%), non–verbal conduct (25%) and dominance of various learning/teaching styles (17.3%) are other difficulties

highlighted by the participants. This could provide some guidance on how to manage the obstacles faced by participants in multicultural classrooms and create assignments in line with those issues. In EFL classes, students have also been questioned about how frequently they make comparisons between elements of their own culture and those of a foreign culture. 25% of them profess to compare the perspectives of various cultures frequently, 38.5% occasionally, and 26.9% occasionally.

To the question "How often are students given opportunities to learn about people from different races, ethnicities, or cultures in your education institution?" 40.4 % of the participants chose the option "sometimes" and 23.1 % "often". It has become apparent that even though the students involved in this research are from multicultural learning environments, their education institutions do not intensively implement a multicultural approach to teaching.

The other question from the survey (At your school, how often are students encouraged to think more deeply about discrimination topics?) shows that only 11.5% of the students are always encouraged to discuss disquieting topics, different kinds of discrimination and stereotypes, and 23.1% are often encouraged to do so, whilst 42.3 % of them only sometimes are given the chance of open discussions and debates.

Finally, to the question "How satisfied are you with the intercultural communication competence (ICC) in your education institution?" 44.2% of the students chose "somewhat satisfied", 23.1% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, and only 11.5% was very satisfied. This image detects that the strategies of these education institutions can be productive in the context of ICC if they meet students' needs and are implemented on regular basis.

As the findings implied, to the question "If students from different backgrounds struggled to get along in your class, how comfortable would you be intervening?" the majority of the students held the opinion that they have average flexibility and readiness to respond if any question about some aspect of the target culture is raised.

The overall findings of the survey show that despite the lack of explicit instruction in ICC many students have high level of ICC. The results of the questionnaires indicate that there is a high awareness of current models but practical communicative exercises are not commonly used in EFL classrooms.

As the findings implied, students have positive attitudes towards ICC and emphasize the need for teaching culture in EFL classrooms. Therefore, EFL teachers should integrate culture teaching as a part of language teaching.

After assessing the applicability of the tasks proposed in the survey it was apparent that they fulfill the principles of ICC and meet the needs of EFL students.

### Conclusion

Ultimately, the findings demonstrate that intercultural communicative competence enables EFL teachers to adopt efficient strategies in their classrooms to promote intercultural awareness and cultural competence. In this regard, the action research revises the theoretical background of ICC and suggests a set of tasks to endorse ICC in EFL classrooms based on the data analysis of the survey.

The ascertained facts put forward the subsequent deductions:

Suggested strategies which function effectively in the context of globalization can be modified according to the learners' needs and interests and advance them with ICC skills so that they become intercultural speakers.

A meticulous examination of the survey data has shown that learners' awareness clearly plays a crucial role in the ICC learning procedure. Moreover, it provides a threshold for changing learners' attitudes towards "otherness" by incorporating a variety of teaching strategies and materials.

A special significance attaches to the findings that signify broad understanding of generalizability emerging from cross–cultural comparisons that illuminate learners' similarities amid their cultural diversity which lead to common understanding, tolerance, and empathy.

## Recommendations

EFL teachers should be equipped with strategies and teaching aids to elucidate students with aspects of cultural content and perform such applicable tasks as role–plays, presentations, interviews, and other tasks presented in the given research.

The integration of all the core three domains–cognitive, affective and behavioral should be maximized since the effectiveness of intercultural communicative competence and the knowledge of the English language is imperative in this day and age.

## Limitations

Albeit the following study equips teachers in–service with strategies of intercultural communication competence in their EFL classrooms, still there is lack of thorough implementation of them. Consequently, further studies should dwell upon particular issues to raise cultural awareness and supply teachers and learners with a relevant scaffolding for advancing intercultural communicative competence.

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**Իրինա Մխիթարյան**

*Եվրասիա միջազգային համալսարանի Օտար լեզուների և գրականության ամբիոնի, Երևանի պետական համալսարանի Եվրոպական լեզուների և հաղորդակցության ֆակուլտետի դոցենտ, բանասիրական գիտությունների թեկնածու*

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**Ինեսա Ուդումյան**

*Օհանյան կրթահամալիրի անգլերեն լեզվի ուսուցչուհի, Միջազգային բակալավրիատի ծրագրի համակարգող օգնական, Օհանյան կրթահամալիր*

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## ՄԻՋՄՇԱԿՈՒԹԱՅԻՆ ՀԱՂՈՐԴԱԿՑՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԿԱՐՈՂՈՒՆԱԿՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՆԵՐԻ ՁԱՐԳԱՑՄԱՆ ՌԱԶՄԱՎԱՐՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՆԵՐԸ ԱՆԳԼԵՐԵՆԸ ՕՏԱՐ ԼԵԶՈՒ ԴԱՍԱՎԱՆԴՎՈՂ ԼՍԱՐԱՆՈՒՄ (ՀՈՒՆԱԿԱՆ ԼՍԱՐԱՆԻ ՕՐԻՆԱԿԻ ՀԻՄԱՆ ՎՐԱ)

Վերջին տարիներին անգլերեն լեզվի ուսուցման մեջ միջմշակութային հաղորդակցման կարողականությունն առավել մեծ տարածում է ստացել: Այնուամենայնիվ, մեր օրերում հույժ կարևոր միտում է մասնագետներին իրազեկելու (ICC) միջմշակութային հաղորդակցումը զարգացնելու ռազմա-վարությունների մասին, որոնք, թերևս, ներառված չեն անգլերենը որպես օտար լեզու ուսումնառողների կրթական ծրագրի համատեքստում: Սույն

հոդվածի շրջանակներում փորձ է արվում ներկայացնելու ՄՀ(ICC) տեսական հիմքերը և գործնական մոդելները՝ որպես հետազոտության հիմք ընդունելով որակական–նկարագրական մեթոդը:Հետազոտության հարցումն իրականացվել է Սալոնիկի Արիստոտելի համալսարանի և Եվրասիա միջազգային համալսարանի Օտար լեզուների և գրականության ամբիոնի ուսանողների հետ: Ստացված արդյունքները հավաստում են, որ անգլերեն լեզվի ուսումնառողները բավականին իրազեկված են միջմշակութային կարողականության (ICC) ռազմավարություններից, սակայն վերջիններիս գործնական կիրառությունը հիմնականում բացակայում է անգլերենը որպես օտար լեզու դասընթացի ժամանակ:

**Հիմնաբառեր.** միջմշակութային հաղորդակցման կարողականություն, անգլերենը որպես օտար լեզու ուսումնառողներ, իրագործելի և նպաստավոր ռազմավարություններ, միջազգային կարգավորում, ընբռնում:

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## СТРАТЕГИИ ПОВЫШЕНИЯ КОМПЕТЕНТНОСТИ В МЕЖКУЛЬТУР–НОЙ КОММУНИКАЦИИ В КЛАССАХ EFL
### (из опыта работы с греческим классом)

В последние годы навыки межкультурной коммуникации стали более популярными в обучении английскому языку. Тем не менее, в наши дни становится все более важной тенденция обучать профессионалов стратегиям развития межкультурной коммуникации (ICC), которые могут не включаться в учебную программу по английскому языку как иностранному. В рамках данной статьи предпринята попытка представить теоретические основы и практические модели МКК. В основе исследования лежит качественно–дескриптивный метод. Общие результаты опроса показывают, что, несмотря на отсутствие чётких указаний, связанных с МКК (ICC), многие учащиеся имеют высокий уровень МКК, хотя практические коммуникативные упражнения обычно не используются в классах EFL.