

# Interculturally competent teachers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

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## Abstract

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, intercultural competence and intercultural communication play an increasingly important role in every segment of life, including education. What does it mean to be interculturally competent or to be able to communicate intercultural? Human communities, society, culture – they are in a constant state of change. Culture is therefore dynamic and never static, just like the language associated with it. One of the main characteristics of intercultural competence is that those who possess it can deal flexibly with change. The coexistence of cultures – like every interaction – is at least bilateral, but we can only transform this way our environment, our society, into a world in that it is worth living together. This will only work if the most diverse groups of the society participate: the national majority, the national or autochthonous minorities, the long-established locals and people with a migration background. Why is this urgently needed and how can it be ensured that students gain practical experience during their training and promote their intercultural attitude? Teacher candidates have to be well prepared for their educational work, which will most likely be characterised by multiculturalism.

**Keywords:** multiculturalism; intercultural competence; intercultural learning; communication

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## Introduction

Multiculturalism can be liked or disliked by the participants of education but one of the greatest tasks of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the school system and in teacher training is to make teachers and students intercultural competent so that they can successfully and sustainably carry out their intercultural work in a multicultural school in the present and in the future, because every child has the right to equal treatment.

The UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity affirms that “respect for cultural diversity, tolerance, dialogue and cooperation in a climate of mutual trust and understanding are among the best guarantees of international peace and security [...]”. (31<sup>st</sup> General Assembly. Paris, 15 October – 5 November 2001.) The original and constantly growing national and ethnic heterogeneity of Europe requires the development of intercultural competence in the training of future edu-

cators. In the document on key competences for lifelong learning of the European Parliament and Council this competence is mentioned several times among the recommended eight key competences. (Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning 2011, 32–33)

The document published by the Council of Europe entitled: *Living together, combining diversity and freedom in 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe*, which states, among other things, that identities are based on the voluntary choice of the individual, and no one can be forced to choose or accept a primary identity that excludes other identities.

According to the relevant requirements of pedagogical training in the European Union, teachers should have knowledge after basic training that can ensure “an unprejudiced and intercultural education”. Although teacher training colleges and universities mention intercultural issues, or intercultural competence and intercultural communication, in their official forums and in relation to their international projects, this does not appear enough in the basic training or the basic curriculum, and if it does, then more on a theoretical than on a practical level (Sipos 2017).

The development of European citizens' sensitivity and intercultural competences should not only focus on the acceptance of identities and cultures outside European culture, but also - with increased emphasis - on the identity and culture of the various European people who settle along the borders of independent states or across several borders as a result of the accelerated and increasingly intensive mobility in Europe. It should be focused on the indigenous national minorities and ethnic groups within the individual states. These circumstances have emerged as a result of border changes and other historical processes and events so minorities are still fighting for their economic, cultural, religious, educational and human rights.

According to Margit Feischmidt, “At the same time as immigrants from other countries, those who were “here” – but were silenced by the prevailing discourses of society, forgotten in a sphere far removed from the public sphere – are also searching for new forms of recognition: native or long-established immigrant ethnic minorities” (Feischmidt 1997, 7).

This article is focused primarily on inter- and multiculturalism in relation to people who are culturally, linguistically and religiously different but belong to the same European civilisation and the Judeo-Christian cultural sphere, rather than on the migration processes to Europe that accelerated in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the multiculturalism that emerged from them.

## 1. Confusion of terms

What can be understood by the terms multiculturalism and interculturalism? What these terms have in common is that they refer to cultural diversity. Multicultural simply means that several different cultures live side by side. For example, we talk about a “multicultural Europe” or a “multicultural society”. It can be said about Budapest, Bratislava and Vienna, for example, since they have always been “mul-

ultural cities”. Intercultural describes the fact that interaction takes place “inter”, i.e. between cultures. In multicultural societies, “intercultural communication” is an everyday occurrence.

The exchange of ideas on the basis of dialogue is an essential element of interculturality. Postmodern dialogue legitimises and supports the cultural diversity present in society. Postmodern philosophy rejects the systemic, unity-seeking thinking of rationalism. In contrast, it values personal experience and its narrative, the so-called “narrative”. The postmodern perspective therefore denies the possibility of interpreting the world in an exclusive, absolute way, i.e. the society has entered an age in which the existence of an absolute truth is questioned (Cseri 2021, 6).

## **1.2. Intercultural competence and communication**

These two competences are interdependent, so someone can only communicate effectively interculturality if they are interculturality competent. Communication and cultural history are closely interwoven. According to Bolten (2012), this can also be demonstrated by the example of naming products (for example with different car brands). With a little background knowledge of history, everyone can understand that culture is a product of communication, and vice versa (Bolten 2012). Language is bound to its time and to the respective contemporary culture, i.e. it is context-bound and cannot be separated from one another.

### **1.2.1. Intercultural competence and intercultural learning**

Intercultural competence, like other competences, is a process has never been really completed. Intercultural competence is “from I to we” (Fischer, Sträde 2015). Intercultural competence encompasses more than knowledge and more than a technique. It encompasses attitudes that are expressed equally in thought, feeling and action and are anchored in corresponding life experiences and ethical principles. Intercultural skills include insight into the cultural dependency of one’s own thoughts, actions and behaviour as well as the ability and willingness to perceive and analyse foreign cultural perspectives. Competences cannot be taught; they can only be initiated.

What does competence mean? When is someone competent? As with the concept of culture, there is no universally valid definition. Competence is “the ability or potential to successfully cope with complex requirements in specific situations”. (Strauch, Jütten, Mania, 2009). Competences, including intercultural competence, cannot be “taught” in traditional way, but the goals of intercultural learning can be formulated. Intercultural learning should lead to the development of intercultural competence, or rather intercultural competence presupposes intercultural learning. On the other hand, it is consciously dealing with and reflecting on existing prejudices and stereotypes, as well as awareness of other cultures, acceptance of cultural differences and appreciation of cultural diversity. (Bolten 2012)

Intercultural education and development is required from everyone: both the majority of a group, a society, and the minority. An important prerequisite is that

members of the minority are not seen as victims. Only this attitude can lead to equal dialogues. Intercultural education and upbringing is not a “re-education” of the “majority” with regards to a tolerant approach to the various minorities and vice versa, but is aimed at all members in society with the goal of ensuring optimal coexistence. There is a list of the most important possible objectives of intercultural learning as summarised by Weidemann (Weidemann 2007, 494; quoted from Straub 2010, 37).

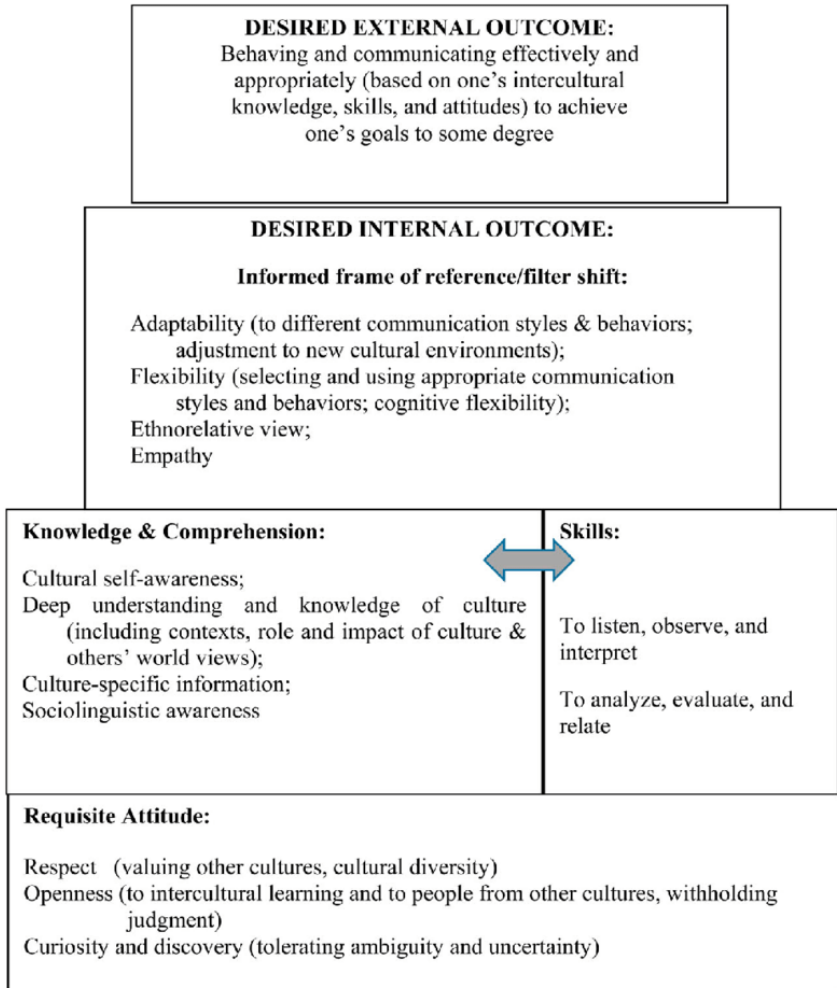
Aims of intercultural learning:

- the acquisition of conceptual knowledge about intercultural content
- learning a foreign language
- the acquisition of new social skills
- reducing anxiety and developing tolerance of ambiguity in interaction with strangers
  - the necessary development of the ability to regulate emotions
  - developing awareness of the cultural dimension of social interactions
  - the development of the generalised ability to orientate oneself quickly in foreign cultural environments or the development of an attitude of attentive information processing
  - increasing flexibility and adaptability.

As an intercultural trainer, these are the goals of intercultural learning of the seminars and workshops for the participants:

- promotion of competences that help students to work and live together with people from other cultures
  - sensitisation to the perception of cultural and other differences
  - acceptance of diversity and equality
  - understanding and dealing with stereotypes, superstitions and fears
  - developing a differentiated and open mindset – critical thinking.

Intercultural competence is always being reinterpreted. Darla Deardorff’s pyramid of intercultural competence, for example, focuses on the hierarchy and interdependence of the elements and explains that the core of competence is the attitude on which knowledge and skills are built. All of this makes the interaction effective and appropriate and enables participants to acquire new skills (Deardoff 2009).



- Move from personal level (attitude) to interpersonal/interactive level (outcomes)
- Degree of intercultural competence depends on acquired degree of underlying elements

Table 1. Pyramid model of intercultural competence (Deardorff 2009)

Darla Deardorff also designed the Intercultural Learning Spiral. As the spiral shape illustrates, all elements interact with each other and are to be understood as an ongoing learning process. The further development of intercultural competence is never really complete (Deardorff, 2009).

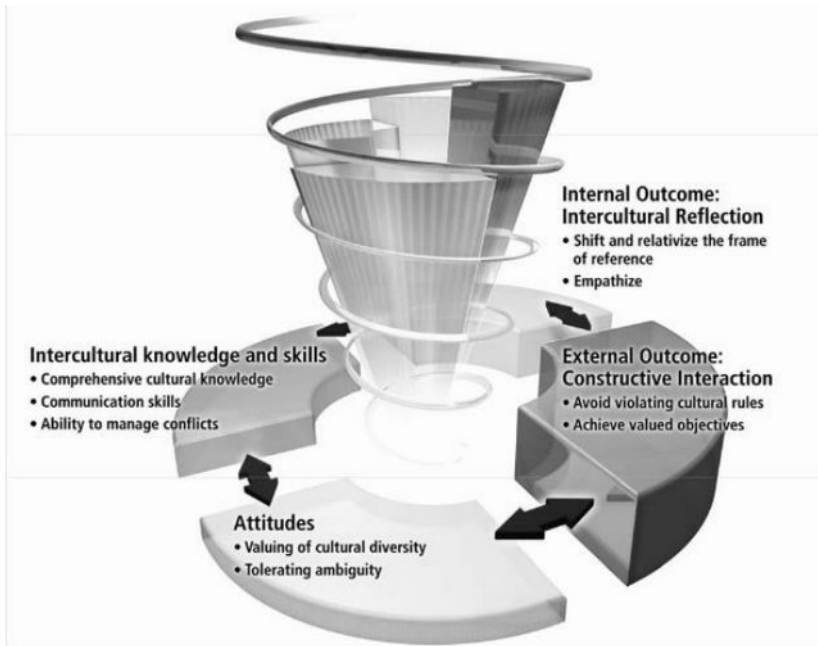


Table 2. The intercultural competence learning spiral (Deardorff 2018)

Learning and appropriate and effective behaviour in intercultural situations is only possible if everyone first opens internally towards the diversity of cultures, to the legitimisation of “otherness” and are genuinely willing to learn. This enables to understand that there are different cultural understandings, “cultural glasses”. With the development of intercultural competence, intercultural communication also develops, as it can also be adapted to new communicative rules with a flexible attitude and empathy for the feelings and actions of our counterparts.

Intercultural competence also can be seen as a holistic interplay. Overall, intercultural competence should not be seen as a single skill, but as a successful holistic interplay of “individual, social, professional and strategic behaviour in intercultural contexts” (Bolten 2012, 87). Someone is interculturally competent if they manage to implement and realise the interplay of these different components of intercultural competence in a balanced and targeted manner.

Intercultural learning should be promoted through learning levels such as the cognitive, affective and behavioural levels in order to develop individual components of intercultural competence. The individual areas of intercultural competence influence each other. Overall, the model of intercultural competence is a theoretical model whose objectives and ideal states cannot normally be completely fulfilled (Straub, Nothnagel, Wiedemann 2010, 22).

Overall, it can be said that intercultural competence is a group of different skills, i.e. knowledge, abilities and abilities that enable the interculturally competent person to act effectively and appropriately in intercultural overlap situations (Hiller 2010, 46). People who have intercultural competence are able to achieve their

own goals “effectively”, but on the other hand they are also willing and able to respect the goals of others and to follow rules of behaviour that are important to their partner, i.e. they can act and communicate “appropriately” in different situations (Müller, Gelbrich 2004, 793f).

### **1.2.2. Intercultural Communication**

Situations of intercultural encounters in everyday and professional life are omnipresent. Intercultural communication is the basis for every intercultural situation and interaction in everyday life, politics and business (Genkova 2019). Intercultural communication refers to any form of communication between members of different cultures. A person’s intercultural competence has an impact on their intercultural communication.

As we all carry a cultural map within us, we only hear and see what we expect to hear and see and do not hear and see what we do not expect to hear and see. We perceive things differently, subjectively. Communication is a process in which people, individuals, try to exchange thoughts, feelings, symbols and meanings. “Pure” communication is impossible because everyone constantly brings culturally conditioned assumptions and prejudices into the communication process. Creating our own reality should not assume that the conditions under which we act are the same for all communication partners, especially not in an intercultural situation.

Intercultural communication is a process in which people, individuals who do not belong to the same culture, try to exchange thoughts, feelings, symbols and meanings. Because they do not have the same cultural background, they do not share the same patterns of thought, feeling and behaviour, beliefs and values. It follows that intercultural communication is a communication under difficult conditions.

Intercultural communication has become a fashionable term. In times of globalisation and multicultural societies, this term, together with the term intercultural competence, is gaining relevance and is associated with constantly growing importance. A standardised semantic classification of the term intercultural communication cannot be made due to its use in different disciplines and in sometimes very different contexts (Papageorgiou 2015, 34). This term is interpreted differently depending on the cultural area and specialised discipline. In linguistics, for example, intercultural communication refers to interpersonal face-to-face communication between members of different cultures (Lüsenbrink 2008, 8).

## **2. Opportunities to develop students’ intercultural competence and communication skills**

In the following, it is shown what options are available to teachers to develop the intercultural competence and intercultural communication of learners. Based on many years of experience as a university lecturer and intercultural trainer, recommendations and practical suggestions are given on how to contribute to the development of the intercultural competence of future educators as much as possible in university practice.

According to this research, the following factors influence the intercultural competence and intercultural communication skills of female students: The number of languages spoken and intercultural relationships, whether they come from a multi-cultural or mono-cultural environment, or school, and whether their intercultural competence is promoted in various ways during their studies.

### **3. How does knowledge of foreign languages and intercultural relations affect intercultural competence and communication skills?**

One can be interculturally competent even if you hardly speak any foreign languages, as people without foreign language skills can also be tolerant, emphatic and open. However, the chance that someone can better understand other cultures and communicate better with representatives of other cultures increases with foreign language skills.

In May 2019, the EU Official Journal published the “Council Recommendation on a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages.” According to this document, it is important for Europeans to master at least two foreign languages in addition to their mother tongue. The aim is to move “from perfect bilingualism to functional multilingualism”.

English is the language of the European Union and of world communication, is “a must”, German – is said to be a plus, but German is much more. In Central and Eastern Europe, the German language and culture have been anchored for centuries. It is almost logical to start with German as the first foreign language in Slovakia or Hungary. “The language of poets and thinkers” is the mother tongue with the largest share of the population (95 million native speakers) on the European continent. German is the official language in Germany, Austria and Liechtenstein – as well as one of the official languages in Switzerland, Belgium, Luxembourg and Italy. In the spirit of promoting intercultural competence, the EU recommends not only learning at least two foreign languages, but also learning the language of a neighbour and according to the Swiss model, the languages of national minorities.

What does functional multilingualism mean? In many regions of Europe, people can talk to each other without speaking the languages perfectly, as it is in Bratislava, which was actually trilingual. In the Central European region, you could learn 2-3 languages for free within a village or town (for example in Austria: Slovenian, Croatian, Hungarian; in Hungary: German, Slovakian, Croatian; in Slovakia: Hungarian, German).

For some people it is natural growing up in an intercultural environment, in contact with people of other mother tongues and cultures, because different languages and cultures have lived together for centuries where they live. Such cities are for example: Bratislava, Vienna, Budapest. The only question is whether politicians support this linguistic and cultural heterogeneity or whether they portray it as negative and use it for their own purposes.



People who live in an intercultural environment, or in a minority, are more autonomous than those who belong to a majority society. Those who belong to a minority within a society are confronted with this fact every day and therefore need a strong identity, personal autonomy and a way of thinking that is independent from the average, from the mainstream, in order not to be assimilated into the majority, but to be able to assert themselves well within it. (Sipos 2017)

#### 4. Promoting intercultural competence at universities

Examples of good practice:

- Practical seminars and workshops where students are sensitised to intercultural issues through theory, interaction, role-play and simulation elements. Compared to traditional teaching methods, workshop-style courses can significantly improve the ability to deal with intercultural situations more efficiently (Sipos 2017).
- Through these learning units, students acquire the necessary knowledge (main topics: democracy, human rights, culture, stereotypes, identity) to become aware of their own situation and the reactions of others and to be able to analyse them. Another aim is to develop a differentiated and reflective way of thinking. One will be prepared to deal competently with intercultural situations.
- Maintaining contacts and cooperation with national or ethnic minorities, as well as visiting their institutions and programmes.
- Joint workshops and seminars with students and teaching staff from foreign partner universities and various institutions abroad. The students work together in mixed teams and solve problems together. Ideally, successful joint work leads to students from Germany and abroad spending breaks and free time together outside of the compulsory parts and staying in contact even after the joint work.
- Organising study trips for students. Visits and internships abroad, in teacher and teacher training institutions, schools, alternative schools with different curricula.
- Inviting local and international guests from other native languages and cultures regularly to various university events. For example, to training courses, exhibitions, conferences, international programmes.
- Counselling regarding intercultural experiences. Students need to be well prepared and equipped for the various intercultural programmes. Equally important is the processing of intercultural experiences, both positive and negative, which can all be seen as a learning process.
- Promoting Erasmus programme. In line with the roots of the European Union, Erasmus supports language learning and linguistic diversity, and thus the development of intercultural competence in Europe. Students should be motivated, supported and prepared for this programme. It is important to support them before, during and after the Erasmus programme. The intercultural workshops can prepare students for what to expect in a new, perhaps unfamiliar environment (topics such as culture shock, intercultural communication and intercultural competence are covered here).

– Organising Erasmus+ Blended Intensive Programmes. These BIPs enable students and their lecturers to work together internationally, partly online and partly face-to-face. The aim of BIP is to promote the use of innovative learning and teaching methods and utilise the opportunities offered by online collaboration. By working together in transnational and interdisciplinary teams, current social challenges – for example in connection with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals – can be addressed.

## Conclusion

Multiculturalism and interculturalism can be liked or disliked, but the fact is that the world, and Europe in particular, is becoming increasingly multicultural. So it is not a vision when we talk about a multicultural society, but merely an observation, the reality in which we have to learn, teach, work and live. The multicultural society is an actual state, it has to be developed this way so everyday life is associated with fewer tensions.

As an intercultural trainer, after several years of experience at home and abroad I believe that not only more, but above all practical intercultural training and experience is needed in the university system. There are enough projects of this kind, mainly funded by the European Union, but it would be more effective and would reach more students and lecturers if intercultural and multicultural topics were integrated into education. A practical form of intercultural education in training (e.g. a workshop) led by qualified and competent trainers would be desirable, as experience shows that effective attitude formation is not possible within the framework of a traditional university lecture.

The lack of diversity education and teaching tolerance and patience based on pluralism, is a complex problem that I believe affects everyone at a university. Such education can break down prejudices and stereotypes that have arisen due to a lack of information. Our society, which sees itself as knowledge-based, suffers from a serious lack of information about its own diversity.

In my personal experience, intercultural competence can build bridges between people and resolve conflicts that seem unsolvable at first glance. Intercultural competence is a kind of understanding that requires knowledge of social traditions and the cultural embedding and diversity of languages. Intercultural sensitivity develops through experience and helps individuals to deal with cultural differences in a various way so that they can gain alternative cultural experiences.

The coexistence of cultures – like every interaction – is at least bilateral, but we can only transform this way our environment, our society, into a world in that it is worth living together. Intercultural competence equips teacher candidates to act in a child-appropriate and age-appropriate manner in a multicultural environment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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