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## **THE CONCEPT OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE AND THE FULBRIGHT EXCHANGE AS A MODEL OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION**

### **Abstract:**

The focus in the suggested research is on the role of intercultural communication in English language education and the program of English teacher assistant (ETA), which is part of the international Fulbright educational exchange in Bulgaria, for the enhancement of intercultural competence. It will present not only the context of English language acquisition in Bulgaria, but also the development of multicultural awareness and tolerance in the language classroom. The new concepts of teaching intercultural communication and competence promote the idea that they are not free from language learning and language-in-culture. The main goal of the ETA program is to improve the quality of English language teaching and learning in Bulgaria by assigning native speakers with adequate academic credentials to (English) language high schools all over the country and especially in underdeveloped regions. This model has real importance as it represents training by native speaker who functions as an intercultural moderator.

The main goals of the research are:

- To promote the Fulbright program
- To strengthen educational advising.
- To promote cultural sensitivity among Americans and Bulgarians.

English language skills and intercultural communication should better be taught by native speakers. It is not only because they are a priceless tool and a natural way for learning English, but meanwhile they teach intercultural communication and intercultural competence. Also they use interactive and productive methods of teaching and presenting American and British culture and conversational English.

As a part of the Fulbright program ETA gives the students, mentor teachers, teacher staff, and the local community the possibility to stay in touch with English and American language and culture, thus imperceptibly enhancing intercultural competence.

### **Keywords:**

English; Bulgarian; intercultural communication; intercultural competence; Fulbright educational exchange;

## **Introduction**

This paper aims to present the realization of intercultural communication via the English Teacher Assistant programme, which is part of Fulbright Educational Exchange in Bulgaria. It also discusses the problem of English language acquisition and the issue of multicultural awareness, thus providing valuable ideas for English language and culture specialists.

## **Intercultural Communication in the 21 Century.**

It is generally known that the acquisition of a foreign language and culture falls outside the conservative teaching of philological skills. The recent image of intercultural conversational ability shows that the proper learning of a foreign language also involves knowing and understanding the culture of that language. A message that lacks suitable cultural content frequently results in comical episodes, miscommunication and confusion.

The connection between own language/culture competence and foreign language/culture competence is defined in the Common European Framework for Languages:

“The learner of a second or foreign language and culture does not cease to be competent in his or her mother tongue and the associated culture. Nor is the new competence kept entirely separate from the old. The learner does not simply acquire two distinct, unrelated ways of acting and communicating. The language learner becomes plurilingual and develops interculturality. The linguistic and cultural competences in respect of each language are modified by knowledge of the other and contribute to intercultural awareness, skills and know-how”.

Council of Europe (2001:43)

Over the last decades the traditional borders of our global society have opened up for new wider perspectives and international researchers have started to discuss the need for a new approach to teaching culture when teaching a foreign language. They have gone so far as to offer a new theoretical background with respect to the acquisition of intercultural competence, which invariably involves the acquisition of knowledge about the psychology, anthropology, education and culture of the host country, in addition to its language.

In contrast to these recent attitudes to culture teaching and learning, Bulgarians have failed to develop a connecting behavioural approach. There is an evident gap between knowing a language and its use in cultural context. The question is: What do individuals have to know to be interculturally competent and what do they actually do in situations involving a clash of two or more cultures?

In this regard Ruben (1976) recognizes seven dimensions of intercultural competence:

1. Display of respect. It describes an individual's ability to express respect and positive approach to other individuals.
2. Interaction attitude. It refers to an individual's ability to respond to others in a descriptive, non-evaluative, and non-judgmental way.
3. Orientation to knowledge describes an individual's ability to recognize the extent to which knowledge is individual in nature.
4. Empathy is an individual's ability to put himself in another person's place.
5. Self-orientation role behavior expresses an individual's ability to be flexible and to ask for information and explanation in order to solve problems.

6. Interaction management is an individual's ability to take turns in discussion and initiate and terminate interaction based on a rationally precise valuation on the needs and desires of others.
7. Tolerance of ambiguity describes an individual's ability to react to new and unclear situations with little evident security.

Intercultural problems are cross-disciplinary. The intercultural study is reinforced by theories and perspectives from fields such as sociolinguistics, social psychology, education and linguistics. The field of a discipline changes according to historical, economic, cultural and social conditions. English language teaching occurs in a shifting perspective and its aims of yesterday are not the aims of today and tomorrow. In international research the norm of the native speaker is now being questioned (e.g Widdowson; Kramsch 1998) and is often replaced by a new model: the intercultural speaker. The latter is described as a language learner who acts as a mediator between two cultures. He or she understands and recognizes other viewpoints and always questions what is taken for granted in a specific society.

Communicative competence is combined with intercultural competence into Intercultural Communicative Competence – ICC (Byram, Zarate). The Council of Europe Language Programmes and the Lingua Projects within the European Union have been initiated as a result of Byram and Zarate's research. Byram (1997) has developed a theoretical framework for teaching and assessing intercultural competence and has identified five factors of knowledge that intercultural competence involves. These are:

1. The attitude factor refers to the ability to relativize one's self and value others, and belief about one's own.
2. Knowledge of one's self and others means knowledge of the rules for individual and social interaction and consists of knowing social groups and their practices, both in one's own culture and in the other culture.
3. Knowledge and skills of interpreting and relating, describes an individual's ability to interpret, explain, and relate events and documents from another culture to one's own.
4. The next skill set, the skills of discovery and interaction, allows the individual to acquire new knowledge of culture and cultural practices, including the ability to use existing knowledge, attitudes, and skills in cross-cultural interactions.
5. The last factor, critical cultural awareness, describes the ability to use perspectives, practices, and products in one's own culture and in other cultures to make evaluations.

It should also be noted that in Byram's model of Intercultural Communicative Competence, critical cultural awareness occupies a central position (Byram, 1997: 54).

According to Byram and Zarate, ICC within foreign language teaching includes the following components: knowledge of Self and Other, skills of interpreting and relating, intercultural attitudes and skills of discovery and interaction (Byram and Zarate, 1997: 11). In addition, Byram (1997) and Risager (2007) have also presented multidimensional models of intercultural competence that are based on people's experiences in a European context.

Using Byram's theory, Risager (2007) provides an extended conceptualization of intercultural competence. She claims that a model for intercultural competence must include the broad resources an individual possesses as well as the fine abilities that can be evaluated.

In the North American framework, a dissimilar model of Intercultural Competence has been widely discussed and explored in the past few years. On the basis of research conducted during the 1970s and the 1980s, Bennett has developed a dynamic model to explain how individuals respond to cultural changes and how their responses progress over time. The Model consists of six stages grouped into three ethnocentric stages (the individual's culture is one of the many similarly valid viewpoints) and three ethnorelative stages (the individual's culture is one of the many equally valid viewpoints).

In her earlier works, Risager (1998:243) maintains that there are four typical approaches in foreign language teaching:

1. The foreign-culture approach, which has been losing ground since the 1980s.
2. The intercultural approach, which has replaced the foreign-culture approach, and is the dominant one today.
3. The multicultural approach, which has made its appearance since the 1980s, but still is in a marginal position.
4. The transcultural approach, which is just beginning to appear because of internationalization.

On the basis of the latest findings, Intercultural Competence can be defined as a combination of information, a well-prepared and culture-oriented teacher, a foreign-culture-presenting textbook, and the culture-oriented learners. Viewed in this way, Intercultural Competence provides the student with the tools to interpret a foreign culture. What is more, it teaches people how to put their cultural knowledge into action, which involves the ability to analyze culture so that consequently they can develop a cultural awareness necessary for communication in a future society.

Nevertheless, when writing or speaking about "teaching culture", specialists habitually limit themselves to the definite culture of the language that is being taught. In the case of English learning, for instance, when students are consistently occupied with the culture of their English language teachers who are native speakers of the language, they stand a better chance of developing intercultural communication skills. Students, however, are usually monolingual and they learn English while existing in their own specific state (Krieger 2005), where their English teachers are, in most of the cases, non-native speakers of English. Thus, students are little exposed to the peculiarities of the foreign culture, which prevents them from fully developing the ability to process cultural information.

The intention of learning English language and culture is not only to connect with native speakers of English but also with non-native users of English. That is why learners are usually learners of English as an International Language. Thus, by learning English, students actually develop the potential to actively participate in global, and to a large extent, intercultural communication. Hence, English language learning turns out to be a device for establishing and maintaining relationships with people from all over the world. Communication in English takes place in fields such as science, technology, business, painting, acting, and travel among others. In order to function effectively in a number of cultural situations, learners need to further develop their intercultural communicative competence. The importance of this new global cultural situation needs to be recognized and revised by the respective institutions in Bulgaria.

According to the global vision for the future of education, every school should have the opportunity to interpret and successfully fulfill the objectives of intercultural communication, so that it can transform them into a local plan relevant to the school's specific ethnic or cultural context. Account has to be taken of the specific

geo-political context, as well as of local learning places and the learners' development patterns (Byram 1997). My observations are that the educational institutions in Bulgaria do not accept the idea of implementing a "local plan" as an important tool for setting local goals and providing the basis for educational assessment. A similar situation can be found in the planning of culture teaching while teaching language.

Why is it so important to have a high level of English language competence? The world is getting smaller through cross-cultural interaction and we know for a fact that English has the reputation of a "lingua franca". In other words, English is the language that serves as an essential tool for establishing intercultural communication without misunderstanding and conflicts. It is much more difficult, however, to become interculturally knowledgeable because in addition to linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse competence, this also involves positive approaches, intercultural understanding and a number of social skills. Thus, the English language teaching process should be structured in such a way that it helps learners to acquire all these skills and competences.

According to the prescriptions of the European Language Policies and the National Program of English Language Study, intercultural and international understanding is an educational goal. I firmly believe that the Ministry of education should include a well-planned program of teaching intercultural communication in the national curriculum. And when making this plan, the respective authorities should be aware of the philosophical aspect of education in order to be able to interpret a variety of discourses. Otherwise, intercultural knowledge in ELA (English Language Acquisition) could be seen as nothing more than the mere accumulation of facts with no occurrence of intercultural acceptance. Consequently, language teachers will be left to the "traditional" interpretations of culture, unless they have a strong personal commitment to intercultural issues.

Generally speaking, a proficiency level of cross-cultural competence involves the acquisition of skills such as adaptability, tolerance, accepting other views, empathy, flexibility, cultural awareness. In addition, the evident interrelationship between communicative competence and intercultural competence helps learners to become conscious about the concepts of ethnocentricity, stereotyping, and social constructivism.

This interrelationship appears to be highly relevant for FLT as it offers the possibility of developing communicative competence and intercultural understanding in integration, not as separate skills or competencies. What is more, it could be used as the starting point for developing a new intercultural approach.

### **The necessity of teaching intercultural communication in Bulgaria.**

The transformation of the old-style cultural contents of language learning/teaching into a new idea of intercultural competence is a well-known fact. The new concepts of teaching intercultural communication and competence have been developed on the idea that these teaching processes are not independent of language learning and language-in-culture. This new vision of acquiring intercultural competence has been adopted by many European countries, where there is a growing consolidated awareness of the need to review the concept and practice of Intercultural Competence at a European level. Bulgaria, however, seems to be lagging behind as regards the new trends in cultural education. Yet, it should be noted that there is still no valid information concerning the level of intercultural competence in our country.

In my opinion, the aim of intercultural teaching, which is to help learners develop cross-cultural skills, could be achieved through the teaching of English as a lingua franca. This is the language most frequently used in interaction with individuals of different nationalities and cultures. In the process of communication, carried out today on a global scale, people copy cultural traits from each other and generate a new "Transcultural society". This means that cultural competence should be reexamined. And in a future socially responsible world, language education will be a new challenge to teachers of intercultural competence.

As far as the situation in Bulgaria is concerned, now it is more important than ever to discuss the meaning and application of the following terms: intercultural, transcultural communication competence, cross-cultural adaptation, intercultural sensitivity and multiculturalism. What they generally imply is that one should reach beyond one's own culture and society and interact with another specific society, which offers a variety of linguistically and culturally different experiences. Specialists should not only provide appropriate definitions for these terms but should also make them applicable to the educational system in Bulgaria.

I firmly believe that Bulgarian education will enormously benefit from new teaching strategies based on Ruben's dimensions of intercultural competence. Cultural intolerance and disagreement will be avoided if both children and adults in Bulgaria are taught to respect and to have a positive approach to individuals belonging to other cultures. On the whole, our Bulgarian society is monoculturally oriented. It is represented by a relatively small number of foreign cultures and what is more, Bulgarians do not have the ability to interact well in an intercultural environment. Hence, it is highly important that they develop a positive attitude, tolerance and understanding of cultures different from their own.

English is an obligatory subject in Bulgarian primary schools but in fact, many children start learning the language at a very early age. English today is the most preferred, most widespread and consequently, most important foreign language in Bulgaria. It is an invariable part of the curriculum for secondary and high schools and is traditionally on top of the list of students' favourite subjects.

It is only in the past few years that it has become very fashionable to speak about an intercultural approach to the teaching of English. As to the teaching of English in Bulgaria, there is still no cultural component integrated into the English classes. It appears that Bulgarian teachers of English are not well acquainted with the essence of intercultural education and consequently, they are not adequately prepared for such an intercultural approach. The Bulgarian educational system needs to establish a successful relationship between the various ethnic and cultural features of the population so that this relationship could be employed as a tool in any teaching process.

When discussing the problems of Bulgarian education, we have to consider a great many factors but two of them appear to be highly challenging. These are:

1. Religious Variety – The population could be divided into three major groups in terms of religious persuasion – Bulgarian Orthodox, Bulgarian Mohammedan and Ethnic Turks.

2. Language Mixture – Bulgarian with all its regional dialects is the official language but each minority group also has its native tongue.

Students often find it rather difficult and sometimes boring to learn English. This is especially true for students from minority groups, who often have no motivation for learning even Bulgarian. On some occasions, the teachers' efforts to involve all the students in various language exercises and to cope with the students' resistance are

totally unsuccessful. On other occasions, the students are overwhelmed with an enormous amount of information that they have to internalize for a short time, which often leads to a stressful atmosphere in the classroom.

In my attempt to analyze the situation in Bulgarian schools concerning the teaching and learning of a foreign language I found out the following problems that need to be solved:

First, the English language textbooks used in Bulgarian schools contain very few texts that deal with ethnic, inter- or multicultural issues and are at the same time appropriate for students. Second, very few are the students who have genuine interest in improving their command of English during teenage years. Another problem is the lack of native speakers in Bulgarian high schools offering intensive training in English. These problems could be solved if we reform our traditional educational system and bring in innovation. And this is highly necessary because if we compare Bulgaria's experience in developing intercultural communicative competence with that of other countries, we will inevitably see an enormous gap. More often than not, Bulgarian teachers are prevented from being creative and innovative in the way they plan their lessons just because they have to observe state-prescribed rules and teaching requirements imposed by the Ministry of Education and other state institutions.

Last but not least, our educational system does not prescribe the teaching and learning of intercultural communication, which could only be seen as a flaw of the system. Having no intercultural competence, our students will not be able to easily access a foreign culture and avoid the imminent intercultural shock. The paradox in this situation is that students themselves are highly interested in foreign cultures but the educational system is designed in such a way that it fails to give students the requisite intercultural communication knowledge. Only when we learn to distinguish and understand foreign cultures, shall we be able to tolerate and respect these cultures, which is crucial and unavoidable in a contemporary global society.

By taking into account the changes that have occurred in our society in the last decades and the changes in the trends that will be shaping Europe in the next ten years, the Bulgarian educational system has to find a way to boost the development of intercultural competence in Bulgarian schools. It is a fact that many Bulgarian teachers are well acquainted with the American culture and other European cultures but cannot put their intercultural knowledge into practice. In addition, it should be noted that teaching and learning today are placed in a broad intercultural perspective. Furthermore, in an intercultural approach it is the values of the individual teacher that seem to play a central role. Very often teachers see themselves as linguists only but it is also highly important how they look upon different cultures and ethnics. Thus, as part of today's global society, we have to find out whether or not teacher education in Bulgaria offers the possibility for an intercultural approach to language teaching. It is also necessary to consider the following questions:

- 1) How is foreign language and culture teaching/learning connected to the issues of intercultural acceptance, Human Rights and citizen education with respect to Bulgarian school-children and Bulgarian teachers?
- 2) What efforts are being made in order to boost the integration of language and culture teaching/learning in Bulgarian schools and in teacher education?

The latter question highlights the need of a special type of research, which hasn't been conducted so far. Our aim should be to find out how to put into practice intercultural knowledge and how to give validity to the working definition of

Intercultural Competence in order to link the current practice to theory. While other European countries measure the extent to which Intercultural Competence is integrated into youth work practice, we should start teaching Bulgarian students intercultural communication and expose them to real examples in order to make the definition operational in our schools.

### **Fulbright English Teacher Assistant (ETA) Programme.**

The problems discussed above can find their appropriate solution via international projects. Many of these problems have been solved as a result of the ETA programme, which is Fulbright's model for the successful implementation of intercultural communication. The programme is designed in such a way as to provide better teaching of intercultural communication and better English language education with the help of native speakers. The latter are a priceless tool for the natural and smooth acquisition of both English language skills and intercultural competence.

The ETA programme gives the students, mentor teachers, teacher staff, and the local community the possibility to stay in touch with the English language and culture. It is very interesting to observe the relationships that English Teacher Assistants (ETA) form with the local community and mentor teachers and how they develop intercultural understanding. The presence of native speakers is also highly beneficial for our students – they undoubtedly make considerable progress in their cultural understanding and English language skills.

Why is it so important to use this model in our education? The following paragraphs discuss the main advantages of the programme.

- The limitations of teaching successfully intercultural communication in a Bulgarian language classroom will disappear because teaching English by native speakers happens via intercultural understanding and vice versa.
- Students develop a high level of intercultural competence and are better prepared for the job market in their home country and abroad.
- During an intercultural exchange Bulgarian teachers act as observers of the American culture. Thus, they become more flexible and their intercultural understanding increases considerably.
- This programme allows American teacher assistants and Bulgarian teacher educators to act as cultural ambassadors of both cultures. Consequently, they achieve a high level of cultural understanding and intercultural competence, in addition to their personal and professional development.

All things considered, there is no doubt that in the present age of internationalization the intercultural approach to English language teaching is not only highly needed but also inevitable.

The concept of internationalization, as an embodied practice, has been widely discussed. It should be noted that the internationalization of education, which is fully represented by the Fulbright Commission for Education, is one of the processes that follow globalization. Internationalized education will ultimately result in the acquisition of a new set of requisite skills. Dr. Julia Stefanova, Executive Director of the Bulgarian-American Fulbright Commission has defined them as the skills of the 21<sup>st</sup> century educated person and they are the following:

1. Creativity and innovative thinking.
2. Communication and intercultural skills.
3. Global competence.
4. Ability to tackle successfully unpredictability, uncertainty, ambiguity, non-linearity, complexity and risk.



## 5. Ability to manage various organizations and networks.

For the past several years there have been numerous proclamations that all teaching, at any level, in any subject, should be carried out from an explicit intercultural perspective. The main aim of the European long-term strategy is to construct a wide community of interculturally competent people who are greatly committed to raising young people's awareness of their role as European citizens who will contribute to the construction of Europe. Therefore, the transfer of cultural knowledge has to be done mostly by participating in training courses and then adapting the acquired knowledge and skills to a local context. The role of intercultural knowledge is to provide more adequate support for young students, workers and leaders in their personal development of intercultural competence. This growing intercultural awareness is highly essential and leads not only to going beyond the traditional way of looking at culture as a static concept, but also to moving towards a multifaceted concept of different cultures, where the dynamics and nuances are often predominant in daily interactions.

### Conclusion

The intercultural approach to second language acquisition has not been thoroughly examined in Bulgaria yet. This area is still relatively new and even neglected to a certain extent. The aim of the Fulbright programme is to create various possibilities for teaching English as a foreign language with an intercultural approach. The ultimate aim is to improve the teaching of English and to reach a high level of intercultural competence for both sides – Bulgarians and Americans.

The first step of the process is an analysis of curricular documents including international arrangements. The second step is to revise the local plans so that the dominant principles of intercultural understanding are expressed as the sixth ELA component (the first five are speaking, writing, listening, reading and autonomous learning). In other words, the cultural component of English called "intercultural understanding" is treated in this paper as a separate fact-based part.

Using the models of intercultural competence, I have tried to situate Bulgarian problems within their theoretical framework. First, I have tried to present the basic approaches to intercultural knowledge and their function. Second, I have pointed out the great danger posed by cultural intolerance, which is often seen today even in highly developed countries. My claim is that cultural intolerance could be avoided if it is recognized and openly discussed. Finally, I have suggested that the integration of cultural studies into the Bulgarian educational system will inevitably lead to a highly developed social consciousness that Bulgarians will only benefit from and that will be particularly appreciated by the European society.

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