# Developing intercultural competence of trainee translators

**Leila Mirzoyeva\*,** Department of Philology, Suleyman Demirel University, 32260 Cunur/Isparta, Turkey.
**Oxana Syurmen**, Department of Philology, Suleyman Demirel University, 32260 Cunur/Isparta, Turkey.

## Abstract

Intercultural competence is one of the key aspects of a translator / interpreter competence as it contributes to better understanding of the source text and thus, its more 'ideal' conveying into the target language. The purpose of this research is to clarify the areas requiring improvement in the process of developing trainee translators' intercultural competence in the context of Kazakhstani education. Questionnaires for instructors teaching Practical English course and translation courses were used to collect data about the most problematic aspects of to-be translators' training and cultural awareness of students. The preliminary results of the research show the lack of cultural information at phonetic, intonation and grammar levels, which supposes developing of a special system of exercises and integrating two different pathways represented by theoretical courses such as lingua-cultural studies and practical courses like English for specific professional purposes.

Keywords: intercultural competence, ELT, translator / interpreter trainin, interpersonal skills, communication strategies.

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Leila Mirzoyeva,** Department of Philology, Suleyman Demirel University, 32260 Cunur/Ispart, Turkey. *Email Address*: leila.mirzoyeva@sdu.edu.kz

## 1. Introduction

Intercultural competence of translators / interpreters and ways of its development has been addressed by many scholars from different points of view. However, nearly all the studies suggest that a special course or experience is needed to foster development of intercultural competence. It is significant that a future translator / interpreter has a full command of language and culture before they start translation courses. In spite of the fact that authentic materials and course books are used at practical English lessons they do not cover all the areas of cultural information as usual course books are aimed at teaching English for general communication purposes. Special theoretical courses included in the training program of translators / interpreters undoubtedly help in developing intercultural communication competence but they are suggested in the last year of training, thus giving students less opportunities to apply the knowledge in practice.

Hence one of the main trends in translator / interpreter training in the general context of Kazakhstani education is long-felt need of integration of two different pathways represented by theoretical courses such as lingua-cultural studies and practical courses like English for specific professional purposes. Since English became an international language interpreters / translators as a kind of bridge between two people with different cultures should know not only peculiarities of the cultures in general but communication strategies and peculiarities of interpersonal communication as well. Moreover, we think it is also important to increase students' awareness of the range of grammatical and vocabulary meanings in different contexts in order to help them interpret different situations correctly, build rapport and avoid misunderstandings.

For this purpose the system of exercises aimed at overcoming a wide range of difficulties treated as hindrances in intercultural communication should be developed, which requires a thorough consideration of the areas that are poorly represented or not addressed at all in different courses. Thus, the purpose of this research is to clarify the areas requiring improvement in the process of developing trainee translators' intercultural competence in the context of Kazakhstani education.

## 2. Acquiring cultural / intercultural competence

There are a lot of models of translator competence suggested by different scholars in different periods of time. Gregorio's (2007) analyses of the models suggested by European scholars during the period between 1976 and 2005 has shown that only some of the models consider cultural and intercultural competences as fundamental to the work of any professional translator. In fact, among thirteen models of translator competence analysed by Gregorio (2007) only four considered cultural and / or intercultural competences as an essential sub competence of translator / interpreter competence.

Some Russian linguists also mention cultural competence as a constituent part of translator competence, although it is given not much significance. Komissarov (2002), for instance, mentions the importance of general knowledge of the world for a translator / interpreter, which is only one component of cultural / intercultural competence. Wilss was one of the first authors who explicitly described cultural competence as "a super-competence, basically defined as an ability to transfer messages between linguistic and textual systems of the source culture and linguistic and textual systems of the target culture" (Wilss, 1976). Hansen (2010) includes different abilities in the description of cultural competence speaking about culturally bound behaviour and skills of communicating in accordance with social standards and cultural differences.

Increase of cultural concern in translation studies in the last decades has lead to substantial changes in the understanding of translator / interpreter competence. The indivisible relationship between language and culture has determined understanding of translation as the tool not only for cross-linguistic communication, but for cross-cultural communication as well. Translating from a cultural perspective acquires more importance nowadays due to development of international communication. An ideal translation is considered to be the one that conveys both the linguistic meaning and the cultural

meaning of source language into target language, so that the source text and the target text recipients can have the same experience. Thus, cultural / intercultural sub-competence became the key component of translator / interpreter competence. Such scholars as Neubert (2000), Kelly (2005), Holz-Manttari (2008), PACTE (2011) and AVANTI Research Groups (Cano, 2012) state that cultural subcompetence is the main component of the model of translator / interpreter competence.

Cultural or intercultural competence cannot be defined or analyzed without a clear idea of what is meant by culture. Over the years, culture as a hugely complex notion has been the subject of much debate and probably much less consensus across several academic disciplines. Such scholars as Hofstede (2001), Trompenaars (2000) and Lewis (2006) represent dominant tradition of culture and its definition as entity. In this tradition culture is also a national culture, which can be defined according to number of dimensions: attitudes to rules, to relationship, to time, to mention but some. Nowadays there is a shift to defining culture as competence Bennet (1993). Finally, some scholars, for instance, Barinaga (2007) and Holliday (2005) define culture as discourse changing the approach from a more ethnographic and inclusive conception of "culture" to the approach summarized by Katan(2004) as "a shared mental model or map of the world. This includes culture – though it is not the main focus. Instead, the main focus here lies in 'what goes without being said' and the 'normal'. This 'normal' model of the world is a system of congruent and interrelated beliefs, values, strategies and cognitive environments which guide the shared basis of behavior" (Katan, 2004). This definition is the most relevant for our research as in our opinion the translator and the interpreter are language specialists who are required to recognize and comprehend varying dialects, registers, genres and pragmatic patterns, which are specific to each culture. According to Nord "the translator can be compared with a target-culture text producer, expressing a source-culture sender's communicative intentions" (Nord, 1997).

At Suleyman Demirel University, Kazakhstan, translator and interpreter training program covers cultural and intercultural competence almost exclusively in the form of knowledge of the foreign culture related to the language studied. The following course modules are suggested: "British American Studies", "Lingua-Cultural Problems of Translation", "Intercultural Communication" together with stressing the importance of having wide general knowledge and being up to date with world events. However, not only awareness of culture as it is represented in traditions, rituals and artifacts as well as in language constitutes cultural and intercultural competence of a translator and interpreter. They should develop special attitudes and skills, which will help focus not only on the referential content of a text but also on the linguistic forms that a speaker employs to convey the text. The text might contain obvious meta-linguistic features that indicate the speaker's consciousness of forms chosen, such as side-comments, retrieval difficulties, hedges, filled pauses and so on. Moreover, the pragmatic and politeness norms of other languages may require different formulations and different choices of responses for different functions.

In accordance with INCA theory six essential spheres of intercultural competence are proposed: 1) tolerance for ambiguity, 2) behavioral flexibility, 3) communicative awareness, 4) curiosity about other cultures in themselves and in order to be able to interact better with people, 5) respect for otherness and, 6) empathy (Sinicrope, Norris & Watanabe, 2007).

As teachers of the course 'Practical English' for translators we have realized that not all the course books cover main spheres of intercultural competence, as it is obvious that language itself is not a guarantee enabling culture. Dignen (2014) suggests rethinking intercultural and states that interpersonal in teaching foreign language is more relevant than intercultural. Thus interpersonal skills are even more relevant for the situation when we have to face communication with the representative of other culture. Dignen (2014) states that intercultural challenges like uncertainty, complexity, paradox and diversity and ability to face them are the main components constituting intercultural competence. Therefore, speaking perfect English won't enable trainee translators/ interpreters to have success when communicating internationally. What an interpreter/ translator should do is not to manage culture, but manage individuals. Then shifting to situational interpersonal skills is observed and as EFL trainers we should provide trainee translators/ interpreters not only with grammar and vocabulary, but raise their awareness of different grammar and vocabulary meanings in different cultural contexts and help them develop communication strategies in order to be able to overcome aforementioned challenges. In other words we have to understand the needs of students in order to deliver effective training and find the

solutions that can be applicable. If to speak about uncertainty, for example, the following strategies can be provided to overcome the challenge: speaking clearly, giving background information if necessary, listening effectively, predicting and asking questions. Speaking clearly is not an equivalent of speaking grammatically correctly. A sentence can be grammatically correct, but have different interpretations in different contexts. "Have you finished the work?" is grammatically correct, but can be interpreted as criticism because people tend to judge others communicative behavior rather negatively than positively. So an interpreter / translator should be very clear and should know when and how to give background information as well as be aware of different meanings of grammatical forms.

Another strategy for managing ambiguity is listening effectively. The ability to listen is fundamental and might be the key success factor in interpreter work. Listening effectively is not only about understanding gist and detail, but the ability to connect to another participant of communicative situation and try to understand them psychologically and emotionally. The term "take-up" is also used for interpreters in the "sense [that]... they make of others' talk and how they respond to it" (Mason, 2006). It is worth mentioning intonation here as one of the key points in understanding another participant of communicative situation correctly and then interpreting and 'responding' in proper manner. Take, for example, irony, which is usually said in English with even intonation. If an interpreter doesn't catch the irony and translates it as something serious in many cases it can cause misunderstanding. Moreover, there are extra linguistic factors such as body language and face expressions that also add to the meaning of the utterance. To develop students' better understanding of these factors we have practiced discussing their behavior during presentations and trying to explain the reason for some gestures, intonation or patterns of behavior. We have done the same with the behavior of people in the videos watched at lessons.

According to AUSIT Code of Ethics "where circumstances permit, interpreters and translators ask for repetition, rephrasing or explanation if anything is unclear" (AUSIT, 2012) so students should be provided with functional language for these needs as well. Comparing cultures will provide trainee translators/ interpreters with useful information about behavioral and attitudinal stereotypes, which can help in managing ambiguity. However, too much stereotyping may lead to failure in communication, so it is better to step away from assumption.

Complexity means facing different legal, political, economic environments and navigating a number of non-aligned knowledge platforms. At practical English course we try to compare different systems existing in Kazakhstan and English speaking countries to make trainee interpreters/ translators aware of different infrastructures and special terms used to describe parts of different systems in different countries.

Another challenge that puts emotional pressure on a person communicating internationally is diversity. Diversity is facing a range of behaviors, business cultures, wider range of definitions of relationship, politeness and directness, which are different from those in own culture. As EFL trainers we should teach students how to express the message in a way recognized as polite. English, Russian and Kazakh have different grammatical structures for functions of polite asking, saying 'no', offering and so on. It will also be helpful to know taboo words, euphemisms and be aware of ageist and sexist language, which can be considered offensive by some individuals.

### 3. Methodology and research design

Being mostly an attitude research, our study is based on two different questionnaires addressed to lecturers who work both in the field of English language teaching and translator training. The main objectives of the questionnaires were

(a) To identify the necessity of the aforementioned aspects of translators' training;
(b) To assess the representation of various types of lingua-cultural information in practical English and translation courses;

(c) To find out the main problems of translator training in the field of intercultural competence formation.

The population of the study is defined as 22 lecturers working in the field of ELT (Practical English for translators) and 13 instructors delivering special courses in translation studies. It is necessary to point out that in the process of study we used the results of lecturers' assessment of students' skills in the field under investigation. The criteria suggested by PICT (2012) were used as the basis for evaluation.

As a starting point for the study, the following questionnaire was applied to the teachers of practical English course:

1. Do your course materials contain cultural information?

2. What cultural aspects in your opinion are best represented in the course materials you use?

   Realia

   Lingua cultural aspects of vocabulary

   Lingua cultural aspects of grammatical constructions

3. What cultural aspects in your opinion are less represented in the course materials you use?

   Realia

   Lingua cultural aspects of vocabulary

   Lingua cultural aspects of grammatical constructions

4. What cultural aspects in your opinion are not represented in the course materials you use?

   Realia

   Lingua cultural aspects of vocabulary

   Lingua cultural aspects of grammatical constructions

5. Is grammar in the course materials you use represented explicitly enough for students to be able to interpret its meaning in different situations?

6. Are intonation patterns and their meanings represented fully enough in the course materials you use?

The results of the questionnaire showed that most Practical English teachers (19 of 22) assessed lingua cultural aspects of vocabulary and realia as the most represented types of cultural information, whereas grammatical constructions and especially intonation patterns were treated as the least/not represented ones (thus, only 5 of 22 instructors chose that option in questions 1-4, and gave the positive answers for the questions 5-6).

The next stage of the research was aimed at translation teachers' to whom the second questionnaire was applied:

1. How well is lingua cultural component represented in translation course materials (English – Russian, English – Kazakh translation)?
   A. Lingua cultural information is well represented by various content and forms of its representation.

   B. Lingua cultural information is well represented with poor variety in content, but good variety of forms of its representation

   C. Lingua cultural information is well represented by various content but poor varieties of representation forms

   D. Lingua cultural information is poorly represented

2. Assess the level of cultural / intercultural competence of students achieved during the course "Practical English in the context of intercultural communication' as prerequisite course for translation (professional) courses.

    A. Students achieved high level of cultural / intercultural competence

    B. Students achieved satisfactory level of cultural / intercultural competence

    C. Students achieved low level of cultural / intercultural competence

3. In your opinion, which type of cultural information is the least represented in the materials of different translation courses?

    A. cultural information at phonetic and intonation levels

    B. cultural information at grammar level

    C. special vocabulary with lingua cultural component

    D. realia

    E. specific phraseological units

    F. cliche for functions / functional language

    G. official document clichés and business clichés

The diagrams below show the results of the second questionnaire, particularly the answers to questions one and two (Figure 1 and Figure 2):
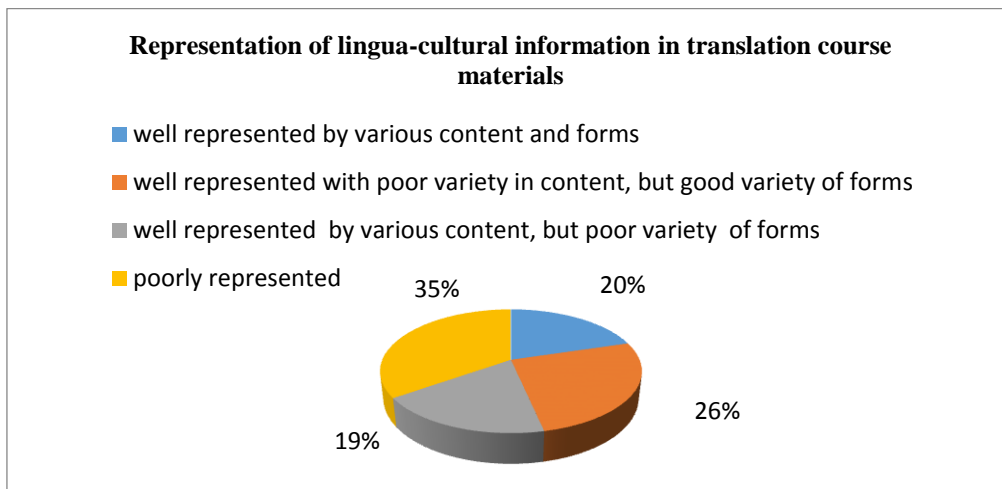


Figure 1. Teachers' opinion concerning lingua cultural component representation in translation course materials

The diagram shows that most of the lecturers (35%) considered the level of representation of lingua cultural information as "poor" (both in form and content), 26 % of the respondents thought that lingua-cultural information is well represented but with a poor variety of content, 19% of the lecturers noted poor variety of forms, whereas 20% acknowledged that the representation of lingua-cultural information is good enough ('well represented by various content and forms'). Instructors' responses to question three were as follows: 10 of 13 instructors (76,9%) highlighted cultural information at phonetic, intonation and grammar levels as the least represented in the materials of different translation courses; by comparison, specific idioms and clichés are considered as well represented by 7 instructors (53,8%); and 8 instructors (61,5%) identified wide representation of special vocabulary with lingua cultural component.
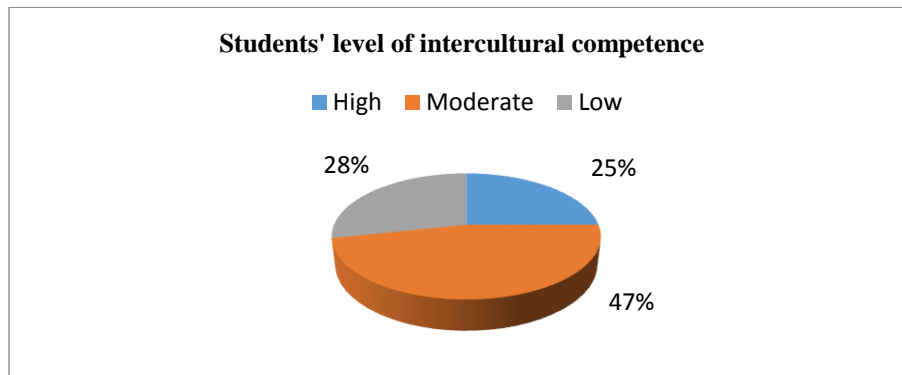
Figure 2. Students' level of intercultural competence as assessed by lecturers

As it can be seen from the diagram, 47% of third and second year students evaluated by the lecturers have moderate level of intercultural competence, whereas 25% have a high level of intercultural competence. It is worth noticing that mainly the third year students comprise the number of those who have a high level of intercultural competence. In our opinion such a result is caused by the fact that culture related theoretical courses are introduced at the third year of the translator / interpreter training program. Since this was only a preliminary attempt to assess intercultural competence of translating / interpreting students there can be some discrepancies in the results when the questionnaire is applied to students themselves.

## 4. Conclusion

As we have seen the data indicates the lack of consistency in developing translator / interpreter trainees' intercultural competence through the whole course of study. Although some frameworks were suggested by scholars they still should be adopted to Kazakhstani educational context and particular translator training programs.

Students should become more aware of different grammatical and vocabulary meanings as well as specific intonation patterns; otherwise, they will not be able to work successfully as mediators in the process of intercultural communication. For this reason we suggest that lecturers delivering translation courses should collaborate with practical English instructors and instructors delivering culture related courses in order to work out the specific training materials for intercultural competence formation, which in our opinion should start at the very beginning of the program at practical English course. In our point of view, the materials should contain the following:

(a) listening and pronunciation exercises with intonation patterns having cultural meaning;

(b) specific commentaries on cultural functions and meanings of different grammatical structures (they should be supplemented with the appropriate drilling and creative exercises);

(c) specific commentaries on equivalence or non-equivalence of vocabulary and clichés used in different spheres of communication and emerging from cultural differences (English and Kazakh, English and Russian pairs of languages);

d) communication strategies, such as clarifying, giving background information, listening effectively.

Furthermore, the need of tools for intercultural competence evaluation is obvious. Unfortunately, there are no special questionnaires for evaluating intercultural competence of Kazakh and Russian speaking students trained to translate into English. Developing the questionnaires will give more reliable information about needs of the students and efficiency of the suggested training materials. Comparing the results of students' self-evaluation of intercultural competence with the results of lecturers' evaluation and the questionnaire evaluating students' intercultural competence can also be useful to see the difference or similarity of students' and lecturers' expectations and real results, which can be an area for further study.

Summing up, it is necessary to point out that in spite of the fact that the study is a limited one it suggests two areas for further study: developing of materials and evaluation tools for intercultural competence applicable for translator training programs in Kazakhstan.

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