

Mechanisms of intercultural competence formation in teaching foreign languages

Gulnara Akhmetova *, L. N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Department of Foreign Philology, 2, Satpayev Street, Astana 010000, Republic of Kazakhstan, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4608-1996>

Dinara Ryspayeva, Sh. Ualikhanov Kokshetau University, Department of the English Language and Teaching Methods, 76, Abai Street, Kokshetau 020000, Republic of Kazakhstan, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7620-2301>

Alma Zhukenova, Sh. Ualikhanov Kokshetau University, Department of the English Language and Teaching Methods, 76, Abai Street, Kokshetau 020000, Republic of Kazakhstan, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3782-376X>

Natalya Zhumagulova, Sh. Ualikhanov Kokshetau University, Department of the English Language and Teaching Methods, 76, Abai Street, Kokshetau 020000, Republic of Kazakhstan, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2159-0831>

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to obtain teachers' opinions on the development of communication skills of preschool children through information technologies. This research is in the case study model, which is one of the qualitative research designs. The participant group of the research consists of 40 preschool teachers who are teaching in various preschool education institutions in Almaty, Kazakhstan, in the 2021–2022 academic year. Research data were collected with the semi-structured interview form developed by the researchers. As a result of the research, majority of the preschool teachers stated that they frequently benefit from information technologies in the development of preschool children's communication skills. They also stated permanence in learning, increasing interest and attention, being educational and entertaining, the ease it provides in learning, the opportunity to raise technology literate children and saving time as the advantages of using information technologies in the development of preschool children's communication skills. They stated the problems experienced in choosing appropriate content, the technological infrastructure problems of the school, the technology addiction and the technological pedagogical inadequacy of the teachers as the disadvantages of using information technologies in the development of communication skills of preschool children. Based on the results of the research, in order to eliminate the deficiencies in teachers' technological pedagogical content knowledge, it is necessary to organise regular in-service training programmes.

Keywords: Preschool teachers, information technologies, communication skills, preschool children;

* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Gulnara Akhmetova, L. N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Department of Foreign Philology, 2, Satpayev Street, Astana 010000, Republic of Kazakhstan
E-mail address: akhmetova_gs@enu.kz

1. Introduction

Humans begin to develop, adapt to the environment and socialise from birth. People living in communities become a social being by learning some values, beliefs and social relations in life (Elçi & Uzunboyulu, 2020; Korzilius, Van Hooft, Planken, & Hendrix, 2011). Culture, which includes the language, beliefs, customs, habits and art of a society, includes human structure, actions, thoughts and also all elements that are passed on from previous generations, valued by the majority of members of society, and also help society establish a relationship with other societies. In every social/cultural system, relationships between individuals and institutions are established and maintained with language (Aida et al., 2022; Muhaisen & Al-Haq, 2012).

1.1. Theoretical and conceptual framework

Today's societies are entering into an increasing linguistic and cultural diversity, thanks to developing communication technologies (Yüce, 2018). This situation causes different societies to interact (Sharifzadeh, Rahimi, & Siahpour, 2022). It is known that this interaction is provided by language, which is the most basic transmission tool of culture. This close relationship between language and culture reveals the importance of cultural transmission in foreign language teaching (Dewaele & Pavelescu, 2021; Güneyli & Kasot, 2021; Rashidi & Soureshjani, 2011; Zyryanova, Chesnokova, Shtanko, & Dudareva, 2020). The main purpose of learning a foreign language is the importance of being able to communicate with individuals who speak this language. For this communication, it is not enough to just recognise the grammatical rules and words of the language in question (Celik-Yavas & Yavuz, 2018; Guntzwiller, Yale, & Jensen, 2016; Savas, 2012). In real communication situations, there are a number of components formed within the culture of a society (Dobson, 2001; Ożańska-Ponikwia, 2017).

Economy, politics, history, traditions, humour etc. are included in culture, which, in turn, includes many different dimensions such as various abbreviations, idioms, proverbs and non-verbal communication components, such as gestures and facial expressions. In this context, it is extremely important to transfer the culture of the target language to students with different dimensions in foreign language teaching (Chan, Bhatt, Nagami, & Walker, 2015; Djafri & Wimbarti, 2018; Matsumoto & Okamoto, 2003). In the rapidly globalising world, foreign language teaching has gained more importance as a natural result of close interaction between countries (Alanazi & Thompson, 2019; Platsidou & Sipitanou, 2015; Tseng, 2013). It is true that every language is the gateway to a different culture. Intense interaction between civilisations has made it a necessity to know other cultures (Piątkowska, 2015). In order for individuals to understand the language better, it is very important to learn the cultural characteristics of the country where they learn the language (Chłopek, 2009). Since textbooks or other written materials used in language teaching have very narrow information content about the cultural characteristics of the target language, different materials are needed in this regard (Nechifor & Borca, 2020; Salama, Chiparausha, & Bsatar, 2022).

In foreign language teaching, considering the social and cultural contexts in which language is used in order to improve teaching includes a two-dimensional goal: to integrate linguistic skills and to ensure intercultural communication (Yang & Chen, 2016). Again, the mainstay here is the close

relationship between language and culture. Therefore, language and cultural education should be done together. It is not possible to fully achieve the acquisition of linguistic skills without knowing the culture. On the other hand, if the aim is to access a foreign culture, to understand and learn it, then again in this context, learning the language is an integral activity (Logie, 2004).

The relationship between language and culture shows that language coexists with thoughts and values. Sometimes even a single word can give an idea about the beliefs, traditions, behaviour patterns and material and spiritual culture of a culture (Onishchuk et al., 2020). The inclusion of cultural elements in language teaching, on which language teaching experts, theorists and researchers emphasise, provides a complete and comprehensive language teaching (Savignon, 2007). Acquiring only target language linguistic skills by foreign language learners is not an indication that they are competent in the target language (Almazova & Rubtsova, 2016; Krasner, 1999). It is also necessary to teach how the target language is used in daily life, whether these uses vary in the cultural context, for example, what language one uses when asking for something in the target language will be culturally appropriate (Fazeli, 2011). In other words, foreign language learners need to have knowledge of cultural compatibility while using the language they learn (Castro, Sercu, & Mendez Garcia, 2004).

1.2. Related research

Reading passages and dialogues in an English textbook were examined by Iriskulova (2012) in terms of their cultural content. According to the data obtained from the study, even the age and proficiency level of the student should be taken into account in determining the cultural content in the book. It was stated that this situation should also be taken into account by the publishers. Liddicoat and Scarino (2013), in their study on foreign language learning from an intercultural perspective, revealed the importance of understanding culture, which plays a key role in individuals' mutual transfer of meaning and interpretation, and its application to language teaching.

In some studies conducted in the field, it is stated that teaching culture as a part of language education programmes is beneficial in terms of improving communication skills (Kramsch, 1995). According to Güler (2005), in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, which emphasises the action-oriented orientation of the communicative language approach, the knowledge, skills and attitudes that language users need to develop in intercultural communication situations, as well as in daily communication environments, are introduced within the scope of certain criteria and categories. According to Straub (1999), the point that educators should keep in mind while transferring culture is to raise awareness of students about their own culture before learning the target culture and to enable them to use it in a way that will help them make comparisons while learning the opposite culture.

Alpar (2013) aimed at revealing the importance of cultural elements in foreign language teaching in his study. As a result of the research, it was stated that the emotions and thoughts that are intended to be expressed in the target language necessitate the teaching of sociocultural structures besides the teaching of the rules of the language. According to the results of the research, teaching

the culture of the target language in teaching a foreign language will both enable the student to learn better and give the student a worldview that has passed through the filter of universal values.

1.3. Purpose of the research

The purpose of this research is to obtain the opinions of foreign language teachers on the mechanisms of intercultural competence formation in foreign language teaching. Within the scope of this purpose, answers to the following sub-objectives were sought in the research:

1. What are the views of foreign language teachers on the importance of culture in language teaching?
2. How do foreign language teachers evaluate their equipment for establishing intercultural competence in language teaching?
3. What are the suggestions of foreign language teachers regarding the establishment of intercultural competence formation mechanisms?

2. Methods and materials

2.1. Research method

The study used the phenomenological design, which is a qualitative research design. In phenomenological studies, it is tried to document how individuals subjectively experience their own conditions from their own perspectives (Christensen, Johnson, & Turner, 2011). Phenomenology studies can make significant contributions to both scientific literature and practice (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006). In phenomenology research, data sources directly experience the phenomenon that the research focuses on, i.e., individuals or groups who have lived experiences about the relevant phenomenon and can express or reflect this phenomenon (Gill, 2014). The views of the foreign language teachers participating in the research on the mechanisms of intercultural competence formation in foreign language teaching were discussed with the phenomenology pattern, which is one of the qualitative research methods.

2.2. Participants

The participant group of the research consists of 20 foreign language teachers. Foreign language teachers work in various educational institutions in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The study group of the research was formed according to the easily accessible sampling method. Convenience or convenience sampling relies entirely on what is available, quick and easy to reach (Mertens, 2019). Information on the demographic characteristics of the study group of the study, which was selected with the easily accessible sampling method, is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of teachers

Experience	Gender		Sum
	Female	Male	
1–5 years	2	one	3

6–10 years	3	5	8
11–15 years	-	1	1
16 years and above	4	4	8
Total	9	11	20

In Table 1, the demographic distributions of the foreign language teachers participating in the research regarding their professional experience and gender are given. Of the foreign language teachers, 3 have 1–5 years, 8 have 6–10 years, 1 have 11–15 years and 8 have 16 years or more professional experience. Of the foreign language teachers participating in the research, 9 are female and 11 are male.

2.3. Data collection tools

The research data were collected with the semi-structured interview form developed by the researchers after the necessary literature review. In order to evaluate the questions in the semi-structured interview form, three experts were consulted. Experts evaluated the questions. The questions were finalised in line with the suggestions from the experts. Two foreign language teachers answered the questions in the semi-structured interview form. The researchers decided that the questions were understandable by evaluating the answers of the teachers. The foreign language teachers who participated in this part of the research were not included in the study group of the research. The questions in the semi-structured interview form are given below.

1. What are your views on the importance of culture in foreign language teaching?
2. How do you evaluate your equipment for establishing intercultural competence in foreign language teaching?
3. What are your suggestions for the establishment of intercultural competence formation mechanisms?

In the semi-structured interview form, there are two demographic questions created to learn the gender and professional experiences of teachers. There are three questions to get the opinions of foreign language teachers on the mechanisms of intercultural competence formation in language teaching.

2.4. Data collection process

The research data were collected during the face-to-face interviews with the teachers in the schools where the foreign language teachers participating in the research were employed. The primary school teachers, who filled out the semi-structured interview form in the interview rooms within the institution, were first made to sign the research volunteer participation form. In the research voluntary participation form, there are information about the ethical principles of the research, the purpose of the research and the personal information of the research participant group to be kept confidential. Face-to-face interviews with teachers lasted approximately 25–30 minutes. The process of collecting all the research data took about 1 month.

2.5. Data collection analysis

After the research data were collected, their contents were examined. The purpose of content analysis is to explain how a group or event is represented by text or visual features. While doing this, questions are asked about the objective characteristics of the subject. For this purpose, the analysed representation or discursive field is divided into parts (categories) and it is discussed what kind of meanings the content features that are repeated in the representation produce. However, a technical procedure must be followed here. In this study, the content analysis method described by Hopkins and King (2010) was followed. The opinions of the foreign language teachers participating in the research were categorised and given in the findings section.

3. Results

In this section, the answers given to the questions in the semi-structured interview form used as a data collection tool in the research were categorised. The tables created are presented using frequency and percentage expressions.

In Table 2, the views of the foreign language teachers participating in the research on the importance of culture in language teaching are given by categorizing them.

Table 2. Opinions of foreign language teachers on the importance of culture in language teaching

Category	F	%
Very important	14	70
Important	4	20
Somewhat important	2	10
Insignificant	-	-
Very unimportant	-	-
Total	20	100

In Table 2, the opinions of the participants on the importance of culture in foreign language teaching are given by categorising them. 70% of the foreign language teachers gave the answer very important, 20% important and 10% somewhat important. Among the teachers participating in the research, there is no teacher who stated that culture is unimportant or very unimportant in foreign language teaching.

In Table 3, the equipment of the foreign language teachers participating in the research on establishing intercultural competence in language teaching is given by categorising them.

Table 3. Foreign language teachers on establishing intercultural competence in language teaching

Category	F	%
Very enough	1	5
Sufficient	4	20
A little is enough	11	55
Insufficient	3	15
Very inadequate	1	5

Total	20	100
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In Table 3, the equipment of the foreign language teachers participating in the research on establishing intercultural competence in language teaching is divided into five categories. 5% of the teachers gave the answer very adequate, 20% sufficient, 55% somewhat sufficient, 15% insufficient and 5% very insufficient.

In Table 4, the suggestions of the foreign language teachers participating in the research on the creation of intercultural competence formation mechanisms are given by categorising them.

Table 4. Foreign language teachers on the establishment of intercultural competence formation mechanisms

Category	F	%
Books contain more cultural texts	16	80
Utilising cultural materials in teaching	13	65
Not neglecting cultural elements in language teaching	11	55
Tradition training	9	45
Introducing the geographical features of the country where the language is taught	8	40
Teaching the music, literature and art of the country whose language is taught	6	35
Language is taught, such as food and meeting	6	35
Developing students' ability to gather information about the target culture	4	20
Arranging the teaching environment with the elements of the target culture	3	15

In Table 4, the suggestions of the foreign language teachers participating in the research regarding the formation of intercultural competence mechanisms are given by categorising them. 80% of the teachers answered that the books should contain more cultural texts, 65% of them answered that cultural materials should be used in teaching, 55% of them answered that cultural elements should not be neglected in language teaching. 45% of the teachers gave the answer to give tradition education; 40% to introduce the geographical features of the country where the language is taught; 35% to teach the music, literature and art of the country where the language is taught; and 35% to teach cultural patterns such as food and meeting of the country where the language is taught. 20% of the foreign language teachers gave the answer to develop students' ability to gather information about the target culture and 15% to organise the teaching environment with the elements of the target culture.

4. Discussion

The majority of foreign language teachers participating in the research stated that culture is very important in foreign language teaching. Majority of the foreign language teachers who participated in the research stated that they found their teachers' equipment to establish intercultural

competence in language teaching somewhat adequate. The suggestions of the foreign language teachers participating in the research on the formation of intercultural competence mechanisms were collected in nine categories. These are (1) books containing more cultural texts; (2) utilising cultural materials in teaching; (3) not neglecting cultural elements in language teaching; (4) giving tradition training; (5) introducing the geographical features of the country where the language is taught; (6) teaching the music, literature and art of the country whose language is taught; (7) teaching the cultural patterns of the country where the language is taught, such as food and meeting; (8) developing students' ability to gather information about the target culture; and (9) organising the teaching environment with the elements of the target culture.

Mete and Gürsoy (2013, p. 354) evaluated the views on teacher competencies in teaching Turkish as a foreign language. In their research on teacher competencies, researchers state that teachers have the highest average in the section of professional attitudes and values, being sensitive to language–culture interaction. According to Jin and Cortazzi (2001), three basic materials as source cultural materials, target culture materials and international cultural materials can be used in foreign language textbooks. Source cultural materials contain information about the language learner's own culture. The results of Belli's (2018) study revealed that pre-service English language teachers thought that including the target culture in language classes would contribute to the development of their language by communicating with people from other cultures more easily for foreign language students, and that they thought that following an intercultural language teaching approach in language classes would contribute positively to foreign language learning.

5. Conclusion

Language teaching in the world dates back to ancient times. Based on the fact that every nation and every tribe has their own system of agreement, we can say that language teaching has existed for centuries. Languages, which date back to ancient times and are among the largest languages in the world, owe this status to the nations they belong to because the nations that have left their mark on history are the nations that develop, protect and teach their languages to other societies. Language teaching is not just the teaching of vocabulary or grammar, but also the teaching of the culture in which that language develops. Culture teaching in foreign language teaching is an important issue. The expression 'language is learned together with culture' clearly states that culture cannot be separated from language and its place in language teaching. Due to the importance of this subject, this study aimed to obtain the opinions of foreign language teachers on the mechanisms of intercultural competence formation in foreign language teaching. As a result of the research, the majority of foreign language teachers participating in the research stated that culture is very important in foreign language teaching. Majority of the foreign language teachers who participated in the research stated that they found their teachers' equipment to establish intercultural competence in language teaching somewhat adequate. When the suggestions of the foreign language teachers participating in the research regarding the formation of intercultural competence mechanisms are evaluated, the books are categorised as containing more cultural texts, using cultural materials in teaching, not neglecting cultural elements in language teaching, giving tradition and custom education and introducing the geographical features of the country where the language is taught. In addition, some teachers mentioned the importance of teaching music, literature and art

of the country where the language is taught; teaching cultural patterns such as food and meeting of the country where the language is taught; developing the ability of students to gather information about the target culture; and arranging the teaching environment with the elements of the target culture.

6. Recommendations

As a result of the research findings, the following recommendations were developed:

1. For foreign language education, the necessary materials should be provided within the educational institution, and the teaching environment should be arranged with the cultural elements of the society of the language taught.
2. In order to take cultural elements into consideration in language teaching, textbooks should contain cultural texts.
3. While giving language education, it is necessary to teach the traditions of the culture to which the language belongs and the cultural patterns such as music, literature and art, food and meeting.
4. Foreign language teachers should be equipped to promote the geographical features of the country where language education is given.
5. Foreign language teachers need to develop their students' ability to gather information about the target culture.

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