DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH LITERATURE IN A MULTICULTURAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract. This article looks at how multilingualism is changing in today's world due to globalization, new technology, and more people moving across borders. It covers both the theory and practical aspects of multilingualism in communication, education, and society. Theoretically, it discusses the "multilingual turn" in education, which moves away from seeing monolingualism as the norm. It supports using flexible language practices like translanguaging, where different languages are mixed based on the situation. The practical side focuses on English as a global language and how multilingualism can be included in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes. It shows how using students' different language backgrounds can improve learning. The article also highlights the importance of developing intercultural skills through literature, which helps students understand other cultures and reflect on their own. The methodology framework presented in the article is based on using literature in language learning to build cultural awareness and critical thinking.

Key words: multilingualism, globalization, EFL (English as a Foreign Language), intercultural competence, literature, multilingual turn, technology.

DEZVOLTAREA COMPETENȚEI INTERCULTURALE PRIN LITERATURĂ ÎNTR-UN CADRU MULTICULTURAL

Rezumat. În: acest articol se analizează modul în care multilingvismul se schimbă în lumea de astăzi din cauza globalizării, a noilor tehnologii și a mai multor oameni care se deplasează peste granițe. Acesta acoperă atât aspectele teoretice, cât și cele practice ale multilingvismului în comunicare, educație și societate. Teoretic, se discută „turnura multilingvistică" în educație, care se îndepărtează de vederea monolingvismului ca normă. Se acceptă utilizarea practicilor lingvistice flexibile, cum ar fi traducerea, în care diferite limbi sunt amestecate în funcție de situație. Partea practică se concentrează pe limba engleză ca limbă globală și modul în care multilingvismul poate fi inclus în cursurile de engleză ca limbă străină (EFL). Aceasta arată modul în care utilizarea diferitelor medii lingvistice ale elevilor poate îmbunătăți învățarea. Articolul subliniază, de asemenea, importanța dezvoltării abilităților interculturale prin intermediul literaturii, care îi ajută pe elevi să înțeleagă alte culturi și să reflecteze pe cont propriu. Cadrul metodologic prezentat în articol se bazează pe utilizarea literaturii în învățarea limbilor străine pentru a construi conștientizarea culturală și gândirea critică.

Cuvinte cheie: multilingvism, globalizare, EFL (Engleză ca limbă străină), competență interculturală, literatură, turnură multilingvă, tehnologie.

In recent years, several factors have contributed to significant changes in the way people communicate, learn, and interact, fundamentally reshaping societal attitudes, behaviors, and communication practices. These changes are driven by advances in technology, global economic processes, and increasing population mobility, all of which

have intensified and developed rapidly, bringing new approaches to language and communication, especially multilingualism.

The development of new technologies has transformed communication by making it both local and global. On the local level, communities, often multilingual due to migration, must negotiate the use of different languages for communication and decision-making. Globally, the instant nature of communication through digital platforms and networks links local sites across borders, connecting cities, universities, and workplaces. This shift has redefined how people engage in discussions and coordinate functions. Previously, communication within national borders relied on a single, standardized language. Today, however, multilingualism is becoming the norm, especially as communities engage in transnational exchanges [20].

Population mobility, driven by globalization, is another factor that has reshaped communication. The impact of migrations is far-reaching, as they not only diversify local populations but also grow the necessity for multilingual communication. Communities are formed of individuals from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds, requiring new forms of communication that can accommodate this diversity. In turn, this requires a need for multilingualism, as individuals and institutions must navigate these linguistic differences to function cohesively [18].

In this context of linguistic diversity, English is seen as the global lingua franca, facilitating communication across borders and cultures. While there is debate about the dominance of English and its effects on other languages, its role as a bridge language in international discourse cannot be ignored. The widespread use of English is evident in the language choices made in education, business, and technology worldwide.

However, while English enables global communication, the growth of multilingualism in local contexts reflects a shift towards more inclusive and diverse forms of interaction. In a world where communication is both local and global, and where populations are more mobile than ever, the ability to use multiple languages becomes a critical skill. As communities become more diverse, the ability to communicate across languages will play a central role in fostering *understanding, cooperation, and societal development*.

In recent years, the study of foreign language learning and teaching has moved away from focusing only on monolingual ideas, where native speakers are seen as the standard for language learners, and languages are kept separate in the mind and in the classroom (e.g., Cook, 2010; Ortega, 2014) [20]. The idea that monolingualism is the usual way people communicate is being replaced by the recognition that multilingualism is becoming more common (e.g., Conteh and Meier, 2014; May, 2014). The belief that foreign language learners are less capable than native speakers is being challenged, and multilinguals are now seen as competent language users, even though they may speak differently from native

speakers [4]. Multilinguals have complex and changing language experiences, and they use their language skills in different ways depending on the situation and the people they are communicating with [12, 16].

As a result of the "multilingual turn" in education (Conteh and Meier, 2014; May, 2014), there have been increasing calls to soften the strict boundaries between languages in learning (Blommaert, 2010; Cenoz and Gorter, 2013). This shift advocates for integrating learners' full linguistic resources through instructional practices, such as culturally responsive teaching [8,11] and pedagogical translanguaging (Cenoz and Gorter, 2020; Cenoz and Santos, 2020; Gorter and Arocena, 2020). In this context, **multilingualism** refers to the ability to use and understand more than one language, drawing on different linguistic systems based on the needs of the communicative situation.

In the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), this shift is especially relevant, as it emphasizes the importance of recognizing all learners as "users of language in diverse ways and as potential and arising multilinguals" (Conteh and Meier, 2014). This multilingual approach encourages teachers to utilize learners' existing linguistic and cultural backgrounds as valuable resources for learning, creating bridges between different languages to facilitate new knowledge. By promoting the use of a learner's entire linguistic collection, teachers can help students understand language relationships and raise their awareness of how languages function together in systematic ways (Cenoz and Gorter, 2020).

A key goal of this multilingual education is to offer equal learning opportunities to all students by legitimizing their diverse language repertoires, identities, and cultural backgrounds (Conteh and Meier, 2014). This approach is particularly significant in EFL classrooms, where students often bring a variety of linguistic resources that, if embraced, can enhance their learning process. However, for this multilingual turn to take root in educational settings, teachers must be seen as the agents of change. Research indicates that while many teachers hold positive attitudes toward multilingualism, they often continue to follow monolingual teaching practices [10]. To fully implement multilingual pedagogies, a shift in teacher cognition is necessary, where educators begin to see *the value of multilingualism* in their classrooms and adapt their practices accordingly.

Multilingualism is defined as the ability of an individual speaker or a community of speakers to communicate effectively in three or more languages. The Oxford linguist Suzanne Romaine has claimed that bilingualism and multilingualism 'are a normal and unremarkable necessity of everyday life for the majority of the world's population.'" — Michael Erard [20]. Oxford Academic (2017) we find that *multilingualism* is described as language diversity in society, highlighting that about 6,500–7,000 languages are spoken, written, and signed worldwide by people who communicate in more than one language [16]. John Edwards (1994) defined multilingualism as the presence of multiple languages

within a given society or community. his definition focuses on the societal aspect, considering how different languages coexist and interact within a population [12]. In the context of teaching - learning EFL *multiculturalism* is often defined as the understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures represented by learners, teachers, and the content being taught. According to Byram (1997), developing *intercultural competence* is crucial in language learning, as learners must not only understand the grammar and vocabulary of a language but also how culture shapes language use [1].

Cenoz and Gorter (2011) describe multiculturalism in EFL as a recognition of **linguistic diversity** where learners come from various cultural backgrounds, bringing different languages and worldviews into the classroom. In this context, multiculturalism involves embracing these differences to **create a more inclusive learning environment** that values each learner's unique cultural identity and uses it as a resource for language learning. According to Little (2019), multicultural education in EFL aims to affirm cultural diversity by **incorporating diverse perspectives into the curriculum**, helping learners develop language skills while also becoming aware of global cultural dynamics. This approach ensures that learners from minority cultures are acknowledged, respected, and included in the learning process. Furthermore, **multiculturalism** in EFL goes beyond language learning to include **cultural understanding, inclusion, and global awareness**, preparing learners to communicate effectively in a diverse, interconnected world claim García and Wei (2014), Baker (2011).
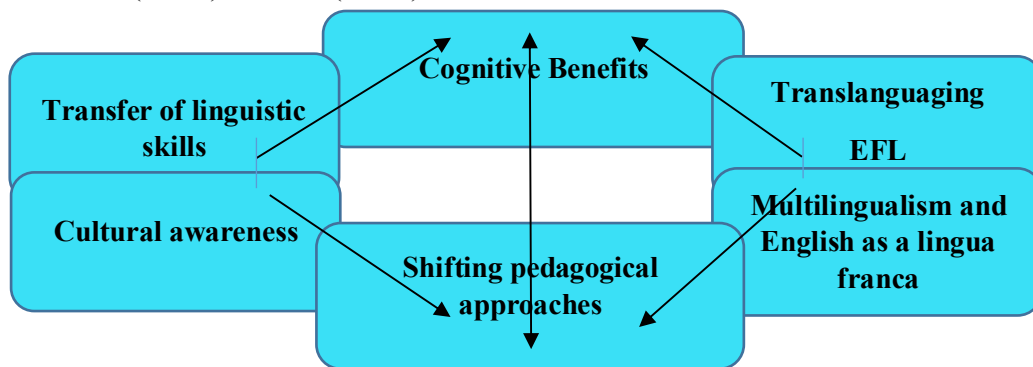

Figure 1. Multilingualism in teaching and learning EFL

In a multicultural society like Moldova, it is important for learners to develop an understanding of the **different cultural norms, values, and practices** of their peers. The EFL classroom offers an ideal platform for developing this awareness. English, as a global language, introduces students to diverse cultural contexts from around the world, but it can also be a tool for exploring the **cultural diversity within Moldova itself**. Moldova has recently aligned to "EU Multilingualism Policy". The European Union supports multilingualism as part of the cultural heritage of its citizens and nations, and has developed a number of policies supporting multilingualism, based on shared beliefs about the benefits of a multilingual and linguistically diverse society. The EU's multilingualism policy has 3 strands [18]:

– working to protect Europe's rich linguistic diversity

– promoting language learning and multilingualism

– importance of languages for trade and competitiveness.

According to it European Union diversity is appreciated and it becomes a common home in which diversity is celebrated, and where many mother tongues are a source of wealth and a bridge to greater solidarity and mutual understanding. Language is the most direct expression of culture; it is what makes us human and what gives each of us a sense of identity.' (European Commission 2005).

Another notable EU Language Policy says that every European should be able to speak 2 languages in addition to their mother tongue. According to it "Foreign language competence is regarded as one of the basic skills that all EU citizens need to acquire in order to improve their educational and employment opportunities within the European learning society, in particular by making use of the right to freedom of movement of persons".

Based on what was said a new language model is outlined, one that embraces a **plurilingual and flexible approach**. In this model, individuals don't need to have the same level of proficiency in all languages, and language skills can develop from **experiences both inside and outside of formal education**, such as through interactions in daily life or on the Internet. **Intercultural understanding** is also a key component. English, as a primary language for communication, plays a vital role in this framework [6,8,9].

In Moldova, English is taught as a foreign language starting in primary school, and its importance has increased in recent years due to the global role of English as a lingua franca. The curriculum focuses on developing listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, and there is an increasing emphasis on using English in real-life, communicative contexts. However, while the **foreign language curriculum** includes some aspects of **intercultural competence**, the literature content is reduced. Currently, in Moldova's English language curriculum, **literature** plays a somewhat limited role in EFL instruction. The focus tends to be more on functional language use and communication, rather than on exploring English through literary texts. While some advanced levels of English education might incorporate short stories, poems, or excerpts from English-speaking authors, literature is not always central to language teaching at earlier stages.

However, incorporating literature into the **English language curriculum** could enrich the learning process by exposing students to **cultural and linguistic diversity** within the English language. **Literary texts** offer students a deeper understanding of the cultures where English is spoken and provide opportunities to develop critical thinking and interpretative skills. This aligns with the integrated language policy discussed earlier, where **intercultural understanding** is essential for comprehensive language education.

One of the challenges with integrating **literature into English language lessons** is the **limited time** teachers have during each class. However, studies and learning experiences have shown that **successful learning does not follow a one-size-fits-all approach**. Learners acquire knowledge in many different ways, and this flexibility opens up new possibilities for teaching strategies. One promising approach is the **Literacy Engagement Framework**, which emphasizes that **literacy engagement**—rooted in providing free access to books, printed materials, and a variety of technological resources—plays a crucial role in literacy development [4].

To address the issue of limited classroom time, **learning beyond the classroom** is seen as a practical solution. Encouraging students to engage with literature outside of school hours, using both **printed materials and digital platforms**, can extend the learning process. This approach not only overcomes time constraints but also fosters independent learning and a deeper connection with texts, which contributes to better **literacy achievement**. In this way, literature can be more effectively integrated into the language learning experience, despite the limited time available during lessons.

It is widely accepted that literature can play a significant role in developing intercultural competence (Matos, 2012). Specifically, foreign language literary texts offer an opportunity to enhance intercultural understanding by exposing readers to different cultural settings and viewpoints through another language. Beyond the cultural content within the text or the unique perspectives it provides, it is the experience of engaging with literature that most contributes to intercultural growth. Unlike reading for mere information, reading literature aesthetically involves interpretation and emotional involvement, allowing readers to connect their personal experiences with the text [5,10]. This connection encourages self-reflection, a key element in developing intercultural competence.

Moreover, reading literature involves imagination, enabling readers to step out of their own mindset and view the world from another person's perspective [19]. By connecting with characters, readers can virtually experience another's perspective, which goes beyond simply learning about different cultures. Literature provides an opportunity to encounter diverse cultural practices, values, and viewpoints, allowing us to reflect on our own cultural influences. Through these intercultural encounters, we not only gain awareness of other cultures but also a deeper understanding of ourselves. The ability of literary texts to encourage readers to explore their own identities while experiencing other subjective worlds makes literature a powerful tool for intercultural development (Matos, 2012).

This framework, focusing on **dialogue with** and **about** literature, serves as a powerful guide for using literary texts to build students' cultural constructs. Through direct engagement with texts (dialogue with) and critical reflection and discussion (dialogue

about), students can develop a deeper understanding of both their own culture and the cultures of others, which is essential in an increasingly interconnected world.
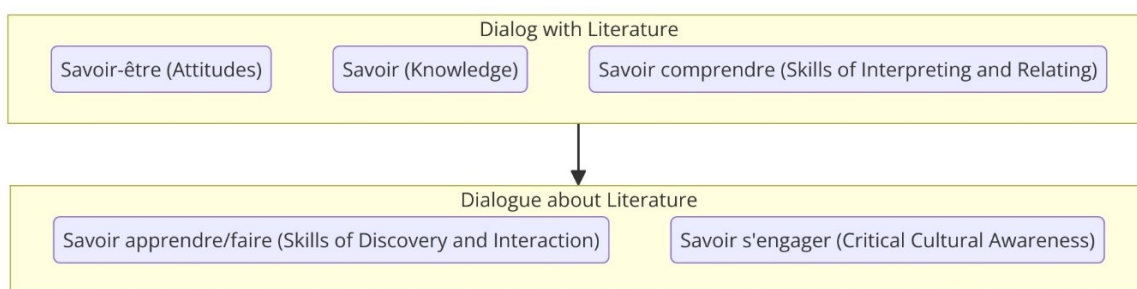

Figure 2. Construct of intercultural competence, source Schat, 2021

1. Dialogue with the text: interacting with the content of the literary text

This aspect of the framework emphasizes direct engagement with the literary text itself. Through dialogue with the text, students interact with the narrative, characters, and cultural elements embedded within the text, which helps them to encounter different perspectives and reflect on their own cultural background. Here's how this can be implemented in the classroom:

• **Attitudes**- As students read, teachers can encourage them to approach the text with an open mind. This may include activities where students identify cultural differences and similarities, challenging their own assumptions and biases. For example, while reading a story set in a different culture, students can be prompted to explore the cultural values portrayed by the characters and discuss how these compare to their own values.

• **Knowledge**-Teachers can guide students to extract and build knowledge about the target culture through the literary text. This can be done by focusing on key cultural elements-such as social norms, values, traditions, and practices-that the text presents. For instance, a literary work that describes a foreign festival or custom can serve as a springboard for a discussion on the significance of such events within that culture.

• **Skills of interpreting and relating**- Literary texts often contain metaphorical or culturally specific language. Teachers can guide students through activities that help them interpret these elements, encouraging them to relate them to their own experiences or prior knowledge. For example, students could be asked to interpret how a character's behavior reflects cultural norms and then compare these norms to their own society.

2. Dialogue about literature- reflecting on and discussing cultural insights

This involves reflecting on the cultural and social implications of the text, encouraging students to engage in discussions and critical analysis of the literature to better understand cultural constructs. Dialogue about literature goes beyond simply reading and involves discussing the broader cultural meanings and significance of the text.

• **Skills of discovery and interaction**- In this phase, students can be encouraged to actively engage with cultural discoveries from the text. For example, after reading a piece

of literature, students might be tasked with researching the cultural practices presented and sharing their findings with the class. This active exploration of culture builds not only their language skills but also their cultural awareness, fostering a deeper understanding of other cultures.

• **Critical cultural awareness**- Literature can be used to critically examine cultural constructs. Teachers can encourage students to debate and discuss the cultural practices or beliefs presented in the text. For instance, after reading a text that portrays gender roles in a specific culture, students can critically evaluate how these roles compare to their own cultural norms and reflect on the broader societal implications. This builds the skill of cultural critique and encourages self-awareness about their own cultural positions. According to Schat dialogue with others about the foreign language literary text may foster the students' ability to use the foreign language in interaction to gain insight into the cultural presuppositions of others (savoir apprendre / faire), and to express a personal evaluation of the text by critically questioning its discourse (savoir s'engager). With the aim of reflection, a strong focus on personal response to literature is essential in both dialogues [17].

This framework can be efficiently applied in the teaching learning process. Teacher has to select the literary texts from diverse cultures that reflect different *worldviews, societal norms, and values*. Furthermore, they may include texts that present complex characters and settings that challenge students' preconceptions and expose them to intercultural differences. In **pre-reading activities** *(Focusing on attitudes and knowledge)* students are encourage to explore their own attitudes toward the culture depicted in the literary text. They can engage in reflective discussions or journaling activities to assess their pre-existing cultural views. It is important to provide background knowledge about the author, historical context, and the cultural setting of the literary text. This will prepare students to better understand and relate to the content.

Then, in-depth reading *(Developing knowledge and skills of interpretation)* students read the text actively, paying attention to cultural markers, symbolism, and narrative styles. Also, teachers assign activities that require students to identify the text's internal characteristics (such as motifs, tone, and narrative perspective), which will help them interpret the text's deeper meaning. Encourage them to make connections between the text and real-world issues, exploring how the themes of the text relate to current cultural or global issues.

Next stage, classroom dialogue with literature (*Fostering interpretation and relating skills*) implies discussions in which students share their interpretations of the text. This can be done in pairs, small groups, or as a whole class. Teachers then guide students to critically evaluate how their own cultural background influences their interpretation of the text. More than this he can provide prompts that encourage students to relate the text to their personal

experiences or global events. This step fosters intercultural understanding by linking the literature to real-world issues and diverse perspectives. Here are some useful prompts to connect the text with their personal experience:

- Can you relate to any of the characters' experiences or struggles? Have you faced a similar situation in your life? How would you have handled it differently?
- Have you ever experienced a situation where your cultural background influenced how others perceived you, similar to the characters in the story? How did that affect you?
- Think about a time when you were exposed to a different culture. How did that experience change your understanding of the world, and how does it compare to the cultural exchange depicted in theory?

The last stage is post-reading reflection (*Developing skills of discovery, interaction, and critical cultural awareness*) during which the teacher facilitates group discussions where students reflect on the text and their understanding of the cultural context. As a follow up activity the students may be given reflection papers or projects where they critically evaluate the cultural norms represented in the text and their relevance to the global context. The students may also be encouraged to interact with peers from different cultural backgrounds during discussions to broaden their intercultural awareness and reflect on differences in interpretation.

Finally, the integration of media resources (*Enhancing authenticity and cultural context*) that results in supplementing the reading with media resources, such as films, interviews, or news articles, related to the themes of the text. This adds authenticity to the cultural context and allows students to explore real-world implications of the issues discussed in the literary work.

Table 1. **Types of questions used in the classroom to guide discussions, promote interpretation, and develop intercultural competence within dialogue with literature and dialogue about literature approaches**

Approach	Focus	Type of Prompts	Example Prompts
Dialogue with literature	**Textual understanding**	Questions to promote deep comprehension and interpretation of the text.	- What do you think the author is trying to convey through the main character's actions? - How does the setting of the story influence the events? - Would these events have been different in another cultural context? - What role does the author's background play in the plot?
	Exploring cultural symbols	Prompts to identify cultural symbols, values, and stereotypes.	- Are there cultural symbols or practices in the text that are unfamiliar? How do they affect your understanding? - How does the author use language or imagery to represent cultural values or stereotypes?

			- Can you identify any biases from the characters or the narrator?
	Character and plot analysis	Questions examining how culture influences characters' actions and the story.	- How do the characters' cultural backgrounds shape their decisions? - Do you think the conflict is specific to the culture depicted, or could it occur in other contexts? Why or why not?
Dialogue about literature	**Relating to personal experiences**	Prompts that link the literary text to students' own experiences.	- Can you relate to any characters' experiences or struggles? - Have you faced a similar situation in your life? How would you have handled it differently? - Have you experienced a situation where your cultural background influenced how others perceived you, similar to the story?
	Relating to global events	Prompts connecting the text to global issues and real-world events.	- Are there themes in the text that remind you of current global issues (e.g., migration, conflict)? - How does the story relate to recent news or events? - How could the ideas or themes from the text help us understand or resolve a current global conflict?
	Exploring stereotypes	Questions focused on cultural norms and stereotypes, comparing them to real-life situations.	- Have you noticed stereotypes in the text? How do they reflect the characters' backgrounds, and how do they compare to real-life representations? - How do the cultural norms in the story differ from those in your culture? Can you think of a similar cultural clash in the real world?
Dialogue about literature	**Critical reflection**	Prompts encouraging students to reflect on personal and cultural perspectives and biases.	- How does your cultural background shape your interpretation of the story? - How would the text's message be understood in another cultural context? - What does the text reveal about cultural assumptions or biases? How does this reflection help with intercultural awareness in today's world?
	Group discussion and reflection	Prompts to stimulate group discussion and collaborative cultural comparison.	- Compare how your group members interpreted the text. How did personal experiences influence understanding? - What did you learn from others' interpretations that you hadn't considered? - How do cultural practices in the text compare to your own culture? How do these affect interactions?

That being said, incorporating literature into English language teaching in the classroom setting would contribute to the development of students' intercultural competence by providing them with broader exposure to various cultures and perspectives.

Despite time limitation, encouraging autonomous learning through extracurricular readings and digital resources can extend the learning process and help students develop their critical and interpretative skills. Thus, literature can become a powerful tool for fostering deep intercultural understanding and for the development of personal identity. Also, the interplay between technology, globalization, and migration has reshaped the way we communicate, learn, and engage with one another. These factors have created a need for new forms of communication that transcend traditional boundaries and accommodate diverse linguistic and cultural realities. Multilingualism is a key approach in this evolving landscape, offering a path toward more inclusive and effective communication in both local and global contexts. As communities become increasingly diverse, the ability to communicate across languages will play a central role in fostering understanding, cooperation, and societal development.

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