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## INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Ana-Maria ANDRIOAIE,

“Ion Creangă” State Pedagogical University of Chisinau

The article describes the process of conceptualizing the intercultural competence through a systematic analysis of the specialized literature, relating it to a complex set of interconnected competences: key competence, plurilingual and pluricultural competence, transversal competence, interdisciplinary competence, integrated competence, axiological competence and the competence to learn to live together with others. The complexity of the intercultural competence stems from its positioning at the confluence of multiple scientific fields, such as psychology, sociology, anthropology and axiology, thus serving as a foundation for social interaction and personal development. The research findings lead to an original definition of intercultural competence, highlighting the interdependence between linguistic knowledge and cultural sensitivity.

**Keywords:** *intercultural competence, conceptualization, key competence, plurilingual and pluricultural competence, transversal competence, interdisciplinary competence, integrated competence, axiological competence, learning to live together.*

### COMPETENȚA INTERCULTURALĂ: PERSPECTIVE TEORETICE ȘI IMPLICAȚII EDUCAȚIONALE

Articolul descrie procesul de conceptualizare a competenței interculturale printr-o analiză sistematică a literaturii de specialitate, raportând-o la un set complex de competențe conexe: competențele-cheie, competența plurilingvistă și pluriculturală, competența transversală, competența interdisciplinară, competența integrată, competența axiologică și competența de a învăța să trăiești împreună cu ceilalți. Complexitatea competenței interculturale provine din situarea acesteia la confluența mai multor domenii științifice precum psihologia, sociologia, antropologia și axiologia, fiind astfel fundament al interacțiunii sociale și al dezvoltării personale. Rezultatele cercetării duc la o definiție originală a competenței interculturale, care aduce în prim-plan interdependența între cunoașterea lingvistică și sensibilitatea culturală.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *competență interculturală, conceptualizare, competență-cheie, competență plurilingvistă și pluriculturală, competența transversală, competența interdisciplinară, competența integrată, competența axiologică, competența de a învăța să trăiești împreună cu ceilalți.*

### Introduction

This article addresses the process of conceptualizing the intercultural competence, an essential stage in grounding the theoretical framework of the thesis bearing the title “Developing the Intercultural Competence of High School Students through the Use of Information Technologies”. The investigative approach aims at outlining the intercultural competence in relation to specialized literature, identifying its constituent components and highlighting its relevance in the academic development of high school students. In the context of contemporary education, marked by globalization and cultural diversity, the intercultural competence is configured as an essential ability, facilitating the development of *the capacity for effective, empathetic and responsible interaction in varied sociocultural contexts*. Therefore, the development of this competence represents an educational priority and a learning objective, as it facilitates the individual’s harmonious integration into diverse social contexts and contributes to the consolidation of a culture of dialogue, mutual respect and intercultural cooperation.

### Methods/materials used

The intercultural competence represents a complex theoretical construct, as it is situated at the intersection of several scientific domains, such as psychology, sociology, anthropology and axiology. Consequent-

ly, the intercultural competence can be viewed as an integrative configuration of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that enable the individual to interact effectively, responsibly and empathetically in the diverse sociocultural contexts which are characteristic of the contemporary globalized societies.

In order to formulate an original definition of the intercultural competence, relevant theoretical contributions from the specialized literature were analyzed, as well as the concepts associated with it, all of which contribute to its grounding and conceptual delimitation. From this perspective, the intercultural competence can be interpreted as a multidimensional structure that integrates several typologies of competences, such as: key competence, plurilingual and pluricultural competence, transversal competence, interdisciplinary competence, integrated competence and axiological competence, while also being correlated with the competence of learning to live together.

**Key competence:** The Council of the European Union has established the following eight key competences, which intertwine and overlap, in order to ensure that European citizens lead a successful life: literacy competences; multilingual competences; competences in science, technology, engineering and mathematics; digital competences; personal, social and learning to learn competences; citizenship competences; entrepreneurial competences, as well as cultural awareness and expression competences. Key competences for lifelong learning are defined as “those which all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development, employability, social inclusion, sustainable lifestyle, successful life in peaceful societies, health-conscious life management and active citizenship” [15, p. 7]. Key competences are developed gradually throughout life, through formal, non-formal and informal learning experiences, in varied educational contexts.

Within this conceptual framework, the intercultural competence is associated with two of the eight key competences agreed upon at the European level: *multilingual competences* and *citizenship competences*. The multilingual component brings to the forefront the role played by the intercultural competence in facilitating communication between individuals belonging to *different linguistic and cultural spaces*. The European policy document highlights the role of education in fostering the appreciation of cultural diversity in developing the students’ interest in different languages and in promoting intercultural communication. Multilingualism and interculturality intersect as linguistic diversity may intensify communication barriers between individuals from different cultures and, moreover, it may also amplify social divisions.

The intercultural competence is subsumed under *citizenship competences*, as it encourages the development of a responsible and constructive attitude toward the democratic principle of respect for human rights. According to the same document, valid at the European level, “interest in political and socioeconomic developments, humanities and intercultural communication” provides the foundation for overcoming prejudices and ensuring social justice and equity [15]. Intercultural dialogue is grounded in mutual respect and tolerance, which cannot be manifested in the absence of respect for human rights.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development highlights the importance of the intercultural dimension in achieving global sustainable development goals. From the perspective of developing intercultural competence, goal 4 is particularly relevant, which entails ensuring “inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” [13]. This objective can be achieved by eliminating gender disparities in access to learning and labor market integration opportunities, as well as by promoting human rights, a culture of peace and non-violence. The global goal on quality education promotes global citizenship, the appreciation of cultural diversity and the recognition of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.

The same policy document includes intercultural skills in the category of key competences, alongside other essential skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, communication and negotiation skills, teamwork, analytical skills and creativity. These competences involve complex cognitive processes oriented toward understanding, interpreting and applying knowledge in varied contexts, going beyond the reproductive level of learning.

The educational policy document “Benchmarks for designing, updating and evaluating the national curriculum” serves as a guide for teachers in implementing the ongoing educational reform and proposes a new reference framework for the national curriculum. Based on the eight European key competences, the document specifies that “high-order skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, negotiation, creativ-

ity, analytical and intercultural skills are included within the overall set of key competences” [17, p. 21]. High-order skills support the understanding and application of knowledge, in contrast to low-order skills, which prioritize rote learning.

The same document [17, p. 70] outlines the educational profile of the high school graduates in terms of key competences, which can be developed at elementary, functional, or advanced levels. The multilingual competence is defined as the ability to use multiple languages effectively and appropriately -in a register that is adapted to the cultural and social contexts-, being complemented by intercultural competences and a historical dimension. At the advanced level, the key competence of multilingualism is manifested through “processing concepts, ideas, opinions and feelings -expressed orally or in writing- according to students’ needs and interests, in various contexts, including multilingualism and intercultural communication,” as well as through “demonstrating appreciation for each individual’s linguistic profile as a basis for the development of the intercultural competence” [16, p. 70]. The integration of intercultural skills in the category of high-order skills, coupled with the integration of intercultural communication into advanced-level multilingual competence, underscores the complexity of the intercultural competence and its importance in the framework of the ongoing of curricular reform.

Key competences underlie the emergence of transformative competences, which develop an individual’s capacity to transform society. These competences [18], essential in increasingly diverse and interdependent societies, can be acquired through interdisciplinary pedagogical approaches, which are specific to formal, non-formal and informal education. According to the OECD, these competences include: *creating new value* (through innovation, resilience and sustainability); *reconciling tensions and dilemmas* (through identifying solutions to global problems, developing tolerance for ambiguity, cognitive flexibility, empathy, respect, creativity and problem-solving); and *taking responsibility* (critical thinking, self-awareness, reflective thinking and self-regulation).

**Plurilingual and pluricultural competence:** From the perspective of the Council of Europe, the plurilingual competence represents the “capacity to successively acquire and use different competences in different languages, at different levels of proficiency and for different functions” [2, p. 8]. The intercultural competence goes beyond the strictly linguistic dimension, integrating “knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours which allow a speaker, to varying degrees, to recognise, understand, interpret and accept other ways of living and thinking beyond his or her home culture” [ibid.]. Plurilingual and intercultural education integrates all the foreign languages known, even partially, by students [2, p. 7]. These languages interact and continuously influence one another. Linguistic and cultural diversity constitutes a significant factor in the development of the student’s personality, which is influenced by multiple sociocultural aspects throughout their ontogenesis. In order to develop the plurilingual and pluricultural competence, the foreign language teacher must capitalize on students’ sociolinguistic and sociocultural environment, as well as the formative function of social representations that are specific to their communities of origin.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Learning, Teaching, Assessment) defines the plurilingual and pluricultural competence as “the ability to use a holistic, interrelated language repertoire for communication and intercultural interaction, where a social agent possesses varying degrees of proficiency in several languages and experience of several cultures” [14, p. 168]. The plurilingual and pluricultural competence highlights the individual’s role as a social agent (who establishes relationships with diverse social groups), as well as the increasing need to participate in intercultural interactions within the context of a globalized society.

According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, throughout the process of studying foreign languages, learners must acquire a set of knowledge, skills and attitudes (at all levels of education) that enable them to cope with the challenges of communication in different life contexts and to overcome linguistic and cultural boundaries. This process begins with the development of *intercultural awareness*, understood as the understanding of the “*the world of origin’ and the world of the target community*” [14, p. 103]. In this context, intercultural awareness becomes an essential component of the educational process, facilitating the reduction of differences in terms of “values and beliefs, politeness conventions, social expectations etc.” [14, p. 51].

**Transversal competence:** In addition to its status as a key competence, the intercultural competence is a transversal competence that facilitates students' acquisition of values and attitudes beyond the boundaries of school subjects. Transversal competences are expressed through the following descriptors: "autonomy and responsibility, social interaction, personal and professional development" [16], according to National Education Law No. 1/2011. The development of the intercultural competence involves integrated learning, which occurs beyond the clearly defined boundaries of traditional academic subjects and aims at fostering autonomous learning and the holistic conceptualization of the world. Integrated learning is essential in today's society characterized by dynamism and complex interdependencies. The intercultural competence encompasses a wide range of transversal knowledge, skills and attitudes that contribute to the development of students' autonomy, responsibility, social interaction and personal development. Its development involves capitalizing on educational resources from various fields of knowledge, as well as on strengthening students' ability to communicate, collaborate and relate effectively in diverse cultural contexts.

**Interdisciplinary competence:** In the Romanian educational system, interdisciplinarity involves the capacity of establishing connections between ideas, explanatory languages, operations, or activities "with the aim of reducing the differences that arise between traditional school subjects" [5, p. 71].

According to Neacșu I., interdisciplinary competences emerge at the intersection of several fields of study. These competences can be classified into: *centripetal*, with a localized character, manifested "through the emergence of new content with an identity-thematic status of the competence" [11, p. 13] and *centrifugal*, oriented toward the extension and further development of learning acquisitions, "analyzed more from the perspective of the subject's capacity to build new cores of complementary, integrated competences" [11]. In the latter case, a fusion between different instrumental competences is achieved, which favors the manifestation of a holistic type of behavior.

The intercultural competence can be interpreted as an interdisciplinary competence, as it entails identifying correlations between various fields of knowledge. The transversal dimension of intercultural competence implies the implementation of integrated educational approaches, that can reach beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries and promote a holistic approach to social and cultural realities.

**Integrated competence:** According to Ciolan L., integrated competences are subsumed under cross-curricular themes and go beyond the conceptual frameworks of academic subjects. "Thus, high-order competences such as decision-making, entrepreneurial competences, intercultural communication, etc. can lead to the emergence of integrated themes or projects situated beyond traditional subjects" [3, p. 190]. Integrated competences, alongside transversal, key and cross-curricular ones, underpin the interdisciplinary approach to curriculum content, as they facilitate *methodological and conceptual transfers* from one subject to another [3, p. 125]. In this way, a systemic view and an integrative perspective on the topic under discussion are configured.

Intercultural competences are characterized by a high degree of complexity and, therefore, can be developed through a plurality of disciplines studied throughout general secondary education. No school subject alone can claim exclusivity in the formation of intercultural competence, which must be approached and taught in an integrative manner. According to Ciolan L., the integrated curriculum involves establishing meaningful connections between themes or competences that are usually developed separately through a variety of academic subjects, as "they have a strong connection to students' everyday life and aim, directly or indirectly, to contribute to shaping of values and attitudes" [3, p. 118].

Cross-curricular themes are oriented toward the students' personal and social development and involve the planning of varied learning experiences, configured within concrete and diverse educational contexts. Cross-curricular themes address the complex social, political, economic and cultural realities of the contemporary society and, therefore, require a reconceptualization of the way curriculum is designed, developed, implemented and assessed.

The intercultural competence can be developed through cross-curricular themes such as: *Multicultural cities of the world*; *Gastronomy, music and literature as expressions of cultural identity*; *Online intercultural communication*; *Migration and identity* or *Nonverbal communication in different cultures*. These themes facilitate the development of students' ability to act appropriately in diverse intercultural situations.

**Axiological competence:** According to L. Cuznețov, personality development is grounded in the knowledge and explanation of values, in “sensitizing the individual to values, in shaping the human personality through values and for values” [8, p. 20]. Every educational endeavor has a teleological, axiological, prospective and dialectical character. The same researcher emphasizes the axiological dimension of education by referring to the essential resources that are needed in order to achieve its intended goals, namely: *general human values; culturally derived values; pedagogical objectives and the general content of education* [8, p. 43].

Axiological competences are intrinsic to the entire teaching–learning process, as “education represents a transmission of values, a direct engagement with otherness – whether of the present, the past, or the future – a context of communication and social interaction” [6, p. 101].

Axiological competences constitute a set of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that ensure students’ cultural autonomy. “Axiological competences facilitate the critical and effective analysis of cultural stimuli and messages, their corroboration, their systemic correlation and the construction of new meanings and value significances” [1, p. 223], favoring the individual’s active and responsible participation in social life.

These competences are not limited to the knowledge and assimilation of cultural goods or conventions, but “aim – above all – at the capacity to invent new codes of reference or to discover new connections within systems of values” [4, p. 46]. The enhancement of the axiological competence corresponds to the axiological function of education, that is materialized in assimilating cultural values by students and generating of new ones. The teaching–learning process aims to equip learners with a broad range of scientific and cultural knowledge deemed valuable for their development and the shaping of their personalities.

“The development of the axiological competence, namely the ability to independently choose and assign meaning to values, appears to be consonant with the objectives of intercultural education” [7, p. 109]. Therefore, the intercultural competence cannot be fostered in the absence of the continuous process of axiological analysis, decentering, signification and re-signification that is facilitated through the development of the axiological competence.

**The competence of living together:** The development of the intercultural competence is grounded in the competence of learning to live together, which involves cooperation, communication and active participation in human activities [9, p. 16].

Learning to live together constitutes one of the four pillars of knowledge and education identified by J. Delors in the UNESCO report of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century, entitled “Learning: The Treasure Within,” alongside learning to do (action), learning to be (becoming) and learning to know (knowledge). These pillars of education aim at contributing to the holistic development of the human personality, based on ethical, spiritual, scientific, aesthetic and artistic values, by promoting democratic values, physical and mental health, as well as by fostering respect for national traditions and values.

This fundamental type of education involves the acquisition of transversal competences designed to facilitate students’ adaptation to a dynamic and constantly changing world, by developing their ability to relate to others, to empathize, to overcome prejudices, to collaborate in diverse teams, to participate in problem-solving, to transcend their own limits and to cultivate the full potential of the mind and spirit on a universal scale.

The competence of learning to live together can be strengthened “by developing an understanding of others and their history, traditions and spiritual values and, on this basis, creating a new spirit which, guided by recognition of our growing interdependence and a common analysis of the risks and challenges of the future, would induce people to implement common projects or to manage the inevitable conflicts in an intelligent and peaceful way” [9, p. 20].

This educational process can be concretized through the following lines of action:

1. *Learning through contact with difference*, which involves focusing on diversity, adopting cultural relativism and cultivating reciprocity;
2. *Learning from controversies and conflicts*, not by avoiding them, but by managing them in such a way that they do not degenerate into violence;
3. *Interactive learning* within networks, teams and communities [10, p. 35-36].

In addition to this pillar of education, S. Shaeffer and his collaborators introduced a fundamental type of education: *learning to transform oneself and society*, oriented toward the development of the abilities to know, reflect and act upon reality, with the aim of promoting a non-discriminatory society and fostering solidarity and social cohesion [12, p. 16-17].

This type of learning is subordinated to the values that shape each type of society. “The individual, the social group and peoples have the right to prioritize those values they consider most important, without harming, through their actions, other individuals, social groups, or peoples” [8, p. 68]. Just as ancient and medieval societies were subordinated to divinity and religious values, contemporary democratic society focuses on harmonious human interactions.

The Council of Europe, through the Pestalozzi program, proposes the following strategies that can be implemented for the development of the competence of learning to live together, which is considered the main objective of intercultural education:

1. *Selecting topics that are specific to the multilingual context of education* (through comparisons between languages and cultures) *and the plurilingual perspective*. In addition to subjects that directly contribute to the development of intercultural competences (such as history, geography, political sciences/social sciences, or foreign languages), the integration of other school subjects is also recommended, such as music, mathematics, or natural sciences.

2. *Developing student-centered teaching and learning methods*, such as: discovery learning, project-based learning, role-play, negotiation of positions and perspectives, the use of fictional texts with intercultural themes and devising strategies for negotiating differences and otherness.

These strategies contribute to achieving the objective of curricular development, which can be attained by offering diverse learning opportunities; by integrating intercultural education as a curricular objective at all levels of formal education; by promoting the principles of non-discriminatory pluralism and cultural relativism; by creating explicit intercultural learning situations; by fostering learning from differences, multiperspectivity, remembrance and reconciliation; by exposing students to intercultural communication situations; by valuing intercultural encounters and by implementing experiential learning situations [10, p. 41–43].

## Results

The analysis of the specialized literature has shown that the development of intercultural competence can be defined *as the process of developing the students' abilities to interact effectively and appropriately with others who are linguistically and culturally different from themselves*. The intercultural competence goes beyond the strictly communicative dimension, involving reciprocal processes of knowledge, interpretation and cultural mutual influence, characteristic of intercultural encounters.

Contact with cultural otherness inherently entails confronting different systems of values, norms and sociocultural representations, which generates opportunities for critical reflection and for the reconfiguration of one's own perspectives. In this context, the development of the intercultural competence involves fostering students' ability to understand and interpret cultural diversity, to negotiate meanings in intercultural communication situations and to demonstrate openness toward the plurality of ways of thinking and acting.

## Conclusions

The analysis of the theoretical framework and the contemporary educational context underscores that the intercultural competence emerges as a complex, multidimensional and integrative competence, whose fundamental manifestation consists in adopting an attitude of respect, tolerance and acceptance of cultural otherness in all its forms of expression.

The intercultural competence develops students' ability to interpret, negotiate and value cultural differences through the integrated mobilization of cognitive, socio-emotional and communicative resources in intercultural contexts.

Therefore, the intercultural competence is essential in developing individuals who are capable of ef-

fectively managing cultural diversity, demonstrating openness and respect toward otherness and actively contributing to the development of democratic and inclusive societies. The intercultural competence facilitates the development of an autonomous and reflective personality, capable of active participation in social life and effective integration into a socio-professional environment, that is characterized by dynamism and increasing competitiveness.

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**Data about author:**

**Ana-Maria ANDRIOAIE**, PhD Student, “Ion Creangă” State Pedagogical University of Chisinau, Republic of Moldova & English Teacher, „Mihai Eminescu” College, Bacau, Romania.

**ORCID:** 0009-0006-4844-1392

**E-mail:** andrioaianamaria@yahoo.com

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