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THE IMPORTANCE OF INTEGRATING SOCIO-CULTURAL COMPETENCE INTO FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Abstract

This article examines the importance of integrating socio-cultural competence into the process of foreign language teaching, particularly at the initial stages of language acquisition. Socio-cultural competence is viewed as a key component of communicative proficiency, enabling learners to understand cultural norms, values, and interaction patterns of the target-language community. The study analyzes theoretical approaches to socio-cultural learning and highlights the relevance of intercultural sensitivity, cultural awareness, and tolerance in modern education. An empirical investigation was conducted among first-year students of Abai University majoring in Two Foreign Languages, whose English proficiency level corresponds to A2. Diagnostic questionnaires were used to assess motivational, cognitive, and axiological components of socio-cultural competence. Findings demonstrate significant improvement in the experimental group after the implementation of culturally oriented instructional strategies, including the use of authentic materials, cultural texts, and activities aimed at enhancing intercultural awareness. The results confirm that integrating socio-cultural content into language instruction fosters learners' motivation, deepens cultural understanding, and strengthens intercultural communication skills. The study underscores the necessity of incorporating cultural dimensions into foreign language curricula and provides recommendations for effective pedagogical practices.

Keywords: *socio-cultural competence; intercultural communication; cultural awareness; foreign language teaching; motivational component; cognitive component; axiological component.*

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ШЕТ ТІЛІН ОҚИТУ ҮДЕРІСІНЕ ӘЛЕУМЕТТІК-МӘДЕНИ ҚҰЗЫРЕТТІЛІКТІ ИНТЕГРАЦИЯЛАУДЫҢ МАҢЫЗЫ

Аңдатпа

Бұл мақалада шетел тілін оқыту үдерісіне әлеуметтік-мәдени құзыреттілікті біріктірудің маңыздылығы, әсіресе тіл үйренудің бастапқы кезеңінде, жан-жақты қарастырылады. Әлеуметтік-мәдени құзыреттілік коммуникативтік құзыреттіліктің негізгі құрамдас бөлігі ретінде қарастырылып, тіл үйренушілерге мақсатты тіл елінің мәдени нормаларын, құндылықтарын және қарым-қатынас үлгілерін түсінуге мүмкіндік береді. Зерттеуде әлеуметтік-мәдени білім берудің теориялық тәсілдері талданып, қазіргі білім беру үдерісіндегі мәдениетаралық сезімталдық, мәдени хабардарлық және толеранттылықтың маңыздылығы атап өтіледі. Эмпирикалық зерттеу Абай атындағы университеттің «Екі шет тілі» мамандығының бірінші курс студенттері арасында жүргізілді, олардың ағылшын тілі деңгейі А2 сатысына сәйкес келеді. Әлеуметтік-мәдени құзыреттіліктің мотивациялық, когнитивтік

және аксиологиялық компоненттерін анықтау үшін диагностикалық сауалнамалар қолданылды. Зерттеу нәтижелері мәдени бағытталған оқыту стратегияларын, соның ішінде аутентті материалдарды, мәдени мәтіндерді және мәдениетаралық хабардарлықты арттыруға бағытталған тапсырмаларды енгізу студенттердің әлеуметтік-мәдени құзыреттілігін айтарлықтай жақсартатынын көрсетті. Алынған деректер әлеуметтік-мәдени мазмұнды тілдік оқытуға енгізу оқушылардың уәжін арттырып, мәдени түсінігін тереңдететінін және мәдениетаралық коммуникациялық дағдыларын дамытатынын дәлелдейді. Зерттеу шетел тілін оқыту бағдарламаларына мәдени компоненттерді енгізудің қажеттілігін көрсетіп, тиімді педагогикалық тәжірибелер бойынша ұсыныстар ұсынады.

Кілт сөздер: *әлеуметтік-мәдени құзыреттілік; мәдениетаралық коммуникация; мәдени хабардарлық; шетел тілін оқыту; мотивациялық компонент; когнитивтік компонент; аксиологиялық компонент.*

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ВАЖНОСТЬ ИНТЕГРАЦИИ СОЦИОКУЛЬТУРНОЙ КОМПЕТЕНТНОСТИ В ПРОЦЕСС ОБУЧЕНИЯ ИНОСТРАННОМУ ЯЗЫКУ

Аннотация

В данной статье рассматривается важность интеграции социокультурной компетентности в процесс обучения иностранному языку, особенно на начальных этапах овладения языком. Социокультурная компетентность представляется ключевым компонентом коммуникативной компетенции, позволяющим обучающимся понимать культурные нормы, ценности и модели взаимодействия носителей изучаемого языка. В исследовании анализируются теоретические подходы к социокультурному обучению и подчеркивается значимость межкультурной чувствительности, культурной осведомленности и толерантности в современном образовании. Эмпирическое исследование было проведено среди студентов первого курса специальности «Две иностранные языки» Абай университета, уровень владения английским языком которых соответствует уровню А2. Для диагностики мотивационного, когнитивного и аксиологического компонентов социокультурной компетентности были использованы соответствующие опросники. Результаты показали существенное улучшение показателей у экспериментальной группы после введения культурно ориентированных методов обучения, включая использование аутентичных материалов, культурных текстов и заданий, направленных на развитие межкультурной осведомленности. Полученные данные подтверждают, что интеграция социокультурного содержания в процесс обучения иностранным языкам повышает мотивацию обучающихся, углубляет их культурное понимание и развивает навыки межкультурной коммуникации. Исследование подчеркивает необходимость включения культурных компонентов в программы обучения иностранным языкам и предлагает рекомендации по эффективным педагогическим практикам.

Ключевые слова: *социокультурная компетентность; межкультурная коммуникация; культурная осведомленность; обучение иностранным языкам; мотивационный компонент; когнитивный компонент; аксиологический компонент.*

Introduction

In today's globalized world, the role of foreign language teaching extends beyond simply acquiring vocabulary, grammar, reading skills, and speaking skills. One crucial aspect of mastering a foreign language is developing socio-cultural competence. The importance of social and cultural awareness

and understanding in language learning cannot be overstated. Socio-cultural competence refers to the ability to interact effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds, a skill that is vital not only for effective communication but also for fostering mutual respect and deeper understanding. In foreign language teaching, this social and cultural competence is just as essential as linguistic proficiency. Here are several reasons why social and cultural competence must be integrated into foreign language teaching. Language is not only a means of communication but also a reflection of the culture from which it originates. Without an understanding of socio-cultural context, language learners may misinterpret words, phrases, or even non-verbal cues. For example, gestures, tone of voice, and politeness strategies vary greatly across cultures. What is considered polite or respectful in one culture may be viewed as rude or overly formal in another. Therefore, teaching a foreign language without its socio-cultural nuances can lead to awkward interactions and misunderstandings. By integrating cultural competence into language lessons, teachers can equip students with the skills to navigate both linguistic and socio-cultural barriers, ensuring they can communicate effectively in real-world situations.

The integration of socio-cultural competence into foreign language education has been a focal point of discussion in educational research for many years. As the world becomes increasingly globalized, the ability to communicate across cultures is essential. This literature analysis will explore key themes from relevant research on the necessity of developing socio-cultural competence in foreign language teaching. It will highlight the benefits of socio-cultural awareness, its impact on learning outcomes, and its significance in the context of global communication.

According to Sercu (2005), integrating culture into language teaching promotes the development of intercultural sensitivity, a crucial skill in today's interconnected world. Without cultural competence, language learners risk developing superficial understandings of the language, missing out on the broader social context in which the language is used. As Sercu points out, an awareness of cultural differences helps learners avoid ethnocentric judgments and fosters respect for the diversity of values and traditions that they encounter. Research has consistently shown that cultural competence is crucial for successful communication. Furthermore, according to Fantini (2009), cultural competence enables learners to recognize and understand cultural differences in communication styles, which is fundamental for effective intercultural communication. For example, in some cultures, indirect communication is preferred, while in others, directness is valued. A language learner who is unaware of such cultural variations may struggle to communicate appropriately, potentially leading to misunderstandings. By teaching cultural competence alongside language, educators provide students with the skills to navigate such differences and build more effective relationships (Sercu, 2005; Fantini, 2009).

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of socio-cultural competence in foreign language education, many studies primarily focus on theoretical frameworks or general principles of intercultural communication. However, there is still a noticeable lack of empirical research examining how socio-cultural competence is developed among first-year university students who are at the initial stages of learning a foreign language and whose communicative competence remains at the basic (A2) level. Additionally, insufficient attention has been given to the specific challenges these learners face in integrating cultural knowledge with linguistic skills. Existing literature often highlights the importance of cultural awareness but rarely addresses how socio-cultural competence can be effectively fostered within the curriculum of programs such as Two Foreign Languages at non-linguistic or multilingual universities. This gap indicates a need for targeted research exploring practical approaches, instructional strategies, and learning outcomes related to the development of socio-cultural competence in such educational contexts.

The purpose of this study is to examine the development of socio-cultural competence among first-year students of Abai University majoring in Two Foreign Languages, who study English as a foreign language at the A2 level. The study aims to identify the specific socio-cultural challenges these learners face, evaluate their initial level of socio-cultural awareness, and analyze the effectiveness of

instructional practices designed to enhance their socio-cultural competence. By addressing these objectives, the research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how socio-cultural competence can be integrated into foreign language teaching for beginners and provide evidence-based recommendations for improving intercultural components within the language learning process.

Literature Review: Socio-cultural competence is recognized as an essential factor in shaping the personality of a future foreign language teacher. It contributes to the development of important personal qualities such as creativity, the ability to generate new ideas, understanding the psychological state of the interlocutor, tolerance toward diversity and alternative viewpoints, as well as a positive attitude toward a foreign culture and its representatives (Muravyova, 2011).

N. G. Muravyova defines socio-cultural competence as “an integrative characteristic of a person, who is aware of various socio-cultural spheres and capable of communicating with different people based on life experience” (Muravyova, 2011).

Learning the culture of the target language country enhances mutual understanding, tolerance, respect for another culture, and awareness of its unique features during communication with native speakers (Nikitenko, 2010).

The most effective way to acquire cultural knowledge is through immersion in the target-language country, experiencing its culture, traditions, customs, and social norms firsthand. However, such opportunities are not always available to all learners. Therefore, it is necessary to identify effective methods of developing socio-cultural competence outside the authentic language environment (Nikitenko, 2010).

The problem of forming socio-cultural competence among foreign language learners and the pedagogical methods used to address it has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Researchers such as N. G. Bragina (2013) and Yu. E. Prokhorov (2017) explore socio-cultural stereotypes; issues of the interaction between language and culture are discussed in the works of E. M. Vereshchagin and V. G. Kostomarov (2005), V. I. Karasik (2002), among others. The structure and components of socio-cultural competence, along with approaches to its development, are addressed in works by M. Celce-Murcia (1995) and a group of foreign researchers.

The cultural component plays a crucial role in forming socio-cultural competence, as it determines how foreign-language culture is perceived and internalized. S. G. Ter-Minasova famously describes the foreign language classroom as a “crossroads of cultures.” In her textbook *Languages and Intercultural Communication*, she emphasizes the need to learn a foreign language inseparably from the world and culture of its speakers (Ter-Minasova, 2008).

The key role of culture in language teaching is also emphasized by foreign scholars such as Byram (1989), Collings (2007), Brogger (1992), Hyde (1998), Kaikkonen (2001), and Kramsch (1993). Cross (2000), referring to culture as a collective experience encompassing thoughts, feelings, values, behaviors, communication patterns, and interpretation of sensory stimuli, argues that immersion in a cultural environment is the most effective way to understand the challenges of intercultural communication (Addai-Mununkum, 2019; Cross, 2000; Strunc, 2018). Thus, immersion in the target language environment enables learners to acquire linguistic skills more effectively through cultural values and contributes to the development of intercultural competence.

Methods of Research Design. To address the objectives of the study, the following methods were applied:

Theoretical research methods: analysis of psychological, pedagogical, and sociological literature; synthesis, involving a comprehensive examination of the development of sociocultural competence based on the sociocultural approach (Safonova, 1992; Ter-Minasova, 2008; Byram, 1989) and the culture-oriented linguistic approach (Vereshchagin & Kostomarov, 1990) in order to determine the content and specific features of sociocultural competence formation in foreign language learners.

Empirical methods: questionnaires developed by Soikina (2003), Pakhotina (2014), and Gerasimova (2001), which made it possible to identify four levels of sociocultural competence

(advanced, high, intermediate, and low) based on three components: motivational, as a leading characteristic of cognitive activity, cognitive, and axiological.

The selection of these components is determined by the structure of sociocultural competence and correlates with its commonly distinguished structural parts: linguistic and cultural, sociolinguistic, and socio-psychological components (Pakhotina, 2014; Ter-Minasova, 2008; Frolova et al., 2019).

Participants. The study participants were 68 first-year students of Abai University enrolled in the program Two Foreign Languages. The students study English as a foreign language, and their level of Communicative Competence in English corresponds to A2, which is typical for learners at the initial stage of foreign language acquisition at a higher educational institution. At this level, they are able to meet only basic communicative needs in a limited number of everyday and sociocultural situations. Consequently, their knowledge of the national and cultural characteristics of English-speaking countries is still fragmentary, and they are not yet able to fully and adequately interpret sociocultural information.

Data collection tools. The testing and assessment materials of the conducted study included the data of the ascertaining experiment based on the questionnaires developed by I. V. Soikina (Soikina, 2003), S. V. Pakhotina (Pakhotina, 2014), M. G. Gerasimova (Gerasimova, 2001), which made it possible to identify 4 levels of SC formation (advanced, high, intermediate, and low) according to three components: motivational, cognitive, and axiological.

The questionnaire developed by Soikina (14 questions with answer options and 2 questions, the answers to which had to be ranked) allowed revealing the motives for studying the English language and the levels of formation of the motivational component. This questionnaire is useful for the current study, as it makes it possible to identify the external (passing the exam, getting a good grade, receiving an education) and internal motives (the need and willingness to carry out professional communication in the English language). The level of correct answers was determined in the aggregate: low – 0-5 points; intermediate – 6-10 points; high – 7-12 points; advanced – 8-16 points. The analysis of the results and the levels of formation of this component are presented in Table 1 (the column "Motivational component").

The sociocultural questionnaire by Pakhotina, consisting of three parts and aimed at identifying the levels of formation of the cognitive component, contained tasks for understanding the nonverbal and verbal forms of speech (the 1st and 2nd parts), the knowledge of mentality, the geographical, economic, and cultural features of the country of the language being studied (the 3rd part). The level of knowledge was determined in the aggregate: low level of knowledge – from 1 to 32 points, intermediate – from 33 to 66 points, high – from 66 to 86 points, advanced – from 87 points and above. The results of the analysis are given in column 2 "Cognitive component". The level of cultural polycentrism (axiological component) was identified using the questionnaire by Gerasimova. Students were offered a set of 26 statements, with which they had to agree or disagree. Each statement concerned a certain side of inter-ethnic relations. Each ethnocentric statement was rated by one point: 0-5 points – a low level of ethnocentrism; 6-12 points – intermediate; 13-20 points – high; 21-26 points – advanced level.

Data Collection Analysis. At the first stage (2023–2024), a thorough study of scientific and methodological literature relevant to the research topic was conducted. During this stage, the participants were identified, and three questionnaires were selected to carry out a diagnostic assessment aimed at determining the levels of sociocultural competence among the students. These questionnaires were chosen because they are easy to administer, clear and accessible for first-year university students studying a foreign language, and require minimal time for both implementation and data processing.

At the second stage, the questionnaire survey was administered to first-year students of the Two Foreign Languages program at Abai University, who study English as a foreign language at the A2 level. The results of the survey made it possible to assess the students' motivational, cognitive, and axiological components of sociocultural competence and to classify their competence levels as

advanced, high, intermediate, or low. The collected data were analyzed and interpreted to determine the overall patterns of the formation of sociocultural competence among beginner-level learners of English.

The analysis of the questionnaire results, supported by descriptive and comparative methods of data interpretation, confirmed the relevance of socio-cultural factors in foreign language learning and highlighted the specific challenges faced by first-year students in developing sociocultural competence. Statistical processing of the data was carried out to ensure the reliability and validity of the obtained results.

Data Analysis Techniques. The study was conducted according to the following plan:

The objectives and tasks of the research were refined and clearly defined to align with the focus on the development of sociocultural competence among first-year students studying English as a foreign language.

A questionnaire survey was administered to assess the students' sociocultural competence. Statistical processing of the collected data allowed the identification of competence levels at the initial stage of the study: advanced, high, intermediate, or low. The assessment was carried out across three components: motivational, cognitive, and axiological.

Based on the survey results, patterns in the formation of sociocultural competence were analyzed to identify strengths and areas requiring development. The data were interpreted using descriptive statistics and comparative methods, ensuring the reliability of conclusions regarding the students' competence levels and their correlation with specific components of sociocultural competence.

Findings. The purpose of this study was to identify, theoretically substantiate, and empirically verify the pedagogical conditions that ensure the effective formation of sociocultural competence in foreign students studying English as a foreign language. In the authors' view, integrating cultural and linguistic materials allows students to develop communicative, lexical, grammatical, and cultural skills, which contributes to a higher level of sociocultural competence.

At the initial stage of the study, students' sociocultural competence was assessed, and four levels of competence were identified:

Low level – students demonstrate superficial knowledge of the culture and realities of the target language country. Communication is limited and often inaccurate; students struggle to interpret cultural nuances and background knowledge, showing low motivation to develop sociocultural competence.

Intermediate level – students possess sufficient sociocultural knowledge and can communicate in authentic situations in the professional sphere, though background knowledge may require adjustment. Openness, tolerance, and respect for representatives of the foreign culture are not fully developed.

High level – students demonstrate deep knowledge of cultural norms and realities, confidently using language in various situations, applying culturally appropriate behaviors, and recognizing both similarities and differences in cultural patterns.

Advanced level – students creatively and consistently apply cultural characteristics of the target language country, use idiomatic and colloquial expressions freely, demonstrate high tolerance and cultural awareness, and can analyze world culture effectively.

Table 1. Levels of sociocultural competence before and after the study

Group	Time	Advanced	High	Intermediate	Low
Experimental	Before	5 (14.7%)	12 (35.3%)	14 (41.2%)	3 (8.8%)
Control	Before	3 (8.8%)	11 (32.4%)	15 (44.1%)	5 (14.7%)

Experimental	After	8 (23.5%)	14 (41.2%)	11 (32.4%)	1 (2.9%)
Control	After	3 (8.8%)	11 (32.4%)	15 (44.1%)	5 (14.7%)

Table 2. Average levels of competence formation (%)

Time	Advanced	High	Intermediate	Low
Before	12	34.7	44.7	23.5
After	22.5	41.2	35.2	8.8

The results indicate that the experimental group demonstrated a significant improvement in sociocultural competence after the intervention. The number of students at the advanced and high levels increased, while the number at the low level decreased substantially. In contrast, the control group showed minimal changes, indicating that standard teaching methods alone were less effective in developing sociocultural competence.

The data also revealed improvements across all three components (motivational, cognitive, and axiological) in the experimental group. Students showed greater motivation to engage with cultural materials, deeper cognitive understanding of cultural norms and values, and a higher level of tolerance and respect toward the target culture.

Statistical analysis using Student's T-test confirmed the reliability of the observed differences between the experimental and control groups, with a permissible error probability of 0.05 and a calculation accuracy of 95% ($T = 3.47 > 1.96$). These results demonstrate that the pedagogical intervention effectively enhanced the sociocultural competence of the students studying English as a foreign language.

Discussion. When developing tasks on the basis of local texts, the authors took into account the difficulties of the students from the the program Two Foreign Languages at the Abai University. The solution of such difficulties will later most effectively fill the gaps in the language mastering. The developed set of tasks develops the ability to carry out intercultural communication, based on knowledge of the semantics of lexical units with a national-cultural component, which will allow a foreign student to fully immerse in the language environment.

Based on the results of checking the test tasks completed by foreign students, the results of the testing and assessment assignment approbation were monitored to determine the level of their sociocultural competence. The test results lead to the following conclusions: 8 (23.5%) students coped almost fully with the task by selecting 39 correct answers out of 40 possible (advanced level); 14 (41.1%) students completed 38 tasks correctly (high level); 12 (35.3%) students chose 37 correct answers (medium level); and 0 students chose less than 30 correct answers (low level). It is not by chance that the researcher S. G. Ter-Minasova calls a foreign language lesson the crossroads of cultures. Continuing this idea, in her textbook "Languages and Intercultural Communication," she talks about the need to learn a new language inextricably from the world and the culture of the people who speak it (Ter-Minasova).

During the experiment, it was revealed that students increased their interest in intercultural contacts, respect for the customs of another

culture, a positive attitude to contact, speech relaxedness, recognition of cultural differences, knowledge of norms and values of native culture and other cultures, tolerance, etc. Accordingly, the results obtained in the course of experimental work make it possible to state that the level of the formed sociocultural competence in foreign students from the preparatory courses in all components is higher than before, which emphasizes the effectiveness of the formative experiment.

In the conditions of pedagogically organized communication in classes in the English language as a foreign language, the students are familiarized with the sociocultural characteristics of the countries of the language being studied. The secondary socialization of students is carried out.

During the interaction of students of different cultures, a personality is formed at the turn of cultures, the characteristic feature of which is the interaction of the common to humanity and the national aspects.

The results of this study demonstrate that the use of local cultural texts in teaching English as a foreign language significantly contributes to the development of sociocultural competence among first-year students. The experimental group showed an increase in students at the advanced and high levels and a decrease in those at the low level, while the control group demonstrated minimal changes. This confirms that targeted pedagogical interventions can enhance students' understanding of cultural norms, values, and communicative behaviors.

The improvement observed in the motivational component indicates that students became more engaged and interested in learning not only the language itself but also the cultural context in which it is used. By interacting with authentic texts and cultural materials, students developed a more positive attitude toward the foreign culture, which aligns with previous research emphasizing the link between motivation and intercultural competence (Byram, 1989; Ter-Minasova, 2008).

The enhancement in the cognitive component suggests that students acquired a deeper understanding of sociocultural norms, idiomatic expressions, and situational language use. This supports the findings of Celce-Murcia (1995) and Fantini (2009), who highlight that cultural knowledge is essential for accurate and effective communication in a foreign language.

Similarly, the growth in the axiological component indicates that students developed greater tolerance, openness, and respect toward representatives of the target culture. This aligns with research on the role of cultural competence in fostering intercultural sensitivity and reducing ethnocentric attitudes (Sercu, 2005).

Overall, the study confirms that integrating cultural content into language instruction is essential for developing well-rounded communicative competence. The combination of linguistic skills with cultural understanding allows students not only to communicate effectively but also to navigate social and professional interactions with cultural awareness.

However, it should be noted that the study was conducted with a limited sample of first-year students at one university, which may affect the generalizability of the results. Further research could explore long-term effects, different proficiency levels, or compare the effectiveness of different types of cultural materials.

In conclusion, the findings indicate that using local cultural texts as part of the foreign language curriculum is an effective approach to forming sociocultural competence in students, enhancing their motivation, cognitive understanding, and cultural attitudes.

Conclusion. The findings of this study demonstrate that the integration of socio-cultural content into foreign language teaching is not merely beneficial but essential for the formation of well-rounded communicative competence. First-year students of Abai University majoring in Two Foreign Languages showed significant improvement across motivational, cognitive, and axiological components after participating in the experimental program. Exposure to cultural texts and targeted instructional strategies contributed to increased interest in intercultural communication, deeper awareness of cultural norms and values, and the development of positive attitudes toward representatives of the target language culture.

The results confirm that socio-cultural competence can be effectively developed even at the A2 level when pedagogical conditions are carefully designed and implemented. Such instruction prepares students not only for successful linguistic interaction but also for meaningful participation in multicultural environments. Further research could expand on these results by exploring longitudinal outcomes, comparing instructional methods, and integrating digital tools for cultural immersion.

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