

LANGUAGES AND CULTURE

**REVISITING THE NEXUS OF CULTURE AND LANGUAGE
IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION****NGUYEN VIET KHOA***

ABSTRACT: Closely interconnected, language and culture are inseparable elements that complement each other throughout the process of teaching and learning a language. For more effective foreign language education, integrating and infusing cultural elements into foreign language lessons is essential and needs to be emphasized. It has become evident that culture is increasingly becoming a significant and inseparable component in language teaching curricula and foreign language teacher training programs, especially in the era of Industry 4.0. This paper revisits the relationship between culture and language by focusing on their role and impact in the process of teaching and learning foreign languages.

KEYWORDS: language; culture; foreign language education; intercultural; integration

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1. Introduction

The primary goal of foreign language teaching and learning is to cultivate and enhance effective communication skills in students. While language skill is undeniably important in this process, it is critical to remember that acquiring mastery in a foreign language goes beyond verbal prowess. A thorough comprehension of the accompanying culture is also required, as language and culture are inextricably linked. As a result, incorporating cultural components into the curriculum while teaching a language is not only advantageous; it is a requirement. The symbiotic relationship between language and culture is unmistakable. Language acts as a vessel that encapsulates and safeguards cultural values, which find expression through linguistic constructs in both spoken and written texts. Hence, language education should encompass not only the structural and grammatical aspects but also the cultural dimensions that are interwoven with the language. In other words, this approach aims to cultivate intercultural communication competence.

Learning a foreign language through a cultural perspective offers two purposes. On the one hand, it allows language learners to understand the complexities and nuances of the culture connected with the language, giving them with a richer context for language acquisition. On the other hand, it emphasizes the importance of intimate acquaintance with the culture from which a foreign language is derived. In this context, “culture” refers to the combination of material and spiritual values that encompasses various aspects of the lives of the language’s speakers. Incorporating cultural studies into language classes serves as a gateway to heightening learners’ awareness of the disparities and fundamental attributes of a national culture. This not only enriches the educational experience but also equips learners with language strategies that extend beyond the confines of the classroom. These insights into culture empower individuals to navigate professional and personal interactions with confidence and sensitivity, whether in the realm of business, diplomacy, or everyday social exchanges.

Finally, the core goal of foreign language training extends beyond linguistic ability to include the development of effective communication skills through cultural knowledge. Language and culture are intricately intertwined, with language serving as a medium for cultural expression and cultural values

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inherent within it. The incorporation of cultural studies into language teaching provides learners with a comprehensive understanding of the language they are learning, fostering cultural appreciation and facilitating language mastering for both educational and practical objectives.

Every nation possesses its unique cultural identity, a defining element that contributes to its resilience and distinctiveness. The acquisition of languages offers learners not only an expanded worldview but also a multitude of opportunities for education, employment, and cultural engagement across diverse societies.

People worldwide have indeed become increasingly aware of the value of foreign language proficiency and cross-cultural/intercultural understanding.^{**} Communication and collaboration across language and cultural borders are becoming increasingly crucial in a globalized context. However, to promote a genuine understanding and respect for different cultures, it is essential for parents, educators, and students to invest time and effort in language learning and cultural research to ensure that this understanding is deep and accurate. Educators must constantly seek effective strategies to smoothly integrate culture into teaching activities, particularly in language education.

2. Culture and language

2.1. A closer look at language and culture

Language is a means of human communication, formed when people began to communicate with each other for their daily life needs. Languages, understood as the particular set of speech norms of a particular community, are also a part of the larger culture of the community that speaks them. Prominent linguists have defined language as a uniquely human means of conveying ideas, emotions, and desires. Language is non-essentialist, relying on a system of symbols that humans voluntarily create. In broad terms, language can be viewed as a system of both verbal and non-verbal signs used for conveying meaning.

“Culture” is a complex concept, the one that is a notoriously difficult term to define. Cultural anthropologists like Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952), who presented 164 definitions of culture, emphasize that culture, as a central concept in anthropology, is transmitted through social learning, encompassing the social behaviour and norms found in human societies. It is not a stagnant entity but rather a dynamic and evolving system of shared meaning, shaping individuals’ thoughts, models, and ways of orienting themselves in the world (Kroeber & Kluckhohn 1952, p. 181; cited by Adler, 1997, p. 14).

Brown’s (2007) definition of culture emphasizes its significance in human life. This definition suggests that culture is not only about patterns of practices and values but also about how people interact, think, and perceive the world around them, as well as how it serves as the “glue” that binds different social groups together. Culture indeed plays a crucial role in shaping and connecting human communities.

Bourdieu’s notion of culture, which he called “habitus”, can be thought of as a set of durable and transferable principles that provide individuals with a sense of group identity and belonging, such as shared beliefs, representations, rules, taboos, symbols, rituals and practices (Bourdieu, 1980). In the similar approach, Hofstede (1991) underscores the role of culture in defining group identity,

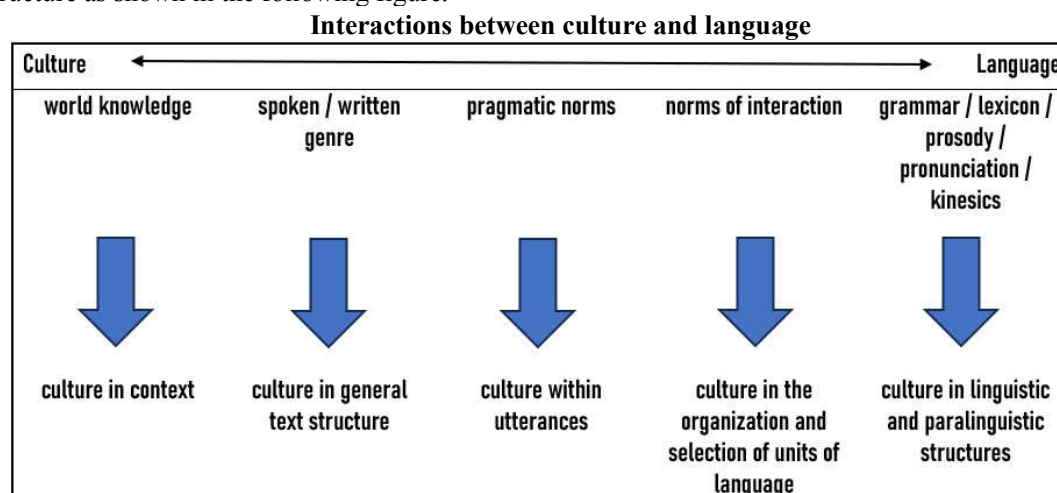
^{**} The terms “cross-cultural” and “intercultural” are slightly different. According to language dictionaries, *cross-cultural* means “dealing with or offering comparison between two or more different cultures or cultural areas” while *intercultural* is defined as “taking place between cultures or derived from different cultures”. Gudykunst (2003, p. vii) separates the two into separate parts as that *cross-cultural* is the overall topic and *intercultural* is a “subset”, and “*cross-cultural* communication is a prerequisite for *intercultural* communications.” The primary focus of this paper does not lie in addressing the nuanced distinctions between the two terms; therefore, they are used interchangeably.

suggesting that culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes one group from another. It is more than just customs and traditions; it extends to encompass the arts, values, and beliefs that shape a society's collective consciousness. Mead (1961) posited that culture is a subject of acquisition, while Fox (1999, p. 90) observed that "culture is relative and changeable in space and time". Tran Ngoc Them (2001) sees culture in the category of values by defining "Culture is an organic system of material and spiritual values created and accumulated by people through the process of practical operation in the interaction between humans and their natural and social environment" (p. 27).

Despite the continuous efforts in various disciplinary fields to find a definition for the term culture, at the present time there is no single definition that satisfies everyone.

In terms of the relationship between language and culture, Newton et al. (2010) observes the extensive content of literature spanning various interconnected fields, such as sociolinguistics, social semiotics, communication, and cultural studies have delved into the relationship between language and its sociocultural surroundings. The central assertion shared by these disciplines can be encapsulated in the statement that "Language does not function independently from the context in which it is used" (Liddicoat et al., 2003, p. 8).

Crozet and Liddicoat (1999) present how culture connects to all levels of language use and structure as shown in the following figure.



Accurate interpretation and understanding of verbal and non-verbal behaviours in specific contexts require a foundation of cultural knowledge. Insufficient recognition of the cultural aspects of communication during interactions between native and non-native speakers can result in "communication breakdowns with more serious consequences than those caused by linguistic difficulties" (Newton et al., 2010, p.19). In this context, culture includes all the social practices that bind a group of people together and distinguish them from others. This perspective governs culture as a group's way of thinking, feeling, and acting, regulating people's lives at every turn. This perspective also reflects the natural description of teaching culture and the problems of teaching culture in foreign language education that we are talking about: "the central purpose in any linguistic endeavour is the human interaction" (Crozet & Liddicoat, 1999, p.120).

As Wierzbicka (1997) asserts, the life of a society and the language it speaks are inextricably linked. This relates to both the external and internal facets of life in a balanced manner. Everyone can

learn and transfer culture from one context to another through interpersonal interactions or communication activities. Language, according to this viewpoint, is not only a component of culture, but also a tool by which culture is modified. A person's culture is naturally expressed through their speech. Culture and language, on the other hand, have a very intimate link, with both being interrelated and indivisible entities.

As mentioned in many studies, it is crucial to integrate cultural elements into language teaching. This is because language is closely intertwined with culture, and language teachers stepping into a different cultural context must respect the cultural values of that context. Language teachers need to recognize that their understanding of something tends to be constrained within the cultural context. They must not only explain the meaning of the language being used but also ensure that the cultural context in which it is placed is understood. The meaning often gets lost because cultural boundaries do not permit such ideas to exist. As Porter (1987) argues, misunderstandings among language educators often arise due to differences in cultural origins, awareness, and cultural boundaries that limit expression.

2.2. Cultural integration and cultural change

When discussing culture and cultural learning, two terms, "cultural integration" and "cultural change," are often used. While the process of assimilating a first culture is referred to as "cultural integration," the process of assimilating a second or additional culture is called "cultural change," and both demonstrate unique variations (Damen, 1987).

Cultural integration can involve the understanding, acceptance, and incorporation of customs, values, and cultural perspectives from various sources. Cultural integration can occur at the individual or community level. Cultural change can include shifts in values, perspectives, customs, and even the language of a community or society. Cultural change can be driven by various factors, including interactions with different cultures, economic and industrial development, and social changes. Cultural integration process can result in enriched cultural diversity and mutual understanding. It is crucial for fostering inclusivity and harmonious coexistence in multicultural societies. Cultural change is a dynamic process that reflects a culture's ability to adapt to external influences and internal developments, ensuring its relevance and continuity in a changing world.

These concepts are integral to the understanding of how cultures evolve, adapt, and coexist in an increasingly interconnected and diverse global landscape. Researchers, anthropologists, and sociologists often explore these dynamics to better comprehend the complex interplay between different cultures and the ways in which they shape societies and individuals (see also Nguyen Van Kim, 2016; Damen, 1987).

The teaching of foreign languages is essential for fostering cultural transformation and integration. It entails knowing the cultural context in which the language is spoken in addition to language proficiency. Along with developing their communication skills, students also learn about the customs, values, and beliefs of the culture that is linked to the language. Learning a foreign language helps people adapt to new cultural contexts and bridge cultural barriers, which promotes both cultural transformation and integration. This not only enhances their language skills but also broadens their perspectives and promotes intercultural competence.

2.3. Cultural awareness and culture shock

For native teachers instructing non-native speakers, encountering cultural clashes is an anticipated part of the teaching process. Therefore, when such clashes do arise, these educators should seize the moment to incorporate them into the curriculum, as experiential learning often leads to more profound cultural insights than conventional textbook knowledge. Cortazzi and Jin (1999) point out that cultural awareness means being aware of members of another cultural group including their

behaviours, expectations, perspectives, and values. Cultural awareness is sensitivity to the similarities and differences that exist between two different cultures and the use of this sensitivity in effective communication with members of another cultural group (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; Health Education and Training, 2018).

Culture shock is a common experience for a second language learner in a second culture that refers to phenomena ranging from mild discomfort to panic and profound psychological crisis (Goldstein & Keller, 2015). Culture shock encompasses a range of emotional responses triggered by the transition from one's familiar culture to a new one, often characterized by limited knowledge or a lack of clear understanding of the meanings of elements, events, or phenomena within the new culture. These unfamiliar experiences can give rise to misunderstandings. In essence, individuals who lack sufficient information about their destination are more likely to encounter culture shock (Furnham, 2010). Besides, Damen (1987) highlights that culture shock represents an intermediate phase in the process of acculturation, and it tends to be particularly challenging as it follows the initial period of excitement and delight that comes with encountering new experiences.

Culture clash can affect individuals who are new to a particular culture, including not just language students but also language teachers. These encounters can serve as valuable learning opportunities for both educators and students, providing material for classroom discussions and enriching the educational experience. Students studying foreign languages are exposed to both the language and the culture that goes along with it. Due to the possibility of encountering social norms, habits, and traditions that are dissimilar from their own, this exposure might occasionally result in a culture clash. Misunderstandings and disruptions in communication may arise from it. However, foreign language education also provides an opportunity to address and mitigate culture clash. It helps students become more interculturally competent, which makes navigating cultural differences easier for them. Language learners can lessen the chance of a cultural collision and communicate across cultures more successfully by comprehending and valuing the cultural facets of a language.

3. Relationship between language and culture in foreign language education

3.1. Relationship between culture and language teaching

Numerous authors have emphasized the close connection between language and culture. Brown (2007) underlined the profound interdependence of language and culture, stating that language is an integral component of culture, and culture is, in turn, an integral component of language. These two elements are so intricately interwoven that attempting to separate them would result in the loss of the essential essence of both language and culture.

There are at least two basic models on the relationship between culture and language teaching: static and dynamic models. Earlier models like the ones maintained by Brooks (1975) and Nostrand (1974), along with others, often portrayed culture as a static entity comprising distinct, tangible facts that could be effectively taught and learned. From this standpoint, cultural knowledge was perceived primarily as artifacts or facts. Students were typically encouraged to acquire knowledge about a specific nation or people, encompassing their history, lifestyles, institutions, customs, and the cultural symbols they generated, including music, art, literature, and architecture (Heidari et al., 2014).

Nonetheless, the static perspective on culture fails to acknowledge the intricate connection between language and culture (Liddicoat, 2002; Crawford & McLaren, 2003). This is where the more recent models, perceiving culture as a dynamic and variable entity, come into play.

In line with the dynamic view of culture, students are urged to actively immerse themselves in their cultural education rather than passively acquiring knowledge about the target culture. They are encouraged to perceive cultural elements within specific contexts and periods, recognizing their evolution across regions, social strata, and generations. Culture is defined as an ever-changing

collection of behaviours that individuals enact daily, continually shaped and redefined through social interactions. These cultural practices serve as a contextual framework that people use to structure, understand, and engage with others in their social milieu. Therefore, culture is about understanding and deeds rather than knowledge and objects. Engaging with the language and non-linguistic behaviours of a culture and gaining understanding of how people live in a certain cultural setting are essential to learning about it (Crawford & McLaren, 2003).

Therefore, having cultural awareness is about knowing how to interact with a culture rather than just knowing facts about it. It is critical that the breadth of cultural learning expand beyond awareness, comprehension, and empathy to include the ways in which learners will put their newfound knowledge into practice. Therefore, cultural knowledge is more broadly understood to be the foundation for language use and the way that things are said and done in a given cultural context rather than being restricted to a specific task or exercise. In sum, as Heidari et al. (2014) show, the dynamic view of culture also requires learners to have knowledge of their own culture and an understanding of their own culturally-shaped behaviours.

Learning a second language, except for purely technical or instrumental purposes, also entails the acquisition of a second culture. In a similar vein, Kramsch (1998) contends that language serves as the primary tool for people to navigate their social interactions and, when used in a communicative context, it becomes intricately intertwined with culture in various complex ways. Going a step further, some scholars take it to the extent of equating the concept of language with culture, suggesting that culture is language and language is culture (Tang, 1999; Gao, 2006).

Nida, a renowned linguist and translation theorist, offered insightful perspectives on the connection between language and culture. According to Nida (2001), culture encompasses the entirety of a society's beliefs and practices, and the language used to express and transmit these beliefs holds unparalleled strategic importance. It serves as the primary medium through which the society's members interact with one another. In addition, Liddicoat et al. (2003) assert that language and culture are deeply intertwined, with culture permeating all aspects of language use and its structures. In other words, there is no level of language that exists independently of culture. Furthermore, the fact that language both reflects and symbolizes cultural realities underscores the inseparable bond between language and culture (Kramsch, 1998).

Kuang (2007, p. 75) emphasized that language serves as “the carrier of culture”, and culture constitutes “the content of language”, and that the two are inseparable; one cannot exist without the other. Similarly, Liddicoat et al. (2003) argue that language and culture are so intertwined that there exists no level of language that functions independently of culture. The interaction between language and culture permeates every aspect of language use and its structures. Additionally, Kramsch (1998) highlights that the interconnectedness of language and culture is unmistakable, as language not only communicates but also embodies and symbolizes cultural realities. Furthermore, Mitchell and Myles (2004, p. 235) posit that culture and language are acquired concurrently rather than in isolation, with each mutually fostering the development of the other.

3.2. Language and online cultures

Research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) in the past years has shown that online communication can enhance both the quantity and the quality of the language produced by language learners; it makes them less timorous to voice their opinions and enables them to make friendships they would not normally make in the intimidating environment of a classroom (Lam, 2013; Kern et al., 2016).

English language educators generally embrace the opportunity for their students to utilize English in genuine, real-world contexts to engage with a global online community as learners worldwide

increasingly employ CMC on the Internet and via social networks (Gardner & Davis, 2013). For example, Kramsch and Hua (2016) presented an example about the Chinese adolescent immigrants studied in the U.S., who connect online with a variety of interlocutors around Japanese anime comics or global hip-hop, find a way to improve their English and to create for themselves a ‘third culture’ in cyberspace. This third culture satisfies their emotional and aesthetic needs and enables them to eschew the discrimination they experience in real life.

However, there are also concerns about the transferability of communication skills from online to offline encounters, the distinctions between online and offline identities, the risks associated with privacy loss, and the addictive nature of the medium. Many educators express apprehensions about online platforms (such as Facebook, X, Zalo, Instagram, etc) as they fear these platforms cultivate a culture centred around self-promotion and self-display, which may hinder the cultivation of profound communicative skills. Instead of fostering genuine connections, these digital spaces have the potential to isolate individuals within echo chambers of like-minded peers, subject them to electronic monitoring, and foster dependency on peer validation and peer influence (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

Foreign language professionals face the task of striking a balance between these concerns and the clear opportunities for learning and personal growth that online communication provides. For example, Kramsch and Hua (2016, p.45) reported the changing nature of culture in English language teaching as culture becomes “denationalised, deterritorialised, decontextualised” and intertwined with language use in genuine and digital settings, spanning social, ethnic, gender, and generational boundaries, rather than being defined by uniform or homogenous national or state cultures.

3.3. Teaching culture in foreign language classes

3.3.1. Imperative requirements

The main purpose of teaching foreign languages is to help learners have effective communication skills at work as well as in social life. People convey information through language using a wide variety of symbols when they communicate. Additionally, the ability to decode linguistic signals is necessary for accurate understanding and analysis of information. Culture affects both the way information is transmitted and how it is analysed.

When a listener is unfamiliar with the speaker’s culture, they tend to interpret the information through the lens of their own cultural background. If the same information is perceived differently in two distinct cultures, the communication process may not be successful. Hence, foreign language learners, in addition to improving language skills such as vocabulary and grammar, must also enhance their comprehension of the cultural context of the language’s native speakers.

Nowadays, culture teaching plays a key role towards the goal of “communicative competence” for people learning foreign language. According to Peterson and Coltrane (2003), language use must be combined with acceptable cultural behaviour in order for communication to be successful. When cultural knowledge is included into language learning, it not only causes students’ curiosity about what they don’t already know about a culture, but it also helps to pique their interest. Getting to know a new culture is a necessary part of learning a new language. Teachers are realizing more and more over time that their students will learn and develop their communication skills more effectively when their lessons incorporate cultural and cross-cultural components.

It can be asserted that culture is an essential component of language teaching and learning. Teaching a language inherently involves imparting knowledge about the cultural aspects it represents. The culture of a nation naturally permeates the teaching and learning of a language as the language’s form and usage are reflections of the cultural values of the society that employs it (Peterson & Coltrane, 2003). Therefore, it is of paramount importance for educators to acknowledge the cultural

elements embedded in language forms and usages and consider them an integral aspect of foreign language instruction and acquisition.

In today's foreign language learning and teaching activities, for instance, students exhibit a keen interest in acquiring knowledge about the cultures of English-speaking countries alongside the language itself. As a result, when students acquire both language proficiency and cultural insight, they become highly effective communicators, adept at averting misunderstandings and unnecessary conflicts. Recognizing its vital role, the teaching of culture should be a central emphasis in foreign language education.

3.3.2. Significance of integrating cultural elements into foreign language curricula

The ultimate goal of foreign language teaching must be understanding of both language and culture. Acquiring a second language is acquiring a second culture. It is evident that learning a language without understanding its culture is challenging. It is actually believed that learning a language is inseparable from learning the culture of that language.

Multiple perspectives advocate for the inclusion of culture teaching in the language classroom (Bennett, et al., 2003; Kramsch, 1993). These viewpoints concur that teaching culture is crucial as learners of the target language are often outside the social contexts where the language is naturally spoken. Neglecting culture instruction in language lessons could potentially lead to students becoming "fluent fools" (Bennett, et al., 2003, p.237). Kramsch (1993) goes further, asserting that culture should form the core of language teaching, emphasizing the reciprocal relationship between cultural awareness and language proficiency. Brown (2007) maintains that culture and language are intrinsically connected, and language teachers inevitably convey impressions of another culture in their teaching.

As in the case of teaching English, teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) is a subject in which culture is fundamental but has not been thoroughly studied. According to Atkinson (1999), culture should remain central to TESOL. Since teachers must address culture in all they do, this author has noted that, aside from language, learning, and teaching, there may not be a more crucial idea in TESOL than culture (either directly or implicitly). Thus, it can be said that culture stands as a cornerstone in foreign language education overall, and especially TESOL. Whether teachers choose to address this issue directly or indirectly, it is an aspect they cannot circumvent in practice. As Damen (1987) pointed out, although language and cultural learning are interrelated and mutually supportive, they diverge in both initial acquisition and subsequent phases. Thus, language educators must grasp the distinctive nature of these differences.

Foreign language teachers run the danger of being unprepared to assist their students in understanding how to use the target language in a way that is appropriate for their culture if they do not take cultural differences into account when teaching language classes. As a result, students could not completely understand the target language's cultural context, which could result in unfortunate miscommunications or misunderstandings. Teachers of language must focus on cultural studies. Refusing to openly and clearly address cultural concerns could obliquely harm students' future ability to communicate effectively on a language and cultural level.

The success or failure of teaching culture in language classes can be attributed to a number of variables. Textbooks, curricula, and teachers are some of the most important factors to take into account. Teachers may find it difficult to effectively serve as cultural guides for a variety of reasons, including a lack of knowledge about what constitutes "culture." Moreover, there are not many teaching strategies available to help teachers support cultural learning.

Assuming that language teachers can naturally teach culture is a serious mistake, because determining what culture is not easy and neither is deciding what culture to teach. Furthermore,

without proper training in cultural teaching methods, it is difficult for teachers to perform the job of teaching culture as effectively as expected. Culture plays a vital role in language teaching and learning. Obviously, during the process of teaching and learning a language, culture and language assist one another and are mutually reinforcing. It is imperative that foreign language teaching incorporate cultural components, and this should be stressed.

4. Conclusion

As the paper has demonstrated, the concepts “learning a language means learning a culture” and “foreign language teachers are also culture educators” are indeed highly accurate. These concepts represent the very goals that language and foreign language education should strive for, particularly within the context of global integration. Culture assumes a significant role in the language teaching process, and language and culture are undoubtedly codependent.

In this era of profound globalization, foreign language teachers must explore strategies and incorporate relevant cultural and intercultural elements into their curriculum. This not only serves as a means to ignite students’ interest and enthusiasm but also acts as the starting point in their foreign language learning journey. It creates opportunities for students to comprehend foreign language culture in comparison to their own and other cultures worldwide. Understanding the close relationship between language and culture allows teachers and students to elevate their awareness of the significance of intercultural competence in the language teaching and learning process. Research on interculturalism in language education will be a pivotal part of the education system, and cultural research will contribute significantly to language teaching theories. It will assist learners in overcoming challenges in language acquisition.

A thorough exploration of the barriers in intercultural communication and the incorporation of intercultural language aspects are indispensable components of language education. Given that the primary objective of language teachers is to foster proficient communication skills among students, this approach enables language professionals to positively influence students’ attitudes towards diverse cultures.

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Trở lại vấn đề văn hoá và ngôn ngữ trong giảng dạy và học tập ngoại ngữ

Tóm tắt: Ngôn ngữ và văn hóa có mối liên hệ chặt chẽ không thể tách rời. Hai yếu tố này đan xen và hỗ trợ nhau trong suốt quá trình dạy và học ngôn ngữ. Để hoạt động giảng dạy và học tập ngoại ngữ hiệu quả hơn, việc lồng ghép, tích hợp các yếu tố văn hóa vào trong bài giảng ngoại ngữ là cần thiết và cần được tăng cường. Rõ ràng văn hóa đã trở thành một thành phần quan trọng và không thể tách rời trong chương trình giảng dạy ngôn ngữ cũng như trong chương trình đào tạo giáo viên ngoại ngữ. Bài viết xem xét lại mối quan hệ giữa văn hóa và ngôn ngữ bằng cách tập trung vào vai trò cũng như tác động của chúng trong quá trình dạy và học ngoại ngữ trong bối cảnh của kỉ nguyên số với CMCN 4.0.

Từ khóa: ngôn ngữ; văn hóa; dạy và học ngoại ngữ; liên văn hóa; hội nhập.