

Integrating Intercultural competence in University Disciplines, Albanian context

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Abstract:

This article contributes to the understanding of intercultural competence at the university level and assesses students' skills of communication and collaboration to effectively cross cultural boundaries. This research makes a valuable contribution to intercultural education at Higher Institutions by including a perspective on how to contribute to social harmony and exploring the application of Intercultural Teaching competence by the Foreign Languages Department professors across their disciplines at Fan S. Noli University. Studying and appreciating different cultures encourages critical thinking as it fosters open-mindedness and intellectual growth. This article gives a general theoretical view of Intercultural Education in the teaching-learning process. Employing a qualitative and descriptive methodology, the study consists of two main data-gathering methods: semi-structured interviews and group discussions. Interviews were conducted with 15 first-year English Branch students at Fan S Noli University, Korça City in Albania. Students provided information on how Intercultural Competence is promoted, perceived, and acquired through materials in the different university disciplines they learn and how knowledge taught in these subjects can be improved during intercultural learning from their personal experiences. To summarize, the research emphasizes that promoting cultural sensitivity in lectures is essential to creating a respectful and tolerant atmosphere.

Keywords: intercultural competence, higher education, study, communication skills, teaching process, inclusive education

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1. Introduction

In our interconnected world, there is an interest in mutual understanding and a necessity for intercultural competence – fundamental for personal and professional growth. It promotes mutual respect and cooperation, enabling individuals to prosper in diverse cultural environments. The development of Intercultural Competence is an immediate need for education, which can help students live together in diverse societies. Developing cultural sensitivity in lectures and university disciplines is essential to creating a respectful and tolerant atmosphere. Intercultural competence is the ability to understand and respect each other across all types of cultural barriers (Council of Europe 2022).

Intercultural competence is a combination of skills, knowledge, abilities, and attitudes that enable people to interact constructively in various contexts. Internationalized education has given rise to a focus on developing global citizenship, a main tenet of which is a move from a one-sided to an inclusive education that values students as participants. One component of this is strengthening Intercultural competence (Guide on Intercultural Competences 2020).

Pluralistic education and participatory approaches to learning can be of great importance to the development of intercultural competencies, which include becoming aware of the relative nature of one's own culture and learning to distinguish what unites rather than what separates us.

It is necessary to create fair, accurate, and balanced educational materials that pique learners' curiosity to show how cultures have always enriched one another and have evolved through contact, exchange, and dialogue with other cultures. The diversity of practices that contribute to the development of individual capacities and how they face cultural differences in a given context help individuals develop sensitivity to the diversity of the world's cultures. According to Dimitrov and Haque (2016), intercultural teaching competence enables individuals – in our case, professors – to effectively communicate with students across cultural, linguistic, and other barriers in the classroom, validate the meaningful relationships that students have with one another, facilitate learning, and promote student engagement. Academic disciplines are unique cultures with shared norms and values

about what constitutes effective communication and teaching (Becher and Trowler 2001; Leask 2013). Intercultural teaching competence also includes the ability to model intercultural dimensions for students in the classroom and to facilitate dialogue about global issues using respectful, inclusive, and culturally relevant teaching strategies. Interculturally competent instructors need to be open to diverse ways of teaching (Archibald 2008; Haig-Brown 2008), be reflective in their approaches to assessment and curriculum design, and promote multiple perspectives when they select content, readings, and learning activities (Deardorff 2011). So, integrating intercultural competence into university disciplines prepares students for the global workforce and creates opportunities in a globalized economy, as inclusion and diversity are increasingly valued in the modern workplace.

Globalization trends directly affect Higher Education, and these trends are inevitable in the contemporary world, so there is an immediate need to integrate Intercultural competence into university disciplines (Garcia-Pérez, and Rojas Primus 2017).

The concepts of culture and education are intertwined. Culture forms educational content and contexts by shaping our systems of reference, thoughts, acts, beliefs, and feelings. All actors involved in education – teachers, learners, curriculum developers, policymakers, and community members – invest their cultural perspectives and aspirations into what is taught and influence how it is transmitted. Education is vital to the survival of culture. Culture cannot exist without continual transmission and enrichment through education, and organized education often aims to reach this purpose (UNESCO 2006).

Referring to our focus group interviews with students in an Albanian context, this article provides the opinions and answers of these students on how University professors use components of intercultural teaching competence in their respective fields in the first English study program.

2. Context and theoretical background; how to include intercultural competence in university texts and materials?

An inclusive understanding of intercultural competence considers students taking part in the communicative event as individuals with their

values, views, skills, and practices and with their own educational, social, and cultural experiences. This presupposes that culture and identity are not static but rather perceived by the individual within a specific context (Jund 2010).

This fact regarding students as individuals and culture as a fluid system is significant as they are not considered to be members of a stereotyped group. This can empower them when they need to communicate in English with more proficient speakers, and through this, they can feel more included. This turn to the individual is useful as well, as it makes professors more sensitive to intercultural differences (Bodis 2020: 28).

Communicative textbooks in higher education, in the Albanian context, occupy a main place in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) because many teachers depend on them as the basis for helping learners develop communicative competence: the ability to use language, convey messages, and negotiate meaning with other speakers in social contexts of real life. To accomplish this task, textbooks include lists of communicative functions, grammar forms, and language skills to be practiced. Additionally, they display communicative tasks that are genuine real-life situations and incorporate sufficient material to help learners build intercultural communicative competence. English professors in various faculties use different coursebooks tailored for specific purposes when teaching English.

They display different styles of communication, different attitudes toward conflict, different decision-making styles, different attitudes toward discovery, and different approaches toward knowledge. Thus, intercultural teaching and the involvement of intercultural activities in the teaching and learning process of English in Albanian Higher Education creates opportunities for students to engage in a foreign culture, learn something new, develop friendly relationships, and understand different views.

In the English Master study program, in the Albanian context, the lectures and seminars on the subject of Linguistic diversity and Intercultural communication are developed in a way to take advantage of real-life resources, such as newspapers, literature, documentaries, history, and movies, to study topics related to race, discrimination, social class struggle, and human rights. Equally, they can create awareness through debates about how cultural traditions can be transformed or affected by, for example, technology,

cyber-bullying, talk shows, reality shows, and television in general. Students are also encouraged to do basic ethnographic research on specific issues. They include research on minority groups, personal lifestyles, linguistic diversity, impacts of stereotypes in the teaching-learning process, and the intercultural adaption of coursebooks in our contexts. Students explore whether topics foster interculturality, whether information is contemporary, or whether topics offer universal situations of interaction, cooperation, conflict, and stereotypes. As Olaya and Gómez (2013) suggest, “not only celebrating cultures but establishing critical views can empower learners to develop critical ICC”. These ways of promoting and applying Interculturality are mostly applied in the Text Analysis discipline.

E-learning has changed the perception of the world and influenced many areas of human social activity. It offers many new pedagogic opportunities and challenges in the teaching-learning process in higher education. The Internet can be interlaced with the coursebook by integrating four language skills to improve overall language comprehension and culture integration in many topics.

As it is stated in the UNESCO guidelines on intercultural education, we as professors try to involve and apply our university subjects to provide the learners with the cultural knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to achieve active and full participation in society (UNESCO 2006). To include Interculture in university materials is of high importance for the main reasons as stated in the Common European Framework of References (CEFR); components and aspects such as respect for sociocultural norms, taboos, and personal appearance have to be included. Taking into consideration sociolinguistic appropriateness and cultural repertoire, the actors of the teaching-learning process have to respect sociocultural norms in producing texts, adapting the appropriate register, forms of politeness, status, etc. (CEFR 2018: 155)

Intercultural learning gives the teacher the roles of a manager, language facilitator, and educator. This makes teachers responsible for the impact they have on students as they help them become more aware of the surrounding world and how to interact in this world. Teachers are unique mediators of cultural connections. The intercultural dimension of language aims for students as intercultural speakers to be able to engage with

complex identities and avoid stereotypes. It is based on the perception of the interlocutor as an individual whose qualities must be discovered (Byram et al. 2002: 9).

In a globalized, postmodern world, a rather different model of education has emerged. In order to fully participate in the new economy – as a worker, consumer, and responsible citizen –, an individual needs to be even better informed and needs higher-order and more flexible skills. So, learning the English language is a good tool to create the future of citizens. Creating a workforce with knowledge, creativity, and critical thinking skills might be good for facing life (Graddol 2006: 71).

The class environment has to be well-organized and adapted not only to students' native culture but also to foreign cultures. The teacher has to use a different rhythm for different cultural activities. Students should be given different tasks and different roles to appropriately reflect the content they are learning, including the norms, ways, and customs of different cultures.

The coursebook is often very useful. It must be adeptly utilized by both the teacher and the students according to their needs, interests, cognitive styles, and objectives. Coursebooks should be challenged, as there may be exercises that can reinforce prejudice and stereotypes, or any reading text may reproduce or resist racism, abuse of social power, dominance, and inequality. After the coursebook has been challenged and the advantages and disadvantages have been spotted, the teacher has to play the role of a mediator: parts of the book can be adapted, new material can be added, personal experience can be presented, and ethnocentric approaches or images can be used as a pretext for intercultural activities (Soler et al. 2007: 73).

English is taught to Albanian learners through familiar situations and cultural comparisons, highlighting the language's practical use for real communication. This contextualization helps learners in reinforcing historical and cultural knowledge and inciting identity growth, self-evaluation, and respect for diversity. The English classes are adapted to Albanian learners' interests and needs and make them feel identified in the classroom context. In this way, they may feel the practical sense of the foreign language (Xega 2013: 25).

Instead of reflecting on a specific culture, coursebooks help develop skills that will allow students to get the right information in every situation. The focus should be the development of analytical cultural awareness (Soler et al. 2007: 73). The teacher's attitude is a principal factor in determining the level to which the cultural objectives are achieved. The teacher's task is to make students aware of cultural differences without judging values (Chastain 1988: 301).

Likewise, Dimitrov (2016) states that examples of actual classroom practices used at faculty level to support diverse learners and promote intercultural learning goals are scarce in different university disciplines, resulting in a lack of information about the possible variation of intercultural teaching approaches in different disciplines.

3. The research methodology

The study relies on the qualitative analysis of a focus group that included semi-structured interviews with university students in an Albanian context. Descriptive data is sought to contextualize the research questions and to discern a semantic understanding of the studied phenomena, the aim being an in-depth analysis of the way intercultural competence is applied in the University teaching materials.

The summarizing qualitative data collected from the interview is presented in a storyline. Through this qualitative research, we needed to understand the students' concepts, thoughts, and experiences during the application of intercultural competence in lectures and seminar classes (Thattamparambil 2020).

3.1. Research questions

Regarding the issues discussed above about developing Intercultural awareness through foreign language learning in a university context, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- How does intercultural competence integration into university disciplines help better language knowledge acquisition and improve the student intercultural experience?

- How is intercultural competence applied in textbooks and university materials? Is cultural sensitivity promoted?
- Why should intercultural competence be integrated into university disciplines?
- How do professors use intercultural teaching competence in their disciplines?

3.2. Aim of the study

Given that culture should be incorporated into texts to promote students' intercultural competencies and communication skills, this study aims to see how the interviews with university students and Intercultural competence are included in the disciplines and how it is adapted in the explanation and acquisition of new concepts in different subjects.

3.3 Participants

The focus group in this research is a group of 15 students from the first course English study program Department of Foreign Languages, during the academic year 2022-2023. Questions are rooted in opinions, and the research is focused on the dynamism of group discussion and real-time responses to the topic. Notes were taken and the responses were analysed (Tegan 2022).

3.4 Data presentation

3.4.1. The Interview

The data was collected using focus group interviews and gathering detailed responses from open-ended questions, which resulted in interaction and exchange of information. It is a semi-structured, face-to-face interview that combines a predetermined set of open questions that encourage discussion, allowing the interviewer to explore the theme and take notes. The students were asked to give permission to be interviewed and to allow the use of the data subsequently. Confidentiality was assured to encourage participants to provide truthful answers. The data was treated with confidentiality and the anonymity of participants was ensured. Narrative data was collected. Students offer concrete examples in different subjects when answering the questions, which are elaborated in data interpretation.

The interview began with an explanation of intercultural terms and the students mentioned the subjects they did during the course. It was important to keep the conversation moving during the interview so that it felt natural, ultimately promoting a sense of comfort among students while they shared ideas. When an interesting point came up during the interview, related to the research, an additional question was asked. At the end of the interview, students were asked to stay in contact, in case there were additional questions, but there was no need for this as the answers were all clear (Ugalde 2017).

Students influence each other with their comments, and some of them form opinions after considering the views of others. Tapping into this interpersonal dialogue can help identify common experiences and shared concerns (Taherdoost 2022: 39). Group interviews are beneficial for capturing diverse perspectives, generating collective insights, and gathering first-hand information. This interview helped draw real conclusions from personal experiences and reduced the ambiguity of the data through detailed discussions (Enago Academy 2023).

3.5 Data interpretation.

3.5.1. Results and discussions

The interview was conducted with students, and they were asked to discuss the integration of intercultural competence in the University subjects they are taught during the first course of the English branch, Department of English.

To gather most of the data, the process focused on sorting and coding the interview to identify patterns, which included using narrative analysis in the qualitative research. The interviews provided valuable information and were analysed to allow us to understand how individuals experienced the presence or non-presence of intercultural competence in the materials they learned at the university.

The interview consisted of 10 questions. Through a thematic analysis, several ideas emerged.

- Based on the question of whether the input texts/subjects have an element of cultural diversity and facilitate thinking about various points of view, it became evident that elements of cultural diversity are applied in two

disciplines in the first English course; in spoken language discipline, a Romanian professor chose to share her lectures by explaining her topics in multiple ways. She conducted an open discussion by comparing and exchanging cultural information with Albanian students and by displaying different interests, skills, needs, norms, values, and attitudes. This helped Albanian students develop an awareness of intercultural issues/communication. Another student pointed out that foreign professors have a unique position to act as cultural bridges and enhance native students' intercultural competence. By creating an inclusive and diverse classroom environment, they can contribute to the growth of students who are more open, accepting, and adaptable in an increasingly interconnected world.

Another participant highlighted that in the French Language discipline, a French professor played a crucial role in helping them develop intercultural competence and bringing elements of cultural diversity. The foreign teacher's perspective as an outsider to the native culture offered valuable insights and fostered cultural understanding. She organized lectures and classes differently with cultural games in the French language while also sharing her traditions and values. The professor encouraged her students to compare and contrast cultures, further promoting intercultural competence and understanding. This comparative analysis helped students identify cultural differences and similarities, fostering a more profound understanding of their own culture. She brought native fluency by encouraging students to engage in real conversations, leading them to acquire not only language skills, but also gain insights into the culture associated with the language. Other students supported this opinion by adding that these classes created an environment where they were encouraged to ask questions, express curiosity, and share their perspectives on cultural matters while also maintaining the importance of respect for diverse viewpoints and cultural practices. In classes, the professor used films, music, literature, and other forms of media from her culture to expose students to different aspects of that culture.

- Concerning the question of whether the texts in language-focused tasks such as grammar activities, and sample paragraphs, reflect social/cultural diversity, many of the interviewees replied that mainly some of the disciplines reflect cultural dimension. One of the subjects of the

interviews eloquently expressed that in Text analysis, the interactive method Keynote includes many sections, real-world texts, websites, and TED talks video materials to promote and develop cultural dimension, discussion, critical thinking, and presentation skills. Even in the Written English discipline, some of the selected texts for editing, outlining essays, writing introductions and conclusions, or analysing thesis statements reflect many cultural issues.

Three other students stated that in the Phonetics discipline, they were taught the use of sounds in British and Albanian. Even in the French language course, most of the units in the coursebook covered cultural spaces by offering a wide range of social and cultural diversity.

- In some of the university disciplines, several tasks require students to interpret the communicative purpose or behaviour of other cultures. Some students offered concrete examples of the way this is presented and communicated in classes (i.e., IC learning activities, games, roleplays, debates, projects, and reflection-type tasks). One of the disciplines is Text Analysis: everyday situations are presented and students need to interact. One of the language skills that can help in intercultural learning is the listening skill, which is incorporated through video and audio clips and is widely used in this subject.

One student stated:

Listening is appreciated across cultures because it signals interest and respect and creates the opportunity for dialogue. This will always be a key skill to develop whether you are communicating with someone from a different culture, in another language, or learning about people's life experiences.

Another student pointed out:

We become mindful of our preferences while listening as well as those of the people with whom we interact. Becoming a good listener in intercultural situations takes practice and requires adaptations based, for instance, on culture or personality. To be good listeners, we remember to pay attention, be involved, provide feedback, avoid judging, and respond appropriately.

Even in the Spoken English discipline, students have organized activities and projects where they have worked individually or in groups to bring the culture of specific countries and talk about their history, traditions, and behaviours.

- Another question asked during the interview was whether the reflection-type tasks facilitated accepting cultural, linguistic, and social diversity through analysis and evaluation and if there are tasks that require students to demonstrate intercultural competence. Students had to identify the subjects which required their skills to communicate and collaborate effectively across cultures.

Most of the students stated that they felt most comfortable with Text Analysis tasks. There are many cases when a Text analysis professor integrates coursebooks with the web, especially on cultural topics, to yield better results in language acquisition. The aim is to process website information to use language skills on cultural topics. They are Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) lessons because they strengthen students' ability to process input and prepare them for high-level thinking skills by enhancing cognitive development and critical thinking (Xega 2023: 15). The interviewees mostly shared the same opinions related to the fact that web integration with the coursebook in higher education in the Albanian context adopts a change of the traditional structure, which ultimately leads to success. A collaborative environment merged with the ideas of the teacher, who maintains continuous control of the activities applied in class with the use of websites, improves knowledge acquisition, and develops language skills. These activities promoted student-centred classes and facilitated the acceptance of cultural, linguistic, and social diversity through analysis and evaluation of these topics (Xega 2023: 22).

- Related to the question of whether any professor in the subject or class they sat in offered an example of a multicultural classroom, four students supported this by offering the example of the projects they conducted in Spoken English. The project asked students to present cultural information on the country they chose to present.

Another student states:

Besides this, in Spoken English, we have organized debates by putting into practice the strategies of debate we have learned from the Club of Debate

JAA. We have made a discussion skills task in text analysis where we had to reflect on how we expressed politeness linguistically. Then, get some language input on indirect requests. We practiced tasks addressing cross-cultural pragmatics, such as requests, and agreeing/ disagreeing on different issues.

In light of the broader context, some of the interviewed students pointed out that outside of the classroom, they are part of the debate team, in a program implemented by Junior Achievement of Albania in high schools, municipalities, and universities in Albania; this is a project that aims to build the culture of debate among youth in the country. Participating in this kind of training encourages students to think critically, solve problems creatively, conduct research, sharpen public speaking skills, practice freedom of speech, demonstrate leadership, exhibit tolerance, and refine conflict-resolution skills. The implementation of debate groups contributes to the continuous education of civic and democratic values and develops a culture of youth self-employment and entrepreneurship. It gives students the ability to demonstrate beliefs, values, attitudes, and skills that enable efficient service to those who practice this art, ultimately helping them build a strong intercultural competence (Debating Economics 2022).

- The other question addresses whether university disciplines carry out “collaborative learning.”

The diversity of perspectives was highlighted by students’ comments like the following, stated by them in the English language.

Student 1: In many subjects, we involve the use of interactive methods in the teaching-learning process and we are organized in individual work, pair work, or student group activities.

For example, in the Written English course, after we are guided on the necessary components of the essays and the ways to write essays, one of the interactive methods we use is a “Peer review writing task” on writing an essay on a cultural topic. We are encouraged to change our work with a friend, by reading the essays and writing a two-paragraph response. We outline the strengths of the essay, discuss the essay problems, and describe what the friend would focus on in revision if it was his/ her essay. We learned a lot. We received ideas on our friends’ perceptions and opinions

of the cultural topic, and we also learned how to write a good essay, based on critical thinking, collaborative learning, and interactive methods.

Student 2: In Text Analysis, many classes especially in text analysis subjects are organized by supporting language receptive (listening and reading) and productive skills (speaking and writing). We practice receptive skills in class for example exercises to get a general picture-reading/listening for gist, recognizing discourse patterns, or deducing meaning from context.

Student 3: We practice receptive skills on the web as well by looking at headlines on a news site and predicting the news, or by skimming and scanning articles, reading/listening at their own pace, providing reference to dictionaries, using videos for listening exercises to provide context and other visual aids.

Student 4: Concerning the productive skills (speaking and writing), in class, we do pronunciation exercises, role plays, and any functional writing, whereas on the web discussion or commentary based on visuals, such as describing a video clip, summarizing audio, video, or writing questions based on websites news.

All the students support the idea that web integration during intercultural topics enhances communication among students, motivation, and research skills. Additionally, it combines language communication and intercultural skills and may be incorporated into lesson activities.

- The other question of the interview addresses the promotion of cultural sensitivity in lectures.

The students revealed a spectrum of perspectives on this question by relating it with the relationship that professors build with them. Most students stated that the creation of a respectful and tolerant atmosphere in the majority of classes is built via empathy, a valuable tool for classroom management and facilitating relationships.

Student: Most of the professors treat us as a friend, not just a student. Communication with the professor as a friend is very important for us since according to studies this has a positive effect on both students and professors in terms of the harmony that prevails in the classroom. They understand you.

You tell a professor a problem and [they] listen with understanding and don't be suspicious in any case. This makes us more responsible so as not to break the trust they have in us. Sometimes they have a sense of humour. To accept that we all love a moment in class to have a little humour and this makes us have a closer relationship with our professors, showing something of ourselves we show that social side of ours."

Student: They treat all of us equally. We have noticed that each of us is treated the same, regardless of religious belief, ethnicity, or economic status. These actions and the relationships that are built are a great leap for us to be interculturally adapted to other people. We are aware of how to interact with peers belonging to other cultures and convey empathy in a culturally consistent and meaningful manner – a thing that helps us as individuals to know how to work with culturally diverse groups."

On this aspect, there was a consensus among most interviewees concerning this relationship, although some expressed little reservations about these issues.

Because culture is multidimensional, Ridley and Lingle (1996) suggest that to genuinely communicate cultural empathy to clients, the counsellor must simultaneously use perceptual, affective, and cognitive processes. Cultural empathy is, therefore, a way of relating interpersonally and understanding and communicating across cultures. Parallely, this happens even between the teacher and the student in our context (Ridley and Lingle 1996: 46).

The interviewees offered examples of students from the second and third Bachelor and Master courses at our university who were integrated into Erasmus learning mobilities, implemented in our university. They stated that the incorporation of intercultural competence in university disciplines is of high importance for them as students as it helps them adapt to new environments, both academically and personally, by understanding other cultures and norms.

- Analysing the following question of the interview, whether non-verbal communication is addressed from a cross-cultural perspective, all of the students agree that this happens rarely. One student stated that once a listening lesson included an interview on the Text Analysis subject of how body language varies from culture to culture; students watched a video in

class and considered how body language was employed in the video and attempted to interpret it. As a classwork, students are asked to roleplay in pairs involving challenging situations regarding body language, and its (mis)interpretation, and to interpret it in class. The observing students had to find out the country to which the body language is related. Students recalled this activity as amusing and that they learned a lot.

- In their interview, students gave a variety of ways in which intercultural competence integration in university disciplines helps them improve language acquisition and their experience through an inclusive curriculum. They admit that integrating intercultural competence into language learning fosters a mindset of lifelong learning, making students more likely to continue improving their language skills and cultural understanding beyond their academic years. Additionally, it makes them more proficient communicators throughout their lives. Incorporating intercultural competence into university disciplines not only enhances language knowledge acquisition, but also prepares students for a world where effective cross-cultural communication is increasingly vital. It equips them with the skills and attitudes necessary to thrive in a globalised, multicultural society, and it enriches their language-learning experience by making it more meaningful and relevant. According to the students' responses, promoting intercultural competence or cultural dimension in university disciplines helps students see the world, traditions, beliefs, values, and attitudes from different perspectives, so that they may learn to accept new points of view, new ideas, and opinions, including those which differ from theirs. This ultimately encourages empathy, collaboration, kindness, and humanity.

4. Conclusions

A university is a microcosm of diverse cultures, subcultures, and backgrounds. The analysis of the interviews contributes to our understanding that integrating intercultural competence into university disciplines creates an inclusive, harmonious, and respectful environment that values and celebrates the diversity of cultures and subcultures.

Comparing our interview findings to existing literature, it is apparent that more has to be done regarding the integration of the cultural dimension and intercultural competence in disciplines taught in Albanian universities. Although intercultural competence and global learning are important outcomes of university education today, there is still a need for professors' training to facilitate intercultural learning or dialogues across cultures and subcultures (Garcia-Pérez and Rojas-Primus 2017); this problem is evident in the Albanian context.

The interviews revealed important aspects of the way some university professors integrate intercultural competence in some disciplines of the first course, such as in Text Analysis 1 and 2, Spoken English, French Language, French Culture, and Written English. Many research, task, and innovation projects mentioned during the answers of the interview have a cross-cultural dimension. Understanding different cultural contexts can lead to more insightful and effective research, product development, and problem-solving. The analysis of the students' interviews showed that when professors incorporate intercultural competence into their teaching methods, it enriches the learning experience for all students. Exposure to diverse perspectives and worldviews can lead to more engaging and thought-provoking lectures and seminars.

During the interview, it became evident that elements of cultural diversity are applied in Spoken French, French Culture, and French Language disciplines, where invited foreign professors have a unique position to act as cultural bridges and enhance native Albanian students' intercultural competence. By creating an inclusive and diverse classroom environment, professors can contribute to the growth of students who are more open, tolerant, and adaptable in an increasingly interconnected world. In the Text Analysis discipline, they were equipped with the skills to communicate and collaborate effectively across cultures. The integration of websites with the coursebooks is of high interest as it creates a collaborative environment. These activities promoted student-centred classes and facilitated the acceptance of cultural, linguistic, and social diversity through the analysis and evaluation of these topics.

Some projects in university disciplines such as Spoken English or Text Analysis offer an example of a multicultural classroom. They carry out

collaborative learning. Interactive methods are applied and used in Written English, Text Analysis, and French culture. Students admit that integrating intercultural competence into language learning fosters a mindset of lifelong learning, fundamentally preparing students for a world where effective cross-cultural communication is increasingly vital.

Despite the above-mentioned results, much of the literature on intercultural competence, language teaching, and learning is descriptive and theoretical, at least in the Albanian context of higher education, resulting in a lack of concrete intercultural language activities in specific disciplines. It is of immediate need, essential even, in our university context, to share knowledge of intercultural competence practices in different disciplines of higher education and further identify its best implementation and innovation through internationalization programs (Garcia-Pérez and Rojas-Primus 2017).

The article and the results of the interviews show that in a university setting most of the subjects lack elements of deep culture that might help learners to develop intercultural competence. Students need to gain more awareness of these facts (beliefs and values; relationships and roles; and attitudes and norms of a culture). Professors should include intercultural competence in their syllabuses, as this is not broadly practiced at the university level, and it is applied to a small degree in some courses, so professors need reinforcement in multilingual education.

The insights from the interviews have important implications for the integration of intercultural competence in university subjects, which is indispensable as it helps in more effective communication, conflict resolution, enhancing critical thinking, and promoting empathy and social responsibility. Especially in the process of globalization, this is an essential need.

As universities continue to internationalize their curricula and recruit a growing number of international students, institutions need to continue to increase learning opportunities for faculty members to develop and enhance their intercultural teaching competence. In terms of curriculum development, “bringing the real world into schools” applies to both content and form, which entails the development of multicultural and multilingual curricula based on multiple perspectives, voices, and the histories and cultures of all groups in a given society.

In conclusion, our research confirms that intercultural competence is essential for preparing students to thrive in an interconnected world, foster inclusive and diverse educational environments, and address complex global challenges. Integrating it into university disciplines equips students with the knowledge and skills they need to be effective, empathetic, and culturally aware global citizens.

Recommendations

The interview analysis shows the need for future research in the area of culture and intercultural competence in other Bachelor and Master courses, and its implementation, more broadly, in the university curricula.

For future research, metacognitive and language awareness should be reflected more in university textbooks and lectures. This study also recommends that English university professors need reinforcement in multilingual education.

To prioritise students' learning about culture and values, the curriculum will also have to provide them with the practical skills they will need to fully participate in an international society. It is, therefore, important that the diversity of knowledge and learning contexts be integrated into formal higher education. Students should also be encouraged to do basic ethnographic research on minority groups, urban population, personal lifestyles, and marginalized groups based on the topics that need to be included in specific disciplines. Every university subject must include elements of culture.

Limitations of the study

The findings of the interviews are limited in scope as they were drawn from a specific sample of participants. It is worth noting that the interviews, while informative, may not capture the full spectrum of intercultural competence integration in various levels of education. The paper also provides guidelines and examples for how intercultural competence could be implemented on this level of teaching, tasks, and materials. The present article is only a small mirror of what is implemented

in the university subjects of the first-year English course, taught in the Albanian context. In further studies, it may be of interest to observe the intercultural competence implementation at various levels of education.

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