

## THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT OF YOUNG LEARNERS' INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE AND ITS PRACTICAL APPLICATION

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**Abstract.** The relevance of the study is explained by the current political situation, where peace and friendship between representatives of various peoples is of importance. Foreign languages could be used as a means of teaching peaceful and effective interaction between representatives of different nations. The article deals with the issue of determining the intercultural competence of Russian-speaking primary school students. The aim of the study is to identify and describe the components of the intercultural competence of Russian youth. The study is based on the method of studying advanced pedagogical experience and the modeling method. The analysis of the works of V. Safonova and M. Bayram, of a number of international projects, European and Russian regulatory documents in the field of education allowed the authors to develop a theoretical construct of intercultural competence for children of primary school age. The construct includes a set of knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes that elementary school students must acquire for effective intercultural communication. The novelty of the study lies in the analysis of cases which served as examples of practical ways to develop intercultural competence in children of primary school age.

**Keywords:** junior schoolchildren, intercultural competence, intercultural approach, foreign language, case method, international projects

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## ТЕОРЕТИЧЕСКИЙ КОНСТРУКТ МЕЖКУЛЬТУРНОЙ КОМПЕТЕНЦИИ МЛАДШИХ ШКОЛЬНИКОВ И ЕГО ПРАКТИЧЕСКОЕ ПРИМЕНЕНИЕ

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**Аннотация.** Актуальность исследования обусловлена текущей политической ситуацией, в которой вопрос мира и дружбы представителей различных народов имеет важное значение. Иностранные языки могли бы использоваться как средство обучения мирному и эффективному взаимодействию между представителями различных наций. В статье рассматривается вопрос определения межкультурной компетенции у русскоязычных младших школьников. Целью исследования является выявление и описание компонентов межкультурной компетенции российской молодежи. Исследование основано на методе изучения передового педагогического опыта и методе моделирования. На основе анализа работ В. Сафоновой и М. Байрама, ряда международных проектов, европейских и российских нормативных документов в области образования авторы разработали теоретический конструкт межкультурной компетенции для детей младшего школьного возраста. Конструкт включает в себя комплекс знаний, навыков, умений и установок, которые учащиеся начальной школы

должны приобрести для эффективной межкультурной коммуникации. Новизна исследования заключается в рассмотренных кейсах, которые являются примерами практических способов развития межкультурной компетенции у детей младшего школьного возраста.

**Ключевые слова:** младшие школьники, межкультурная компетенция, межкультурный подход, иностранный язык, метод кейсов, международные проекты

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## Introduction

In today's modern world, also called the "global village" people communicate with each other using various means of transport. It gets remarkably uncomplicated to investigate other traditions and customs, whether travelling abroad or using modern gadgets. This circumstance has engendered gaining significance of such fields of humanities as cross-cultural research and cultural anthropology. As for foreign language teaching, now the cultural component of learning a language takes a leading role, though it has been neglected for many years [3, 9]. Language reflects culture, preserves it, and passes it to the following generations [28]. As culture itself is very complex, let us try to define it in the way it relates to learning a foreign language.

1) Lado defined culture as "cultures are structured systems of patterned behaviour." Such definition shows that two sections are significant in the concept of culture: structured and patterned [14].

2) Robinson considered culture from four viewpoints: behaviour, function, cognition and symbols. Behaviourists believe that culture represents a number of certain behaviors. According to the meaning of cognitive definition, culture is a process of interpretation while a symbolic one defines culture as the product after interpretation. Thus, cultural definitions outgrow from learners' subjective comprehension. "Culture is both process and products. Culture should be studied as a process as well as a product" [24].

3) Kramersch (1993) identifies that "culture is a social construct, the product of self and other perceptions". The definition implies that culture is not collective but also subjective [10].

4) McCarthy and Carter consider culture from a social discourse perspective. It refers to "social knowledge and interactive skills which are required in addition to knowledge of the language system" [16].

5) Moran (2001) defines culture as "a cul-

tural phenomenon". It means that a cultural concept includes material objects or systems that particular representatives use in different ways in special community situations and groups implying methods that show their values, morals and culture [20].

6) S.G. Ter-Minasova pointed out to the relatively new aspect of cultural studies called "history of everyday life culture". It deals with all aspects of a person's everyday routine including food, clothing, housing, family, friends, hobbies etc. [28].

We think that this definition of culture regards culture at its status of the artwork and relates mostly to the specific notions that foreign language learners are offered to study.

7) Irina A. Mironenko, Pavel S. Sorokin (2018) described in detail the components of culture: material and spiritual objects, created by an individual, and the external – internal process going on within the individual. In this definition of culture an individual is viewed as creator / bearer and core of culture [18].

In turn, these ideas of prominent scholars gave rise to incorporating culture into foreign language teaching (FLT). In FLT culture learning could be defined as the process of acquiring the culture-specific and culture-general knowledge, skills, attitudes required for effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures [8]. This leads to the fact that international aptitude is conventionally comprehended as the capacity of a person to work in a profitable way in the process of interaction between members of various countries and in various cultural surroundings.

Dr. O. Khukhlaev offers a comprehensive theoretical pattern of intercultural capacity. This pattern is based on 9 concepts. These are: intercultural sustainability, flexibility, openness, interest, absence of ethnocentrism, cultural sensitivity, empathy, intercultural relations management, and tolerance to intercultural uncertainty.

Those concepts are grouped into 3 combinations of characteristics: 1) intercultural traits; 2) attitudes and mental features; 3) intercultural skills.

Recently not only specialists in culture and foreign language teaching have been paying a great deal of attention to intercultural competence, but also a great number of specialists in related areas.

N. Melnikova, the Russian academic, analyzes domestic and foreign approaches to development of intercultural competence of Psychology students. She also considers the issue of developing Psychology students' intercultural competence in our country at its state of the art [17].

Doctor I. Novikova studies characteristics of Russian university students and defines four major traits of the university students that are significant for intercultural competence. These traits are negativists, undecided, ethno centrists, ethno relativists. As a result, the profile of Russian university students is created based on these traits [21].

Dr. Wang suggests using videotaping to assess students' intercultural competence. It's pointed out that videotaping allows to assess students' non-verbal behavior which is important, not only verbal one [29].

As for high school students the influence of students' academic achievement and cognitive abilities on their intercultural competence is studied by Dr. I. Novikova [4].

The role of English in intercultural communication is explored by academics L. Grigoryeva and R. Zakirova [7].

**Cross-cultural approach  
in foreign language teaching:  
in Russia and abroad**

In Europe the need to incorporate culture into foreign language teaching had to do with the huge wave of immigrants that came to Europe in search of jobs or for studies in 1960-s–1970-s. For this very reason the educational process in European colleges and universities needed to be adapted to the changing circumstances. Lately Dr. Byram has tackled the issue of intercultural language teaching in an era of internationalization. As a result, a prominent European methodologist, M. Byram, created a model of intercultural competence for students [1, 2]. Currently in modern European educational papers such as CEFR, Companion Volume, a new mode of communication – mediation – has been identified and described. Mediation helps to stimulate mutual understanding and interaction which be-

comes inconceivable without interpreters. Not only the language is to be translated, but rather the message, the cultural phenomenon that makes contingent on the language being spoken. The morale of amicable, sympathetic and respectable relations towards other countries is also written in such documents as “Living Together as Equals in Dignity” and “Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Cultures.” [15, 23].

As for Russia, a great interest in foreign language learning emerged with the Fall of the Soviet Union. At that time, a prominent Russian specialist in cross-cultural communication S.G. Terminasova, MSU, introduced cross-cultural communication as an obligatory subject at university foreign language departments. Meanwhile, Doctor Victoria Safonova developed a socio-cultural approach in foreign language teaching. Later Dr V. Safonova has dealt with the issues of introducing mediation as a new aspect of FLT & FLL into tertiary education and integrating it into professional education of young educators – researchers [25, 27].

Nowadays according to Russian Federal State Educational Standard, constructing an amicable relation towards other nations and countries is regimented as one of the learning intentions on elementary school level. It is significant because in modern world children with their parents are able to travel and interact with their friends via various means of social media. Therefore, it is really significant to teach small children how to interact productively and have a friendly attitude towards their friends and peers from foreign countries [6].

Normally the experience considering international interaction result in getting knowledge and skills which form the important twenty first century diplomatic abilities.

In this study peculiar attention will be paid to forming intercultural competence of Russian elementary school children. The paper is aimed at identifying what sort of knowledge, skills and qualities young learners should have to communicate successfully with their peers abroad and at developing practical ways of forming elementary school students' intercultural competence.

**Materials and Methods**

In the process of research work the following stages were gone through:

1) The Federal Educational Standard for elementary school, Russia, and CEFR (level A1) were analyzed with the aim of finding the intercultural component in them at the level of educa-

tional results. These papers were chosen for analysis because they set the goals of education, targeted results, content of education, and the organization of educational process (Federal State Educational Standard – in Russia, CEFR – in Europe). We decided to study CEFR at level A1, because this level corresponds most to the level at which elementary school children are able to use English as a foreign language.

2) Next the works of Dr. M. Byram and Dr. V. Safonova, the scholars prominent in Russia and Europe, were studied. They gave birth to intercultural competence as a notion and worked on this issue practically simultaneously. M. Byram created the pattern of international skills for students in Europe and V. Safonova developed the socio-cultural approach in foreign language teaching aimed mostly at high-schoolers. Another reason for turning to the works of these academics was their labour specifically in the sphere of methodology of foreign language teaching, not in other related fields such as Psychology or Pedagogy.

3) At the last stage the construct of intercultural competence was synthesized. So, analysis

and synthesis were used as research methods (Table 1).

Furthermore, the steps of analytical research that was done while organizing this construct are introduced, according to Federal State Educational Standard for elementary school (Russia).

**Attitudes** – 1) forming Russian students' identity, proudness of their mother country, its culture and heritage; 2) developing democratic and humanistic morals; 3) constructing awareness in students of their national and cultural identity uniqueness; 4) forming Russian multinational society values; 5) organizing sustainable, community-focused outlook in students, considering all the multiplicity of origin, traditions, and beliefs; 6) developing regardful relation toward another person's opinions, history, and other nations culture; 7) building amicability, good nature and empathy. The Federal State Educational Standard for elementary school regards these as individual outcomes of learning process.

Building amicable relations and stimulating tolerant attitude towards target language speakers according to the fundamental knowledge of their

Table 1

The theoretical construct of intercultural competence developed by the authors

Knowledge	Skills / acquired practices	Skills	Abilities	Attitudes
About forms of formal / informal greetings	To find out common features and differences in a foreign culture	To tell about oneself, one's hobbies, one's home-town, one's school, one's favorite food	To begin and finish communication with an international partner (in other words – intercultural in-touch capabilities)	Friendliness
About forms of formal / informal ways of saying goodbye	To identify cultural gaps and to ask for their interpretation		Intercultural observation	Tolerance
About peculiarities of counting, writing, and colors in a foreign culture			Intercultural sensibility	Love to native land
About hobbies, interests of one's peers abroad			Intercultural openness to otherness / new / open-mindedness	Openness to another culture
About everyday life of one's peers abroad (food, housing, home-towns, daily routines)				
Basic knowledge about a foreign culture (children's folklore, poems, songs, fairy-tales)				

lifestyle, folklore and children's literature is registered as one of the subject outcomes in FSED for elementary school.

**Acquired practices** – to decompose objects, to make parallels between items, to generalize, to categorize, to bring into correlation obscure data to the known one, to define analogies, to specify cause-effect relations. Federal State Educational Standard for elementary school regards that as meta-subject outcomes.

**Erudition and skills** – fundamental language knowledge and elementary skills in interaction with native speakers in a foreign language [6].

CEFR A1

**Knowledge:** names of month of the year, parts of day, names of the days, location, basic forms of greetings, basic forms of saying goodbye. Specific notions: personal information, everyday life, housing, weather, hobbies, free time, food and drinks, shopping.

**Abilities:**

Students are able to:

- 1) apprehend in colloquial speech numbers, cost of products and time;
- 2) buy basic goods using gestures and other means of non-verbal interaction;
- 3) apply elementary means of greetings, saying goodbye as basic forms of manners;
- 4) speak about themselves;
- 5) make a small talk with the interlocutor or other speaker;
- 6) describe themselves and their living environment;
- 7) make a request of necessary objects, lend things to others if they are being asked for [5].

M. Byram's theory of intercultural competence

**Knowledge:**

- 1) about social communities within one's own culture and interlocutor's culture;
- 2) about communication process on individual and community level.

**Skills:**

- 1) to apprehend papers from another culture point of view;
- 2) to interpret the paper from one's own cultural background.

**Abilities:**

- 1) to request for one's interlocutor explanation of the paper, using the means of foreign language and another country pragmatics;
- 2) to define cultural relations between one's own culture and a foreign one;
- 3) to operate with acquired knowledge and

skills for mediation between interlocutors of one's own culture and a foreign one.

**Attitudes:**

- 1) sincerity and inquisitiveness;
- 2) preparedness to deal with prejudices about another cultures [1].

Socio-cultural capability and knowledge as it is structured for 10–11 graders by Doctor Victoria Safonova:

**Socio-cultural knowledge:**

- 1) ways of courtesy in everyday life, socio-cultural surrounding, and in the area of work and study;
- 2) language background in circumstances of formal and informal interaction.

**Interdisciplinary knowledge:**

- 1) about English – speaking countries culture,
- 2) principles of living for various social classes in English-speaking countries,
- 3) about possibilities for getting education and work in English-speaking countries,
- 4) about social morals in English-speaking countries,
- 5) about ethnic and religious communities in English-speaking countries.

**Socio-cultural skills:**

- 1) linguistic means for expressing one's own opinion in a regardful, calm and neuter way,
- 2) linguistic means necessary for describing one's own country and culture abroad, for accessing international guests in everyday life situations,
- 3) speech etiquette formulas in standard communicative situations [26].

Due to the analysis of these documents and works the required knowledge, skills, acquired practices, abilities and attitudes for successful intercultural communication were identified and the theoretical pattern of international capacity for youngsters described above was made.

At the elementary school level the main ways to build students' intercultural knowledge are: 1) target country traditions and customs stimulation; 2) immersion into the environment of life communication with foreign friends; 3) reading and learning poems, songs and fairy-tales in a foreign language by heart [19]. Natalya V. Kravchenko considers adding project-based learning as an effective method to build cross-cultural capability to the list of means above [11]. According to Evgeniya S. Polat "the activity aimed at reaching a particular didactic goal through thorough investigation of a problem that ends up with a practical visible result or product" is meant by project-method [22].

This definition highlights the research, educational and practical potential of project-work. For forming elementary students' intercultural competence this method might be used in the following way: a group of Russian elementary school students does a research on a certain topic, presents the results in a particular way, exchanges the results with foreign peers and then discusses the results finding commonalities and peculiarities. In other words, the projects are international.

Natalya V. Kravchenko developed a set of international projects aimed at forming different aspects of Russian elementary school students' intercultural competence. For example, the project "We celebrate New Year in Russia and Christmas in the USA" is aimed at developing students' intercultural knowledge, their skills in presenting their own culture, their willingness to share and communicate with foreign peers, and their observation skills regarding another culture [12]. The next project "We meet with our American peers" is aimed at forming Russian elementary school students' openness to others, their friendliness and tolerance [13].

The project "Hobbies of Russian and American elementary school students" helps form students' intercultural awareness, openness and sensitivity [16].

One more project that is done by Russian and American elementary school children is "Daily meals in Russia and in the USA as they are viewed by Russian elementary schoolchildren". This project was made and used by the authors of present research.

The objectives of the project are:  
 1) improving students' writing skills;  
 2) making students' critical and analytical thinking skills stronger;  
 3) approving students' capability to parallel objects;  
 4) introducing Russian elementary school students to American national cuisine.

Stages of the programme:

In the first step – organizational – the contacts in the process of learning with colleagues in the US were established, the theme of the programme was established, as well as its objectives and deadlines for each stage of the programme. Finally, two colleagues from Russia, Perm Krai, Mariya V. Mikrukova and Natalya U. Bragina, and a colleague from the US, Kathy Burnitt, Abilene participated in the programme.

During the second stage – the stage of project realization – Russian elementary schoolchildren made a poster with their daily meals for breakfast, lunch and dinner. The Americans peers did the same task.

In the third stage – reflection stage – the Russian elementary school students identified common features and peculiarities in Russian and American everyday meals.

**Results**

Analyzing posters made by Russian elementary school children the following meals were represented (Table 2).

Analyzing posters made by American elementary school children the following meals were represented (Table 3).

**Table 2**

**Everyday foods in Russia**

Breakfast	Lunch	Dinner
Cereals, oat meal (6)	Beet soup\ Soup (8)	Pizza (1)
Scrambled eggs (4)	Rice with chicken (1)	Meat with potatoes or vegetables (2)
Fruit (5)	Hamburger (1)	Mashed potatoes with meat or meat patties (4)
Sandwiches (1)	Salad (3)	Tea with sweets (1)
Pizza (1)	Mashed potatoes with sausage or meat patties (2)	Pasta with meat patties (2)
Pancakes (1)	Pelmeni (1)	Fish with vegetables or potatoes (5)
		Salad (1)
		Soup (1)

**Table 3**

**Everyday foods in the USA**

Breakfast	Lunch	Dinner
Cereals, oat meal (10)	Macaroni and cheese (7)	French fries with deep-fried chicken (9)
Fried eggs with pork chops and milk (10)	Pizza (8)	Meat with vegetables / potatoes or beans (2)
Buns, bread with jam (5)	Ice-cream (5)	Pizza (8)

As a result, when Russian elementary schoolchildren were asked to find similarities between Russian and American daily meals, they said that in both countries people ate cereals and eggs for breakfast, sausage – for lunch, mashed potatoes / vegetables with chicken or other meat for dinner.

Pizza is also a common dish in both countries, though Russian elementary schoolchildren prefer to have it for breakfast, while their American peers usually have it for lunch or dinner. There is also some fast food represented in daily meals both in Russia and in the US.

However, in the USA fast food is represented in a wider variety than in Russia. This is because fast food originates from the US. For Russia nationally – specific meals are pancakes and soup / borsh. One reason why soups are so popular in Russia might be the frosty and cold climate there. Soups just help people stay warm during cold times.

#### Discussion

While considering the results of the present study, it should be mentioned that in the Federal State educational Standard there is no difference between students' skills neither there are any peculiar knowledge for elementary school level interaction. In CEFR knowledge and abilities are regarded as a last outcome for English teaching at A1 level. CEFR, unlike the Federal State Educa-

tional Standard, makes comments on communication for small students. From our perspective, M. Byram's idea of international interaction is more applicable for European educational environment and is aimed at students with a higher language level, at least B1, than ordinarily young students have. It also requires some adaptation for the Russian education. As for the concept of socio-cultural capability considered by Doctor Victoria Safonova, we believe that it focuses more on discrepancies in social differentiation of various communities than on culture itself. We suppose it is rather rested upon sociological knowledge than cultural one.

#### Conclusion

In conclusion, it's worth mentioning that the ultimate goal of the present research is to build a theoretical pattern of international knowledge for young students is achieved. The major components needed for successful intercultural communication on the elementary school level are identified and presented in the construct. However, some elements might be added to this construct considering students' cultural and educational background as well as the currently changing local and world environment. With regard to possible future research directions, investigation to the practical part of the developed theoretical construct of elementary students' intercultural competences could be pursued.

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