

THE ROLE OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN THE ACQUISITION OF UZBEK AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract. *This article explores the essential role of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in the acquisition of Uzbek as a foreign language (UZFL), arguing that successful language learning requires far more than grammatical and lexical knowledge. Uzbek presents learners with distinctive sociocultural challenges, including the T/V distinction (“sen/siz”), elaborate systems of kinship terms and titles, ritualized hospitality practices, and evidential markers (“-mish”, “ekan”) that convey stance and social alignment. Without ICC, learners risk pragmatic failures that undermine communication, even when their grammar is accurate. Drawing on an analysis of widely used Uzbek textbooks such as institutional series like “Uzbek Language for Foreigners” (A1,A2,B1), recent textbooks published by Alisher Navoi Tashkent State University of Uzbek Language and Literature, Nigora Azimova’s “Uzbek: An Elementary Textbook” and “Uzbek: An Intermediate Textbook”, Oztopcu’s “Colloquial Uzbek”, the study shows that while cultural notes and authentic dialogues are present, intercultural outcomes are not consistently operationalized or assessed. To address these gaps, the paper incorporates insights from international scholarship, including Michael Byram’s framework of intercultural communicative competence, Claire Kramsch’s notion of the “third place” in intercultural learning, and Deardorff’s ICC model, to suggest practical applications for UZFL contexts. Pedagogical strategies proposed include task-based interaction, media literacy, telecollaboration, and explicit pragmatics workshops. Activities such as role-playing a first visit to an Uzbek home, practicing marketplace negotiations, or analyzing evidential usage in media provide learners with authentic opportunities to develop intercultural sensitivity and pragmatic accuracy. The article concludes that ICC is both a prerequisite and an outcome of acquiring Uzbek, enabling learners to interpret input more effectively, sustain motivation, and engage respectfully in Uzbek-speaking communities. Embedding ICC at the core of UZFL instruction ensures that language teaching transcends memorization of forms and instead fosters holistic communicative competence.*

Introduction

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has become a central concept in foreign language pedagogy, and its role is especially crucial in the acquisition of Uzbek as a foreign language (UZFL), where communicative success depends not only on grammatical accuracy but also on the ability to navigate the complex sociocultural norms embedded in language use. Uzbek is rich with sociopragmatic systems such as honorific address distinctions (“sen/siz”), kinship terms, hospitality rituals, and evidentiality markers like “-mish” and “ekan”, which convey stance, source of information, and social alignment. Learners often find that grammatical knowledge alone is insufficient to achieve communicative competence, since pragmatic missteps—such as

addressing a professor with “sen” or misusing evidential forms in sensitive contexts—can cause greater misunderstandings than errors of syntax. For this reason, Uzbek language acquisition requires the simultaneous development of ICC, which involves not only knowledge of cultural practices but also skills in interpreting social cues, attitudes of openness and adaptability, and critical cultural awareness that enables learners to decenter from their own norms. Scholars such as Michael Byram (1997) emphasize that ICC entails knowledge, skills, and attitudes that allow learners to mediate between cultures, while Claire Kramsch (1993) highlights the creation of a “third place” where learners negotiate meaning between their native culture and the target culture.

Deardorff (2006) further stresses that ICC is a dynamic, developmental process rather than a fixed outcome, which is especially relevant in UZFL learning, where learners must gradually internalize sociopragmatic conventions that differ significantly from those in Indo-European languages.

Uzbek language textbooks provide essential but varied support for ICC development. More recently, Alisher Navoi Tashkent State University of Uzbek Language and Literature has developed a series of textbooks called “Uzbek Language for Foreigners” (A1,A2, B1), aimed specifically at international learners of Uzbek. These materials include broader cultural modules on Uzbek customs, proverbs, and etiquette, reflecting a growing awareness that culture must be systematically incorporated into language learning. Nigora Azimova’s “Uzbek: An Elementary Textbook” integrates cultural notes, politeness routines, and authentic dialogues. UZFL pedagogy must embed intercultural practices through experiential and reflective learning. For example, task-based scenarios such as role-playing a first visit to an Uzbek home, where learners must politely refuse food multiple times before accepting, help develop awareness of hospitality norms. Marketplace negotiations serve as practical exercises in bargaining language and politeness strategies. Explicit attention to evidential markers in authentic contexts—such as gossip, news reports, and inferential statements—trains learners to interpret how “-mish” signals hearsay or distance, while “ekan” conveys inference or confirmation, each carrying implications for politeness and face-saving. These activities resonate with Byram’s (1997) emphasis on “savoir comprendre” (skills of interpreting and relating) and Kramsch’s notion of intercultural positioning.

Moreover, the integration of modern media and technology provides further opportunities for ICC development. Analyzing Uzbek vlogs, dramas, or news broadcasts allows learners to observe authentic uses of politeness, humor, and evidentiality in natural discourse.

Telecollaboration projects with Uzbek peers, supported by universities such as Alisher Navoi Tashkent State University, create real-life contexts for practicing invitations, refusals, compliments, and negotiations. Reflective journals and intercultural portfolios encourage learners to document and compare cultural observations, deepening their awareness and helping them internalize intercultural strategies. Teacher competence also plays a crucial role: as Byram and Fleming (2001) argue, educators must themselves possess intercultural awareness to guide learners effectively. Professional development for UZFL instructors should therefore include training in intercultural mediation, pragmatics-focused micro-teaching, and corpus-based analysis of authentic Uzbek language use.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the acquisition of Uzbek as a foreign language requires a comprehensive approach that prioritizes intercultural communicative competence alongside grammar and vocabulary instruction. Uzbek's linguistic and cultural richness, from its honorific systems to its evidential markers and ritualized politeness strategies, makes ICC not a supplementary skill but a foundational component of communicative competence. By integrating the theoretical insights of Byram, Kramsch, and Deardorff into UZFL pedagogy, educators can design tasks and activities that foster critical cultural reflection, pragmatic awareness, and authentic engagement. ICC in UZFL is therefore both a process and an outcome: it develops gradually through authentic interaction and reflection, while also enabling learners to interpret linguistic input more effectively and participate respectfully in Uzbek-speaking contexts. Embedding ICC within curriculum design, teaching practice, and assessment ensures that learners acquire not just a language but also the intercultural skills necessary for meaningful global communication.

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