

**THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF
INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE AMONG
UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN AZERBAIJAN**

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Abstract

The paper deals with the issues of forming and developing students' intercultural competence (IC) level and the demands for culture-based, appropriate teaching materials including social websites in Azerbaijan. In order to succeed in fostering students' intercultural competence, the content and teaching strategies of foreign languages, all educational documents, programs, syllabi, and teaching materials must be thoroughly designed based on culture. The swift development of global economy, transportation, and communication necessitates the tendencies relating to intercultural competence meaning that people from multicultural backgrounds has made intercultural competence very relevant. In this context, social media play a key role in increasing the Internet users' culture awareness and improving intercultural competence. In this study, the questionnaire was designed in order to gain the influence of social media in the development of intercultural competence and the impacts of learning foreign languages among the students who study at Azerbaijan University of Languages. Using social media in the classroom environment contributes to understanding of foreign cultures which facilitates the language acquisition.

Keywords: intercultural competence; language teaching; tertiary system; teaching material; native and target culture; social network.

Literature Review

Higher education plays an important role in developing well-educated professional specialists, providing intercultural training and preparing students to understand and accept cultural diversity. The theoretical background of the issue has been examined, the content of

teaching materials: authentic, non-authentic materials and their pros and cons have been analyzed. English language teachers have a great opportunity to contribute to peaceful and sustainable development of multicultural societies, in bringing up young generation who will build the peaceful society, who will be able to face, to fight against and to stop cold wars, terrors, conflicts, and racism among countries, states, and rulers. Today we face serious global problems and threats: social inequality, environmental destruction, ethnic conflicts, poverty, prejudice, pollution etc. Teacher training program and curricula must highlight the peaceful multicultural education in the XXI century. It must be globally disseminated and teachers and educators should focus on this important challenge. They must work in cooperation and collaboration for creating modern universities, school curricula, policy, programs, and text books.

The current state of the education system in Azerbaijan is characterized by a kind of positive crisis caused by the fundamental changes in our society. The Republic of Azerbaijan, being a member of the European Council since 2001, has been involved in the process of the Bologna Declaration, which is considered as the modern education system in many European countries. The Bologna Process covers the complex tasks, which are aimed in qualitative methods of assessing knowledge and improving the educational system of European countries.

The aim of promoting IC in tertiary education (in our case Azerbaijan University of Languages) is to prepare future specialists - mediators in order to understand and evaluate native and other cultures and those who have a linguistic and cultural knowledge, the ability to see their similarities and differences, to use the knowledge are likely to get mutual understanding with the people of other cultural communities.

Modern society needs specialists who are able to communicate effectively in difficult socio-cultural circumstances, carry out full-fledged contacts with representatives of other countries and cultures in various spheres of human activity, actively realize their individual potential in professional and creative activities.

Tertiary education must create a qualitatively new educational system taht capable of providing real interaction among specialists in a global space which includes the conglomerate of cultures. The formation of such a system largely depends on the establishment of the patterns of this interaction and the formation of the qualities of personality in university students that will allow them to work and live fruitfully in the 21st century.

Teaching materials, the ways of achieving desirable level, methods and principles for promoting IC are not also perfect. The complicated nature of IC creates problems such as choosing appropriate aspects for fostering and assessing this competence.

There is a large number of definitions of IC depending on the contexts. Some researchers focus on cultural awareness, knowledge and motivation while others focus on communication and behavioral skills. However, we choose M. Byram's definition, a professor at Durham University in the UK, one of the leading researchers in intercultural competence who has made IC the necessary topic for foreign language teachers and methodists (Byram, M. & Morgan, C., 1994).

M. Byram defines IC as "Knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others' values, beliefs, and behaviors." (Byram, M.,1997).

M. Byram prioritizes linguistic competence and states that "Acquisition of languages in education is considered important in terms of giving social and cultural capital to future generations in the globalizing world" (Byram, M. & Morgan, C., 2008).

In M. Byram's model, Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) consists of two closely related concepts: communicative competence and intercultural competence. The communicative competence in its turn consists of sociolinguistic, linguistic, and discourse competences. Intercultural competence is a combination of three components (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) and is supplemented by five values:

1. intercultural attitudes;
2. knowledge;
3. skills of interpreting and relating;
4. skills of discovery and interaction;
5. critical cultural awareness.

(Byram, M., 1997).

These five major intercultural competence elements are strongly interrelated. The cognitive aspect of intercultural competence consists of the following nine components:

1. Fluency;
2. Vocabulary;
3. Wide worldview;
4. Motivation;
5. Definition of goals and purposes;

6. Cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies;
7. Language skills;
8. Formation of discourse knowledge;
9. Integrating non-print information to text (Chubukova, Y.I., 2010).

It must be mentioned that the forced transition to distance education in higher educational institutions in connection with COVID-19 has made the opportunities in IC forming practically unlimited from a methodological point of view.

The availability of media sources creates the effect of rapprochement with a foreign culture, which is undoubtedly useful for motivating students, who will thus be able to understand that languages are not just an academic subject, but a real form of communication.

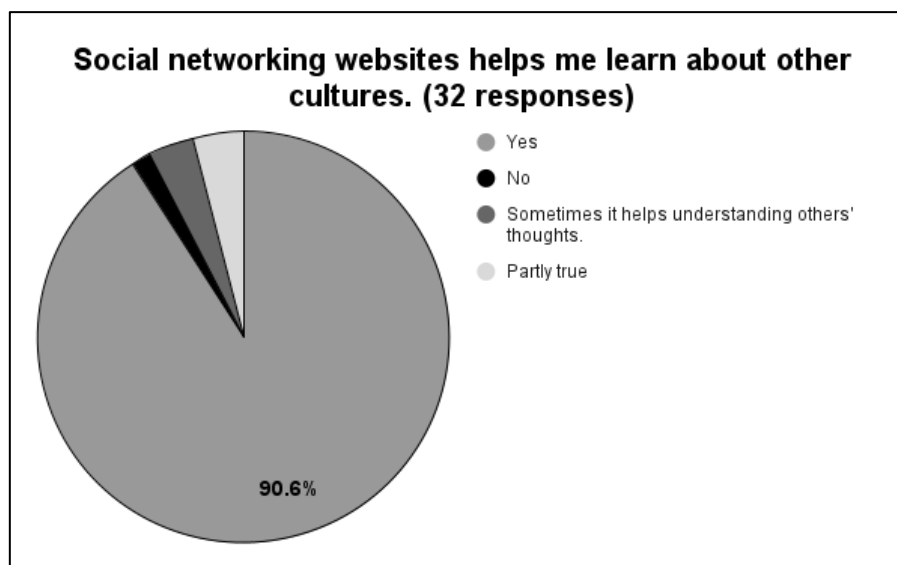
We can note the following advantages of social networks in the development of intercultural competence in foreign language teaching: 1) Popularity; 2) extensive information capacity; 3) Ability to select and add existing information about the cultures in the network; 4) Multifunctionality; 5) Relevance; 6) Accessibility through any device; 7) Ability to work online; 8) Interactivity; 9) Increasing the prestige of the teacher; 10) Opportunity to benefit different groups and societies according to the area of interest.

Thus, due to high popularity and the huge number of users of social media platforms as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, the role of social networking sites in the enrichment of students intercultural knowledge through the media is irreplaceable. Foreign language teachers should use social networks and popular social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Google+, Twitter for both educational and cultural purposes for the promotion of IC. Instagram, first appeared in 2010, is gaining more popularity across the world, as a photo sharing platform and over the time other new features such as video, texting, and story sharing have been added to this online platform. In terms of language learning, Handayani F. (2019) argues that Instagram can be used as the source for applying a number of activities in language classrooms such as digital storytelling, grammar activities through photos, role plays, reading, speaking activities through videos etc. (Handayani, F., 2019). Therefore, Instagram addresses to four language skills to practice it in and outside the classroom. Additionally, some studies were conducted on Instagram in order to develop writing skills. Teacher has a number of responsibilities in the formation of intercultural competence with the media. First of all, the teacher should define what social English is and explore the goals, needs, and requirements of language learners in learning foreign languages.

The media is a stimulus for the enrichment of our cultural knowledge. Teachers are encouraged to create virtual tours, field trips, video conferencing, webinars and interactive convention clubs to increase students' motivation and creativity.

Methodology

As a research technique we have performed content analysis by which a key concept of our study- *IC intercultural competence* relating to teaching materials which have been analyzed. The questionnaire as a quantitative method has been prepared in order to obtain the data. To determine the student's interest concerning culture based teaching materials, we used one of the important research tools in teaching methodology-questionnaire. The aim was to integrate culture-based topics into the educational program, teaching material and activities. Data collection in this research was done at Azerbaijan University of Languages between 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 academic years. There were involved 28 junior students, 18 female and 10 male students completing the first year of study.



Question: Social networking websites helps me learn about other cultures.

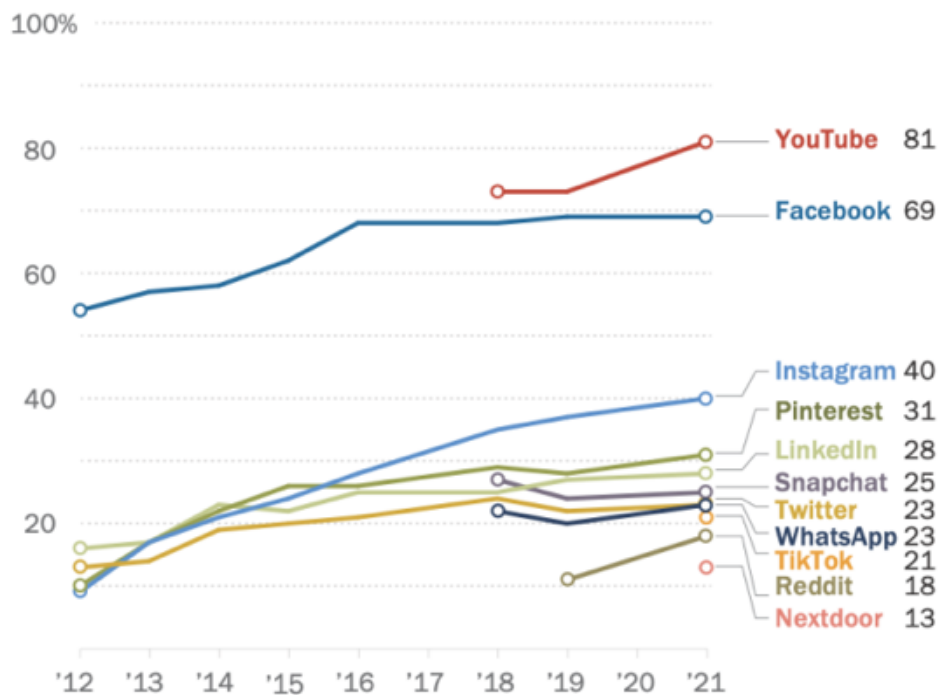
Doing research on the impacts of social networking websites provides me with the knowledge about other cultures. According to the pie chart, 90.6% of 32 respondents consider using social networking websites helps them gain knowledge about other cultures. Sometimes it makes me to be able to understand people's opinions.

The results of the study conducted among fourth-year students in the Faculty of International Relations and Regional Studies at Azerbaijan University of Languages shows that the majority of students clearly understand cultural differences. Instagram is a social

media platform where users post photos and short videos (up to a minute) in their profiles. The main feature of the platform is the placement of short “stories” that remain for 24 hours (the circle of persons for whom the story is available can be limited to certain users), and then are automatically deleted. According to a Pew Report (2021), the widely used social networking websites among Internet users are Youtube and Facebook and there is a considerable increase in the number of people using Instangram.

Growing share of Americans say they use YouTube; Facebook remains one of the most widely used online platforms among U.S. adults

% of U.S. adults who say they ever use ...



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown. Pre-2018 telephone poll data is not available for YouTube, Snapchat and WhatsApp; pre-2019 telephone poll data is not available for Reddit. Pre-2021 telephone poll data is not available for TikTok. Trend data is not available for Nextdoor.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 25-Feb. 8, 2021.

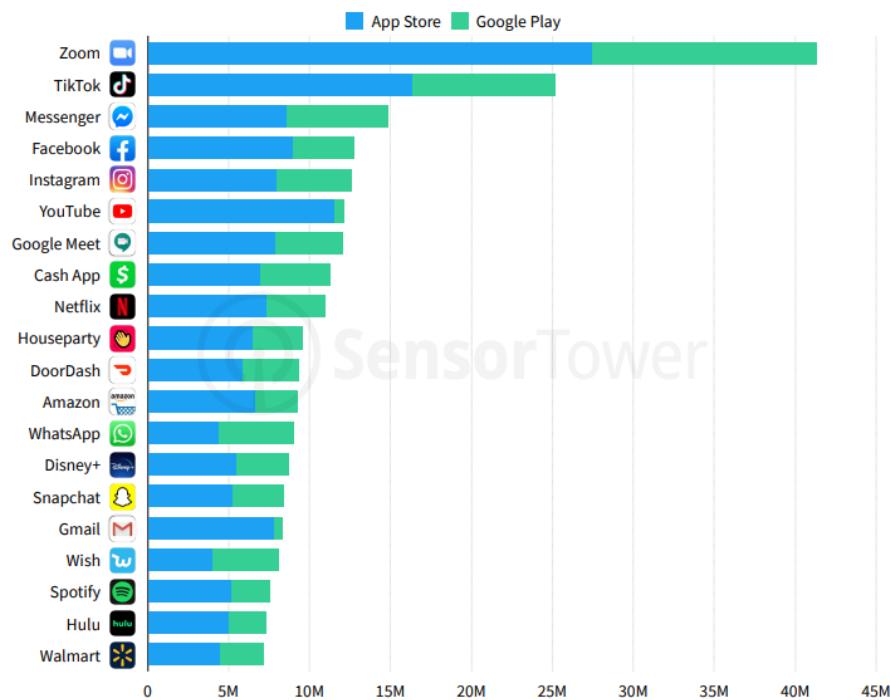
"Social Media Use in 2021"

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These studies show that Instagram is an effective tool in increasing students' motivation to develop language and cultural competence (Mansor and Rahim, 2017). We can

define three stages of worksheet process: the previewing stage is a complex activity preparing students for the next main moment - watching unknown video material based on culture. Teachers should provide students with the background necessary knowledge and information about the issue of culture. The main moment in the previewing stage is keywords, unknown words, and phrases. Students must figure out themselves meanings.

Nowadays, young people are more likely to use social media in order to improve language skills and develop intercultural competence through learning about different cultures. Instagram is a social media platform in which photo and video materials are edited and shared (Gaivoronskaya S., 2021). According to “Digital 2020” report of “We are Social” international company, a person spend approximatley 7 hours in social networking websites (Komarova, 2019). Instagram is one of the most uploaded program based on the report of “Store Intelligence Data Digest” issued by Sensor Tower in 2020 (SensorTower, 2020).



Q2 2020 Apps by U.S. Downloads

On Instagram, communication takes place through direct, where group and private chats are created with the ability to send text, audio and video messages, leave them in chat forever, or allow one-time viewing. It is convenient to organize the process of working out materials in the form of “question-answer”. Students create a closed story (except for a certain circle of people: teachers, classmates) with a sticker, where other users can ask a question in text form. In the following stories, the learner who is asked the questions answers them. This option is convenient in that it is a fairly quick process (the answer is given no

more than 30 seconds). This type of activity can be organized both in class and as homework. Instagram contains a myriad number of original photos which reflect foreign cultures and can be used in foreign language lessons. The abundance of online photos gives students an opportunity to understand and approach other cultures from different point of views. Students can improve critical thinking and enhance the global perspectives through analyzing these photos and comparing their culture with others. Millions of users all around the world share photos and videos including stories in Instagram. Instagram is a rich platform which contains visual and content-related elements (photos, videos, titles, and comments) and culture-related information.

Authentic materials are divided into the following groups:

1. Printed materials: articles, books, newspapers, magazines, restaurant and cafe menus, letters, travel brochures, theater programs, questionnaires;
2. Audio materials: radio programs, news, films, songs, announcements;
3. Visual materials: TV programs websites, e-mails, instructions, advertisements or warnings signs, road signs, signboards, drawings, photographs, labels, posters, flyers, advertisements, maps, tourist brochures, traffic tickets and schedules etc.

International textbooks are intended for the international market and belong to certain cultural content, composition and elements. The authentic materials provided in these textbooks are prepared by native speakers and do not take into account the cultural and spiritual values, national outlook, psychology and age of students specific to national audiences.

Conclusion

It should be taken into account that teaching English language and culture should be taught more effectively only on condition of using materials taken from the native speaker's real life or compiled taking into account the peculiarities of target culture. The use of such culture-based materials designed for methodological aim, will make it possible to teach all types of speech skills to imitate immersion in the natural speech environment in English classes. In relation to this, we can conclude that in Azerbaijani and foreign methodology there is no single definition of authentic materials, their classification, as well as opinions on their predominant use in teaching a foreign language.

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