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## **Developing Intercultural Competence in Pre-service EFL Teachers: Challenges and Strategies**

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**Annotation** *This article examines the essential role of intercultural competence in the education of pre-service EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers, particularly within the context of Uzbekistan's evolving educational landscape. As global interconnectedness increases, teachers must not only facilitate language learning but also cultivate students' awareness of cultural diversity and inclusion. Intercultural competence encompasses metacognitive awareness, empathy, adaptability, and critical reflection. Drawing on foundational theories by Flavell (1979), Schraw and Dennison (1994), and Winne and Hadwin (1998), as well as recent innovations by Koedinger et al. (2013), Luckin et al. (2016), and Irgasheva (2025), the article explores challenges such as limited exposure to diversity, curricular constraints, and teacher readiness. Strategies discussed include simulated cultural encounters, reflective practice, localized content, and AI-supported learning. The article recommends integrating intercultural content into teacher education curricula, promoting CPD for educators, and implementing authentic assessment models. Uzbekistan's multicultural context offers rich potential for fostering intercultural competence when global methodologies are thoughtfully adapted to local realities.*

**Keywords** *Intercultural Competence, EFL teachers, metacognition, cultural awareness, teacher education, reflective practice, Uzbekistan, CPD*

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## **Развитие межкультурной компетентности у будущих преподавателей английского языка: вызовы и стратегии**

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**Аннотация** *В статье рассматривается ключевая роль межкультурной компетентности в подготовке будущих преподавателей английского языка как иностранного (EFL), особенно в контексте реформирующейся образовательной системы Узбекистана. В условиях растущей глобализации учитель должен не только обучать языку, но и развивать у студентов уважение к культурному разнообразию и инклюзивности. Межкультурная компетентность включает в себя метакогнитивную осознанность, эмпатию, адаптивность и критическое мышление. На основе работ Flavell (1979), Schraw и Dennison (1994), Winne и Hadwin (1998), а также исследований Koedinger и др. (2013), Luckin и др. (2016), и Иргашевой (2025), анализируются основные трудности — от недостатка культурного опыта до ограниченного учебного контента. Предлагаются стратегии, такие как симуляция культурных ситуаций, рефлексивная практика, использование*

локального контента и ИИ. В статье подчеркивается необходимость включения межкультурных модулей в учебные программы, повышения квалификации преподавателей и внедрения аутентичных методов оценки.

**Ключевые слова** Межкультурная компетентность, преподаватели английского языка, метакогниция, культурная осознанность, подготовка учителей, рефлексивная практика, узбекистан, повышение квалификации

## Ingliz tili o'qituvchisi bo'lishga tayyorlanayotgan talabalarda madaniyatlararo kompetensiyani rivojlantirish: muammolar va strategiyalar

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**Annotation** *Ushbu maqolada ingliz tili o'qituvchilarini tayyorlash jarayonida madaniyatlararo kompetensiyaning ahamiyati, xususan, O'zbekiston ta'lim tizimi kontekstida muhokama qilinadi. Bugungi globallashuv davrida o'qituvchilar nafaqat til o'rgatishi, balki o'quvchilarning madaniy xilma-xillik va bag'rikenglik borasidagi bilimni shakllantirishi lozim. Madaniyatlararo kompetensiya o'z ichiga metakognitiv ongli yondashuv, empatiya, moslashuvchanlik va tanqidiy fikrlashni oladi. Maqolada Flavell (1979), Schraw va Dennison (1994), hamda Winne va Hadwin (1998)ning nazariy ishlari, shuningdek Koedinger va boshqalar (2013), Luckin va boshqalar (2016), va Irgasheva (2025)ning zamonaviy ishlanmalari asosida qiyinchiliklar va strategiyalar tahlil qilinadi. Taklif qilingan strategiyalarga rolli o'yinlar, reflektiv amaliyot, mahalliy kontentni qo'shish va sun'iy intellekt asosida o'qitish kiradi. Maqolada o'qituvchi tayyorlash dasturlariga madaniyatlararo modulni kiritish, doimiy malaka oshirish kurslarini yo'lga qo'yish va muqobil baholash usullarini joriy etish tavsiya etiladi.*

**Kalit so'zlar** *Madaniyatlararo kompetensiya, ingliz tili o'qituvchilari, metakognitsiya, madaniy ong, o'qituvchi tayyorlash, reflektiv amaliyot, O'zbekiston, malaka oshirish*

### Introduction

In today's increasingly globalized and culturally interconnected world, the task of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) extends beyond grammar instruction and vocabulary acquisition. English classrooms are evolving into spaces where learners from diverse cultural backgrounds interact, exchange values, and form new understandings of the world. As a result, English language

teachers must not only possess strong linguistic skills but also be culturally competent facilitators capable of fostering empathy, inclusion, and mutual respect.

For pre-service EFL teachers – the future educators currently undergoing formal teacher training – developing intercultural competence is not merely an add-on to their pedagogical toolkit; it is an essential professional requirement. Their ability to recognize, respect,

and respond to cultural differences profoundly influences classroom dynamics, student engagement, and overall educational outcomes. Teachers lacking in intercultural competence may inadvertently reinforce stereotypes, create misunderstandings, or alienate learners from minority or international backgrounds.

This article seeks to explore the nature and significance of intercultural competence in pre-service teacher education. It investigates the theoretical underpinnings of the concept, particularly its connection to metacognitive awareness and reflective practice. Furthermore, it outlines the major challenges pre-service teachers face in developing intercultural skills and proposes practical strategies that teacher educators and policymakers can implement to enhance intercultural training in EFL programs. Special attention is given to the educational context of Uzbekistan, where multilingualism and diverse ethnic heritage offer both opportunities and challenges for intercultural education.

### **Understanding Intercultural Competence**

Intercultural competence refers to the ability to communicate and interact effectively and appropriately with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. It encompasses a multifaceted set of skills, attitudes, and knowledge domains. These include affective components such as empathy, open-mindedness, and tolerance; cognitive dimensions such as cultural knowledge and critical awareness; and behavioral aspects like flexibility, adaptability, and respectful communication styles.

From a psychological perspective, intercultural competence is rooted in self-awareness. Flavell's (1979) foundational theory of metacognition emphasizes the importance of understanding one's own mental processes – what we think, why we think it, and how those thoughts influence our behavior. In the context of intercultural communication, metacognition plays a crucial role in helping teachers

recognize their own cultural assumptions and biases. This self-awareness is the first step toward engaging meaningfully with other worldviews.

Moreover, the development of intercultural competence requires the capacity for reflective judgment – a trait defined by Schraw and Dennison (1994) as the ability to evaluate situations, beliefs, and actions from multiple perspectives. Reflective EFL teachers consider how their cultural background affects their teaching, and they actively seek to understand the diverse experiences and expectations of their learners. In doing so, they foster a classroom environment grounded in mutual respect, inclusivity, and open dialogue.

By nurturing these metacognitive and reflective skills, teacher education programs can empower future educators to become not only competent language instructors but also effective cultural mediators.

### **Metacognition and Cultural Awareness**

The intersection between metacognition and intercultural competence is vital for effective teacher preparation. Just as metacognition underpins academic learning, it also serves as a foundation for cultural awareness. Pre-service teachers must consciously plan how they will engage with cultural differences, monitor their communicative behaviors and internal responses, and critically evaluate the outcomes of their intercultural interactions. This recursive process mirrors the cycle of metacognitive regulation: planning, monitoring, and evaluating (Winne & Hadwin, 1998).

Teacher education programs can scaffold this development by integrating targeted metacognitive strategies into coursework and practicum experiences. Reflective journaling, for example, invites pre-service teachers to record and analyze their intercultural encounters and teaching dilemmas, helping them become more attuned to the influence of their cultural assumptions. Structured group discussions offer opportunities to compare cultural interpretations and challenge

ethnocentric views, while peer feedback cultivates an awareness of how different perspectives are communicated and received in diverse classroom settings.

Such activities not only foster intercultural competence but also reinforce essential teaching dispositions such as empathy, adaptability, and open-mindedness. When pre-service teachers engage metacognitively with their intercultural growth, they are better equipped to create inclusive learning environments that validate and leverage cultural diversity.

### **Challenges in developing intercultural competence**

Despite its critical importance, the development of intercultural competence among pre-service EFL teachers is often hindered by multiple systemic and pedagogical obstacles:

**Lack of Exposure to Diversity:** In regions such as Uzbekistan, where the population is more culturally homogeneous compared to global urban centers, many teacher trainees may have limited direct interaction with individuals from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds. This lack of exposure restricts the development of empathy and inhibits the ability to reflect on and respond to cultural differences authentically.

**Curricular constraints:** EFL teacher education programs frequently emphasize grammatical knowledge and language pedagogy while giving minimal attention to intercultural communication. As Koedinger et al. (2013) argue, effective learning environments must integrate both content and metacognitive scaffolds. A curriculum that neglects sociocultural dimensions leaves future teachers ill-prepared for culturally responsive instruction.

**Resistance and discomfort:** topics such as privilege, cultural norms, and systemic bias can provoke discomfort or defensiveness among students, particularly if such issues challenge deeply held beliefs. Without supportive learning environments, these

discussions can become contentious or superficial. As Luckin et al. (2016) emphasize, educators must design learning spaces that are both emotionally safe and intellectually rigorous to enable authentic engagement with cultural difference.

**Assessment difficulties:** intercultural competence is complex, context-dependent, and dynamic. Traditional assessment methods, such as standardized tests or checklists, may fail to capture its nuanced and evolving nature. Alternative approaches like reflective portfolios and self-assessment tools are more aligned with the metacognitive processes underpinning intercultural learning.

### **Pedagogical strategies for building intercultural competence**

To address these challenges and foster deeper intercultural awareness, EFL teacher education programs must incorporate intentional, diverse, and context-sensitive pedagogical strategies:

**Simulated cultural encounters:** role-plays, critical incident analysis, and interactive case studies allow students to practice navigating intercultural situations in controlled settings. These simulations provide a safe space for making mistakes, receiving feedback, and refining communicative strategies. As VanLehn (2006) illustrates, structured simulations supported by feedback loops can enhance both analytical reasoning and social-emotional learning.

**Collaborative learning with international peers:** online exchange programs, joint projects, and cross-cultural forums with students from other countries expose pre-service teachers to a broad spectrum of perspectives and norms. These interactions promote both linguistic competence and intercultural sensitivity, encouraging students to move beyond stereotypes and engage in authentic dialogue.

**Reflective practice models:** building on Winne and Hadwin's (1998) framework, teacher educators can guide students through structured reflection cycles where they set

intercultural learning goals, monitor their progress, and evaluate outcomes. These models cultivate a growth-oriented mindset and encourage deeper awareness of how one's actions and beliefs influence others.

**Localized content and cultural relevance:** incorporating materials and examples that reflect Uzbekistan's rich cultural and linguistic heritage helps students connect abstract concepts with familiar realities. Drawing on traditions such as the "mahalla" (community support network) system or multiethnic classroom case studies makes intercultural competence more relatable and applicable. As noted by the Ministry of Public Education of the Republic of Uzbekistan (2023), aligning pedagogy with national cultural values enhances both relevance and impact.

**AI-powered support for cultural reflection:** in this context, the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools can further enhance the development of intercultural competence. As Irgasheva (2025) emphasizes, AI-based applications such as intelligent tutoring systems and reflective dashboards can support metacognitive awareness, promote self-regulation, and personalize learning pathways. These tools allow teacher educators to tailor intercultural training experiences and offer real-time feedback, thus fostering a reflective learning culture in which pre-service teachers can actively evaluate and adjust their approaches to cultural diversity. By strategically combining digital innovation with cultural pedagogy, Uzbekistan can prepare a new generation of teachers who are both technologically competent and interculturally sensitive.

By combining these strategies, teacher education programs can create dynamic and inclusive learning environments where intercultural competence is not only taught but lived.

#### **Contextualizing in Uzbekistan**

Uzbekistan's ongoing educational reforms strongly emphasize the development

of 21<sup>st</sup>-century competencies, such as critical thinking, digital fluency, and intercultural communication. These reforms align with the country's broader goals of global integration and educational modernization. Uzbekistan's diverse sociocultural composition – comprising multiple ethnicities, languages, and regional traditions – makes it a particularly fertile context for developing intercultural competence in pre-service teachers.

However, effective implementation of intercultural training requires balancing globally endorsed pedagogical standards with deeply rooted local cultural norms. For instance, integrating culturally resonant concepts such as the "mahalla" system – a traditional form of neighborhood-based mutual assistance – into teacher training practices promotes respect for Uzbekistan's communal ethos while advancing inclusive education (UNESCO, 2021).

Furthermore, educational institutions must be mindful of the complexities involved in embedding intercultural themes across different courses. While international best practices offer useful frameworks, adaptation to local realities remains essential to ensure sustainable and culturally appropriate outcomes. Irgasheva (2025) supports this view by advocating for culturally aligned, AI-driven learning environments that respect Uzbekistan's educational values while fostering metacognitive development.

#### **Recommendations**

To operationalize intercultural competence in EFL teacher training programs, the following strategic actions are recommended:

**Curriculum design:** develop specific courses on intercultural communication and cultural studies, integrated into language teaching methodology. These courses should include diverse readings, multimedia resources, and case studies reflecting both global and local cultures. Emphasis should be placed on real-world applications and cultural analysis

tasks to help learners draw parallels between cultural theory and practical communication.

**Teacher training:** introduce continuous professional development (CPD) initiatives that focus on intercultural pedagogy, reflective teaching, and cultural self-awareness. These trainings should combine theoretical instruction with hands-on workshops, allowing educators to explore their own cultural biases, engage in reflective discussions, and model intercultural behaviors in classroom settings. Drawing on the ideas of Luckin et al. (2016), professional development programs can incorporate AI-enhanced tools to provide feedback and track progress on educators' reflective competencies.

**Assessment tools:** employ alternative assessment models such as reflective portfolios, peer assessments, and self-evaluation rubrics that capture the multidimensional nature of intercultural learning. These assessments should be formative and ongoing, designed to evaluate not only knowledge acquisition but also attitudes, awareness, and behavioral adaptations. AI-supported dashboards, as suggested by Irgasheva (2025), can further facilitate the self-monitoring and feedback loop central to metacognitive and intercultural growth.

**Research and policy support:** promote empirical research on the effectiveness of intercultural competence development within Uzbekistan's EFL programs. This includes qualitative and quantitative studies exploring the outcomes of intercultural interventions in both pre-service and in-service teacher education. Research findings should be disseminated to inform policy frameworks that prioritize intercultural goals, support inclusive curricula, and allocate resources for sustained implementation.

### Conclusion

Developing intercultural competence in pre-service EFL teachers is essential for preparing reflective, adaptable, and globally aware educators. Through metacognitive

strategies, contextualized learning, and sustained institutional support, teacher education programs in Uzbekistan and beyond can foster the skills needed to navigate diverse cultural landscapes. As Flavell (1979), Schraw and Dennison (1994), and Winne and Hadwin (1998) have shown, self-awareness and reflection are key to mastering any complex cognitive skill – including those required for intercultural communication.

A two-fold approach must be embraced – one that values both global insights and local relevance. Pre-service teachers should be trained not only in theories of intercultural communication but also in practical, lived cultural experiences. This involves embedding reflective activities in day-to-day instruction, encouraging teachers to interrogate their assumptions, and modeling intercultural dialogue in teacher-student interactions. As Irgasheva (2025) illustrates, AI-enhanced tools provide additional scaffolding for reflection and analysis, enabling teacher candidates to assess their growth and identify areas for further development.

Furthermore, cultural competence cannot exist in a vacuum. It must be supported by institutional values and policies that recognize diversity as an educational asset. This includes integrating multicultural perspectives into national curriculum standards, funding collaborative cross-cultural initiatives, and rewarding innovative pedagogies that foster inclusion. Uzbekistan's education sector, as reported by the Ministry of Public Education (2023), is gradually moving in this direction – emphasizing digital transformation, inclusive learning, and pedagogical innovation.

Yet, the journey is ongoing. Cultural competence must remain a dynamic, evolving target that adapts to societal changes and learner needs. Assessment strategies must also evolve to capture not only knowledge but also attitudes, empathy, and behavioral flexibility. As Koedinger et al. (2013) argue, bridging the gap between learning theory and classroom practice is critical. Likewise, Luckin et al. (2016)

emphasize the role of intelligent systems in supporting personalized, reflective learning environments.

By combining traditional approaches such as role-playing and ethnographic inquiry with modern tools like AI-supported feedback and global collaboration platforms, teacher education programs can cultivate interculturally competent educators. These educators are not only equipped to teach English effectively but are also prepared to engage meaningfully with the global community.

Ultimately, fostering intercultural competence is about cultivating human understanding. It is about preparing teachers who do not merely instruct but inspire – who act not only as language experts but as cultural mediators, peacebuilders, and lifelong learners. With strategic investment, interdisciplinary collaboration, and a commitment to continuous growth, Uzbekistan stands poised to lead regional progress in creating a globally competent, culturally grounded teaching force.

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