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FACULTY OF PHILOLOGY

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## INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COGNITION OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA AND BULGARIA

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**Abstract** This study focuses on intercultural communication competence (ICC) of English language teachers in the Republic of North Macedonia and Bulgaria. Recently, English language teaching has been brought into relation with intercultural communication competence especially in countries where English language is not a native language. The globalization of the world, the immigration of people to Europe and overseas, and the diverse nature of many societies have caused the ICC to become a trend not only in the field of ELT, but also in other disciplines such as: business and economy, communication, art, marketing etc.

**Keywords:** *intercultural communication, teaching, globalization, diversity, culture, foreign language*

### 1. Introduction

Recently, English language teaching has been brought into relation with intercultural communication competence especially in countries where English language is not a native language. The purpose of this study is to see the level of intercultural communication competence among teachers and students in two neighboring countries. It is believed that ICC is a crucial component in education in general. For the purposes of this study the focus will be on English language teachers because it is believed that learning a foreign language is no longer about knowing how to use language for the purpose of speaking and reading, but about knowing how to communicate with people who have different cultural identities. Hence, the English language classes can be a great platform for developing ICC among students but they must be tailored by the teachers themselves. The biggest benefit of studying intercultural communication is to help people appreciate cultural differences

by seeing the value in the different worldviews and the way other people live. Intercultural competence is a powerful tool in the fight against intolerance, xenophobia and ethnocentrism (Mrnjajus, 2013,p.11). When people from different cultural backgrounds start a conversation and see themselves as representatives of their own country, cultural barriers to communication are likely to happen due to the differences in their patterns of life, social style, customs, world view, religion, and philosophy. From one hand this accent of national identity leaves a possibility for them to rely on stereotypes and thus decrease the person to be taken as a representative stereotypical example of their country and culture. On the other hand, there are arguments that very often when students are taught a foreign language they are not introduced with the cultural dimension. Bennett (2004) claims that people often tend to overestimate their intercultural sensitivity and people do this “more than others, which means that they rate themselves relatively high in ethnorelativism while still having a high profile in ethnocentrism“ (p.7). Finally, learning the language without the cultural dimension takes certain risks such as relying on stereotypes. It has been widely recognized in the language teaching profession that learners need not just knowledge and skill in the grammar of a language but also the ability to use the language in socially and culturally appropriate ways. (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002).

A distinction between “learning” and “acquisition” is being made in recent studies of learning a foreign language and the final outcome. The evidence of success in foreign language learning is in favor of linguistic learning, which gives a better final result, language learners should be in a natural linguistic environment. This puts aside the artificially controlled learning process in the classroom. To achieve this ultimate positive outcome in teaching and learning in intercultural competence, methods such as: role-playing games, research and description of participants in intercultural interaction, problem solving situations should be used. In order to carry out this competence, it is also necessary to have at least one of the conditions listed in the learning environment:

- Presence of native speaker
- The trainer to be familiar with the foreign culture
- To have teaching materials that represent culture in a high and low context;
- To participate in active intercultural interaction: meetings, exchanges, excursions, summer institutes, etc. Achieving unproblematic communication of a foreign language with a foreign culture is so far essential, whether communication is personal or professional. Studying the foreign culture is important because language remains the most important communication tool, although there are others. Scarino & Liddicoat (2009) assert that “understanding the nature of the relationship between language and culture is central to the process of learning another language. In actual language use, it is not the case that it is only the forms of language that convey meaning. It is language in its cultural context that creates meaning: creating and interpreting meaning is done within a cultural

framework” (p.18). The prerequisites for successful intercultural communication are not only associated with the accumulation of certain grammatically correct expressions and phrases, as well as accumulation of vocabulary of words, but with real knowledge of the culture and society of that language. Internationally, foreign language learning is the most successful through a communicative approach, according to which foreign language learning is primarily considered as a means of communication. The knowledge of cultural differences and overcoming them by the learner of a foreign language can also be accomplished by moving from the context of textbooks and traditional stereotypes in the schools. This can also be done by introducing materials and didactic approaches that open minds to cultures in the world as a whole under a careful guidance of the teacher. But in order to do this, wider strategies for such training should be developed and implemented.

## **2. Background of the study**

The school is a specific place for meeting and learning about different cultures and this happens on different levels whereas two particularly important aspects can be distinguished - content and functional. The educational content, along with the cognitive components consists of certain values, norms and rules which are decisive for the culture of the ethnic group that has a dominant role in the social structure and therefore can define the educational goals and tasks facing the growing generations of the nation. The main normative documents defining the content of the education are the state educational requirements, the curricula and the textbooks. Within the dissertation, analysis of the English language curricula for state secondary schools in Republic of Macedonia will be done along with a review of the textbooks used in the English language lessons. More precisely, this dissertation will deal with intercultural communication competence of English language teachers in the Republic of Macedonia which will be measured through qualitative and quantitative research methods. The prime aim of this dissertation would be to increase teachers' awareness in terms of intercultural communication in order to achieve better results in teaching English as a foreign language. The research questions of this study are based upon the assumption that teachers in English language lack the needed prerequisites for developing intercultural awareness i.e. intercultural communication awareness and intercultural communication sensitivity. In order to prove that, the following research question is to be answered:

- What is the level of intercultural communication awareness of English language teachers towards students from different ethnic backgrounds?

Developing the intercultural dimension of students in teaching in general, and in language teaching more specifically, revolves around the following aims: to give learners intercultural competence as well as linguistic competence; to prepare

them for interaction with people of other cultures; to enable them to understand and accept people from other cultures as individuals with other distinctive perspectives, values and behaviors; and to help them to see that such interaction is an enriching experience (Byram, 2002). Thus, English language teaching should focus on improving intercultural communication competence as a needed component. Many studies and projects conducted in the Republic of Macedonia are mainly oriented towards improving the intercultural communication competence of students and this dissertation will include a research focused on assessing the intercultural communication competence of English language teachers in the country. Within this study, English language teachers were chosen as a focus of a research due to the opportunities of discussing cultural topics during the English language lessons. However, integrating culture in other lessons is also very important. The reason for that are the multicultural classrooms and today's overseas exchange opportunities in different fields (not only in English language as a subjects at school) and European projects which require intercultural competence in order to be able to participate and knowledge in English language too.

### **3. Research methodology**

This research aims to analyze intercultural communication cognition among English language teachers and students in the area of the city of Strumica compared to a school in Ruse, Bulgaria. Up to now, not many studies have been done in terms of intercultural communication cognition and cultural competence of English language teachers. Most of the projects for interethnic integration are oriented towards the students only and that is the reason why the central phenomenon in this case study is the intercultural communication cognition of English language teachers towards students from different ethnic backgrounds. This study starts from the following research question:

- What is the level of intercultural communication awareness of English language teachers towards students from different ethnic backgrounds?

Furthermore, the study aims to measure the intercultural competence among English language teachers using a questionnaire, which is to be distributed to the teachers from the state municipal high-schools in Strumica. The variables that this research is going to investigate are intercultural communication awareness and ethnocentrism. The questionnaire is divided into three sections including demographic information, investigating teacher's perception of ICC and investigating intercultural communication awareness.

## 4. Findings

In order to give a more precise presentation and interpretation of the data within the research the results from the questionnaires will be analyzed using SPSS. The aim of this research is to find out what is the level of intercultural awareness of English language teachers in the state secondary schools in Strumica and Bulgaria. The participants of this study are students and teachers from the state municipal schools in the municipality of Strumica. The three high-schools in Strumica (“Nikola Karev”, “Jane Sandanski” and “Dimitar Vlahov” have students from different ethnic backgrounds and very often these students show lower results at school. In this research, surveys were conducted among the students and teachers in the above mentioned schools.

### 4.1 Demographic parameters of the sample - teachers

In table 1 below are shown the frequencies of the sample - teachers who had taken the survey in terms of place of living i.e. Macedonia or Bulgaria. From the results it can be seen that 19 surveys are filled in by teachers in Macedonia, whereas in Bulgaria 8 teachers were surveyed and the total number of teachers who have participated in this research is 27.

**Table 1.** Responded by country

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Macedonia	19	70.4	70.4	70.4
	Bulgaria	8	29.6	29.6	100.0
	Total	27	100.0	100.0	

In terms of gender 25 teachers are women and 2 teachers are men which is very often a mere fact in the sphere of education in the recent years.

**Table 2.** Responses by Gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	2	7.4	7.4	7.4
	Female	25	92.6	92.6	100.0
	Total	27	100.0	100.0	

In table 3 below are shown the frequencies of the surveyed teachers according to age whereas the most frequent group of teachers is 30-39 if compared to the other age groups:

**Table 3.** Responses by country and age

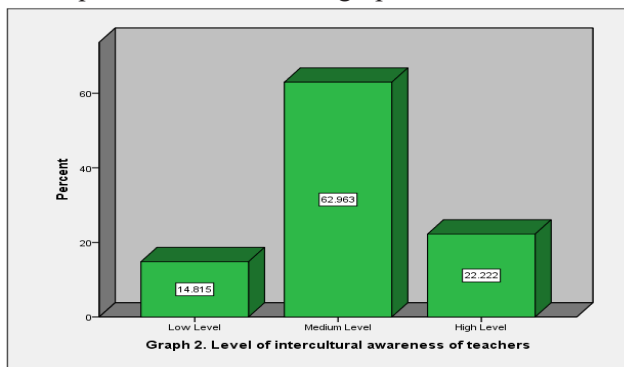
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	22-29	2	7.4	7.4
	30-39	13	48.1	55.6
	40-49	8	29.6	85.2
	50-59	2	7.4	92.6
	60 and above	2	7.4	100.0
	Total	27	100.0	100.0

In addition, the higher percentage of the surveyed teachers is 93% and shows that they are familiar with the term intercultural communication.

**Table 7.** Are you familiar with the term Intercultural Communication?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	1	3.7	3.7
	Other	1	3.7	7.4
	Yes	25	92.6	100.0
	Total	27	100.0	100.0

In order to summarize the answers from the teachers' questionnaires, the results will be divided on three needed levels when the general frequencies occur and the level of intercultural awareness of teachers is as follows: 63% from the participants - the teachers have enough or medium level of intercultural awareness, 22% show higher level of intercultural awareness and 15% show lower level of intercultural awareness. These frequencies are shown in graph 2 below:



#### 4.2 Interpretation of HYPOTHESIS - conclusive statistics of teachers

In terms of the demographic information from the participants in this case the teachers, for the aim of this research the main question is raised, if there are differences in the level of intercultural awareness of the teachers from the two cities or countries. Another important question to be answered is if there is a big difference between the level of intercultural awareness among teachers in terms of gender, age and of course taking the main aim of the research if there is a difference taking into account if the teachers have experience with students from different ethnic backgrounds. For the purpose of this research and according to the main hypothesis, t-test (independent and ANOVA) is going to be used as a statistical method.

In table 10 in the fourth column are shown the mean differences of the intercultural awareness level of teachers according to the country of living and table 11 shows the coefficient of significant differences:

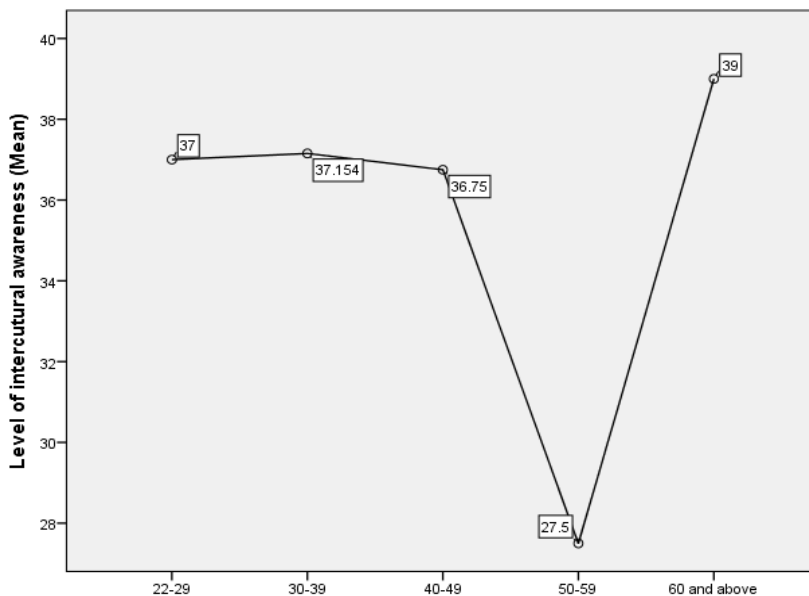
**Table10.** Difference between mean according to country

	Place	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Points Total	Macedonia	19	36.26	4.318	.991
Teachers	Bulgaria	8	36.88	3.182	1.125

According to the coefficient of significance which is bigger from the second limit of possibility ( $0.722 > 0.05$ ), it can be stated that there is no significant difference of the level of intercultural awareness in the two countries i.e. the level of intercultural awareness is not related with the country of living of the teachers in this research. But it looks like the students of the two countries differed in their intercultural awareness. The reason for that might be the explanation that the students from Bulgaria who were part of this research were at their final stage of high-school studies i.e. mainly about 17 and 18 years old and this a time when they prepare for university enrollment and do not pay too much attention to the school duties and consider themselves as adults. Another interesting explanation could be as mentioned before that some of them are still self-centered and ethnocentric and have to move from the phases of ethnocentrism such as: denial of existence of cultural differences, feeling superior towards other ethnicities, minimize the existence of different cultures in order to protect their culture towards the phases of ethnorelativism of acceptance, adaptation and integration i.e. to start interact comfortably with students from different cultures instead of denying that they are part of the education system.

On the other side, using t-test with ANOVA, the two coefficients of significance are pointed out and according to them there is a significant difference only in Macedonia ( $0.014 < 0.05$ ) significant for the second limit of possibility by 0.05 or in

order words 95% of the sample shows statistical difference of the level of intercultural awareness particularly in Macedonia i.e. the group aged 60 and above and after this group follows behind the group aged 30-39 etc. In Bulgaria, the situation is different because of the different coefficient of significance which is ( $0.567 > 0.05$ ), and this means that there is a big difference between the teachers in the two countries when speaking about the level of intercultural awareness in this research. There is a proof for the statistical difference in terms of age i.e. it means that the first age category 20-29 there is no statistical difference whereas in the second category 30-39 there is statistical difference if compared to the fourth category where as the 50-59 category has a statistical difference of 0.006. The most important statistical differences are shown in the graph 3 below:



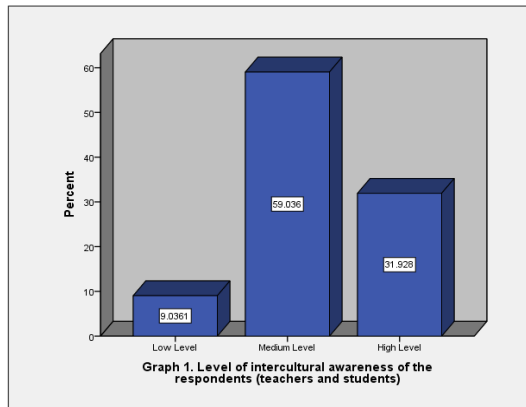
Graph 3. Level of intercultural awareness of teachers according to age

## 5. All Respondents

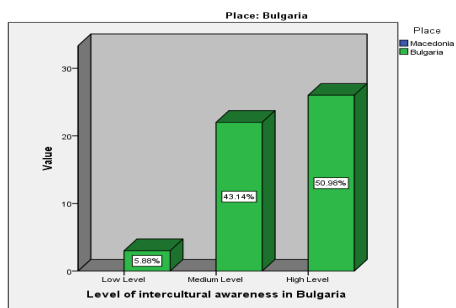
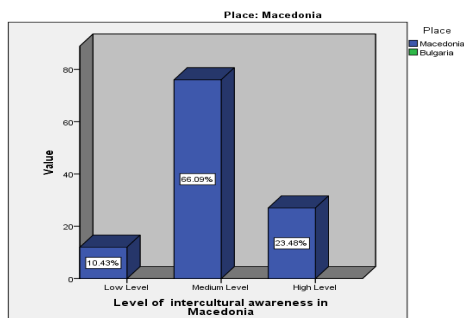
After the summarized and analyzed data, the total number of responds from the participants of this research (students and teachers), the survey shows and points out the level of intercultural communication awareness in general and according to the statistical parameters the intercultural awareness level will be divided into three needed levels thus general frequencies occur speaking about the intercultural awareness of the participants. So, the research points out that 59% (98) participants show medium level of intercultural awareness, 31.9% (53) participants show high level of intercultural awareness, and 9% (15) participants show low level of



intercultural awareness in the two countries. These frequencies are shown graphically in the graph 1 below:



If the two countries are compared in terms of intercultural awareness, the differences can be seen:



If the t-test is used to provide the significance of these differences (speaking about the total number of teachers and students) than it can be underlined that there is statistical difference ( $0.001 < 0.01$ ) of the intercultural awareness level of the two countries as shown in table 3 and 4 below:

**Table 3.** Difference between mean by country

	Place	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Points Total All	Macedonia	115	34.23	3.707	.346
	Bulgaria	51	36.43	3.838	.537

**Table 4.** Significance for mean difference - Independent Samples Test

	t-test for Equality of Means						
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
Points Total All	-3.484	164	.001	-2.197	.630	-3.441	-.952
	-3.438	92.955	.001	-2.197	.639	-3.466	-.928

Speaking in general, the intercultural level is higher in Republic of Bulgaria if compared with Republic of Macedonia in this research in which teachers and students participated and the results show that the participants from Ruse - R. Bulgaria show a higher intercultural awareness in this research. The results can be confirmed by the data mentioned before considering the curricula and the number of lessons in English language per week which is much bigger than in Macedonia. Macedonian students have 3 lessons per week whereas students in Bulgaria have 8 to 11 lessons per week and the number varies in accordance to the branch of high-school but still the number is much bigger then what we have in Macedonia. In the recent reforms in the curricula for construction technician in the state vocational schools in R.Macedonia, the number of lessons in English was cut to 2 lessons per week. Another change which was made was that students were not allowed to use the students' books as the rest of the branches of high-school but the teacher had to develop their own teaching materials starting with the English alphabet. This does not correspond to the level of studying English language considering the age and what had the student learned up to that point because learning English language for specific purposes requires upper-intermediate level in order to be able to follow the curricula. To sum up, I would add that our educational system in English as a foreign language must undergo reforms but they should be in accordance to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and mainly towards the needs of the students in order to be more competitive within the workforce.

## 6. Conclusion

Intercultural communication is becoming essential part of the education system nowadays because of globalization, immigration and the multicultural work environments. The need for training, knowledge and research in this field is increasing because of the recent trends in education. The prime aim of this dissertation is to increase teacher's awareness in terms of intercultural communication in order to achieve better results in teaching English as a foreign language. Another purpose of this research would be to prove that students from different backgrounds can achieve very good results in English as a foreign language if they are appreciated, not discriminated or stereotyped.

The hypothesis and aims were proved through questionnaires with students and teachers, involved in the education system of students from different ethnic backgrounds. My prediction that teachers need support and professional development related to intercultural communication is confirmed with this research. The fact that the teachers from Bulgaria show higher intercultural awareness compared to the teachers in Macedonia confirms this premise. The fact that R. Bulgaria is part of the European Union gives more opportunities to teachers to be part of European projects such as Erasmus+. These projects are also available in Republic of Macedonia, but still the institutions in the surrounding of Strumica have not participated a lot. The reason for that is the lack of information and knowledge considering the application process of these projects. A very interesting study by Young and Sachdev (2011) investigated the intercultural communicative competence views of language teachers from the US, UK, and France in terms of [Byram's 1997] ICC [intercultural communicative competence] model" (p. 86). It was identified that there is a connection between intercultural communicative competence and the attributes of both successful language learners and language teachers. More precisely, they found a discrepancy between instructors' who expressed intercultural communicative competence beliefs and attitudes and their classroom priorities. Finally it was still obvious that they are somehow ill equipped or somewhat unwilling to implement an intercultural approach in their own classrooms. They cited a lack of learner interest, curricular support, suitable textbook material, intercultural communicative competence testing materials, and confidence in addressing difficult topics which applies for the situation in the Republic of Macedonia and the city of Strumica.

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