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Development of Sociocultural Competence of an English Language Teacher in The Context of The Modern Foreign Language Educational Environment

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Abstract: The article examines the development of sociocultural competence of an English language teacher as an essential component of professional competence in the contemporary foreign language educational environment. The relevance of the study is determined by the changing role of English as a means not only of linguistic communication but also of intercultural interaction. The article argues that professional competence of an English language teacher cannot be reduced to language proficiency and teaching methodology, since the teacher acts as a mediator between different cultural norms, values and communicative patterns. Based on the analysis of contemporary approaches, the concept of sociocultural competence of an English language teacher is clarified. An original structural model is proposed, comprising motivational-value, cognitive-interpretive, communicative-mediational, methodological-design and reflective-evaluative components. The pedagogical conditions for developing this competence are identified, including contextualization of sociocultural content, comparative analysis of cultures, organization of intercultural interaction, cultural mediation and professional reflection. Criteria and indicators for assessing the level of sociocultural competence are proposed. The scientific novelty lies in conceptualizing sociocultural competence not as a set of country-specific facts but as an integrative professional ability to interpret cultural meanings, mediate intercultural interaction and transform sociocultural content into a pedagogical resource.

Keywords: Sociocultural Competence, English Language Teacher, Intercultural Communication, Professional Competence, Cultural Mediation

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1. Introduction

Modern foreign language education is developing amid the rapid expansion of international contacts, the digitalization of communication, and the increasing mobility of learners and teachers. English is now used across a wide range of social and professional contexts, including interactions among people from different cultural and linguistic communities. Consequently, the traditional understanding of the aims of foreign language teaching, which has focused primarily on developing language skills, is gradually being expanded to include the development of individuals' ability to engage in effective intercultural interaction.

Changes in the nature of foreign-language communication directly affect the professional work of English language teachers. Teachers must not only have command of the language and modern teaching methods but also understand the social and cultural

factors that shape learners' communicative behaviour. In addition, teachers organize educational interactions among members of different cultural and social groups, which requires a well-developed ability to interpret cultural meanings and prevent communication breakdowns.

In this context, the development of English language teachers' sociocultural competence becomes particularly important.

It should be noted that the concept of sociocultural competence is not entirely synonymous with "country-specific knowledge," "sociocultural competence" in its narrower sense, or "intercultural communicative competence." While country studies primarily aim to provide information about the country whose language is being learned, the contemporary understanding of sociocultural competence involves the ability to use cultural knowledge in a particular communicative situation.

In his framework of intercultural communicative competence, M. Byram associates successful interaction not only with knowledge of cultural facts but also with the ability to interpret cultural phenomena, establish connections between cultures, acquire new cultural knowledge through interaction, and critically reflect on one's own cultural assumptions [1].

Darla K. Deardorff likewise views intercultural competence as a combination of interrelated attitudes, knowledge, skills, and outcomes of interaction [2]. This approach suggests that competence develops through activity and is manifested primarily in a person's ability to act appropriately in specific situations of cultural interaction.

Thus, a contemporary English language teacher should serve not only as a language instructor but also as a cultural mediator who can foster mutual understanding among different participants in the educational process.

State of Research

The relationship between language and culture has a long history of study in pedagogy, language teaching methodology, and intercultural communication theory.

In international scholarship, M. Byram's framework occupies an important place. According to this framework, intercultural competence comprises interconnected knowledge, skills of interpretation and relating, the ability to interact, and critical cultural awareness [1].

Darla K. Deardorff developed a process-oriented model of intercultural competence in which respect for other cultural perspectives, openness, curiosity, knowledge, analytical skills, and the ability to adapt one's behaviour play important roles [2].

F. Dervin emphasizes the need to approach simplified representations of cultures critically and highlights the dynamic nature of identity and intercultural interaction [4].

A. Holliday develops the concept of "small cultures," which makes it possible to understand culture not only as a characteristic of large national communities but also as a set of social practices that emerge within different groups [5].

Documents issued by the Council of Europe also approach contemporary language competence through the perspectives of plurilingual and pluricultural education, mediation, and online interaction [3].

National and regional pedagogical scholarship has examined the development of sociocultural competence among prospective English language teachers, the criteria for assessing its development, and opportunities to incorporate cultural content into teacher education [6].

However, an analysis of the literature indicates that the development of sociocultural competence specifically as a professional and pedagogical ability—enabling teachers to transform sociocultural content into a means of organizing intercultural learning—requires further theoretical investigation [7]-[10].

2. Materials and Method

The aim of this study is to provide a theoretical rationale for the content and structure of English language teachers' sociocultural competence and to develop a model for fostering it in the contemporary foreign-language learning environment [11]-[14].

To achieve this aim, the following objectives were established:

1. To clarify the meaning of the concept "sociocultural competence of the English language teacher";
2. To identify the structural components of this competence;
3. To determine the main pedagogical conditions for its development;
4. To develop a structural-functional model;
5. To identify criteria and indicators for assessing the level of competence development.

The methodological foundation of the study consists of the competence-based, communicative-activity, cultural, learner-centred, and intercultural approaches.

The methods used included the analysis and synthesis of scholarly literature, comparative analysis, pedagogical modelling, the analysis of pedagogical situations, and reflective analysis of professional practice.

3. Results and Discussion

Theoretical Content of English Language Teachers' Sociocultural Competence

Based on an analysis of scholarly approaches, we propose the following definition of the sociocultural competence of an English language teacher:

The sociocultural competence of an English language teacher is an integrated professional and personal capacity to understand and interpret the socially and culturally determined meanings of communicative behaviour, take account of the cultural diversity of participants in the educational process, mediate intercultural interaction, and design pedagogical situations that promote productive and reflective interaction among learners.

This definition substantially broadens the traditional understanding of sociocultural competence.

A teacher who knows a great deal about the United Kingdom, the United States, or other English-speaking countries does not necessarily have a high level of professional sociocultural competence.

The professionally significant progression is:

From knowledge → to understanding → to interpretation → to interaction → to mediation → to pedagogical application → to reflection.

In our view, this progression forms the basis for developing teachers' competence.

For example, knowing how expressions of politeness are used is a cognitive element. Professional competence, however, is demonstrated by a teacher's ability to explain the social context in which these expressions are used, compare them with the communicative norms of the learners' own culture, create a simulated communication scenario, and organize subsequent reflection.

Based on the analysis, we have identified five components of English language teachers' sociocultural competence.

Table 1. Structural Components of Sociocultural Competence

Component	Content	Indicators
Motivational and value-based	Attitudes towards cultural diversity	Openness, respect, tolerance, willingness to engage in dialogue
Cognitive and interpretive	Knowledge of social norms, values, and cultural contexts	Knowledge of cultural realities, contextual understanding, comparative analysis

Communicative and mediational	Ability to foster mutual understanding among people from different cultures	Interpretation, explanation, message adaptation, prevention of misunderstandings
Methodological and design-oriented	Ability to use sociocultural content in teaching	Task development, material selection, scenario design
Reflective and evaluative	Reflection on one's own professional behaviour	Self-assessment, error analysis, adjustment of teaching practices

The identified components are interdependent. Insufficient development of any one component may limit the effectiveness of the system as a whole.

For example, a teacher may possess extensive cultural knowledge, but without communicative and mediational skills and the ability to design learning activities, this knowledge will not necessarily help develop learners' intercultural competence.

To systematize the process of competence development, we propose a structural-functional model based on a gradual transition from recognizing a professional need to independently designing intercultural learning activities.

Table 2. Stages in the Development of Sociocultural Competence

Stage	Main objective	Methods	Expected outcome
Diagnostic and motivational	Determine the initial level	Diagnostics, self-assessment, questionnaires	Recognition of the need for further development
Cognitive and analytical	Systematize knowledge	Lectures, text analysis, discussion	Expanded sociocultural knowledge
Interpretive and communicative	Develop the ability to interpret	Case studies, role-play, critical incidents	Ability to explain cultural differences
Professional design-oriented	Transfer competence to teaching practice	Lesson and task design	Independent development of sociocultural tasks
Reflective and corrective	Analyse results	Portfolio, self-assessment, expert evaluation	Professional self-correction

A key feature of the proposed model is its cyclical nature.

After completing the reflective and corrective stage, a teacher can return to the diagnostic stage, identify new professional challenges, and determine the next steps in their development.

The first pedagogical condition is the contextualization of sociocultural material.

Cultural information should not be presented as an isolated collection of facts; instead, it should be embedded in an actual or simulated communicative activity.

For example, rather than assigning the task "Read the information about British traditions," it would be more appropriate to present the following scenario:

You are an Uzbek student participating in an international exchange programme. Your British partner invites you to a family celebration. What cultural aspects should you consider when communicating with your host family?

This type of task requires not only factual knowledge but also its practical application.

The second condition is the comparative analysis of cultures.

Comparison should not be based on the question of "which culture is better" but rather on the following questions:

What is similar? – What is different? – Why? – How can the difference affect communication?

This approach reduces the risk of developing stereotypical perceptions.

The third condition is the development of cultural mediation.

Teachers should be able to explain culturally determined meanings that may be unfamiliar to members of another culture. This is particularly important when working with authentic texts, films, online communication, and contemporary media resources.

The fourth condition is the reflective organization of professional practice.

After an intercultural task, teachers should analyse not only learners' language errors but also the ways in which learners interpret culture.

Methods for Developing Sociocultural Competence

The most productive methods appear to be those that actively engage prospective or practising teachers.

Case study makes it possible to analyse situations involving intercultural misunderstanding.

Role-play creates opportunities to apply sociocultural knowledge in practice. For example, participants may be assigned the roles of a teacher from Uzbekistan, a British teacher, an American student, and an international coordinator. Their task is to work together to develop an international educational project.

The critical incident method helps participants analyse ambiguous communication situations and avoid simplistic, stereotypical explanations.

The project method involves teachers independently designing a lesson that incorporates a cultural issue, a communicative situation, and a reflective task.

Criteria and Levels of Competence Development

For diagnostic purposes, we propose distinguishing three levels: low, intermediate, and high.

Table 3. Assessment Criteria

Criterion	Low level	Intermediate level	High level
Value-based	Limited openness	Positive attitude	Consistent willingness to engage in dialogue
Cognitive	Fragmentary knowledge	Systematized knowledge	Deep contextual understanding
Interpretive	Stereotypical explanations	Partially substantiated explanations	Multi-perspective interpretation
Communicative	Difficulty interacting	Use of selected strategies	Flexible management of communication
Mediational	Information transfer	Partial adaptation	Effective cultural mediation
Methodological	Use of ready-made materials	Adaptation of materials	Independent instructional design

Reflective	No systematic analysis	Partial reflection	Systematic self-assessment and adjustment

The key indicator of a high level is not the amount of cultural information acquired, but the teacher's ability to analyse a culturally determined situation independently and select an appropriate pedagogical course of action.

Scientific Novelty of the Study

The scientific novelty of the study is reflected in several findings.

First, the concept of "sociocultural competence of the English language teacher" is clarified as an integrated professional and personal capacity.

Second, a five-component structure of competence is developed, combining motivational and value-based, cognitive and interpretive, communicative and mediational, methodological and design-oriented, and reflective and evaluative components.

Third, an original cyclical model for competence development is proposed. It enables a transition from diagnosis and knowledge acquisition to interpretation, mediation, pedagogical design, and professional reflection.

Fourth, the principle of pedagogical transformation of sociocultural knowledge is substantiated. This principle involves turning cultural information into a means of organizing learning activities and promoting intercultural interaction.

Fifth, cultural mediation is considered an independent and professionally significant component of an English language teacher's work.

Practical Significance

The proposed model may be applied in the professional preparation of prospective English language teachers, continuing professional development programmes, courses such as "Intercultural Communication," "English Language Teaching Methodology," and "Sociocultural Foundations of Foreign Language Education," as well as in teaching practice.

The proposed criteria can be used for initial and final assessments, while the suggested methods can support the organization of practical classes.

The integration of sociocultural tasks into teaching practicum is particularly promising because real educational settings allow student teachers to test their ability to apply cultural knowledge in specific communicative situations [15].

4. Conclusion

The study indicates that sociocultural competence is an essential component of the professional competence of contemporary English language teachers.

Its development is driven by changes in foreign language education, where English functions as a means of interaction among people with different cultural and social experiences. Under these conditions, teachers perform not only linguistic and methodological functions but also a mediational one.

This article defines sociocultural competence as an integrated professional and personal capacity that enables teachers to interpret socially and culturally determined meanings, take account of the cultural diversity of communication participants, mediate intercultural interaction, and design pedagogical situations.

The proposed model includes five components and five interrelated stages of development. Its distinguishing feature is its cyclical nature, which supports the ongoing improvement of professional competence through reflection and the adjustment of teaching practice.

Further research should experimentally test the effectiveness of the proposed model, develop diagnostic instruments, and quantitatively assess changes in the sociocultural competence of prospective and practising English language teachers.

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