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## DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS: IMPLEMENTING A PROJECT IN A MULTI-LINGUAL/ CULTURAL PRIMARY EDUCATION SETTING

The contemporary language speaker should adopt the role of an intercultural mediator who tries to resolve conflicts or misunderstandings arising during interaction among people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In this paper, an attempt is made to implement a framework to enhance intercultural communication skills and strategies through the utilization of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the multicultural setting of a primary school classroom. Focus was placed on both multi-lingual/cultural skills, while opportunities were created for modeling and practicing strategies in a multilingual/cultural context. A number of communicative, game-based and creative activities realized in a digital environment were designed and implemented with the purpose to generate collaboration and communication in Greek as a second language and enhance students' intercultural competence. Considering parental involvement as an important factor for successful language education, an effort was made to involve parents in school activities and meetings. The results of the current study offer insights toward fostering intercultural communication competence through ICTs in the context of foreign/ second language learning.

**Keywords:** intercultural communication, Greek as a second language, digital tools, game-based activities, parental involvement

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

During the last decade European societies have become multicultural and, hence, plurilingual making the need for the development of both language and intercultural communication competence more evident than ever. What is more, in today's societies inequalities stemming from socio-economic and political problems lead to misunderstandings among people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Consequently, the modern educational environment obtains a multilingual and multicultural character, making the need to develop intercultural skills and mutual understanding urgent, in order for today's students and tomorrow's citizens to be able to collaborate in culturally diverse societies.

The Council of Europe has shown its concern for the promotion of intercultural dialogue since the 1970s, adopting a policy for the promotion of intercultural communication, while the implementation of curricula for plurilingual and intercultural education followed in late 1990s. The Council actually adopts a "transversal" approach which seems to influence all component parts and contribute to intercultural dialogue in various forms, such as long-term action programmes, i.e. Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (<https://www.coe.int/en/web/edc>), individual activities or programmes of activities organized for the promotion of intercultural dialogue by the European Centre of Modern Languages of the Council of Europe (<https://www.ecml.at/>) or other initiatives, such as high-visibility conferences or forums for the exchange of information and the enhancement of intercultural dialogue within European societies or between European countries and their neighboring ones. Regarding the Council's language policy, intercultural education is not a new or 'another' methodology adopted in language learning contexts but it covers the teaching of all languages-minority, foreign or schooling languages, according to students' educational and language needs. Intercultural competence is also one of the eight core skills in lifelong learning proposed by the European Commission (2018).

### 1.1. Building intercultural competence in the language classroom

Byram (1997: 34) defines intercultural competence 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; and relativizing one's self". At greater length, Byram (1997) underlines that competence is a mixture of communicative and intercultural competence, placing emphasis on a set of skills, knowledge and attitudes. The model proposed is five-dimensional, including: a) knowledge, b) interpreting/ relating skills, c) discovery/ interaction skills, d) attitudes, and e) critical awareness.

Hammer, Bennett and Wiseman (2003) also suggest a definition of intercultural competence, as to effectively interact with people from other

cultures, targeting at one's interest, sensitivity to perceive cultural differences and the ability to adapt to new situations and respect other people's worldviews. In the context of the language learning classroom, intercultural practice "asks students to think and act appropriately within a growing knowledge of the culture within language" (Moloney & Harbon 2010: 281). Researchers observe that individuals' language repertoires can serve as an essential resource for language acquisition (García & Li Wei 2015), while relating to the cultures associated with these languages allows for an intercultural focus in language education. Developing intercultural understanding entails the understanding of our own culture, as well as that of other cultures, also putting the perception of the convergences and divergences between these cultures at the core (Rader 2018). In this light, the possibility of dynamic interaction between cultures and languages is a priority regarding the modern language education context (Barnet & Lee 2003).

Intercultural communicative competence is therefore considered an integral part of our contemporary lives and a prerequisite for language learning, concerning both teachers and learners. It is also worth mentioning that although the integration of culture into second/ foreign language learning is well-acknowledged in the post-secondary level (e.g. Liu 2017; Tran & Duong 2018), prior research is rather limited with learners at the primary or secondary grades of education. As a result, the importance and originality of conducting the present study is highlighted.

### **1.2. Fostering intercultural communication skills through ICT tools**

The rapid and continuing advances in ICTs establish new ways regarding finding, processing and sharing information. The need for educational contexts to prepare students to be highly skilled and ready to communicate effectively in a digital world is recognized by all stakeholders. In that vein, preparing students for our future society means creating the specific conditions for allowing them to think and face challenges, being able of critical understanding (Caena 2017). The 21st Century Skills cover a range of areas (Lee 2012) with creativity, critical thinking, communication, collaboration and cross-cultural functioning being listed among the key skills for tomorrow's active citizens.

Multimodal tools used in language learning seem to stimulate students' attention and enhance their motivation, while technology based instruction methods are observed to apply to young learners, facilitating the successful accomplishment of tasks. Effective technology use in the language classroom also seems to support intercultural communication through gamification of learning, game-based and collaborative activities in a digital environment. Researchers observe that educational technology can support both teachers and learners as they seek to understand language through culture and culture through language.

In more detail, it is stated that moving from traditional representations of culture in the classroom to the concept of intercultural communication competence is favored through ICTs, as ample opportunities for gaining intercultural experiences can be provided (Ferreira, Bezanilla & Elexpuru 2018).

In that context, multiliteracy pedagogy implementation becomes essential in contemporary language learning contexts. Students are provided with opportunities to identify, interpret, create, and communicate meaning across a variety of visual and oral forms of communication. In that learning context, attention is paid on developing an awareness of the social, economic and wider cultural factors that frame communication, in order to explore challenges and opportunities of intercultural understanding and communication. During instruction, learners are encouraged to employ intercultural communication strategies, in order to monitor communication, to interact in a multicultural context, to engage in nonverbal communication, to deal with intercultural misunderstanding and, on the whole, to adapt their behavior across cultures to achieve communicative goals (Berardo & Deardorff 2012), to collaborate and negotiate with others who are different to oneself in order to forge a common interest with a broader community of peers (Cope & Kalantzis 2015).

## **2. DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS THROUGH LANGUAGE EDUCATION**

### **2.1. Research setting**

The current research project was realized in a primary school setting with 47 students (27 girls, 20 boys) attending the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade, in the region of Western Macedonia-Greece. The project lasted for 7 weeks and activities were implemented during language learning classes. Some of the students (N=26) were of Greek origin, native speakers of Greek, while the rest of them (N=21) had an immigrant background being of Albanian, Bulgarian or Russian origin, all of them learning Greek as a second language. The primary aim of the study was to explore the feasibility of a project where a number of technology-enhanced, game-based and creative activities were employed to enhance young children's motivation in intercultural communication. Therefore, a five-stage framework was adopted for the development of intercultural communication. The focal point of the research project was digital tools utilization to enable multilingual expression and the development of specific skills and strategies.

### **2.2. Procedure**

On the basis of Byram's model for effective intercultural communication development (1997) a number of activities were implemented to enhance students' a) knowledge, b) skills, and c) attitudes. More specifically:

- a) Knowledge: Focus was placed on engaging primary school students in activities that could expand their knowledge of their own culture as well as knowledge of other cultures. Understanding cultural norms, values, beliefs, and customs of different groups, as well as developing an awareness of cultural differences in communication styles, behavior, and social norms were perceived as the core elements of the learning context.
- b) Skills: The skills component was pursued by engaging primary school students in a range of communication skills that enable individuals to effectively communicate across cultures in a digital learning environment. Verbal and nonverbal communication in the multicultural classroom, listening, as well as interpreting and responding to cultural cues encouraged students to build relationships with their peers from other cultural contexts, to resolve conflicts through decision making and the sharing of digital narratives.
- c) Attitudes: Regarding the attitudes component, primary school students were involved in interactions and activities that could facilitate gaining an open-minded attitude towards other cultures, being willing to learn from others and showing respect for cultural differences. Empathy, as the ability to understand and feel what others are experiencing, was developed through discussions and digital storytelling.

The abovementioned components were developed by adopting the following five stages, suggested by Griva and Kofou (2020) in order to build up students' intercultural skills and strategies:

#### *Preparation*

Emphasis was placed on warm up activities to elicit students' prior knowledge and make them value their own prior linguistic and cultural experiences. Young students were encouraged to take interviews from their family members, in order to search for and share information and experiences related to historical or cultural events. The ability of multilingual students to move between languages was encouraged by adopting translanguaging pedagogy at that stage (Creese & Blackledge 2015). The treating of language as a series of performances within cultural and social contexts was promoted, in which elements from multiple and complex, yet single linguistic repertoires were utilized (García & Li Wei 2015; Vogel & García 2017). Digital tools (see Table 1) facilitated vocabulary acquisition and nonverbal expression, by allowing students to create representations of culture concepts for their peers to recognize on a multiplayer drawing and guessing pictorial game.

### *Presentation*

A number of intercultural communication strategies were selected and modeled by the teacher, while young students were supported to develop a set of skills and abilities required to effectively address, manage and resolve or even interpret conflicts within a culturally-diverse context. More specifically, students from diverse cultural backgrounds were asked to analyse aspects of conflicts by engaging in discussions and exchange of ideas through online polls, word clouds and quizzes (see Table 1), cooperating to identify cross-cultural understandings and making better decisions together in a digital environment. Such a process seems to enhance literacy and language acquisition among linguistically diverse students (Snowman & Biehler 2003).

### *Coordinated training*

Students were asked to experiment with a range of strategies in a multimodal environment by using scenarios and interactive activities, based on the real stories they have shared in class during the preparation stage. They took part in a number of game-based activities (board games, role plays and motion games) in order to empathize with their peers and their experiences and be able to expand on them during the next stage. Digital tools (see Table 1) enabled students to collaborate in a digital environment, being able to interact and exchange ideas expressed or represented on a visual platform using digital post-it notes.

### *Expanding newly acquired skills and strategies*

Students were asked to extend their understanding of strategy use to other tasks and contexts. By being engaged into a digital interactive context, children were enabled to acquire knowledge of 'self' and 'other', as well as knowledge of everyday life in different cultural contexts, with the ultimate aim of being able to fully function in an intercultural situation (Kramsch 1993: 233–259). Composing digital narratives provided them with a number of opportunities to develop various competencies, such as comparing and contrasting cultures and experiences and adopting a critical, yet respectful attitude towards concepts of diversity. In addition, empathy was augmented both in light of the ability 'to put yourself in the mind of the other' (Mercer 2016: 100), and of the ability 'to view one's own culture from the viewpoint of outsiders' (McAlinden 2014: 72) by involving students in digital storytelling learning process, facilitating them in the development of their communication skills and contributing to the development of their intercultural competence.

### *Evaluation*

This stage was accomplished by a) following alternative assessment methods, such as a researcher's journal or pre- and post-rubrics/ checklists for

intercultural communication skills/ strategies, and b) engaging students in self-and/ or peer-assessment methods. In order for both the researcher and the students to be able to evaluate their intercultural communication strategies the intercultural portfolio served as a tool encouraging participants to reflect upon their knowledge, their skills and attitudes and their familiarization with diverse cultures or a target-culture (Griva & Kofou 2020).

Students' participation in activities was organized in four thematic units, as follows (Table 1):

Thematic Unit	Intercultural skills & strategies	Digital tools
Our diverse backgrounds	Comparing and contrasting Accepting the different	Spinning Wheel <a href="https://www.randomspinwheel.com/">https://www.randomspinwheel.com/</a> Skribbl.io <a href="https://skribbl.io/">https://skribbl.io/</a>
'Playing' with diversity	Intercultural mediation Managing intercultural communication Dealing with intercultural misunderstanding and conflict	Miro <a href="https://www.miro.com/">https://www.miro.com/</a> Mentimeter <a href="https://www.mentimeter.com/">https://www.mentimeter.com/</a>
Creating digital identities	Encourage a shared communication culture Use prior knowledge in cross-cultural communication	Plotagon <a href="https://www.plotagon.com/">https://www.plotagon.com/</a>
Sharing and reflecting upon intercultural experiences	Understand cultural norms and rules through non-verbal communication Encourage a shared communication culture Mediate a shared communication culture Demonstrate sensitivity to different viewpoints	Padlet <a href="https://el.padlet.com/">https://el.padlet.com/</a>

**Table 1.** The thematic units, the intercultural skills and strategies developed and the digital tools utilized in the research project

Parental involvement was also of utmost importance in the present research project. Home literacy environment has been recorded as one of the most significant predictors regarding early literacy skills (Niklas, Tayler & Schneider 2015). Therefore, its importance in the development of children’s literacy was acknowledged in the current study. Parental involvement in school activities and meetings, enabled parents to spend quality time with their children, doing home activities and utilizing the digital tools to support their children’s learning. The involvement of parents in the program was operationalized through a) parents’ attendance to and participation into classroom events, b) time spent using the educational material at home to enhance students’ language literacy and their intercultural skills and strategies. All in all, emphasis was placed on strengthening bounds between school and parents for improving students’ intercultural competence.

**2.3. Findings**

The following tables (Table 1 and Table 2) present the results obtained from the thematic analysis of the open-ended questions that the teacher of the class was asked to respond to, by means of an interview after the completion of the project. It is noted that thematic analysis consists of the systematic identification, organization and understanding of recurring patterns of meaning within a data set (Braun & Clarke 2012, p. 57), in order to further explore expression of meaning and experiences.

THEMATIC AXIS	CATEGORIES
1. Teaching materials	i. Experiential learning activities ii. Utilization of elements of linguistic and cultural diversity iii. Interdisciplinary approach
2. Teaching objectives	iv. acquisition of knowledge v. acquisition of skills vi. strategies development vii. attitudes development

**Table 1.** Thematic analysis regarding teaching materials utilized and teaching objectives achieved



THEMATIC AXIS	CATEGORIES
1.Implementation of game-based activities	i. interest inspiring content ii. meaning making processes iii. paralinguistic/ extralinguistic communication iv. oral skills development v. intercultural skills and strategies development
2.Utilization of digital tools	vi. critical thinking skills development vii. collaboration in a digital environment viii. creation and sharing of digital material ix. meaning-making processes in a digital environment

**Table 2.** Thematic analysis regarding the implementation of game-based and digital activities

The findings of the study align with that of previous research, documenting that it is not technological devices and applications alone but also the interrelationship and interaction with multimodal semiotic resources that may affect the learning environment and have an impact on classroom communication (Jewitt, 2006). As observed in previous studies (Korosidou & Bratitsis, 2021), the digital storytelling approach with young learners enables the expression of thoughts and ideas, as well as their collaboration in order to achieve a common purpose. In this current study collaborative communication activities in a game-based and digital environment also seem to support the development of young learners' critical thinking and creativity in a multilingual and multicultural setting, as well as their language skills.

### 3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this current study an attempt was made to create a framework for effective intercultural skills and strategies development with primary school students, in the context of a multi-lingual/ cultural and digital learning environment. Certain stages were practiced enabling students to a) identify and use a variety of strategies to interact with their peers from other cultures, b) fulfill the role of 'a mediator' between their own and another culture, and c) interpret events from another culture, and relate them to events from their own culture. The design and implementation of the study focused on advancing practices and methodologies

by embedding technological tools for making a difference for intercultural learning experiences. It was observed that educational technology tools, when properly integrated in the teaching process, amplify learners' interest and their collaboration during discussions. Learners' exposure to multimodal material creates a learning environment that significantly influences vocabulary learning and can trigger intercultural communication. Digital tools positively affect dialogue and participation in creative activities, enabling learners to exchange ideas both verbally and nonverbally and negotiate meanings (see also Korosidou & Bratitsis 2020, 2019). Moreover, the observations of the current study are in accordance with existing literature regarding parental involvement being associated with significant benefits for children's reading and writing ability (Sénéchal & Young 2008) in a multi-lingual/ cultural context, their oral skills' development (Korosidou, Griva & Pavlenko 2021) and their ability to understand the different, to interpret events from other cultures and deal effectively with situations of intercultural misunderstanding. Through the instructional approaches followed, students had the opportunity to think critically, to accept their responsibility for being active in understanding themselves and the world around them, to generate a dynamic synthesis of the intercultural experiences shared and gain a true understanding of them.

However, this pilot study was conducted in a specific primary school context in Greece. Aiming at making this framework more applicable to similar settings with primary school students, the following suggestions are made for future research: a) the framework should be applied at various proficiency levels in different contexts, with students with different first languages and cultural backgrounds, b) more opportunities for meaningful cross-cultural interaction in a digital environment should be created and c) the research project should be realized on a larger scale for a lengthened period of time.

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## ΑΝΑΠΤΥΣΣΟΝΤΑΣ ΔΕΞΙΟΤΗΤΕΣ ΚΑΙ ΣΤΡΑΤΗΓΙΚΕΣ ΔΙΑΠΟΛΙΤΙΣΜΙΚΗΣ ΕΠΙΚΟΙΝΩΝΙΑΣ ΣΕ ΕΝΑ ΠΟΛΥΓΛΩΣΣΙΚΟ ΚΑΙ ΠΟΛΥΠΟΛΙΤΙΣΜΙΚΟ ΠΛΑΙΣΙΟ

### Περίληψη

Στο σύγχρονο εκπαιδευτικό περιβάλλον, η γλωσσική και πολιτισμική ετερότητα επιτάσσει την ανάπτυξη δεξιοτήτων ευαισθητοποίησης, όχι μόνο αναφορικά με τον «κυρίαρχο» πολιτισμό, αλλά και με τους «άλλους» πολιτισμούς (García & Li Wei, 2015). Ο ομιλητής της γλώσσας υιοθετεί το ρόλο ενός «διαπολιτισμικού διαμεσολαβητή», ο οποίος προσπαθεί να επιλύσει συγκρούσεις ή παρεξηγήσεις που προκύπτουν κατά τη διάρκεια της αλληλεπίδρασης μεταξύ ανθρώπων από διαφορετικά γλωσσικά και πολιτισμικά υπόβαθρα. Στην παρούσα εργασία, επιχειρείται η περιγραφή της εφαρμογής ενός πλαισίου για την ενίσχυση των δεξιοτήτων και στρατηγικών διαπολιτισμικής επικοινωνίας, μέσω της αξιοποίησης των Τεχνολογιών Πληροφορίας και Επικοινωνιών (ΤΠΕ) στο πολύπολιτισμικό περιβάλλον των Ε' και Στ' τάξεων ενός δημοτικού σχολείου. Η ενίσχυση της ικανότητας για διαπολιτισμική επικοινωνία επιχειρείται μέσα από τον σχεδιασμό και την υλοποίηση επικοινωνιακών, παιχνιδιών και δημιουργικών δραστηριοτήτων σε ψηφιακό περιβάλλον, ώστε να προσφέρονται ευκαιρίες για συνεργασία και επικοινωνία στην ελληνική ως δεύτερη γλώσσα. Επιχειρείται, επίσης, η συμμετοχή των γονέων στις σχολικές δραστηριότητες, καθώς και σε συναντήσεις, με απώτερο στόχο τη βελτίωση των δεξιοτήτων και στρατηγικών διαπολιτισμικής επικοινωνίας των μαθητών. Τα αποτελέσματα της παρούσας μελέτης ενισχύουν τα συμπεράσματα της σχετικής βιβλιογραφίας στο πεδίο της ανάπτυξης της ικανότητας διαπολιτισμικής επικοινωνίας μέσω των ΤΠΕ κατά τη διδασκαλία της δεύτερης/ ξένης γλώσσας.

**Λέξεις-κλειδιά:** διαπολιτισμική επικοινωνία, ελληνική ως δεύτερη γλώσσα, ψηφιακά εργαλεία, παιγνιώδεις μαθησιακό περιβάλλον, γονεϊκή εμπλοκή