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## **Bridging Cultures through Non-Native Language Learning and Teaching**

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In today's interconnected world, learning a non-native language is not just about memorizing grammar or expanding vocabulary. It is increasingly recognized as a way to connect cultures and build mutual understanding. Scholars in applied linguistics and intercultural studies argue that successful communication across languages requires intercultural communicative competence, i.e., an ability to recognize, interpret, and mediate between cultural perspectives [1; 4; 7]. The Council of Europe's updated Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Companion Volume (2020) underscores this by adding descriptors for mediation, plurilingual and pluricultural competence, and online interaction [3]. These updates

place culture at the heart of language education. The challenge and the opportunity for educators, then, is to design teaching practices that prepare learners to act not only as users of another language but also as mediators between cultures.

To do this effectively, we need to bring together established intercultural frameworks and the possibilities offered by new technologies. Byram's model (1997) identifies five key elements of intercultural competence, including attitudes of openness, knowledge of cultural practices, and the skills to interpret, relate, and interact [1]. Deardorff (2009) complements this with a process model, where internal outcomes like adaptability and empathy lead to external outcomes such as effective intercultural behavior [4]. Both models are useful because they move beyond language as structure and emphasize language as social action. The CEFR Companion Volume [3] translates these ideas into practical tools for curriculum design, offering performance descriptors that can guide teaching and assessment.

Besides, recent research shows that three technological approaches are especially promising for developing these competencies: virtual exchange (VE), extended reality (XR/VR), and artificial intelligence (AI), particularly conversational agents and large language models (LLMs). Each of these tools allows learners to experience intercultural communication in different ways, either through authentic dialogue with peers abroad, immersive simulations of cultural encounters, or adaptive role-play with AI-driven partners.

To be more precise, VE has become one of the most effective ways to integrate intercultural learning into language classrooms. It involves structured collaboration between classes in different countries, usually online, where students work together on shared projects. Research shows that VE helps learners reflect on their own cultural perspectives, compare them with others, and develop strategies for mediation [8]. For example, students may be asked to co-author responses to "critical incidents" where cultural expectations clash, or to interview each other about communicative norms. These kinds of activities not only strengthen linguistic skills but also directly

practice CEFR mediation descriptors, such as rephrasing for clarity or negotiating misunderstandings.

Next, XR and VR extend this further by placing learners in immersive, consequence-rich situations. A large-scale meta-analysis found strong positive effects of XR on language learning outcomes, especially when learners engaged in interactive role-play [2]. More recently, researchers have begun to design VR scenarios specifically around intercultural conflict mediation. In these simulations, learners find themselves in service encounters, workplace interactions, or community settings where cultural norms diverge and misunderstandings arise. Studies show that these tasks increase willingness to communicate and give learners a safe but realistic space to test strategies like hedging, reframing, or face-saving [9]. Such experiences would be difficult to replicate in a classroom, yet VR makes them accessible and repeatable.

The third tool, AI-driven conversational agents, has gained enormous attention in recent years. Systematic reviews indicate that chatbots and LLMs can enhance speaking practice, boost confidence, and encourage turn-taking in English as a foreign language [5; 10]. What makes them particularly interesting for intercultural learning is their flexibility: with the right prompts and safeguards, they can simulate culturally specific communicative styles or role-play institutional encounters. For example, an AI partner can take the role of a municipal clerk, a business manager, or a peer from another cultural background, allowing students to practice mediation strategies. At the same time, educators must be cautious. AI tools can reproduce stereotypes, generate inaccurate information, or raise privacy concerns. Scholars recommend strong guardrails, such as providing cultural briefs, requiring sources for cultural claims, and anonymizing learner data [6]. Used responsibly, AI can support learners before and after authentic exchanges, giving them rehearsal opportunities and immediate, if imperfect, feedback.

Taken together, these approaches point to a coherent pedagogy for bridging cultures through non-native language teaching. The first step is to define outcomes in

terms of intercultural mediation and pluricultural competence, using CEFR descriptors as benchmarks. The second step is to embed a VE module of several weeks, where learners collaborate with peers abroad to reflect on identity, compare communication norms, and co-author responses to intercultural challenges. The third step is to integrate at least one VR simulation that creates a “hot moment” of misunderstanding, requiring learners to mediate under time pressure. The final step is to use AI tools as a space for rehearsal and reflection, with clear ethical guardrails. This sequence ensures that students experience intercultural practice through authentic dialogue, immersive simulation, and adaptive rehearsal.

There are challenges to this approach. Access to VR hardware and high-speed internet remains uneven, which can limit participation, especially under developments in the Ukrainian territory and with the challenges students and teaching staff face. Then, teachers also need sustained professional development in intercultural pedagogy and in digital literacy. Evidence on the long-term impact of VR and AI on intercultural competence is still emerging, and there is a risk of over-reliance on technology. Ethical questions, particularly around bias, transparency, and privacy in AI, require ongoing attention. Yet the potential is significant. VE, VR, and AI provide multiple ways for learners to encounter and manage cultural difference, turning the classroom into a space where intercultural mediation is not just talked about but actively practiced.

In conclusion, teaching a non-native language today means teaching learners to bridge cultures. Intercultural mediation must be treated as a central learning goal rather than a byproduct of communication. By combining well-established frameworks with innovative technologies, educators can create meaningful opportunities for learners to develop these skills. VE brings authentic intercultural encounters into the classroom, VR provides immersive and consequential practice, and AI offers adaptive rehearsal and reflection. When guided by clear outcomes and ethical standards, these tools prepare learners not only to speak another language but also to live and work effectively in a multicultural world.

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## **Intercultural Communication Strategies in Language Training of International Students at Higher Education Institutions**

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In the context of globalization, higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly focused on integrating international students into their academic environments. Language training has evolved beyond mere linguistic proficiency to encompass cultural and communicative competence. Intercultural communication is