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THE ROLE OF COUNTRY STUDIES IN DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE AMONG EFL STUDENTS

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Abstract: The present article examines the role of country studies in the development of intercultural competence among students majoring in foreign languages, and in the context of contemporary globalization particular attention is paid to the integration of cultural, historical and socio-political content into the process of foreign language teaching, since the ability to interpret cultural differences and to engage in effective intercultural communication is considered one of the key outcomes of modern language education, while the analysis of teaching practice conducted during the spring semester of 2026 demonstrates that the systematic inclusion of country studies contributes to the development of analytical thinking, cultural awareness and communicative competence, even in groups with different levels of language proficiency.

Keywords: country studies, intercultural competence, foreign language education, cultural awareness, communicative competence, teaching methodology

Annotatsiya: Mazkur maqolada xorijiy tillar yo'nalishida tahsil olayotgan talabalarda madaniyatlararo kompetensiyani rivojlantirishda mamlakatshunoslik fanining o'rni tahlil qilinadi, bunda zamonaviy globallashtirish sharoitida madaniy, tarixiy va ijtimoiy-siyosiy mazmundagi bilimlarni chet tilini o'qitish jarayoniga integratsiya qilish muhim ahamiyat kasb etishi asoslab beriladi, chunki madaniy tafovutlarni anglash va samarali madaniyatlararo muloqotni amalga oshirish zamonaviy til ta'limining asosiy natijalaridan biri hisoblanadi, shuningdek, 2026-yil bahorgi semestrda olib borilgan amaliy mashg'ulotlar tahlili mamlakatshunoslik materiallarini tizimli qo'llash talabalarning tahliliy fikrlashini, madaniy ongini va kommunikativ kompetensiyasini rivojlantirishini ko'rsatadi, hatto tilni bilish darajasi turlicha bo'lgan guruhlarda ham.

Kalit so'zlar: mamlakatshunoslik, madaniyatlararo kompetensiya, chet tilini o'qitish, madaniy ong, kommunikativ kompetensiya, o'qitish metodikasi

Introduction. In recent decades, the development of foreign language education has been significantly influenced by the processes of globalization, internationalization of higher education and the increasing importance of intercultural communication, which has led to a reconsideration of the objectives of language teaching, as the ability to use a foreign language effectively is no longer limited to grammatical accuracy or lexical knowledge, but is increasingly associated with the capacity to understand cultural contexts, interpret culturally conditioned meanings and engage in communication with representatives of different cultural backgrounds in an appropriate and meaningful manner, which in turn necessitates the development of intercultural competence as a key component of language education, since without such competence communication remains superficial and limited in scope.

Intercultural competence is commonly understood as a complex integrative construct that includes knowledge of cultural norms and values, the ability to analyze and interpret cultural phenomena and the readiness to participate in intercultural communication, and it is precisely this multidimensional nature that requires the integration of cultural content into the learning process, since language cannot be considered in isolation from the social and cultural environment in which it functions, while the absence of such integration leads not only to a fragmented understanding of linguistic material but also to difficulties in real communicative situations where cultural context plays a decisive role.

Within this framework, country studies represent an important pedagogical tool, as they provide students with structured knowledge about the cultural, historical, political and socio-economic characteristics of English-speaking countries, thereby creating a meaningful context for language learning and facilitating the development of a more comprehensive understanding of cultural diversity, however, despite their potential, country studies are often taught in a predominantly descriptive manner, focusing on the reproduction of factual information rather than on the development of analytical and interpretative skills, which significantly reduces their effectiveness and limits their contribution to the formation of intercultural competence, therefore requiring a shift toward more analytically oriented and student-centered approaches.

Methods. The present study is based on the analysis of teaching practice conducted during the spring semester of 2026 within the course “Country Studies,” delivered in English to a group of 11 undergraduate students majoring in foreign languages and enrolled in the fourth semester of an evening program, whose level of English proficiency ranged from A2 to B1–B2, which created specific pedagogical conditions due to the variability of their linguistic competence despite their academic specialization, thereby requiring the implementation of differentiated instructional strategies and a flexible approach to the organization of the learning process, particularly in relation to the explanation of complex cultural and socio-political concepts.

The course content included a systematic study of English-speaking countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, with particular emphasis on cultural traditions, lifestyle patterns, political systems and historical development, while the teaching process was organized in accordance with communicative and student-centered approaches, which involved the use of discussion-based tasks, comparative analysis, problem-oriented activities and interpretative exercises aimed not only at the acquisition of factual knowledge but also at the development of students’ ability to analyze cultural phenomena, to identify similarities and differences between cultural systems and to express their viewpoints in a logically structured and coherent manner, which gradually led to the transformation of their cognitive activity.

Given the complexity of the subject matter and the heterogeneous level of language proficiency within the group, the occasional use of the native language

was applied as a supportive pedagogical tool in order to facilitate comprehension of abstract and conceptually demanding material, which allowed students to engage more deeply with the content without significantly reducing the overall effectiveness of English language practice, thus demonstrating that a flexible approach to language use can serve as a productive methodological strategy in the context of mixed-level groups.

Results. The analysis of the learning process revealed a gradual but consistent development of students' intercultural competence over the course of the semester, as at the initial stage the majority of students demonstrated a predominantly descriptive approach to cultural material, with approximately 60–65% of them experiencing difficulties in interpreting cultural phenomena, structuring their responses in a coherent manner and expressing their ideas in English in an analytically grounded way, while their answers were largely limited to the reproduction of factual information without deeper reflection, comparison or evaluation, which indicates an insufficient level of cognitive processing.

However, as the course progressed and students were increasingly exposed to tasks requiring interpretation, comparison and evaluation, a noticeable shift toward analytical thinking was observed, and by the end of the semester around 80% of students were able to participate more actively in discussions, demonstrate a clearer understanding of cultural differences and provide more structured and reasoned explanations, which indicates the development of higher-order cognitive skills and a more advanced level of intercultural competence, as well as a gradual increase in their confidence when expressing personal viewpoints.

In addition, it was observed that the integration of culturally oriented tasks had a significant impact on student engagement and motivation, as topics related to real-life cultural contexts stimulated interest and encouraged participation even among students with lower levels of language proficiency, while the use of comparative analysis enabled students to relate new information to their own cultural experience, thereby facilitating deeper understanding and promoting reflective thinking, and the selective use of the native language contributed to improved comprehension and allowed students to engage more fully in analytical tasks without creating a barrier to communication.

Discussion. The findings of the study demonstrate that country studies have significant pedagogical potential in the development of intercultural competence, particularly in groups with different levels of language proficiency, as the results indicate that intercultural competence does not develop automatically even among students specializing in foreign languages, but rather requires deliberate methodological support and the systematic integration of tasks aimed at developing analytical and interpretative skills, which confirms the importance of reconsidering the role of country studies within the structure of foreign language education and their transformation from a descriptive discipline into an analytical one.

The transition from descriptive to analytical responses observed in the course of the study confirms the importance of incorporating comparative analysis and

problem-oriented tasks into the learning process, as these methods create conditions for the development of critical thinking and facilitate a deeper understanding of cultural diversity, while the use of authentic and culturally relevant material enhances the practical orientation of the learning process and contributes to the development of communicative competence.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that the controlled use of the native language should not be viewed as a limitation, but rather as a strategic pedagogical tool that supports comprehension and promotes more meaningful engagement with the material, particularly in contexts where students' language proficiency does not fully correspond to the level of cognitive demands imposed by the subject matter, which is especially relevant in groups with different levels of language proficiency. Conclusion. In conclusion, the present study demonstrates that the integration of country studies into foreign language education plays a crucial role in the development of intercultural competence, as the results indicate that even within a relatively small group of students with different levels of language proficiency it is possible to achieve significant progress in analytical and communicative abilities, provided that appropriate methodological approaches are applied, while the findings highlight the importance of combining cultural content with interactive and student-centered teaching strategies, which contribute to the development of cultural awareness, enhance students' ability to interpret cultural differences and improve overall communicative competence, thereby confirming the pedagogical value of country studies as an essential component of foreign language education and as an effective tool for the formation of intercultural competence in modern educational contexts.

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