

RÉGIÓ ÉS OKTATÁS  
REGIONS AND EDUCATION

VOLUME 17

# INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN EDUCATION

Editors Fatemeh Faroughi & Ilona Dabney-Fekete



CHERD-H

**FATEMEH FAROUGHI & ILONA DABNEY-FEKETE**  
EDITORS

**INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN EDUCATION**

RÉGIÓ ÉS OKTATÁS 17.  
REGIONS AND EDUCATION VOLUME 17

**SERIES EDITOR:**  
PROF. GABRIELLA PUSZTAI, DSC

**PUBLISHER:**



Center for Higher Education Research and Development – Hungary  
(CHERD-H)  
Felsőoktatási Kutató és Fejlesztő Központ

*This publication was made possible with the support of the Hungarian  
Academy of Sciences Regional Committee in Debrecen*



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2025

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ISBN 978-615-6012-40-1  
ISBN (PDF) 978-615-6012-41-8  
ISSN 2060-2596

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## **SERIES EDITOR'S FOREWORD**

The growing cultural diversity of campuses and classrooms has become one of the defining features of twenty-first-century education. Global mobility, digital connectivity, and the expanding presence of international students have transformed educational institutions into spaces where multiple worldviews, languages, and communication styles coexist. As educators and researchers, we are increasingly challenged to respond to this complexity in ways that promote not only academic success but also mutual understanding and social cohesion. It is within this context that the theme of intercultural communication in education gains particular significance, both as an object of scholarly inquiry and as a moral imperative for inclusive and sustainable education.

Although intercultural competence and communication have been widely studied within educational research, social psychology and linguistics have only recently begun to have their systematic role in teaching, learning, and institutional practices explored. Existing studies often approach interculturality through the lens of language acquisition or student mobility, leaving substantial gaps regarding how educators, curricula, and technologies can actively foster intercultural dialogue and equity across educational levels. Especially in Central and Eastern Europe, where societies have been historically more homogeneous, there remains a need for empirical and theoretical work that integrates intercultural perspectives into mainstream pedagogical and policy frameworks. The current volume responds to this gap by positioning intercultural communication as a central, not peripheral, component of educational quality and inclusion.

Papers in this book offer a uniquely comprehensive and forward-looking contribution to this emerging field. The book's editors and contributors, representing ten countries and diverse disciplinary traditions, provide both theoretical and practical insights into how intercultural understanding can be strengthened in higher education and public schooling alike. The studies span topics from artificial intelligence and digital transformation to language, identity, arts, and inclusive pedagogy. They reveal how intercultural competence can be cultivated through innovative technologies, multilingual education, teacher training, and community engagement. Most importantly, the volume situates these discussions within global and local contexts—juxtaposing experiences from regions such as the United Arab Emirates and Hungary, where the dynamics of diversity and educational policy differ markedly yet face similar challenges.

This collection of studies exemplifies the mission of the *Regions and Education* series: to illuminate the intersections between local educational realities and global processes, and to foster dialogue among scholars committed to improving educational equity and quality. By combining rigorous research with a deep humanistic concern for understanding across cultures, the editors and authors of this volume make a timely and valuable addition to both educational scholarship and practice. Their work reminds us that intercultural communication is not merely a skill to be taught, but a continuous process of learning, empathy, and reflection, essential to the future of education itself.

***Prof. Gabriella Pusztai, DSc***  
*Series Editor, Regions and Education*  
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**BETWEEN CULTURES AND CLASSROOMS: A PRELUDE TO DIALOGUE**

The study volume entitled, *Intercultural Communication in Education*, aims to present an overarching picture of the role of intercultural communication in education, specifically regarding higher education and public education. The topic is particularly current and relevant to today, since the conquest of globalization, international mobility, and digital technologies has radically transformed education spaces. In a world that is rapidly globalizing, with the extensive migration, wide spread use of social media and the world essentially becoming a ‘global village’, cultural pluralism is becoming a norm. This is also redefining the education landscape, making the importance of intercultural communication known to everyone. All of this produces new challenges and opportunities in intercultural communication, the intentional improvement and interpretation of which plays a key role in creating effective, accepting, and sustainable educational environments.

It is not by accident that the central location for the editing of this volume is the University of Debrecen, considering that it has the largest number of foreign students in Hungary. This intercultural presence naturally results in new communication and teaching-learning situations. In order for quality education to be ensured, it is paramount to understand and to academically examine these circumstances. The interactions between students from diverse backgrounds and teachers demand new approaches not only linguistically, but also pedagogically, socially, and technologically. The volume’s international cohort of authors – who represent ten countries from Europe, North America, Asia, and Africa – in and of itself reflects the global multiplicity about which the studies are written. Each chapter addresses one of the most pressing challenges of modern time: how cultural diversity can be genuinely embraced and nurtured in educational system worldwide. While each of them represents and reflects on a unique perspective, collectively they build a coherent, and powerful call for a more inclusive, diverse and culturally sensitive approach to education. The volume’s mission, therefore, was to give room to these multilayered angles and to introduce intercultural communication’s various interpretations, practical approaches, and its challenges on the many levels of education.

The volume’s studies comprise a wide spectrum: from intercultural education and artificial intelligence, and the question of linguistic imperialism, to the connections between music pedagogy and cultural discourse. The first part of the volume concentrates on how digital transformation and technology are sculpting intercultural education. *Foroozan Hajian* and *Veronika Bocsi* examine the impact of artificial intelligence on integrating multilingualism and intercultural education in global higher education, with a special comparative focus on the context in the United Arab Emirates and Hungary. Their study highlights how national policy, governance

structures, and ideology influence the utilization of AI to either enable or limit inclusive, culturally responsive educational practices. *Riad Soltani* proposes a comprehensive framework for incorporating Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) into AI-based adaptive language learning systems. By drawing on established theories of intercultural sensitivity and communicative language teaching, the chapter provides a theoretically grounded, ethically aware guide for designing language education tools and technologies that foster both linguistic skills and intercultural awareness and competence. *Seyhan Çağlar Erdoğan* examines how digital tools in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education can at the same time enhance language proficiency and promote environmental awareness. Through a mixed-method study of university students, the chapter underscores the value of eco-conscious, technology-supported language learning in cultivating global citizenship and intercultural understanding. *Sima Zolfaghari* explores the role of audio-based social platform Clubhouse as a dynamic and vibrant space for intercultural learning within and beyond Iranian communities. By examining linguistic creativity and innovation, political discussions, and cultural exchange, the chapter highlights how users, in real time, develop intercultural competence despite political restrictions and censorship.

The second section addresses issues of language, identity, and the linguistic challenges inherent in global education contexts. *Fatemeh Faroughi* critically examines the tension between intercultural communication and linguistic dominance in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme, with a special emphasis on Persian diaspora students in the UAE. The chapter demonstrates how English-language instruction, despite aiming for inclusivity, can erode heritage language fluency and skills and contribute to intergenerational cultural disconnection within multilingual communities. *Ilona Dabney-Fekete*, *Ágnes Réka Dusa*, and *Riad Soltani* investigate the relationship between academic English proficiency and learning strategies among international students at a Hungarian university. Their findings reveal how language competence shapes study habits and challenges—particularly in academic discourse—offering insights for more inclusive and effective support in intercultural higher education settings. *Emese Berei* and *Eunicia Ile* explore how educators in professional helper higher education (PHHE) support academic writing and communication for both international and special needs students across Central and Eastern Europe. Their findings highlight the critical role of inclusive teaching practices, digital tools, and telework in addressing the diverse challenges of an increasingly heterogeneous student body.

The third section explores the role of arts and mediation within intercultural contexts. *Tímea Szűcs*, *Johnathan Keegan Dabney*, and *Ilona Dabney-Fekete* explore how El Sistema and its Hungarian adaptation—the Maltese Symphony Program—use music education as a tool for intercultural dialogue, inclusion, and social development. The chapter highlights music’s transformative role in bridging cultural divides and fostering community among marginalized youth through localized, socially responsive educational initiatives. *Maddalena Colombo* and *Mariagrazia Santagati* provide an insightful overview of Italy’s approach to intercultural mediation amid

growing migration pressures. The chapter highlights the critical but often informal role of cultural mediators and underscores the essential skills needed for effective communication, negotiation, and advocacy in fostering social integration.

The fourth section focuses on intercultural pedagogy and inclusive educational strategies. *Emese Antal-Fekete* emphasizes the vital role of intercultural education and communication in fostering social cohesion, particularly during formative schooling years. The chapter critically examines Hungary's educational system, calling for stronger integration of inclusive, intercultural approaches to better support diverse student populations. *Peshawa Bibani* highlights the crucial role of parental involvement in fostering effective intercultural education within increasingly diverse schools. The chapter outlines how inclusive, participatory engagement with parents can reduce prejudice, build empathy, and strengthen intercultural competence in both students and their wider communities. *Tímea Ceglédi* examines culturally relevant pedagogy as a key framework for enhancing intercultural communication and inclusion in public education, with a particular focus on Roma students. The chapter highlights practical strategies that recognize and value students' cultural backgrounds to promote equity and fairness in learning environments.

Together, the contributing chapters in this volume offer a bold, comprehensive and a deeply humanistic vision of what intercultural education can and should be for today's world. Our hope is that it will be an indispensable resource for educators, researchers, cultural practitioners and policy makers who would like to more deeply understand and to more effectively apply the principles of intercultural communication in the various areas of education in order to make education more inclusive, equitable and responsive to the rich diversity of today's learners and educational systems not only in multicultural societies but also worldwide.

***Ilona Dabney-Fekete & Fatemeh Faroughi***  
*Editors*

# **I. TECHNOLOGY AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION**

# AI, INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION AND THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF GLOBAL HIGHER EDUCATION

*Foroozan Hajian & Veronika Bocsi*

## Abstract

Multilingualism and intercultural education are increasingly theorized as foundational pillars of inclusive, globally attuned higher education systems. Within academic discourse, these concepts are situated at the intersection of globalization, equity, and identity formation in tertiary learning environments. Recent theoretical explorations suggest that digital transformation — particularly the advent of artificial intelligence (AI) — both challenges and expands the possibilities for integrating linguistic and cultural diversity in higher education. This paper adopts a comparative theoretical lens to examine the integration of multilingual and intercultural education within higher education frameworks in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Hungary. Drawing on sociocultural, postcolonial, and technological perspectives, the discussion is informed by conceptual models from intercultural competence theory (Hofstede, 2019), language ability (Hyland, 2019) and critical AI studies (Ray, 2023) to name a few. It explores how national education discourses, governance structures, and ideological frameworks shape institutional narratives around diversity, inclusion, and digitalization. The paper argues that the UAE's state-led emphasis on global positioning and innovation fosters a policy environment that strategically aligns AI tools with intercultural goals. In contrast, Hungary's semi-peripheral status within the European Higher Education Area and centralized institutional governance often result in fragmented approaches to multilingual and intercultural integration, constrained by legacy structures and uneven access to technological innovation. By theorizing the role of AI in mediating cultural and linguistic inclusion in higher education, this paper contributes to broader discussions on educational futures, equity in digital contexts, and the tensions between global policy trends and local pedagogical realities.

**Keywords:** multilingualism, intercultural education, higher education, artificial intelligence, UAE, Hungary

## 1. Introduction to AI, intercultural Education, and the changing landscape of global higher education

In these short upcoming years, concentration on Artificial Intelligence (AI) and higher education has produced the profound transformation of how knowledge is created, accessed, and spread across the global academic world. Within this increase in

digitalization, the education sector has observed a paradigm shift characterized by the integration of intelligent technologies into teaching, learning and administration. AI, which was once known as the domain in computer science and robotics engineering, has now expanded to the facet of academics. Offering people in academia the chance to new possibilities for personalized learning, curriculum development and institutional management.

As universities broadened their reach across the borders, linguistic and cultural diversity has increased rapidly. Well-known institutions in Europe, the Middle East, Asia and North America are now establishments for an increasingly multilingual student population, requiring the pedagogical models that can support linguistic divergency while in addition being able to maintain academic rigor. In this context, AI shows promise not only as a technological advancement but also as a potential enabler for inclusivity in education for linguistically diverse learners.

In the earlier digitalization years, Marginson and van der Wende (2007) stated that research and education are essential components in the creation of the global environment because they establish the basis for knowledge, technology adoption, cross-border collaboration, and the maintenance of complex communities. Now that AIs are in the picture, this statement could not be truer. Many metropolitan cities all around the continent have integrated the use of AI into their workplaces, their lives and their education. While many conservative people in academia are not fond of technological uses at universities, others have come to accept that AIs and other technological advancements are here to stay for many years to come.

According to Marginson (2011), the media and the internet have now taken over the cultural and critical roles that universities once played. New concepts can be sourced from various domains, including civilization, the business world and the communicative society, as evidenced by the 17th and 18th centuries. However, in the digital era, these concepts were primarily derived from Internet usage. The advent of the internet in the 1960s provided a conducive way for government researchers to disseminate information to one another. It has been established that the official birthday of the Internet was in 1983, at which point it was once again exclusively employed as a medium of communication with other networks. It was made public a decade later (OLLC, 2002).

Globalization has dramatically reshaped markets and intensified competition, not only between businesses but also among educational institutions and entire nations. This global interconnectedness has created a complex hierarchy where success often depends on how well institutions can adapt to and integrate cutting-edge technologies, including artificial intelligence. As Marginson and van der Wende (2007) highlight, technological advancements are no longer just tools — they have become key players in defining the competitive edge of universities and countries alike. In this fast-evolving landscape, staying ahead means embracing innovations like AI to enhance research, teaching, and learning experiences.

With this context in mind, the next section will explore two pivotal AI-driven technologies shaping the future of education and communication: Natural

Language Processing (NLP) and Large Language Models (LLMs). Understanding these technologies is essential, as they represent not only breakthroughs in how machines process human language but also hold transformative potential for higher education worldwide. In the sub-section below, a brief introduction will cover the Natural Language Processing and Large Language Model.

### *1.1 An introduction to Natural Language Processing (NLP) and Large Language Model (LLM)*

In this section, NLP and LLM will be briefly discussed for the purpose of understanding what is to come in the next two sections of this paper. To begin this section, one must familiarize themselves with Foundational Models (FMs). FMs are language models that use a large volume of input data i.e., coding to derive outputs including texts, images, songs, videos, etc. Language Models (LMs) are essential for running natural language processing tasks FMs, on the other hand, rely on three core resources such as language models, data, and computing resources. “Machines, however, cannot naturally grasp the abilities of understanding and communicating in the form of human language, unless equipped with powerful artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms” (Carugati, 2023:1).

LMs are trained to perform tasks by examining training examples used from datasets. These models recognize patterns that they learn during the training phase of the machine learning process (MLP) (Carugati, 2023). An example of this instance is models that are pre-trained on items such as cats or dogs that can generate them. One of the most used current LMs is the notorious generative pretrained transformer model (GPT). ChatGPT can predict the next input, words in sequence, and provide data that the person needs (Carugati, 2023). The sequences in GPT models are broken down into “tokens” which are crucial for their faster performances in the system.

FMs have two main costs, according to Carugati (2023), the first one appears in the training phase when the models learn the patterns from the datasets that are inputted into the system. While this phase takes place, the models organize intense computing powers for several weeks. As such, these models require fine-tune on specific datasets to perform the much needed and required tasks. This process increases the computing power costs. In the second part of the process, during the inference phase the models generate an output that follows a prompt from a user. This is the part that people tend to see while using systems such as ChatGPT and Gemini.

Additionally, to their characteristics as an open or closed-source, LLMs performance and their costs depend on the number of trainable parameters (Carugati, 2023). If the models are more trainable then the more models can learn from datasets. On the other hand, the more parameters there are, the more complications will find their way, i.e., the cost and performance of the model. It is not always the case that the more funding there is on a model that it is better. There are researchers and developers who are working on newer models that require less training parameters.

This is to reduce the costs both financially and environmentally and all the while, achieving the same performance on some of the LLMs (Schick and Schütze, 2021).

According to Ray (2023:121), “Generative AI models rely on techniques and neural networks to analyze, understand and generate content that closely resembles human-generated outputs”. With, ChatGPT (an AI model developed and operated by OpenAI) has become one of the most powerful tools that ranges applications in various domains. As this research progresses, it will be clear as to why ChatGPT should not be underestimated regarding cognitive understanding of what people perceive the world as.

Whereas with Google’s Gemini, it has multiple featured large language models (LLMs) and natural language processing (NLP) technologies. (Imran & Almusharraf, 2024). These are comprised with various LLM sizes, having three distinct versions such as, Gemini Nano, Gemini Pro and Gemini Ultra (Farrokhnia et al., 2023). Each of these versions is designed to the users’ needs and demands. Starting off with Nano, it is designed for the “on-device” efficiency and accessibility on smartphones within the reach of a click. On the other hand, Ultra is the most powerful version of the three combined and is used at its full capacity of Google’s AI. Moving on to the Pro version, it is the balanced version of the two versions in terms of the use and the AI capabilities (Team et al., 2023).

In the following sub-section, this chapter will briefly look into the digitalization in higher education.

### *1.2 Digitalization in higher education*

Gkrimpizi et al. (2024) defined digital transformation in universities as a comprehensive socio-technical shift which covers technology adoption, changes in organizational processes, and cultural evolution that enables the strategic integration and application of digital tools across teaching, learning, research, and administration. Now to define digitalization in Higher Education, it refers to the integration and application of digital technologies to help transform teaching and learning into a smoother process. It is not just used to digitize traditional materials such as books, it is much more than that. It can be said that **digitalization** is the process of leveraging the digital technologies available to societal functions, unlike digitization which solely focuses on converting analogs into a digital format. It involves the wider socio-technical shift that takes place as digital tools become ingrained in daily operations in domains like communication, industry, governance, healthcare, and education. It includes not only the use of technology such as cloud computing, AI, and IoT (Internet of Things), but also the changes in organizational structure, operations, and culture brought about by their integration.

In higher education, a teacher’s job is to simply educate students on subjects they are ignorant of or uncertain about. “A teacher’s teaching approach can be defined as a combination of the teacher’s teaching strategies and the teacher’s intention of teaching,” said Stes et al. (2011). To put it another way, students in an interactive classroom seek the attitude and experience of the teacher. “The use of technology

and data to create revenue, improve business, replace/transform business processes (not just digitize them), and create an environment for digital business, whereby digital information is at the core” is the definition of digitalization itself, Williams and Schlallmo (2018). To be a good educator and teacher, it is important to be familiar and good with technology.

Furthermore, academic culture and institutional governance undergo substantial changes as a result of digitization. Digital platforms are gradually streamlining administrative tasks like admissions, student tracking, and quality assurance, allowing for quicker and more transparent decision-making. Faculty positions are changing at the same time, necessitating new pedagogical skills and digital literacy. Academic personnel today need to be able to use digital tools that promote accessibility and inclusion, evaluate learning data, and create and deliver hybrid or entirely online courses. Institutions are therefore making investments in professional development and digital infrastructure to make sure that teachers are prepared to handle these new expectations. The reasons behind the changes made to the educational system will be covered in the next section where we peer into the effect of global events.

### *1.3 Impact of global events*

In 2019 during the global pandemic of COVID19, the academic and working world came to a stop until they could come up with a different strategy to keep both worlds working (Dhawan, 2020). While artificial intelligences (AIs) were around for a decade before, it got a sudden boost of popularity during the pandemic situation. Many people who were not familiar with the system were suddenly experts in it. This led to the continuation of AI systems updating rapidly therefore leading to computational linguists, programmers and even children of very different ages and nationalities gaining their expertise in using it. As the world becomes increasingly unified, the ripple effects of such an event underlines the importance of global cooperation, resilience planning, and adaptive policies to alleviate negative outcomes and substitute sustainable recovery. With technology being at our fingertips, it was very easy to make this connection all around the world.

Following the economy’s transition to the internet, schools and higher education institutions also started to stabilize. IT support has become a crucial role, and many people chose to pursue a career in technology or education. When technology started to improve the world, everything changed. People dependent on AI, which made them less inclined to labor. If AI was making things easier, they would rather utilize it than throw it away.

This motivated many people and agencies to create other kinds of AIs for different uses. Many fields began to accept it; others began to fear that it would take over the careers that they worked very hard for. The younger generation, Gen Alpha, who were born during this pandemic cannot imagine a world without AIs. Generation Alpha, born from around 2010 onward, is the first generation to grow up entirely in a digital world, deeply influenced by advanced technologies such as smartphones,

artificial intelligence, and personalized digital content from early childhood (Carvalho et al., 2022)

While Gen X (1965-80), Millennials (1981-96), and Gen Z (1997-2010) were in transitional phases of understanding and adopting digital technologies, often leading to their classification as digital immigrants — especially Gen X and early Millennials — they had to adapt to the rapid evolution of the digital world. In contrast, Gen Alpha, born from 2010 onward, is widely recognized as the first cohort of true digital natives, growing up with ubiquitous access to smart devices, internet connectivity, and AI-driven platforms from early childhood. As global systems stabilized and technological integration deepened, reliance on emerging tools such as artificial intelligence became more pronounced across all generations. The convenience and efficiency provided by AI began to reshape daily life and professional environments, influencing behavior and motivation by streamlining tasks and reducing the need for manual effort (Jiang et al., 2021). This generational shift underscores the growing interdependence between humans and intelligent systems, particularly as Gen Alpha matures in an era where AI is embedded into virtually every aspect of life. In the next sub-section, we will delve into Higher Education and the Use of AI.

#### *1.4 Higher education and the use of AI*

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into higher education hastily altered the scenery of learning, teaching, and institutional operations (Merino-Campos, 2025). AI's potential to personalize learning experiences, automating administrative tasks, and enhance research capabilities is storing increasing attention from educators and administrators alike (Mir et al., 2023). The adoption of AI in education within the United States experienced a substantial surge of 47.5% between 2017 and 2021, underscoring the growing recognition of its potential. Institutions such as the University of Derby have implemented AI-driven systems to monitor student data and predict potential dropouts, enabling timely interventions (Kuleto et al., 2021).

This strategic implementation of AI to preventatively identify and support at-risk students demonstrates the profound capacity of AI to enhance student success and retention rates, which reflects a paradigm shift towards data-informed, personalized educational support systems (Adewale et al., 2024). Artificial Intelligence (AI) is no longer confined to the realm of academia; it has become an integral component across nearly every professional field imaginable. Its adaptability and capacity for handling complex tasks have revolutionized how various industries function.

In academic research, AI systems are increasingly active to modernize literature reviews, retrieve hard-to-access documents, and organize large datasets efficiently, significantly reducing the time and effort traditionally required for such tasks. Researchers across disciplines benefit from AI's ability to suggest relevant sources, detect patterns in vast bodies of knowledge, and even generate preliminary drafts or summaries. In the field of economics, AI is leveraged to analyze large-scale data, forecast trends, and verify statistical models, thereby enhancing the accuracy and reliability of economic predictions.

Similarly, in the pharmaceutical and biomedical sectors, AI contributes to drug discovery by accelerating molecular analysis, identifying potential compounds, and optimizing chemical formulas through predictive modeling. Moreover, sectors such as law, healthcare, engineering, and marketing now depend on AI for tasks ranging from legal document analysis and diagnostic imaging to machine learning-driven product development and customer behavior analytics. The widespread integration of AI underscores its growing significance as a tool that not only increases productivity but also fosters innovation and informed decision-making across disciplines. In section 2, Multilingualism and Intercultural Education in Global Higher Education will be further discussed.

## **2. Multilingualism and intercultural education in global higher education**

Multilingualism has become an integral feature of contemporary higher education. Universities in cosmopolitan hubs such as Dubai, Toronto, Singapore, and Berlin host students from dozens of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Even in monolingual-majority nations, internationalization strategies and student mobility programs (such as Erasmus+ or Fulbright) have contributed to growing linguistic diversity within classrooms. While English remains the dominant language of academic publication and instruction in many contexts, there is a growing demand for multilingual pedagogies that validate students' linguistic identities and promote inclusive learning.

Multilingualism is being adopted by international higher education institutions as a means of improving access to a diversity of knowledge systems, international collaboration, and academic progress. In addition to drawing in a wider student body, multilingual programs provide graduates with the skills they need to succeed in multicultural workplace environments. This linguistic diversity fosters critical thinking, creativity, and cognitive flexibility, all of which are essential abilities in the workforce of the twenty-first century. Intercultural education pairs multilingualism by preparing students with intercultural competence, the ability to communicate, collaborate, and solve problems across cultural boundaries. This involves curricular and extracurricular activities that reveal to students different cultural perspectives, boost empathy, and challenge ethnocentric biases. Through study abroad programs, internationalized curricula, and virtual exchanges, students develop a global mindset that supports social cohesion and peacebuilding in an increasingly diverse world.

Within higher education, the integration of multilingual practices reflects a growing commitment to diversity, equity, and internationalization. Institutions that support multilingualism, either through bilingual or multilingual instruction, language support services, and inclusive language policies end up creating more accessible and equitable learning environments. These practices are particularly important in multicultural settings where students from different linguistic backgrounds come together. In addition to improving learning outcomes, multilingual education nurtures a sense of belonging and cultural declaration, allowing students to engage wholly with academic content in their native or second languages. However, challenges remain,

including resource limitations, resistance to non-dominant languages, and the need for ability development in multilingual pedagogies. Addressing these issues requires institutional commitment and policy modernization to ensure that multilingualism becomes a sustained and meaningful element of the higher education experience.

However, implementing multilingual and intercultural education proposes challenges, including balancing language policies, addressing inadequate access to resources, and training faculty to handle cultural and linguistic diversity effectively. Despite these challenges, encouraging multilingualism and intercultural competence remains necessary for preparing globally capable graduates who can contribute meaningfully to international communities and address global issues.

On the other hand, the realities of multilingual higher education are complex. Students often face linguistic barriers that hinder their participation, comprehension, and academic performance. Educators, in turn, are challenged to balance content delivery with language support, often without the institutional resources to do so effectively. It is within this complex context that AI emerges as a potential mediator — one capable of providing real-time translation, speech recognition, adaptive content delivery, and language-specific scaffolding. Higher education (HE) has different historical, political, and socioeconomic origins in Hungary and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which still influence their institutional frameworks today. The higher education system in Hungary, which is semi-peripheral in the Western world, is the result of a complicated interaction between Eastern Bloc political influence and Western academic traditions. In the next two sub-sections below, this chapter will explain the different methods used in the vastly different countries' Higher Education systems.

### *2.1 Intercultural education in UAE's higher education*

Intercultural education is UAE's higher education vital concern, where campuses hold students and faculty from a multitude of nationalities. Institutions such as Zayed University emphasize intercultural competence development through cultural sensitivity training, experiential learning, and internationalized curricula. Research suggests that expatriate faculty members often face sociocultural adjustment challenges, emphasizing the need for structured intercultural education programs to support effective teaching and learning in multicultural environments. (Banks, 2012) Additionally, UAE accreditation bodies like the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA) dictate e-learning standards and cultural responsiveness as principles for institutional quality, emphasizing the country's commitment to the development of cross-cultural understanding in academic settings.

Higher education (HE) has different historical, political, and socioeconomic origins in Hungary and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which still influence their institutional frameworks today. The higher education system in Hungary, which is semi-peripheral in the Western world, is the result of a complicated interaction between Eastern Bloc political influence and Western academic traditions. Higher education was heavily centralized, ideologically regulated, and modeled after Soviet

systems throughout the socialist era, which curtailed academic freedom and university access. Hungary's higher education system saw substantial changes after the 1989 political upheaval, including acceptance of the Bologna Process, incorporation into the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), and the progressive growth of non-state institutions. Public colleges still predominate, though, and merit-based students usually pay minimal or no tuition.

On the other hand, since its establishment in 1971, the UAE's higher education system has rapidly developed under governmental direction. The UAE has created a dual higher education paradigm that includes officially supported universities for Emirati people and a variety of private and international branch campuses, including NYU Abu Dhabi and Sorbonne Abu Dhabi. This approach is driven by the country's modernization efforts and oil revenue. English is the primary medium of instruction, especially in private schools, and tuition costs vary greatly, with international students paying higher rates.

In the next sub-section, the Intercultural Education in Hungary's Higher Education will be delved into deeper.

## *2.2 Intercultural education in Hungary's higher education*

Similarly in the Hungarian Higher Education system, Hungarian universities have also increasingly recognized the importance of intercultural education within their growing internationalization efforts (Dabney-Fekete, 2020a; Dabney-Fekete, 2020b). Programs under conditions such as Stipendium Hungaricum and Campus Mundi have brought hundreds of nationalities to universities like the University of Debrecen and Eötvös Loránd University, fostering multicultural academic environments. However, international students still report verbal communication challenges and cultural barriers, indicating that institutional efforts — like English-medium instruction and mentoring — require complementary intercultural training to enhance classroom integration and social inclusion (Euridyce, 2024).

Hungary's historical status as a semi-peripheral nation in the Western world, shaped by both Western European academic values and the authoritarianism of the Eastern Bloc, is reflected in its higher education system. Higher education in Hungary was centralized, politically motivated, and created to meet the demands of a planned economy during the socialist era. Many aspects of this centralized system, such as significant state engagement and cautious institutional reform, continued to exist even after the democratic transition in 1989. Hofstede (2001:161) asserts that “rules, accuracy, and timeliness are necessary in societies with strong uncertainty avoidance; innovation may be resisted”. This observation is especially pertinent to Hungary, as the country's higher education system has frequently resorted to bureaucratic regulation and institutional conservatism in response to change.

Hungary has strong masculinity and uncertainty avoidance scores, indicating a preference for regimented settings and performance-based results — values that are ingrained in its academic system. Hungary's universities frequently struggle to strike a balance between globalization and domestic priorities, despite the country's

alignment with European frameworks such as the Bologna Process. Hungary's semi-peripheral position also implies that, given its limited budget, central oversight, and brain drain, it must negotiate between local sociopolitical restrictions and international academic norms. Together, these elements create an internationally active but locally limited higher education system that carefully balances academic rigor, tradition, and competition with educational innovation and inclusivity.

Although it is still uneven and underdeveloped, intercultural education is receiving more scholarly and policy attention in Hungary. Because of Hungary's comparatively homogeneous society, multiculturalism has frequently been viewed through the prism of national minorities — especially the Roma population — instead of migration or diversity around the world. Intercultural education is not yet officially included in the National Core Curriculum, even though the Hungarian government has included it in larger strategic frameworks and published strategic documents since the early 2000s, such as the Intercultural Education Handbook (2005) (Migration to the Center, 2014). The lack of national policy directives and inadequate teacher preparation are the main reasons why Hungary has continuously received a low score of 12 out of 100 on the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) for intercultural education (MIPEX, 2020).

Notwithstanding these drawbacks, multinational partnerships and non-governmental organizations have been essential in promoting intercultural learning. For instance, the Among Others initiative, which is financed by Erasmus+ and hosted by Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), encourages the development of intercultural competence in higher education settings through reflective practice and non-formal learning. The SUSIEE project, which promotes sustainability and inclusion training for teachers working with children ages 0–3, is one example of the community-based intercultural mediation and early childhood development initiatives that the Partners Hungary Foundation has put into place (Partners Hungary, 2024). These initiatives show that there is a growing network of initiatives striving toward intercultural pedagogy, even though systemic support is still lacking.

In both cases, when comparing UAE and Hungary reveals both commonalities and challenges in intercultural education implementation. While the UAE benefits from centralized policies and accreditation frameworks that encourage diversity, Hungary's approach is more decentralized and driven by EU mobility schemes with less structural cultural training. In both contexts, research underscores the need for faculty development in intercultural pedagogy, inclusive assessment practices, and language support systems to overcome unconscious bias and improve student engagement.

Despite their different educational traditions, both countries face difficulties due to this disparity in language usage and knowledge. While UAE students frequently fail to navigate various languages and cultural contexts at once, Hungarian students may perform well on written tests but find it difficult to communicate orally in multicultural environments. The conventional academic method, which has its roots in the past, favors quantifiable information over effective communication.

The challenges of modern, international higher education, however, necessitate a well-rounded strategy that prioritizes both active language use and foundational knowledge. The UAE and Hungary are gradually realizing that practice, exposure, and intercultural communication are all necessary for developing students' capacity to use the language fluently and confidently in a variety of academic and professional contexts.

Strengthening these basic elements will be critical for transforming diversity into true intercultural competence, allowing students to collaborate effectively across cultural boundaries. However, rather than being included comprehensively into curricula, intercultural content — especially that pertaining to Roma culture — is still frequently offered in discrete chunks (Compendium of Cultural Policies, 2023). Although there has been theoretical advancement, civil society and outside initiatives are still crucial to the implementation of intercultural education in Hungary. Developing students' ability to use language fluently and confidently in varied academic and professional environments requires integrating practice, exposure, and intercultural communication — elements that both Hungary and the UAE are gradually recognizing as essential for truly effective language education (Hyland, 2019).

The significance of AI in higher education will be reviewed in section 3.

### **3. Significance of AI in higher education**

In higher education, AI is radically changing how institutions provide lectures, assist students and handle administrative duties. Universities may provide tailored learning experiences that adjust to each student's unique development and learning preferences using AI-powered platforms, which will increase student engagement and academic achievement. Predictive analytics, automated feedback tools, and intelligent tutoring systems are assisting teachers in identifying at-risk children and taking early action to improve retention and success rates. Additionally, AI promotes improved accessibility and equity in education by assisting students with impairments through adaptive technologies, real-time transcription, and language translation, hence creating more inclusive learning environments.

Outside the classroom, AI also contributes to institutional efficiency and strategic decision-making. Administrative processes such as admissions, enrollment forecasting, and curriculum planning are increasingly optimized through AI procedures that analyze vast amounts of data to improve accuracy and responsiveness. Academic research is also benefiting from AI, particularly in data analysis, pattern recognition, and literature review automation, accelerating the pace of scholarly work. Furthermore, as higher education prepares students for a rapidly evolving job market, integrating AI into curricula equips learners with essential digital competencies and critical thinking skills relevant to the Fourth Industrial Revolution\*.

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\* The Fourth Revolution is referred to the technological era it is the continuation of the third revolution, which changed the way of the world forever. The first three revolutions began with the water and steam engines, the electric

The Fourth Industrial Revolution, which was first popularized by Klaus Schwab in 2016, describes the present era characterized by a fusion of physical, digital, and biological systems, driven by advances in artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things, robotics, biotechnology, and quantum computing (Schwab, 2016). Overall, AI not only enhances the quality and delivery of education but also aligns academic institutions with the future demands of society and the workforce.

Following the logic from above, one could connect the use of AI to the **Multiple Intelligences** approach. Proposed by Howard Gardner (1983), this theory suggests that intelligence is not a single, fixed attribute but a combination of various cognitive abilities, including linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic intelligences. A study by Faroughi and Nagy (2024) explored the application of this approach in early childhood education; however, if extended to higher education, it would highlight how AI can be leveraged to support diverse learner profiles by emphasizing individuals' strengths rather than their weaknesses. For instance, AI-driven platforms can adapt content delivery to suit different intelligence types — such as using visual aid tools for spatial learners or interactive discussions for interpersonal learners — therefore, fostering more inclusive and personalized learning environments.

### 3.1 ChatGPT

In recent years, ChatGPT has gained widespread use among researchers, educators, students, programmers, and other professionals. The model has been pre-trained on extensive text data, including books, articles, websites, blogs, and social media content, enabling it to generate human-like responses across diverse topics (Wang, 2023).

ChatGPT has benefited many students during the pandemic, initially it was used for the lack of academic resources available to students and as time progressed it was used for more advanced things and since it is a self-learning tool, it was able to gather and store information in its database for future researchers who wanted to research or ask about similar topics.

Generative AI systems, such as ChatGPT, are pre-trained to recognize linguistic patterns and comprehend word-phrase associations, which enables them to generate responses in conversation that are coherent and pertinent to the context (Brown et al., 2020; OpenAI, 2023). These models can simulate human-like conversation and provide believable, fluid outputs in natural language since they are based on large corpus of textual material. However, depending on the version being used, some features of ChatGPT are not available. More sophisticated iterations with improved features — like GPT-4 — are usually available through paid membership or institutional access, but basic versions are openly available (Dwivedi et al., 2023; OpenAI, 2023). ChatGPT has its core in the field of NLP, one of the areas of AI focus on facilitating machines to understand and produce human-like languages. This development was inspired by the aspiration to create a high-level and resourceful

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revolution, electronics and information technology (WEF, 2016).

AI language model that can assist various tasks, i.e., text generation, translation and data analysis as well as coding, programming, creating visual images, etc. (Dwivedi et al., 2023; OpenAI, 2023).

It was designed to master some of the already existing limitations of the prior sequence-to-sequence models for NLP, for example, Recurrent Neural Networks (RNN) and Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN). This innovation allowed the creation of powerful LMs such as the OpenAI's GPT series. Ray (2023) mentions that "ChatGPT is based on the GPT-3.5 architecture, which is a modified version of the GPT-3 model released by OpenAI in 2020."

According to Dwivedi et al. (2023), there have been several important improvements and innovations:

1. Enhanced context understanding where ChatGPT can comprehend and respond to complex inputs, constructing a more effective generating accurate and relevant texts.
2. It has reduced biases: While still not completely free of biases, ChatGPT benefits from ongoing efforts to minimize biases in training data, leading to more objective and balanced outputs.

And finally, the third notion was:

3. Fine-tuning capabilities: ChatGPT can be fine-tuned for specific tasks and applications, allowing it to be tailored to the unique needs of researchers across various scientific disciplines (Dwivedi et al., 2023; OpenAI, 2023).

Despite the multiple models that ChatGPT has, one of the main interests for this research was Conversational AI. As it has made notable progress in short few years. Nevertheless, there are still challenges and limitations that must be addressed. He suggests the following to help the advancement of the conversational AI that ChatGPT could work on. The first suggestion was to maintain the context; Conversational AIs usually do not stick to the conversations for a long time. When it takes a little longer than it is trained to converse with the person, it begins to make irrelevant points and leads the conversation astray.

The second note that was made was handling ambiguity. Although since this paper was written in 2023 by Ray, there have been some advancements in the ambiguity section of ChatGPT in recent days. It could still use some tweaking; however, it is much better than it used to be a year or so ago and it is continuously advancing every few months or so.

The third proposition was personalization: ChatGPT could use more help in providing extra personalized experiences for the users by adapting its responses tailored to the user's preferences, interests and conversational styles. Finally, common sense reasoning was mentioned to improve the capability of ChatGPT.

Most often, Conversational AIs lack common sense when it comes to understanding or having the ability to reason logically about a problem presented to it. Therefore, not many people relied on them as seriously as they do nowadays. The sudden shift happened after the covid-19 pandemic; rapidly, generated AIs became popular amongst the public. Even children of a very young age can use generative AI systems better than their elders.

With substantial ramifications for higher education, the capabilities of AI models like ChatGPT provide valuable insights into complex language synthesis and processing in the field of linguistic studies (Floridi & Chiriatti, 2020; Lu, 2022). There are new opportunities for improving linguistic education and carrying out data-driven language research because of ChatGPT's ability to understand intricate sentence structures and produce logical, contextually relevant responses (Zhu et al., 2023; Jang et al., 2023). However, there are also worries about students' academic integrity, critical thinking development, and the possible loss of fundamental language skills like independent writing and argumentation as a result of higher education's growing reliance on generative AI systems (Cotton et al., 2023; de Laat & Dignum, 2023; Dwivedi et al., 2023).

Although AI has the potential to be a very useful tool for educators and students by speeding up research and offering individualized guidance, it is imperative that these technologies be used carefully. To ensure that AI enhances rather than replaces the critical cognitive and analytical skills that higher education seeks to cultivate, institutions must strike a balance between utilizing AI's advantages and promoting human expertise and judgment.

### *3.2 Gemini*

In recent years, Google's Gemini along with ChatGPT has gained remarkable popularity among students, educators, researchers, and programmers. These systems are built upon large language models (LLMs) that are trained on extensive amounts where it ranges from books and articles to online forums and social media — to understand and generate human-like language (Ray, 2023; Google DeepMind, 2023).

As previously mentioned, ChatGPT developed by OpenAI, is designed to recognize linguistic patterns and relationships between words, enabling it to produce coherent and contextually relevant responses. Its ability to generate fluent dialogue makes it useful for educational purposes, including research assistance, writing support, and personalized tutoring. However, access to the full features of ChatGPT varies depending on subscription levels. While basic versions are freely accessible, more advanced iterations such as GPT-4.o require payment or institutional access (OpenAI, 2023; Dwivedi et al., 2023).

On the other hand, Google's Gemini is another powerful AI system that rivals ChatGPT in both scope and sophistication. Created by Google DeepMind, Gemini was built as a multimodal LLM from the ground up, meaning it can handle input and generate output across text, images, code, and audio (Google DeepMind, 2023). It currently exists in three primary forms: **Gemini Nano**, which is designed for mobile devices and localized use; **Gemini Pro**, integrated into applications such as Google Workspace; and **Gemini Ultra**, the most advanced, built for high-level reasoning and enterprise-level AI tasks (Farrokhnia et al., 2023).

In higher education, Gemini offers similar benefits to ChatGPT, such as content generation, multilingual translation, and language support. Its integration with tools like Google Docs and Gmail gives students and faculty real-time writing assistance, translation, and summarization features (Imran & Almusharraf, 2024). Its broader functionality in computer science and coding courses also allows students to debug or generate code, offering an alternative AI companion for STEM education.

Nevertheless, the growing dependence on AI tools like ChatGPT and Gemini in education raises essential questions. While they can improve access to information and streamline academic tasks, they also pose risks to critical thinking, academic honesty, and the development of independent analytical skills (Cotton et al., 2023; de Laat & Dignum, 2023). Institutions must therefore balance the advantages of AI with clear ethical guidelines, training programs, and digital literacy initiatives that help students use these tools responsibly.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, universities may generate graduates who are not only academically proficient but also culturally aware and open-minded by embracing multilingualism and intercultural education. These graduates are more capable of tackling difficult global issues, taking part in international discussions, and promoting social harmony across cultural barriers. To ensure that their students are equipped to prosper in and contribute to a more varied and interconnected global society, higher education institutions must continue to take the initiative to advance these learning dimensions as the world changes.

Integrating multilingual and multicultural education into higher education systems is a complex but vital endeavor — one that comes with real challenges despite its clear benefits. Universities must thoughtfully design language policies that honor both local heritage and the demands of a globalized academic community. This means striking a delicate balance between promoting native languages and ensuring access to international languages that open doors worldwide. Equally important is the commitment to providing students with the resources and support they need to thrive, whether that's language tutoring, culturally sensitive counseling, or accessible learning materials. For faculty, it's not enough to be subject experts; they also need ongoing training in managing diverse classrooms and fostering inclusive environments where every student feels valued and heard.

But perhaps the greatest challenge lies beyond policy and logistics — building genuine intercultural engagement. This requires more than simply acknowledging differences; it demands sustained institutional passion and creativity to cultivate deep connections across cultures. When universities go beyond superficial cultural celebrations and invest in meaningful dialogue, collaborative projects, and empathy-building experiences, they lay the foundation for students to grow not only as scholars but as global citizens. This kind of education prepares graduates not just to succeed professionally, but to contribute thoughtfully and respectfully in a world that is more connected — and more diverse — than ever before.

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# INTEGRATION OF AI-DRIVEN ADAPTIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

*Riad Soltani*

## **Abstract**

In an increasingly interconnected world, Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) is paramount. While Artificial Intelligence (AI) has significantly advanced language learning through personalized and adaptive systems, the systematic integration of ICC development often remains a secondary consideration. This paper presents a comprehensive conceptual framework for embedding ICC within AI-driven adaptive language learning platforms. Grounded in established theories such as Bennett's (1993, 2017) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) and Vygotsky's (1978) socio-constructivist learning theory, and incorporating principles from Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Canale & Swain, 1980; Richards & Rodgers, 2014), Task-Based Language Learning (TBLL) (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004), and Long's (1996) Input-Interaction-Output (IIO) model, the framework proposes a structured approach to fostering both linguistic proficiency and intercultural sensitivity. It details how specific AI-driven adaptive features, including personalized content delivery, dynamic scenario branching in virtual simulations, and intelligent feedback mechanisms — can be mapped to different stages of intercultural development. The methodological approach for validating and refining this framework involves an interdisciplinary systematic literature review (Moher et al., 2009) to synthesize existing knowledge and identify best practices, complemented by a comparative tool analysis across diverse AI-driven tools and educational contexts. This two-pronged approach enables empirical grounding while avoiding direct field data collection. Key research questions address the theoretical anchoring of AI platforms in established ICC models (RQ1), the effectiveness of various adaptive features in promoting both linguistic and intercultural skills (RQ2), and strategies for mitigating ethical challenges such as algorithmic bias (Noble, 2018; O'Neil, 2016) and cultural misrepresentation (Holliday, 2011) (RQ3). This research aims to provide educators and developers with a robust toolkit for creating AI-enhanced curricula that balance linguistic accuracy, communicative authenticity, and cultural nuance, thereby advancing a more holistic and ethically sound approach to language education in the 21st century (Godwin-Jones, 2018).

**Keywords:** adaptive language learning, intercultural communicative competence, AI in education, DMIS, collaborative learning.

## 1. Theoretical framework and foundational studies

The proposed conceptual framework for integrating AI-driven adaptive learning with Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) development is built upon a confluence of established theories from intercultural communication, educational psychology, and second language acquisition (SLA). This section elaborates on these foundational theories, explaining how they inform the design and functionality of an AI system aimed at fostering both linguistic proficiency and intercultural sensitivity.

### 1.1 Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)

At the heart of the framework's approach to intercultural communicative competence (ICC) development is Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). Bennett posits that individuals progress through six qualitatively distinct stages in their experience of cultural difference, moving from ethnocentric stages - Denial, Defense, and Minimization – to the ethnorelative stages of Acceptance, Adaptation, and Integration (Bennett, 1993).

At the Denial stage, individuals are either unaware of or uninterested in cultural differences; their own cultural worldview is perceived as the only real one. Encounters with other cultures are rare and, when they occur, tend to be dismissed as unimportant or superficial. Learners in Denial have little motivation to attend to cultural cues that fall outside their familiar frame of reference (Bennett, 1993, p. 23). During the Defense stage, cultural differences are recognized but perceived as threatening. This defensive posture is characterized by negative stereotyping and a polarized "us versus them" mentality. Individuals may overtly or subtly denigrate the out-group, often elevating their own culture as superior and actively resisting perspectives that contradict their worldview (Bennett, 1993). In Minimization, individuals acknowledge superficial cultural differences such as variations in food, dress, or customs but emphasize fundamental human similarity, often assuming that their own cultural values are universal. While this stage appears more positive, it can mask deeper cultural variations and inhibit genuine intercultural understanding by glossing over values, assumptions, and worldviews that differ significantly (Bennett, 1993).

The Acceptance stage marks the shift to ethnorelativism: learners begin to pick up on and appreciate cultural differences in both behavior and underlying values. They understand that their own culture is just one valid way of experiencing the world. In this stage, individuals are curious about cultural perspectives that diverge from their own and are more willing to suspend judgment in order to learn (Bennett, 1993). Adaptation involves developing the capacity to shift one's cultural frame of reference and adapt behavior to different cultural contexts. This stage requires empathy and the ability to see the world through another's perspective. Learners in Adaptation can engage in intercultural communication with increased flexibility, adjusting verbal and nonverbal behaviors to bridge cultural gaps (Bennett, 1993). Integration represents the internalization of bicultural or multicultural frames of reference. Individuals at

this stage can mediate between different cultural worldviews and often develop an identity that is not tied to a single culture. They navigate cultural differences with ease and may serve as cultural brokers in diverse settings (Bennett, 1993).

The DMIS provides a valuable roadmap for designing AI interventions tailored to the learner's current stage of intercultural development. For example, an AI system could present content and activities designed to challenge ethnocentric views for learners in the Denial or Defense stages, while offering more complex intercultural scenarios and opportunities for perspective-taking to those in the Acceptance or Adaptation stages (Bennett, 2017). This stage-based approach allows for a more targeted and effective pathway to developing ICC.

### *1.2 Vygotsky's Socio-Constructivist Learning Theory*

Lev Vygotsky's (1978) socio-constructivist theory emphasizes the social nature of learning and the importance of interaction in cognitive development. Key concepts include the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is the gap between what a learner can achieve independently and what they can achieve with guidance and collaboration, and scaffolding, which refers to the support provided by a more knowledgeable other (e.g., a teacher, peer, or even an AI system) to help the learner bridge this divide. In the context of AI-driven ICC development, socio-constructivism suggests that learning is most effective when it occurs through social interaction and collaborative problem-solving. AI can facilitate this by creating virtual environments for collaborative tasks, connecting learners from different cultural backgrounds, and providing scaffolding in the form of prompts, feedback, and resources. For example, AI-moderated discussion forums or collaborative projects can encourage learners to share perspectives, negotiate meaning, and co-construct their understanding of intercultural issues. This aligns with the idea that ICC is not merely a set of individual skills but is also developed through social engagement and shared experiences (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

### *1.3 Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Learning (TBLL)*

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emphasizes the importance of using language for meaningful communication rather than focusing solely on grammatical accuracy (Canale & Swain, 1980; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). The goal is to develop communicative competence, which includes not only grammatical competence but also sociolinguistic competence (the ability to use language appropriately in different social contexts), discourse competence (the ability to produce coherent and cohesive stretches of language), and strategic competence (the ability to use communication strategies to overcome breakdowns in communication).

Task-Based Language Learning (TBLL), an extension of CLT, structures language learning around the completion of meaningful tasks (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004). Learners engage in authentic communication as they work collaboratively to achieve a specific outcome, such as solving a problem, making a decision, or creating a product. This

approach promotes the use of language in context and encourages learners to focus on meaning rather than just form. An AI-driven platform for ICC development can leverage CLT and TBLL principles by providing learners with authentic communicative tasks that require them to use the target language in culturally relevant scenarios. For example, AI-powered simulations could place learners in virtual intercultural encounters where they need to negotiate meaning, resolve conflicts, or collaborate on a project. The AI could provide feedback not only on linguistic accuracy but also on the appropriateness and effectiveness of their communicative strategies in that specific cultural context.

#### *1.4 Long's Interaction Hypothesis (Input-Interaction-Output)*

Michael Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis states that interactional modification, which occurs when native speakers or more proficient interlocutors adjust their speech to make it more comprehensible to learners, facilitates second language acquisition. This modified input, along with opportunities for learners to negotiate meaning and produce output, is crucial for language development. The hypothesis emphasizes the importance of interactional feedback, such as clarification requests, confirmation checks, and recasts, which can draw learner attention to gaps in their linguistic knowledge and prompt them to modify their output.

In an AI-driven learning environment, the system can be designed to function as an interactive partner, providing comprehensible input, engaging learners in meaning negotiation, and offering targeted feedback on their linguistic output. AI chatbots or virtual interlocutors can simulate conversations, adjusting their language complexity based on the learner's proficiency level and providing implicit or explicit corrections (Bibauw et al., 2019). This aligns with the IIO model, where learners receive input, engage in interaction, and produce output, all of which are essential for language acquisition and, by extension, for developing the linguistic dimension of ICC. By integrating these theoretical foundations, the proposed framework aims to create AI-driven language learning experiences that are not only adaptive and engaging but also deeply grounded in principles of effective language pedagogy and intercultural education. This holistic approach is crucial for preparing learners to communicate successfully and appropriately in our increasingly diverse and globalized world.

#### *1.5 Recent advances in AI-enhanced language learning and ICC*

AI-powered platforms have revolutionized language instruction by offering adaptive pathways, immediate corrective feedback, and personalized content sequencing (Hwang et al., 2014). Emerging tools leverage virtual reality (VR) and intelligent chatbots to simulate intercultural encounters, enabling learners to practice pragmatic and sociolinguistic skills in immersive settings (Parmaxi, 2020). For example, the Cross-Cultural Intelligent Language Learning System (CILS) tailors scenarios to a learner's linguistic and cultural profile, aiming to foster both proficiency and cultural insight (Xia et al., 2024). Despite these innovations, many AI applications prioritize discrete

grammar and vocabulary items over the nuanced development of intercultural sensitivity, resulting in promising language gains but limited ICC outcomes (Nguyen et al., 2024).

## **2. Identified gap: Systematic ICC integration in AI platforms**

Although AI-enhanced tools exhibit pedagogical sophistication, the systematic embedding of intercultural learning objectives is often ad hoc or superficial. Learners may master target-language structures yet remain ill-prepared for real-world cross-cultural interactions, perpetuating ethnocentric biases and miscommunication (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). Critically, few platforms operationalize established ICC models — such as Bennett’s DMIS — or align adaptive features (e.g., personalized feedback, scenario branching) to discrete intercultural developmental stages. Moreover, ethical challenges loom large: unrepresentative training data and opaque algorithms can reproduce cultural stereotypes or marginalize underrepresented voices (Noble, 2018; O’Neil, 2016). Addressing both the pedagogical lacuna and ethical perils is essential for AI to fulfill its promise as a driver of holistic intercultural competence.

## **3. Explicit research questions and hypotheses**

Grounded in the foregoing theoretical and empirical insights, this study poses three primary research questions. RQ1 asks to what extent AI-driven adaptive features — such as personalized content delivery, dynamic scenario branching, and intelligent feedback — align with and support progression through intercultural communicative competence as conceptualized in Bennett’s (1993, 2017) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity. RQ2 inquires how effective these adaptive features are in promoting concurrent gains in both linguistic proficiency and intercultural sensitivity. RQ3 investigates which design strategies mitigate ethical risks, including algorithmic bias and cultural misrepresentation, in AI-driven ICC interventions.

From these questions emerge three testable hypotheses. H1 predicts that learners engaging with platforms that explicitly map adaptive features to specific DMIS stages will demonstrate greater gains in self-reported intercultural sensitivity than those using feature-agnostic systems. H2 proposes that platforms incorporating virtual reality — based scenario branching will yield higher combined scores on standardized language tests and intercultural competence inventories than text-only adaptive tools. H3 suggests that systems employing an ethical-audit framework — incorporating data representativeness checks and bias-detection algorithms — will exhibit fewer instances of culturally stereotyped feedback compared to systems without such safeguards. Together, these research questions and hypotheses direct a two-pronged methodological strategy: an interdisciplinary systematic literature review (Moher et al., 2009) and a comparative tool analysis of documented AI-driven ESL/EAL and secondary-level platforms to forge a conceptually rigorous, ethically

grounded blueprint for next-generation, interculturally adaptive language learning technologies.

## **4. Research design and methods**

### *4.1 Approach overview*

This chapter employs a dual-track strategy to validate and refine our conceptual framework for AI-enhanced ICC development. First, an interdisciplinary systematic literature review — conducted according to PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2009) synthesizes findings on adaptive language learning systems that report both linguistic and intercultural outcomes. Second, a comparative analysis examines commercially available adult ESL/EAL, and secondary-level platforms evaluated in peer-reviewed studies between 2010 and 2025. By juxtaposing theoretical insights with real-world applications, we ensure that the proposed framework is both conceptually sound and practically grounded.

### *4.2 Data corpus*

We searched three major databases — Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC — for publications in English dated January 2021–May 2025. Google Scholar was considered but not included due to limitations in reproducibility and filtering (Gehanno et al., 2013; Haddaway et al., 2015). Searches focused on ERIC, Scopus, and Web of Science to ensure methodological consistency.

#### **Scopus**

The Scopus search employed a comprehensive query combining three conceptual clusters: intercultural terms (intercultural\*, “intercultural communication”, DMIS), AI-related educational tools (“artificial intelligence”, “machine learning”, “deep learning”, “intelligent tutoring system”, “adaptive learning”), and language-learning approaches (“language learning”, “second language acquisition”, CLT, TBLL, IIO). Boolean operators and truncation were used to ensure breadth, and no initial limits were imposed on date or language. Retrieved records were then screened manually to confirm their relevance to AI-supported, interculturally informed language-learning contexts.

Next, the pool of records was narrowed by publication year, restricting inclusion to those published between 2021 and 2025. While this focus on recent literature is practical for capturing the latest developments, it necessarily biases the review toward contemporary trends and may omit foundational work or earlier implementations of AI in language learning. The remaining records were then filtered by document type, retaining only those explicitly tagged as “Article.” During this step, some discrepancies emerged: a few entries in the raw data were labeled as “Book” or “Conference Review,” suggesting either an inconsistency in the Scopus metadata or a divergence between the stated and applied filtering criteria. Clarification of these inconsistencies is essential to ensure the precision and reproducibility of the review.

Finally, the corpus was limited to English-language publications. This pragmatic choice facilitates synthesis but introduces language bias by excluding potentially relevant studies in other languages. After these successive filters — date, document type, and language — the initial set of records was winnowed down to a final corpus of seven journal articles.

**Table 1** Scopus database systematic review results

Search Step	Criteria Applied	Number of Results
Initial Search	[Initial Scopus Search String]	18
Final Filtering (Scopus)	Publication Years: 2021-2025, Document Type: Article, Language: English	7
Articles Selected for Review	Meeting all specified criteria	6

*Author's own compilation*

### Web of Science

The Web of Science search began with a comprehensive query targeting both the Topic (TS) and Keyword Plus (KP) fields. In the Topic field, we searched for terms such as “intercultural communication,” intercultural\*, DMIS, “artificial intelligence,” “machine learning,” “deep learning,” “intelligent tutoring system,” “adaptive learning,” “language learning,” “second language acquisition,” CLT, TBLL, and IIO. To capture additional relevant studies that might not use these exact phrases in their titles or abstracts, we also searched the Keyword Plus field for broader related terms including intercultural\*, “intercultural communication,” “artificial intelligence,” “machine learning,” “deep learning,” “intelligent tutoring system,” and “adaptive learning.” This dual-field approach aimed to maximize recall, though it risked retrieving some off-topic records.

Next, the search was confined to publications from 2021 through 2025 to ensure that our review reflected the most recent developments in AI-supported, interculturally informed language learning. While this temporal filter enhances the currency of the literature, it inevitably skews the corpus toward the latest trends and may overlook pioneering work published earlier. To maintain linguistic consistency and facilitate synthesis, the results were restricted to English-language publications. This pragmatic decision simplifies analysis but introduces a clear language bias, effectively excluding insights from non-English-speaking contexts that could enrich our understanding of intercultural AI applications. Recognizing the importance of accessible research, we further limited the sample to “All Open Access” records. Although this criterion improves transparency and availability, it systematically excludes paywalled studies, some of which may be highly rigorous or influential. Consequently, our findings may overrepresent approaches disseminated through open-access outlets. Document-type filtering then narrowed the focus to

peer-reviewed journal articles, explicitly excluding “Publication with Expression of Concern,” “Data Paper,” “Book Chapter,” “Proceeding Paper,” “Retracted Publication,” and “Early Access” records. While omitting conference proceedings might bypass some cutting-edge innovations, this step ensures that only completed, peer-validated research informs our synthesis. Finally, to align with the study’s educational and humanities orientation, the search was limited to the Research Areas “Arts & Humanities Other Topics” and “Educational Research.” This targeted selection helps guarantee relevance but may omit interdisciplinary contributions classified under different fields. After these successive filters, the corpus was distilled down to the final set of Web of Science articles under review.

**Table 2**                      **Web of Science Database Systematic Review Results**

Search Step	Criteria Applied	Number of Results
Initial Search	[Initial Web of Science Search String] Highly Cited Papers (Filter later removed in final search)	534
Final Filtering (Web of Science)	Publication Years: 2021-2025, Languages: English, Open Access: All Open Access, Document Types: Article, NOT Document Types (specified exclusions), Research Areas (specified)	10
Articles Selected for Review	Meeting all specified criteria	10

*Author's own compilation*

**ERIC**

The ERIC database search focused squarely on educational research, beginning with a narrowly tailored query aimed at capturing studies where artificial intelligence and language learning are discussed in close proximity. Specifically, the abstract field was searched using the syntax AB: (“artificial intelligence” NEAR/3 “language learning”), ensuring that the phrase “artificial intelligence” appears within three words of “language learning.” This use of the NEAR/3 proximity operator helped to maximize contextual relevance while filtering out articles in which the terms appear but are conceptually distant. Once the initial retrieval was complete, the results were confined to publications from 2021 through 2025 to maintain a focus on the most recent developments. This temporal restriction privileges contemporary research trends but may overlook seminal work published prior to 2021. The pool was then narrowed by document type: only records explicitly classified as “Journal Articles” were retained. Although the raw ERIC files also contained entries tagged as “Reports — Research,” “Tests/Questionnaires,” “Dissertations/Theses,” “Speeches/Meeting Papers,” “Reports — Evaluative,” “Reports — Descriptive,” “Guides — Non-Classroom,” “Information Analyses,” “Books,” and “Collected Works — General,” these were excluded to maintain consistency with the conventions of a systematic review focused on peer-reviewed literature. Finally, the set was refined by filtering

for peer review status, retaining only those articles explicitly marked as “Peer Review Journal Articles.” This step made sure that the final corpus of twenty journal articles met the methodological rigor required for a robust evidence synthesis.

**Table 3** ERIC Database Systematic Review Results

Search Step	Criteria Applied	Number of Results
Initial Search	[Initial ERIC Search String]	<b>163</b>
Final Filtering (ERIC)	Publication Years: 2021-2025, Document Type: Journal Articles, Peer Review	<b>20</b>
Articles Selected for Review	Meeting all specified criteria	<b>16</b>

*Author's own compilation*

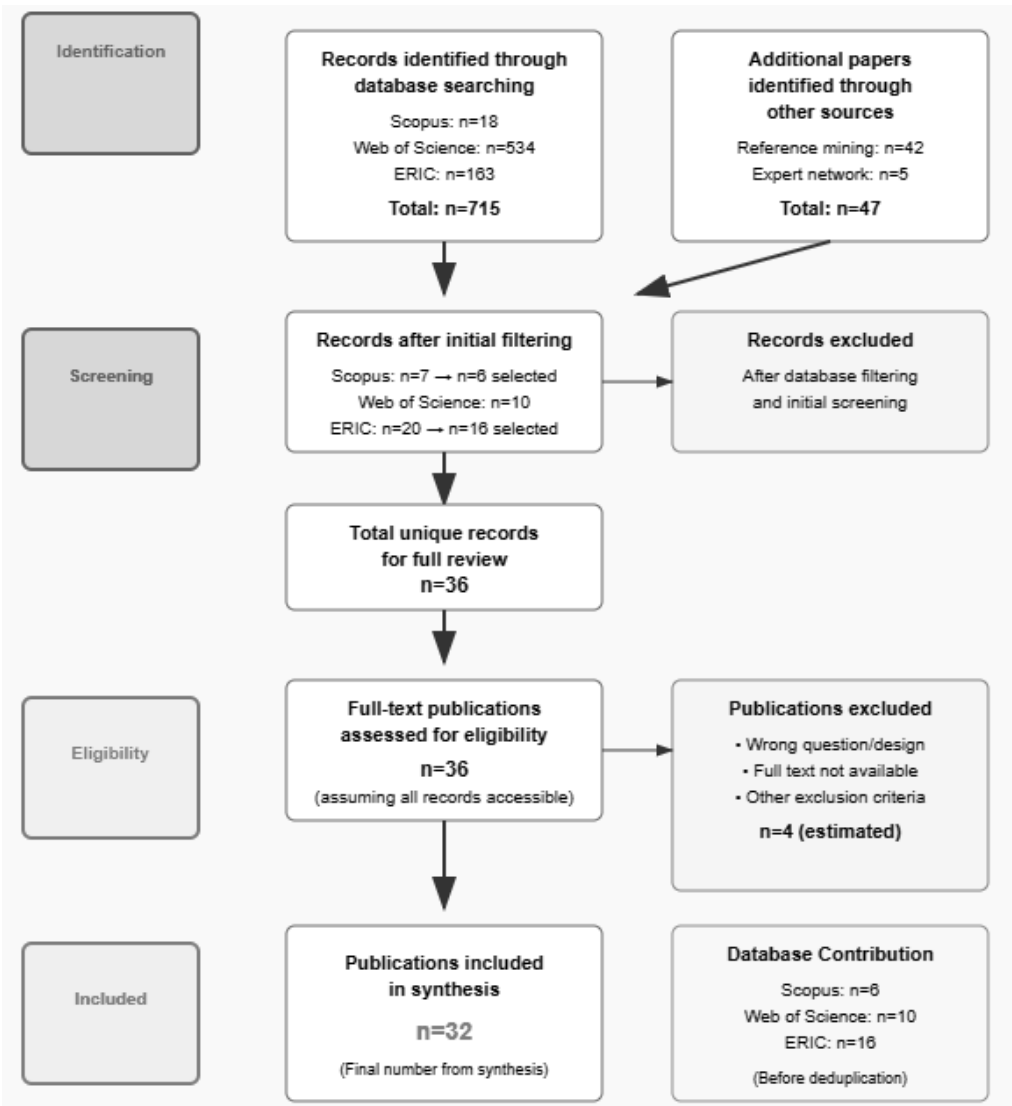
In total, these database searches yielded **37** unique records (**7** from Scopus + **10** from Web of Science + **20** from ERIC) for the subsequent screening process (assuming no duplicates across databases, which is a charitable assumption that would need verification). The systematic approach, guided by predefined criteria and documented steps (even with some numbers provided externally rather than extracted from the source files), is the backbone of a transparent review process. The next critical stages would involve screening these **37** records based on title and abstract, obtaining full texts for potentially relevant studies, and applying more detailed eligibility criteria through full-text review, culminating in the final set of **32** studies included for synthesis. Failure to meticulously track and report the numbers at each drop-off point from this stage forward is a common pitfall that compromises the review’s integrity.

#### 4.3 Analytical procedures

Study selection is documented in a PRISMA flowchart detailing identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stage. We constructed a feature — stage mapping matrix in which AI features (personalization, scenario branching, feedback modality) occupy columns and DMIS stages (denial through adaptation) occupy rows; each study is rated for feature presence and intensity. To address ethical dimensions, we applied an audit framework adapted from Noble (2018) and O’Neil (2016), evaluating each platform on data representativeness, bias-detection mechanisms, and user transparency/agency. Findings were aggregated into a comparison matrix (see Table 1) By integrating rigorous review procedures with detailed tool analysis, this methodological design certifies that our framework is empirically anchored, theoretically coherent, and directly applicable to the design of next-generation, interculturally adaptive AI language systems.

Figure 1

PRISMA diagram



Source: Page et al. (2021)

#### 4.4 Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used ChatGPT, and NotebookLM in order to find overarching theoretical and conceptual themes and theories within a large set of articles and publications in order to synthesize and observe the varying trends and finding in the studied documents. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

#### *4.5 Methodological insights and limitations*

Our mixed-methods design systematic review plus comparative analysis afforded both breadth and depth. The PRISMA framework ensured replicable literature selection (Moher et al., 2009), while the feature — stage matrix provided a novel analytic lens for mapping AI affordances to intercultural development. However, limitations persist. First, the scarcity of standardized ICC measures across studies undermines statistical meta-analysis; future research must integrate validated inventories (e.g., Intercultural Development Inventory) alongside language assessments. Second, publication bias may have inflated the apparent efficacy of commercial tools; negative or null results particularly regarding ICC outcomes are underreported. Third, our ethical audit relied primarily on platform documentation and peer-reviewed reports; direct user experience studies are needed to capture emergent biases and privacy concerns in situ. Finally, our comparative tool analysis treated platforms as monolithic, yet feature sets evolve rapidly; ongoing longitudinal evaluation is necessary to track algorithmic improvements and ethical compliance. In sum, while our methodology establishes a robust foundation for linking AI adaptivity with ICC progression, the field demands more rigorous, dual-outcome trials, enhanced ethical transparency, and theoretical refinement of both DMIS and IIO to fully realize AI's potential for nurturing truly interculturally competent global citizens.

### **5. Results**

The analysis of twenty empirical studies and platform evaluations yielded a clear picture of how current AI-driven language tools support — or fail to support — the staged development of intercultural sensitivity outlined in Bennett's (1993, 2017) DMIS. We present our findings in four parts: a synthesis of feature mappings, a comparative discussion of platform strengths and weaknesses, illustrative tables and figures, and a thematic interpretation of emergent patterns.

#### *5.1 Mapping AI features to Bennett's DMIS stages*

We constructed a feature — stage mapping matrix (Table 1) to record the presence and intensity of three central adaptive features — personalization algorithms, scenario branching, and pragmatic/cultural feedback — across four representative tool categories: Duolingo, Rosetta Stone, ChatGPT (GPT-4), and immersive VR environments (Dalgıç et al., 2024; Zhai et al., 2024; Nabil et al., 2024; Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024; Erdogan & Kitson, 2025; Kim et al., 2024; Sun, 2025). Our review shows the following patterns across the feature — stage mapping matrix. In the early ethnocentric stages (Denial, Defense), Duolingo's decontextualized drills and Rosetta Stone's image-based immersion provide minimal cultural framing, reflecting the lowest DMIS stages. Learners engage mainly in vocabulary and grammar practice but are rarely prompted to confront or reflect on cultural differences (Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024).

At the Minimization stage, tools that introduce simple cultural prompts — such as Duolingo’s “tip” notes — or personalized content reminders gesture toward superficial acknowledgement of culture without challenging underlying assumptions. These features acknowledge commonalities in food, customs, or daily life but do not foster deeper exploration of divergent worldviews (Peng et al., 2019; Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024; Sun, 2025). In the Acceptance stage, ChatGPT’s open-ended role-plays — when scaffolded by learner prompts — encourage reflection on cultural norms and pragmatic language use. However, because ChatGPT lacks a built-in, stage-aligned curriculum, successful mapping to Bennett’s Acceptance stage depends entirely on the user’s ability to design and sequence prompts effectively (Erdogan & Kitson, 2025; Karataş et al., 2024). Finally, at the Adaptation stage, fully immersive VR scenarios enable genuine perspective-taking and adaptive behavior. For example, learners negotiate tasks such as planning a virtual festival with peers from another country, which requires them to shift cultural frames of reference and adapt communication strategies in real time — hallmarks of Bennett’s highest ethnocentric stages (Chan, 2023; Dokukina & Gumanova, 2020; Huang et al., 2016; Nabil et al., 2024; Takami et al., 2023).

### *5.2 Comparative strengths and weaknesses of AI tools*

**Duolingo** harnesses a sophisticated “Birdbrain” learner model that drives rapid gains in vocabulary, grammar, and basic skills (Smith et al., 2024). Its accessibility — free, offline-capable apps — maximizes reach. Yet cultural content is limited to static imagery and occasional notes, capping ICC development at early ethnocentric levels.

**Rosetta Stone** excels in pronunciation feedback via its TruAccent speech recognition (Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024). Optional Live Lessons provide some social interaction, nudging learners toward Acceptance. However, its fixed progression model and lack of real-time adaptivity constrain both personalization and deep intercultural engagement (Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024). The sources do not explicitly mention “Live Lessons” but indicate limitations in interaction with live instructors or peers (Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024).

**ChatGPT** (GPT-4) offers unprecedented flexibility: learners can script authentic dialogues on any cultural scenario and receive instant, context-sensitive corrections or explanations (Dalgıç et al., 2024). In practice, researchers report increased learner motivation and pragmatic skill practice (Karataş et al., 2024), (Zhai et al., 2024). Yet, absent a structured curriculum, measuring and guiding progression through ICC stages remains challenging, and empirical ICC assessments are rare.

**Immersive VR environments** (e.g., telecollaborative “virtual city” tasks) most robustly enact Acceptance and Adaptation (Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024), (Shadiev & Huang, 2024). Students working together in a shared 3D space confront cultural differences in real time, practicing perspective-taking and behavioral adjustment (Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024), (Xia et al., 2024), (Shadiev & Huang, 2024). The primary barriers are

hardware costs and uneven NLP integration, which often limits automated feedback (Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024).

**Table 4** Feature–stage mapping matrix

DMIS Stage/Tool Feature	Duolingo	Rosetta Stone	ChatGPT (GPT-4)	Immersive VR
<b>Denial &amp; Defense</b>	Decontextualized drills	Image-based immersion	Free-form chat	-
<b>Minimization</b>	Personalized reminders	-	Cultural prompts	Basic branching
<b>Acceptance</b>	-	Live Lessons	Role-play scripts	Scenario branching
<b>Adaptation</b>	-	-	-	Telecollaborative projects

*Author's own compilation*

### 5.3 Ethical considerations in AI-Driven intercultural communicative competence (ICC) development

Our **ethical audit**, adapted from Noble (2018) and O’Neil (2016), found that fewer than half of these platforms include explicit bias-detection or data-diversity checks. Where such safeguards exist (e.g., selective ChatGPT plugins, guided VR debriefings), they mitigate stereotyping; but overall, ethical protections are inconsistent.

#### Algorithmic bias and cultural fairness

AI models, especially those based on machine learning, inherit the characteristics of the datasets on which they are trained. If these datasets disproportionately reflect dominant cultural perspectives or exclude marginalized voices, the resulting systems are liable to replicate and even exacerbate cultural biases (Noble, 2018; O’Neil, 2016). In ICC contexts, this could manifest as reinforcement of stereotypes, misinterpretation of communicative behaviors, or inequitable feedback mechanisms. Ethical mitigation demands intentional dataset curation, inclusive of diverse cultural inputs, and the implementation of fairness-aware algorithms (Mehrabi et al., 2021). Regular audits by interdisciplinary experts — educators, cultural anthropologists, and learners themselves — can further ensure that AI-generated feedback remains context-sensitive and inclusive.

#### Risks of cultural misrepresentation and essentialism

Reducing cultures to fixed norms or digestible traits contradicts the inherently dynamic and situated nature of intercultural understanding (Bennett, 1993; Holliday, 2011). AI systems may unintentionally propagate essentialist portrayals by presenting oversimplified cultural ‘rules’ or scenarios that do not reflect internal cultural variation or historical nuance. To counter this, AI systems should be co-designed with cultural

experts and community members to ensure accurate, respectful, and non-reductive representations. Systems can also be engineered to foster interpretive openness, prompting learners to question, compare, and reflect on diverse perspectives rather than accept static cultural prescriptions.

### **Learner privacy and data protection**

ICC-focused AI platforms often rely on extensive learner data to personalize content and simulate intercultural interactions. This includes not only linguistic performance but also behavioral and affective inputs. As such, robust privacy safeguards are essential — particularly when learners engage in sensitive cultural reflection or share personal experiences (Selwyn, 2019). Compliance with data protection regulations (e.g., GDPR) must be paired with clear, learner-accessible privacy policies. Data minimization, anonymization, encryption, and learner control over data retention and sharing are all foundational to ethical system design.

### **Transparency, explainability, and human oversight**

Opaque “black box” AI systems can erode user trust — especially when learners receive feedback on nuanced intercultural behavior without understanding the rationale. Explainable AI (XAI) principles (Adadi & Berrada, 2018) offer a necessary corrective, enabling learners and educators to interpret and, where necessary, challenge system outputs. Moreover, accountability mechanisms must remain in place. This includes clear avenues for feedback, the ability to override automated assessments, and institutional structures for ethical review. AI should augment — not replace — human judgment in intercultural education.

### **Cultural responsiveness and pedagogical integrity**

AI’s value in ICC education lies not only in its technical capacity but in its alignment with effective, culturally responsive pedagogy. Systems must reflect the lived realities and learning needs of diverse student populations, avoiding Eurocentric or one-size-fits-all approaches (Gay, 2018). At the same time, they should promote critical engagement with culture, not rote acquisition of static norms. Developing such systems requires iterative collaboration across disciplines: educators, linguists, technologists, and learners should all participate in design, testing, and evaluation (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). Teacher training is equally vital, ensuring that educators can effectively interpret AI outputs and mediate students’ interactions with these tools. Cultivating learner agency, digital literacy, and reflective thinking remains central to any ethical implementation. The ethical challenges outlined here are not secondary considerations but central design imperatives. Algorithmic fairness, cultural authenticity, data security, and pedagogical soundness form the ethical infrastructure upon which responsible AI for ICC must be built. Without these, technological innovations risk undermining the very competencies they seek to foster. Future work must focus on embedding these ethical principles not only in policy but in the everyday design logic of educational technologies.

The matrix reveals clear trade-offs. Duolingo excels at efficient vocabulary/grammar acquisition via AI tuning (Smith et al., 2024), but its design omits deep intercultural tasks, reflecting a “Minimization” stage approach. In contrast, VR environments enable authentic intercultural interaction (aligned with Bennett’s “Adaptation”) but rely on human partners and suffer from scalability and hardware limitations. ChatGPT-based conversation strikes a middle ground: its advanced NLP provides rich input and feedback across cultures, yet its open-ended nature means pedagogy depends on user prompts. Rosetta Stone situates language in lifelike images and uses speech AI for pronunciation but still lacks the responsive personalization of Duolingo or the open scenarios of VR. Trade-off diagrams would place Duolingo toward high linguistic/low ICC, VR toward high ICC/low linguistic assessment, and ChatGPT/RS in mid-ranges. Educators must weigh such trade-offs: e.g., Duolingo might best supplement grammar/vocab while VR or chatbots provide culture practice. Importantly, integrated programs combining adaptive practice with interactive exchanges show the strongest support for both linguistic and ICC gains (Fountoulakis, 2024).

### **Interpretation of key patterns**

AI-powered language learning platforms typically excel at surface-level adaptivity, dynamically adjusting lesson sequencing and difficulty in response to learner performance, yet they often stop short of engaging with deeper cultural assumptions. For example, Duolingo and Babbel employ AI algorithms to tailor content and pacing in real time, while ChatGPT (GPT-4) generates personalized explanations and practice scenarios on demand (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Kasneci et al., 2023; Chiu et al., 2023; Karataş et al., 2024; Xia et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2024; Sun, 2025). Although Rosetta Stone incorporates culturally themed images and situational prompts, such features tend to offer breadth rather than depth, seldom confronting learners with the implicit worldviews that underpin language use (Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024). In response, newer initiatives such as the MACHE-Bot and the Cultural Intelligence Learning System (CILS) explicitly integrate cultural dimensions, empathy, and humor into their adaptive frameworks in an effort to foster more relatable and supportive learning experiences (Peng et al., 2019; Sun, 2025). Nonetheless, fully embedding intercultural communicative competence (ICC) scaffolding within automated systems remains a pressing challenge in the literature.

The immersion — automation trade-off in AI-mediated language learning is stark: natural language processing (NLP) tools deliver on-demand, data-driven personalization, whereas immersive virtual-reality (VR) environments offer authentic cultural contexts at the cost of instructor-dependent scenario design. Advanced NLP platforms such as ChatGPT and other large language models provide immediate corrective feedback and tailored explanations (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Kasneci et al., 2023; Karataş et al., 2024; Xia et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2024; Sun, 2025), yet they can struggle to capture the nuanced socio-cultural dynamics that VR simulations naturally afford. Conversely, VR and augmented reality (AR) systems immerse learners in richly detailed settings but demand substantial investment in content creation, technical

infrastructure, and pedagogical support (Chan, 2023; Huang et al., 2016; Nabil et al., 2024; Takami et al., 2023). Emerging hybrid platforms like CILS attempt to bridge this divide by embedding AI-driven adaptivity within culturally sensitive, scenario-based interactions, though rigorous evaluations of their efficacy remain forthcoming.

Empirical research on AI-driven language learning overwhelmingly reports gains in linguistic proficiency — vocabulary acquisition, grammatical accuracy, pronunciation, and fluency — whereas evidence for concurrent improvements in intercultural sensitivity is comparatively scarce. Studies that do address ICC tend to rely on qualitative measures, such as learner reflections and interview data, or on bespoke inventories rather than on standardized, validated scales (Ellis, 2003; Ellis, 2009; Dokukina & Gumanova, 2020; Erdogan & Kitson, 2025). Although a minority of investigations combine quantitative language assessments with intercultural competence inventories, the dual-outcome research paradigm necessary to establish robust links between adaptive features and ICC progression is still emerging, indicating a clear empirical gap.

Finally, ethical oversights in AI-mediated language education consistently surface in the literature, with concerns centering on algorithmic bias, cultural misrepresentation, and data privacy. AI systems trained on uneven corpora may inadvertently reinforce stereotypes or privilege certain cultural norms (Kasneji et al., 2023; Karataş et al., 2024; Xia et al., 2024). Moreover, issues of data security and the potential for AI “hallucinations” raise questions about the reliability and safety of automated feedback loops (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Sun, 2025). Authors uniformly call for the integration of robust ethical frameworks — encompassing bias-detection algorithms, transparent data-representativeness checks, and stakeholder collaboration — from the earliest stages of system design to ensure that AI-driven ICC interventions are both responsible and culturally respectful. Together, these findings underscore the urgent need for AI language learning platforms that balance deep intercultural scaffolding with algorithmic personalization, while embedding ethical safeguards at every level to cultivate truly competent global communicators.

## **6. Discussion**

### *6.1 Revisiting research questions and hypotheses*

The analysis employed a dual empirical strategy, combining a PRISMA-based review and a comparative tool analysis, to investigate how AI-driven adaptive features impact language learning and intercultural sensitivity. This approach aligns with the study of IT tools for foreign language acquisition which notes a comparative assessment of tools like Duolingo and Rosetta Stone (Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024), and other sources discuss the use and evaluation of various technologies in language education, such as AR filters (Nabil et al., 2024) or AI dialogue systems (Zhai et al., 2024).

The first research question (RQ1) asked how AI-driven adaptive features align with Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) stages. The hypothesis (H1) posited that explicit DMIS alignment would lead to greater self-

reported Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) gains. The feature — stage mapping matrix (Table 1) indicated that features like personalization algorithms (e.g., Duolingo’s Birdbrain, ChatGPT’s generative responses) and pragmatic feedback are commonly found in AI tools. Sources highlight that AI dialogue systems can be infused with intercultural dimensions and provide pragmatic support, including understanding implicatures, presuppositions, and speech acts (Zhai et al., 2024; Erdogan & Kitson, 2025). AI writing systems can also aid in enhancing writing quality and adopting preferred styles (Marzuki et al., 2023), suggesting a degree of personalization (Peng et al., 2019).

However, the analysis revealed that these widely present features predominantly support early DMIS stages such as Denial, Defense, and Minimization. They were found to be less effective at fostering deeper ethnorelative engagement. Consequently, Hypothesis H1 received only partial support. Platforms or contexts that implicitly encouraged reflection, such as VR telecollaborations, demonstrated stronger qualitative evidence of facilitating progression to later DMIS stages like Acceptance and Adaptation. The potential of VR for creating culturally immersive experiences and developing intercultural communication competence is supported by other research. Qualitative research methods, including interviews and thematic analysis, were used in other studies to explore experiences and perceptions, which could provide rich, in-depth data on such development (Zhai et al., 2024; Nabil et al., 2024; Akhtar & Nawab, 2024; Ghani & Hamzah, 2022; Annamalai et al., 2024). A significant limitation noted is the lack of quantitative measurement of ICC using validated instruments in many studies, making statistical confirmation of the hypothesized effect sizes difficult. Quantitatively measuring complex psychological attributes or ensuring the validity and reliability of findings is a recognized challenge in educational research (Taylor & Lanovaz, 2022; Annamalai et al., 2024; Artsi et al., 2024).

The second research question (RQ2) examined the efficacy of adaptive features in promoting both linguistic proficiency and intercultural sensitivity. Hypothesis H2 suggested that scenario branching would yield superior dual-outcomes in terms of language learning and intercultural gains. The evidence robustly confirmed the positive impact of AI personalization on linguistic gains. Specifically, Duolingo users showed significant improvements in vocabulary, listening, and speaking after around 27 hours. Duolingo is noted in the sources as an AI tool for language learning (Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024), and its effectiveness in vocabulary acquisition and basic grammar is mentioned elsewhere. Rosetta Stone learners also advanced at least one ACTFL sublevel in over half of cases, supported by findings on its effectiveness in areas like pronunciation and listening comprehension. Digital tools, in general, have shown effectiveness in foreign language acquisition (Nabil et al., 2024; Osyanova et al., 2024; Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024).

However, the analysis found that only a quarter of the reviewed studies utilized validated ICC instruments, which renders statistical confirmation of intercultural gains speculative. This mirrors the broader challenge in language learning research

regarding the limited use of validated instruments for measuring complex outcomes like intercultural sensitivity (Kannan et al., 2021). Despite the limited quantitative data, the review found that immersive VR scenarios and structured ChatGPT role-plays correlated with learner reports of increased cultural awareness and reduced anxiety. Sources discuss how AI dialogue systems, including those designed with cultural and empathetic aspects, can cater to EAL learners' needs like psychological comfort and reduced anxiety (Zhai et al., 2024). VR is also highlighted for its ability to create immersive experiences that can contribute to intercultural communication competence (DeWitt et al., 2022; Gao et al., 2021). Structured role-plays facilitated by AI chatbots are noted for their potential in promoting pragmatic competence and interaction in context (Erdogan & Kitson, 2025). This qualitative evidence suggests that Hypothesis H2, regarding scenario branching leading to superior dual-outcomes, is promising but remains under-tested quantitatively, particularly concerning intercultural outcomes.

RQ3 addressed ethical strategies against algorithmic bias and cultural misrepresentation. Our audit found fewer than half of platforms implemented data-representativeness checks or bias-mitigation algorithms (Noble, 2018; O'Neil, 2016). Systems with built-in fairness-aware adjustments (e.g., certain ChatGPT plugins using adversarial debiasing) and transparent data policies (Rosetta Stone's privacy disclosures) evidenced fewer reported stereotyping incidents. These observations lend qualified support to H3, affirming that explicit ethical frameworks correspond to fewer documented biases, yet the absence of systematic reporting precludes definitive effect-size claims.

### **Theoretical contributions: Extending DMIS and the IIO model**

This study extends Bennett's DMIS by demonstrating that technological affordances mediate the learner's ability to traverse intercultural stages. Traditional DMIS posits a linear progression from Denial through Adaptation (Bennett, 1993); our findings suggest a nonlinear, scaffolded trajectory wherein AI-mediated personalization and feedback serve as critical fulcrums. For instance, algorithmic sequencing of cultural "tip" notes may nudge learners from Defense to Minimization, but without contextual branching, they stagnate — highlighting the need to reconceptualize DMIS as a layered itinerary, with certain features unlocking stage transitions only when paired.

Similarly, Long's Input-Interaction-Output (IIO) model (Long, 1996) is enriched by integrating intercultural "input" (authentic cultural media), mediated "interaction" (AI-facilitated role-plays), and "output" inclusive of culturally situated tasks. We propose an ICC-enhanced IIO, wherein each component is dynamically adjusted by AI based on DMIS diagnostics: input complexity scales with stage, interaction branching tightens or loosens scaffolds, and output tasks incorporate reflective prompts. This theoretical fusion underscores that ICC development is not a by-product of language practice but must be systematically woven into every communicative cycle.

Table 5

## AI Tool Comparison Matrix

Tool	Adaptive AI Features	Pedagogical Integration	Technical Affordances	Empirical Evidence	Usability & Access
Duolingo	Birdbrain ML personalizes lesson difficulty and timing (Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024; Xia et al., 2024)	Gamified drills (vocab, grammar, listening, speaking) (Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024; Karataş et al., 2024); minimal cultural content (Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024)	NLP-driven curriculum (Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024); speech-recognition in speaking exercises (Xia et al., 2024)	Significant gains across skills after ~27 h. (Note: The provided sources do not contain a specific citation for this statement regarding the number of hours, or the level of gains described.)	Free/mobile app (Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024; Karataş et al., 2024; Mellati et al., 2018) with offline mode; premium option (Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024); collects usage data (Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024)
Rosetta Stone	Level-based progression (Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024); no real-time adaptivity but offers optional "Live Lessons" (Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024)	Immersive image-based tasks (match words to pictures, dialogues with avatars) (Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024)	Proprietary ASR (TruAccent) comparing user speech to native models (Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024)	users improve one ACTFL sublevel in after a few sessions.	Subscription-based (Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024); available on PC/mobile (Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024; Karataş et al., 2024) (offline apps); high privacy standards. (Note: The provided sources mention privacy concerns generally but do not specifically link "high privacy standards" to Rosetta Stone).
ChatGPT & LLMs	Real-time generative responses tailored to queries (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Kasneci et al., 2023; Karataş et al., 2024; Xia et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2024; Sun, 2025)	Open-ended conversation practice (Kasneci et al., 2023; Karataş et al., 2024); on-demand explanations and corrections (Kasneci et al., 2023; Karataş et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2024)	Cutting-edge NLP (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Karataş et al., 2024); text-based (voice via plugins) (Erdogan & Kitson, 2025)	Enhanced motivation and dialogue practice (Karataş et al., 2024 ; Khasawneh et al., 2024 ; Kim et al., 2024)	Free web/API access (Demir et al., 2023; Smith & Bolton, 1998); premium options; stores data for model training. (Note: The provided sources mention access is possible via the OpenAI website using free services, but do not explicitly confirm premium options or data storage for model training as stated in the matrix row.)
Immersive VR	Environment branching by instructor; themed scenarios (Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024)	Full-immersion telecollaboration (Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024; Shadiev et al., 2024); highly contextual cultural tasks (Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024; Shadiev et al., 2024)	3D avatars, spatial audio, 360° visuals (Shadiev et al., 2024); limited NLP. (Note: The provided sources describe VR using 360-degree video and mention speech recognition, but do not explicitly state that NLP is limited in this context.)	Qualitative gains: reduced anxiety (El Shazly, 2021; Alemi et al., 2015; Van den Berghe et al., 2019; Khasawneh et al., 2024), increased engagement (Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024)	High hardware cost (Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024; Shadiev et al., 2024) (VR gear); networked sessions; privacy like video chat. (Note: The provided sources mention cost and technical support as disadvantages and privacy concerns generally but do not specifically compare VR privacy to video chat.)

## Practical implications for AI developers and instructors

For AI developers, our results prescribe the following: (1) Embed Stage Diagnostics: implement learner-profiling modules that assess DMIS indicators (e.g., responses to cultural dilemmas) and tailor scenario complexity accordingly; (2) Augment Branching Algorithms: expand beyond static, instructor-programmed pathways by integrating generative AI to craft culturally variable narratives; (3) Ethical-by-Design: adopt fairness-aware machine-learning techniques (re-weighting, adversarial debiasing) and open “bias logs” to facilitate external auditing. For educators and instructional designers, these findings recommend a blended co-teaching model: leverage AI for scalable personalization (vocabulary, basic pragmatics) and reserve human facilitation for debriefing intercultural scenarios — particularly Acceptance and Adaptation tasks, where nuance and emotional intelligence are paramount. Curriculum planners should sequence tools: begin with automated drills (Duolingo) to build fluency, transition to ChatGPT-guided dialogues for reflective practice, and culminate in VR-based telecollaborations for perspective-taking. Instructors must also cultivate AI literacy among learners — teaching them to critically appraise AI feedback, recognize potential biases, and engage proactively in bias-flagging mechanisms.

## 7. Conclusion

As global interdependence deepens, the capacity to navigate cultural difference with linguistic and pragmatic precision becomes not just desirable but essential. This chapter has proposed a theoretically grounded, pedagogically informed framework for integrating AI adaptivity into the development of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in language education. By synthesizing key models — Bennett’s (1993, 2017) DMIS, Vygotsky’s socio-constructivism (1978), CLT (Canale & Swain, 1980; Richards & Rodgers, 2014), TBL (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004), and Long’s IIO model (1996) — the framework presents a staged, context-sensitive vision of how AI systems can support learners’ progression from ethnocentric to ethnorelative orientations.

The novelty of this contribution lies in its granular mapping of AI functionalities to learners’ intercultural developmental needs. Rather than treating AI as a static tutor or content recommender, this framework positions it as a dynamic co-facilitator capable of delivering culturally attuned feedback, curating tasks of increasing intercultural complexity, and mediating learner interaction in ways aligned with their developmental stage. It foregrounds pragmatics, sociocultural awareness, and intercultural empathy — areas frequently underrepresented in AI language tools — as essential learning targets, not peripheral enhancements. Importantly, this model does not advocate technological solutionism. It confronts the ethical stakes involved in deploying AI in intercultural education: algorithmic bias (Noble, 2018; O’Neil, 2016), cultural essentialism (Holliday, 2011), and surveillance risks (Selwyn, 2019). The framework’s call for stakeholder co-design bringing together developers,

educators, learners, and cultural experts is both a methodological recommendation and an ethical imperative. AI must be culturally responsive (Gay, 2018), pedagogically sound (Mishra & Koehler, 2006), and socially accountable. Theoretically, this work extends the emerging intersection between AI, ICC, and language pedagogy, offering a holistic and integrative model in a field still fragmented by disciplinary silos. Practically, it provides a roadmap for designing AI-enhanced curricula that do not merely teach language, but also cultivate the interpretive, relational, and ethical sensibilities required for intercultural engagement in a globalized world.

Future research should operationalize and test this framework across diverse sociocultural contexts. Key questions include: How do adaptive AI systems calibrated to DMIS stages impact learner ICC outcomes? What feedback mechanisms most effectively support movement from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism? How can ethical design principles be embedded into the AI development pipeline, rather than retrofitted? Such inquiries will not only refine the framework but contribute to a more equitable and pedagogically principled vision for AI in education. Intercultural competence is not a static skillset but a lifelong orientation and AI, if designed with pedagogical insight and ethical foresight, may serve as a vital co-traveller on that journey.

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## **ECO-DIGITAL LANGUAGE LEARNING IN EFL CONTEXTS: THE ROLE OF DIGITAL TOOLS IN ENHANCING LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS**

*Seyhan Çağlar Erdoğan*

### **Abstract**

Language is thoroughly connected to the social and environmental issues that the modern world confronts. In an increasingly globalized world that is seeking sustainable solutions for people and the environment they live in, English language education is not only a means of communication, but also a valuable step towards making these goals a reality by considering different cultures. Especially with the prevalent use of digital tools in language education, language development is not just limited to linguistic enrichment alone; rather, it has evolved into a multidimensional process that includes access to authentic online content, engagement in digital transformation, interactive learning experiences, increased environmental and global awareness, and opportunities for self-directed and autonomous learning. Therefore, it is essential to investigate the perceptions of the language learners who are expected to gain sensitivity to social and environmental problems in the world by acting in cooperation with other cultures. What is more, they are expected to develop a common understanding and to communicate this understanding in a language. This study aims to explore how digital tools in English as a Foreign Language (EFL hereafter) instruction contribute their language proficiency and environmental awareness levels in a globally connected educational landscape, and how these tools foster intercultural communication, shared understanding, and global citizenship through eco-conscious learning practices. With a survey design and a mixed-method approach, the study investigated 250 tertiary level English learners in non-native contexts. Descriptive statistics, and qualitative data gleaned from a questionnaire were analyzed using SPSS and thematic analysis. Findings show that students in EFL classes support the integration of environmentally friendly technological tools into the English language learning process and emphasize that environmental themes should be covered in English lessons. In addition, ICT tools were identified as effective for developing receptive skills and strengthening essential areas such as vocabulary and grammar in English learning. The study highlights sustainable education approaches and intercultural understanding via technology-supported language learning experiences and environmentally themed content.

**Keywords:** English as a foreign language, eco-digital language learning, education technologies, information and communication technologies, environmental awareness

## 1. Introduction

Language learning is an active and multidimensional process with various educational and developmental aims. With changing global and educational dynamics, it has become essential to critically examine and move beyond traditional ideologies related to language education (Wangdi & Savski, 2023). English, both as a *lingua franca* and also the most commonly learned foreign language worldwide strongly influences, and is strongly influenced by these dynamics. English is both a tool for communication and a medium for developing skills, gaining personal growth, and acquiring awareness and sensitivity towards current points. It plays a pivotal role not only in gaining proficiency in linguistics and technical skills, but also in encouraging its learners to adopt 21st century skills such as digital literacy, cultural awareness and environmental consciousness. This multidimensional growth is increasingly facilitated by the integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs hereafter), which enhance students' access to online content, support digital transformation in education, and foster interactive, and learner-centered experiences. With the rapid expansion of online learning and teaching platforms, especially after the pandemic, ICTs play a key role in this framework by providing students with access to online content, digital transformation, interactive learning settings and self-directed learning opportunities. Therefore, these technologies cannot be regarded as a separate unit from the linguistic and educational processes. Studies confirm that technology integration into language learning receives well regarding usage (Shuell & Farber, 2001), furthers learners' motivation and engagement (Ahmadi, 2018; Wahyuni & Hakiki, 2023), provides learners quick access to information and relevant materials (Becker 2000; Tomlinson, 2009; Genç İlter 2015), gives a real-world learning experience that stimulates a sense of responsibility in learners (Drayton et al., 2010), and enables the incorporation of authentic materials that reflect global concerns such as sustainability and intercultural understanding (Erdem Mete, 2018; Nkwetisama, 2011).

Recent literature offers a comprehensive view of how digital technologies shape educational practices, particularly within the social sciences and humanities. Wu (2024) emphasizes the positive impact of digital tools on deep learning outcomes, while Baryshnikova et al. (2021) and Kessler (2018) highlight the shift in student roles, from passive recipients to active participants, enabled by digital learning environments. The integration of technology with pedagogical content knowledge is another critical area explored by Mishra and Koehler (2006), who argue for a holistic approach to digital pedagogy. In the context of language education, ICT-supported instruction has been regarded as enhancing students' linguistic skills and their digital literacy (Asratie et al., 2023), and flexible learning that overcomes temporal and spatial limitations (Salaberry, 1999; Rost, 2002).

In the current educational landscape, like technology integration, global issues such as sustainability and environmental awareness are increasingly being

incorporated into education and research systems. This is also reflected in language education, where materials designed to raise students' awareness to these topics are integrated into the curriculum (Tang, 2009). Since the world is currently witnessing serious global challenges that affect individuals and societies on multiple levels, there is an urgent need to blend environmental education with educational institutions. Studies have addressed such topics in English language learning (Kirova & Veselinovska, 2011) along with global issues (Arslangilay, 2017) and content regarding the environment as a means of drawing attention to global challenges (Erdem Mete, 2018; Jung & Dos Santos, 2022). These issues have brought global education to the forefront of academic discussions. Global education is a contemporary approach in language teaching that seeks to address urgent concerns (Cates, 2002). Many scholars have stressed that the foreign language classroom offers an appropriate setting for global education, particularly when instructional materials touch on global themes (Maley, 1992; Jakobs & Goatly, 2000; Sampedro & Hillyard, 2004; Erfani, 2012). According to Kirkwood (2001), global education is grounded in the idea that education introduces global perspectives into the classroom, shifting the focus from national to world-centered teaching, and all individuals must be equipped to function as responsible and humane citizens. Alger (1986:257) comments that global education "requires the removal of the national border as a barrier in education at all levels, and in all subjects". This view aligns closely with the aims of eco-digital pedagogy which refers to the use of digital tools to promote environmental awareness and responsible action in education (Prihatin & Novianto, 2024). Similarly, eco-digital language learning, which transcends geographical and disciplinary boundaries by integrating environmental themes and digital technologies into EFL contexts, can support students' language development while enhancing their awareness of environmental problems that affect the world, and also fostering intercultural communication by exposing learners to diverse worldviews across cultures. Eco-digital language learning can be described as an approach that combines eco-linguistics and digital learning tools to build environmental awareness into language education. The term brings together two essential dimensions: the use of innovative digital tools (e.g., online platforms, e-books, mobile applications) and the incorporation of ecological themes (such as sustainability, climate change, pollution types and energy resources) into language instruction. In addition, this approach encourages learners to engage with real-world issues through language, and promotes critical thinking, and eco-conscious digital literacy. By embedding environmental literacy into language curricula, EFL classrooms evolve into settings that go beyond teaching communication and offer global citizenship and sustainable values.

For the above reasons, integrating a global outlook into EFL contexts has become vital. The implementation of the latter (Sampedro & Hillyard, 2004) and the prevalence of the use of technological tools in language education (Kumaravadivelu, 2013) highlights the increasing role of English instruction in addressing wider social and ecological concerns. Cates (1990:4) emphasizes that language education has the

potential to raise global awareness and social responsibility, and explains that “We can’t call our English teaching successful if our students, however fluent, are ignorant of world problems, have no social conscience by using their communication skills for international crime, exploitation, oppression or environmental destruction”. On the other hand, Prodromou (1992:49) remarks that “Broadening students’ horizons is a traditional objective of educational activity and the expression takes on a new and more urgent meaning in the time of global environmental disasters and the collapse of international barriers.” In today’s context, education remains one of the most powerful tools to respond international challenges. In addition, language stakeholders are also expected to take an active role in addressing global concerns. Since the use of digital technologies in language teaching has increased rapidly, and language learning and teaching environments have undergone significant changes, it is inevitable that this evolution brings the interconnection between language, environment, and technology to the forefront. In an era defined by digital literacy, where younger generations are immersed in technology from birth, there is a growing need for interdisciplinary approaches to address shared global challenges. Therefore, inputting environmental sensitivity into global researches such as English language teaching becomes crucial for stirring up both individual and collective awareness. The two domains are rarely researched in literature together or separately; in fact, studies examining the integrated effects of ICT-supported language education and environmental content remain quite limited in English language education. To bridge this research gap, this study, aimed to address EFL students’ perspectives about the impact of digitally enhanced learning environments on the development of EFL students’ language skills, and the effects of integrating ecological content into the language learning process on their environmental awareness.

Focusing on both technologically supported language development experiences and attitudes towards environmental content, this research aims to contribute to sustainable education methods. Specifically, the study aims to investigate the following research questions:

What is the effect of ICT tools on the language proficiency of EFL students?

How does the integration of environmental content influence students’ environmental awareness?

What are the perceived environmental impacts of using ICT tools in English language teaching?

What are students’ attitudes toward the relationship between ICT tools and environmental issues in language learning contexts?

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Research design

The current study's methodological framework is based on mixed-methods research principles including the integration of both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis tools. According to Bryman (2004), the presence of qualitative data can significantly contribute to the analysis of quantitative data, and for Greene (2006), the aim of mixed methods is to explore, validate, and organize the accuracy of collected data. In the study, the use of survey as a quantitative method enabled data collection from a large sample size, while the inclusion of open-ended questions allowed for rich and in-depth insights from multiple perspectives.

The purpose of the study is to assess the impact of ICT tools on EFL students' language skills, as well as to evaluate the role of eco-themed digital materials in enhancing their environmental awareness. To achieve this objective, the researcher used a student questionnaire to investigate learners' perspectives on the digital and environmental experience in EFL setting. The questionnaire items were developed by the researcher based on a comprehensive examination of the existing literature to directly address the study's research questions. Quantitative data were obtained through Likert-scale questions designed to measure students' perceptions of ICT usage and English learning experiences, and ICT-supported eco-themed content and its effects on their environmental awareness. Qualitative data were collected through open-ended questions included in the same questionnaire, reflecting students' personal opinions and different ideas on the same topic. To ensure content validity, expert feedback was obtained from two instructors, with more than 15 years of academic experience, from the Department of English Language and Literature and the School of Foreign Languages.

### 2.2 Participants

The study sample consists of 250 first year students from several academic departments at a state university in Trabzon, Türkiye. The research was carried out towards the end of the 2024–2025 academic year with the pupils learning English as a foreign language. According to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and since the course textbook is designed for that level, they are expected to be at an A2 level of English proficiency. The study was conducted with the volunteers enrolled in the compulsory foreign language course, aiming to reach participants from various faculties. They completed an online consent form with details about the study and their consent for participation.

The demographic data in Table 1 indicate that the majority of participants were female (72.8%), and between the ages of 17 and 22 (only 0.8 were not). Most of the participants in the study majored in Law (36.0%), followed by Health Sciences (26.0%), Teacher Education (20.04%), and Informatics (17.6%). Regarding English proficiency, the majority identified as having an intermediate level (50.4%), with 42.08% at the beginner level.

**Table 1 Demographic data of the participants**

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Options</i>	<i>f (Frequency)</i>	<i>% (Percent)</i>
Age	17-22	247	98.08
	23-28	1	0.4
	28+	2	0.8
Gender	Female	182	72.8
	Male	68	27.2
Major	Teacher Education	51	20.04
	Law	90	36.0
	Health	65	26.0
	Informatics	44	17.6
English Level	Beginner	107	42.08
	Intermediate	126	50.4
	Upper-intermediate	13	5.2
	Advanced	4	1.6

### *2.3 Data collection*

In this study, the mixed-methods questionnaire was administered to students to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. The data collection instrument consists of a total of 31 questions. The first section of the survey includes 7 questions aiming to gather participants' demographic information. The second section comprises of 12 five-point Likert-scale items to assess the perceived effects of ICT tool usage on students' linguistic skills. The third section contains 9 five-point Likert-scale items that examine students' perceptions of environmentally themed content within the English learning process. The scale items range from 'strongly agree' (1) to strongly disagree' (5). The fourth and final section includes 3 open-ended questions exploring students' views on the role of ICT tools and content regarding the environment in English language learning, and cultural and ecological awareness.

Initially, a pilot study was conducted with 20 students through an online survey, administered following the approval of the university's ethics committee. Based on the results of the pilot study, the reliability coefficient (Cronbach's Alpha) was found as 0.797. A Cronbach's alpha of 0.80 indicated a satisfactory level for the overall reliability of the instrument (Lin et al., 2015). However, a closer inspection of the SPSS analysis showed that Item 12 (ICT tools are not effective in improving my English skills) in the second section negatively affected the internal coherence of the scale and was therefore removed. This amendment led to an improved Cronbach's alpha of 0.829, indicating a higher level of internal consistency in the revised instrument. The main data collection process was implemented via the final version

of the online questionnaire including 30 items distributed through Google Forms, focusing on the use of ICT tools and the impact on environmental awareness in English language learning. The data collection process therefore spanned two weeks.

**2.4 Data analysis**

The collected data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Firstly, quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed through descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25. This analysis aimed to explore EFL students’ perceptions about the relationship between ICT usage and English proficiency, ICT usage and environmental awareness, and the role of eco-digital content in supporting sustainable language education. Prior to conducting the descriptive analysis, Cronbach’s value of the main questionnaire was reassessed for all items and responses. Based on the final collected data, the Cronbach’s value was found to be 0.884. According to Taber (2017:1278), the Cronbach Alpha values between 0.84–0.90 are described as reliable, and values ranging from 0.76 to 0.95 are considered fairly high. For the qualitative data, thematic analysis was employed to examine responses from the open-ended questions in the questionnaire. Participants’ answers were grouped based on thematic similarities, and representative responses were presented accordingly.

**3. Results**

The analysis commences by examining three specific questions from the first section of the questionnaire. These items aim to explore participants’ frequency of ICT use, their preference for learning materials, and their exposure to environmentally themed English content. Frequency distributions for the items were presented, followed by a brief interpretation of the results.

The descriptive statistics results in Table 2 illustrate that a majority of the participants (37.2%) reported frequent use of ICT tools in English language learning, while only 6% stated they never used them. These results indicate a high level of ICT integration among EFL learners.

**Table 2** ICT Use of the participants

<i>ICT Use in English Language Learning</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Very often	37	14.8
Often	93	37.2
Sometimes	79	31.6
Rarely	26	10.4
Never	15	6.0

**Table 3 Preferred book type of the participants**

<i>Preferred Book Type in EFL Classrooms</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
E-book	183	73.2
Printed Book	55	22.0
Neither	12	4.8

The descriptive statistics results in Table 3 indicate that majority of the students (73.2%) had a strong preference in using digital resource in EFL classes. In contrast, only 22% preferred printed books, and a minimal percentage of 4.8% reported using neither. These results highlight the growing shift toward digital learning materials in language education.

**Table 4 Familiarity with environmental themes in English materials**

<i>Familiarity with Environmental Themes in English Materials</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Yes	192	76.8
No	15	6.0
Not Sure	43	17.2

Table 4 shows that a significant majority of participants (76.8%) reported having encountered environmentally themed content in English learning materials, suggesting a relatively high level of exposure. However, a smaller percentage (6%) indicated no prior experience while 17.2% were uncertain. These findings imply that environmental themes are becoming increasingly integrated into English language education.

### Quantitative Data Analysis Findings

Table 5 reveals strongly positive perceptions among EFL students regarding the role of ICT tools in developing their English language proficiency. Since lower mean values indicate stronger agreement, the findings highlight that learners mostly agree the benefits of ICT on multiple language skills. In addition, it can be inferred that the participants hold more positive attitude toward Items 2 (M=2.13), 6 (M=2.14), 1 (M=2.14), 5 (M=2.16), and 3 (M=2.24) respectively. Participants presented the highest level of agreement for item 2 related to ICT role on listening skill.

**Table 5 Perceptions of participants in ICT usage and English proficiency**  
*Rating Scale: Strongly Agree (SA = 1), Agree (A= 2), Neither Agree Nor Disagree (N = 3), Disagree (D= 4), and Strongly Disagree (SD= 5)*

<i>Part II- ICT Usage and English Proficiency</i>	<i>SA %</i>	<i>A %</i>	<i>N %</i>	<i>D%</i>	<i>SD %</i>	<i>Mean %</i>	<i>Std. Deviation %</i>
1- Using ICT tools contribute to the development of my English reading skills.	16.4	58.8	21.2	2.0	1.6	<b>2.14</b>	0.764
2- Using ICT tools contribute to the development of my English listening skills.	18.0	56.4	20.8	4.0	0.8	<b>2.13</b>	0.778
3- Using ICT tools contribute to the development of my English speaking skills.	15.2	53.2	26.0	3.6	2.0	<b>2.24</b>	0.825
4- English writing activities through ICT tools contribute to the development of my writing skills.	14.0	48.8	28.0	7.2	2.0	2.34	0.879
5- I learn English grammar more effectively through the use of ICT tools.	18.4	56.0	18.8	5.2	1.6	<b>2.16</b>	0.838
6- I believe ICT tools help me improve my English vocabulary.	18.8	56.4	18.0	5.6	1.2	<b>2.14</b>	0.827
7- Technology-based lessons help me increase my motivation to learn English.	13.6	47.2	27.2	10.0	2.0	2.40	0.914
8- I prefer digital materials over printed ones while learning English.	16.4	29.6	22.4	24.8	6.8	2.76	1.192
9- I am more inclined to complete English assignments when they are delivered digitally.	11.6	32.0	31.6	17.2	7.6	2.77	1.101
10- The use of ICT tools makes my learning English more enjoyable.	14.0	53.2	24.8	5.6	2.4	2.29	0.864
11- I feel more confident in technology-supported activities.	11.6	36.0	34.0	14.8	3.6	2.63	0.991

Similar levels of agreement are found in Item 6 and Item 1 related to ICT role on reading skill and vocabulary development. Besides, higher mean scores were noted in Items 5 and 3 related to grammar learning and speaking skills. These results suggest that students view ICT tools helpful for receptive skills such as listening and reading. Students have also positive views towards language acquisition fundamentals such as vocabulary and grammar experiences. Slightly higher mean value is also observed for productive skills such as speaking. EFL learners additionally perceive ICT as moderately supportive in enhancing motivation, increasing confidence in technology-based tasks, and encouraging engagement with digital learning materials. Standard deviation values, ranging from 0.764 to 1.192, with higher variability in Items 8 and 9, reflect diverse learner preferences regarding digital materials and task completion formats.

**Table 6 Perceptions of participants in ICT usage and environmental awareness**

<i>Part III- ICT Usage and Environmental Awareness</i>	<i>SA %</i>	<i>A %</i>	<i>N %</i>	<i>D%</i>	<i>SD %</i>	<i>Mean %</i>	<i>Std. Deviation %</i>
1- I consider that using digital materials in class causes less harm to the environment.	25.2	54.4	14.4	4.8	1.2	<b>2.02</b>	0.839
2- Learning English through eco-friendly technologies instead of using paper contributes to environmental protection.	30.8	56.0	9.2	2.4	1.6	<b>1.88</b>	0.793
3- Environmentally themed content makes English lessons more interesting.	17.2	54.0	21.2	6.4	1.2	2.20	0.842
4- My environmental awareness has increased while learning English.	7.6	43.2	30.4	16.4	2.4	2.63	0.928
5- It is important for English textbooks to include topics on environmental sustainability.	20.0	65.6	12.0	1.2	1.2	<b>1.98</b>	0.691
6- Integrating environmental themes in English lessons is unnecessary.	26.8	50.0	11.6	9.6	2.0	<b>2.10</b>	0.970
7- The digital tools used in English classes are ineffective in raising my environmental awareness.	13.2	50.0	23.6	12.0	1.2	2.38	0.903
8- My teacher effectively uses eco-friendly technological tools in class.	18.4	59.6	15.6	4.0	2.4	<b>2.12</b>	0.839
9- I consider that I have English vocabulary related to the environment.	10.4	49.6	32.4	4.4	3.2	2.40	0.855

Table 6 reveals that EFL students held generally positive attitudes toward the environmental benefits of ICT use in language learning. Since lower mean values indicate stronger agreement, the findings highlight that learners mostly agree with the benefits of ICT usage on environmental protection, and the inclusion of ecological topics in target language materials. The result implies that the participants looked more favourably on Items 2 (M=1.88), 5 (M=1.98), 1 (M=2.02), 6 (M=2.10), and 8 (M=2.12) respectively. Items 6 and 7 were reverse-coded to maintain interpretive consistency. Participants agreed most on Item 2 emphasizing that learning English through eco-friendly technologies supports environmental protection, and item 5 stressing that including topics on environmental sustainability in English textbooks is important. Moreover, it can be inferred that they highlight their support for integrating environmental themes into English lesson materials. Similarly, a majority of participants (54.4%) concurred with Item 1, which states that using digital materials in class reduces environmental harm. After reverse coding, Item 6 — which originally reflected negative perceptions — also revealed agreement with environmentally conscious attitudes. Therefore, Item 6 suggests that most students believe integrating environmental themes in English lessons is worthwhile. Item 8 indicates that students generally acknowledge that their teachers make effective use of eco-friendly technological tools in class. This signifies that environmentally conscious practices are

not only valued by learners but are also being actively implemented by instructors in the classroom setting. Items 3, 4, 7 (reverse-coded), and 9 reflect moderately positive perceptions, suggesting that while students widely support the integration of eco-friendly practices and content in English language learning, their confidence in their personal environmental literacy is somewhat less pronounced.

Qualitative Data Analysis Findings

The questionnaire’s fourth part includes three open-ended questions to elicit students’ opinions on digital tools in EFL classes, their role in environmental awareness, and the significance of environment-based themes in language learning. The responses were analyzed using thematic content analysis. Initially, all responses were carefully reviewed in Excel, and similar expressions were grouped together to identify common meanings. Based on these groupings, thematic categories were created. Finally, the frequency of each theme was determined to better understand the distribution of responses across different categories. Meaningless or irrelevant statements were excluded from the analysis, and were not included in the table. Since most of the students reported various answers in one question, only the frequencies were signified.

**Table 7 Findings on most commonly used ICT tools in English language learning (1st question)**

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Codes</i>	<i>f</i>
Most commonly used ICT tools in English language learning	Mobile Devices	Smart Phone/Tablet	134
	Language Learning Apps	Duolingo, British Council, HelloTalk, Khan Academy etc.	32
	Projectors/Smart Boards	Classroom technologies	29
	Computers	PC/ Laptop	29
	AI Tools	ChatGPT	18
	Digital Books	E-books/PDFs	17
	Translation Tools	Google Translate, Tureng, Deepl	16

Table 7 illustrates that the students reflected their experiences regarding the prevalent use of ICT tools in learning English. Most frequently used ICT tools in English language learning are the mobile devices (smartphones/tablets) with a frequency of 134. This indicates that learners heavily rely on portable technology due to its accessibility and the wide range of available language learning applications. Language learning apps, including Duolingo, British Council resources, HelloTalk, and Khan Academy, follow with a frequency of 32, reflecting a strong preference for interactive and structured platforms. Projectors/smart boards and computers each

have a frequency of 29, suggesting their continued relevance in classroom-based learning by instructors to display digital course materials for visual learning. It can be stated that AI tools, particularly ChatGPT, are gaining popularity especially among younger learners, and personalized learning is increasing, too. Digital books, such as e-books and PDFs, are also significant resources ( $f = 17$ ), especially chosen for their ease of use, portability, and eco-friendliness. Finally, translation tools like Google Translate, Tureng, and DeepL are frequently used ( $f = 16$ ), primarily for vocabulary assistance and comprehension support.

**Table 8** Findings on the role of ICT in English learning journey (1st question+)

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Codes</i>	<i>f</i>
Reasons for Choosing ICT tools in English Learning Journey	Instant Access to Information and Convenience	25
	Proficiency in English Learning (Vocabulary and Grammar Development, and Translation)	22
	Portability	18
	Visual & Auditory Support	10
	Efficiency in Practice	8
	Engagement & Motivation	6
	Environmental Concerns	4

Table 8 shows that the analysis of the question related to the first one presents several prominent themes based on participants' reasons for utilizing such technologies in EFL learning. The most prominent reason in using ICT tools is that they provide instant access to information. Technological tools play a crucial role in English language learning due to their convenience, accessibility, and efficiency. The second most cited reason indicates that tertiary level students generally prefer ICT tools in English learning for target vocabulary and grammar, and translation. As two students noted, "I need immediate answers when I don't understand something in English.", and "It's really helpful for looking up word meanings. I use it for translation." The most frequently cited reasons also include portability highlighting how new generation prioritize flexibility. ICT tools are easy to carry, practical and enable them study everywhere. One of the students remarked that "I use my phone to practice vocabulary while commuting." The other codes are identified as visual & auditory support, efficiency in practice, engagement & motivation, and environmental concerns. Additionally, the eco-friendly aspect (4 responses) of digital tools was noted as a positive factor. One of the participants uttered that "I prefer using digital tools because they are more environmentally friendly and help reduce my carbon footprint." Overall,

the integration of technology in language learning not only supports individual study habits but also fosters collaborative and interactive classroom experiences.

**Table 9 Findings on students’ recognition of environmental themes in English class (2nd question)**

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Codes</i>	<i>f</i>
Environmental Topics in English Course Materials	Adventure	48
	Nature/Environment/ Forest	35
	Outdoor Activities	33
	Places	29
	Travel /Vacation	25
	Weather	10
	Recycling	9
	History	7
	Global Warming	6

Half of the students stated that they remembered topics based on environment in their lessons, while the other half said they did not. The frequency of the respondents remembering environmental topics, along with the specific topics they mentioned, are presented in Table 9. The table shows that the most common theme is adventure (f=48), followed by nature/environment/forest (f=35) and outdoor activities (f=33). The findings reveal that students find dynamic and engaging content particularly memorable and relevant when it is compatible with environmental themes in English lessons. The respondents also presented a strong connection between language learning and real-life experiences in nature. Secondary themes such as places and travel/vacation also suggest an emphasis on cultural and geographical contexts. Less frequent themes reported by EFL students include recycling (f=9), history (f=7), and global warming (f=6). It is pointed out that critical environmental issues like recycling and global warming were less recognized by participants. Integrating these less frequent topics into language learning could contribute to a more comprehensive environmental education within English language instruction. In addition, since the participants are at an A2 level, it is possible that more advanced environmental topics such as climate change, recycling technologies, or sustainable development were not included in the course materials due to linguistic limitations. According to one of the participants, “Topics such as online applications, the use of electric vehicles, increased use of public transportation, and using the internet for research and online services are also related and contribute to the broader understanding of sustainability.”

**Table 10 Findings on integrating environmental topics into language learning (3rd question)**

Theme	Codes	f
<i>Integration of Environmental Sustainability Topics into Language Learning</i>	Yes	217
	I don't know	24
	No	9

The vast majority of students (f=217) viewed implementing environmental sustainability topics into language learning positively. A smaller group (f=24) stated uncertainty, while only few students (f=9) responded negatively. One of the participants stated that “instead of teaching through more entertaining topics, focusing on environmental issues which are seen as boring may decrease our interest.” However, these results indicate young EFL learners’ support for incorporating these themes into English language education may be because they consider not only do they contribute to linguistic development but also promote environmental awareness and global citizenship. On the other hand, the participants who expressed their opinions on this issue mostly remarked that caring for the environment is a universal responsibility. Some of the prominent utterances explaining why environmental sustainability topics should be in language learning process are given below: “... because this planet belongs to all of us, and we must take good care of it.”

*„Even though it is in another language, we still become more conscious about ecological topics.“*

*“Yes, I find the environmental topics useful because sometimes discussing these topics in a foreign language makes them more significant and engaging.“*

*“I believe it is beneficial because topics such as environment and nature are universal and should therefore be included in English lessons as well.“*

*“I find it beneficial because it not only raises awareness, but also helps us express that awareness across nations.“*

*“... environmental topics should be addressed and emphasized in every language.“*

*“Yes, I find it beneficial because it helps me show sensitivity toward the environment.“*

*“I find it beneficial, because even though it is discussed in another language, it helps raise our awareness and allows us to learn new information about this topic on a global scale.”*

*“In general courses, we tend to briefly touch on these topics, but when they are covered in English classes, I think they become more memorable because we translate them word by word, which helps reinforce our understanding over time.”*

*“It is clear that in this era, where technology and industry have significantly advanced, and environmental pollution has also increased. In my opinion, public unawareness has raised as well. Many people live without any knowledge of environmental sustainability and are therefore unaware of the harm they cause to the environment. I believe that including such topics in English lessons helps raise awareness, even if only to a small extent.”*

*“It should be included not only in English lessons but also in other courses, as it contributes to raising awareness.”*

*“I believe that the more we focus on this topic, the easier it becomes to integrate it into our daily lives.”*

*“Our environment affects our future, and everyone needs to be aware of this issue.”*

*“With the increasing pollution in our world and the resulting climate change, visuals used in lessons help us understand the beauty of nature and the importance of protecting it.”*

*“When we visit foreign countries, we see English words almost everywhere and , which is why I believe learning English is necessary from a cultural perspective as well.”*

*“I find it beneficial because it increases students’ interest in the lesson and provides the opportunity to discover many beautiful places around the world and learn about them.”*

*“Yes, we gain more knowledge about the environment, and the fact that it is taught in English makes it remarkable.”*

*“Environmental sustainability is a lifelong issue that requires continuous education and awareness.”*

*“Definetely yes because when we visit new places or interact with tourists, knowing how to recognize and introduce our environment becomes an advantage.”*

*“Since environmental issues concern all societies, they are also closely tied to culture and global responsibility.”*

*“Because nature is important for all of us, and as conscious individuals, it is everyone’s responsibility to protect it. Becoming aware of this issue makes it easier for us to take the necessary actions.”*

*“I believe that this is necessary. In fact, integrating technology in English lessons can make environmental topics more interactive and engaging, helping students better understand and retain key concepts.”*

Opinions about the incorporation of these topics into English learning display that participants appreciated the opportunity to connect language learning with real-world problems. They mostly agreed that this approach promotes environmental consciousness, supports global awareness, and makes lessons more meaningful. Besides, several students noted that covering these topics in English enhances their cultural understanding and communication skills, especially in contexts such as travel, tourism, and interacting with foreigners. From a cultural standpoint, this integration also helps students recognize that environmental issues, go beyond national boundaries, look from a different worldview, and enable to engage in cross-cultural dialogues, require collective understanding and action. Since this topic is a universal issue, the findings are expected to offer valuable guidance for the broader implementation of language teaching practices enriched with eco-friendly materials and supported by ICT. In this way, language learning becomes not just a linguistic process, but also a cultural and ethical experience that fosters global citizenship.

#### **4. Discussion**

The originality of this research lies in its in-depth evaluation of the integration of environmentally themed content and ICT-supported practices within English language learning, offering a comprehensive perspective on how these elements jointly enhance linguistic proficiency and foster ecological awareness. The study suggests that while learning English, learners should be attentive of acquiring knowledge that contributes to understanding and addressing global issues. As emphasized by Cates (2002:43), “The education profession has always recognized its unique responsibility in promoting peace, justice, and an active concern for the world’s problems.” Therefore, English language education holds a strategic basis in fostering not only communicative competence but also global awareness, ethical responsibility, and intercultural understanding among learners. Cates (2002:45) also asserts that “Global issues can

be included in teaching content even when students are just starting to learn the sounds of the foreign language.” In this respect, the current study seeks to explore the perception of younger, digitally native generations toward the incorporation of environmental issues in English language instruction. By using ICT tools, which are already embedded in their daily lives, the study aims to elicit learners’ perceptions of the connection between technology and the teaching of environment-related topics in English, as well as how these tools can foster a broader perspective that extends beyond textbooks, and contribute to linguistic proficiency. Similarly, learning a new language shapes learners’ attitudes and perceptions, motivates them to perform at their best and helps adopt positive values and cultural insights associated with the target language.

In today’s digitally and globally interconnected world, students are required to develop diverse literacy competencies that enable them to interact with a variety of textual, visual, and digital materials. Based on the first research question, the findings of this study indicate that students perceive ICT tools as highly beneficial, particularly for receptive skills such as listening and reading, as well as for vocabulary and grammar development. Also, EFL learners signified that these technologies increase their motivation and contribute to a more engaging and enjoyable language learning experience. For the second question asking the relationship between environmental content and students’ environmental awareness, the results reveal a strong positive correlation, meaning that putting eco-related topics in English lessons makes the learning process more engaging and fosters a sense of responsibility towards environmental issues. These findings are consistent with broader educational perspectives that highlights the pivotal role of environmental themes in language learning settings, where environmental education emerges as a prominent domain (Indriyani et al., 2024; Kirova & Veselinovska, 2011). Similarly, according to Auliayant et al. (2025), environmental education should be prioritized, students should be encouraged to take an active role, and a learning atmosphere that promotes a culture of sustainability should be established to achieve a long-term impact. Concerning the third question, students demonstrated favorable attitudes toward the ecological benefits of digital learning, such as reduced paper consumption and increased exposure to sustainability themes. Notably, learners express that using digital materials contributes to environmental protection and incorporating sustainability topics into English lessons is both relevant and meaningful. These attitudes also support eco-digital learning, which integrates digital literacy with environmental responsibility in education (Prihatin & Novianto, 2024). Finally, in relation to the fourth research question, the findings, particularly from the qualitative analysis, indicate predominantly positive perceptions. The participants emphasize the value of ICT tools in supporting self-directed learning and providing instant access to information. They highlight the applicability, portability, and motivational aspects of mobile and AI-based technologies, indicating a shift toward more personalized and ubiquitous forms of language learning. Moreover, inputting these environmental themes was perceived to strengthen student engagement by unifying classroom

content with global real-world concerns. Aligned with this approach, Erdem Mete (2018) asserts that literary texts including ecological topics can be seen as especially valuable in promoting environmental awareness among language learners. It can be asserted that learning a language is going beyond just getting to know grammar or vocabulary; it becomes an opportunity to discover new perspectives, engage with and respect to diverse cultures, and confront shared global challenges. Discussing environmental issues in English courses and favoring digital tools over paper-based materials might not only enhance linguistic competence but also nurture ecological awareness and intercultural sensitivity for 21st century learners. This illustrates that eco-digital language learning can be an effective approach in promoting language development and environmental, ethical and global awareness.

## **5. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the research is significant within the emerging field of eco-digital language learning, as it offers valuable insights into learners' perceptions of integrating environmental themes and digital tools in EFL contexts. For future research, the scope of the survey can be broadened by including language teachers in order to consult on their views on how they support and influence students' environmental awareness through instructional practices.

In a world increasingly challenged by global issues such as environmental degradation, climate change, and rapid digitalization, there appears to be a need to advance individuals equipped with critical thinking, communication skills, and environmental consciousness. For societies to collaborate effectively in addressing these global issues, a shared understanding and a common language of communication is essential. In this regard, English, the lingua franca of international discourse, plays a vital role in fostering intercultural dialogue and promoting shared values across borders. This engagement becomes even more meaningful and impactful within technology-supported language learning environments that will help take an active role in real-world issues. Therefore, the study adds to the emerging intersection of language education, environmental awareness, and digital literacy by exploring EFL learners' perspectives on integrating ICT tools and environmental sustainability topics into language instruction. Since environmental disasters such as floods, earthquakes, climate change, and forest fires are of increasing global concern, both general and foreign language education bear a responsibility to inform, raise awareness, and inspire action. Educational practices must therefore be inclusive of all generations and extend a sense of collective responsibility toward the earth. By identifying learners' views, this research provides valuable insights for educators and policymakers to design more responsive, globally relevant, and sustainability-oriented language learning experiences. Future research should explore its implementation across different proficiency levels and cultural contexts, as well as its long-term impact on learners' attitudes, behaviors, and competencies.

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# VOICES WITHOUT BORDERS: CLUBHOUSE, IRANIAN COMMUNITIES, AND THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW INTERCULTURAL REGISTER

*Sima Zolfaghari*

## Abstract

This study examines Clubhouse, the voice-based social media platform, as a site for intercultural education, with a particular focus on its adoption and adaptation in Iran. Drawing on intercultural competence frameworks (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006), it explores how Clubhouse's synchronous, audio-only format fosters informal, cross-cultural learning by enabling spontaneous, real-time interaction across national and linguistic boundaries. The Iranian case demonstrates how users navigate censorship, diaspora connections, and linguistic innovation, creating new Persian compounds and adopting hybrid communicative strategies. Themes such as poetry, political debate, language learning, and mysticism illustrate the platform's role as a digital agora where knowledge, attitudes, and skills of intercultural communication are negotiated and developed. The study therefore underscores the potential of emerging social audio platforms to advance intercultural competence while highlighting the unique challenges posed by political constraints and cultural adaptation.

**Keywords:** clubhouse, intercultural competence, Iranian diaspora, linguistic innovation, informal digital learning

## 1. Introduction

In the early months of 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic confined much of the world to homes and screens, a new form of online interaction began to capture public imagination: social audio. Among the emerging platforms, Clubhouse stood out as an application that allowed users to participate in live, voice-only conversations with strangers or acquaintances from around the world. Unlike text-based platforms such as Twitter or visually oriented platforms like Instagram, Clubhouse created ephemeral, synchronous "rooms" where people could join, listen, and speak without the pressures of curated images or permanent written records.

The format was deceptively simple: each room was an audio conference moderated by one or more users, with an audience who could request to speak. Yet the absence of visual cues and the presence of real human voices made interactions feel more immediate, intimate, and spontaneous than many existing online platforms

(Kraut & Resnick, 2012). The application's rise was meteoric: from a small, invite-only community of Silicon Valley technologists in mid-2020 to millions of users across the globe by early 2021 (Newton, 2021).

The appeal of Clubhouse lay not only in its novelty but also in its potential for cross-cultural encounters. Because rooms could be joined from anywhere in the world, the platform acted as a "digital agora" where individuals could exchange ideas, challenge perspectives, and encounter others whose cultural, linguistic, and political realities differed from their own.

For educators and researchers concerned with intercultural communication and intercultural competence, Clubhouse represents both an opportunity and a challenge. It is an opportunity because it lowers the threshold for direct, synchronous, human-to-human conversation across cultural boundaries; it is a challenge because such encounters occur without the contextual scaffolding of formal intercultural programs, and are therefore more susceptible to misunderstandings, stereotyping, or conflict (Holliday et al., 2010).

This chapter examines Clubhouse through the lens of intercultural education, with a particular focus on its adoption and adaptation in Iran. In doing so, it situates the platform within broader discussions of how emerging digital spaces influence, transform, and sometimes disrupt intercultural learning processes. Before turning to the Iranian context, however, it is necessary to lay out the theoretical foundations that allow us to understand how a voice-based social medium might serve as a site of intercultural education.

## **2. Theoretical framework: Clubhouse and intercultural education**

### *2.1. Intercultural education in the digital era*

Intercultural education refers to pedagogical and social processes that foster the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and critical awareness necessary for individuals to interact effectively and appropriately with people from other cultural backgrounds (Byram, 1997; UNESCO, 2013). Traditionally associated with formal education — classrooms, study-abroad programs, structured exchanges — intercultural learning increasingly occurs in informal and digital environments.

The rise of Web 2.0 and later platforms has multiplied the spaces in which intercultural encounters happen. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and now Clubhouse act as contact zones (Pratt, 1991), where individuals with differing linguistic repertoires, value systems, and lived experiences meet, often without mediation. Such platforms create possibilities for intercultural dialogue but also amplify tensions arising from cultural differences, asymmetrical power relations, and differing communicative norms (Chun, 2016).

The Council of Europe's White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue (2008) emphasizes that intercultural engagement requires conditions of equality, mutual respect, and open exchange. While traditional intercultural education seeks to create such conditions in structured settings, digital platforms like Clubhouse allow them

to emerge — or fail — in real time, under the unpredictable dynamics of online communities.

## 2.2. *Linking Clubhouse to Intercultural Competence Models*

One useful framework for analyzing Clubhouse in the context of intercultural education is Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Byram identifies five "savoirs" essential for intercultural communication:

**Attitudes** (savoir-être) — curiosity, openness, and readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures.

**Knowledge** (savoirs) — understanding of social groups, their practices, and cultural products.

**Skills of interpreting and relating** (savoir-comprendre) — ability to interpret documents or events from another culture and relate them to one's own.

**Skills of discovery and interaction** (savoir-apprendre/faire) — ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and to operate knowledge in real-time interaction.

**Critical cultural awareness** (savoir s'engager) — ability to evaluate perspectives, practices, and products critically.

Clubhouse rooms can provide fertile ground for each of these competencies:

**Attitudes:** By joining a discussion led by speakers from another country, a user may practice openness and curiosity.

**Knowledge:** Exposure to culturally specific debates or art forms enriches understanding of other societies.

**Interpreting and relating:** Participants must make sense of references or metaphors rooted in unfamiliar contexts.

**Discovery and interaction:** The live, unscripted nature of Clubhouse demands on-the-spot adaptation to linguistic and cultural cues.

**Critical awareness:** The diversity of voices can sharpen a listener's ability to evaluate multiple perspectives on the same topic.

Another widely cited approach is Deardorff's Process Model of Intercultural Competence (2006), which emphasizes that intercultural competence develops over time through a cyclical process involving attitudes, knowledge, skills, internal outcomes (adaptability, empathy), and external outcomes (effective communication and behavior). Clubhouse interactions — especially when sustained over multiple encounters in themed rooms — can support this cyclical process by providing repeated opportunities for intercultural engagement.

### *2.3. The audio dimension: Why voice matters*

One reason Clubhouse is particularly interesting from an intercultural education perspective is its audio-only format. Human voice carries prosody, emotion, hesitation, and emphasis that are absent from text-based interaction (Cohn, Mehl, & Pennebaker, 2004). Voice can build rapport more quickly, convey sincerity, and humanize the speaker. In intercultural encounters, these qualities can mitigate misunderstandings by providing additional cues to meaning and intention.

However, voice-based communication also poses challenges:

(1) Accent bias can influence how speakers are perceived (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010).

(2) Lack of visual cues can make it harder to interpret humor, irony, or politeness strategies across cultures.

(3) Turn-taking conventions vary between cultures, which may cause overlap or unintended interruptions.

These dynamics make Clubhouse both a promising and a complex site for intercultural education research.

### *2.4. Informal Learning and Digital Interculturality*

From an educational standpoint, Clubhouse represents a form of informal digital interculturality. Unlike formal online courses or institutional exchanges, participation is voluntary, unstructured, and self-directed (Livingstone, 2001). The learning that occurs is often incidental: a user may join a room out of curiosity and leave having acquired not only new knowledge about a cultural issue but also an expanded vocabulary in another language.

This connects to the concept of lifelong learning and the recognition that intercultural competence can be cultivated outside formal educational frameworks (European Commission, 2001). For scholars and practitioners in intercultural education, the challenge is to understand and harness such informal spaces without imposing structures that strip them of their spontaneity.

### 3. Clubhouse in the Iranian context: A case study

#### 3.1 *Digital and sociopolitical context*

Iran's digital environment is shaped by a complex interplay of technological innovation, state control, and user adaptation. The Iranian government has implemented extensive filtering of global platforms since the late 2000s, most notably Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. While some services such as Instagram have remained accessible without filtering until recently, others — Telegram, WhatsApp — have periodically been disrupted or throttled. In this mediated landscape, users have developed advanced digital resilience, routinely employing VPNs, proxy servers, and other circumvention tools to access global networks.

Clubhouse entered the Iranian digital sphere in early 2021, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, at a time when social isolation had increased the appetite for mediated connection. Its invite-only model created an aura of exclusivity, while its live, voice-only format offered a novel alternative to text- and image-based platforms. For many Iranians, Clubhouse appeared to provide a relatively secure, semi-private space in which to discuss sensitive topics, precisely because its conversations were not natively recorded and were more difficult to monitor than persistent textual content. At the height of its popularity, Clubhouse became a virtual meeting hall where Iranians from vastly different political, cultural, and geographic backgrounds could converse in real time.

#### 3.2 *Typology of Iranian Clubhouse rooms*

Iranian users have adapted Clubhouse to their own sociocultural needs, creating a diverse ecology of “rooms” that range from overtly political to deeply personal. The following thematic typology draws on participant observation and reports from users active during 2021–2025.

##### 3.2.1. Literary and cultural rooms

One of the most vibrant genres of Iranian Clubhouse rooms is dedicated to poetry and literature. In particular, classical Persian poetry rooms — often centered on canonical figures such as Ferdowsi, Hafez, Rumi, and Attar — serve not only as spaces for recitation but also for interpretation and discussion. These rooms, often moderated by literary scholars or passionate amateurs, encourage active participation, especially from younger audiences, who find themselves both challenged and inspired by the richness of classical texts. Among the most popular are weekly or annual series dedicated to reading and discussing the *Shahnameh* or the *Masnavi*, which have evolved into virtual traditions thanks to the consistent efforts of knowledgeable hosts and devoted communities.

##### 3.2.2. Political analysis and debate rooms

Perhaps the most internationally visible use of Clubhouse by Iranians has been for political dialogue. In these rooms, activists, journalists, academics, and ordinary

citizens engage in extended discussions of domestic and international politics. Such conversations often blur the boundaries between inside and outside Iran: participants may include residents of Tehran, exiled dissidents in Europe, and policy analysts in Washington, all in the same room. The format enables long-form political debate, but also demands careful self-censorship from those inside Iran, who are acutely aware of potential state monitoring.

### 3.2.3. Clubhouse as an alternative news source during crises

Beyond cultural and literary discussions, Clubhouse has also emerged as a vital platform for Iranians seeking real-time updates during moments of crisis. Whether during natural disasters, waves of public protests, or sharp economic downturns, many users have turned to Clubhouse rooms to hear firsthand accounts from people on the ground. The platform became especially active during the twelve-day war in the region, where Iranians gathered in large numbers to follow developments and share perspectives. These spontaneous rooms often function as informal news hubs, driven by direct, uncensored testimonies from within the country.

This growing reliance on Clubhouse for news stems from a deep and growing mistrust toward both state-run media inside Iran and even some foreign-based Iranian outlets. Over years of exposure to propaganda, censorship, and disinformation, many Iranians have come to question the credibility of traditional sources. In contrast, hearing from fellow citizens who are physically present at the scene — whether during a flood, a protest, or a political event — feels more authentic and trustworthy. Clubhouse, with its interactive and unfiltered nature, has thus become a space where lived experience can cut through the noise of competing narratives.

### 3.2.4. Language learning rooms

Language learning rooms on Clubhouse are inherently intercultural. Persian speakers use them to practice English, French, Turkish, or German with native or fluent speakers abroad, while learners of Persian join to refine their conversational skills. These exchanges are often informal, blending structured teaching with spontaneous conversation, and they model an egalitarian form of intercultural education where teaching and learning are reciprocal.

### 3.2.5. Mystical and astrological rooms

Another popular category involves astrology, tarot readings, numerology, and mystical discussion. These spaces often blend Persian mystical traditions with contemporary New Age influences. Participants may share personal birth charts or seek astrological guidance, creating a hybridized discourse that merges local cultural heritage with global spiritual trends.

### 3.2.6. Dating and social interaction rooms

In a society where public interaction between unrelated men and women is often restricted, Clubhouse provides a novel venue for informal socialization. Dating-

themed rooms range from light-hearted “get to know you” games to frank discussions about romantic relationships and gender expectations. In some cases, these rooms serve as intercultural meeting points for Iranians inside the country and those in the diaspora, who may have different norms regarding dating and intimacy.

### 3.2.7. Expert-led rooms: Psychology and therapy

A significant portion of Iranian Clubhouse activity is dedicated to specialized fields, with psychology standing out as one of the most engaging and frequently visited topics. In these rooms, professionals and mental health advocates create open discussions around issues such as anxiety, relationships, trauma, and emotional well-being. Some rooms even offer informal therapeutic sessions, where moderators — sometimes licensed psychologists — answer audience questions and guide them through self-reflective exercises. These gatherings often serve as a bridge for those who are hesitant or unable to seek formal therapy.

The accessible and conversational nature of these psychology-focused rooms helps normalize mental health discourse within the Iranian community. Listeners, many of whom may have never attended a therapy session, gain useful insights into emotional resilience, personal growth, and mental hygiene. In a society where mental health has long been stigmatized or misunderstood, these spaces provide a rare sense of safety and education, blending professional knowledge with peer support.

### 3.2.8. Financial literacy and market analysis

In parallel to the growing public interest in mental well-being, Iranian Clubhouse users have also shown increasing enthusiasm for financial topics. Rooms focused on the Iranian stock market, currency fluctuations, and broader economic trends attract large audiences. Expert investors, market analysts, and even amateur traders lead sessions to explain complex financial concepts in simple, accessible language. These discussions provide an important service for newcomers to the world of investing who may lack formal education in economics or finance.

By demystifying subjects such as cryptocurrency, inflation, and personal finance, these rooms contribute to financial empowerment and economic literacy. The participatory nature of Clubhouse allows users to ask questions in real time, fostering a more engaged and informed community. In a country where economic instability is a constant concern, such dialogues can be not only educational but also deeply reassuring.

### 3.2.9. Music, socializing, and informal learning

Music is another vibrant dimension of Iranian presence on Clubhouse. From casual gatherings where users share their favorite songs, to live performances and discussions about musical theory and history, the platform hosts a range of music-related rooms. In some sessions, musicians perform live or provide tutorials, offering informal yet effective learning opportunities for aspiring artists or curious listeners.

These music rooms often function as both educational and social hubs—spaces where people bond over shared tastes, discover new genres, or simply unwind after a long day. While some events are structured and moderated by professionals, others resemble intimate living room jam sessions, reinforcing the communal and democratic spirit of Clubhouse.

### 3.2.10. Local and cultural identity rooms

Clubhouse has also become a digital gathering space for diverse cultural, linguistic and regional communities. Rooms run by or for Bakhtiari speakers, southern Iranians, and speakers of Azerbaijani and Kurdish languages offer a platform to celebrate and preserve cultural heritage. These rooms are often multilingual and incorporate storytelling, music, and discussions of local customs, creating a sense of belonging for users who might otherwise feel marginalized in national conversations.

Afghan users, while smaller in number, have also carved out a distinct presence on Clubhouse, often focusing on literature, social issues, or political developments in Afghanistan.

### 3.2.11 Revisiting history to foster cultural cohesion

These historically and culturally focused rooms often serve a deeper social function as well. By revisiting sensitive issues such as ethnic relations, contested historical narratives, and long-suppressed regional identities, they offer a space for critical reflection and civic education. For many participants, these discussions are not just about the past — they are about the present and future of Iran. Engaging with such topics through scholarly dialogue can help counteract divisive narratives, whether fueled by separatist agendas from outside the country or by top-down policies within the state itself. For some, education in these areas becomes a way to reinforce cultural and territorial integrity, promoting mutual understanding rather than ethnic tension, and encouraging a more inclusive vision of Iranian identity.

## 3.3 *Personal Note: A linguist's introduction to clubhouse*

The initial motivation behind writing this article stems from my own unexpected entry into the Clubhouse community. I was invited by friends to participate in rooms where users were grappling with a wide range of questions about language — its definitions, distinctions between dialect and language, the idea of a “mother tongue,” and whether it is more effective to teach in the mother tongue or the mother tongue itself. These conversations led to dozens of hours of presentations, dialogue, and Q&A sessions.

Over the past two to three years, I've watched with great satisfaction as many of the distinctions and arguments I once had to explain at length have now become common knowledge within the Clubhouse community. This shared learning experience stands as a testament to the platform's unique role in enabling serious, grassroots education through open conversation.

#### 4. The Iranian context: Clubhouse as a site of intercultural negotiation and innovation

The adoption of Clubhouse in Iran exemplifies how a global digital platform can be culturally and politically reinterpreted, becoming a unique space for intercultural communication under particular constraints. Iran's complex social, political, and linguistic landscape shapes how users engage with Clubhouse, reflecting broader themes of diaspora connectivity, language politics, and digital resistance.

##### *Clubhouse's rise in Iran: Motivations and social dynamics*

Despite Iran's strict state control over internet access and censorship, Clubhouse gained rapid popularity among Iranians starting in early 2021. Several factors explain this phenomenon:

**Reduced censorship compared to other platforms:** Unlike Twitter or Facebook, which are heavily filtered or blocked in Iran, Clubhouse's voice-only, ephemeral rooms made it harder for authorities to monitor or filter content in real time. This relative "safe space" attracted users seeking freer expression.

**Privacy and anonymity:** The absence of visual or written permanent records eased users' fears of surveillance, making discussions on politically sensitive topics more accessible.

**Diaspora connections:** Iranian expatriates and activists abroad used Clubhouse to connect with those inside Iran, facilitating intercultural dialogue that bridges geographical and political divides.

**Cultural and intellectual engagement:** Iranian users created rooms and clubs centered on Persian poetry, literature, mysticism, astrology, and socio-political analysis, blending traditional cultural themes with modern discourse.

**Prestige of early adoption:** In digitally literate circles, being on Clubhouse early conferred social capital and signaled global connectivity.

These motivations illustrate how Iranians appropriated Clubhouse not merely as a social tool but as a multifaceted platform for intercultural interaction and informal education, aligning well with the intercultural competence frameworks outlined earlier.

Interestingly, the Iranian Clubhouse ecosystem has produced its own "in-platform" celebrities — individuals who gained fame primarily through their activities on Clubhouse rather than bringing pre-existing fame from outside. Contrary to what

one might expect, most mainstream Iranian celebrities from cinema, music, or sports have shown little interest in joining or maintaining a presence on the platform. Instead, the public figures of Clubhouse are often ordinary users who have mastered the art of attracting large audiences. Some do so through thought-provoking discussions, while others employ more controversial or performative tactics—crafting exaggerated personas, creating fictionalized identities, or engaging in verbal conflicts to boost their visibility. While such behaviors are not unique to Clubhouse and can be found on virtually any social platform, this paper only briefly acknowledges them before returning to its primary focus: the platform’s educational potential.

### 5. Linguistic innovation and the emergence of new Persian compounds

Clubhouse has left a distinct mark on contemporary Persian, particularly in its introduction of new terminology drawn from English platform-specific jargon. Many terms were imported wholesale, with minor phonological adaptation; others were translated or calqued into Persian. For example:

- The English word “**room**” is commonly translated as “اتاق” (**otāq**) but Clubhouse users coined “**روم**” (**room**) as a loanword, which has since entered colloquial usage.
- Terms like “**mod**” (moderator) became “مدیر روم” (**modir-e room**) or simply “مد” (**mod**).
- Expressions for “raising a hand” to speak are translated into Persian idiomatic phrases blending gesture and digital action metaphors.

This hybrid lexical formation demonstrates how digital intercultural contact reshapes language in situ, creating new sociolinguistic practices.

Below are some more examples:

English term	Persian form	Adaptation type
Room	روم (rūm)	Phonological loan
Moderator	مدراتور (moderatūr)	Loan via French
Speaker	اسپیکر (espīker)	Direct loan
Mute	میوت کردن (myūt kardan)	Hybrid loan + Persian verb
Unmute	آنمیوت کردن (ān-myūt kardan)	Hybrid loan + Persian verb
Raise hand	ریز هند کردن or دست بلند کردن	Calque (literal translation)
Club	کلاب (kalāb)	Phonological loan

English term	Persian form	Adaptation type
Bio	بايو (bāyo)	Shortened loan
Ping	پینگ کردن (pīng kardan)	Hybrid loan + verb
Stage	استیج (estēj)	Loanword

To illustrate the abundance and diversity of new compounds formed with three frequent Persian light verbs, the following is a compiled list of common Persian Clubhouse verbs built with کردن (*kardan*) that I have heard or seen used by Iranian users, particularly during the app’s peak popularity.

Many of these are loanwords or hybrids mixing English and Persian, and they reflect the in-group jargon of Clubhouse rooms.

### 1. Clubhouse “کردن” verbs (Persian + clubhouse slang)

1. میوت کردن (*mute kardan*) – to mute someone’s microphone
2. آنیموت کردن (*unmute kardan*) – to unmute the microphone
3. ریست کردن (*reset kardan*) – to reset the room (often by moving everyone down or restarting)
4. پینگ کردن (*ping kardan*) – to invite someone into the room
5. ریموو کردن (*remove kardan*) – to remove someone from the stage or the room
6. بلاک کردن (*block kardan*) – to block a user
7. ریپورت کردن (*report kardan*) – to report a user for abuse or violations
8. فالو کردن (*follow kardan*) – to follow a user
9. آنفالو کردن (*unfollow kardan*) – to unfollow a user
10. ریفرش کردن (*refresh kardan*) – to refresh the participant list (often by pulling down the screen)
11. آوت کردن (*out kardan*) – to publicly expose someone (social meaning)
12. اینوایت کردن (*invite kardan*) – to invite someone to the app or to the stage
13. مدیریت کردن (*moderate kardan*) – to act as a moderator
14. آپدیت کردن (*update kardan*) – to update the app
15. ریکوست کردن (*request kardan*) – to request to speak (raise hand)
16. دراپ کردن (*drop kardan*) – to drop someone from the stage or to leave the room
17. ریکورد کردن (*record kardan*) – to record the audio (officially or secretly)
18. ساپورت کردن (*support kardan*) – to support a user, event, or topic
19. چت کردن (*chat kardan*) – to chat in the backchannel (text DMs)

20. اسکرین‌شات کردن (*screenshot kardan*) – to take a screenshot
21. هک کردن (*hack kardan*) – to hack the system or use exploits
22. باگ کردن (*bug kardan*) – to intentionally trigger a bug or glitch
23. پلی کردن (*play kardan*) – to play an audio file through the mic
24. پاز کردن (*pause kardan*) – to pause audio or discussion
25. کپی کردن (*copy kardan*) – to copy text/links in chat or profile
26. پیست کردن (*paste kardan*) – to paste copied text in bio/chat
27. پابلیک کردن (*public kardan*) – to make the room public
28. پرایوت کردن (*private kardan*) – to make the room private
29. آرشیو کردن (*archive kardan*) – to save a recording or session notes
30. سیو کردن (*save kardan*) – to save data, images, or notes from a room

The other frequent Persian light verbs are **زدن** (*zadan*, “to hit/strike”) and **داشتن** (*dashtan*, “to have”). The following is the English rendering of Persian Clubhouse slang formed with these verbs, with context and nuances preserved. The sample sentences are not meant to reflect how Persian is naturally spoken, but rather to illustrate the contexts in which these new compounds are used.

### 2. “Zadan” (زدن) in Persian clubhouse speech

In Persian, *zadan* literally means “to hit/strike,” but in digital slang it conveys quick, informal, or sudden actions. In Clubhouse, it is often used for creating or triggering something, especially social interactions.

Most common “*zadan*” compounds in Clubhouse Persian:

1. *room zadan* – to create a room  
“Let’s *room bezanim* about last night’s movie.”
2. *ping zadan* – to ping/invite someone into the room  
“I *ping zadam* a few people to join us.”
3. *request zadan* – to send a speaking request  
“If you have something to say, *request bezan*.”
4. *bug zadan* – to cause/trigger a glitch (intentionally or not)  
“He *bug zad* and everyone dropped from the stage.”
5. *reset zadan* – to reset the room (refresh discussion/list)  
“Let’s *reset bezan* so new people can join the conversation.”

### 3. “Dashtan” (داشتن) in Persian clubhouse speech

*Dashtan* means “to have,” and in Clubhouse it is mostly descriptive, used to talk about states, conditions, or ongoing issues rather than actions.

Most common “*dashtan*” compounds in Clubhouse Persian:

1. *bug dashtan* – to have a glitch  
“The room *bug dare*; the list isn’t updating.”
2. *echo dashtan* – to have an echo in one’s audio  
“Your mic *echo dare*, wear headphones.”

3. *voice dashtan* – to have the mic / to have speaking turn (sometimes humorous)  
“He has voice now, let’s listen.”
4. *moshkel-e seda dashtan* – to have sound problems  
“I can’t hear you, I *moshkel-e seda daram*.”
5. *moshkel-e internet dashtan* – to have internet problems  
“You’re cutting out — you *moshkel-e internet dari*.”
6. *tadakhol dashtan* – to have interference/noise  
“Don’t speak near another phone, you *tadakhol dari*.”
7. *modirati dashtan* – to have moderator privileges (often jokingly)  
“You *modirati dari*, control the mics.”

Note: *dashtan* gives a sense of a state rather than an act, which is why you hear “*bug dashtan*” (having a bug) but not “*bug zadan*” in the same sense — *bug zadan* implies causing it, not just having it.

### *The Word “bug” and its derivatives in Persian clubhouse culture*

In Persian-speaking Clubhouse communities, the English tech term “bug” has been adopted and combined with Persian verbs to create a range of expressions,. Originally, “bug”<sup>2</sup> refers to a software glitch or error, but in Clubhouse Persian it has expanded to cover not only technical malfunctions but also playful, social, and even metaphorical uses.

#### 1 باگ داد – *bâg dâdan* (“to give a bug”)

- Literal/technical: To trigger a glitch intentionally or accidentally.  
Example (technical): “If you turn your mic on and off, it gives a bug and your voice disappears.”  
Example (playful): “He gave a bug — suddenly jumped up to the speakers in the middle of the debate!”

#### 2 باگ خوردن – *bâg khordan* (“to be hit by a bug”)

- To experience a glitch.  
Example: “The room got hit by a bug and everyone was dropped.”

#### 3 باگ گرفتن – *bâg gereftan* (“to take/grab a bug”)

- Sometimes means exploiting a glitch for personal gain.

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<sup>2</sup> This word has an interesting history: In the 1940s, in one of the early computers (Mark II), a real moth entered the circuitry and caused a malfunction. When the engineers found it, they wrote in their logbook: “*First actual case of bug being found.*” Since then, **bug** has been used metaphorically to refer to any kind of error or malfunction.

In Persian, among internet users (including Iranian Clubhouse users), “**having a bug**” means that a system or application is experiencing a technical problem or unexpected behavior. In Clubhouse, this term is usually used in two senses: **Technical meaning:** For example, “*Clubhouse has a bug*” means a user’s voice is cutting out, the listener list is not displayed correctly, or the microphone won’t activate. **Informal/metaphorical meaning:** Users sometimes refer to strange or unexpected features of the app itself (which might even be amusing for some) as a “bug.” For example, “*bug-e dadan-e mute*” (“mute bug”) refers to being able to secretly toggle your microphone on and off.

Example: “She grabbed a bug that kept her always on the stage.”

4. باگ میکروفون / باگ صدا – *bâg-e sedâ / bâg-e microphone*
  - Audio or microphone malfunction.
5. باگ لیست – *bâg-e list*
  - When the list of listeners/speakers doesn’t display correctly.
6. باگ فالو / آنفالو – *bâg-e follow / unfollow*
  - When the system follows or unfollows people without user action.
7. باگ بالا آوردن / بالا پریدن – *bâg-e bâlâ âvardan / bâlâ paridan*
  - When a user suddenly appears in the speaker section without requesting it.
8. باگ دست – *bâg-e dast* (“hand bug”)
  - When the “raise hand” icon malfunctions or activates by itself
9. باگ دادن عمدی – *bâg dâdan-e amdi* (“intentional bug-giving”)
  - Deliberately using a system flaw to create humor or attract attention.

This playful and productive adaptation shows how a highly technical English loanword entered Persian digital speech through Clubhouse and quickly developed a social and humorous layer of meaning. Users not only talk about real bugs in the app but also use “bug” metaphorically for unexpected social events, awkward moments, or “magical” jumps in the speaker hierarchy.

These examples are by no means the entire set of new Clubhouse-related terms in Persian, and the list could certainly be expanded. However, to avoid unnecessary length and keep the focus on the main line of discussion, I will limit myself to these. Other examples, if I were to mention them, would include expressions such as *zir mic raftan* (“going under the mic”), *replay bâz/baste budan* (“replay being open or closed”), or *dar audience neshashtan / goosh dâdan* (“sitting in the audience” / “listening”), among others.

These linguistic innovations are significant for intercultural education because they reflect not only lexical borrowing but also the integration of platform-specific cultural practices into Persian-speaking contexts. The hybrid forms (*mute kardan, ping kardan*) illustrate how Iranian users linguistically domesticate foreign concepts, embedding them into Persian morphosyntactic structures.

## 6. Intercultural education implications

From an intercultural education perspective, Iranian Clubhouse rooms function as informal yet potent arenas for developing intercultural communicative competence. Participants navigate cultural differences, linguistic diversity, and political sensitivities in real time. In political rooms, they learn strategies for perspective-taking and managing disagreement. In literary rooms, they experience cross-cultural literary appreciation. Language learning rooms are direct examples of intercultural pedagogy in action, where both teacher and learner roles are fluid.

Clubhouse also fosters **critical digital literacy**: users must assess privacy risks, evaluate sources, and negotiate meaning across languages and cultural contexts. These are core competencies in contemporary intercultural education, though they emerge here in self-organized, non-institutional settings.

## 7. Conclusion

The Iranian experience with Clubhouse demonstrates how a global platform can acquire locally specific functions while still enabling transnational intercultural exchange. Its temporary openness and distinctive audio format made it a powerful tool for Iranians seeking connection, dialogue, and expression beyond state-controlled media channels. Linguistically, it has introduced a micro-lexicon of platform-derived terms into Persian, leaving a lasting imprint on digital discourse. From an intercultural education standpoint, it offers a compelling example of how informal digital spaces can foster the very competencies—empathy, adaptability, critical awareness — that formal education seeks to cultivate.

Furthermore, the Iranian case of Clubhouse vividly illustrates the platform’s potential as a site of informal intercultural education. Users navigate censorship, linguistic diversity, and diaspora relations to create a rich, dynamic digital environment fostering the development of intercultural competencies. These real-world practices resonate closely with the theoretical frameworks discussed earlier, confirming the importance of emergent digital spaces for intercultural learning.

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## **II. LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, AND LINGUISTIC CHALLENGES IN GLOBAL EDUCATION**

**INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION OR LANGUAGE IMPERIALISM IN  
EDUCATION: THE CASE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN THE INTERNATIONAL  
BACCALAUREATE DIPLOMA PROGRAMME**

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**Abstract**

This research aims to investigate the interplay between intercultural communication and linguistic imperialism by examining how English-medium instruction in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) affects Persian diaspora students in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and its famous city of Dubai. Although the IBDP promotes multilingualism and cultural diversity within multicultural societies such as the UAE, the structural dominance of the English language as the language of instruction in these schools raises concerns about the erosion of the heritage language competence amongst Persian diaspora in the country. The concern is more visible particularly in culturally embedded elements such as slang, metaphors, and proverbs and their use in the language. Drawing on a constructivist-interpretivist framework, the study employs a mixed method exploratory approach through two pilot case studies. The first examines generational slang comprehension between Persian-speaking parents and their children, while the second assesses students' knowledge of literary devices and proverbs in Persian. Findings suggest that students, although officially bilinguals, show significantly reduced proficiency in their mother tongue, resulting in a measurable communicational gap and cultural differences amongst two consecutive generations. This study argues that although the current implementation of the IBDP's Language A: School Supported Self Taught (SSST) option gives hope to parents in retaining the mother tongue for their children, it is not sufficient reinforcement for native like fluency. This phenomenon aligns with the introduced concept of soft linguistic imperialism in the paper, where English replaces heritage language not through coercion but through promising a prosperous life. The paper concludes that despite the IBDP's inclusive goals, its language policy in practice may contribute and result in cultural displacement, specifically within diaspora communities.

**Keywords:** intercultural communication, language imperialism, English language, IB diploma programme

## 1. Introduction

Language as a communicational tool carries with it other specifications, which include but are not limited to information exchange, and the deeply imbedded human identity, community, and cultural norms of each society in which that language is being used on a daily basis. As Hall (1997) claims, language can play a constitutive role in constructing social and personal identities and help shape personal identities and intrapersonal connections in societies. In this globalised world, due to the increased mobility across continents and normalised cross-cultural interactions, intercultural communication, or the ability to exchange ideas and meanings across cultural and linguistic boundaries, is increasingly becoming a fundamental competency (Byram, 1997). Therefore, this form of interaction can heavily rely on a shared medium, with the English language, as the dominant global tongue, filling that position.

However, the central role English plays in this situation is not without controversy, as scholars such as Philipson (1992) have introduced the significant and well-known concept of linguistic imperialism. This term describes the way in which English, as a dominant language, at least historically, has replaced or displaced local and minority languages, endangering linguistic diversity and, definitely, contributing to cultural erosion. Linguistic imperialism, according to Philipson, is the dominance of a language asserted and maintained by setting up said language as the primary one, and by continuously reconstituting structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages. This phenomenon is clearly visible even in educational settings, where the adoption of English-medium instruction is normally seen as a symbol of prestige and modernity, especially in countries where English is not the national language and is not spoken in daily life.

As a result, there is a growing academic consensus that English has become entrenched as the global *lingua franca*, a language of international academia, commerce, and diplomacy (Seidlhofer, 2005; Crystal, 2003). The widespread use of the English language is seen as both inevitable and, of course, advantageous for global communication; although, it might have other unforeseen downsides. In contrast, multilingualism has always been celebrated in the educational sphere for its cognitive, social, and academic benefits (Cummins, 2000; Garcia & Wei, 2014); however, multilingualism and using English as *lingua franca* differ in their roots and nature. In this line of study, scholars have increasingly raised concerns due to the imbalance created by the dominance of English over other languages, particularly in the international education context, where it is often used for development, resulting in the status of students' heritage or mother tongue being in the poor condition we currently find it. This dynamic is clearly visible in international schools, especially those that follow the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum. While the IB curriculum promotes ideals of international mindedness, intercultural diversity, and linguistic diversity (IBO, 2020), English remains the primary language of instruction in IB schools globally. Therefore, and according to a recent IB study on intercultural

understanding, the framework often works with English as the default language even when it stresses and promotes multilingualism, and with schools prioritising English proficiency over full competency in other languages, including the mother tongue (IBO, 2024). Moreover, scholars such as Canaggarajah (1999) and Yamada (2023) argue that the power of English, and its appeal through media, technology and academic opportunity may today result in a form of neo-imperialism in linguistic competency for all the world, where cultural and linguistic homogenisation occurs not only by coercion but through through promises of the grandeur, benefits, and prestige of the English language. This, in return, has resulted in young multilingual students becoming what Fishman (1991) brands as “language shifters”, who gradually lose fluency in their mother tongue and forget cultural knowledge in their heritage languages.

The context of this study is the Persian diaspora community residing in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where the international schooling system, which primarily uses English as the language of instruction, is the norm for middle and upper-income expatriate families. Therefore, many Persian families choose the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) for its global recognition and liberal pedagogical orientation. The IB curriculum, in an attempt to offer support for linguistic diversity, allows for choosing the mother tongue as language A: Literature Self-Taught (SSST) option. This option allows students to study literature in their mother tongue, while in practice, this is often minimal, fragmented, and heavily reliant on either parental support or external tutors, who are familiar with the IB system but extremely difficult to find. All these issues lead to a critical point of tension where, on the one hand, Persian parents value English as a pathway to the academic and economic success of their children, while on the other hand, they express concerns about the erosion of Persian language competence. This erosion of the mother tongue includes and is not limited to culturally embedded forms of language use such as slang, metaphor, and proverbs, or features that require cultural context, not only vocabulary knowledge. Therefore, the dominance of the English language in the IB schools, combined with the sociocultural prestige that is attached to the English language in the UAE, has significantly contributed to a situation where the Persian language is reduced to a second or even foreign language for second-generation students residing in the country. This phenomenon is consistent with trends identified by Skutnabb-Kangas (2000), who stresses that minority languages often become endangered not through prohibition but through neglect and marginalisation within supposedly inclusive systems.

The goal of this study is to examine the interplay between intercultural communication and linguistic imperialism by investigating how English-medium instruction in the IB diploma programme can affect the mother tongue proficiency of Persian diaspora students in the UAE and its famous city of Dubai. While the IB promotes and promises multilingualism, there is a significant research gap concerning the actual effectiveness of the Language A offered by the IB and in preserving the

cultural and linguistic fluency of the mother tongue, particularly among students from non-English-speaking backgrounds in the multicultural context of the UAE.

### *1.1 Research Aim*

The aim of this research is to investigate whether the use of the English language as the language of instruction in the IBDP facilitates intercultural communication at the expense of heritage language or mother tongue maintenance, with a focus on Persian-speaking students in the UAE.

### *1.2 Research Questions*

How does participating in English-medium IBDP influence the comprehension and proficiency of culturally rich elements of their mother tongue (e.g., metaphors, slang, and proverbs in the Persian language among diaspora students)?

How effective is the IB Language A: Self-Taught program in maintaining and developing Persian language competence among these students?

To what extent does IBDP promote to a communication gap between Persian students and their monolingual Persian-speaking parents?

### *1.3 Hypotheses*

H1. Persian diaspora students who reside in the UAE and study in the IBDP demonstrate significantly lower proficiency in culturally embedded language elements compared to monolingual Persian speakers back in Iran.

H2. The IB Language A SSST option provides insufficient reinforcement for the development of native-like fluency to these Persian diaspora students due to a lack of formal instruction and curriculum integration.

H3. Increased exposure to English language as a prevailing language both in academic and social contexts of these students contribute to a widening communicative gap between parents and their children.

### *1.4 Structure of the study*

This paper begins with a literature review exploring the theoretical constructs of intercultural communication, language imperialism, and multilingualism in international educational systems. The next section details the methodology used to assess the linguistic proficiency of Persian IBDP students and their parents, including two pilot studies. Then the results are presented and analysed in relation to the study's hypotheses. The paper then concludes by discussing the implications of these findings for curriculum development, language policy, and parental engagement in international education.

## 2. Literature Review

The terms “intercultural” and “multicultural” has usually been used interchangeably by researchers in the field and it is imperative to take a look at what has been said about the terms by those involved. To put it simple Gundara (2000), claims that the term ‘multicultural’ is used by those European researchers who are native English speakers, while ‘intercultural’ is used by those who are non-native speakers of the language. This geography-based definition is nowhere near sufficient to explain the dilemma of understanding the term, especially in an academic context. On the contrary, May (1999), focusing on diversity in its broad sense, claims that multicultural could describe the natural behaviour of a society that contains a number of cultures while intercultural could describe the interactions within the cultures themselves. On the other hand, multiculturalism in education could have various means as well. For instance, having multiple religious and ethnic cultures within a society and an institution could be considered a case of multiculturalism. In such institution every member brings with him/her their own culture and sets of beliefs which obviously differ from other members. Having this in mind a number of scholars then have associated multiculturalism or interculturalism with immigration, and those students who come from a diverse linguistic, cultural, or religious background. However, this too is a very shallow definition of the term as even today, there are still countries that within their borders hold different cultures native to the country itself. For instance, in Middle Eastern countries such as Iran, the UAE, Kuwait, and Oman, to name but a few, multiculturalism is a norm of the society, where in the case of Iran, Persian Turks, Kurds, Lors, Baluch, and Armenians have lived alongside each other and each group has its own culture, language, religion and faiths. Another instance is India, where the number of different cultures within the same country surpasses the norm due to the large population of the country. Therefore, to look at a phenomenon such as multiculturalism or interculturalism, and by giving a general definition, scholars have wandered away from unbiased research which would lead to a fruitful result. Due to the close connections between intercultural and multicultural and for the purpose of this research, intercultural and multicultural education will be employed interchangeably, as they both share the same goals when it comes to education.

Therefore, intercultural/multicultural education has at its core the basic idea that children with diverse linguistic, cultural and religious background, who study within the same institution should have the same opportunities and that the diversity and differences should be respected and more importantly maintained. Now, the most difficult and yet important aspect here lies in the word ‘maintaining the differences and the diversity’, which could cause issues and problems in an educational institution. Castles (2004) observes that valuing diversity within a curriculum, means including and recognising customs such as dress codes, food, and religious attitudes of students accounted for in classroom practice and wider organisation of the school. In other words, it directs to a liberal educational system where plurality and diversity

are celebrated and accepted as normal within the educational system in question. However, as in any other aspect of life, liberty as defined here, even within education as an important aspect of society seems like a hopeful dream and easier said than done. It is exactly at this point that one could argue, English as the global lingua franca could play an important role in uniting the next generation of human kind, by using the same communicational tool. However, the degree of this influence and common use of the language is in dire need of research and study.

On the other hand, the dominance of a language does not end within the borders of communicational needs only, as any language carries with it culture, religious specifications, faith, and beliefs of a nation or even a group within the nation. This is exactly where researchers such as Philipson (1992), Canagarajah (1999) and Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) have discussed the fear of a new imperialism yet in an entirely different form, that being linguistic imperialism. The fact that multilingualism is practiced around the world today, the ascendancy of the English language has had a rather negative impact on different countries around the globe, endangering languages and cultures based on many different factors. While it is simply unimaginable to see a world where English is not the common language of communication, the immense impact the language carries with it has not previously been studied and evaluated. Therefore, it would be naïve to resist the global reach of English especially within the sphere of academic communication. Still, it should also be noted that in those countries where English is not the standard language, knowledge of the latter is considered a prestigious qualification, and simply possessing that knowledge forms an elite class in certain societies. Such prominence brings with it the immense cultural impact, on the younger generations, of movies, music, social media, easier connectivity via advanced technology and vast amount of accessible knowledge. This well-known trend will undoubtedly enable English to further its influence on the next generation, as the knowledge of English has rooted itself deep into the educational systems worldwide. This simply means that language learning is itself not a neutral phenomenon. For, as in a very liberal mindset, any language learning brings with it some linguistic and cultural concepts that are naturally transmitted into the language learning process and consequently into the learners themselves.

It is clearly evident, therefore, that many languages around the world have been impacted by the power of English as the global lingua franca. The number of borrowed English words is worryingly increasing in languages such as Persian, Arabic, and Urdu to name but a few. It is not the borrowed words that are the main concern here, however, but the cultural effect English has had on societies. For instance, in Iran the new generations celebrate Valentine's Day whole heartedly, but, if asked about Sepandarmazgan, the Persian equivalent of this lovers' day, they have no idea what or when the day is. This repercussion of the English language is critical as it changes the way languages are taught and, even more importantly, what remains of that language to be passed on to the next generation. Philipson (2012) goes as far as to claim that linguistic imperialism could be the cause of discrimination and inequality within the same country, as some languages may become minority languages while others could

be endangered or disappear altogether. In other words, English overshadows native culture, values and heritage leading to language shift and death.

### **3. Multilingualism and language diversity**

A natural consequence of diverse societies is having a multicultural population. As Malik (2015) elaborates that 'multiculturalism' refers to societies that have both a diverse population, most likely due to constant immigration, and managerial policies put in place to govern such a society. Multiculturalism can be seen around the globe. In Europe, this phenomenon can be observed after the Second World War and with intercontinental migration that happened at the time. In other countries, such as those in the Middle East, multiculturalism has always been the case, due to population density, flourishing trade and easier mobility across countries in the area. Therefore, to put it simply, multicultural, to many, simply means a society in which several cultures reside together, each culture being grouped by race, ethnicity and language (Edelstien, 2005). However, this coexistence does not mean those cultures do not have an impact on each other, as a multicultural society does not only represent diverse ethnic groups or different religions. It also acknowledges and values the diversity brought into the society that makes it possible for different ethnicities to live together. Momin (2002, p. 101), calling the phenomenon a social and political 'philosophy', elaborates that multiculturalism is a model of socio-political organisation that offers a set of values, including tolerance and acceptance, so that different groups might peacefully coexist within a democratic framework. This encompasses acknowledging human rights, and the beliefs and cultural traditions of all involved in that society.

What is missing in all these studies is that the attention to language diversity has been neglected extensively, as language is the most visible and liberal sign of multiculturalism, not grouping people by their appearances and colour, but by the language they speak. Furthermore, each language carries the weight of the cultures, faiths, traditions and even politics therein. It must be noted that, due to differences in culture and other aforementioned areas, language diversity can cause misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and miscommunications. In light of this, it would be logical to attempt to understand multiculturalism through the linguistic difference within a multicultural society by looking at education.

However, multicultural education is an extremely complex phenomenon. It does not simply mean having a diverse body of students but rather an educational environment where there are many cultural groups, like women, the disabled, ethnic minorities, and even students from different regions, all studying in the same classroom. When focusing on the liberal side of the phenomenon, we find that among efforts to modify the curriculum and teaching methodologies, to increase staffing to accommodate cultural diversity and ensure all get equal instruction, the linguistic part of multiculturalism is overshadowed. However, in international schools with English as the language of instruction, this linguistic barrier has been partially resolved. For, though it is used to unify communication in the classroom, this does not

mean students coming from other cultures will be able to understand and appreciate that unification.

#### **4. Impact of the English language on education, could it be linguistic imperialism?**

English has been regarded as the prominent language in academia and mostly in higher education today. However, in international schools, the policy of using English as the language of instruction has resulted in a generation of students who are at least bilingual if they are native English speakers. In some other countries not only bilingualism but multilingualism is the norm. For instance, in India, children first learn their local dialect or mother tongue, then growing up have to learn one or two regional languages, when at school, they need to learn Hindi which is the country's national language (A. van Dijk, 1999), making them multilinguals even without leaving their native land. In addition to this, children have to learn English as India was colonised by Great Britain and even after their independence in 1947, English has been considered a prestigious national, as well as international, language to be learnt. This bilingualism/multilingualism has resulted in children switching between the languages they speak in different situations not only in multilingual societies such as in India but also in Middle Eastern countries like the UAE, Qatar, and Bahrain to name but a few. They might speak in their mother tongue with their parents, a different language with their grandparents and extended family, another with their friends and peers, and yet another (usually English) when watching television or interacting with friends online and on social media.

The English language's influence on students does not end with its use in different aspects of daily life, but rather it linguistically asserts the power of Western culture over student bodies around the world. As language learning is not a neutral process and it always contains transmission of linguistic and cultural concepts, having a lasting impact on the influenced language and the way it is going to be transferred to the next generation is of utmost importance. Philipson (1992), by coining the term 'language imperialism', tried to demonstrate the importance of the wide spread use of certain languages, which have sometimes taken the shape of lingua franca in the past. While imperialism itself has a negative connotation, having a forced and discriminatory meaning, it seems an exaggeration at first. Yamada (2023) argues that although language imperialism has been debated by scholars over the past two decades, its impact on language acquisition, language learning and prioritisation of a language (English in this case) has always been there. Having a more liberal and democratic stance towards the dominance of the English language, one might call this phenomenon 'Soft Linguistic Imperialism', since it is not forced upon unwilling societies, but rather they choose it, most probably in order to catch up with the fast-growing technology of the modern world. This in turn calls for immediate action and attention regarding soft linguistic imperialism as it has impacted first language acquisition by overshadowing native heritage and cultural values.

At the speed with which English is overtaking the linguistics of the world, it is possible to see a complete shift in and the consequent death of less powerful first languages. Currently, some countries are taking actions regarding the preservation of native language, heritage and values in different forms, and, via varied policies, however, their efforts do not match the spread of English worldwide. For instance, in 2020 the UAE government started a campaign on preserving the Arabic language and identity in order to promote the local language politically as well as socially, economically, and academically (WAM, Emirates News Agency, 2020). Their efforts included but were not limited to switching to Arabic writing codes on social media instead of using Latin letters to write Arabic words and sentences, a phenomenon known as *Finglish* for Persians using English letters for writing Persian words or sentences; as well as encouraging Emirati children and youth to take pride in their identity, culture and heritage.

## **5. International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme and the mother tongue as Language A topic**

The International Baccalaureate programme originated in 1962 in Switzerland to offer internationally mobile students a unified educational system and a diploma that was recognised around the globe. Influenced by famous educationalists of the time such as Dewey, Piaget, and Neill (IB, 2017), the focus of the programme was moving away from traditional teaching methods into progressive and more liberal techniques including critical thinking, student/child centred, and open plan classrooms amongst others. Today, IB offers four different plans including the Primary Years Programme (PYP), Middle Years Programme (MYP), Diploma Programme (DP), and Career-related Programme (CP). The number of students enrolled in an IB school in 2025 is 1,950,000 students and the number of schools that offer the IB curriculum around the world is 5,800 institutions. This curriculum is favoured both by parents and students not only because it offers a more liberal teaching method in the English language, but most importantly the possibility of choosing the mother tongue as the Language A option. This Language A is usually offered as a school supported self-taught (SSST) course where students are to study their chosen language and understand its literature by the study and critical evaluation of seven sources (from 2026 academic year) chosen from a prescribed reading list comprising four different genres. Most students opt for their mother tongue, and this decision is supported by parents and first language instructors and teachers. However, how much this selection of mother tongue as the language A option of IB is successful or effective remains to be studied further.

The next section will look into the results of the two separate researches done in this regard, as two sets of questionnaires were sent out to 20 Persian IB DP diaspora students to see if their knowledge of the mother tongue was as expected compared to their monolingual peers back home. The first questionnaire focused on the slang used by two consecutive generations, parents and children, to see if each

generation could understand the other one. The difference between the two groups was that the parents were usually monolingual speakers of the Persian language with varied degrees of understanding in English, while the children had native like English fluency. Meanwhile, Persian, their mother tongue, played the role of a second language or even a foreign language. The second questionnaire also focused on the literature part of the IB's language A mission, as it is expected that every student in their final two years of the diploma programme, should be capable of critical evaluation of millennium old literature and for instance should detect literary devices of the Persian language. However, the results of both questionnaires were surprisingly negative leading the researcher to question the main topic of this chapter: is English, as soft linguistic imperialism, taking over languages as quickly as Persian which is spoken by over 110 million people around the world?

## **6. Methodology**

This chapter briefly outlines the methodology adopted for this research, investigating the potential effects of English language dominance and what is described in this study as soft linguistic imperialism on mother tongue knowledge or Persian diaspora students residing in the UAE. These students are enrolled in an international school where they study the last two years of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme in Dubai. This chapter then presents the research paradigm, population under study and the sampling techniques employed in this paper, followed by data collection instruments, procedures of data analysis and ethical considerations. As the study explores both observable language patterns which includes slangs, metaphors, and proverbs as well as the broader implications of linguistic shift on intercultural identity, hence, the mixed-method exploratory design was used for this study.

### *6.1 Research paradigm and philosophical positioning*

This research focuses on a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, in an attempt of recognising that knowledge and meaning are socially constructed through language and cultural interaction in societies. Therefore, the constructivist lens particularly helps with exploration of how young people from multicultural and multilingual environments understand and use their heritage language in a context where English is institutionally superior. While the interpretivist stance focuses on the conceptual framing, and with a quantitative and descriptive approach the data collection in both pilot studies are easier to understand. This pragmatic combination in return allows for observation of patterns to be statistically measured, while still effective in recognising the deeper, and culturally embedded meanings behind language use.

### *6.2 Research objectives*

The methodology used in this research aims to respond to the following overarching research objectives:

- First, to examine whether Persian diaspora students in the UAE maintain native fluency in their mother tongue while being educated in English as the language of instruction in the schools.
- Second, to assess generational differences in language use between monolingual Persian speaking parents and their at least bilingual children.
- Third, to evaluate the effectiveness of the IB's language A option which is offered to the students as School Supported Self-Taught or SSST topic in the hope of preserving their mother tongue, in this case Persian language and literature proficiency.
- Finally, to contribute to the discourse on intercultural education, the value of multilingualism and most importantly linguistic imperialism in international schooling context in multicultural societies of countries such as the UAE.

### *6.3 Population and sampling*

The target population of this study comprised Persian diaspora families who reside in the UAE and whose children were born in or either grew up in there. Since only international schooling systems are available to expatriate populations in the UAE, these Persian diaspora children are enrolled in international schools that offer the IBDP curriculum. These families were selected due to their direct engagement with bilingual education in these IB curriculum schools, and as a result of their presumed interest in maintaining the Persian language since their children chose Persian as an SSST topic. Also, the maintenance of the Persian language as a heritage language within the framework of the predominantly English-speaking schools is one of the main concerns of the families involved in the research.

### *6.4 Sampling strategy*

A purposive sampling method seemed most suitable for this research to recruit participants. The sample includes:

- 32 Persian parent-child pairs for the first case study on generational slangs.
- 30 IBDP student for the second case study on Persian metaphors and proverbs use in Persian literary works.

### *6.5 Selection criteria include:*

- The students must be enrolled in the IBDP at the time of the study.
- The students must have selected Persian as their Language A topic.
- The family must self-identify as part of the Persian diaspora in the UAE.
- In the case of Case Study 1, only one parent was required to complete a paired questionnaire.

Participants were mostly contacted via researchers' own educational network, Persian community groups and snowball sampling referrals. While not statistically representative, the sample offers insight into a unique and under-research Persian diaspora population in the UAE.

### *6.6 Research design*

This study adopted an exploratory case study design by utilising quantitative survey instrument in order to support qualitative interpretation of the data collected. Given the focus of the study being on educational outcomes and linguistic shifts within a specific curriculum (IBDP), a case study design seems most appropriate to examine lived experiences of the participants and observable linguistic phenomena within a bounded educational context of the UAE.

### *6.7 Data collection instruments and procedure*

For the purpose of this research two separate but thematically connected data collection tools were developed and administered online using Google Forms format. Case study 1 which focuses on generational slang questionnaire collected 32 participant responses from parents and their IBDP student children. Two parallel questionnaires in Persian, each containing 37 questions was sent out. Out of the 37 questions, 13 were demographic and general questions such as age, gender and language background while the 24 remaining questions focused on generationally distinct slang specific items. The procedure for the first case study was to ask both groups of parent and children to identify and interpret slang terms used by the other generation. Items were selected to specifically reflect on cultural nuances, common idioms and lexical shifts due to technology and diasporic influence of each group.

Case study 2 focuses on literary devices and proverbs of the Persian language. An online questionnaire was sent out to 30 Persian IBDP students who studies in grades 11 and 12. This questionnaire too was in Persian and consisted of 8 literary excerpts from canonical Persian poets such as Hafez, Ferdowsi, and Sa'di, followed by 7 common Persian literary proverbs requiring interpretation. The students were asked to identify literary devices such as metaphors, irony, simile and paradox, and correctly interpret the meaning and the cultural context of each proverb. The items were drawn from the IB literature syllabus and broader cultural canon. Both questionnaires were piloted with two individuals from each target group for clarity and cultural appropriateness before full distribution.

### *6.8 Data analysis*

The collected data was manually transferred to IBM SPSS Statistics software for quantitative analysis which consisted of descriptive statistics, for frequencies and mean scores for correct and incorrect answers. Then cross-tabulation was used to compare across variables such as age, gender and generational groups, and finally content coding was used where it was applicable to categorise student errors and to infer patterns of misunderstanding or language shift. Due to the small sampling sizes

of both studies no inferential statistics were conducted but the data analysis yielded clear patterns, particularly in mutual comprehension and the cultural embeddedness of mother tongue knowledge.

### *6.9 Trustworthiness and limitations of the study*

While this study provides valuable insights into an understudied topic, several limitations are also acknowledged:

- First: the sample size is small and non-random sampling method limits generalizability of the research.
- Second: self-reporting approach of the researches especially for parent participants, who might have sought external help despite instructions of not doing so could be a potential limit.
- Third, this study focuses on Persian students who reside in the UAE and hence the results might not apply universally to other diaspora context globally.
- Fourth, the language fluency of the participants is another issue as it was assumed that participants were all fluent in both Persian and English, but actual fluency varied and was self-reported.

Nonetheless, this study offers a trustworthy exploratory lens into an extremely under-researched intersection of intercultural communication, language imperialism in international educational systems.

### *6.10 Ethical considerations*

This study adhered to standard research guidelines for social sciences and educational research therefore and informed consent was obtained from participants specifically from parents of those participants who were minors and under the age of 18. The participants were also made aware that their participation was voluntary with the option of withdrawing at any point they wished. Also, all responses were anonymized, and no personally identifiable information was collected. In the case of students, they all completed their questionnaires during supervised online class sessions to ensure authenticity and finally, data was stored securely and used solely for academic purposes related to this study. Though no formal institutional ethical review board was involved due to the scale and low risk nature of the study, the research design complies with the ethical standard of qualitative and educational research.

## **7. Case study 1: Slang as language specifications of generations**

Generation, as an umbrella term, is used to define people who are born around the same time and have common characteristics (Demir & Sonmez, 2021). Under the generation definition also comes not only the style and manners of interaction but also the use of specific vocabulary including slangs. Therefore, each generation

has a specific vocabulary by which they could be recognised and even categorised. However, up to day, it has never happened that the gap between two consequent generations has become so great that they could not effectively communicate with each other. This gap is even more significant amongst the half million Persian diaspora residing in the UAE, and the economic hub city of Dubai as Generation X, those who are born between 1966 to 1979, which encompasses parents and educators are usually monolingual speakers of the Persian language, with significant attention paid to Persian language and literature, poetry, proverbs, Quranic verses and the inherent understanding of preservation of the mother tongue. This in return makes their use of language specific and unique to their generation, along with a forced and varied knowledge of the English language due to globalisation and the role English plays as lingua franca in the multicultural society of a country such as the UAE. However, the same overprotective Generation X parents and educators have come to the decision that their children should learn English in order to secure a bright future later on in life. UAE's educational policies offer only the international educational system, which functions in the private sector only, and as a flourishing business with a guaranteed benefit for the investor. Therefore, neither the investors and administrators, nor the policy makers put any effort into offering mother tongue education to children, because that would mean losing another income in the form of private classes should they teach the mother tongue in school. Also, in a classroom that has over 10 different nationalities, offering a mother tongue class would be almost impossible or heap huge financial burdens on the schools as they would need to recruit teachers for every language. The only solution to solve the mother tongue education of the children in this case is hiring a private tutor, and, later on, at the IBDP stage, the chance to use Persian as mother tongue language A option requirement of the IB.

However, since English is the language of instruction in the international private schooling system including IB, children grow up to acquire native like fluency in English, sometimes in Arabic and another second language such as French or German. It is obvious that a Persian diaspora child who has attended an English international/IB school, and has never had a Persian class has limited knowledge of the mother tongue. Their knowledge of English is heavily influenced by Western culture, while pride in the Persian language and culture is naturally alien to them. Therefore, today's Persian teenagers, who are born in the UAE, like any other teenager around the world use their own vocabulary, consisting of slang that are highly influenced by English, technology and social media. They also mix two perfectly functioning words into one that has a mixed meaning as well as an entirely new one, such as "requestion" which is a mixture of "request" and "question" combined into one. While understanding their parents' sarcasm which is one of their generation's specifications has become almost impossible to them, as most of the time they take the meaning of the sarcasm as an insult, since they misunderstand or do not understand the cultural element behind the sarcasm. Communicational gap between grandparents and grandchildren is both accepted and expected as the age difference between the two is larger, however for modern young Persian families who usually marry at a younger age, this

gap is worrying. It is unknown if the parents are conscience about this issue or not, however, it seems that they see the presence of an issue due to the non-existence of the mother tongue. In an effort to amend the issue, they tend to send their children to an IB curriculum institution in the hopes that having Persian as mother tongue Language A option will force their children to learn and reattach to the culture they are so proud of.

### *7.1 Methodology for the first study case*

A set of two online questionnaires was sent to parents/student groups using an online Google form to 32 participant pairs. For each student who participated one parent had to answer the questionnaire. The goal of this research was to study and compare parent/children slangs and to evaluate how familiar each group was with the other's language use. Both questionnaires consisted of 37 questions with 13 general and 24 slang related questions. Children had to answer questions about parents' slang and parents had to answer regarding the slang from their children's generation. Students are known to be at least bilingual speakers of English and Persian and in most of the cases multilinguals as another language such as Arabic was also studied by the students in school. Parents on the other hand were monolingual speakers of the Persian language with varying degree of English knowledge.

### *7.2 Results*

The overview of the major questions of this experiment is presented in this section and it shows that both groups had difficulties with understanding each other. The average age of the parents was between 40-50 years old and 22 parents out of 32 claimed that they could understand their children's language use. While the students average age was 17-19 and 9 out of 32 agreed that they could partially understand their parents' language. It was also studied to see if age and gender of the participant played a role in each group but there was no significant difference due to age and gender with regards to language understanding. A slight difference could be seen, however, with gender, where mothers could understand their children better compared to fathers. The explanation for this seemed to be due to cultural specifications of Persian families where fathers, due to their work commitments, spend less time with their children compared to their wives. Out of 24 slang terms, parents gave an average of over 20 wrong answers, while it was over 25 for their children. This results, even with the small number of participants is an indication of the communicational gap, the cause of which might be intercultural communication or the multilingual society in which the student group was born and has grown up. There could be reasons behind this miscommunication as the parents' group are monolinguals and monocultural with some knowledge of a second language, in this case English. Meanwhile, the children's group is clearly multicultural and multilingual with a vast knowledge of both the cultures and languages they interact with on a daily basis at their schools.

## **8. Case study 2: Understanding of metaphors and proverbs of Persian as Language A in IBDP**

Since IB's diploma programme requires the students in their final two years of their studies to choose a second language in order to pass their high school education as bilingual graduates, students are free to choose a language in which they have native fluency. For Persian diaspora in the UAE as well as around the world, this second language option is their mother tongue. The students during these two final years have to read 9 works in four different genres (after 2026 the number is reduced to 7). This includes poetry, plays, autobiography, novels, shorts stories, etc., and they also have to mix and match 3 works in translation, 3 works in different times, 3 works from different countries/continents, and 3 different genres. This way, IB introduces the students to a wide variety of different literary works in the student's mother tongue, familiarising them with not only different styles of authors but also with the culture and the language used by those different authors from various times and countries.

### *8.1 Methodology of the second case study*

As a pilot study, an online Google form questionnaire was sent to IBDP students in order to examine their deep knowledge of the Persian literature and within this the literary devices that is the signature of the language and its culture. The number of participants for this questionnaire is 30 IBDP students and in order to have a deeper understanding of the children's knowledge of the language both metaphor and proverbs were included in the questionnaire to make it more challenging. It is important to keep in mind that culturally Persians use metaphors and proverbs on a daily basis and as a language specification inherently available to them. The goal of this pilot study was to see if the use of mother tongue as the second language option of the IB's diploma programme is indeed useful and beneficial to young Persian students who reside in the UAE and study at an international school where the language of teaching is English.

### *8.2 Results*

A set of 8 poems from famous Persian poets such as Hafiz, Sa'di, Mulana and Ferdowsi was presented to the student, and they were asked to identify the literary devices within those poems. The knowledge of the literary devices is one of the main cores of learning Persian as IB's language A topic and based on the specifications of the Persian language. It is also worth mentioning that students by year eleven and twelve of the IB's diploma programme should have native fluency in both their language A and English. According to the data collected in this research the number of correct answers for literary devices such as paradox, simile, and irony for instance was around 15 out of 30 with the highest number of incorrect answers being 29 out of 30 in one instance.

In the case of the 7 proverbs, which are sometimes used in the form of a verse and commonly used in informal situations, the result is not any better. The number of

incorrect answers range between 16 to 27 for 4 proverbs, and the number of correct answers exceeds 25 only in 3 instances. The reason behind the higher number of correct answers in the 3 proverbs mentioned was due to their constant use and the familiarity of the students with these common proverbs. Therefore, the students have heard these proverbs in use by their Gen X parents, for whom, regardless of level of education, the use of metaphors and proverbs was a norm.

## 9. Discussion

The goal of this study was to examine whether Persian diaspora students enrolled in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) in the UAE are experiencing a gradual erosion of their mother tongue as a result of the dominance of the English language. More specifically, this research tried to investigate whether this prominence of the English language could be considered a form of soft linguistic imperialism, a term employed to describe the voluntary yet systematic replacement of native languages in multilingual, multicultural and international contexts. The two case studies with one focusing on generational slangs and the other on literary fluency, aimed to explore both communicational and cultural dimensions of this language shift among Persian diaspora residing in the UAE.

The findings of both case studies suggest a worrying pattern that Persian, although preserved nominally through the IB's Language A topic in IBDP curriculum schools, is increasingly treated by Persian diaspora students in the UAE as a second and even a foreign language. This in return causes communicational gaps between two consecutive generations, as highlighted in the first case study, a symptom of broader cultural and language drift. This is consistent with what Canagarajah (1999) has branded as the periphery's adaptation to the centre, where non-native English-speaking communities gradually adapt their linguistic norm and use to those of the dominant language and culture, at the cost of the local or heritage language.

The second case study in the support of the first illustrates that native literary fluency including the knowledge of metaphors and proverbs, are reduced. These language specifications are often seen as culturally deep structures (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000), are not adequately developed among Persian diaspora students in the UAE. Hence, aligning with Skutnabb-Kangas's argument that language shift should not be considered just as a linguistic phenomenon but a form of cultural and epistemological loss, which is often exacerbated by educational systems that usually prioritise global over local competencies. On the other hand, while IBDP positions itself as a liberal educational system with multicultural curriculum (IBO, 2017), the findings of this research indicates that in practice, multilingualism offered in the IB is often unequal. Therefore, English retains a privileged status and serving as the medium of instruction in the IB system, as well as a tool for socialisation and academic success. May (1999) argues that critical multiculturalism requires an approach that focuses on more than surface level inclusion of languages, as it demands deep structural recognition of all language and cultures as epistemically valid. In this research, the superficial inclusion of the Persian language via the SSST topic offered by the IB does not ensure

cultural continuity or linguistic confidence of the students despite the parental belief that choosing Persian as Language A option would preserve the heritage tongue. However, the findings in this research suggest that this strategy of preservation of the heritage language and culture proves to be insufficient, as curriculum based exposure to the language is not sufficient and lacks lived, everyday use of the mother tongue. This gap between informal instruction and cultural transmission in return reflects on Boyle-Baise's (1999) critique that although multicultural education is preferred in the modern world, it often fails to translate into meaningful pedagogical outcomes as far as it is not embedded in the students' social reality. Therefore, although IB's framework nominally aims to support intercultural communication and linguistic diversity, the actual practices in international schooling system in the UAE reflects what Demir and Sonmez (2021) describe as pragmatic multilingualism, as languages in this situation are ranked based on their utility and marked value rather than identity and belonging. Finally, and returning to the central theoretical concept employed in this research where Philipson (1992) introduces language imperialism, it must be kept in mind that not only a critique of top-down language policies is important but also a framework for understanding how well-intentioned educational system can inadvertently promote linguistic homogenisation is needed. Here, since English does not act as a neutral medium but as a cultural filter, the English language is used shaping not just what students learn but how they relate to their own cultural heritage. Therefore, this research set out to explore whether the educational context of the IBDP implemented in a multicultural and multilingual settings of countries such as UAE might paradoxically contribute to the erosion of heritage languages among diaspora students. Thus, the combination of two small-scaled, empirical pilot studies with a critical review of multilingual education theory, this research argues that soft linguistic imperialism is a real and measurable phenomenon even in a curriculum such as the IBDP that promote interculturalism. The study also adds to the existing literature by offering a rare empirical insight into the Persian diaspora in the UAE, a population often under-studied and overlooked in studies of language policy and education. It also critiques liberal educational models in order to treat language diversity as logistical feature rather than an ethical and cultural commitment.

## **10. Conclusion**

Since Philipson (1992) and the coinage of the term 'language imperialism' and all the concerns with regards the influence of one language over all others, many scholars and researchers have voiced their concerns. They argue that if English use continues at its current rate to spread around the world, mother tongue loss will be inevitable. While English overtaking other "weak" languages, in the case of Persian, a strong language, it is resulting in an incorrect belief that the mother tongue does not have any value or power and thus is not needed.

Also, multilingualism has always been considered a privilege for those who are able to communicate with people with other mother tongues, this capability makes

interculturalism and multiculturalism a natural process of human societies around the globe. However, this natural process of interculturalism and multiculturalism does not result in the erosion of the other languages, as Philipson's definition clearly indicates. With the rapid speed of the advancement of technology, the wide and spreading use of computers, laptops, smartphones, social media and most recently open Artificial Intelligence, this utilization of the English language is cemented in all societies around the world. This excessive use of one language does not cause any issues for generations newly introduced to this advancing world. However, for the next generation, who is born and raised in this world, we technology becomes the norm, making it clearly visible that competency in the English language is not just desired but utterly essential for survival in this rapidly progressing world. This is the concept of linguistic imperialism comes into play. Usually, it has a connotation meaning, forcing something on an unwilling person/society, but this does not apply here. Societies around the world willingly and consciously move towards acquiring English, unaware the excessive use of this lingua franca could have a dire consequence on the generations to come.

The effects of the wide use of the English language have become visible within the Persian diaspora residing in the UAE, where monolingual Persian speaking parents are incomprehensible to their English/Persian bilingual children. The communicational gap between the two consecutive generations was examined in the first case study where parents' and teenagers' slang use were investigated. The result of this research showed that even with the low number of participants (N=32) both parents and their teenage children could not communicate with each other and that has become the main source of major disagreements in every household. At some point along the way Persian parents' diaspora in the UAE might have felt the inconsistency when communicating with their children and hence decided to find a curriculum which allowed their children to study Persian as a mother tongue option in school. This is where the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme becomes essential. The IBDP offers the second language option as Language A examination where students have the possibility to choose their mother tongue for this subject, giving parents the hope that their children will remain connected to their mother tongue. The question then arose of whether or not IB's Language A option is an effective way to preserve the mother tongue for Persian diaspora. In hopes of answering this question the second research was conducted which focused on more technical issues of a language such as metaphors and proverbs as language specifications which were not familiar to the students.

The data collected in this second study, even though it had a low number of participants, still indicates that the knowledge of the Persian language as the mother tongue is diminishing amongst Persian diaspora students in Dubai and possibly around the world. There could be a number of reasons behind this which like the employment of English as the language of instruction in the IB curriculum, Moreover, English as a modern day lingua franca, the intercultural and multicultural communication in education systems around the world, and even 'soft language imperialism', along

with both parents and educators, all put immense stress and pressure on students/children to learn English, even at the cost of the mother tongue, be it Persian, Arabic, or Hindi. Linguistic imperialism or not, a language loss is not about simply losing a communicational tool. For, languages carry with them culture, religion, faiths, sense of belonging, and roots as well. A child that is detached from its roots will feel a sense of emptiness in his life, possibly leading to a series of issues both for them as adult individuals and in their contributions in society. The generation X or the current parents/educators in every society have introduced all sorts of new technologies, advancing the previous findings without thinking about the ramifications on the new generation and on future generations. Societies around the world were not prepared for such immense changes, they were not educated and, for sure, did not understand how to handle all the changes themselves. What is given to the next generation is a society that has immense possibilities and capabilities due to the technological advancements but not enough education and awareness on how to properly apply what is learned.

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**LOST IN TRANSITION? – LEARNING STRATEGIES AND ACADEMIC LANGUAGE  
PROFICIENCY IN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT COMMUNITIES: IMPLICATIONS FOR  
INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION**

*Ilona Dabney-Fekete & Ágnes Réka Dusa & Riad Soltani*

**Abstract**

The number of foreign students studying in Hungary shows continuous growth. This makes examining them all the more urgent to discover what learning strategies and environments, and support structures best help them in reaching their study goals. They form their own student groups and face multitudes of problems such as studying in a strange culture, in a foreign language environment where they are oftentimes isolated. Though it is generally accepted that academic English proficiency plays an important role in the success of studies, the research results regarding the connection between knowing language and learning effectively are not uniform. The aim of our examination was to dig up what relationships exist between students' subjective academic English language skills and their applied learning strategies. The study took place at a rural, Hungarian university having multiple faculties, where the number of foreign students is high. The quantitative survey data sampling proceeded in three waves and occurred in online and paper form during the course of 2022 and 2023 (N=426). The data was analyzed with SPSS, using chi-square trials, variance analysis, and factor analysis. Based on our results, participation in academic debates was identified by students as their greatest challenge, and understanding lectures was found to be less problematic. According to the proficiency level, three groups were set apart, and great differences were found between in regards to their learning strategies. Those with the greatest linguistic competency apply more intentional and concentrated learning methods. Meanwhile, those with lower levels of linguistic competency choose lonelier, repetition-based learning methods. Our findings contribute to the development of more effective support and teaching methods for international students in higher education in Hungary.

**Key words:** learning strategies, language knowledge, international students, learning communities, intercultural communication

## 1. Introduction

Year by year, the number of higher educational students aspiring to study outside their country of origin, is showing a proliferating tendency globally (M. Császár et al., 2021). This is probably the most well-defined and conspicuous phenomenon of internationalization (Dusa & Dabney-Fekete, 2024), since the extent of a country's higher educational internationalization can be measured through the ratio of international students (Teperics, 2017). According to statistics (Education indicators in focus, 2005), in 2014 there were 3 million such students, which number rose by over 53%, to 4.6 million in 2022 in the OECD countries. The growth between 2018 and 2022 was 18%, which may not appear to be significant, especially compared to the 30% increase noted between 2014 and 2018. However, it takes on a different meaning, given that during this period for a while, traveling was restricted due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Education indicators in focus 2005).

In Hungary the same tendency of constant considerable increase could be detected, if we take the figures of international students' ratio compared to that of Hungarian students into account. While in 2001 3.4% of the students studying in higher education were citizens of another country (Teperics, 2017), in 2006, 3.9%, and ten years later that ratio rose sharply to 9.6% (Lannert, 2018). On the basis of the OECD report (Education at a Glance 2024), in 2022 it has reached 14%, which far exceeds both the EU average, which was 8%, and also the OECD mean, 6%

The University of Debrecen is one of the higher educational institutions in Hungary that has been remarkably successful in integrating into the global bloodstream of internationalization. With its 14 faculties it serves as an international hub for the roughly 40 000 students, out of which 23.6% come from 140 different countries (UD student statistics). Hosting 7625 international students, this higher educational institution ranks first among the universities with the most international student enrollment. Within the span of less than 25 years, in the number of international students we can see an exceptional growth: while in 2000 there were only 885 enrolled, in 2024 their number increased by more than 8.5 times (UD student statistics). This population is significantly notable, thus it is essential to identify the different challenges they face, and to develop a support system in order for them to achieve better in their academic studies. Enhancing their academic outcomes will not only impact the students positively, but it can also elevate the prestige and international recognition of the university itself.

Consistent with this, in our research the focus was put, on one hand, on examining the **academic language proficiency** of these international students, as the level of their English knowledge can have a crucial effect on: (1) learning success, since it is indispensable in understanding the lectures and special literature, as well as in achieving well on the exams and participating in academic debates; (2) participating in international research and publication; and (3) intercultural communication, for in a multicultural environment English is not only the language of instruction and learning, but also the lingua franca among the fellow students. Secondly, on the

**learning strategies** and how the students apply those to acquire knowledge in a presumably linguistically and also culturally very diverse environment. And last, the research aimed to examine how academic language proficiency and learning strategies influence students' **intercultural communication skills** and academic integration. Although several research addressed the question of academic success and language proficiency of international students (Russell et al., 2022; Daller et al., 2021; Trenkic & Warmington, 2019; Humphreys et al., 2012), however, only a few have examined how the correlation between these two affect learning strategies and the development of intercultural communication skills. Furthermore, the Central and Eastern European aspect is also scarce. An additional crucial consideration is the need to clarify and define what English language proficiency implies in an academic context. Our research puts a special emphasis on highlighting the characteristics and aspects of it in a higher education setting. For measuring that a questionnaire was used at the University of Debrecen, among the international students in 2022-2023.

## **2. Language skills and learning strategies for academic excellence**

### *2.1 The unique learning communities of international students*

International students in higher educational institutions represent a rather distinct and special student community, who come from diverse educational, cultural and linguistic environments. Due to that, they often have to face an array of challenges as well as problems related to adaptation difficulties (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Dusa & Dabney-Fekete, 2024). Among them are disparities between their home and the host countries' educational systems, divergences in instructional methodologies, academic language knowledge impediments, social disconnection, and complications in cultural integration (Andrade, 2006; Ansari Lari et al., 2025; Su et al., 2021). Not only do these factors have a strong influence on the students' academic achievements and performance, but they also play an important role in how they approach learning and which learning strategies they will acquire in their new academic environment. They may lean more on their peers for support, use repetitive learning techniques in order to reduce cognitive load, and utilize translation tools to overcome language limitations (Rienties et al., 2012). The recognition of the behavior, needs and characteristics of these unique learning communities is crucial for higher educational institutions that wish to provide a supportive and inclusive academic environment for students. Findings indicate that customized academic assistance and culturally aware and respectful teaching methods and practices can significantly contribute to international students' social and academic integration as well as their academic achievement (Zhou et al., 2008).

### *2.2 English language proficiency and academic success*

In higher educational settings, where academic content is provided in English to international students who are non-native English speakers, and whose level of language knowledge may vary significantly, the proficiency of language skills are

essential elements (although not exclusive) from the aspect of academic success (Barkaoui, 2025; Li & Pei, 2024; Feng et al., 2023; Neumann et al., 2018; Cloate, 2016).

Cui and Gardiner (2025) highlighted that stronger English language competence in their research led to higher academic achievements not only because students understood the instructors better, thus acquired the course material faster, but also because it increased their self-confidence, and this way they were able to participate in the class activities and discussions. Furthermore, Li and Pei (2024) showed how academic English skills are strong predictors of academic success, and they explain more than 28% of grade variance. Alturjman (2025) offers one more additional insight to this relationship, namely that stronger proficiency in English indicates more advanced and sophisticated strategic reading techniques. Likewise, Kamaşak and Sahan (2023) pointed out that their data revealed that those students whose English knowledge was more advanced and thus experienced less language challenges, tended to report stronger academic results.

While several researches found convincing and solid correlation between English language proficiency and academic success, others clearly expressed quite the opposite. For example, in their research Curle and colleagues (2020) proved that scores in English proficiency played no substantial role in students' English-Medium Instruction (EMI) courses, as shown by the GPA. This indicates that the level of English knowledge could not be taken as a predictor for academic success. Moreover, García-Álvarez de Perea and Ramírez-García (2024) found that in their research language skills and abilities had no influence on students' performance on conceptual questions. However, in both cases the researches were carried out among domestic EMI students, which could suggest that they all share a common L1 foundation and previous background knowledge of the content, and they undergo standardized, institutionally regulated admission benchmarks. Thus English language proficiency and its predictive function become less important. But on the other hand, in case of international students, language proficiency counts more of a key predictor of and a major contributor to academic achievement and participation.

Several examinations pointed out that institutional and cultural setting could also have a significant impact. Yang and Tsai (2023) observed that students' background shaped both their English proficiency and the selected and favored learning approaches. Metacognitive strategies were more likely chosen by higher language proficiency European students, whereas social and affective methods were favored more frequently by Asian students, whose level of English knowledge was poorer in general. These differences and unfolding patterns suggest that cultural background and language proficiency have an impact on students' academic success as well as their coping mechanisms. Another example for the institutional context could be Tajik and colleagues' research (2023), during which eight EMI higher educational institutions' graduates were examined in Kazakhstan. The results showed that more than 70% of them had no previous EMI experience, and approximately two-thirds were discontented with their Language skills, and 72.6% were not fond of reading or writing in English. Tajik et al. (2023) argue that the internationalization

process of higher education should in all cases be succeeded by careful and thorough planning, effective implementation, and a comprehensive and strong support for both the students and the teachers.

Successful academic performance therefore depends on several factors. In our study, learning strategy is the other key factor besides language proficiency, so we will now present the research findings on the learning strategies of international students.

### *2.3 Learning strategies*

Since the massification of higher education, traditional higher education pedagogy has been replaced by learning management, and traditional university lecturers have become supporters of independent learning. Student-centered learning also means that the teacher-student relationship becomes more of a partnership, which in turn gives students greater responsibility for their own development (Hrubos, 2024, Kozma, 2024). In a foreign language environment, finding and applying the “right” learning strategy can be even more important, but self-regulation during the learning process may be impeded in this difficult and new environment, and maladaptive learning strategies may occur. Learning motivation and academic self-efficacy are also closely related to learning strategies (Pintrich, 1999, Cho et al., 2021, D. Molnár & Gál, 2019). In fact, when examining English learner foreign students, Phakiti and colleagues (2013) found that motivation, self-efficacy, self-regulation, and English language proficiency were all significant influencing factors on academic achievement. Entwistle and McCune (2004) point out that collaboration is a less measured dimension of learning strategies. Learning together with other students or asking teachers/lecturers for help can deepen knowledge, which can be particularly important in unfamiliar academic and linguistic environments (King et al., 2024).

### *2.4 Research question and hypotheses*

In our research we wanted to know whether a significant correlation could be detected between the international students’ preferred learning strategies types and the level of their English language proficiency. Therefore, we developed three hypotheses:

H1: Based on Phakiti et al’s (2013) research, our first hypothesis was that international students with a more advanced academic English language knowledge in their learning strategies will put a greater emphasis on goal-oriented and focused study approaches.

H2: In our second hypothesis we assumed based on Rienties et al. (2012) that self-regulated and self-timed learning strategies, where the students study at their own pace, unsupervised, will be primarily characteristic of learners with lower academic English proficiency, since they would want to compensate their weaker command of the language with individual learning. Probably that is true to the students who in their home countries excelled in their studies in their mother tongues.

H3: We posited according to Yang and Tsai (2023), Rienties et al. (2012) that since there is a more prominent number of non-European international students at the University of Debrecen, learning together and asking for help from the instructors will be more typical for lower English proficiency students.

### **3. Methodology**

Our research was conducted within the frame of the International Learning and Teaching Experience (ILTE) research group's examination, which is a subdivision of the Center for Higher Education Research and Development (CHERD), and which focuses primarily on international students and their teachers in higher education.

The data collection took place at the University of Debrecen, a Hungarian higher educational institution that welcomes the most international students in the country, 7625 as of the latest 2024 October data. The online questionnaires were distributed through the Neptun system, an electronic platform in Hungary that manages every activity in connection with student administration and academic progress, and were based on Google Forms. We sent them out on three different occasions between December 2021 and June 2022. However, due to the low response rate (6% compared to the 2021 October statistics), in-person approach was also necessary. Despite the fact that the generalization of the results is not possible, since the sampling was randomized, the analysis could still add to the more effective development of internationalization strategies.

The final "ILTE 2022" database included 434 international students after the data cleansing. For the analysis, we used the SPSS program, and used crosstab and variance analysis, and index preparation.

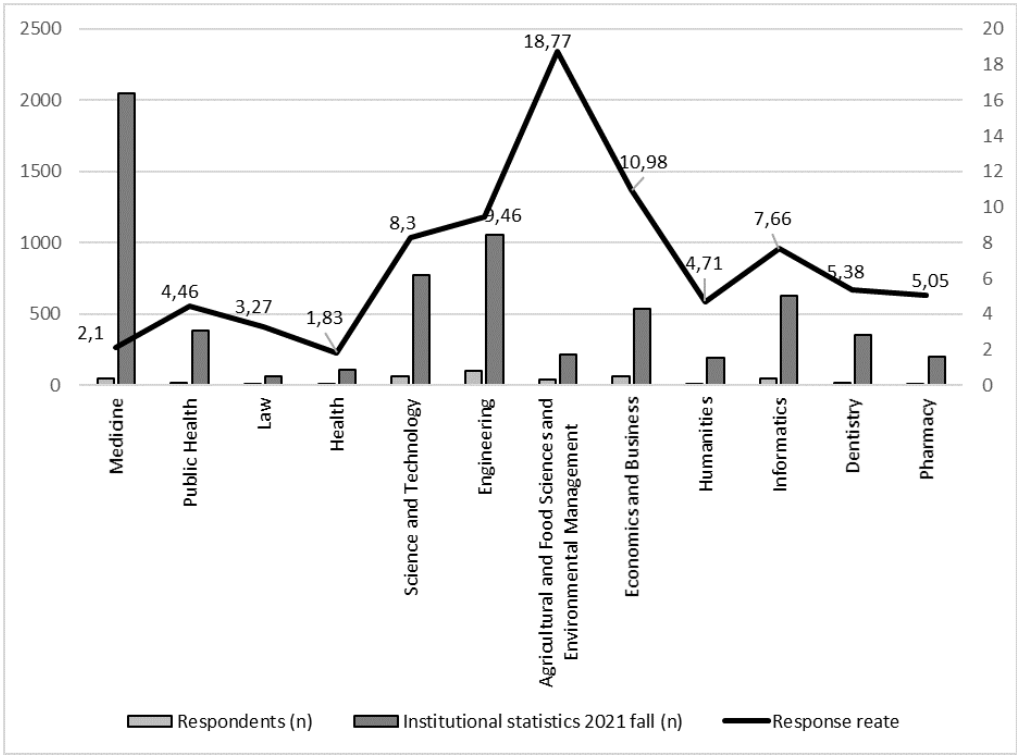
The questionnaire explored six main areas: (1) demography and academic background; (2) language proficiency; (3) learning strategies, (4) intercultural experiences in the host country; (5) family background; (6) religious affiliation. In this particular segment and study of the research the question blocks regarding language competences and learning strategies received increased attention. The questions in these two blocks were formulated and developed by the International Learning and Teaching Experience (ILTE) research group at the Center for Higher Education Research and Development (CHERD), and were customized to the characteristics and specificities of the given higher educational institution and the international student group studying there.

The youngest respondents are 17 years old (attending a prep course), the eldest being 44 years of age. The average age is 23.47 years of age with the median being 22. 53% of respondents are men (224), and 47% are women (199). By continent, the percentages are as follows: 3.3% European, 53.5% Asian, 35.1% African, 7.9% American, 0.2% Australian and Oceanian. According to their marital status, 83.7% are single, 4.2% are married, 1.2% is engaged, 10.8% have a partner, and 3.6% have at least one child.

Their numbers judging by course are the following: 11.3% Basic Medicine Course (BMC) or some other preparatory course, 46.4% BSc/BA, 24% MSc/MA, 11.1% Undivided program, 7.2% PhD.

Their ratios according to faculty are thus (Figure 1): 23.5% Engineering, 15.0 Science and Technology, 13.8% Economics and Business 11.3 Informatics, 10.3% Medicine, 9.4% Agricultural and Food Sciences and Environmental Management, 4.5% Dentistry, 4.0% Public Health, 2.3% Pharmacy, 2.1% Humanities, 1.2% Intensive Foundation Semester, 0.5% Law, 0.5% Health (and 1.6% not answered).

**Figure 1** The ratio of international students according to faculty



Source: institutional data reporting

Instead of examining the general language knowledge of the students, we put emphasis on academic language proficiency. We measured it with a custom-designed string of questions that we specifically devised for this particular research. The respondents could mark their answers on a five-point scale. The items were as follows: Understanding academic lectures, Reading academic literature, Taking part in academic debates, Giving academic presentations, Writing academic papers. The choice of answers on the five-point scale were the same as those applied to the general English knowledge question: 1) I use it like it was my mother tongue; 2) I read

/ write/ speak without difficulty; 3) I read / write/ speak with some difficulty; 4) I read / write/ speak with much difficulty; 5) I know only a few words.

For the combined English academic knowledge, we created an index which brought together all of the items. The minimum of the index could be 5 (highest proficiency), the maximum 21 (lowest proficiency), and the average reached a value of 9.065. In the interest of easier analysis and interpretation, we generated low-measurement variables from the index. Hereby, we formed three groups. We considered those who achieved a value of 5 or 6, the most language proficient. Those with intermediate academic English language proficiency reached values between 7 and 10, and those with the least academic English language proficiency obtained values between 11 and 21. Thus, the most proficient group contained 140 members (33.7% of respondents), the intermediate/ average proficiency group 153 members (36.9%), and the least proficient group (by their own admission) 122 members (29.4%).

Their academic English proficiency level did not appear to be tied to respondents genders or age, however, connections were discovered with level of study ( $p=0.021$ ). According to the table results, the majority of respondents with poor academic English proficiency are those among the master's degree courses (41%), while the ratio of this group among the other courses is below 30% (PhD: 30%, Preparatory course 25.6%, BSc/BA: 24.6%,). The lowest ratio of this group was detected in the undivided courses where 22.2% of respondents have poor academic English proficiency. Following this, it comes as no surprise that almost half of those in undivided courses are those with the highest academic English proficiency (48.9%).

We used our own questions to measure learning strategies. During the compilation of the survey, we strove to employ short question blocks due to the growth of response willingness, thus, we utilized a 14-item line of questions for measuring learning strategies. The 14 statements were evaluated on a four-point scale by respondents, with 1 being "not at all typical of me", and 4 being "very typical of me". With the help of a 14-item factor analysis, we created five factors. In the first factor, such statements were compiled that were typical of intentional, goal-oriented strategies, e.g. - I plan and set objectives before studying; My study plans are always oriented towards future goals; I make directional study goals quite often; If I want to learn something, I find the ways to do it, doesn't matter how occupied I am. The attention control statements pertaining to concentration skills were put into the second factor. It is comprised on the following three statements: It is not a problem if something is hard to learn if I am interested in it.; I always consider myself to be solely responsible for my learning results; I feel enthusiastic and motivated to learn new things. Within the third factor, the independent study form statements - I like to learn in a quiet place, I usually learn with the silent reading method, and I remember something better if I write it down - were conglomerated. The fourth factor contained the learning organizational challenges and problems, with two statements encompassing the latter: I would like to learn so many different things, but I always run out of time; I make plans to learn but am unable to execute them.

Finally, in the fifth factor, the Preference for collaborative learning factor, we find the following two statements: I prefer to study in a group; I need teachers’/ Professors’ guidance at every step. In our study, the five factors collectively explained 47.733% of the total variance. The KMO test revealed that the variables were sufficiently correlated to proceed with factor analysis, with a value of 0.761. The Bartlett test and the Goodness-of-fit Test were significant.

We compared the five factors of learning strategies with the three levels of academic English language proficiency. It is true, we found significant connections in the case of only two factors during the ANOVA analysis, but the interpretation of all other factors is also telling.

#### 4. Language proficiency and learning strategies in an international academic context

In our research we wanted to examine the level of English proficiency among the international students at the University of Debrecen. However, we put a special emphasis not on the general language skills, since it does not equate or correspond to the academic language knowledge. For that, we used a measurement tool developed in a previous research (Dabney-Fekete, 2020) that was specifically designed to evaluate language competences in an academic environment. The instrument focused on students’ ability to comprehend university lectures, to understand written academic texts, to participate in debates and academic discussions, to deliver presentations, and to compose academic writing assignments or manuscripts. The results are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1** Dimensions of student-reported competence in academic English language

	Comprehension of university lectures	Comprehension of academic texts	Participation in academic debates	Delivering academic presentations	Composing academic papers
<i>I use it as if it were my native language.</i>	<b>45.2</b>	42.1	35.1	<b>38.1</b>	<b>37.8</b>
<i>I read/write/speak without difficulties.</i>	<b>42.1</b>	40.7	39.4	<b>40.5</b>	<b>40.1</b>
<i>I read/write/speak with minor difficulties.</i>	11.8	16.8	<b>22.8</b>	<b>19.8</b>	<b>20.2</b>
<i>I read/write/speak with significant difficulties.</i>	0.9	0.5	<b>2.2</b>	1.2	1.7
<i>I only know a few words.</i>	0	0	0.5	0.5	0.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Most respondents see a high proficiency level in each dimension. They feel most confident in understanding university lectures: combined, answers “like my mother tongue” and “without difficulty” boast an 87.3% ratio. The productive skills show a lower competence than the receptive ones, which aligns with expectations. The most challenging dimension is the participation in academic debates, only a little more than one-third (35.1%) think that they can engage in academic dialogues like English-speaking natives. It is 2.2%, the highest among the skills who struggle with significant difficulties. The second greatest hardship comes when delivering academic presentations, since still 21.5% of the students experience some kind of difficulty. Given the fact that it is a productive and often a stress-inducing skill, this result does not deviate from the already established patterns. Composing academic papers also constitutes a greater challenge for about one-fifth of the respondents.

Based on the variables of the table an aggregated academic English language knowledge index was created, which integrated the skills and competences of the international students in five different academic settings. By calculating the mean of the index, three groups with approximately the same number of respondents were formed: (1) the best, or above average; (2) average; (3) below average, or the poorest language knowledge.

Regarding learning strategies, we applied a 14-item question block, and with the help of factor analysis, we were able to identify five very distinct learning strategy factors: (1) Goal-oriented learning and planning; (2) Focused attentional control; (3) self-paced, solitary learning; (4) Learning organization difficulties; (5) Preference for collaborative learning (Table 2).

The first factor appears with great factor emphasis. It shows that the students who belong to this factor take a structured and preemptive approach to learning. They are highly motivated, and in their planning they set long-term, future-oriented goals. Based on these results, we designated this group as Goal-oriented learning and planning. Students in the Focused attentional control group are characterized by an internal drive and motivation for studying, in particular when they are interested in the course material. Cognitive perseverance, a strong sense of self-discipline and commitment defines them. Self-paced solitary learners prefer studying alone, in a quiet environment. This suggests that these students tend to perform better when every form of external disturbance and distraction is minimized around them. The fact that they rely on writing as well as the silent reading method as memorization techniques, indicates that they tend not to rely on teacher-supported or collaborative learning strategies but rather be more inclined to use more private ones, with which the internalization of the given material is less challenging. There are also students who struggle with time management and find it difficult to plan their studies. In their case there lies a gap between their original studying intentions and the execution of those activities. We named the group where this particular learning strategy is used Learning organization difficulties. The last factor is the Preference for collaborative learning, where students demonstrate a strong inclination to work in groups, to seek guidance from peers and teachers.

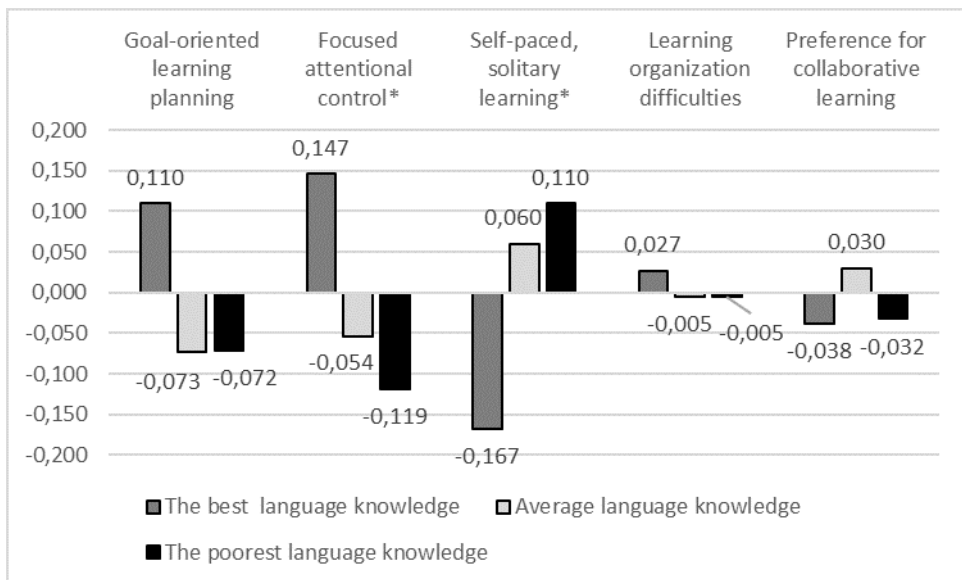
Table 2

## Learning strategy factors of international students

	GOAL-ORIENTED LEARNING PLANNING	FOCUSED ATTENTIONAL CONTROL	SELF-PACED SOLITARY LEARNING	LEARNING ORGANIZATION DIFFICULTIES	PREFERENCE FOR COLLABORATIVE LEARNING
<i>I plan and set objectives before studying.</i>	<b>.789</b>	.180	.099	.041	-.066
<i>My study plans are always future goal oriented.</i>	<b>.742</b>	.243	.097	.071	-.068
<i>I make directional study goals quite often.</i>	<b>.647</b>	.137	.168	-.038	.219
<i>If I want to learn something. I find the ways to do it. doesn't matter how occupied I am.</i>	<b>.400</b>	.224	.128	-.038	.208
<i>It is not a problem if something is hard to learn if I am interested in it.</i>	.198	<b>.745</b>	.024	.053	-.021
<i>I always consider myself to be solely responsible for my learning results.</i>	.157	<b>.438</b>	.141	.020	.001
<i>I feel enthusiastic and motivated to learn new things.</i>	.263	<b>.403</b>	.262	.076	.110
<i>It is better for me to get work done in a quiet place.</i>	.036	.127	<b>.747</b>	.103	-.114
<i>I learn with silent reading method.</i>	.151	.048	<b>.473</b>	.134	.057
<i>I remember something better if I write it down.</i>	.190	.271	<b>.418</b>	-.062	.086
<i>I would like to learn so many different things. but I always run out of time.</i>	.193	.222	.052	<b>.839</b>	-.001
<i>I plan for my learning. but unable to execute them.</i>	-.102	-.052	.098	<b>.453</b>	.113
<i>I prefer to study in a group.</i>	.043	.053	-.103	.023	<b>.614</b>
<i>I need teachers'/ Professors' guidance at every step.</i>	.063	-.053	.222	.249	<b>.418</b>

We were curious as to whether or not there was a connection between learning strategy factors and foreign language knowledge. In order to explore this, the factors were analyzed with an ANOVA test (Figure 2).

**Figure 2 Learning strategy factors by English proficiency level**



In the case of two factors, we discovered significant connections regarding language knowledge: Focused attentional control, and Self-paced, solitary learning. As pertains to the Goal-oriented learning planning strategy, significant relationship might be possible if we were to calculate the average and the worst language proficiency in. The Goal-oriented learning planning and Focused attentional control groups are clearly characteristic of those with the best language proficiency. Self-paced, solitary learning is rather typical of the average, as well as the worst language proficiency groups (assuming that memorization is primary here). In the case of those with Preferences for collaborative learning, there are no big differences that would be presumably thanks to the “good ones” not needing it, and the “worse ones” being ashamed to ask for it. The average group, however, is familiar enough with the language that they are able and dare to ask for it, while needing reinforcement.

## 5. Conclusion

The aim of our study was to examine to what degree the level of academic English language proficiency correlates with applying certain learning strategies among the international students at the University of Debrecen. The analysis of the topic was noteworthy, since previous research highlighted that English as a medium instruction language has a great impact on international students’ academic achievement. It is

especially true for the English used within an academic environment, for there it is the basis for professional communication not only during the university years, but also it can affect the later career of students. Thus, in our research we focused on higher educational studies, and one of our results was that out of the academic language knowledge dimensions, based on the responses, participating in academic debates poses the greatest challenge. This is, however, consistent with expectations, since one can prepare for academic debates in a more limited way, unlike for instance for an exam, where it is sufficient to provide answers within the scope and boundaries of the topics that the curriculum defines. Even during a class there is a possibility to look up the unfamiliar terminology later. Engaging in a debate requires the most spontaneous ways of using the academic vocabulary, therefore only students with the most stable language skills feel comfortable in such an activity.

By merging the dimensions of the academic English language knowledge, the students were assigned to three categories, and we examined how their language skills are related to the learning strategies they use. Our main result was that the most proficient language users are characterized by the Goal-oriented learning and planning strategy, and it was also them who are able to focus on studying for a long period of time and also to keep up their commitment. Although regarding the first, there was no significant difference between the three different language knowledge level groups, but the advantage of the highest proficiency level group is clearly apparent. In case of the Focus attention control group it is significantly delineated that the better a student's language proficiency is, the more it is characteristic of him to have focused attention during studying. This can also be possible – as we saw it in Phakiti and colleagues' (2013) study — because the energy that studying requires is not drained by the student having to compensate for the language barriers, and it is easier to stay motivated when there are no linguistic challenges. This particular result supported our first hypothesis (H1), namely that students who are on a more advanced level of academic English, tend to adopt goal-driven and focused learning strategies.

Our second hypothesis (H2) was in connection with the solitary learning approach, and we assumed that self-timed and self-regulated strategies will be characteristic of those students whose English proficiency is less advanced. This assumption — based on Rienties et al. (2012) — was also confirmed, since this learning method is significantly more characteristic as the proficiency of English language becomes weaker: it is not a defining trait for students with advanced language skills, it appears with the ones whose language knowledge is average, while it is very common with students with the poorest language competence. Thus, self-directed, individual learning, and often slower-paced learning may be a typical strategy in order to mitigate for linguistic disadvantages.

And finally, our last hypothesis (H3) concerned collaborative learning being characteristic of students with more limited language proficiency, especially, because of the greater linguistic challenges, they require outside assistance as well. The data provided only partial evidence for this, thus, the hypothesis could not fully be

confirmed. Preferring collaborative studying was indeed characteristic of students with an average language knowledge — and not the lowest language knowledge, as we assumed based on Yang and Tsai (2023), Rienties et al. (2012) —, however, it was not a distinctive trait of the ones whose language level was the poorest. The reason for that could be that the insufficient language proficiency serves as a barrier for them in asking for help, or maybe they are ashamed of their linguistic deficiency. As it was evident how strongly the self-paced, solitary factor was typical of them, they tend to adapt to that strategy more, while the group with average language skills display a mixed strategy: solitary, individual learning is complemented with collaborative learning.

The question arises, and may also be the basis for further research areas, whether these learning strategies are capable of successfully compensating throughout the academic studies. Also, another interesting aspect could be to examine how they change over the course of the university years, since it is possible that during the first few years - partly due to the level of English proficiency, to some extent to the lower integration level, and partially to the nature of the studies - solely through the exclusive application of the solitary, quiet and mechanical learning approaches can academic success be achieved. Later, with the higher level of academic integration and the development of language proficiency, other learning strategies may also appear.

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**SUPPORTING ACADEMIC WRITING AND COMMUNICATION FOR SPECIAL NEEDS  
AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS: EDUCATORS' ROLES IN PROFESSIONAL HELPER  
HIGHER EDUCATION**

*Emese Beáta Berei & Eunicia Ile*

**Abstract**

Educational inequalities present a global challenge for modern societies. Teachers should support the learning process and evaluate a diversity of adult populations with special education needs (SEN), including those who are financially, socially, educationally, or familially disadvantaged, or students with disabilities. They should also aid mothers with children, working or elderly persons, internationally mobile or international students, and those with culturally diverse backgrounds — in short, teachers ought to aid everyone in succeeding. However, in higher education, some challenges persist like digital academic writing skills development process and their evaluations. This study examines the support of professional helper higher education (PHHE), focusing on academic responsibilities and diversity of student population, including an empirical evaluation of international students' teaching. The study explores three research questions: How do academics support the learning process of different student groups? What characteristics can be identified among teachers who are committed to the teaching of international students? How does telework support international students' academic writing?

The international sample for the quantitative analyses consisted of academics in Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, Serbia, and Ukraine (N = 315) teaching in one of the following PHHE fields: pedagogical, medical, health sciences, and theological education. The complex questionnaire, titled Central and Eastern European Teachers in Higher Education (CEETHE 2023), contains questions referring to the inclusive teaching process. Data were recorded in the Centre for Higher Education Research and Development — Hungary (CHERD-H) in 2023 and the SPSS statistical programme examined data through chi-square tests, factor analyses, and correlation tests.

Academics' supportive pattern includes responsibilities and accommodations throughout the teaching process of SEN students: help in academic writing, availability of written and audio learning resources, time extensions, and evaluation flexibility. The backing for academic writing encompasses both digital and human aspects of communication, allowing for the assistance of a proofreader to correct spelling and punctuation, and ensuring the use of a writing assistant (e.g., a computer) for written reports/essays. PHHE academics' involvement was frequent in foreign student

teaching, being predominantly female, from the medical or health sciences field, typically working more than 40 hours/week, and being based in Hungary. As regards international students, the academic writing process support has a positive and significant correlation with full-time telework teachers' activities and asynchronous communication but the frustration caused by the constant availability made possible by digital technology had a negative and powerful tie to digital academic writing support.

In conclusion, academics possessing educational degrees should organise training for teachers to effectively teach students who have special educational needs; they should also manage telework, and bolster the academic writing process.

**Keywords:** teachers' responsibilities, academic writing, educational support, special educational need, international students, professional helper education, telework, international quantitative research

## 1. Introduction

Following the social massification of education, students from an educational institution are not homogeneous. Different subgroups of students participate in the learning process: the majority and cultural minorities, the socially disadvantaged, the disabled, or international students with various language and cultural backgrounds (Varga, 2015). Further education at a higher level is not only a social trend, but also an aspiration of many adults (Pusztai & Fináncz, 2003). The term "special educational needs" (SEN) is large, referring to students who face learning difficulties due to various causes some of which are communication challenges, physical or mental disabilities, trauma, family roles, social status, cultural differences and so on. Distinct assessment of these groups throughout the entire process is necessary for efficient integration of students with different special needs (Varga, 2015). Evaluating the institution's social, familial, physical, and mental health assessment of the enrolled is crucial for establishing the different equity criteria necessary for a successful educational process. According to Fejes (2006), compensating for disadvantages is important not only for preventing the loss of talent but also for offering economic and macro-social benefits to society as a whole. Economic growth requires reducing the proportion of the population that is low-skilled, reducing excessive disparities, ensuring social mobility opportunities, and effectively utilising human capital. Increased attention to compensating the disadvantaged is also important for the efficient use of public investment in education, providing long-term benefits to society.

In his systematic literature review, *Teaching International Students in Western Universities: A Literature Review*, Agostinelli (2021:118-119) argues that the "increase of international students in higher education is primarily the product of globalization" and maintains that Western higher education institutions that host massive numbers of international students are under-equipped to meet their diverse needs. MacGregor and Folinazzo (2018:300), confirm the pressing requirements for

campuses to react and evolve given the new institutional and academic expectations. Agostinelli points out the family financial betterment, the facile international travel, the wide spread of English language skills, as well as the European Union Bologna Process among the enhancing factors for the intake of international students in Western universities that offer educational programs in English or countries where English is the primary language spoken

In Australia's education system, which, according to OECD comparative studies, is characterised by above-average equity, special equity groups have been defined by the current legislation. The English language is in official use and disadvantaged groups are defined in various statistical data, which takes into account the characteristics that put these groups at a disadvantage compared to the majority: (1) students from low socioeconomic backgrounds; (2) indigenous people (aboriginals); (3) those who use English as a second language; (4) those who do not speak English; (5) those living in isolated communities; (6) people with physical or mental disabilities (Papp Z., 2015:3).

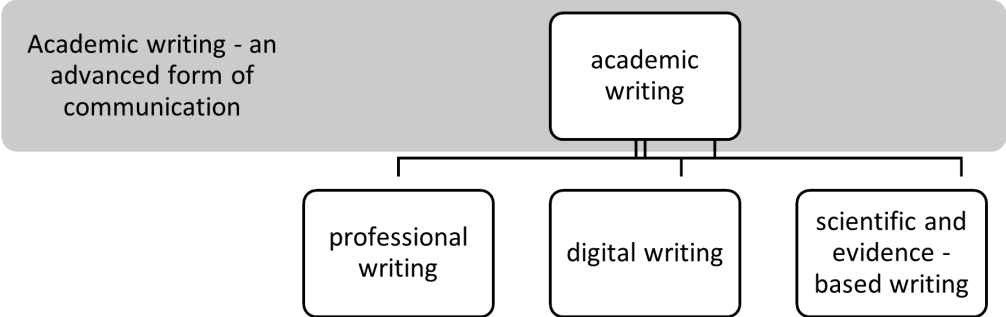
In a comparative study, Hanushek and Woessmann (2011) found a correlation between a country's educational effectiveness and its economic performance. Examining the economic growth of 24 OECD countries between 1960 and 2000, they established a close link between education reform measures and long-term economic development performance. While traditional education policy measures such as allocating more funding to educational institutions or reducing class sizes have not significantly improved educational performance, investment in human capital has paved the way for long-term economic progress. If these results were applied to higher education, it would be an investment in institutional human capital.

For the Centre for Higher Education Research and Development — Hungary (CHERD-H), teaching special educational needs students is a frequent research topic. The author's dissertation examined the future plans and attitudes of teacher students towards their peers with different educational needs and found that peer attitudes are related to students' workplace preferences. There was a positive relationship between the attitudes and plans of teacher students preparing for their professions. A broader career choice spectrum resulted from their support of Romani, minority, disabled peers (Berei, 2018).

Academic writing is a new and special form of communicating at the tertiary level of the education, and the learning process occurs throughout students' educational careers, including writing essays, professional and scientific reports. Bachelor's theses and dissertations also have a written form, and this advanced form of writing conditions the finalization of the higher education study. Students marked difficulties in learning this form of scientific and professional communication. Academic writing is a complex form of communication in a higher education context which has three learning outcomes: communication in a professional, evidence-based and scientific form, and digital communication (Figure 1). The professional form of communication is based on the field of future work of students; scientific communication has formal rules and is a transgenerational evidence-based knowledge transmission. The digital

aspect of academic learning appeared in the 21st century and means searching, writing and communicating through digital devices (Berei, 2025)

**Figure 1 Academic writing components in communication**



*Source: Berei, 2025, authors’ design*

To continue, it would be worthwhile to differentiate between the notions of foreign students and of international students. Students considered to be “foreign” learn abroad temporarily or are enrolled in a higher education institution in a country or culture other than their home. “International” students are those with a nationality different from that of the country of study. This term is broad, including internationally mobile, migrant, refugee, or other categories of students, with non-domestic, non-citizen backgrounds, with different nationalities who are studying somewhere other than their home countries (EUROSTUDENT 8).

As MacGregor and Folinazzo (2018:300) point out, “with the influx of international students, institutions and the students themselves are pushed to adapt”. Thus, the authors identified four major difficulties that international students face in their academic endeavours: skill area weaknesses perceived as language issues, sociocultural considerations, isolation and adjustment, and differences in classroom environment.

Elaborating on their research data, MacGregor and Folinazzo (2018) indicate the predicament of international students who do not possess the technical terminology specific to their field of study and their disadvantage concerning the course reading requirements. The complexity of the problem resides not only in the ability to keep up with the reading load, to follow the organization of a text, to synthesize and apply concepts from those texts to case studies, but also to grasp the very lexical nature of readings. Further, the authors’ study focuses on the intricacy dealt with by those students in understanding lectures. The format, delivery speed, the unfamiliar content, together with the foreign students’ underdeveloped note-taking skills all present large hurdles for international students.

According to Taylor and Beasley (2005), non-native students frequently run into trouble in written communication in three main ways. Alongside with

the complexity of communicating ideas in a foreign language, the educational background of the international student poses a possible root of deficiencies in scientific communication and writing.

As Prashanti Chennamsetti (in Donna M. Velliari, 2020) writes, foreign students who possessed superior English language skills adapted more easily to the US than those who considered their proficiency to be poor. Studies concur regarding the lower-levels of acculturative stress in the cases of high English language competence. The same principle applies to the written and oral skills related to academic success with regard to academic writing, understanding lectures, actively participating in classes, and performing well in oral and written examinations.

Moreover, MacGregor and Folinazzo (2018) also disclose the insufficient participation of foreign students in class presentations and speaking activities even among the students who obtained high TOEFL scores. In his review, Agostinelli (2021) maintains that faculty members generally perceive a better performance from international students in their passive tasks (reading and listening) rather than in active ones (speaking and writing), as along with the fact that instructors tend to overlook language related errors in favour of focusing on content.

Writing on the socio-cultural considerations, Smith and Khawaja (2011) underscore the mutual benefit of international students and universities in developed countries but also indicate that several factors impact upon international student acculturation. Smith and Khawaja agree on Berry's definition of acculturation as "the process of change that takes place as a result of two or more cultures coming into contact" (Smith & Khawaja, 2011:700). This process involves the acculturative stress of international students and the resulting adjustment problems. At the same time, this process needs a permanent analysis and the refinement of the dominant acculturation models since the recent majority of the acculturation models are related to immigrants and refugees. The two authors underline the (quasi) absent discussion regarding the state and theoretical frame data concerning the acculturation models in the present studies.

According to MacGregor and Folinazzo (2018), international students bring their own social and cultural history with divergent social and academic expectations. Multiple home countries of international students provide an educational paradigm based on memorization and repetition. International students with such a formative background often feel uncomfortable expressing their own thoughts and tend to display minimal critical thinking. The authors include a particularity regarding the cultural shaping of female students emerging from certain societies who are reluctant to contribute to classroom discussions. Following Xu's argument, the authors point out the hesitancy of international students to freely share their views indicate the experience of learning shock appearing in uneasiness and frustration with unfamiliar learning and teaching methods and expectations.

Both the extension and style of the Western academic research represent potential threats to the student's ability to communicate. The extension of a Western academic paper might prove quite challenging as opposed to the requirements

met in the former educational system which might necessitate memorization and reproduction, not necessarily writing. At the same time, the style of Western academic research includes critical thinking which rests on analysis, argumentation, clarity and explicitness of conclusions (Taylor & Beasley, 2005).

In MacGregor and Folinazzo's (2018) view, foreign students also experience alienation issues, isolation and adjustment problems due to their unawareness of social rules and lacking social skills. What is more, in other studies (Poyrazli & Lopez's, 2007), the authors point out indicated increased levels of homesickness and discrimination which sharpened the acculturation and adjustment among international students, leading to detrimental effects on physical and mental health.

Notwithstanding, the complexity of international students' adaptation to a Western university must overcome the barrier of differences in classroom environment. MacGregor and Folinazzo (2018) argue that a shift from collective learning to independent learning can lead to disorientation since studies indicate that international students are less familiar with the demands of group projects. The authors maintain that the international students enrolled from Asian countries will not challenge teachers due to a dissimilar view on the teacher's authority. Agostinelli (2021:124) underscores an analogous conclusion stating that the "difficulties with participation might not be a `language problem`, but a `conversational problem` that is likely derived from their previous experiences with a Confucian style of education". Following the same vein of thought, Tran (2013) underlines that since international students are shaped in distinct academic traditions, their different interpretations of the approaches to writing are marked by various factors including the imprinted mould of a specific worldview, ways of valuing and constructing knowledge, the ways of communicating with the audience and organising discourse. Therefore, Tran (2013) concludes, analytical, descriptive, or reproductive approaches should perhaps be viewed as different logical ways of making sense of the world and making meaning in writing in different cultures.

MacGregor and Folinazzo (2018) surmised that the solution for providing learning supports for students with special needs requires a combined effort. The authors invite the action of international students, domestic students, professors, and of the institution. The requirement for international students presupposes improving their English, participation in the activities and social life, and communicating with domestic students. The domestic students' group requires a change in attitude towards the foreign students in the direction of being more inclusive. For the professors, the expectations of international students include pro-active pedagogical behaviour and enhanced student-teacher dialogue. Agostinelli advocates that a student-centred approach in teaching, utilising group work and discussions to accommodate and explain concepts to foreign students, better equips students to become critical thinkers as opposed to a teacher-centred pedagogical method which involves lecturing and explicit instruction (MacGregor & Folinazzo, 2018).

At an institutional level, fair accommodations for international students would involve the use of dictionaries during tests and exams, extra time to complete tests

and exams, and course notes provided ahead of time for each lecture (MacGregor & Folinazzo, 2018). Traditional learning resources are physical libraries with printed books, worksheets, audio, and written materials supporting students' professional preparation. Digital resources are platforms with digital documents, PowerPoint presentations, questions, tests, websites with digital texts, graphics, data, animation, audio, video content, and hyperlink connections. Research has shown that it is effective for both types of resources to be accessible to higher-education students.

The institutional strategies, Taylor and Beasley (2005) point out, display interest in directing students towards literature and model articles, providing structured analytical and critical writing materials, with teachers working with the students through each step of their drafts of academic research and academic skills. Furthermore, MacGregor and Folinazzo (2018) stress, the institutional effort to adjust for foreign students must, nevertheless, include strategies to facilitate the nurturing and development of international students on campus. Setting up a committee to articulate a curriculum and the implementation of these courses for all first-year students represents the first step. Creating additional events and allocating supplementary resources and employment opportunities for international students also help significantly. Prashanti Chennamsetti (in Donna M. Velliari, 2020) reiterates the necessity to engage foreign students in extracurricular activities, and exercising, alongside with introducing them to Western culture as a means to augment their self-confidence and to help them focus on their studies.

The number of European 32 nationals enrolled outside their country of nationality (study abroad) is considerably lower than that of foreign nationals studying in the European 32 zone. The total number of students abroad in 2006/07 was 673,000, less than half the number of foreign nationals studying in Europe's 32 countries during the same period (1,507,000) (Teichler et al. 2011). EUROSTUDENT database 8 refers to the period 2021-2024 and includes different data on the social conditions of students in around 25 countries. Internationally mobile students enrolled temporarily abroad are students learning in higher education institutions outside of the country of their residence or previous studies (for a short time, for one or two semesters), to gain only a relatively small number of credits. In Central and Eastern European countries (Hungary, Romania, Slovakia), most students continued higher education studies as "domestic" students in the 2021–2024 period (a part of this period was with Covid-19 restrictions).

This study examined teachers' supportive attitudes towards special education need (disabled, disadvantaged, national minority, with young children and foreigner) and international students through educational and assessment processes, preparing them for a career in one of the helpings (pedagogical, health science, medical, or theological) professions. Teachers on PHHE develops theoretical and practical knowledge, skills, and competences on caring for vulnerable groups in society (Berei & Kovács, 2025) and academic writing and communication skills for their profession, at the same time (Berei, 2025).

## 2. Research design and methods

The international quantitative research was managed in the Centre for Higher Education Research and Development — Hungary (CHERD-H) in 2023. A subsample consisted of data from academics teaching in Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, Serbia, and Ukraine (N=315) in one of the professional helper higher education fields: pedagogical education (N=35.6%), medical or health science education (N=61%), and theological education (N=2.9%). The socio–demographic, family, and academic characteristics of teachers were detailed in a previous study (Berei & Kovács, 2025).

The complex questionnaire, named Central and Eastern European Teachers in Higher Education (CEETHE 2023), contains questions referring to inclusive responsibilities of academics and their exceptional support for students with special needs (disabled, disadvantaged, minority, mothers with children, and foreign).

The questions were: How involved are you in the following activities: supporting students with special educational needs, supporting the learning and integration of new students, and in mentoring activities to help students catch up (N=312)? The measurement of the variables was on 5–point scale (absolutely characteristic, mostly characteristic, undecided, mostly not characteristic, and not at all characteristic). The educational support activities of teachers were measured using 10 items (Cronbach’s Alpha = 0.795, Mean = 1.54, n = 292).

The telework of teachers on academic writing encompasses the digital aspect of work in educational institutions, as well as the use of digital technology for teaching activities (Table 1).

**Table 1** Variable on measuring the digital aspect of teacher telework

	Mean	Standard deviation	N
In your workplace, non-attendance training with digital support is recognized as a full-time job	3.17	1.24	209
The asynchronous communication of digital technology makes it easier to handle situations more thoughtfully, thus reducing stress levels	2.98	1.05	210
The constant availability made possible by digital technology is very frustrating	3.45	1.14	210

*Source: CEETHE 2023*

The SPSS statistical programme examined data through chi-square and ANOVA tests, factor analyses, and correlation tests.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Supporting students with special needs. What does it mean for teachers?

Academics in professional helper education were questioned (Table 2) on if they have responsibilities for teaching students with special needs: disabled, disadvantaged, national minority (majority in case of minority institution), with young children, and foreigners.

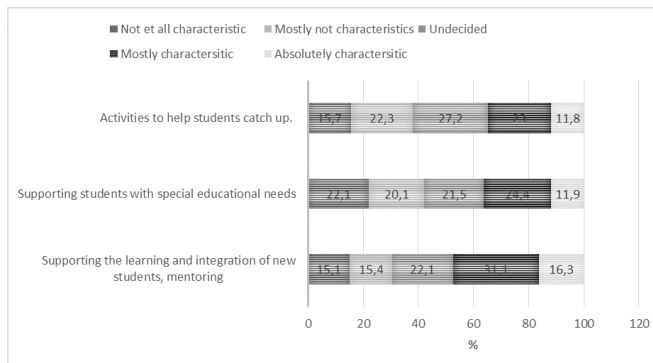
**Table 2 Do you teach any of the following groups of students with special needs?**

	Yes	I don't know	No	%	N
People with disabilities (e.g. visual, hearing, mobility, learning disabilities, autism, etc.)	27.1	20.4	52.5	100	314
Disadvantaged (e.g. poor financial situation)	42.3	42.6	15.1	100	312
Belonging to a national minority/majority (in the case of a minority institution)	48.2	27.7	24.1	100	311
Students with young children	55	28.4	16.6	100	313
Foreigner	67.7	1.6	30.7	100	313

Source: CEETHE 2023

Two-thirds of academics (67.7%) provide teaching activities for international students, and more than half of them (55%) teach mothers with young children in their group. Teachers who lack knowledge of students with special needs are in the majority. With 42.6% of respondents admitting to being unaware of the poor financial situation, it is clear that many do not know about the social disadvantages faced by students (Table 2). This deficit is observed in the involvement of PHHE academics in supporting special needs students (Figure 2): 42.3% admitted to not being involved, and 21.5% were undecided.

**Figure 2 PHHE teachers' involvement in supporting students (%) (N=312)**



Source: CEETHE 2023

There is a significant relationship between the support of those with special educational needs and the support and mentoring of learning in integration for new students ( $\rho=0.603^{**}$ ,  $p=0.000$ ). The support of special needs students positively connects with the supportive activities for inclusion, but for different special groups this support presents different mean values:  $m(\text{disabled})=3.69$ ;  $m(\text{disadvantaged})=3.40$ ;  $m(\text{minority/majority})=3.25$ ;  $m(\text{with young children})=3.2$  and  $m(\text{foreigner})=2.78$ . The support of those with disabilities is the highest, and students with small children and foreigners receive the least amount from teachers. Significant differences were found between the means for disadvantaged students ( $F=26.04$ ,  $p=0.000$ ), those who communicate in languages other than the institutional language ( $F=16.13$ ,  $p=0.000$ ), and students with children ( $F= 17.35$ ,  $p=0.000$ ).

The concrete educational support activities of teachers were measured using 10 items (Table 3), including the learning process and different type of evaluations.

**Table 3** What types of activities do teachers admit for the support of special needs students?

Do you think it is right to apply the following when teaching students with the above special needs?	Yes	No	Cannot decide	%	N
Allowing to making an audio recording of the lecture.	57	23.4	19.6	100	312
Making course material available in written format.	93.3	3.2	3.5	100	311
Extending the deadlines for student projects, submissions.	55.2	27.5	17.3	100	313
Allowing an alternative means of assessment.	69.4	12.1	18.5	100	313
Allowing longer preparation time during the exams	74.4	14.1	11.5	100	312
Allowing typos, incorrect punctuation and incorrect grammar on tests without penalising the student.	52.4	18	29.6	100	311
Allowing the assistance of a proofreader to correct spelling and punctuation.	50.5	17.5	32	100	309
Ensuring the use of a writing assistant (e.g. computer) for written reports/essays	60.7	19	20.3	100	311
Replacing a written exam with an oral exam.	72.8	13.1	14.1	100	312
Replacing an oral exam with a written exam.	64.7	19.4	15.9	100	314

Source: CEETHE 2023

Principal component analyses were performed with varimax rotation, resulting in four factors (Table 4) from the academic activities list (Table 3), specifically teaching special needs students (KMO = 0.784,  $p = 0.000$ , with 68.79% of the variance explained). Teachers supporting the process acknowledged the use of various learning techniques, including digital assistance, time extensions, availability of learning resources, and flexibility in evaluation.

**Table 4 Factor types of activities admitting for the support of special needs students**

	Flexibility in evaluations	Time extension	Support in writing	Learning resources
Replacing a written exam with on oral exam.	.834			
Replacing an oral exam with a written exam	.738			
Allowing typos, incorrect punctuation and incorrect grammar on tests without penalising the student	.650			
Extending the deadlines for student projects, submissions		.827		
Allowing longer preparation time during the exams		.736		
Ensuring the use of a writing assistant (e.g. computer) for written reports/essay			.866	
Allowing the assistance of a proofreader to correct spelling and punctuation			.607	
Making course material available in written format				.820
Allowing to make an audio recording of the lecture.				.675

*Source: CEETHE 2023*

Teacher support for students with special needs correlates significantly with time extension ( $\rho = 0.263$  and  $p = 0.000$ ) and support in writing ( $\rho = 0.151$  and  $p = 0.033$ ).

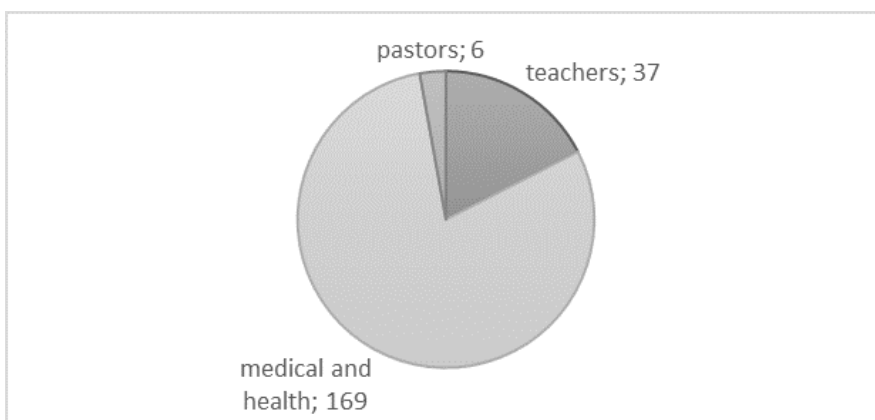
### 3.2. An evaluation on teachers' activities in supporting international students. The academic writing support

A special group evaluation was conducted to explore the pedagogical responsibilities of faculty members who seek to ascertain whether their responsibilities extend to students of foreign nationalities. Specifically, the study aims to determine whether faculty members teach any of the following groups of students with special needs, named foreigners. The majority of the teachers were involved in the instruction and education of this particular group of students (Table 3). The category of students with special educational needs was the most extensive, with those from foreign countries. In the following analysis, the characteristics of professors who teach international students and the support they provide will be examined. In the present section of the study, efforts are underway to ascertain responses to the following research questions: What characteristics can be identified among academics who are committed to the education of their international students? How does digitization support international students' academic writing?

The socio-demographic and family characteristics of the PHIHE academics who teach international students were as follows: 162 were from Hungary, and 48 were from other countries (Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine, and Serbia); 112 were women; 137 were married; 152 had children; and 143 were over 40 years old. The majority of academics (81%) held a scientific degree, with two-thirds (67.5%) employed as junior lecturers or at a lower level, and three-quarters (76%) working more than the mandatory minimum of 40 hours/week.

The subsequent phase of the process will involve designing an academic profile for teachers. Statistical data (Figure 3) indicate that most academics involved in teaching international students were from the medical and health science fields.

**Figure 3** The distribution of academics in function of the PHHE fields (N=212)



Source: CEETHE 2023

The chi-square statistical test of the data revealed that academics from medical or health specializations had 12 times the chances of teaching international students than teachers and pastors (OR = 12.26, p = 0.000, chi-square coefficient = 90.08). Females had 3 times the chances as males (OR=3.2, p=0.000, chi-square coefficient=17.91), and academics in Hungarian institutions almost 7 times more often than those from Romania, Slovakia, and other countries (OR=6.93, p=0.000, chi-square coefficient=58.34).

Writing support ensures the use of a writing assistant (e.g., computer) for written reports/essays and allows the assistance of a proofreader to correct spelling and punctuation. This refers to the use of digital devices and the teleworking of academics encompassing the digital aspect of work, as well as the use of digital technology for teaching activities (Table 5).

**Table 5 Writing support factor correlation with the telework characteristics of academics teaching with foreign students.**

	In your work place, non-attendance training with digital support is recognized as a full-time job	The asynchronous communication of digital technology makes it easier to handle situations more thoughtfully, thus reducing stress levels	The constant availability made possible by digital technology is very frustrating
Support in writing factor	rho= 0.203 p=0.004	rho= 0.214 p=0.002	rho= - 0.207 p=0.003

Source: CEETHE 2023

Teacher work in supporting foreign students writing correlates significantly with non-attendance training as full-time job (rho = 0.203 and p = 0.004), asynchronous communications (rho = 0.214 and p = 0.002) and constant digital availability (rho= - 0.207 and p=0.003).

**4. Discussion**

A social and educational equity analysis highlighted the socio-demographic and family characteristics of students, comparing the social dimension of education in Hungary and Romania. Due to the family backgrounds (parents with low educational level, precarious economic situation, and low occupational status), disadvantaged students were 10-40 % in Hungary and Romania (Berei, 2018). In these analyses a high percentage of teachers have responsibilities on students teaching from outside the borders, but fewer for those from disadvantaged financial situations. The subgroup of academics uncertain in the support provided to students with different special educational needs is large (Table 2). This uncertainty can impact the entire

process of inclusion in the educational institution and the quality of education. According to Boudon's theory (1981), students from different backgrounds have varying values in terms of educational behaviour. In constructing a micro-sociological theory of the decision to continue education, Boudon (1981) drew on theories of economic and social mobility. He considered a young adult's career in the educational system to be a series of decisions. The repetition of these decisions can lead to an exponential increase in social inequalities. He hypothesized that differences exist in the distribution of values that influence school attitudes among groups belonging to different social classes. Young people from families with a lower social status are less likely to value further education as a means of achieving success. Furthermore, they are also at a cognitive disadvantage compared to those socialised in a favourable family background. They tend to underestimate the future benefits of learning, overestimate its current disadvantages, and perceive it as risky. Thus, a disadvantaged, economically low-income family background is typically associated with language disadvantages, and the value placed on learning is too low. Their limited subjective view of the time horizon leads them to be less concerned with future investments out of necessity, causing them to undervalue the future benefits of learning compared to the immediate benefits. Boudon's (1981) theory explains how this plays out at the individual level.

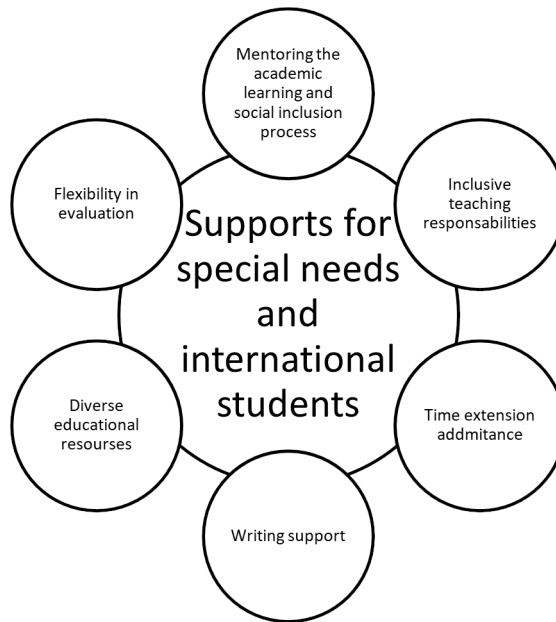
Regarding the study results, the majority of academics with teaching activities for international students were from Hungary, specifically in the fields of medicine and health sciences. Educational integration and social inclusion of international students are high in these profiles. Teacher education also integrates international students at a high percentage. The academic writing support process for them would be organised more efficiently if non-attendance training with digital support and asynchronous communication is recognised as a full-time job for teachers, based on the study's results. Students and teachers, it is crucial to learn to focus on their academic responsibilities while working remotely and engaging in digital learning, without constant availability, to reduce digital frustrations and work–family life conflicts (Berei & Pusztai, 2022; Berei, 2024).

## **5. Conclusions**

Teachers should be trained to know the institutional equity criteria for each special needs group of students and facilitate their inclusion in the academic environment. To facilitate optimal student success in higher education, a comprehensive and multifaceted evaluation approach is imperative, encompassing both social and learning dimensions. Mentoring is provided for the academic learning of new entrants and inclusive teaching activities in tertiary education, which is characteristic of most academics. Four directions were identified: writing support, time extension admission, diversity in traditional and digital educational resources for learning, and flexibility in evaluation for students with special educational needs (Figure 4).

Figure 4

## How do academics support the learning process of special needs students?



Source: Authors' design

Academic writing support is of great importance, as it ensures the use of a digital writing assistant (e.g., a computer) for written reports/essays, and allows for the assistance of a proofreader to correct spelling and punctuation. The establishment of conducive conditions is crucial for promoting student progress and ensuring the successful completion of their academic endeavours.

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### **III. ARTS MEDIATION IN INTERCULTURAL CONTEXTS**

## **HARMONY ACROSS CULTURES: EL SISTEMA AS INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE AND INCLUSION THROUGH MUSIC EDUCATION**

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### **Abstract**

Music, as a universal language, plays a vital role in promoting intercultural communication within educational settings. It transcends linguistic and cultural barriers, allowing individuals from diverse backgrounds to connect, share experiences, and collaborate. In education, it nurtures understanding, empathy, and respect for diversity, making it a powerful instrument for community-building, inclusion, and personal development. El Sistema, founded in Venezuela in 1975, exemplifies this approach, using music education to address social and cultural challenges. It combats economic hardship, social exclusion, and disconnection through instrumental training. This program has spread to over 80 countries, reaching more than one million children. Its decentralized model adapts to local contexts, blending global values with local needs. More than music learning, it promotes community development and equal educational access. Its slogan, "Play and Fight," embodies resilience. Networks like Sistema Global and El Sistema USA® support local projects and global connections. Founder José Antonio Abreu advanced youth orchestras and intercultural collaboration through UNESCO's "World Movement of Youth and Children's Orchestras and Choirs."

This study introduces the Hungarian group inspired by this philosophy: the Maltese Symphony Program. Hungary joined in 2014, offering music education to disadvantaged children. It started as an EU-funded pilot in 15 locations in Southern Transdanubia and Northern Hungary. After 2015, the Symphonia Foundation and the Hungarian Maltese Charity Service took over. Some educators pushed for a return to traditional music schools, risking the program's community focus. In 2019, the "Integrated Communities Program" was launched to reach Hungary's most marginalized groups. By 2021, "There is a Melody in Everyone's Heart" involved 32 organizations in 67 locations, serving over 3,000 children. It remains central to the Hungarian Maltese Charity Service's youth efforts. Beyond music, they assist municipalities with economic development, housing, sports, and social programs. A key goal is expanding the Program to support child development in as many communities as possible. After facing temporary financial difficulties, the Program has regained momentum and continues to grow alongside the Symphonia Foundation's work, staying true to El Sistema's principles. In summary, El Sistema

and its adaptations — including Hungary’s Maltese Symphony Program — show how music bridges divides, supports communities, and fosters meaningful education.

**Keywords:** intercultural communication, El Sistema, diversity, community-building

## 1. Introduction

Music serves a powerful and thus significant dual goal. On the one hand, it is able to reflect the various layers of emotions, personal and group identity (Tao & Chang, 2025), cultural experiences, as well as personal perceptions and recollections. On the other, it is a tool for interaction such as bonding, healing (Feng & Wang, 2025; Li et al., 2023), communicating, and it may also facilitate cultural awareness (Guan & Matsunobu, 2022), intercultural empathy (Li et al., 2023), and even language learning (Wolverton, 1991; Thompson et al., 2025). This dual function makes music a very effective and influential apparatus for intercultural communication, especially amid an era that is characterized by social fragmentation and cultural polarization.

Based on Samovar et al. (2013), intercultural communication comprises communication between people whose symbolic system, cultural understanding and observations are different and distant from each other to such an extent that it substantially impacts the interaction. Most of the time this denotes verbal and non-verbal communication, including paralinguistic, gestures, body language, facial expression, eye contact and appearance. However, music is also a system of symbols that is culturally embedded, that can be universal, while being bound to traditions, specific emotions and values. It is culturally rooted, thus reflects cultural diversity, while simultaneously having the potential to reconcile cultural differences (Barnabé Villodre, 2012) and promote collaboration and intercultural dialogues without verbal expressions. Incorporating music from different cultural traditions into classroom or group settings that are multicultural, enhances self-awareness, and fosters appreciation for cultural richness and diversity. Music can create an environment where inclusion is promoted, the sense of community is nurtured, and critical engagement of both personal and others’ cultural expression is encouraged.

El Sistema is an education program that came into being with the purpose of harnessing classical music training to enhance social inclusion. In it, music has functioned as a powerful symbolic system, where children from various social, economic and cultural backgrounds understand this shared symbolic system, and thus it serves as a non-verbal lingua franca. El Sistema also provides a context for music to become an effective tool in transforming the sociocultural understanding of the participants by building mutual respect and fostering a sense of belonging. Thus, in this program, music becomes a bridge that, despite disparities, brings different worlds together. This does not necessarily mean that one has to like certain styles or composers, but listening to and turning towards somebody else’s music with respect, understanding and curiosity is an adequate foundation for intercultural dialogue (Gilboa, 2016). In our research we used the following research questions:

1. How can music support intercultural dialogue in an educational context?
2. What social and community building effects can be detected in the different adaptations of El Sistema in other countries?
3. How are the core principles of El Sistema manifested in Hungary's Maltese Symphony Program?

## **2. Methodology**

With the help of document analysis, we examined the structures, activities, aims, and principles of El Sistema organizations worldwide. In order to gain insight into the contextual background, we scrutinized the texts and records constructed by the Program.

Throughout the tests the following criteria served as the bases for comparing the different international and Hungarian organizations: (1) objectives of the program; (2) target group; (3) location; (4) organizational structure and framework; (5) engagement with local communities; (6) instructional design, classes; (7) teaching methods; (8) musical repertoire; (9) performances, concerts. Despite the fact that in some cases our information was limited or insufficient, the criteria still served as an essential framework for our research.

## **3. The global backbone: El Sistema's umbrella organizations**

El Sistema, the Venezuelan music education system, was established in 1975 by musician and economist José Antonio Abreu (Caselli, 2013). This program views musical instruments and skills as tools for dealing with economic and cultural problems. El Sistema and its inspired programs spread throughout the world to many countries, and the rate at which it has been growing since the beginning of the 21st century is continuously rising. More than 80 countries, for instance, Venezuela, the United States of America, Canada, Columbia, the Philippines, Cyprus, Türkiye, Great Britain, Portugal, France, Sweden, Finland, Belgium, Switzerland, Hungary, etc., have tried to adapt the program to the local conditions and various social issues. With the exception of Antarctica, there are, today, hundreds of problems taking root all over the world which are helping roughly one million children (Marcus, 2017a).

El Sistema is a decentralized global organization. It does not direct the multitudinous programs founded around the world, rather it has given open access to its ideas, to those who want to adopt them. As a result of this, the El Sistema "brand" became something similar to an open-source code idea, embracing multiple approaches and cultural models which all reflect the varied local conditions and aid in creating a real "glocal" (global and local) movement. Its motto: "Play and Fight" expresses members' determination and commitment (Marcus, 2017a).

The worldwide programs birthed from El Sistema are held together by many international organizations such as, Sistema Global, Sistema Europe, and El SistemaUSA®.

### *3.1 Sistema Global*

Sistema Global is a nonprofit organization, intertwining all of the operating, independent and scattered El Sistema programs and promoting mutual expansion of the scope of resources. Besides, it encourages and stimulates teachers and leaders in every corner of the world, making up-to-date information available across the world. It is made up of passionate volunteers whose expertise and experiences add to making its virtual mission a reality (<https://sistemaglobal.org/>). Moreover, its researchers studied the success of El Sistema's adaptation in different countries. The results thereof revealed a need for an expanded network of partners where the program has no state funding. This could mean cooperation with art corporations, symphonic orchestras, conservatories, with educational and social organizations. For, in order for success to be attained, communication with partners would be essential, not to mention, flexibility in adapting to local needs. This is supported by concerts, volunteering, family involvement, and by collaboration with local music groups (Creech et al., 2013). Surveys were conducted by the researchers of the organization regarding the effects had on children of early participation in musical groups. They were able to identify improvement in three key areas: musical performance, social-emotional learning, and school performance (<https://sistemaglobal.org/>).

### *3.2 Sistema Europe*

Founded in 2012, Sistema Europe is a network of all European Sistema and its inspired organizations and individuals. They all possess the shared goal of continuing activities while holding true to the principles of the original Venezuelan El Sistema. Sistema Europe is part of the network of the same name and the Sistema Europe Association. The network gives its members an opportunity to get acquainted with and to share the Sistema practices of Europe. They can plan projects together, and request lectures, courses, and instructive classes about Sistema work in Venezuela and throughout the world. There are also financing options which can be taken advantage of. The Sistema Europe Association, a non-profit organization which operates the Sistema Europe Network, has its legal headquarters in Australia. Sistema Europe's aim is to allow the children and youth from all layers of European society to thrive and to discover the talents and potential within them. It strives to help its programs impact and form the lives of kids, youth, and their families in a positive way through orchestral and band concerts. Since the members of the network and the association often come from very different cultures and societies compared to that of Venezuela, the fundamental pinnacles of the program are interpreted according their own cultural and societal norms, as well as based on their ties to the Venezuelan El Sistema and the international Sistema movement (Marcus, 2017a).

What is more, it has defined countless core values which guide its operation. The orchestral, choral, and other musical groups' musical activities all serve as tools for development, inclusion, and integration. They ensure youth access, especially to those who have the least financial backing and greatest need. They create such instinctive learning environments that make it possible for children to quickly excel. They provide high quality instruction through regular lectures which are intensive, intriguing, joy-filled, and cooperative. They maintain regular program work schedule which includes many weeks and hours of activities. It deepens their ties to social media and to the development that occurs in the local context of the Venezuelan "nucleo" model. Its famous musical group, SEYO (the Sistema Europe Youth Orchestra), brings together hundreds of the program network's young, talented musicians and teachers (Marcus, 2017a).

### 3.3 *El Sistema USA*®

El Sistema USA® (ESUSA) connects and supports 140 member programs, 6,000 instructor musicians, and 25,000 students across the United States and Canada. Its national network of programs began in 2009 as a New England Conservatory program. Moreover, the Sistema Fellows Program trained 50 musician activists and program organizers to create and develop other such programs across America. In 2014, its national corporation came into being first as a nonprofit to serve the individuals and organizations inspired by the Venezuela music education model, and has now borne the name of El Sistema USA® since 2018. Their goal: that every child regardless of income, geographic location, or identity be able to access a high-quality music education program which provides them with community, opportunities, and personal improvement. The model emphasizes frequent classes (5-10 hours a week), band-based learning and long-term student participation, and either free or low tuition costs. The programs of El Sistema USA help deepen students'/ children's personalities, individualities, and relationships with their peers, thus further contributing to their communities (<https://elsistemausa.org/>).

When adapting the original El Sistema system, the economic, social, and cultures differences of each country must be compared to that of Venezuela. Also, the original program has to be adapted to solve the problems in the local context. For instance, in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany, the programs are used to connect with the children of migrant families who grew up in different cultural environments and, for the most part, live in segregated communities. The primary goal of the program in these countries is to promote integration. Here at home in Hungary, this same program supports disadvantaged settlements as well as children from less well-to-do families in overcoming their sociocultural differences (Kecskés D. & Vértesy, 2016).

Following the introduction of the international organizations, I will detail the characteristics of the original program, El Sistema Venezuela, along with those of El Sistema Greece and the problems that it faces.

## 4. Local voices: national implementations of the program

### 4.1 *The Venezuelan El Sistema Program*

The **aim** of the El Sistema Venezuela is to open the eyes of deeply impoverished children through music and to help progress their social integration. To begin, it is a social program which utilizes music as a tool. José Antonio Abreu said that the classical music orchestra and society work in similar ways, the individual plays a decisive role in contributing to the reaching of a common goal (Abreu, 2009). Currently, this program has dozens of orchestras and bands, more than 700,000 students (the majority from poor backgrounds), and it plans to expand that number to 1,000,000 (Marcus, 2017a).

The **place**, where teaching happens, is near children's homes, usually in a primary school building. Instruction runs as an after-school program with six classes being held weekly, and each lesson being four hours in length. Groups are not divided up by class year, but rather children of varying ages and skill levels cooperate together. The elder students serve as role models for the younger ones both in play instruments and in overall behavior, and they often help the little ones during their rehearsals and classes, when the teacher is busy helping individual students.

**Teaching is centered** on orchestral playing which is both a tool and a goal of El Sistema. This corporate creativity is critical during activities. Since each class day has multiple activities, children have no need to constantly take their musical instruments home with them. What is more, because they love spending time together, the idea of practicing at home that is common place in Europe is foreign to them.

During collaboration, supportive and guiding **educational methods** are employed - giving encouragement and praise, seeing good examples and getting the chance to taste success are all essential (Kecskés D. & Vértésy, 2016). As was stated in the El Sistema documentary film: "This culture is not looking for what's wrong" (Arvelo, 2006). Alongside encouragement, setting the example is also important, where it is not only the teacher, but the older students who are role models for their classmates. As for teachers, it is not just teaching the children, but practicing, orchestra rehearsals, and play time that allow the teachers to be with them to develop close relationships with their pupils. It is worth noting that group work and cooperation are the primary focus; after all, the goal is to raise up orchestra musicians, not soloists (Csonka, 2014).

The **activities** begin everyday with practicing parts (45% of class time), followed by unified orchestra practice (45% of class time). With the last 10% of the time, the focus turns to music theory and music literature (Creech et al., 2013). Throughout the course of playing in the orchestra, children learn a plethora of things, for instance, integrating into a hierarchical system, communicating properly, paying attention to one another's work, and working together. In all of these, each one has his or her place, and each is a necessary part of the whole. Experiencing this kind of organizational structure will prove useful throughout their adult lives.

The **repertoire of music** is made up mainly of Western European classical symphonic works, but the works of local contemporary composers also find their way into the piece inventory (Creech et al., 2013).

They often put together concerts, since, on the one hand, are a fantastic opportunity to experience success, and, on the other, they are a way to draw in the local community, family, and friends, which is critical to the organization.

To measure **the success of the program**, there are multiple avenues that can be taken. First, the children come in contact with friends and a good community during classes where they are appreciated. Successful concerts increase their self-esteem and confidence. Moreover, learning music teaches endurance, discipline, precision, and responsibility, all of which improve academic performance and employment opportunities, while decreasing juvenile crime in these areas of the city. Beyond personal development, playing in an orchestra also teaches commitment to community, attention to one another, and solidarity. Furthermore, multiple musical successes are tied to the program (Szádeczky-Kardoss, 2013). Through the success of the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra lead by Gustavo Dudamel, El Sistema quickly rose to international recognition (<https://elsistemausa.org/>). Gustavo Dudamel was once one of the program's pupils who today is the musical director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra. And, there are many other individual success stories like his. Conductor Dietrich Paredes and upright bass player Edicson Ruiz were also part of El Sistema (Csonka, 2014).

#### *4.2 El Sistema Greece*

The El Sistema Greece musical program targets mainly those dwelling in refugee camps and at-risk Greek children. Its founder, Anis Barnat, always was intrigued by the educational and social changes impacted by music. With many problems like communicating with refugees, navigating the unpredictable life of the camps, constant changing of refugee camp group composition, and dealing with disciplinary problems, the organization faces many challenges.

In 2016, El Sistema Greek was born with the **intent** to ease the suffering of the children and youth living in the camps, and to foster in them self-esteem, giving them the chance to properly reintegrate into society. During the course of this, they learn of their uniqueness, their talents, and experience the solidarity and teamwork among their peers. They gain mutual respect for each other. For, building relationships with local communities and with Greek children is a principal goal. To promote understanding, to build out harmony between nationalities and classes, to fight stereotypes are all major factors from the perspective of enduring social integration ([sistemaglobal.org/el-sistema-greece-musical-hope-for-refugee-children/2023](http://sistemaglobal.org/el-sistema-greece-musical-hope-for-refugee-children/2023)).

From the outset of the program, more than 1,500 **children and young adults** between the ages of 5 and 26 participated in El Sistema education, in a friendly, motivating environment, in six different **locations** (Marcus, 2017b).

In this program, **employees** work together in groups. On a daily basis, administrators, pedagogues, coordinators, committees, interpreters, and countless volunteers collaborate. What is more, they often invite experts from other countries

who interact with teachers, transferring their experience to them. The program is also aided by many international artists ([sistemaglobal.org/el-sistema-greece-musical-hope-for-refugee-children/2023](http://sistemaglobal.org/el-sistema-greece-musical-hope-for-refugee-children/2023)).

Twenty-six classes are held to conduct the activities; a pedagogical model and teaching system were developed specifically for use with migrant communities in the refugee camps. When putting together a **musical repertoire**, a “universal repertoire” is what they strive for, one which contains many pieces from different cultures and is compiled in such a way as to be useable everywhere, even in the simplest performance conditions. They plan multiple concerts and gatherings, involving every community, refugee and ethnic Greek alike, in their creation. ([sistemaglobal.org/el-sistema-greece-musical-hope-for-refugee-children/2023](http://sistemaglobal.org/el-sistema-greece-musical-hope-for-refugee-children/2023)).

During its creation, the organization had many **successes**. For example, students regularly returned to their classes and activities with enthusiasm and joy. For, these structured, art education group activities offer hope to all the children and their families, regardless of nationality, skin color, or religion. Along with this, they teach not only the refugees, but also the city residents who do have access to these cultural institutions. These teaching methods achieved success with them too ([sistemaglobal.org/el-sistema-greece-musical-hope-for-refugee-children/2023](http://sistemaglobal.org/el-sistema-greece-musical-hope-for-refugee-children/2023)).

Without a doubt, the Venezuelan El Sistema has spread far and wide around the world. Though the local problems that inspired the programs are similar, their main objective and their tools are similar. The El Sistema international corporations further serve these, working together to support the countries’ programs. Thus, El Sistema became a family of sorts where helping one another grow is central, the wonderful foundation of it all being music. Hungary joined this community, and formulated the El Sistema-based yet unique Maltese Symphony Program.

#### *4.3 Maltese Symphony Program*

##### **The foundation story of the Maltese Symphony Program**

The testing of El Sistema’s methods in Hungary began in the summer of 2013, in Monor, during a six-week music camp. Due to the effect of the many curious inquirers and positive experience, with the help of the Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta, the music education continued in Monor that October. With that and slight variation in financial backing, the Hungarian version of El Sistema was born: the Symphony Program. In September 2014, 15 sites across Southern Transdanubia and Northern Hungary were able to initiate the program with European Union finances (Tarnaszadány, Tarnabod, Miskolc (in two schools), Alsózsolca, Felsőzsolca, Szendrőlád, Parasznya, Pécs, Darány, Barcs, Bogádmindszent, Magyarmecske, Szakály, Gyulaj) (Herczeg, 2015b).

The one-year pilot program ran its course, and, in September 2015, with the cooperation of the Symphony Foundation and the Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta, the Symphony program continued. The programs operated by the Symphony Foundation function as an arts education institution making their maintenance much easier due to government support. However, due to the change

in institutional frame, a number of the teachers involved would rather employ traditional music school teaching methods, which would mean a breakaway from the program's original objectives (Kecskés D. & Vértesy, 2016). In 2019, with the start of the Program for the Advancement of Lagging Settlements here at home, which encompassed Hungary's 300 poorest settlements, help was given in many different areas like economic development, housing, mobile playground, sports, music, etc. (Bessenyei et al., 2025). The goal is to initiate the Maltese Symphony Program in as many of these villages as possible in order to help children. As a result, following temporary monetary troubles, the Program began its spread anew, with new momentum. Later, between September 2020 and June 2021, more settlements were added to the Program with the "Within the heart of everyone lies a melody" grant. It continued its operation parallel to running the foundation, tying together pedagogy and music pedagogy, as well as social- and community development. Within this framework, 32 organizations began their community music programs with 94 grants in 67 locations throughout those lagging settlements. More than three thousand disadvantaged children were able to join the program, and the Maltese Symphony Program is just one of the youth programs within the Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta (Maltese Symphony, 2024).

### **The goals, construction, tools, and operation of the Maltese Symphony Program**

The Maltese Symphony Program in Hungary is a social program, an opportunity for another chance and to rise above terrible circumstances, in which music is a tool (Szádeczky-Kardoss, 2013). Since it is typical of the Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta's point of view to always scrutinize a situation and to adapt to it, during each of the music activities, attention is always paid to possible changes, both in musicality and the methodology of music teaching (Maltese Symphony: the orchestra as a social tool, n.d.).

The program's main, **long-term goals** contain supporting the integration of the disadvantaged children, reducing school dropout and early school leaving, along with aiding students in completing their education careers and in being socially mobile. In the Maltese Symphony Program system, the fundamental thought is that the educational career of children is not understandable in and of itself, rather only in the framework of the familial, local societal and social, well-being and health institutions surrounding the children. As a result, the Program not only supports and improves the children, but also their families, where they provide aid through social and community-developing activities like career and prevention days. It is with these activities that they aim to involve the parents, teachers, and other experts as well. For families in need, individual help is offered and various problems are funneled into the local supply system. This is done in an effort to broaden children's view that they might see that it is possible to get ahead when a goal is set. Role models and patterns, and activities like field and theater trips, concerts, and games are planned for this very purpose. Many of the children's role models are the Roma teachers involved in the Program s (The methodology of the Maltese Symphony Program to implement the

grant for the Music program - Within the heart of everyone lies a melody, 2022). In order to execute these long-term goals, the development of cognitive and social skills is essential, as well as the strengthening of self-esteem and community-belonging. However, in order to begin this process, the children must taste success, after all, they experience very little success during the classes (Kecskés D. & Vértesy, 2016).

Its **short-term goals** are putting on musical performances (to be a sources of joy), forming the group into a community, increasing confidence, and identifying individual and family problems. From among these, an outstanding objective is the boosting of confidence. This springs from the fact that the children receive little recognition and praise for what they do, whether it be their behavior or their performance. Behind this lies both familial and individual issues, hence the need to uncover these problems and treat them. This is the job of the music teacher, the social worker, and those working at the Presence meeting points.\* Family visitations are a great opportunity for getting acquainted with both the parents and the area in which they live. It also gives opportunity to expose and solve any possible problems. Clarifying these issues is extraordinarily important, for they define the behavior of the children. For example, self-esteem and confidence issues can arise from a distorted view of self, springing from a lack of praise and too much reprimand (Demeter & Ballai, 2015). The counterbalancing of this is the task of the music teachers - aiding the students through creating an encouraging, assisting, accepting environment. Forming the group into a community is also a critical task. The environment generated by these teachers provides a model for the students, who, in turn, more willingly embrace one another. Preparing for concerts together is pivotal in this process, binding the children together with the feeling of success and the joy of performing. It is in this way that the “symphony self-awareness” forms, giving students a feeling of solidarity. This is further bolstered by regional and national meetings, concerts, camps where the groups can become acquainted. Truth be told, the road of learning to play an instrument is not easy. It requires serious persistence and commitment. It is precisely for this reason, the programs inspired by El Sistema strive to teach musical instruments from the beginning, that students may taste the joys of playing music together and to help them overcome difficulties that emerge (Herczeg, 2015a).

The **target group** is made of the children coming from hard, impoverished backgrounds who are considered “problematic”. In the Maltese Symphony Program, the children are called through in-school recruitment and Presence meeting points.

During the process, everyone who would like to try gets a chance to learn music. For, the program is open to all. So, even though the program aims mainly for disadvantaged children, there are students from more well-to-do families as well. Their participation is expressly useful and essential, after all, they can practice accepting one another and learn how to deal with each other’s differences (Nagy et al., 2017).

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\* In the Presence Program centers and academies workers support impoverished families and their children. In the academy, they await the primary-school-age children, where they help them with their studies, to plan life goals, and to use their free time well (Bessenyei et al., 2025).

Similar to El Sistema, education, in Hungary, takes **place** near the homes of students, in nearby primary schools or Presence meeting points. Cooperation is key, along with the continuous communication between the Program employees and the leaders of the schools and Presence meeting points that host the music activities. For the music classes, two rooms that open one into the other or that are at least adjacent are ideal - rooms that the children can decorate to help them feel more at home (Kecskés D. & Vértesy, 2016).

The **structure** of the Maltese Symphony Program is currently being transformed. In its original form, the program leader was responsible for the Program's operation, the art director headed the Program's musical part. The area mentors and coordinators dealt with the regional tasks. The music teachers, in various towns, carried out their assignments. Presently, the mentors' place was assumed by the orchestra conductors that they might put together local, regional, and national orchestras. They find it important to strengthen the social side of the Program with the involvement of community-building, social worker colleagues, and also irreplaceable to have their administrative colleagues present as well (own interview with the Maltese Symphony Program Director, Kálmán Nagy, 2023).

Among the **music teachers**, there are those who have degrees and verifiable music experience. In choosing these, along with musical prowess, particularly significant are social skills, the ability to cooperate, and commitment to the Program. The reason for this is, in the Program, the goal is to train non-professional musicians, though quality work is also essential. Meanwhile, in order to keep children in the Program, personal connections between students and teachers are paramount. In light of this, teachers annually take part in many professional workshops and team-building activities where they have the opportunity to exchange experience and expertise, and to share feedback and ideas to improve the Program (Kecskés D. & Vértesy, 2016).

Self-reflection, professional development, and brainstorming are aided by regular meetings and discussions between **social workers and their Presence point colleagues**. Tight communication is also needed with the social organizations, the children and their families, and the school teachers too. Since it is typical of the parents of the children in the Program to not participate in school and other programs, the music teachers, and the social workers and their Presence point all push to form and strengthen those ties.

This is critical because José Antonio Abreu and Sistema Global stressed building relationships with the **local communities**. Multiple opportunities arise for involving parents which would then reinforce the children's commitment to the Program. Attending concerts, participating in activities for learning musical instruments, helping children prepare their food and aiding in decorating, and accompanying the children home are all prime opportunities for them to get closer to the Maltese Symphony Program. If they are threatened by dropout, concerts can be held at the home of the child, where the teachers can get to know the parents, and the parents can see and be proud of their children's musical abilities. This can

also aid in raising awareness of the Program and in motivating the children. Including students from music vocational secondary schools into the Program hides special opportunities, even within the frame of community service. They can be helpful in many different areas of the music teachers' work - in rehearsals, music classes, concerts, and recruitment as well. Besides this, helping the **non-governmental organizations** (NGOs) that work with disadvantaged children in these towns can be very fruitful as well (The institutional introduction and realization of the Symphony Program - Methodology Edition, Symphony Program, 2016).

Over the course of **organizing the teaching**, the Maltese Symphony Program adapts to the all-day schedules of the children. The music classes are usually in the afternoon, two or three times a week with each class being 45 minutes each. This is far fewer than for Venezuelan children who have classes six times a week, each activity being 4 hours long. This is due to the lack of teachers which limits the Program's options. The groups are composed of children all from one class, but, in the collective schools, the groups are adjusted to the children from the same settlement (Pósa, 2012). There is usually opportunity for one musical instrument group to be taught in each place, but, regionally, the variety is broader. The instruments can only be used during classes; students cannot take them home for security reasons. This way, there is no chance for daily practice. However, in the interest of protecting the meager inventory of instruments, this seemed the most practical. Of course, with more practice and attention, more progress could be made, but the current level of infrastructure and human resource does not leave room for this (Kecskés D. & Vértesy, 2016).

The children who enroll in the Program can not only participate in musical activities, but also in other community, cultural, and free-time events as well. These are critical for acquiring new experiences and for preparing them for life. Field trips, concerts, trips to the movies, crafting events, obstacle courses, and drug prevention and career days are also organized.

As regards **teaching methods**, the Venezuelan example is the foundation: group work, experiencing success, praise, and role models. In the Maltese Symphony Program, the group musical activities receive special significance. Here, students' intellectual, emotional, and social skills are developed through playful, special methodology with an experiential approach. The group training occurs according to development level, but opportunity is also left for movement between the groups. As opportunity provides, 2 to 4 children can participate in the classes, usually with children that are on similar cognitive and technical levels. If they work in larger more heterogeneous groups, differentiation tools are employed. Oftentimes, teachers ask more experienced students to help the younger or less proficient ones, as a method of motivation especially when it comes to larger groups. Thus, students learn responsibility while boosting their confidence and social sensitivity. These students routinely become role models for the others who gladly learn from them. Both children and teachers stated that among those who participate in the Program a "symphony identity" forms, when they feel, they belong somewhere or have become

the member of a team (Herczeg,2015b; Mecskei, 2021). As regards in-class activity, teachers work with special methodology, using colorful sheet music, colored strings, and simple rhythms. These music sheets were adapted to the abilities and needs of the Maltese Symphony Program students. For easy learning, the traditional five-line system, the key signatures, and the accidentals are modified with colors, and the finger order chart is modified with numbers (the note head and the string to be used have matching colors) (Mecskei, 2021).

Concerning the **class procedure**, it is worth noting, the playful, direct tone and the initiation of conversations are a cardinal part of the beginning of class time. An important point to remember is a positive end to class, that students leave with good feelings toward the class. In most locations, picking (in 56 towns) and percussion (in 51 towns) instruments are used for instruction, but stringed (in 22 towns), keyboard (in 14 towns), and wind (in 10 towns) instruments are also options that the children can choose. It is a monumental thing that everyone is given a chance in the orchestra, from the simpler to the more complex voices, thus, everyone can be part of playing music and succeeding together. During these music activities and in the orchestra, students are met by an accepting, inclusive, loving atmosphere and community, where instead of rivalry, each helps the other, adapting to one another, so that they might achieve success together. It is priority goal to create orchestras at the region and later at the national levels, as well as to ensure as many performances opportunities for the students as possible where they can taste success. This teaches the children workshop-work endurance, organization, discipline, attentiveness, and perseverance to achieve their goals. Moreover, success strengthens their confidence and self-esteem. Therefore, they receive reinforcement in the competencies that are essential foundations for good school performance, and, later, for them to do well in life (Kecskés D. & Vértesy, 2016; Maltese Symphony, 2024).

The Program's **repertoire** is characterized by musical variety. While the Venezuelan El Sistema had classical music at its center with the works of local contemporary composers on the side, Hungary had room for every style from authentic gypsy music and children's rhymes to the multiple styles of folk music. The songs were arranged in such a way as to make it possible for the orchestra to play them. When writing the voices, the goal was to give everyone a voice, the difficulty of which would allow all to join into the work of the orchestra. To increase the children's motivation, they would play film music and local gypsy music as well. The later carries great weight in preserving culture (Nagy et al., 2017).

The organization of **concerts** also played a central role in the Maltese Symphony Program. On one side, giving children the chance to experience success is an integral piece to every El Sistema program. All children participate in this with parts of varying difficulty. On the other side, in Hungary, it is an aim to not only organize concerts at the settlement level, but also at the regional level. Hungary also has a national orchestra, the Maltese Symphony National Orchestra, which is made up of the brightest symphonic children, having been the guest of the Danubia Orchestra, performing concerts at the Liszt Academy and the Vienna Concert House (Maltese Symphony, 2024).

Students are believed by their teachers to be born for a life in music, though, the Maltese Symphony Program stresses that it is not a talent development program. After all, anyone can learn music from their program. Even so, it observes and gives opportunity to children who appear to have more talent, giving them a chance to grow. These youths are given chance to apply for the Snétberger Music Talent Center, meanwhile they are supported in their music studies by the Program. Furthermore, students have the option to study at the music conservatory, a serious opportunity to continue after the program.

Though Hungary has a network of elementary art schools and music schools spread far and wide, many children are unable to access it, be it due to the situation in their settlement or in their family's sociocultural status. Between the teaching methods of the music schools and El Sistema there is much similarity, but the goals and where emphasis is put are different. The Maltese Symphony Program is not in competition with the traditional music school network, because it recruits those kids who do not make it into traditional music education (Kecskés D. & Vértesy, 2016).

Success can be seen in many areas of the lives of the children in the symphonic orchestra. The performances and the successes of the children on this musical track speak for themselves. Although, there are less visible, yet significant positive changes in their lives. The reduction in bad behavior, the increase in their educational performance, the ability to set goals all mean small daily successes (Szűcs, 2024). If this value system, which they acquired through learning music, can be maintained, then certainly the skills needed to meet societal expectations will be attainable.

## **5. Conclusion**

Music is often considered a lingua franca, a common language in the world, since regardless of culture, language and social background, it has the capacity to build relationships between people. It is a universal means of interaction that can transmit emotions, values and stories, which can be comprehended and interpreted by anybody. Especially, playing music together can have a unifying force, a binding effect: a special non-verbal cooperation, mutual understanding and empathy can develop. This type of collaborative creative activity enhances the forming of interpersonal relationships, and even the gap of cultural differences can be bridged and overcome. Thus music is not only artistic self-expression, but it also possesses social and community functions that support the development of a more inclusive society. In an educational context this is even more crucial, due to the fact that students from diverse social and cultural background may develop sensitivity, creativity and reflective thinking, curiosity towards, acceptance of, and mutual respect for one another through shared experiences, which could lead to a more receptive and diverse environment. Our analysis of the El Sistema Program provided further support for this, it being especially relevant to our first research question.

The examination of El Sistema and its satellite programs worldwide displays and confirms what an influential and transformative role music education can play in

confronting socioeconomic inequalities and enhancing intercultural communication. El Sistema emerged from a Venezuelan initiative that strove to provide availability of high quality orchestral training to underprivileged youth as a means of improving their lives and bringing them out of their current situations. The different branches worldwide share this core vision, while keeping the local community's context features, needs and interests in sight. Despite the fact that each program varies in its availability and range of resources, as well as the social and political landscape, each manages to help improving not only musical abilities and skills, but also nurturing personal and social values and competencies such as cooperation, teamwork, discipline, perseverance, resilience, empathy and cultural awareness. In these programs music becomes a lingua franca with which cultural differences are reconciled, and an inclusive, mutual respect-based environment is established.

The El Sistema Program plays a vital role in the enhancement of the cultural and social capital of its members. Exposure to and encounters with musical works and various cultures increase that cultural capital, allowing participants to foster a mindset of openness, collaboration and tolerance. The shared experiences of making music together as well as the mutual understanding build a strong sense of belonging and commitment. The forming of several new connections and friendships enhance the social capital of the members, which may play a crucial role in their better integrating into society and managing everyday life. These intercultural relationships and interactions develop sensitivity and empathy, which are critical traits in today's diverse society. All of this answered our second research question, which aimed at exploring the ways in which music can be applied as an educational tool in the service of intercultural education.

The Maltese Symphony Program that was birthed from a test to investigate El Sistema's methods and adaptability, also affirms the program's effectiveness. Even on a small scale, it has proven how music can build up a community and promote intercultural cohesion and dialogue. El Sistema is not merely a music program, however — it can be seen as a global movement, an approach that can help alleviate social disparity and stimulate communication and harmony across cultures. Moreover, music is also seen as a complex tool that serves a social goal. As was discovered, the focus of the program is not to train professional musicians but to form a community, to enhance social integration, and to support the personality development of the primarily underprivileged, predominantly Roma children who take part. The program aims not only at aiding these young ones, but also at empowering the wider family environment as well, thus strengthening social cohesion and community responsibility. Musical activities contribute to the ability to form and maintain interpersonal connections. They also assist in pupils' becoming part of society, promoting the development of skills needed for adapting to social norms and expectations. Furthermore, experiencing success in music can build confidence, which can have a positive effect on motivation to learn and on success. These things bolster the educational approach that stresses the idea that artistic education can be a very effective tool in giving underprivileged children equal opportunity in society.

These experiences and results promptly respond to our third research question that strove to see how El Sistema's core principles are implemented in the Maltese Symphony Program. The latter is a prime example that the values represented by El Sistema can be adapted to the Hungarian social and educational context as well.

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## **NEEDS OF INTERCULTURAL MEDIATION AND COMMUNICATION: INSIGHTS FROM THE ITALIAN CASE**

*Maddalena Colombo & Mariagrazia Santagati*

### **Abstract**

In the 21st century the intensification of global migration has transformed the demographic and cultural landscape of Europe and intensified the urgency of promoting intercultural communication and mediation. Institutional and academic responses to these challenges are substantial, starting from an intercultural approach. This must address not only the causes of migration, but also its effects on the resident population, enhancing both the resilience of migrants and the capacity of native citizens to create peaceful coexistence and social integration. The chapter aims at introducing international readers to the case of Italy, as one of the most pressed “receiver country” in the EU in the last decades, and its responses. After a theoretical introduction on the twofold essence of mediation (relational and communicative), and a short description of the 3 forms of the cultural mediation practice (Instrumental, Advocacy-Based, and Intercultural), the essay shows a picture of the Italian migration policy by highlighting both the reception system and the political narratives sustained by the populist parties. A socio-demographic profile of cultural mediators in Italy is offered, as evidence that their employment is largely informal, unprofessional and little paid. This occurs not only in the receiving services for asylum seekers and migrant residents, but also within the school system, where still lacks stable funding for mediation service. In conclusion, the essay reports a discussion around the intercultural skills that must be trained and possessed by intercultural mediators in 4 areas: communication, negotiation, care and advocacy. Given the particular role that they play (and will play) as “border” professionals, they must acquire exceptional skills of psychological resilience, emotional intelligence, and crisis management.

**Key words:** populist policy, intercultural skills, informal profession

### **1. Introduction: Intercultural mediation needs in the European framework**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, interculturalism emerged as a foundational pillar for building socially cohesive, pluralistic societies across the globe. A series of pivotal events in the 20th century - two world wars, the decolonization process, globalization of the economy, and significant technological advancements - have profoundly reshaped international

relations. Alongside these, the intensification of global migration has transformed the demographic and cultural landscape of Europe. Today, multiculturalism is no longer an exception, but a structural feature of most European nations, challenging traditional notions of the nation-state as an ethnically and linguistically homogenous entity, and prompting a reconsideration of citizenship as a fixed, heritage-based status.

Entering the second quarter of the 21st century, new global threats — including the fluctuations of international markets, the acceleration of digital economies, the COVID-19 pandemic, and regional wars in the Middle East and Eastern Europe — have intensified the urgency of promoting intercultural communication and mediation. These changes have given rise to a new civic consciousness, particularly among younger generations, who increasingly embrace an open and fluid concept of citizenship — one rooted not in origin or tradition but in personal experience and a sense of belonging.

Institutional and academic responses to these transformations have been substantial. Over the past two decades, a growing body of literature has promoted the development of intercultural competence (Bennett, 2004; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009), intercultural and global education (CED, 2006; Portera, 2008; Faas et al., 2014; Sikorskaya, 2017), and policies focused on intercultural dialogue (Council of Europe, 2008). These efforts represent a conscious shift from multiculturalism to interculturalism as the preferred paradigm in the European context.

This distinction is critical. Whereas multiculturalism — a model notably adopted by countries such as the United States, Canada, and Australia — emphasizes the coexistence of distinct cultural groups with equal rights and recognition, interculturalism seeks to foster active dialogue and interaction among cultures. This preference in Europe stems not only from concerns about the separatist tendencies sometimes associated with multicultural policies (as observed in the UK, Belgium, and the Netherlands) but also from the need to cultivate a unified European identity amid significant internal diversity.

The UNESCO (2006) definition of interculturalism emphasizes mutual respect and exchange at all levels — local, regional, national, and international. The Council of Europe's White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue (2008) expands this understanding, stressing the importance of reciprocity and the asymmetrical power dynamics often present in intercultural encounters. Intercultural dialogue is thus described as: "A process that comprises an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, on the basis of mutual understanding and respect. It requires the freedom and ability to express oneself, as well as the willingness and capacity to listen to the views of others" (CoE, 2008:9).

Significantly, the Council's position draws attention to the power imbalances inherent in majority-minority relations, positioning intercultural dialogue not merely as a tool for coexistence but as a mechanism for social justice. In this light, interculturalism is not only a celebration of cultural diversity; it also demands the active elimination of systemic inequalities, discrimination, poverty, and marginalization. It

promotes these aims through dialogue, exchange, inclusive policies, and institutional reforms grounded in shared democratic values. Yet, despite the official endorsements of interculturalism across Europe, practical implementation often falls short. Intercultural communication and mediation remain neglected, inconsistently applied, and, in some cases, obstructed — particularly at the local level. A deeper sociological critique can help illuminate the barriers that continue to hinder progress.

Three key areas of tension emerge:

*1. Migration Pressure and Public Fear.* Demographic projections in Africa, environmental degradation, and geopolitical instability (notably in Eastern Europe and the Middle East) have led to significant migration flows into Europe. Under the Dublin Regulation, frontline states like Italy, Spain, Hungary, and Poland bear the brunt of arrivals, contributing to widespread perceptions of crisis and exacerbating public anxiety.

*2. Crisis of European Identity and Sentiment.* Following the 2008 financial crisis, skepticism toward European institutions intensified. In several countries — particularly on the periphery, such as Italy and Hungary — citizens began to associate the EU with the erosion of national sovereignty rather than protection of collective interests (Eurobarometer, 2025). This loss of trust has deepened resistance to intercultural policies and fostered a retreat into nationalist narratives.

*3. Normalization of Private Violence and Xenophobic Sentiments.* Amid concerns over organized crime (EPRS, 2025) and societal insecurity, acts of interpersonal aggression and intolerance have gained a troubling legitimacy in public discourse (Karstedt, 2008). Rather than fostering familiarity with cultural difference, many European societies respond with defensiveness, intolerance, and exclusion, leading to symbolic and physical “expulsion” of the Other.

The concept of “super-diversity” (Vertovec, 2007) — the recognition of overlapping diversities within migrants themselves — offers a more nuanced understanding of the contemporary European context. However, this complexity is often met with frustration or fear rather than critical reflection or openness.

In this climate of populism, nationalism, and neo-racism, intercultural mediation is not a luxury but a necessary resource for civil coexistence. Alternative responses — social selection, rejection, or the retreat into exclusive identities - will only exacerbate tensions and threaten the democratic achievements of post-war Europe.

Therefore, the response must be twofold: addressing not only the causes of migration, but also its effects within host societies; not only managing migrants but also enhancing the resilience and intercultural capacity of native citizens. Although no communication is free from risk — be it misunderstanding, failure, or identity

loss (Kurylo, 2017) — the responsibility to engage in intercultural dialogue remains fundamental.

The educational system offers one of the most promising responses. Since the early 2000s, schools and universities across Europe have promoted curricula aimed at intercultural awareness, critical thinking, and civic responsibility. Research confirms that individuals with higher levels of education tend to exhibit greater openness and lower levels of xenophobia (Weber, 2022). Ultimately, education must equip future generations to build bridges, overcome contradictions, and face the complexities of plural societies with empathy, dialogue, and shared purpose.

## **2. Theoretical framework: Mediation and interculturalism, diverse forms and their limits**

The multicultural and global dynamics outlined in the introduction provide the foundation for understanding intercultural mediation as a crucial socio-political and communicative tool. Broadly defined, mediation is a social, communicative, and cultural practice aimed at facilitating the reception, participation, and integration of migrants into the host society. Its function is not limited to addressing immediate communicative barriers, but extends to supporting systemic inclusion, thereby influencing broader immigration policies — whether they are assimilationist, pluralist, or intercultural in orientation (Besozzi, 1998).

In Italy, the notion of mediation began to gain institutional relevance in the early 1990s, influenced by similar developments in the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States, where community mediation had already evolved as a strategy for managing multicultural tensions. In the Italian context, intercultural mediation developed in response to growing migration flows, particularly in local settings where public and private service providers found themselves ill-equipped to address the vulnerabilities and exclusion experienced by foreign nationals.

Mediation was introduced to bridge gaps between institutions and individuals or groups perceived as culturally distant, due to differences in language, social norms, or family structures. This bridging role became particularly relevant when social inequalities and discrimination escalated into open or latent conflict, calling for targeted interventions that could prevent fragmentation and enable equal access to services (Baraldi, 2003; 2015).

Despite its growing visibility, a clear, shared conceptualization of mediation has yet to be established. Terminological diversity persists, reflecting the complexity and evolving nature of the field. Among the various expressions used - cultural mediation, social mediation, linguistic mediation — the term intercultural mediation has emerged as the most comprehensive, emphasizing the intersubjective and dialogic dimensions of the process. It reflects the commitment to mutual recognition, understanding, and the co-construction of meaning between diverse individuals and groups.

Giménez Romero (2001) offers one of the most influential definitions of intercultural mediation, framing it as a process that occurs in significantly

multicultural settings, where a third actor — the mediator — facilitates dialogue and understanding between parties. The ultimate objective is not merely conflict management, but rather the promotion of inclusion, citizenship, and reciprocity, all of which are essential components of democratic societies.

A useful theoretical distinction is presented by Six (1990), who identifies both micro-social and macro-social levels of mediation. On the micro level, mediation refers to professional intervention — typically a triadic model where the mediator facilitates formal dialogue between a service provider and a migrant client. On the macro level, mediation is understood as a social function, emerging informally through interactions among community members, without necessarily involving a professional figure.

This dual nature highlights the relational and communicative essence of mediation, which relies on the capacity to foster empathy (Stein, 2002) and reciprocity (Mauss, 1957). These are not merely personal attributes but structural prerequisites for social cohesion. In this sense, mediation is not only a means of delivery service but also a tool for constructing social fabric, particularly in societies undergoing rapid demographic change.

Empirical studies confirm that mediation takes on multiple forms, each corresponding to distinct socio-political logics and practical applications. Drawing on her field research, Santagati (2004; 2016) identifies three primary models of mediation:

1. *Instrumental Mediation*. This model serves a normalizing function, aligning with assimilationist policies. Its primary objective is to adapt migrants to the host society's norms, values, and institutional structures. In practice, instrumental mediation often reduces the mediator's role to that of a linguistic translator, facilitating access but not engagement. Projects are typically short-term, fragmented, and fail to encourage service innovation or change the perspectives of native professionals. This approach perpetuates asymmetrical power dynamics, reinforcing the precarious legal and social position of migrants. Rather than fostering inclusion, it may contribute to further marginalization.

2. *Advocacy-Based Mediation*. This form arises in contexts where pluralist integration models prevail — i.e., where cultural difference is tolerated but largely confined to the private sphere. Public life remains structured around universalist norms, and the host society's cultural hegemony remains unchallenged. In this model, mediation often occurs informally within migrant communities through solidarity networks and ethnic economies. Mediators act primarily as advocates, representing the interests of their communities and often abandoning neutrality to defend vulnerable individuals. While this advocacy is crucial, particularly when institutional recognition is lacking, it may also entrench segmented integration and limit broader intercultural engagement.

*3. Intercultural Mediation.* Intercultural mediation is based on dialogue and mutual transformation, viewing cultural differences not as obstacles, but as resources for building inclusive societies. Unlike negotiation-driven models that aim for compromise, intercultural mediation emphasizes continuous co-construction of meaning, especially amid the ambiguities of lived experience. It acknowledges the significance of both individual identity and collective belonging, seeking to cultivate reciprocal and symmetrical relationships across cultural lines.

This model is often implemented in experimental initiatives within schools, hospitals, social services, and civil society organizations. It promotes interpersonal communication, shared understanding, and transformation, not only of users but also of institutional actors. Despite its promise, intercultural mediation remains more aspirational than institutionalized in many contexts, and its full potential is yet to be realized.

Intercultural mediation is inherently multi-dimensional, encompassing a range of roles and functions. As Santagati and Bertozzi (2025) argue, mediation can either preserve the status quo, by controlling information and reinforcing dominant norms, or it can act as a transformative force, empowering individuals to exercise autonomy and resist sociocultural determinisms. This dynamic tension lies at the heart of contemporary mediation practices and points to the need for ongoing critical reflection.

For mediation to evolve as a professional and transformative practice, it must be accompanied by coherent training, recognition, and integration into public services. It must also be capable of navigating the delicate balance between institutional expectations and migrant needs, between neutrality and advocacy, between service delivery and empowerment. In this sense, intercultural mediation is not merely a tool for managing diversity, but a mirror of how societies conceive of justice, participation, and human dignity in a globalized world.

### **3. The case of Italy. Migration, reception systems, and political narratives**

The Italian context presents a rich case study in understanding the challenges, contradictions, and evolving practices of intercultural mediation. Between 2013 and 2019, Italy was one of the principal destinations for migration flows from North and Sub-Saharan Africa, largely because of political upheavals following the Arab Spring. Countries such as Egypt, Algeria, and Tunisia experienced massive social unrest, leading thousands — particularly young people — to embark on perilous journeys through smuggling networks operating along the Libyan coast. This period marked the intensification of irregular sea arrivals and the emergence of a highly organized, transnational system of human trafficking (Montagna, 2024).

Italy received an average of 62,000 asylum seekers annually, many of whom applied for international protection. However, during the protracted waiting period - often lasting between 12 and 24 months — asylum seekers were hosted in

reception centers without the legal right to work. This state of suspension generated multiple layers of exclusion (Della Puppa & Sanò, 2021), reinforcing precariousness and frustration while simultaneously influencing public opinion, often in a direction unfavorable to migrant rights.

The securitization of migration intensified following high-profile terrorist attacks in France between 2015 and 2016 (Charlie Hebdo, the Bataclan, Nice), carried out by individuals of migrant descent. Although Italy was spared similar tragedies during this period, the arrival of migrants coincided with the perception of threat, partially exacerbated by fears of infiltration by foreign fighters associated with extremist groups like ISIS.

This perception gave rise to a discursive disjuncture: many of those arriving in Italy were fleeing violence and persecution, yet public narratives increasingly framed them as potential threats, particularly in media representations. Philosopher Amartya Sen (2006:104) warned against such essentializing logic, describing these young radicals as “imaginary slaves of an illusory force”— individuals alienated from both European identity and their countries of origin, shaped instead by nihilistic ideologies and exclusion.

Against this backdrop, civil society and institutions attempted to provide more coordinated reception mechanisms. Yet, as Colombo and Gilardoni (2021) observe, this occurred within an increasingly hostile political climate dominated by populist and sovereignist discourses. Conservative parties gained traction by exploiting anxieties surrounding migration, fostering narratives of national decline and cultural threat.

The media played a pivotal role in shaping public attitudes. Images of migrants with smartphones, or boats filled with exhausted families, became emblematic of both humanitarian need and security panic. These representations were often manipulated in political discourse to gain electoral advantage, especially by right-wing parties advocating stricter border controls (Campisi & Sottilotta, 2022).

The Central Reception System (SPRAR) was initially established under Law No. 189/2002 to accommodate asylum seekers. It was later renamed SIPROIMI in 2018 and restructured into SAI (Reception and Integration System) through Law No. 173/2020. The latest iteration aimed to encourage local authorities to voluntarily participate in the reception system. However, only one in four municipalities currently adheres (roughly 2,000 out of 8,000), leaving significant gaps in territorial coverage (Ministry of Home Affairs — ANCI, 2025).

The result has been an uneven, decentralized governance of migration, relying heavily on third-sector organizations and vulnerable to local political fluctuations. Reception centers have often been in marginal or degraded urban areas, generating further social tensions, particularly where resources are scarce or competition over housing and employment is fierce.

The politicization of migration peaked in 2019 under Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, whose administration adopted a hardline stance. One particularly symbolic act was the denial of port access to NGO rescue vessels, such as the case of migrants

stranded outside Catania for 10 days. Such actions galvanized public debate but also hardened national narratives around migration as invasion and migrants as illegal threats.

Salvini's rhetoric, while polarizing, was effective in mobilizing public sentiment, using terms such as "enemy," "replacement," and "rejection" to evoke fear and urgency. At the same time, counter-narratives began to emerge in Italian civil society and culture. Matteo Garrone's film *Io Capitano* (2023), nominated for an Oscar, presented a more humane and nuanced portrayal of the migrant journey, demonstrating that many so-called "traffickers" are in fact desperate migrants themselves, blackmailed into taking on leadership roles aboard unseaworthy vessels.

Amid these polarized representations, the role of intercultural mediation became increasingly sidelined. Despite its capacity to foster dialogue, understanding, and social inclusion, mediation was largely absent from public debates dominated by emergency rhetoric and securitization. Where it did occur, it was often "from below" — in everyday encounters, informal settings, and small-scale civil society initiatives.

Symbols, rituals, language, and artistic expression — tools that could support empathetic understanding — were rarely mobilized at the institutional level (Martiniello, 2019). Instead, media-driven perceptions of difference often led to cultural essentialism, further deepening divides between "natives" and "others."

The COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021) added further complexity. It deepened existing social inequalities, leading to a stark division between "guaranteed" and "non-guaranteed" citizens. Public discourse turned inward, prioritizing national survival and economic recovery over migrant rights. According to Genova and Lello (2021), right-wing actors attempted to instrumentalize the pandemic to promote anti-immigrant sentiments, though arrivals had declined.

Unexpectedly, anti-immigrant communication briefly subsided during the peak of the health crisis (Serafini, Gottlob & Ceri, 2023). However, risk-based narratives quickly returned, reasserting fears of the "Other" once borders reopened. Throughout this period, the Catholic Church, under Pope Francis, remained a strong voice in defense of migrants. As noted by Guglielmi, Breskaya, and Sbalchiero (2024), the Church mobilized thousands of volunteers through its parishes, offering language instruction, healthcare, and humanitarian aid, and advocating for regularization policies for undocumented immigrants.

### *3.1 New emergencies, old fragilities*

In 2022, the Russian invasion of Ukraine triggered another wave of forced migration, bringing renewed attention to Europe's borders. Italy hosted approximately 170,000 Ukrainian refugees by the end of 2023 (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 2023), reigniting discussions about reception capacity, integration mechanisms, and legal vs. irregular migration routes.

This new emergency further strained Italy's capacity to respond with coherence. The newly elected government under Giorgia Meloni (September 2022) built its platform on populist and anti-immigration rhetoric, emphasizing "security"

and “sovereignty.” While public expressions of sympathy followed the tragic Cutro shipwreck (February 2023, 94 deaths, including 35 minors), the government’s institutional response was largely focused on blame assignment — targeting traffickers and NGOs rather than addressing the structural issues of migration governance.

Plans to build external processing facilities in Albania (2024), aimed at detaining irregular migrants and accelerating expulsions, reflect the ongoing shift toward externalization and border securitization, in line with the EU Migration and Asylum Pact adopted in June 2024.

However, such policies risk exacerbating legal ambiguities, humanitarian concerns, and political tensions within and beyond EU borders. As the European Union becomes more fragmented on migration, Italy remains at the frontline, grappling with both its geographical position and the absence of shared EU solidarity mechanisms.

At present, Italy does not offer an optimal environment for the widespread development of intercultural mediation. The political and social context is marked by polarization, media sensationalism, and short-termism. While parts of civil society remain committed to inclusive approaches, much of the institutional landscape lacks the vision, investment, and coordination necessary to mainstream mediation. Nevertheless, within the cracks of this fragmented system, intercultural mediation continues to emerge as a vital — if underutilized — resource. Its future depends not only on policy reform but also on cultural change: one that values encounter over fear, dialogue over propaganda, and shared humanity over exclusion.

#### **4. The state of intercultural mediation in the Italian education system**

Over the past three decades, intercultural mediation has become an essential feature of Italy’s local and national strategies for migrant reception and integration — particularly in sectors such as education. Regardless of the prevailing political orientation or the broader trajectory of immigration governance, mediation has played a dual role: on the one hand, assisting public and private service providers in responding to the needs of increasingly diverse student populations; on the other, empowering migrant individuals and families — often unfamiliar with institutional procedures and lacking formal citizenship rights — to navigate unfamiliar environments with greater autonomy.

As early studies demonstrate (Santagati, 2004; Luatti, 2006), intercultural mediation in Italy emerged spontaneously in the 1990s, often in response to urgent local needs. The growth of multicultural school populations brought attention to the communicative, pedagogical, and cultural challenges faced by teachers and administrators. Migrant social workers — whether volunteers or professionals — began to support schools, healthcare centers, legal offices, and social services in efforts to understand and interact with foreign-born users. These early mediators frequently acted as cultural translators, helping both institutional actors and migrant families interpret each other’s expectations, behaviors, and norms.

Initially, these practices were largely informal and unprofessional (Antonini, 2014). They were often rooted in the voluntary efforts of ethnic associations, diaspora communities, and third-sector organizations. These grassroots movements also exerted pressure on public institutions to create training programs for foreign-born mediators, setting the stage for more formalized roles. Gradually, acts of spontaneous solidarity — such as interpreting, advocating, or supporting enrollment procedures — were transformed into more structured professional profiles, marking the beginning of the institutionalization of intercultural mediation.

This process gained traction in both large metropolitan areas and smaller municipalities, especially as educational settings became sites of intercultural contact and, sometimes, conflict. Mediators began to support schools in addressing a wide range of challenges, from linguistic inclusion and family-school communication to managing cultural differences in disciplinary practices, religious observances, and curricular content.

However, the professionalization of mediation in education has proceeded unevenly and remains incomplete. One of the principal risks, as Quassoli and Colombo E. (2012) warn, is the delegation of responsibility: institutional staff may rely too heavily on mediators to handle all issues related to migrant students, thus failing to develop their own intercultural competences. Moreover, there is the danger of creating dependency, where migrant families rely entirely on mediators to navigate educational systems, without gaining long-term autonomy.

Another major concern is the overemphasis on “culturalist” explanations for school difficulties, which may obscure the socio-economic and structural inequalities that shape educational trajectories. By attributing underperformance or miscommunication solely to cultural difference, institutions risk simplifying complex realities and neglecting broader issues such as poverty, discrimination, and access to resources.

Despite these limitations, intercultural mediation continues to be a key strategy in promoting inclusive and democratic education. The volatile international context — marked by new migration flows, the aftermath of the pandemic, and rising geopolitical instability - has heightened the need for schools to act as spaces of social cohesion and intercultural encounter.

In this framework, intercultural mediation is increasingly recognized not merely as a tool for overcoming language barriers but as a socio-political practice aimed at enabling equal participation, enhancing trust, and building a pluralistic sense of belonging. Mediators in schools contribute not only to the integration of individual students but also to shaping school culture as a whole — encouraging openness, recognition, and critical reflection among all members of the educational community.

Several innovative programs and pilot projects across Italy demonstrate how intercultural mediation can be embedded within broader pedagogical frameworks. In some cases, mediators co-design activities with teachers; in others, they participate in parent-teacher conferences, serve as facilitators in conflict resolution, or support multilingual education initiatives. These experiences underscore the potential

for mediation to evolve beyond technical support into a form of transformative engagement.

Nonetheless, challenges remain. Many educational institutions still lack stable funding for mediation services. Training opportunities for mediators vary widely by region, and the absence of a unified national framework contributes to discrepancies in recognition, compensation, and professional development. Moreover, the ad hoc nature of many mediation interventions — triggered by emergencies or isolated incidents — prevents the consolidation of mediation as a sustainable and strategic practice within the education system.

To overcome the risk to remain an “informal profession”, and to fully realize the potential of intercultural mediation in education, Italy must invest in long-term strategies that integrate mediation into teacher training, school planning, and policy development. Doing so will not only benefit newly arrived students but will also prepare schools to serve as laboratories of intercultural citizenship, where diversity is not merely managed, but actively cultivated as a common good.

## **5. Intercultural and communicative competences of mediators in Italy: training experiences**

As the complexity of migration in Italy has grown, so too has the need for professionalization and training in the field of intercultural mediation. Over the years, mediation has evolved from a largely spontaneous, grassroots activity into a recognized field of social intervention. However, this evolution has not been uniform, and the skills, training, and recognition of intercultural mediators remain highly variable. The current context calls for a strategic investment in competencies — not only to ensure effective service delivery, but also to promote social justice, dialogue, and long-term integration.

### *5.1 Which is the socio-demographic and cultural profile of the mediator in Italy?*

According to the 2014 Institutional Working Group on Intercultural Mediation, there are approximately 8,000 practicing mediators across Italy. The profession is marked by a significant feminization: most mediators are women of immigrant origin, typically with upper secondary or post-secondary education, who operate within third-sector organizations or under temporary contracts with local governments. They work in diverse domains — schools, healthcare, social services, courts, immigration offices, and reception centers — where intercultural tensions and miscommunication are most likely to occur.

Despite their central role, many mediators continue to work under precarious conditions, often without stable employment or access to professional development. Their roles are frequently under-recognized, and their contributions seen as subsidiary to core institutional functions, rather than as integral to social cohesion and inclusive policy-making.

## *5.2 Where and how are the intercultural mediators trained in Italy?*

One of the most persistent challenges in Italy has been the lack of a standardized training framework for intercultural mediators. Courses vary significantly in terms of duration, curriculum, accreditation, and pedagogical approach. While some regions have developed comprehensive training pathways, including field placements and intercultural theory, others offer only short-term courses with limited practical application.

This disparity has contributed to the creation of heterogeneous professional profiles, making it difficult to clearly define the role of the mediator or to establish national benchmarks for evaluation and certification. As highlighted by the CISP report (2003), most mediation interventions fall within the category of “first-level services” - primarily aimed at welcoming, informing, and orienting newcomers, particularly in the early stages of their contact with public services.

Moreover, mediation is often mobilized on a reactive basis, triggered by specific needs or emergencies, rather than embedded as part of a systematic institutional strategy. This limits its long-term impact and reinforces the perception of mediation as a stop-gap measure, rather than a strategic tool for inclusive governance.

## *5.3 What skills should intercultural mediators have?*

Intercultural mediation demands a wide array of competences, many of which go beyond language proficiency. While linguistic competence is fundamental - particularly in the early phases of reception - effective mediators must also possess interpersonal, intercultural, psychological, legal, and institutional knowledge. They must be able to navigate ambiguous situations, mediate between conflicting expectations, and create spaces for mutual understanding.

In high-stress environments such as reception centers, detention facilities, and identification hubs, mediators often work with individuals experiencing trauma, violence, or legal uncertainty. As Casadei and Franceschetti (2009:15-16) note, mediation in these settings involves close collaboration with the Ministry of the Interior, law enforcement agencies, and humanitarian organizations such as the Red Cross, Caritas, and the Civil Protection Department.

Here, the role of the mediator is both technical and emotional. In addition to supporting asylum procedures, family reunification, and access to healthcare and legal aid, mediators must manage interpersonal tensions, convey complex legal realities, and foster realistic expectations among migrants. They act as informal educators, counselors, and bridges between systems.

In cases involving unaccompanied minors, victims of human trafficking, or individuals under humanitarian protection, the mediator’s task shifts from emergency management to longer-term accompaniment — including case management, educational planning, and community engagement. This work requires not only high-level intercultural sensitivity, but also resilience, emotional intelligence, and the ability to work within multi-professional teams (Ferrari et al. 2025).

Developing intercultural competence is not simply a matter of acquiring factual knowledge about different cultures. Rather, it involves cultivating a reflexive, dialogic attitude - one that recognizes the dynamic and situated nature of identity, and that embraces complexity, ambiguity, and multiplicity.

As Deardorff (2006) argues, true intercultural competence includes self-awareness, empathy, curiosity, tolerance for ambiguity, and a commitment to ethical engagement. In the context of mediation, this means recognizing one's own positionality, suspending judgment, and fostering mutual transformation rather than one-sided adaptation.

In Italy, many of the most effective mediators are those who draw on their own lived experience of migration. Their biographical trajectories often serve as sources of insight and legitimacy, enabling them to navigate cultural borders and build trust with users. However, personal experience alone is not sufficient. It must be accompanied by critical training, continuous reflection, and the capacity to engage ethically and professionally with diverse stakeholders.

To move forward, Italy must shift from a fragmented, short-term approach to mediation toward a spread mediation, that permeates institutions, policies, and civic life (Pellegrino, 2007). This vision requires comprehensive investment in mediator training, including modules on:

- intercultural communication theory and practice;
- conflict transformation and negotiation skills;
- legal and institutional frameworks governing migration;
- trauma-informed care and psychological first aid;
- facilitation, advocacy, and community organizing.

Such training must be coupled with clear certification pathways, adequate compensation, and professional recognition. Moreover, mediators must be viewed not simply as interpreters or service providers, but as co-creators of inclusive institutions and agents of social innovation. Only through this deeper integration can intercultural mediation fulfill its potential — as a tool not only for managing diversity but for transforming it into a shared resource, building a society that is more just, plural, and connected.

## **6. Future challenges and opportunities for intercultural mediation**

Beyond the theoretical and practical development of intercultural mediation — which remains an ongoing endeavor — this practice now faces critical transformations in

light of shifting migration patterns and evolving demographic realities in Italy. Two major trends, in particular, challenge the assumptions and structures that have historically underpinned mediation: 1) The growing complexity of forced migration, especially among asylum seekers and refugees; 2) The emergence of second and third generations of immigrants who are increasingly rooted in Italian society.

The first challenge relates to the significant increase in forced displacement worldwide, driven by war, persecution, climate change, and socio-political instability. Italy, like many other European countries, has seen a marked rise in the number of asylum seekers and refugees, placing considerable strain on national and local reception systems.

In this context, intercultural mediation has become indispensable. As Casadei and Franceschetti (2009:15–16) observe, mediators play a critical role in reception centers, detention facilities, and identification and expulsion centers. They serve as interlocutors between migrants, humanitarian agencies, and state institutions — including the Ministry of the Interior and law enforcement. Their responsibilities include:

- assisting with identity verification and legal documentation;
- facilitating access to medical, psychological, and legal services;
- explaining asylum procedures and residence rights;
- providing cultural orientation and Italian language education;
- supporting migrants in navigating camp rules, expectations, and rights.

In these high-pressure settings, mediators must possess not only technical and legal expertise, but also exceptional psychological resilience, emotional intelligence, and crisis management skills. They are frequently called upon to work with unaccompanied minors, survivors of torture, or victims of trafficking, where mediation takes on a longer-term, more structured dimension — including case planning, rehabilitation, and reintegration into local communities.

Moreover, mediators must guide migrants through the often-painful recalibration of expectations. Many arrive with unrealistic hopes shaped by misinformation or desperation. The mediator's task, then, is not simply to assist but also to convey a more grounded, realistic understanding of the legal and social limits of life in Europe - while maintaining empathy and dignity.

The second major shift concerns the rise of second-generation immigrants — young people born or raised in Italy, often the children of migrants or mixed-heritage couples. These individuals embody a new multicultural consciousness, having grown up in bicultural or pluricultural environments. They possess multiple reference points —

linguistic, cultural, and religious — and are often fluent in both their heritage culture(s) and the dominant Italian context.

Unlike the previous generation, these young people are not merely recipients of mediation — they can become their most powerful agents. They embody hybridity, adaptability, and intercultural literacy, and their lived experience equips them with cognitive and emotional tools crucial for navigating and transforming plural societies. Many of them are already informally fulfilling mediation functions in families, peer groups, workplaces, and civic life.

Italy now possesses a reservoir of human capital that was largely absent during the early phases of the migration cycle. However, this potential remains underutilized. Without adequate training, recognition, and professional pathways, the contribution of second-generation youth to mediation risks being lost. Furthermore, their intercultural aptitude must not be romanticized; it is often developed through difficult negotiations with parents, conflicting loyalties, and social exclusion. Their engagement in mediation requires supportive structures and reflective spaces that allow them to process their experiences and build professional identities.

Looking ahead, the professional landscape of mediation may well include individuals with personal or familial migration histories, who are equipped with both academic training and intercultural sensitivity. These future mediators — active in schools, universities, healthcare, legal institutions, and beyond — will be capable of translating between systems, navigating between codes, and connecting diverse worldviews. Their contributions may reshape mediation as we know it: not as an external service, but as a mainstream cultural practice embedded within everyday institutions.

This vision calls for a paradigm shift. Intercultural mediation must move from being a reactive response to diversity to becoming a proactive driver of inclusive citizenship. As Pellegrino (2007) argues, this involves promoting a “culture of mediation”- not restricted to specialists, but diffused throughout society, enabling everyone to understand, respect, and engage with difference. Anolli (2006) describes this as developing a “multicultural mind”- a mental framework shaped by symbolic, emotional, and moral learning, made possible through education, experience, and reflective dialogue. Educational institutions thus have a central role to play: not only in forming future mediators, but in cultivating citizens capable of intercultural engagement at every level of society.

Despite these opportunities, significant risks remain. As Quassoli and Colombo (2012) caution, there is a tendency to reduce mediation to cultural translation, neglecting the socio-economic and political conditions that structure exclusion. Mediation cannot substitute for adequate housing, employment, legal status, or political participation. It must be part of a broader structural response to inequality, not a culturalist fix for systemic problems.

Moreover, without clear regulation, training, and recognition, there is a risk that mediation will remain fragmented, peripheral, and vulnerable to political manipulation. It may continue to be mobilized only in emergencies, without continuity

or vision. The task for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners is to redefine mediation not as a service, but as a right — a cornerstone of democratic society in the age of super-diversity. This means imagining mediation not only between migrants and institutions, but also within communities, across generations, and between competing narratives of identity and belonging.

In conclusion, intercultural mediation in Italy has undergone significant transformation, shaped by migration flows, political climates, and civic engagement. While the profession has grown in reach and recognition, it continues to face challenges of fragmentation, underinvestment, and conceptual ambiguity. At the same time, mediation holds immense potential — as a tool of inclusion, a space of encounter, and a method for building shared meaning in complex societies. Whether in the emergency of arrival or the long-term work of integration, mediation helps articulate a vision of society that welcomes difference without erasing it, and that seeks unity not in uniformity, but in reciprocal recognition and shared purpose.

For Italy to fully realize this potential, it must invest in training, standardize professional pathways, and integrate mediation into all dimensions of public life — especially in education, social services, and governance. Most importantly, it must trust and empower the new generations growing up between cultures, and offer them not only the language of mediation, but also the tools to lead it.

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## **IV. INTERCULTURAL PEDAGOGY AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES**

# THE ROLE OF INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION AND COMMUNICATION IN PROMOTING SOCIAL COHESION

*Emese Antal-Fekete*

## Abstract

Human beings are born to be a part of society, a fact proven by over the past year in sociology, economy or psychology, and other disciplines. Moreover, inclusion is not only an individual's desire but necessary for all members of society. As socialization's most important periods are childhood and adolescence, schools, teachers and classmates have roughly as significant a role as the family in these stages. However, the newest educational research highlights the importance of inclusive approaches, in which intercultural intentions, policies, practices are essential. There are vast differences among the national educational systems of different countries, and the Hungarian educational system is among the weakest. This paper aims to highlight the key aspects of the significance of social cohesion and to emphasize why it would be important to integrate intercultural approaches into education policies and teaching practices. Despite international data showing that the Hungarian educational system has not implemented these approaches sufficiently, measures needed for dealing with a significant number of students whose background would require these elements of education.

**Keywords:** social cohesion, inclusion, intercultural education, intercultural communication, groups in danger of social exclusion

## 1. Introduction

What is the meaning of life? What is the main purpose of living (Andorka, 1991)? According to historians, the answer is knowledge (homo sapiens); economists think life is about money and economical rationality (homo oeconomicus), while sociologists say all is about social integration. Many fields of science attempt to explain it, so who is right? These theories have the factors of social exposure and the necessity of social cohesion in common. After the Industrial Revolution, the traditional family-based boundaries, the well-known social order and integration model changed into a more individualistic, self-responsible and less authority-based system, in which people worked in jobs so specialized that they were unable to continue their mostly self-sufficient lifestyle (Durkheim, 1893). On one hand, this change increased individualism and independence in society, while also making social mobility more

significant and accessible. On the other hand, the interdependence and the need for cooperation intensified as well. People had more responsibilities in their personal life. This enormous shift brought on the relevant problems of social disintegration and exclusion, in today's world.

This paper aims to examine the main aspects and key features of social cohesion, especially in the context of education. It also seeks to emphasize why intercultural approaches are important to be built into education policies and teaching practices. Despite the fact that international data shows that the Hungarian educational system has not incorporated these approaches amply, there are many students would benefit from these elements. This theoretical work presents the most important theories related to the role of intercultural education and communication in promoting social cohesion.

The first chapter's goal is to present the most crucial findings to prove the irreplaceable role of social cohesion in achieving a well-functioning social system. This chapter is based on a holistic approach, which contains elements of classical and modern sociologist thought, economical aspects with the newest Hungarian and international data, the pedagogical point of view complete with practical experiments and effectiveness, and the psychological background, which is quintessential during one's academic years when wanting to fit in and be part of a community.

The second chapter unravels the role of intercultural education and communication. As the role of communication has, today, gained a role bigger than ever, we must not forget the importance of what and how we communicate about our society, social classes, cultural minorities or low socioeconomic status groups (low-SES). School can be understood to be a miniature copy of society, and student diversity a vital factor in educational research and policies. Moreover, intercultural scholar communication could serve as open-minded and accepted groundwork for anticipated future communicational habits.

The third chapter aims to point out the main groups that are in jeopardy of being excluded during their academic years, especially those with cultural differences, including low-SES children, the Roma, and immigrant students. Along with theoretical elements explaining the why of these particular groups in respectively disadvantaged states, this part also contains statistical data with Hungary-specific examples about headcount and territorial distribution.

The fourth and final chapter strives to depict the realization of intercultural education based on international data-collecting, encompassing data about how deep elements of intercultural education are integrated into national educational systems and curriculums.

## **2. The necessity of social cohesion**

Why is this issue so significant? The short answer is that the inclusion is not just an individual problem, but it also pertains to all of society. The following chapter aims to express the relevance of social cohesion and inclusion in a holistic way.

First of all, we must mention that conditions of cohabitation have roots in integration as a form of solidarity (Durkheim, 1893, 1897). Studying the phenomenon of suicide, Durkheim came to the conclusion that a low level of social integration results in an anomic state in society which supports different types of emerging deviancy, such as suicide, criminality, and substance abuse all of which may lead to social exclusion. Prior to capitalism, social mobility was neither effective nor possible, but many accepted the situation based on ideological beliefs (e.g. religion) (Ferge, 1990), as aligning with Durkheim's concept of mechanical solidarity (Durkheim, 1893). In traditional social orders, similarity-based grouping features allowed the members of communities to relate to each other in a more personal and emotionally involved way. This dynamic is what resulted in the common acceptance of social norms and boundaries (Ferge, 1990). The Industrial Revolution broke this trend with a series of civil revolutions, the main goal of which were to eliminate the existing segregated social order, and permanently dismantle the pre-existing limitations and obstacles of social mobility. All of these phenomena combined led to, aside from better and more effective social mobility, the expansion of personal autonomy and freedom in the subsequent period, producing a more modern and resilient social structure.

To continue, a large body of empirical literature explains the connection between academic achievement and economical status. According to OECD data\*, lower academic levels significantly increase the risk of poverty or social exclusion. In 2024, the rate of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion was found to be 46.5% among those who, at most, had attended lower secondary level education (ISCED levels 0-2). Meanwhile, in the case of citizens with upper secondary and post-secondary but non-tertiary education (ISCED levels 3 and 4), this rate was 18.5%. Furthermore, among those who attended tertiary education (ISCED levels 5-8), it was 6.1. Observing the rate of these people according to educational attainment level, we must see that Hungarian data compared to the EU27 average shows a significantly higher risk among people with lower academic levels, the national average being 46.5 against the EU27's 33.9. Researchers emphasize that a lower level of education generates not only unfavourable economic circumstances, but also damages political behaviour, opportunity in employment, the social sector and healthcare access (Gitschthaler & Nairz-Wirth, 2018, Fehérvári et al., 2021).

Human beings are born with the desire to belong, to a social group, a family, a nation, etc., something considered an evolutionary heritage (Csányi, 1999). When someone is left out, the result is sorrow (Williams, 2007). This is critical when trying to understand adolescents, for, they try to understand and define their personal and social identities, which are strongly tied to self-esteem. A suitable level of self-esteem is essential to accepting ourselves, and determining who we are, both of which play indispensable roles in social accommodation (Pikó, 2020). This also correlates with self-efficacy, the ability to cope with the world's expectations, conflicts and obstacles (Bandura, 1997).

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\* [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc\\_peps04n/default/bar?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_peps04n/default/bar?lang=en)

Social cohesion therefore is chief for everyone, in order to form a just, equitable society built up from members that function well physically and mentally. According to the Council of Europe, social cohesion “denotes the capacity of a society to ensure the welfare of all its members, minimising disparities and avoiding polarisation” (Council of Europe, 2008:11).

Moreover, cohabitation should be understood on three different dimensions: equality, attitude toward diversity and the individual’s opportunity to make decisions (Varga, 2015). The author distinguishes two types of higher levels of cohabitation, where cohabitation is based on a mutual decision of majority and minority: integration and inclusion. While integration is rooted in multicultural approach, inclusion is related to intercultural perspective. “Inclusion is a process that helps to overcome barriers limiting the presence, participation and achievement of all learners. It is about changing the system to fit the student, not changing the student to fit the system, because the “problem” of exclusion is firmly within the system, not the person or their characteristics” (OECD, 2023).

### **3. The role of intercultural communication and education**

As was mentioned before, social cohesion is integral on both the individual and societal level. Thus, Western education policies aim to reach inclusive and intercultural goals in educational policy both international and domestic. This chapter herein strives to present the definitions, main approaches, and the roles of intercultural education and communication.

Now more than ever, classrooms are and have been diversified. Due to immense social change around the world, such as migration and globalization, classroom heterogeneity’s significance has increased, and children vary not just academically and socially, but linguistically and culturally as well (Lothan, 2024; Korpics, 2011). This phenomenon makes social-cultural differences in pedagogy stand out, highlighting such theories as linguistic socialization (Ferguson, 1959; Bernstein, 1962, 1975, 1977), rational choice theory (Boudon, 1998), social identity (Tajfel, 1963; Turner et al, 1987; Ray et al., 2008; Gordijn et al., 2006), etc. Educational specialists must be aware of not only the psychological and pedagogical aspects of the juvenescence, but they also must possess knowledge about these children’s cultural backgrounds, as well as strategies and methods of intercultural education to support them and help them achieve well academically (Korpics, 2011).

As demonstrated above, social life is essential for human beings, and communication is the base of all social interactions (Forgó, 2011). According to Cambridge Dictionary, communication refers to “the process of sharing information, especially when this increases understanding between people or groups”. By today, the role of communication has gained more attention and plays a bigger role than ever before, (Forgó, 2011), the paramount nature of communication about our society, social classes, cultural minorities or low-SES status groups cannot be ignored. It is for this reason, we study the concept of intercultural communication.

According to relevant literature, we can distinguish three different approaches of intercultural communication (ten Thije, 2020). The traditional use of this term refers to the communication between people with different cultural or linguistic background (Jandt, 1995). Some researchers think that intercultural communication must have a relevant context, in which cultural or linguistic differences have a significant effect on the outcome of the interaction (Zhu, 2014). The strictest definition says only those types of communication can be defined as intercultural, in which one of the participants has changed his or her mindset, deeply considering the representations, value systems and behaviours rooted in their group (Rehbein, 2006). The main approaches of researching intercultural communication are: (1) the interactive approach in which intercultural interactions are in focus, (2) the contrastive approach in which cultural and linguistic differences are in focus, (3) the cultural representation approach in which the goal is to analyse cultural representations in communication, (4) the multilingualism and linguistic diversity approaches; and (5) the transfer approach in which the goal is to integrate knowledge, attitudes, etc. in learnable intercultural competencies (ten Thije, 2020). Our mission here is to lay bare the main aspects of intercultural communication, so the reader can see a wide range of theoretical and empirical work focusing on various aspects of intercultural communication.

Intercultural interactions take place in various platforms throughout life where socialization can happen. The educational system is one such quintessential scene of socialization. In spite of the fact that it is a lifelong process, we should keep in mind that the most critical period of socialization, in which most of the values and norms internalise, is connected to the first stage of life, during which the school has an accentuated role. Brint (1998) identifies three different dimensions of in school socialization. These are as follows: (1) behavioural conformity, (2) moral conformity, (3) cultural conformity. All three of these are built around conformity, which emphasizes the process of internalization of common values, norms and rules connected to social life, striving to make children fit into the world. For, school is not only a place where pupils learn the official material of each subject, but a place where children can experiment with various types of interactions — conflicts, problem solving, etc. - that model real-life problems they will face as adults. This includes interacting with different people from different cultures with unknown customs and speaking foreign languages. This is called hidden curriculum (Illich, 1973; Kozma, 2001).

Nowadays, European educational policies aim to involve such principles as acceptance, aspiration to satisfy individual needs, equity and fairness. Since such theorists as Bourdieu (1978, 1999) and Coleman (1966) highlighted that classical educational systems reproduced the social inequalities through selectivity and requirements, alternative solutions had to be sought after to support the system in working effectively with children “who do not fit in”. Varga (2015) stresses the difference between equality and equity. Equality is a condition in which everybody has equal fundamental rights, and laws are geared toward repressing the direct or indirect actions of exclusion. However, equity refers to a condition in which people

with economical, sociocultural or other disadvantages are compensated in order to gain the equal opportunities and access to general services such as education.

According to the Council of Europe, intercultural education and acquiring intercultural competences is fundamental for democratic culture and social cohesion (COE, 2008:43). Intercultural educational strategies “need to identify common or overlapping ideas and values, but they must also identify and address difference. Effective intercultural dialogue requires the acquisition of intercultural competences, including multiperspectivity and the ability to see oneself and familiar situations and events from the perspectives of cultural ‘others’” (Byram, 2009:8). Intercultural education may manifest in teaching regional or minority languages, which makes it possible to compare the same phenomena from different points of view, thus allowing multiperspectivity to show itself. Byram highlights that teaching local minorities’, communities’ languages and cultures in school leads children to pay attention to, understand, and appreciate the cultural background of others, and, perhaps, help them see a new vantage point. Intercultural education consists of various alternative practices besides language-teaching, such as integrating another community’s habits, artifacts, symbols, dress, customs, music or dance (COE, 2008).

#### **4. Risk groups in Hungary**

Moving on, this chapter intends to show the groups in Hungary in danger of social exclusion, who might be in the focus of intercultural education: low SES, Roma and immigrant students. After the reasons behind these groups’ being in danger of social exclusion is demonstrated, we will also observe their numbers, where they are located, and the kinds of sociocultural backgrounds they have.

Students of low socioeconomic status usually struggle with performance in their academic career, having to wrestle with lack, with lots of intense work, and with their parents’ low academic achievements (Fekete, 2016; Perpék, 2022). According to statistical data, risk of poverty has a greater effect on children than on the adult population. The risk of impoverishment is further increased by childbearing (at an early age) (Gábos & Szívós, 2003, 2006; Bauer, 2016). In the youngest age-group (0-5) 8% of children were officially classified as poor, while the same rate was 10% among 0-17-year-old children (Hajdu et al 2024). According to EU-SILC data, the poverty rate is 19.5% among EU children, which may lead us to mistakenly assume that Hungarian children are more protected from poverty than the EU average. Examining international data, we should keep in mind that EU-SILC data works with national incomes, which, in Hungary, is approximately 40% of the EU average (Eurostat EU-SILC 2010-2020 quoted by: Perpék 2022). Additional data reveals that significant risk-increasing factors are: parents’ low academic qualifications, three or more children per household, loss of a job by one parent, divorce, widowhood and terminal illness (Fekete, 2016, Hajdu et al., 2024). These factors above highlight how different sociocultural backgrounds must be anticipated among different pupils. There have been tremendous bodies of literature that have proved the connection between

sociocultural and economic status and academic achievement (Bourdieu, 1978; Esping-Andersen, 2006; Boudon, 1998; Coleman, 1966). The difficulties entailed by this can be shown in their language skills (Ferguson, 1959; Bernstein, 1962, 1975, 1977), in their rationality (Boudon, 1998), in their further educational plans (Kapitány, 2012; Gábos & Szívós, 2008), in their access to goods and services (Pusztai, 2015; Coleman, 1997), in their social relations and bondings (Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 1993), etc. This is where the critical mission of educational systems comes in. These systems not only to transfer knowledge, but also have an inequality-decreasing function. In recognizing and reacting to these disadvantages, they complete their main goal: to provide equal opportunities for acquiring knowledge, and to develop individual and social competencies. Empirical data demonstrate that socioeconomic background can also influence informal status (Adler et al., 1992; Eder, 1985; Francis et al., 2010), but in Hungarian samples it seems to be true in a rather covert way, especially in regions with generally better socioeconomic status (Bocskor, 2021).

Roma students partially form part of the aforementioned group that lives in lower socioeconomic conditions. Additionally, in the 20th century, they were treated as part of the social group of people with disabilities (Erőss & Kende, 2010; Furray & Hegedűs, 2003). According to statistics (KSH census 2022), it is true that 61.7% of the Roma population is in the low-SES grouping, however Roma people make up only 7% of the total population living in that group. This means that these two groups should be examined separately. Roma people are not only affected by higher rates of poverty, but they also experience additional hidden and direct discrimination during their life (Cserti Csapó & Orsós, 2013). Researchers highlight that if a group is constantly exposed to prejudice and has hardly any chance of social mobility, this may result in marginalization, which then could create further frustration among the people. A current study points out that Roma students' self-esteem is significantly lower compared to non-Roma pupils in an academic environment (Kisfalusi, 2023). This is a perfect example of a self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1948). The self-fulfilling prophecy in this case refers to the fact that generally teacher expectations of Roma students are low, decreasing motivation and self-esteem among those students. This then leads to lower academic achievement (Arató, 2015, Rayman, 2015). According to empirical studies (Shakib et al., 2011; Bocskor, 2021), the social acceptance of Roma students is among the lowest social groups. Researchers denote that the factors that usually significantly increase social acceptance and popularity have little to no effect on this group.

The third key group in connection with intercultural education is students with immigrant origins. According to the Census of 2022 there were 217 945 foreign citizens in Hungary, which was 2% of the whole Hungarian population at that point. Most of them came from Europe and Asia, and many of them arrived with their families, proving the need for education (Dajnoki et al., 2021). In 2022, 1% of primary and secondary education students were foreign citizens: 10 430 children under 10, and 13 347 between 10 and 19 years old. Among them 19% were Ukrainian, 16% Chinese, 10% Slovakian, 7% Romanian, and 4% German. Integration struggles were rooted in

foreign maternal languages, prejudices, cultural differences, and integration policies (Dajnoki et al., 2021; Heckermann, 2001). They had difficulties learning Hungarian, which was found to be a significant obstacle in student-teacher and student-student relationships. The lack of English knowledge and other languages spoken by teachers, along with low parent willingness to cooperate further exacerbated this issue (Kállai & Vadász, 2014). Contrary to previously mentioned social groups, however, these children usually had a better socio-economic background, and their parents were likely to have higher educational attainment than average (Papp, 2017; Csákó, 2017). The result: these families usually sought out higher quality education (Papp, 2017).

As regards these difficulties, intercultural education must treat them sensitively, supporting all students, if a multiperspective mindset (COE, 2008; Byram, 2009) is to be formed. These groups struggle with a myriad of problems, therefore, the solutions that educational systems develop must also be varied. While low-SES and Roma students are overrepresented in vocational education, where matriculation exams, obligatory for higher education, are not provided, children of foreign citizens often attend grammar school, and higher quality education, where these exams are present (Hajdu et al., 2024; Papp, 2017). When looking at territorial distribution, Low-SES and Roma students are also distinct from the children of foreign nationals: Low-SES and Roma students represent higher rates in smaller villages, and regions where the general socioeconomic status is lower (Hajdu et al., 2024), meanwhile students with immigrant backgrounds mainly attend schools in the capital and in territories where the general socioeconomic status is higher. In solving further differences among these groups, disparities in culture and use of language, and in an effort to decrease prejudice, intercultural communication is key. As seen in the first chapter, attempting to integrate everyone to maintain a well-functioning society is essential. In contrast, this chapter highlights numerous different situations and their solutions with which the subsystem of education has to struggle.

## **5. Intercultural education and communication in practice**

In this chapter, international data is displayed regarding how national educational systems have involved intercultural elements in policies and practices.

Intercultural education is not only important in disadvantaged social groups but also in an intercultural society understood at a global level. The OECD points out that education has a future-forming role as it furnishes a place, time, and opportunity for children to acquire global competences, for example “1) examine issues of local, global and cultural significance; 2) understand and appreciate the perspectives and worldviews of others; 3) engage in open, appropriate and effective interactions across cultures; and 4) take action for collective well-being and sustainable development” (OECD, 2020:2).

In the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018, the focus was inclusion, interculturalism, and global competencies. The OECD (2020) reports that 87% of the students engaged in cultural diversity in school,

while only 50% mentioned communicating with people from other countries. 76% of the students reported that they learned about different cultures, 64% said they learned how to solve problems and conflicts with classmates. Moreover, PISA 2018 measured global competence using 10 topics covering global issues (for example climate change, gender equality, poverty etc.) and intercultural learning (for example respect for cultural diversity, openness to experience, knowledge of different cultures etc.). While in the most open-minded, and global-thinking educational systems (for example Philippines, Dominican Republic, Singapore, Albania, Montenegro, Baku) students reported to engage in 6 to 8 learning activities out of 10, other countries like Hungary, Slovenia, and France reported participation in only about 4. Among OECD countries, Hungary's education system was shown to be the least open-minded, and global-thinking. Hungarian students reported less than 4 learning activities in connection with this issue. Additionally, they found that girls are more likely to learn about intercultural issues than boys, advantaged students have more learning opportunities to learn about this compared to disadvantaged students, and children attending general schools are similarly positioned as opposed to those attending vocational school (OECD, 2020).

Practically, integrating intercultural communication into educational practice should mean using a certain communication style which encourages people, giving children who are curious about each other a safe environment in which it is possible to ask and talk about differences (e.g.- culture, religion, language habits and mindsets) in a non-offensive way, and encouraging them to do so. This could be framed in the curriculum and supported by teachers in the form of group-based co-operative project work, organized discussions, and structured debates (OECD, 2018). Were this successfully executed, global and intercultural education would be realized.

## **6. Discussion**

Intercultural education is ever growing in importance in national and international educational policies, rooted in the unquestionable fact that people seek to belong. We saw that this is supported by numerous sociological theories, has significant influence on the economy, and that its psychological aspect bears even greater significance during the academic years. It was clear, inclusion is not only a need and desire of the excluded groups but it is quintessential for all of society. To reach and promote these intentions and goals, there is an international strategy called intercultural education, which includes relevant communication strategies and supports for schools to create open-minded, safe places for cultural diversity. Intercultural aspirations aim to encourage educational systems to integrate knowledge of cultural diversity and languages into their curriculum to make students engage in these topics and interact with others. As there are many student groups in danger of social exclusion, educational systems should strive to incorporate these principles into their policies and strategies, while aiming to also engage with their specific intercultural aspects. Hungary specifically, as highlighted by OECD data, achieves extremely poorly in

completing intercultural goals. Therefore, this volume seeks to promote and broaden intercultural approaches, pressuring policymakers to integrate these principles into Hungarian educational policy and strategy.

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## PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION

*Peshawa Bibani*

### **Abstract**

Today, schools are more culturally diverse. This change needs a complete approach to intercultural education. It should meet the needs of all students and stakeholders, including parents. This article explores how important parental involvement is for effective intercultural education. Using educational theories and recent studies, it argues that parents play a key role in promoting intercultural understanding. The article examines how parents' attitudes, expectations, and participation can support or hinder intercultural programs. It focuses on how parental involvement can reduce prejudice and foster empathy. The article discusses challenges and opportunities from parental involvement in intercultural education. Then, it shares strategies to create a more welcoming environment in schools. The article also argues that inclusive, participatory models of parental involvement are vital. They support students' academic and social growth and help develop intercultural competence in the wider community. It concludes with practical recommendations for educators, policymakers, and researchers. These suggestions aim to integrate parental involvement into intercultural education frameworks. This ensures schools become places where diversity is recognized, valued, and part of everyday learning.

**Keywords:** parental involvement, intercultural education, language, diversity

### **1. Introduction**

The growing connection in our global society highlights the need for intercultural education. This education helps create inclusive and fair learning environments. Intercultural competence refers to the ability to engage well with people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It involves developing understanding, empathy, and respect for diverse views and worldviews (Layne & Teng, 2022). This means not just recognizing different cultures but also encouraging dialogue and collaboration among people from varied backgrounds (Guillén-Yparrea & Soledad, 2023). Developing intercultural competence is a continuous journey of learning and reflection. Such intercultural competence development often results in bicultural socialization (Smolcic & Katunich, 2016).

Bicultural socialization is a process where people learn to blend knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors from two different cultures. It happens when individuals connect with and actively participate in both their ethnic heritage and the mainstream culture around them. This gives them the ability to move comfortably between different cultural settings. It can go far beyond just being able to speak two languages. It involves a much deeper process of bringing together different cultural identities and making them part of who you are as a person. It is about finding ways to authentically live in both cultural worlds while creating your own integrated sense of self (Murdock, 2016).

Supporting individuals through this identity integration process requires collaborative effort. In intercultural education, parental involvement is crucial for shaping students' attitudes and behaviors toward cultural diversity (Sierra-Huedo, 2024; Basnet, 2024). Active participation from parents impacts academic success, emotional growth, and intercultural understanding. Parents pass down cultural values and norms to their children as key socializing agents. How children view and interact with people from other cultures is affected by parent's engagement in intercultural education (Oranga et al., 2023). For children's success in school and their lives after, Joyce Epstein developed a paradigm categorizing parental involvement into six levels. The framework was to help build partnerships between family, school, and community. According to her, the six types are parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community (Epstein et al., 2018).

There are two primary forms of parental involvement: those which take place at home and those which take place at school. The term "home-based parental involvement" pertains to the active involvement and participation of guardians in the educational and developmental pursuits of their children while they are at home. It includes a range of activities and behaviors that parents engage in to assist their children's learning, mental health, and overall development outside of school. Typical instances of parental involvement in a home setting include: aiding with homework, engaging in shared reading, participating in educational games and activities, discussing learning topics, monitoring academic progress, fostering curiosity and exploration, establishing expectations and goals, and providing emotional support and nurturing (Li et al., 2020).

Parents' active participation in their children's education in the school setting is called "school-based parental involvement". The actions and initiatives that receive attention in this type of parental participation are those that occur immediately within the school environment. It additionally entails cooperation among parents, educators, administrators, and other school personnel. Parental engagement in their children's education can manifest in several ways. Parents and teachers engage in activities such as volunteering, attending parent workshops and seminars, collaborating on school governance and decision-making, utilizing communication channels, and participating in parent-teacher conferences (Park et al., 2017).

Despite parental involvement being a good thing, its effectiveness varies by cultural context. This role is vital for effective intercultural education as it promotes understanding and builds bridges between home and school. To develop responsive interventions for diverse families, understanding how cultural values shape parenting styles is the key (Garcia & Guzman, 2020).

Yet, engaging parents from different cultural backgrounds in educational initiatives presents challenges that require sensitivity and awareness (Jing, 2020). Some factors may hinder meaningful engagement such as language barriers, economic differences, and varying cultural views on parental roles. Educators often have a narrow view of parental involvement. They may focus on traditional activities that reflect the dominant culture and miss valuable contributions from diverse families, such as home support and storytelling. To create inclusive partnerships, educators must work to overcome these barriers and build welcoming environments where all parents feel valued. For instance, research shows that immigrant parents face challenges like limited English skills and cultural differences, which can limit their participation in their children's education (Öztürk, 2013). Some parents may have had negative experiences with schools in their home countries (Crozier & Davies, 2007). This causes mistrust or hesitance to engage with new schools. Addressing these challenges is critical for building strong partnerships between schools and diverse families.

Moreover, culturally sensitive approaches are crucial for supporting parents and children from various backgrounds (Elwakeel, 2024). Schools should create chances for parents to share their cultural heritage, which enriches the learning experience for all students and validates diverse identities (LaRocque et al., 2011). This article aims to examine how parental involvement supports intercultural education, drawing on existing research and theoretical models. It explores challenges and opportunities in building inclusive partnerships between families and schools, and offers strategies to foster intercultural understanding in diverse educational settings. Accordingly, the research question guiding this study is: How does parental involvement contribute to intercultural education, and what strategies support inclusive partnerships between families and schools in diverse cultural contexts?

## **2. Methodology**

This article employs a comprehensive literature review approach to examine the multifaceted role of parental involvement in intercultural education. Because intercultural education is complex and always changing, a narrative review was chosen to bring together different ideas, theories, and research findings. The review draws on existing literature to examine theoretical frameworks such as Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett, 2017) and Banks' multicultural education theory (Banks, 2021), exploring how parental involvement intersects with intercultural educational goals and outcomes.

### 3. Intercultural education: A theoretical foundation

To better situate intercultural education within broader educational discourse, it is important to distinguish it from multicultural education, which often serves as a related but distinct framework. Multicultural education emphasizes the recognition and appreciation of cultural differences. It seeks to address social and cultural diversity, promote equity, enhance cross-cultural understanding, and foster social cohesion. It challenges stereotypes while promoting cultural awareness and social justice (Lee et al., 2023). In contrast, intercultural education goes beyond recognition by emphasising interaction and dialogue between cultural groups. It highlights mutual respect, shared cultural expressions, and the co-construction of understanding among diverse communities (Walton & Webster, 2019). While both approaches share goals of inclusivity, equity, and cultural awareness, they differ in methodology and emphasis. One focusing on diversity recognition (multicultural), the other on intercultural engagement (intercultural). Some scholars argue that these distinctions may be overstated and call for greater integration and collaboration between the two frameworks to better support students in diverse societies (Hill, 2007).

Intercultural education as a term includes approaches like multicultural education, minority education, diversity inclusion, and citizenship education (Allemann-Ghionda, 2009). Over time, the idea of intercultural education has changed. It has shifted from focusing on the majority's interaction with ethnic minorities or migrants to a broader view. Today, it covers various layers of socio-cultural diversity beyond just cultural or ethnic differences. The term also changed according to contexts. In the United States, multicultural education began in the early 1970s. It is similar to intercultural education in other countries. Multicultural education is defined as a concept, a reform movement, and a process aimed at achieving educational equality for students from diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, social-class, and linguistic backgrounds (Todor, 2015; Grant & Portera, 2010).

Intercultural education focuses on building mutual understanding. The goal is recognize and respect diversity as a human right. It promotes educational equity and inclusion for all students. In this way, it faces prejudice and ethnocentrism, promoting solidarity, and teaching democracy and humanistic values. Throughout the curriculum, it works towards integrate diversity (Beser et al., 2021). Intercultural education aims to reshape schools, so every student gains the knowledge and skills to thrive in diverse communities and nations. This education helps students develop a global mindset and become effective world citizens. Schools must support all students, from minority to majority groups, in gaining skills for jobs in a global society. A major challenge today is fostering genuine understanding between diverse groups. This requires encouraging solidarity and sensitivity while achieving unity in diversity. It involves overcoming stereotypes and ideas of inferiority (Jayadi et al., 2022; Baranova, 2018).

Several theoretical frameworks can guide intercultural education, but here two main ones are addressed. The first one is Bennett's Developmental Model of

Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). The DMIS is based on constructivist perception and communication theory. It assumes people build their reality through perception. More complex perceptions lead to more sophisticated experiences. The model suggests that individuals shape boundaries of “self” and “other,” which influence their intercultural experiences. It outlines a sequence of stages in how people perceive cultural differences. These stages move from ethnocentric views, where one’s own culture is seen as central, to ethno-relative views, where all cultures are viewed as complex (Bennett, 2017). The six stages are: Denial, Defense, and Minimization (ethnocentric), then Acceptance, Adaptation, and Integration (ethno-relative). The first three stages are related to viewing one’s own culture as more “central to reality.” The last three stages focus on seeing all cultures as different ways to organize reality. In the ethnocentric stages, people view their culture as the standard. In Denial, they hardly notice other cultures. In Defense, they see differences as threats. In Minimization, they focus too much on similarities. When it comes to ethno-relative stages, people recognise and value cultural differences. Acceptance is about understanding and appreciating these differences. Adaptation allows for shifting perspectives and behaviors. Integration involves blending multiple cultural views into one’s identity (Bennett, 1998).

The DMIS applies not just to racial and cultural diversity but to all differences among individuals. A higher level of intercultural sensitivity, as described by the DMIS, is expected to enhance intercultural competence. i.e. - your ability to recognise, understand, appreciate cultural differences develops your ability to interact effectively, and appropriately with people in different cultures. According to (Mellizo, 2018), understanding DMIS by teachers and schools can lead to a strong, based, intercultural education, to awareness and adaptability to culturally differences. This can also create a more respectful and stronger parent-teacher partnership.

Banks’ (2010) multicultural education theory is another framework towards a better understanding of intercultural education and parent-teacher communication. This theory has five dimensions. The dimensions may be seen as guidance for educators in developing theory, research, and practice. These dimensions include:

**Content Integration:** This means including content from various cultures in the curriculum. Teachers may use examples to explain key concepts and theories. When parents see their culture’s representation, they feel more welcome and valued. This leads to more culturally sensitive communication and more involvement.

**Knowledge Construction:** It focuses on helping students understand and explore how cultural assumptions and biases shape knowledge in different fields. In relation to teachers and parents, when teachers become more aware of parents’ cultural backgrounds, they can avoid misunderstandings and open intercultural dialogue.

**Prejudice Reduction:** This dimension is about helping students build positive attitudes towards people from different backgrounds. When a

space is created for all families to participate, parents feel more confident and motivated to get involved. In this way, parents from different backgrounds feel that their identity is respected.

**Equity Pedagogy:** This concerns adjusting teaching methods to help all students succeed, regardless of their background. In fair practices, parents see that their children are treated equitably and that leads to strengthening two-way communication.

**Empowering School Culture and Social Structure:** This relates to the school environment and how educators, students, parents, and the community work together. The goal is to create a space where all students can experience equality. Banks encourages schools to challenge biases in their policies and communication systems. This may include offering translation, flexibility in scheduling meetings and recognizing diverse family structures.

These dimensions are distinct but in practice, they are interconnected. Research based on the cultural difference paradigm supports this approach. It emphasizes incorporating diverse cultures and languages into teaching to boost academic achievement (Banks, 2021; Freire & Valdez, 2021).

Intercultural communication is key to success in diverse classrooms. Cultural awareness and effective communication foster positive interactions. A key part of enhancing intercultural learning is mastering cross-cultural communication and relationships. Successfully navigating cultural differences requires this skill. Engaging in dialogue among cultures is essential for understanding and interacting with others. This dialogue involves confronting inequalities, overcoming biases, and learning from diverse perspectives (Akkari & Radhouane, 2022).

To sum it up, intercultural education aims for equity and mutual understanding in diverse settings. Theoretical frameworks like Bennett's DMIS shows how people experience cultural differences, while Banks' dimensions offer a structural method for school reform. Both highlight the importance of intercultural communication, dialogue, and understanding different perspectives for achieving educational success and creating inclusive environments. This theoretical foundation sets the stage for exploring how parents, as primary agents of cultural transmission, contribute to the goals of intercultural education.

#### **4. The role of parents in intercultural education**

There are different factors which influence the way parental roles shape education. The education level of parents plays a key part in how they help their children. Parents who are well-educated often help their children more effectively. Such parents can access information and provide resources like books, computers, and tutors (Tan et

al., 2020). In contrast, parents with lower education levels may struggle to navigate the educational system. Providing the needed academic support might be hard for them (Tan et al., 2020; Kirkøen et al, 2021). In keeping their cultural traditions and native languages alive, parents' roles are seen as vital to their children's identity. Thus, some parents actively push for their culture, history, and language to be part of the school curriculum (Mera-Lemp et al., 2025). They might organize extra education focused on their heritage. Parents can also share their culture with teachers and the school community, boosting pride and self-esteem. However, some prioritize proficiency in the dominant language, which might lead to less focus on the family language in school programs.

Working with parents and community groups is crucial for overcoming barriers in the educational system. Strong home-school relationships, especially in early education, help teachers learn about families' cultural backgrounds and parenting priorities. Moreover, empowering school culture can support intercultural education by involving parents in school governance (Tran, 2014). Additionally, parents from different communities may want to have a say in all aspects of their children's education, including curriculum and teaching methods. However, given the wide variety of cultural norms, family dynamics, and institutional practices, a uniform approach or standardized measurement for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) parent-practitioner partnerships is likely neither feasible nor beneficial across these diverse contexts (Murray et al., 2020). Given this complexity, it becomes essential to clearly understand the different forms that parental engagement can take such involvement and partnership.

The concepts of parents' involvement, partnership, and cooperation in education represent distinct yet interconnected dimensions of parental engagement. Understanding these differences is crucial for fostering effective educational environments. Partnership emphasizes a collaborative relationship between parents and educational institutions. This dynamic involves shared responsibilities and mutual respect, where parents and schools work together to support student learning. Effective partnerships can lead to improved educational outcomes and a more inclusive school environment (Eden et al., 2024).

Central to building these effective partnerships is recognizing that parental beliefs about their culture, the host culture, and education shape how engaged their children are (Durand, 2011). They often feel strongly about their children keeping this identity. They advocate for educational methods that honor their cultural heritage.

It is especially important to have a Balance between cultures and instrumental goals. Parents typically want their children to gain the benefits of school knowledge for success in society. However, this may clash with their wish for their children to maintain their cultural identity. This conflict can lead to focus on adaptation and limited empowerment, which might result in de-socialization or re-socialization instead of integration (Manish, 2024).

Parents' view towards school content can be different from one community to another. Some may object to topics that they find a threat to their identity, religious

belief and nationality (Hurst et al., 2023; Raveaud, 2008). These objections may reflect deeper negative feelings or resistance to challenging their beliefs. This usually happens in the case of parents from minority, migrant, or refugee backgrounds. They face various challenges in education such as navigating the system, linguistic barriers, financial status, lack of understanding from school policies and cultural misunderstandings.

Many parents struggle with understanding the structure and traditions of the new educational system. Less educated parents may find this especially hard. One of the reasons for failure in understanding is linguistic barrier. Limited skills in the dominant language can make communication with schools difficult (Tarasawa & Waggoner, 2015). This may hinder parents' ability to support their children's learning. Poor academic performance among minority children is often linked to language differences at home and school. Also, many immigrant and refugee families face poverty, which makes supporting their children challenging. Parents may have demanding work hours that limit their availability. Those with uncertain legal status may see their children marginalized in school (Bean, 2011).

The misunderstandings are not always from the parents' side. There could be deficit views and lack of understanding from schools. Schools may hold negative views of minority or immigrant families, seeing them as lacking resources. Sometimes teachers struggle to understand parental values or the complexities of these families' situations. Prejudice and non-inclusive attitudes among staff can hinder effective communication (Özmen, 2016).

Parents are vital partners in promoting intercultural education and supporting their children's success. Achieving this requires educational systems and educators to build strong, respectful relationships with diverse families (Eden et al., 2024). It is crucial to understand and value families' backgrounds and perspectives while identifying and overcoming structural barriers that may impede parental involvement.

## **5. Language barriers and multilingualism in intercultural education**

Language plays a central role in shaping the relationship between families and schools in intercultural settings. For students and families from linguistic minority backgrounds, language barriers often hinder communication and engagement. When the language of instruction differs from the home language, students may struggle academically, and parents may find it difficult to support their children's learning or interact with educators (Zheng et al., 2023; Berktaş & Lam, 2023). For example, in Francophone Africa, although French is the official language of instruction, many children speak local languages at home. This mismatch limits their learning and contributes to poor academic outcomes (UNESCO, 2010). Similarly, in Germany and Italy, despite policies promoting diversity, some schools remain monolingual in practice, marginalizing students' home languages and cultures (Allemann-Ghionda, 2008).

Research shows that incorporating students' home languages and cultures into the curriculum can boost academic performance and strengthen identity.

Parents often feel more confident and welcome when their language is respected. Conversely, a lack of language support can create feelings of exclusion, weaken parental engagement, and increase dropout rates (Gaitán, 2012).

In multilingual environments, the nature of family-school partnerships becomes even more complex. Language policies and the social value assigned to different languages shape how parents experience and interact with schools. Parents of language minority students may feel unprepared to challenge the dominant culture's influence within schools, leading to disengagement or silence (GarcíaSánchez & Orellana, 2020). Moreover, language can act both as a bridge and a barrier. When schools offer translators, culturally responsive communication, and recognize bilingualism as an asset, families are more likely to participate meaningfully. For instance, American Indian and Alaska Native communities have developed first-language programs that both preserve cultural identity and enhance second-language learning (Genova, 2015).

However, national policies can complicate these efforts. In France, for example, immigrant languages are sometimes taught only as a way to prepare for repatriation, rather than as valuable cultural assets (Le Gac, 2025). Such approaches reinforce assimilation rather than integration.

From an intercultural education perspective, learning multiple languages supports empathy, inclusion, and global competence. Bilingual education fosters stronger ties between community and school, enabling children to navigate both their family culture and the mainstream environment (Johnson, 2010). On the other hand, if linguistic diversity is ignored, schools may reinforce exclusion and inequality.

Therefore, educational systems must adopt inclusive language policies that reflect the sociolinguistic realities of students and their families. Teachers need training to engage with multilingual families, and schools must move beyond monolingual norms. Supporting language diversity is not just a pedagogical strategy, it is a key dimension of intercultural education that validates identities, strengthens parent-practitioner partnerships, and promotes equity.

## **6. Barriers to parental involvement**

While parental involvement has many benefits in intercultural education, it is often shaped and sometimes limited by a range of structural, cultural, and linguistic barriers. Due to differences in parent's beliefs, attitudes and actions regarding their children's education, parental involvement is complex and varies across cultures. This can involve home support, school participation, and providing resources for learning. It also covers how teachers create opportunities for parent engagement and emphasize parental responsibility. Some studies emphasize that parental involvement needs an investment of time, money, and energy in social and academic opportunities (Sivabalan et al., 2024; Puspita & Waroh, 2024).

There are factors that hinder parental involvement, however these can be different according to contexts. Different cultural norms shape how parents view their

roles in education. Sometimes teachers may have different expectations than what parents understand. This can create a gap between parents and schools. In some cultures, parents see teachers as highly respected and less approachable, making involvement harder. More traditional cultures might lead parents to engage less in school activities (Huntsinger & Jose, 2009).

However, despite the potential for parental involvement to override socioeconomic inequalities (Pusztai, 2025), low income can create many obstacles (Mohammed, 2025). Parents with financial limitations, tight schedules, or lack transportation, their ability to participate in school activities is restricted (Hartas, 2011). Parents with different educational backgrounds may also participate less. These differences cause unfamiliarity with the schools system and regulations. Immigrant parents may not know local school practices, rules, or expected forms of involvement. This lack of knowledge can lead to lower engagement (Yamamoto et al., 2022).

Negative school environment can discourage involvement. Parents may feel distrustful of the system, especially if they experience not apart from the system. This more likely happens when understanding of diverse involvement forms is limited (Foley, 2015). Educators may have a narrow view of parental involvement, often focusing on traditional activities that reflect the dominant culture. Other valuable contributions, like home support or cultural storytelling, may go unrecognized.

To face those challenges, parents from different backgrounds must be involved and more opportunities should be provided by the school. Parents' comfort with their native language often affects their involvement. Teachers need training in working with diverse families. Greater intercultural sensitivity leads to more parental involvement. Acceptance between dominant and minority cultures is key for family-school cooperation. This can help to align values taught at home and school.

Teacher training should prepare educators to engage with culturally diverse families, covering knowledge, skills, and understanding of diverse parental involvement. Training should focus on ethical, organizational, and pedagogical competencies (Del Carmen Medina Podadera, 2023; Gay, 2002). Parental involvement should be assessed across various dimensions that reflect community values. To promote parental involvement in intercultural education, schools must address barriers, cultural differences, and communication issues with sensitivity and inclusive practices.

## **7. Recommendations**

To improve intercultural education, a concerted effort is needed to enhance communication and partnerships between schools and diverse families. The following strategies could be organized to guide educators, school leaders, and policymakers in creating more inclusive and effective learning environments.

### *1. Fostering inclusive communication and building trust*

Effective partnerships begin with overcoming communication barriers and challenging negative preconceptions. Schools should address the language proficiency gap that can disadvantage children and parents. Key actions include using interpreters and translating school announcements and materials into the languages spoken by the community.

It is also essential to promote dialogue and knowledge exchange through meaningful conversations with families. Schools should create initiatives that give immigrant parents, in particular, chances to share their concerns and experiences with teachers and other parents.

To build trust, educators must challenge deficit views of non-dominant families. This involves encouraging parents to see their children as “at promise, not at risk” by recognising their inherent strengths.

### *2. Reforming the school culture and curriculum*

Creating a welcoming environment requires systemic changes to the school’s culture, policies, and instructional practices. Developing policies that affirm identity and recognition is crucial. Such policies should value cultural diversity and multiple perspectives within the school community.

It is essential to implement culturally responsive teaching strategies. This involves culturally responsive teachers incorporating aspects of students’ family and community cultures into lessons to make learning more relevant. This approach is vital for children who face cultural gaps between their home and school environments.

The curriculum should be enriched by incorporating the cultural capital of the community, which helps validate students’ identities. This requires a shift to recognizing parents as valuable cultural resources whose knowledge and experiences can enhance education.

### *3. Enhancing teacher education and professional development*

The attitudes and skills of educators are fundamental to the success of intercultural education. A primary strategy is to address teacher attitudes and biases. Teachers should be encouraged to adopt democratic values and increase their intercultural sensitivity. Teacher education programs should be a focus for reform, encouraging future educators to reflect on their own biases and equipping them with the skills for effective intercultural practice.

### *4. Future considerations for engagement*

While global interconnectedness and technology highlight the need for intercultural sensitivity, the sources provided lack specific details about how digital tools can bridge cultural and language gaps in parental engagement.

## 8. Conclusion

This article has explored the multifaceted and essential role that parental involvement plays in creating effective intercultural education environments. Through examining theoretical frameworks, practical challenges, and emerging strategies, several key insights have emerged that underscore both the complexity and the critical importance of engaging diverse families in educational processes. It reveals that parental involvement in intercultural education extends beyond traditional notions of school participation. Parents serve as cultural bridges and identity preservers. However, their engagement is significantly influenced by a complex relationship of factors including educational background, linguistic competence, cultural values, socioeconomic circumstances, and institutional receptiveness.

The theoretical frameworks demonstrate that successful intercultural education requires a systematic approach to understanding and accommodating cultural differences. These models highlight how both educators and parents must navigate stages of cultural awareness, moving from ethnocentric perspectives toward more inclusive viewpoints that value diversity as a strength rather than a challenge to overcome.

One of the most significant findings is that barriers to meaningful parental involvement are often systemic rather than individual. Language differences, cultural misunderstandings, socioeconomic constraints, and institutional biases create multilayered obstacles that require comprehensive solutions. The article revealed that deficit-based thinking about minority families maintains exclusion, while asset-based approaches that recognize parents as cultural resources can transform educational experiences for all students.

Building on our earlier discussion, when parents speak multiple languages, this can either help or hinder their involvement in their children's education. Whether multilingualism becomes an asset or an obstacle really relies on how schools choose to handle language diversity in their policies and daily practices. When schools embrace linguistic diversity and provide adequate support for multilingual communication, families become more engaged, and students experience greater academic success. Conversely, monolingual policies that ignore home languages can lead to cultural disconnection and educational inequity.

The evidence presented throughout this article points to several critical areas for educational reform. Teacher preparation programs must prioritize intercultural competence development, helping educators understand their own cultural biases while developing skills to work effectively with diverse families. Schools need to adopt culturally responsive pedagogies that honor students' home cultures while building bridges to broader academic success. Institutional changes are equally important. Schools must evolve from viewing parental involvement through a narrow, culturally specific lens to embracing diverse forms of family engagement. This includes recognizing that parents contribute to their children's education in many ways, from

maintaining cultural traditions and home language support to providing cultural knowledge that enriches classroom learning.

Creating inclusive intercultural education requires a fundamental shift in how educational institutions conceptualize and facilitate parental involvement. This transformation demands moving beyond surface-level multicultural celebrations toward deep structural changes that embed cultural responsiveness into every aspect of school operation, from curriculum design and teaching methods to communication strategies and governance structures. The article's examination of successful strategies reveals that meaningful change occurs when schools actively work to understand and accommodate diverse family perspectives, provide robust language support, challenge their own institutional biases, and create multiple pathways for family engagement that respect diverse cultural approaches to education.

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## **ENHANCING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN PUBLIC EDUCATION AMONG ROMA STUDENTS: PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR INCLUSIVE TEACHING.**

*Tímea Ceglédi*

### **Abstract**

Why do schools fail to educate students from immigrant backgrounds, and those from lower socioeconomic families effectively? According to proponents of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), the answer lies in the fact that society and schools do not take into account, or take little account of, the cultural background of students and the history of their communities, and even consider it inferior to the values and culture that are dominant in schools (Boreczky, 2000; Gay, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lampert et al., 2016; Vavrus, 2008).

Numerous studies have concluded that CRP clearly brings us closer to a solution to the massive disadvantages that solutions based on dominant or privileged cultures and deficit perspectives have failed to address (Chang & Viesca, 2022; Gay, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Literature understands CRP as a comprehensive pedagogical concept that views the culture and learning styles of students and families as resources and operates in harmony with the educational environment and classroom atmosphere. The goal of CRP is to ensure that everyone experiences equal opportunities and fairness (Boreczky, 2000; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Chang & Viesca, 2022; Gay, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Pusztai & Inántsý-Pap, 2016).

The current study explores CRP and its intercultural communication aspects. In addition to presenting the theoretical cornerstones of the concepts, it describes the specific strategies that have been proven most effective in public education. In this, we pay special attention to Roma families and students.

**Keywords:** intercultural communication, educational inequality, Roma students

### **1. Introduction**

One of the fundamental works on intercultural communication is based on the premise that it is essential to develop cultural skills in a globalized world (Lustig & Koester, 2013). Although Lustig & Koester do not explicitly use the term culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), their basic principles and practical guidance are perfectly in line with CRP. For example, both intercultural communication and CRP interpret

cultural diversity positively, emphasizing reflection, context-dependent learning, and flexible adaptation. Mutual respect, the perception of cultural values as resources, the central role of language, mutual understanding, etc. are important in both (Gay, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lustig & Koester, 2013)

The aim of this study is to answer the following questions through a thorough review of the theoretical literature: What need gave rise to the CRP concept? What characterizes CRP? The study discusses the following questions in the context of intercultural communication. Herein, the situation of Roma students and families receives special scrutiny, contributing to the research gap that exists in this area.

First off, CRP goes beyond universalist psychological models of pedagogical practice and emphasizes the cultural embeddedness of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ogbu, 1981; Pusztai & Inántszy-Pap, 2016; Torgyik & Karlovitz, 2006; Valenzuela, 1999). However, the understanding of this cultural embeddedness and the pedagogical responses related to it go beyond the symbolic walls of the school, raise questions on a social scale, thereby opening a wider critical surface for the debate (which otherwise requires professional foundations) to be discussed both politically and ideologically. The aim of this study, however, is not to decide debates that go beyond the academic sphere. Rather, we present purely the pedagogical concept through the analysis of the literature appearing in peer-reviewed publications, including its criticism.

To understand the concept of CRP, we first present the environment in which the need for this pedagogy arose. If the school represents, accepts and expects a culture that it considers dominant (or privileged), rewards cultural assimilation and the abandonment of family culture, and does not take into account the cultural characteristics of students, the identity of the student (and parent) is eroded, they feel inferior, and excluded, and their academic performance will suffer as a result (Bernstein, 1996; Boreczky, 2000; Bourdieu, 1978; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Chang & Viesca, 2022; Derdák & Varga, 2003; Lampert et al., 2016). All this results in a disproportionate, hierarchical, non-reciprocal system of relationships in communication.

## **2. What need gave rise to the CRP concept?**

### *2.1 Differences between school and family culture and communication difficulties*

Differences between family and school culture can manifest themselves in several areas. One of the most discussed issues is language disadvantage, which highlights the gap between the language spoken at school and at home (Bartha, 2015; Bernstein, 1971; Biró & Ceglédi, 2023; Derdák & Varga, 2003; Magnússon et al., 2025; Réger, 2002). Basil Bernstein explained this gap with his theory of linguistic codes. Bernstein sees the problem in the fact that the school is not sensitive to children's different (but not inferior) language code. The decades-long sociolinguistic findings have been confirmed by subsequent generations (Andrási & Biró, 1978; Bernstein, 1996; Cause, 2010; Jánk, 2018; Pap & Pléh, 1972; Rétháti, 2021).

In addition to language, schools and disadvantaged families may also have different perceptions of time. Predispositions related to time are linked to social belonging and reflect the functioning of society in the decisions made throughout one's life (Bocsi, 2013; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Ceglédi et al., 2018; Pusztai, 2015; Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). Children from more favorable social backgrounds have a more planned vision of the future, with a greater emphasis on learning and future work, and they look further ahead (Bathó & Fejes, 2013; Boudon, 1974; Covacevich et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2014; Nurmi, 1991).

The future orientation that is so important in school is seriously damaged in disadvantaged families because students are confronted with the limitations of their opportunities – even if they otherwise see goals ahead of them (Bathó & Fejes, 2013; Ceglédi, 2018). This is confirmed by the PISA 2018 analysis of three countries, which shows that, based on the ESCS measure of family background, 15-year-olds in the bottom quartile are less likely to believe that hard work will lead to a good job in the future, and are more likely to think that school is a waste of time (Covacevich et al., 2021).

The damage to future orientation, which is important for taking school seriously, is also worrisome among disadvantaged students because it goes hand in hand with less favorable academic and labor market motivations, lower school commitment and school performance. Furthermore, a lack of thinking about the future or a lower degree of the latter makes various risk behaviors more likely (Alm et al., 2019; Bathó & Fejes, 2013; Chen & Vazsonyi, 2013; Covacevich et al., 2021; Guo et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2014; Lin et al., 2024; Mello et al., 2013; Nurmi, 1991; Stoddard et al., 2011; Xiao et al., 2021; Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). All this can be interpreted as a reflection of the sharp differences between school and family cultures.

Social disadvantage therefore increases the likelihood that the family will think in shorter time frames, constantly undermining their vision of the future, creating tension between any goals they may have set and the lack of resources needed to achieve them (Bathó & Fejes, 2013; Breen & Jonsson, 2005; Ceglédi et al., 2018; Engler, 2019; Johnson et al., 2014; Nagy, 2010; Nurmi, 1991; Örkény & Szabó, 2001; Sallay, 2003; Xiao et al., 2021).

In connection with the above, a fatalistic worldview is also more characteristic of families who, based on their experiences and perceptions, feel they have little ability to influence their own destiny and are less likely to associate it with their own values, decisions, and actions (Durst, Nyíró, & Bereményi, 2023b; Johnson et al., 2014; Stoddard et al., 2011). According to Raymond Boudon, the lower classes are less likely to believe that they can influence their own success, by completing school assignments for example, and are thus much more likely to attribute success to luck or good fortune (Boudon, 1974; Ceglédi, 2018).

The differences in values and norms between families and schools, as well as the cultural distance, can be described as a weakening of the myth of meritocracy

(Durst, Nyíró, Dés, et al., 2023; Frank, 2016; Reay, 2017; Young, 1961) or by recognizing the cruel optimism of social mobility (Durst, Nyíró, & Bereményi, 2023b). Among others, the works of Pierre Bourdieu and Zsuzsa Ferge drew attention to the fact that individual mobility, in addition to not being a real solution to social inequalities, does not have a clearly positive impact on the lives of individuals facing these inequalities (Bourdieu, 2003; Ceglédi et al., 2024; Durst, Nyíró, & Bereményi, 2023a; Ferge, 2006). All this is not conducive to the acceptance of school values, norms, and school culture, as it conveys to students the idea that “individuals who are unable to move on” are unsuitable (Ceglédi, 2021; Ceglédi et al., 2024; Durst, Nyíró, & Bereményi, 2023b; Reay et al., 2009; Róbert, 2000). The long-term consequence is that the spectacularization of individual success (as an artificial reinforcement of the myth of meritocracy) seeks to obscure the inequalities of the social structure (Bourdieu, 1978, 2003; Ceglédi, 2018; Ceglédi et al., 2024; Durst, Nyíró, & Bereményi, 2023a; Ferge, 2006; Reay, 2017).

A traumatic past dulls the connection between the different time zones (past, present, future), thereby damaging the sense of personal continuity and the connection between the present and the future (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). The role of schools as embodiments of the future is thus diminished, and identification with school culture is pushed into the background. Disadvantaged students live through more stressful life events (Ceglédi, 2018), which, in this context, may increase disengagement from school.

## *2.2 Encounter and communication between cultures in the case of Roma students*

Roma parents and some researchers also talk about teachers who display cultural superiority and ignore the needs of students arising from cultural differences (Luciak & Liegl, 2009; Starčević et al., 2016). In fact, we can even talk about (covert) assimilation efforts at the educational policy level in certain periods and countries (Helakorpi et al., 2020; Pusztai & Inántsypap, 2016). For example, during the socialist regime in Hungary, the official position of the government, which was also reflected in its actions, was that strengthening Roma culture and language would hinder the integration of Roma into society, or, in political terms, their assimilation (Pusztai & Inántsypap, 2016).

According to the results of the MTA-DE-CSATOKK Parent Survey, the more problems we see in the indicators of family-school relations, intercultural communication, respect, and cultural identity, the weaker the child’s performance (Ceglédi, 2024).

Learning-related goals (as part of family and school culture) are more closely aligned than the parties may perceive, and the reason for this is the extremely low level of encounters, conversations, and communication in general (Hofstede, 1984; OECD, 2019).

The encounter between family and school culture is complicated by the image that they have of themselves and each other, about which there is no

communication between the two actors (Table 1). The school's self-image is based on the premise that its operation is legitimized by social consensus. From the families' point of view, this legitimacy is merely formal; they feel that the school operates in a coercive manner, based on legislation, penalties, and reprisals (Fónai, 2020). The school as an institution is part of a hostile environment outside the Roma community, where initial encounters can reinforce the image of punishment, retribution, and coercion (Durst, Nyíró, Dés, et al., 2023; Elekes, 2012; Messing, 2017). Parents' school experiences from their childhood were often marked by discrimination, racism, and aggression, perpetrated not only by fellow students but also by school staff. Schools first experience that Roma families respond to these out-of-community institutions, which are coercive, punitive, and punishing, with resistance, distrust, and defensive mechanisms.

**Table 1 Possible differences between the school and Roma families' perceptions of school**

<b>The School's Self-Image</b>	<b>Possible School Image of Roma Families</b>
<b>Its operation is based on social consensus</b>	The school is based on regulations, it coerces, punishes, and retaliates
<b>Children are being prepared for life at school</b>	"Real" life takes place outside of school
<b>School has the right to define the values to be taught</b>	The family has the right to define the knowledge to be acquired
<b>School has priority in education</b>	The family has priority in education
<b>School takes over educational responsibilities from the family</b>	The family does not accept the school's educational role, considers it its own responsibility
<b>Views itself as grading through marks</b>	Views the school as evaluating through praise and scolding
<b>Emotions are not part of schoolwork</b>	Emotions are important
<b>The school's job is to lift the child out of the family</b>	The child's natural place is within the family
<b>Talks about teacher-student, student-student conflicts</b>	Talks about Roma–non-Roma (Gadjo) conflicts
<b>Expects the family to send the child to school prepared</b>	It is the school's duty to prepare the child
<b>The child's lag is due to the family</b>	The child's lag is due to the school
<b>Parents have no place at school during teaching hours</b>	It is the parent's duty to protect the child even at school

*Source: Own compilation based on Fónai (Fónai, 2020)*

The school's self-image includes preparing students for life, and in this context, it assumes that the school has the right to determine the values to be taught and that it has priority in education. In contrast, families believe that real life takes place outside of school, that the family has the right to determine the values that need to be learned, and that the family has priority in education (Fónai, 2020). According to Roma parents, teachers do not recognize the importance of learning at home (e.g., business skills in Fairground/Show families) (Kiddle, 2000), at the same time, there are also studies showing that parents evaluate their own knowledge (e.g., reading skills) as insufficient to help their children with their studies (Lloyd & Stead, 2002; Luciak & Liegl, 2009). The school intends to take over educational tasks from families, which families reject. In extreme cases, the school may even aim to remove children from poor family circumstances, while the family believes that the child's natural place is within the family (Fónai, 2020).

From the school's perspective, grading is seen as an objective assessment, while families tend to focus on criticism and praise. This also reflects the difference in opinion between the school, which considers emotions to be irrelevant to schoolwork, and families, for whom emotions play an important role (Fónai, 2020; L. Ritók, 2009).

The school uses a colorblind approach to interpreting conflicts and talks about teacher-student and student-student conflicts. In contrast, parents resent the conflicts arising from Roma and non-Roma differences, which are also evident in school life (Fónai, 2020; Rutigliano, 2020). Parents report racialization, discrimination, racist name-calling, and cultural misrecognition, racial harassment, suffering racist abuse, being called derogatory names, being ignored in class (Bloomer et al., 2014; Boyle et al., 2020; Connolly & Keenan, 2002; Nguyen Luu et al., 2019). The perpetrators may be fellow students, but also school staff and teachers. Roma students and their parents report racism and discrimination, which the authors describe as institutional racism and discrimination (Helakorpi et al., 2020; Macura-Milovanović & Peček, 2013; Messing, 2017; Walker, 2008). They resent that the school does not take racism seriously and does not protect them from the resulting physical and psychological harassment. Therefore, they have to defend themselves, which teachers interpret as a "mob mentality" (Allan, 2010; Bhopal, 2011; Bloomer et al., 2014; Boyle et al., 2020; Derrington, 2005, 2007; Lambrev, 2015; Lloyd & Stead, 2002; Rosinský et al., 2009; Symeou et al., 2009).

The two most important socialization agents also have conflicting views on the child's preparedness. The school expects parents to ensure that their children are prepared, while the family believes that it is the school's responsibility to educate the child. A similar contradiction can be observed in the way the two actors interpret the child's possible failures and shortcomings. The school blames the family, while the family blames the school (Fónai, 2020). Teachers or prospective teachers, and even education policy documents, often attribute failure to a lack of motivation on the part of students and families (Helakorpi et al., 2020; Macura-Milovanović & Peček, 2013). Roma children feel that teachers expect less from them, and parents reported the same (negativity, unchallenging pedagogy, curricular alienation) (Boyle et al., 2020).

The solution would clearly be communication, active dialogue, and mutual understanding between the two sides. However, according to numerous international publications and Hungarian sources, there are few opportunities for this (Ceglédi, 2024; Kiddle, 2000; Ríos et al., 2023; Wauters et al., 2017; Wilkin et al., 2009). The family and the school have conflicting views about the meeting itself, as the school believes that parents have no business being at school (at least during school hours), while the parent considers it important to protect their child even within the school walls (Fónai, 2020).

The biggest barrier to communication is not differences in values, but rather the lack of discussion and communication at all about these values (Hofstede, 1984), and thus the nature of mutual misconceptions that undermine relationships. One of the most striking examples of this is the following: While teachers report the opposite, learning as a value is strongly present among Roma parents, according to their own statements. Roma parents recognize the value of education in terms of social mobility, but they are also aware that, due to a lack of desirable economic and cultural capital, as well as their ethnicity, social class, gender, and “undesirable” status, they can only rely on limited resources (Bloomer et al., 2014; Bouillet & Miškeljin, 2017; Boyle et al., 2020; Hamilton, 2018; Luciak & Liegl, 2009; Lukšić, 2019; Nguyen Luu et al., 2019; Pahic et al., 2011; Rosu, 2021).

The differences between school and family culture are not only symbolically in conflict with each other but also manifest themselves in the form of explicitly stated and experienced contradictions. Roma parents, for example, report that they are not welcomed at school (Derrington, 2007; Hamilton, 2018; Lambrev, 2015). Roma parents express that they consider the values represented by school to be dangerous, and they fear everything that is far from the safety of home, whether it be the journey to school or the dangers lurking at school (e.g., sexual abuse, alcohol or drug use) (Derrington, 2007; Hamilton, 2018; Lloyd & Stead, 2002; Nguyen Luu et al., 2019). Parallel to this, there is a growing appreciation of one’s own culture and a desire to protect one’s own values (Bhopal, 2011; Bloomer et al., 2014; Derrington, 2007; Hamilton, 2018; Kiddle, 2000). They fear that their children may lose their cultural identity at school. By sending their children into the non-Roma world, Roma parents risk alienating their children from their traditional beliefs and customs and exposing them to cultural conflict (e.g., Roma children teasing those who befriend non-Roma). They hold to a culture based on the collective, while the school stands as an opposing bastion of individualistic values (Boyle et al., 2020; Derrington, 2007; Hamilton, 2018; Starčević et al., 2016; Wauters et al., 2017).

According to the research conducted by MTA-DE-CSATOKK, Roma parents perceived distance between themselves, teachers, and the class community in terms of educational principles, and felt that their culture was less respected than that of non-Roma parents (Ceglédi, 2024). These results provided further evidence for the above claim in the literature that the school system expects and supports the dominant/privileged culture, which considers the culture of the family of origin to be reprehensible, in need of change, or even deficient (Bernstein, 1996; Boreczky,

2000; Bourdieu, 1978; Flecha et al., 2022; Hafíčová et al., 2020; Reay, 2017; Ríos et al., 2023; Szalai, 2011).

### *2.3 Consequences of cultural mismatch*

It can cause minor or even serious conflicts in students when the two most important socialization agents in their lives (family and school) convey different and often contradictory values and expectations (indirectly or directly). It can also be damaging if one considers some things to be self-evident while the other does not, or even if one punishes lessons learned from the other agent, etc.

This difference can estrange children from school and create hostility between schools and families (Ladson-Billings, 1995), but alienation can also happen in the other direction: the child can become distant from their family. However, choosing between the two sides is not always a definitive process; rather, it is experienced as a constant “search for a place”. They find themselves in a vacuum, floating (Reay, 2017) between the school’s imposition for students to distance themselves from their community of origin on the one hand, and the family or local community’s demand for disassociation from the school on the other. This phenomenon is referred to by various terms in literature. It is called, for example, double bind or distancing (Ceglédi et al., 2024; Nyírő & Durst, 2023; Orsós, 2019), double outsider (Ceglédi, 2018; Ceglédi et al., 2024; Hafíčová et al., 2020), social isolation or separation (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Reay, 2017), leaving cultural identity behind (Gay, 2015; Reay, 2017). All this captures the difficulties of existing between two worlds (Hafíčová et al., 2020), where the identity crisis is exacerbated by constant self-justification, self-hatred, self-questioning, self-esteem issues, lack of self-confidence, and the pressure to conform (Ceglédi et al., 2024; Elekes, 2012; Gay, 2015; Kállai, 2023; Leist-Balogh & Jámbori, 2016; Máté, 2015; Reay, 2017).

Research also points to emotional effects resulting from conflict between the two socialization agents, such as a decline in cultural and psychosocial well-being (Ladson-Billings, 1995), emotional fragmentation (Ceglédi, 2018), emotional difficulties associated with loss of community (Pusztai, 2004), which can result in a so-called schizophrenic life, being caught between two worlds, living two lives, belonging nowhere (Nyírő & Durst, 2023), wearing a mask (Derrington, 2007; Hamilton, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995), or an intermediate state or an unbalanced, split habitus (Ceglédi et al., 2024; Durst & Bereményi, 2021; Nyírő & Durst, 2023; Reay, 2017). Ágnes Lukács describes the experiences of students using the concepts of mental costs and social vacuum (Lukács J., 2018). We can also read about mental illnesses, anxiety, neurosis, pessimism, melancholy, susceptibility to depression, and harmful effects on health (Beck, 1983; Ceglédi, 2018; Ceglédi et al., 2024; Czeizel, 1997; Durkheim, 2000; Subramanyam et al., 2013). Researchers also say that confronting the divide between different social strata has a weakening effect (Ceglédi, 2018; Ceglédi et al., 2024; Durst & Bereményi, 2021; Hafíčová et al., 2020; Kapitány & Kapitány, 2007; Kovács et al., 2022; Reay et al., 2009).

In the “space” between family and school, a positive self-image can help navigate, because it keeps the focus on goals. At the same time, disadvantaged students are more likely to have a negative self-image, also compared to their actual performance (Ceglédi, 2018; Fejes & Józsa, 2005). Impostor syndrome is common among successful adults who started out at a disadvantage, and manifests itself in the fact that they do not attribute their successes to themselves, even though their achievements objectively prove their merits (Durst, Nyíró, & Bereményi, 2023b). This is also related to the self-handicapping strategy described by Jones and Berglas, in which one strives to avoid negative feedback by deliberately making circumstances more difficult so that they can serve as an excuse for possible failure (Nurmi, 1991). All this puts a damper on long-term success in the name of short-term self-confidence.

Individual maladaptive solutions can only be ad hoc symptom treatments, with numerous further consequences (see the emotional cost detailed above), and in the long term they hinder genuine communication between cultures. Such a strategy may be to completely conceal or effectively abandon one’s family culture in the school environment, without which it is impossible to succeed as a minority student in a school based in another culture. Self-exclusion, escape, struggle, and denial of Roma identity or wearing a mask have long-term negative consequences for one’s career (Derrington, 2007; Hamilton, 2018). According to a study, for example, successful African-American students believed that they had to separate themselves from other African-American students in order to prevent their teachers from attributing to them the negative characteristics commonly associated with them (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Researchers also drew attention to this pseudo-solution in the case of Roma students, where identifying with school goals posed a threat to the students’ identity, causing them to separate their self-esteem from their school performance. Thus, they could only maintain their positive self-esteem and identity by not measuring themselves against school standards (Nguyen Luu et al., 2019).

Many researchers seek the answer to why it is necessary to choose between two worlds and why alienation from family values is expected in the functioning of the school system, which expects and supports a dominant culture and considers the culture of the family of origin to be reprehensible and in need of change (Bernstein, 1971; Boreczky, 2000; Bourdieu, 1978; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Luciak & Liegl, 2009; Reay, 2017; Starčević et al., 2016). Mollenhauer shows the price and conflict of alienation in connection with distancing oneself from one’s original social environment (Mollenhauer, 1996). When discussing language code switching, Bernstein talks about the consequence that not only does the language code change, but so do the relationships with relatives and the community (Bernstein, 1971; Ceglédi et al., 2024). Acceptance of school culture and taking learning seriously can also be interpreted by family and neighborhood as a kind of opposition to the community (Beck, 1983), but we can also talk about a sense of betrayal of the community (Reay, 2017). The students’ community may also view the rapprochement with the school culture on

the part of individual students and their families as a threat to the community's existence, either symbolically or in terms of livelihood (Elekes, 2021; Forray R. & Óhidy, 2019; Hafičová et al., 2020; Nyírő & Durst, 2023).

However, according to several studies, these emotional consequences cannot be resolved on an individual level in the case that the education system and society as a whole perpetuate these constraints by offering few opportunities for the two spaces to meet in an acceptable way and for cultures to be recognized (Durst, Nyírő, & Bereményi, 2023a; Lustig & Koester, 2013; Reay, 2017).

The above results confirm that it is worthwhile examining relationships not only between families and schools, but also between families and communities. Schools are not connected to individual families, but to entire communities. When cultures meet, the question is not how a single family and a single teacher can bridge the differences—although this is undoubtedly an important step—but how an entire school staff and an entire community relate to each other. For example, if a single family approaches the school world, it may result in the community rejecting the entire family. The Roma community often views taking school seriously as pretending to be something they are not, which to the community is reprehensible. It may also result in intra-cultural disapproval, with the families concerned ending up on the periphery of both their old community and their new target community (e.g., parents from majority groups in school) (Derrington, 2005; Hamilton, 2018).

Marginalization can affect teachers as well within their own community. If a single teacher or support professional represents values that promote the rapprochement of cultures, they may also face disapproval and rejection from the school community (Lampert et al., 2016; Reay, 2017).

The consequences of the differences arising from the clash between school and family cultures therefore have an overall impact on students, families, teachers, schools and, in the long term, society as a whole. Society loses out from the conflicts between family and school cultures because these fundamentally undermine the functionality of schools and thus the development of children's abilities (Ceglédi et al., 2020). Not only will children's lives become aimless and vulnerable, but they will also be less able to contribute to society as potential workers and responsible citizens (Polónyi, 2016).

Nevertheless, experts and scholars not only present the problem, but also offer solutions. Such solutions include, for example, the development of mentoring, support for individual and community empowerment, and the joint preservation of (at least) two identities, which can enrich each other through mutual support. This also includes the targeted development of teacher training and the processing and support of life experience values in the case of resilient Roma and non-Roma teachers (Boreczky, 2000; Boros et al., 2023; Ceglédi, 2018; Ceglédi et al., 2018, 2024; Durst, Nyírő, & Bereményi, 2023b, 2023a; Elekes, 2021; Forray R. & Óhidy, 2019; Godó et al., 2020; Hafičová et al., 2020; Kállai, 2023; Kovács et al., 2022; Varga, 2019).

The CRP concept and practice offers a way to move beyond the deficit model and make a decisive shift towards solutions, which may also mean bringing the two

arenas closer together (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Valencia, 2010).

### **3. Response to consequences: Culturally relevant pedagogy as a model for intercultural communication**

CRP is known by several terms in international literature. In this study, we use the term culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP). Literature understands CRP as a comprehensive pedagogical concept that views the culture and learning styles of students and families as resources and operates in an educational environment and classroom atmosphere that is consistent and in harmony with that culture. The ultimate goal of CRP is to ensure that everyone experiences equal opportunities (Boreczky, 2000; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Chang & Viesca, 2022; Gay, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Pusztai & Inántszy-Pap, 2016).

#### *3.1 A brief overview of the terminology of culturally relevant pedagogy*

The most cited author of the CRP concept, Gloria Ladson-Billings, arrived at the anthropologically rooted concept by describing the practices of eight teachers who successfully taught African-American students (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

The concept of CRP exists alongside many other concepts, with which there are overlaps, correlations and differences (Table 2) (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Chang & Viesca, 2022). A concept quite close to CRP is culturally responsive teaching (CRT) (Gay, 2015), which is also often referred to synonymously with CRP. “CRT aims not only to transfer mainstream knowledge through other techniques, but also to transform the approach, knowledge base and approaches to curriculum and instruction in the traditional classroom” (Vavrus, 2008, p. 49). The two concepts have common roots, and CRT advocates refer to CRP as a fundamental source of inspiration and build on it heavily in the presentation of their methods. The difference lies in the fact that CRT is more a collection of practical pedagogical tools, whereas CRP is a more comprehensive, self-declared theoretical concept.

Critics of the movement stress that CRT and CRP are too tool- and school-centered, and do not consider – as the author interprets – institutional-level oppression and prejudice. Instead, they propose the concept of ‘culturally sustaining pedagogy’ (CSP), which envisages linguistic and cultural pluralism embedded in the basic democratic functioning of the school and promises to sustain the concept in the longer term (Chang & Viesca, 2022; Paris, 2012). This can also be interpreted as a “change of gear” in relation to CRP because, as Paris writes, CRP is not sufficient to ensure that a multi-ethnic and multilingual society is perceived and maintained as a value, and that social justice and equality are achieved (Paris, 2012).

The CRP and the CSP are therefore not competing concepts, as their objectives and underlying principles are the same (Chang & Viesca, 2022). There is a difference in the means to an end and the intensity of intervention, but this is not a contradiction, but rather a complementary relationship. Furthermore, CRP is

not only focused on classroom practice, nor is it only a method. CRP is a culturally focused theory of pedagogy that informs teacher education and school practice in a comprehensive way (Chang & Viesca, 2022; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

**Table 2** Conceptual links of CRP in international literature

Abbreviation	Term	Definition	Source
–	culturally appropriate/ congruent/ compatible pedagogy	Students’ culture must be understood but adapted to the mainstream culture.	Au & Jordan, 1981; Singer, 1988; Jordan, 1985; Vogt et al., 1987 (cited in Ladson-Billings, 1995)
<b>CRT</b>	culturally responsive teaching	A collection of practical pedagogical tools. Builds on students’ cultural knowledge. Culturally based adaptation of curriculum and teaching strategies.	Gay, 2015
<b>CRP</b>	culturally relevant pedagogy	A comprehensive theoretical pedagogical concept. Supports academic achievement, reinforces cultural identity, and develops critical awareness of social injustice.	Ladson-Billings, 1995
<b>CSP</b>	culturally sustaining pedagogy	Envisions linguistic and cultural pluralism as embedded in the democratic functioning of schools and promises the long-term sustainability of this approach.	Paris, 2012

*Source: own editing based on above cited literature*

### 3.2 The three criteria for CRP

Ladson-Billings broadened the concept of pedagogy beyond strictly psychological models and defined three criteria for CRP: 1) Promoting student academic progress, based on a belief in students’ teachability. 2) Cultivating and supporting cultural competence, which means accepting the learner’s own identity and integrating the learner’s culture into learning. 3) Developing critical view in the areas of social justice and equality through learning about other cultures (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

### 3.2.1. Belief in the teachability of learners

In CRP, learners learn basic skills and knowledge according to the logic of their own culture. In this way, the school actors help to create meaning and understanding of the world, to develop a learner's role and status as a learner, to strengthen identity, by building on and building on the awareness of the culture of the learners and their families (Boreczky, 2000; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Gay, 2015; Lampert et al., 2016).

In Ladson-Billings' research on successful educators of African American students, educators “\* believed that all the students were capable of academic success, \* saw their pedagogy as art-unpredictable, always in the process of becoming, \* saw themselves as members of the community, saw teaching as a way to give back to the community, \* believed in a Freirean notion of ‘teaching as mining’ (1974, p. 76) or pulling knowledge out” (Ladson-Billings, 1995:478–479). Teachers never assigned adjectives highlighting shortcomings to students when talking about them or with them, but they reflexively confronted the shortcomings of their own teaching methods (Ladson-Billings, 1995:478–479).

Teachers are also important role models in children's lives, whether in terms of ethnicity or social class (Boreczky, 2000; Lampert et al., 2016). An internationally recognized element of CRP is the presence in the school of teachers or other school staff from the same social, ethnic or even religious background as the pupils (Babic et al., 2018; Boreczky, 2000; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Everington, 2014; Khalfauoui et al., 2020; Luciak & Liegl, 2009; Rosinský et al., 2009; Salinas, 2002; Starčević et al., 2016). In the case of schools in Hungary, this may mean, among other things, that Roma teachers (or other occupations) work in schools with Roma pupils.

Teachers' thinking about knowledge also shows specific features in CRP. “\* Knowledge is not static; it is shared, recycled, and constructed. \* Knowledge must be viewed critically. \* Teachers must be passionate about knowledge and learning. \* Teachers must scaffold, or build bridges, to facilitate learning. \* Assessment must be multifaceted, incorporating multiple forms of excellence” (Ladson-Billings, 1995:481).

Children typically feel comfortable and learn well with teachers who can provide some continuity between the family and the school world (Boreczky, 2000; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). The advantage of the CRP is that the external reality conveyed by the families and the school is close or even identical (Boreczky, 2000). This can also manifest itself in spatial solutions. A practice of this in Hungary is, a sacramental space was used as a teaching environment, such as a chapel, where learning is linked to the typical spaces of faith and religious community (Pusztai & Inántsý-Pap, 2016).

### 3.2.2. Building on the student's culture

An important element of CRP is trust and mutual respect between the student and the teacher, based on building a relationship between the school and the family culture (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Chang & Viesca, 2022; Gay, 2015; Pusztai & Inántsý-Pap, 2016). Pupils do not have to choose between their own culture and that of the school, and do not have to hide or give up their own culture in exchange for

success at school, but can even see their own cultural heritage as a value (Chang & Viesca, 2022; Gay, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995). This is not to say that students cannot learn about cultures different from their own, rather, that they can. It is precisely the reinforcement provided by CRP, and the new knowledge and skills that they will build on, that will contribute to their ability to be ‘cultural border crossers’ in several worlds (Boreczky, 2000; Gay, 2015).

In practice, this is achieved, for example, by building on personal stories or community resources, or by offering authentic literary works, even by teaching literature through rap lyrics (Gay, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995). For example, for native Hawaiian students, the so-called talk-story is used, where several speakers share their stories cooperatively at the same time (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In another example, students’ peer leadership skills were integrated into classroom and school leadership. The influence and “cool” reputation of the loud African American boys was used by the teacher, in addition to discipline, to make learning popular and “cool” (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Moreover, community values are a priority in CRP. Children bring their culturally grounded habits of action, vision and knowledge to school. The school sees these as values and reflects this back to families and students. This reinforces knowledge and values which can be further built upon in the classroom. Ultimately, this promotes student success (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011).

Successful CRP advocates place – particular emphasis on the value of social relationships. They maintain smooth student-teacher connections. No student is left out of the teacher-student relationship, the connection is visible to all. However, the relationships are not teacher centered. Care is taken to build a community of learners. They focus on cooperation rather than competition, encourage learning together and practice taking responsibility for each other in the learning process (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1995). For example, one teacher introduced a so-called “buddy system”. Pairs of student “buddies” checked each other’s homework and classwork and helped one another in making up for absences. This helped to raise awareness that success and failure are shared. They are careful not to single out any one pupil all the time, praise is given at the class and individual level proportionally. Peer-to-peer, teacher-student relationships are also indicated, for example, students may be placed in the role of teacher or expert. For instance, a teacher compiled a list of ‘classroom experts’ who were asked to give a presentation (e.g. on rap, gospel singing, cooking, hair braiding, reading, writing, babysitting, mathematics, baseball) (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

For Roma pupils, the importance of human relations, thinking in community, respect for community roles, free creativity, love of music and craft traditions, arts and movement are values that schools can and should implement (e.g. in addition to competition and individualized tasks and assessments). Triological learning, culturally relevant curricula, recognition of home learning, learning supported by ICT tools, support for musical and visual creativity, singing songs with Roma words together have proven to be good practices. Specific examples include the Respect for Diversity

and Peace Building manual or the pedagogy of Miklós Sója from Hodász (Bouillet & Miškeljin, 2017; Hamilton, 2018; Kárpáti et al., 2014; L. Ritók, 2009; Luciak & Liegl, 2009; Pusztai & Inántsý-Pap, 2016).

Importantly, CRP does not mask lower expectations, but deliberately builds on high expectations (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Gay, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Pusztai & Inántsý-Pap, 2016).

### 3.2.3. Mutual acceptance of cultures through intercultural communication

An essential method is the use of “mirrors”, i.e. the integration of content into the curriculum that mirrors and reflects the learners’ own culture, identity or language. The similarity experienced in the curriculum increases the sense of belonging to the community and strengthens self-confidence and cultural identity. In addition to mirroring, “windows” are an important method for learning about other cultures and groups. This contributes both directly and indirectly to understanding different perspectives and opinions, developing empathy, and increasing critical awareness (Chang & Viesca, 2022; Gay, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Together, the two methods (described by the symbol “mirrors and windows”) enable learners to be able to embrace other cultures in addition to their own (Gay, 2015).

In traditional education, the “windows” method is often the only one, so that the exposure to other cultures, and even the learning about diverse cultures, is reduced to the imposition of a single dominant/privileged culture. However, CRP achieves what education so often fails to do: students accept and value both their own culture and that of the society (including their own and other cultures) that the country considers dominant and/or privileged (Gay, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995). This will also develop intercultural communication (Lustig & Koester, 2013).

## 4. Critique

Critics of CRP challenge its positions on social justice, equity, and social critique. According to critics, developing students’ critical perspectives directly may aim to overthrow the existing social order and can lead to radicalization. Other sources warn that radical (or what is seen as such in the political field) social criticism pedagogies – including CRP – can provoke political backlashes that ultimately harm the cause of equity, and that misinterpreting or simplifying CRP can also have the opposite effect (Evans et al., 2020; Lynch, 2006; Sleeter, 2001). According to Hirsch, the key to equal opportunities is access to a uniform basic literacy rather than culturally diverse knowledge content. The author sees the reduction of social gaps in providing everyone with the same knowledge base (Hirsch, 1996).

Another argument of those who formulate criticism against CRP is that there may be many elements of the students’ culture that conflict with the school’s core values, which is why they oppose their introduction into the school. Although CRP goes beyond deficit models and does not differentiate between the values of cultures, the authors address the issue of what is in the students’ family culture that can be

incorporated into school practice. Two basic principles must prevail in deciding this. On the one hand, compatibility with fundamental social values, and on the other hand, compliance with the interests of the student. Ladson-Billings draws attention to the fact that not all cultural elements can be automatically integrated into pedagogy. CRP is therefore not characterized by uncritical acceptance, but by conscious selection. It is important that students can interpret and critically examine those elements of their own culture that are contrary to the above. Automatic internalization is also prevented by the critical approach that is characteristic of CRP, which can be based on the knowledge of multiple cultures (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

## **5. Summary**

Many studies conclude that CRP clearly brings us closer to a solution to help students from diverse backgrounds where solutions based on dominant or privileged culture and deficit-based thinking have failed. For example, it improves their academic performance, boosts their confidence for the future, increases their motivation, and builds out teacher-student relationships (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Bernstein, 1996; Boreczky, 2000; Bouillet & Miškeljin, 2017; Bourdieu, 1978; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Chang & Viesca, 2022; Hamilton, 2018; Kárpáti et al., 2014; L. Ritók, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Luciak & Liegl, 2009; Pusztai & Inántsý-Pap, 2016; Valencia, 2010)

Overall, bridging the gap between family and school is essential to support students' school careers. The CRP concept outlined here provides a theoretical and practical framework. It can also help intercultural communication, as it resonates with many of its components. For example, symbols such as language or cultural understanding are highlighted. It allows for an interpretative process in which participants can create shared meanings. Mutual respect can also develop more easily in such a pedagogical atmosphere. And finally, it takes into account the cultural context, the specificities of the cultural environment (Lustig & Koester, 2013).

The most important conclusion of the study is that intercultural communication is of fundamental importance in the encounter between cultures and in bringing closer together the two most important agents of socialization in students' lives: the family and the school.

## **Acknowledgement**

The research on which this paper is based has been implemented by the MTA-DE-Parent-Teacher Cooperation Research Group (University of Debrecen, Faculty of Humanities) and with the support provided by the Research Programme for Public Education Development of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. This paper was supported by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

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Originally from California, USA, Johnathan Keegan Dabney has cultivated a deep academic and personal interest in intercultural communication through music. Raised in a region historically inhabited by the Chumash people, he developed an early awareness of indigenous cultures, which fostered his enduring commitment to cultural understanding. His international experience includes volunteer work with Nepalese and Tibetan children in Nepal, as well as extensive travel throughout Asia, Europe, and North America. He pursued all three of his higher education degrees in Hungary, where he currently resides. He works as both an English and music educator, directing a student music ensemble that reflects his interdisciplinary approach to teaching. His fluency in English and Hungarian, along with knowledge in Spanish, Russian, and Hebrew, informs his academic interest in the ways language can both connect and divide. These experiences have led him to explore the unique communicative potential of music as a cross-cultural medium. His research focuses on music as a form of intercultural dialogue—a nonverbal mode of communication capable of bridging linguistic and cultural boundaries. He has also been working as a native proof reader for the international Central European Journal for Educational Research.

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