

EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP: THEORY AND TEACHING
PRACTICE

Session 7C: ENGLISH LANGUAGE - 3

Title: **Developing intercultural competence with secondary school learners
of English**

Evdokia Karavas

Introduction: Understanding the teenage language learner

Until recently, it was believed that the majority of brain development happens in childhood. We now know that the changes that occur in the brain during the teenage years are dramatic. Research over the past decade has shown that the structure and function of the brain continue to develop significantly during the adolescent years. Researchers at the University of Oregon used fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) to identify the parts of the brain that develop later in life. They found that, for teenagers, the prefrontal cortex—the part of the brain responsible for decision making, impulse control, and prioritization—continues to build over time and functions differently than in the brains of adults (see *The science of Adolescent Learning*). Adolescence is also a critical time for shaping identity. For these reasons, high school is a critical time to engage students in new, creative ways of learning and doing.

In view of the above, teachers should aim for a variety of instructional methods which encourage students to think for themselves. In so doing, teachers must keep in mind that teenagers

- want to be treated with respect
- have their own culture (teachers should be well aware of their interests and trends)
- can be quite emotional
- need motivation (they always have an opinion on subjects that affect their lives so teachers should challenge them by choosing activities and materials that make them think and want to express themselves through the foreign language)
- mostly care about themselves (they think that nobody understands them)



- experience
 - Physical changes (sudden changes make them sensitive to the way they look and the way other people see them)
 - Social changes (they experience changes in the way adults treat them - give them responsibility - they want to belong)
- have developed "Thinking skills" (they can engage in group activities, they start analyzing what they see, they start creating a world system away from the one their parents have created, etc)

In addition, based on the stage of their brain development, adolescents are more likely to:

- act on impulse
- misread or misinterpret social cues and emotions
- get into accidents of all kinds
- get involved in fights
- engage in dangerous or risky behavior

Adolescents are less likely to:

- think before they act
- pause to consider the consequences of their actions
- change their dangerous or inappropriate behaviors

(The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2020)

Keeping teenagers' brains active will help develop and strengthen the neural pathways that are vital for long-term learning. Two factors strongly influence whether the brain pays attention to a piece of information: a) If the information has meaning and b) if the information causes an emotional response. Meaning and emotion are crucial elements to grab the brain's attention and thereby aid learning. An effective strategy that allows teenagers to work with larger and larger amounts of information is to show them how the information fits together. The addition of emotion can help students remember because emotion drives attention and attention drives learning.

Developing intercultural competence with teenage learners

Adolescence is an important period for ethnic identity development. It is during this period that teenagers establish the distinction between self and the other. Studies conducted with secondary school learners suggest that adolescents can achieve high levels of intercultural competence (Schwarzenthal et al 2017).

Ethnic identity development involves two distinct processes of *commitment* (i.e., having a strong sense of belonging to one's ethnic group) and *exploration*

(i.e., actively seeking information and experiences about one's heritage culture). Studies of interventions designed to teach intercultural competence suggest that engaging in intercultural contact (learning about others) and reflecting on your own cultural heritage (learning about yourself) are complementary prerequisites for intercultural understanding and competence (Chao, Okazaki, & Hong, 2011). It has been found that if 11 to 18-year-old students actively explore their own cultural identities and heritage, this exploration can also contribute to their levels of intercultural competence over and above the contribution that is made by their contact with people from other cultural backgrounds (Schwarzenthal, Juang, Schachner, van de Vijver, & Handrick, 2017). Thus, encouraging students to reflect critically on their intercultural experience and encouraging them to explore their own cultural identities and heritage are two important additional strategies that can be used for building their intercultural competence.

Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) define intercultural teaching and learning as “a cycle of interconnected processes in which the learner engages in experiences of languages, cultures and their relationship” (p. 59). They further explain that the cycle covers four processes: noticing, comparing, reflecting, and interacting. According to Liddicoat and Scarino, noticing is a fundamental activity that will stimulate students to examine something new and attempt to understand what it is under the teachers’ guidance. The process of comparing can inspire students to compare and contrast their home culture and other cultures. The act of reflection enables students to understand the new linguistic and cultural knowledge. Interaction provides students opportunities to negotiate meanings and understand diverse cultural phenomena from different perspectives.

Other authors (Huber and Reynolds 2014; Barrett 2018) have proposed a variety of activities and methodologies which can facilitate the development of intercultural competence with adolescent learners. These include:

encouraging intercultural friendships: It is now well established that encouraging students to form intercultural friendships is an effective method for reducing intercultural prejudice

organizing periods of study abroad: students can encounter people from other cultural groups in various other ways. One way is to spend a period of time studying abroad



arranging for students to have Internet-based intercultural contact: The Internet provides students with an almost unlimited opportunity to access information about other cultures, to communicate with students from those cultures, and to exchange views and perspectives with diverse people whom they might otherwise never meet or interact with in person. The teacher can set up collaborative projects with students from different countries using videoconferencing tools and social media platforms in which students present themselves, interview each other, discuss issues, and complete tasks designed by their teachers. If communication becomes difficult or breaks down, there is the opportunity for discussions with the teacher about what went wrong, what unintended messages might have damaged the communication, and how future communications can be conducted in a more interculturally sensitive manner. Online activities using social media could therefore enable students to develop, inter alia, openness, listening skills, perspective-taking skills, tolerance of ambiguity, respect for others, critical thinking skills, communication skills, cooperation skills, and critical understanding of culture and cultures.

setting up school-community links and partnerships : schools can create opportunities for students to experience contact with members of other cultural groups, by forming educational links and partnerships with organizations and individuals in their local community. For example, individuals with other cultural affiliations can be invited to the school to work with or talk to students in the classroom; students can also interview visitors using questions prepared in advance with the teacher. In addition, students can visit community organizations and places of worship in their neighborhood, and they can also interview community members in their own environments. Finally, students can be required to make observations and reflect critically on their own responses to meeting people who have different cultural affiliations from themselves.

using cooperative learning: When students from different cultural groups work together in class they can develop intercultural friendships, they more easily accept cultural differences and appreciate the strengths of diverse people and they can also develop empathy and communication skills. Cooperative learning however does not simply mean students working together in pairs or small groups in an unstructured manner. Instead, it involves students working together on tasks that have some specific cooperative features built into their structure. According to Johnson and Johnson (2009) these features include:



- a) Positive interdependence: students need to perceive that they are linked with other group members in such a way that they cannot succeed in achieving the common group goal unless they work together on the given task.
- b) Individual accountability: the performance of each individual student needs to be regularly assessed and the results given back both to the group and the individual.
- c) Promotive interaction: students need to help, share, and encourage each other's efforts to complete the tasks and achieve the group goals.
- d) Appropriate use of social skills: students need to be taught the social skills that are required for high-quality cooperation (e.g., decision-making, trust-building, communication, and conflict-management skills) and be motivated to use these skills (note that some of these skills are components of intercultural competence).
- e) Group processing: groups need to reflect periodically on how well they are functioning and how they might improve the working relationships between the group members

Using project based learning: Project-based learning supports students in working on open-ended projects or problems. Learning is student-centered with the teacher as the facilitator. Students usually work in cooperative groups for extended periods of time, seeking multiple sources of information and creating authentic products. Projects typically require the student to undertake planning and design work, decision-making, investigative activities, and problem solving as part of the project. Critical self reflection on the process of conducting the project, and particularly on the learning process, is usually an integral component of a project, with evaluations of learning taking place throughout the progress of the project. Projects based on group work at both primary and secondary school level have been found to be effective in building various aspects of students' intercultural competence, including linguistic and communicative skills, listening skills, perspective-taking skills, and respect for others.

Using Role plays, simulations and drama activities The benefits of role plays, simulations and drama for the development of intercultural competence are numerous. Learners experience what it is like to be different, to be looked on strangely, to be criticised or even excluded. Such activities can help to



develop attitudes of openness, curiosity and respect, as well as a willingness to empathise and suspend judgment. Students are also encouraged to develop skills of observation and interpretation, skills for learning about one's own culture and discovering others, as well as skills of adapting and empathy

Theatre, poetry and creative writing: Reading plays in literature or foreign language classes helps students learn from and through theatre in many different ways. Staging theatrical works takes this learning even further as acting out enables people to explore and reflect on experiences that they would probably never encounter otherwise. Many short stories and poems also lend themselves well to the development of intercultural competence. They can be read, enjoyed, discussed, illustrated with drawings, retold or even – with a little bit of imagination and creative writing skills – rewritten from the learners' own perspectives

Use of films and texts in general can be a key to self-reflection and to openness to explore other places as well as conflicts and tensions related to diversity, either in the past or present, in contexts which may never be physically accessible to learners. With regard to films and texts teachers may purposely select films, film scenes or extracts from written sources to discuss where diversity becomes crucial, either by asking learners to discuss their view of the events or to take the perspective of and empathise with the people involved in a given scene or passage. These discussions may focus especially on why they think these people talk to each other but fail to really communicate, whether intercultural competence is manifested and whether and why cultural diversity fuels tension and conflict in the selected extracts. which could involve asking students to explain their own judgments or to take the perspective of characters that have been depicted, this type of activity can be used to build knowledge and understanding of people from diverse cultural backgrounds, to stimulate critical reflection on cultural issues, and to enhance openness, empathy, respect, critical thinking skills, and the valuing of human dignity, human rights, and cultural diversity.

Using Ethnographic tasks: Ethnographic tasks involve learners in going outside to explore life in the real world in order to bring back experience and knowledge that they can compare, analyse and reflect on – a process which can also promote self-discovery and self-reflection. Learners in a class or participants in non-formal training sessions can be assisted in compiling an observation grid to explore how people greet each other, how long they wait in



certain situations, what verbal and non-verbal means they use to express respect, gratitude, anger or any other emotions. Another task could be for them to interview people to find out how people in a certain neighbourhood live, think or relate to specific questions.

Developing students' cross linguistic mediation skills

Throughout Europe, the interest in promoting “plurilingualism” for European unity as “the ability to use several languages to varying degrees and for distinct purposes” (Council of Europe, 2000) has fuelled the interest in mediation. With roots in sociocultural theory, mediation is a form of purposeful social practice, which occupies “an important place in the normal linguistic functioning of our societies” (p. CEFR 2001 14). The mediator is a “social agent who creates bridges and helps to construct or convey meaning, sometimes within the same language, sometimes from one language to another (cross-linguistic mediation)” (Council of Europe, 2018: 103). Mediation is a dynamic multilingual practice which reflects the fluidity with which individuals use their linguistic resources and cultural knowledge to interpret, negotiate and make meaning (see Garcia 2009).

More specifically, according to Dendrinos (2013) who has been a major proponent for the inclusion of mediation in school EFL textbooks (Dendrinos 1992) and later in the KPG exams, mediation consists of extracting meaning from texts (visual and/or verbal) in one language (Greek) and relaying it in another in order to facilitate communication. It involves providing information from a source text that an interlocutor has no access to or explaining a message contained in a text to someone who does not understand it (see Dendrinos 2006, 2007). The mediator acts as a go between, a facilitator of communication, a meaning maker, an intermediary between two or more interlocutors who are experiencing a communication gap or a communication breakdown and undertakes the task of reconciliation or compromise of meanings. As such, the mediator creates meaning for someone who is unable to understand a text in one language and with whom he/she may or may not share the same cultural or social experiences. As a result, unlike interpreters and translators whose main task is to render the meanings of a text as closely to the original as possible, the mediator is has the right to produce his/her own text (which may not be the same as the original in terms of form and maybe loosely connected to the meanings of the original) and to change the discourse, genre or register of the original text provided that this helps the interlocutor better understand the meanings of a text. The mediator’s responsibility is to act a linguistic and cultural bridge between individuals who do not share the same language, actively participating and interfering in the communicative event, choosing which meanings to extract from a source text, through what linguistic means, and



shaping new meanings in the target language in order to facilitate communication and understanding between them (Stathopoulou 2016).

The assessment of mediation performance is a unique characteristic of the KPG exams and Greece and Germany are the only two European countries which have included the assessment of cross linguistic mediation in their examinations soon after the publication of the CEFR (2001). The Integrated Foreign Language Curriculum also contains **mediation descriptors**, which are used within a foreign language learning context for educational rather than for testing purposes. Below are examples of mediation descriptors of the IFLC for the B1, B2 and C1 level.

B1 level can-do statements		B2 level can-do statements		C1 level can-do statements
Written mediation	Oral mediation	Written mediation	Oral mediation	Written mediation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CAN complete an incomplete text in the TL using ideas / content from one or more (short) source texts • compose a short text in the target language which relays the general or specific information from one or more short Greek texts on familiar issues regularly encountered 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CAN pose questions in the TL about a text in L1 • summarise the main points of a familiar topic involving everyday actions and activities, professional life, education and free time, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CAN respond in the TL to questions regarding the purpose for which a source text on everyday matters has been written, who the addressee is, or what the writer's attitude/opinion on this matter is • convey the main idea of a written Greek text 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CAN use information from (oral or written texts) on everyday social issues in order to interact with his/her interlocutor (initiating and sustaining an exchange). • convey the main idea of a Greek text 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CAN relay in the TL what is articulated in a source text dealing with a social or technical issue, supplementing TL output with his/her opinion on this issue, evaluative comments, or personal account of events



in various
social
contexts.

The KPG exams in the speaking and writing test presuppose and involve the use of the candidates' common language – which is Greek since it addresses learners living and working in Greece. The KPG candidate is required to prove that s/he is able to act as mediator and can produce written or oral discourse in the foreign language by relaying information from a Greek written text

Mediation tasks in the KPG exams are cognitively and linguistically challenging and usually demand degrees of literacy in both languages as well as various types of competences and skills. Apart from requiring on the spot decisions as to what the communication problem is and what type of intervention is required depending on the interlocutor's needs and existing cultural knowledge, what pieces of information need to be relayed and in what form and manner, mediation tasks require the following range of competences and skills:

Sociocultural awareness, which includes lifeworld knowledge, knowledge of how two languages operate at the level of discourse and genre, as well as rules of text and sentence grammar and of the grammar of visual design

Literacies, i.e. school literacy, social literacy and practical literacy.



Competencies, i.e. linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence.

Cognitive skills to read between the lines, select pertinent information, retain and recall information for use in a new context, combine prior knowledge and experience with new information, combine information from a variety of source texts, solve a problem, a mystery, a query, predict, guess, foresee, infer, make a hypothesis, come to a conclusion.

Social skills to recognize the interlocutor's communicative needs and be able to facilitate the process of communication, negotiate information by adjusting effectiveness, efficiency and relevance to the context of situation


(Dendrinos 2006, 2013)

Interlinguistic mediation (or cross linguistic mediation) is assessed in the writing (module 2) and speaking test (module 4) of the KPG exams at B and C levels. Below are some examples of mediation tasks taken from the KPG exams

Examples:

You are the person who found the kitten in the photo and you're excited. Using information from the small ad below, write an **email message** (about 80 words) **about this** to your Dutch friend Hanna, who has a cat too. Sign as Jean (not with your real name).

ΒΡΕΘΗΚΕ ΓΑΤΑΚΙ



Βρήκα αυτή την πανέμορφη γατούλα στις 30 Απριλίου και τη φιλοξενώ. Τη βρήκα στο πάρκο κοντά στο σπίτι μου, λίγο φοβισμένη. Κρύωνε. Δεν είχε microchip. Είναι μόλις 2,5 μηνών και παιχνιδιάρικη. Την ονόμασα Kitty. Χτες την πήγα για να την εξετάσει ο κτηνίατρος και τη βρήκε υγιέστατη. Αν κάποιος την έχασε να μου γράψει στην η-διεύθυνση (info@world.gr) και θα του δώσω οδηγίες να έρθει να την παραλάβει. Αν όμως την έδωξε, ευχαρίστως θα την κρατήσω. Λίγες μέρες μόνο την έχω και ήδη την αγάπησα.

The task: Imagine that I am your English friend who heard about the Greek actress Efi Papatheodorou on BBC. I'm wondering who she is. Use the information from the text and tell me



a few things about her.

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