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INTEGRATING SOCIO-CULTURAL COMPETENCE INTO TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: A US HIGHER EDUCATION PERSPECTIVE

The author of the article explores the theoretical foundations and practical strategies for integrating sociocultural competence (SCC) into ESL instruction, primarily based on the US higher education experience. She points out the shift from linguistic accuracy to sociocultural appropriateness. It is especially relevant for Ukrainian higher education amidst contemporary societal shifts. The study also systematizes a comprehensive pedagogical framework categorized into four groups: cognitive-comparative analysis, interactive-modeling tasks, project-based research methods, and direct cross-cultural interaction. Drawing on the works of leading Ukrainian and foreign scholars, the research identifies SCC as an important prerequisite for academic success and social integration. The author concludes that the key to promoting genuine intercultural fluency lies in the synergistic combination of the mentioned methods, transforming the language classroom into a space for career development and global advocacy.

Key words: sociocultural competence, ESL pedagogy, higher education, intercultural competence, teaching methodology, pedagogical adaptation.

Ольга ЖУПАНИК

ВПРОВАДЖЕННЯ СОЦІОКУЛЬТУРНОЇ КОМПЕТЕНТНОСТІ У ВИКЛАДАННЯ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ ЯК ДРУГОЇ: ПЕРСПЕКТИВИ ВИЩОЇ ОСВІТИ У США

Автор досліджує теоретичні засади та практичні стратегії інтеграції соціокультурної компетентності (СКК) у викладання англійської мови як іноземної на основі досвіду вищої освіти США. У ній підкреслюється перехід від «лінгвістичної точності» до «соціокультурної доречності». Це є особливо актуальним для українських ЗВО в умовах сучасних суспільних змін. Дослідження систематизує комплексну педагогічну структуру, розділену на чотири основні групи: когнітивно-порівняльний аналіз, завдання з інтерактивного моделювання, проектні методи дослідження та пряма міжкультурна взаємодія. Опираючись на роботи видатних українських та зарубіжних вчених, дослідження визначає СКК як важливу передумову академічного успіху та соціальної інтеграції. Автор робить висновок, що ключ до розвитку справжньої міжкультурної компетентності полягає у поєднанні описаних методів, що перетворює мовну аудиторію на простір для професійного зростання та глобальної адвокації.

Ключові слова: соціокультурна компетентність, викладання англійської як іноземної мови, вища освіта, міжкультурна компетентність, методика викладання, педагогічна адаптація.

Relevance of the Topic. In contemporary higher education, SCC has emerged as one of the most essential skills for student success.

Particularly within the diverse, multicultural environments of US universities, the ability to understand complex social dynamics, interpret

varied perspectives, and adapt to unspoken academic norms is no longer a secondary soft skill; it is a fundamental prerequisite for both academic achievement and social integration. These complex sociocultural negotiations are primarily mediated through communication, that is why the traditional paradigm of treating language learning merely as the mechanical acquisition of grammar and vocabulary is profoundly insufficient. We should prepare students for this reality by integrating sociocultural components directly into English classroom. It is essential to transform the language classroom into a key training ground for intercultural fluency.

By teaching the cultural pragmatics, power dynamics, and “hidden curriculum” embedded within the language, educators ensure that students do not just learn how to speak English accurately, but how to use it strategically to advocate for themselves, develop connections, and thrive in high-stakes environments [25].

While this integration is a well-established priority in the US context, it has now become an urgent necessity within Ukrainian higher education institutions. Driven by profound societal shifts—specifically the radical alteration of Ukraine’s social environment following Russia’s full-scale invasion—the teaching of English, particularly for future educators, must evolve to meet new realities.

The focus on the discussed topic is driven by specific pedagogical and cultural shifts in US higher education, notably:

1. *The urgent pedagogical transition.* The critical need to elevate English language instruction—especially in the preparation of future educators—beyond traditional linguistic frameworks and toward deep intercultural fluency.

2. *The response to radical societal shifts.* The necessity of equipping teachers with the sociocultural tools required to effectively manage, teach, and support the diverse and dynamically changing student populations resulting from the war and internal displacement.

3. *The transferability of US diversity models.* The high practical value of analyzing established US higher education frameworks

(such as inclusive pedagogy, equity, and social sensitivity) to adapt them for rebuilding social cohesion and safe learning environments in Ukrainian universities.

4. *The demand for cross-cultural advocacy.* The requirement for Ukrainian students and professionals to master Western sociocultural pragmatics—such as tone, context, and indirect communication—to effectively represent, defend, and integrate Ukrainian interests on the global academic and professional stage.

Therefore, **the aim of this study** is to provide a theoretical foundation for, and to conduct a comprehensive analysis and systematization of, contemporary approaches to integrating the sociocultural component into the teaching of English in US higher education institutions, as well as to identify the prospects for adapting this experience to the Ukrainian educational context.

Presentation of the Main Material. The development of SCC in higher education has been extensively examined by both Ukrainian and international scholars. Foundational research by international theorists (e.g., Hymes, Canale, Swain, Hofstede) established SCC as an important theoretical construct of communication and intercultural interaction. Subsequent studies contextualized these principles within the university environment, emphasizing internationalization, academic mobility, and critical cultural awareness (e.g., Byram, Deardorff, Kramersch).

Within the Ukrainian academic sphere, research spans the philosophical and psychological dimensions of personal development (e.g., Bekh, Kremen, Andrushchenko) to practical pedagogical models for higher education institutions (e.g., Zakiryana, Zhukova). Across this literature, SCC is universally recognized as important to student adaptation, particularly in foreign language acquisition. Viewing language as a tool for genuine intercultural dialogue rather than an isolated system of rules, scholars emphasize SCC as a fundamental prerequisite for mastering English. Consequently, the theoretical foundations laid by the pioneers of Communicative Language Teaching (e.g., Byram, Kramersch, Savignon) have been widely adapted by Ukrainian researchers (e.g.,

Nikolaieva, Tarnopolsky, Borisko) to integrate sociocultural components into domestic professional training and foreign-language methodology.

We can conclude that the issue of sociocultural factors is quite widespread in the methodological field. That is why we should define what sociocultural competence is. This phenomenon is a multidimensional construct that integrates language knowledge with a deep understanding of the national and cultural characteristics, social norms and value systems of the society whose language is being studied. This competence is not a static body of facts but is dynamically expressed through a continuous process of personal adaptation to new communication conditions, the ability to flexibly adjust one's behavior depending on the cultural context, and the ability to find common ground with people of different worldviews in a wide variety of life situations. The main approaches to interpreting the concept of sociocultural competence are summarized and presented in Table 1.

An analysis of existing definitions shows that researchers consistently view sociocultural competence as a complex system grounded in the unity of theoretical knowledge and practical skills. Two key components are common across approaches: a deep understanding of the sociocultural context (including traditions, values, social norms, and behavior) and the ability to apply this knowledge appropriately in communication. All scholars also emphasize that its primary goal is to ensure effective intercultural interaction and mutual understanding, requiring adaptability, openness, and sensitivity to the interlocutor's background.

This explains why foreign language learning is inseparable from the sociocultural dimension. Claire Kramsch argues that language is not merely a means of communication but a way of expressing and shaping cultural reality [14]. Culture, therefore, is not an additional skill but the foundation of language learning, involving the creation of a "third place" where learners develop a flexible intercultural identity.

Similarly, Milton Bennett emphasizes that linguistic knowledge alone does

not prevent ethnocentrism [1]. Effective communication requires a psychological shift from denying to accepting cultural differences, making sociocultural reflection essential. Alvino Fantini reinforces this view, noting that language reflects a unique worldview, and without sociocultural integration, learners risk becoming "linguistic robots" incapable of meaningful interaction [9]. Expanding this perspective, Fred Dervin proposes a critical approach, viewing culture as fluid rather than fixed. He emphasizes the importance of perceiving interlocutors as individuals rather than stereotypes, thus linking sociocultural competence with critical thinking [8]. To sum up, within foreign language learning, sociocultural competence is the ability not only to use language correctly but also appropriately, considering cultural and social contexts. It enables learners to interpret implicit meanings, adapt communication strategies, and avoid misunderstandings—making speech natural and effective in real-life interaction.

American academics and educators were among the first to recognize the importance of integrating socio-cultural components into teaching English as a second language. The pioneering role of American higher education professionals was not coincidental; it was driven by a unique combination of historical, demographic, and intellectual factors specific to the United States during the 20th century (see Table 2).

The early integration of the sociocultural component into American ESL (English as a Second Language) methodology proved to be a real catalyst for a paradigm shift in foreign language education. In fact, it transformed the very philosophy of what it means to "know a language," leading to a shift from rigid structural methods (such as the grammar-translation or audio-lingual approaches) to the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach.

This influence has led to several specific changes in teaching methods, including:

1. *A shift in the primary objective: from accuracy to appropriateness.* Prior to this period, the methodology focused on the

error-free reproduction of grammatical structures. Following the recognition of the role of culture, the primary objective became communicative competence—the student’s ability to achieve communicative goals by using language that is appropriate to the specific social situation, the status of the interlocutors and the cultural context.

2. *The revolution in teaching materials: the era of authenticity.* Methodists moved

away from artificial, “sterile” texts written specifically for textbooks, where the dialogues bore no resemblance to real life. Instead, authentic materials began to be actively incorporated into the teaching process: real newspaper articles, excerpts from radio broadcasts, menus, advertisements and tickets. This allowed students to see the language as it functions in a natural cultural environment.

Table 1

Different interpretations of the term “sociocultural competence”

Scholar (Year)	Interpretation
Michael Canale, Merrill Swain, 1980	The author defines this concept in terms of sociolinguistic competence, which was interpreted as knowledge of the sociocultural rules governing language use and discourse. It entails the ability to understand and produce utterances that are appropriate to a given sociocultural context (considering the status of the participants, the purpose of the interaction and the norms of politeness) [5, p. 30–31].
Sandra Savignon, 1983, 2018	Sociocultural competence is the ability to understand the social context in which communication takes place, including knowledge of the social roles of the participants, shared background knowledge and the goals of the interaction, which are necessary to achieve communicative appropriateness [20, p. 3].
Jan van Ek, 1986	The researcher identifies sociocultural competence as a distinct component, defined as the knowledge and understanding of the sociocultural context in which a language functions (knowledge of the characteristics of society, traditions and value systems); the ability to use this knowledge to communicate effectively with native speakers of that culture [26, p. 35–36].
Michael Byram, 1997, 2021	The concept has been expanded to include intercultural communicative competence. It is defined as the ability to interact in a foreign language with representatives of other cultures, based on the integration of knowledge (savoirs), skills of interpretation and contextualization (savoir comprendre), and skills of discovery and interaction (savoir apprendre/faire), as well as critical cultural awareness (savoir s’engager) and an open attitude towards “otherness” (savoir être) [4, p. 44–45].
Darla Deardorff, 2006, 2019	Intercultural competence (which encompasses sociocultural competence) is defined as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations, drawing on intercultural knowledge, skills (reflection, observation, analysis) and internal attitudes (openness, respect, curiosity) [7, p. 247].
Oleg Tarnopolsky, 2006, 2012	The author sees SCC as knowledge of the cultural characteristics of native speakers, their traditions, customs, behavioral norms and etiquette, as well as the ability to understand these realities and apply them appropriately in cross-cultural communication in order to achieve mutual understanding [23, p. 62–64].
Sofia Nikolaeva, 2013	The scholar defines this term as a body of knowledge concerning the national and cultural characteristics of the countries whose languages are being studied; an understanding of the norms of verbal and non-verbal behavior; as well as the ability and willingness to adapt one’s communicative behavior in accordance with these characteristics and norms [18, p. 74].

3. *The introduction of pragmatics and speech acts.* Teachers began to focus on the speaker’s intentions. Instead of simply memorizing lists of words, the methodology shifted towards teaching how to act through language: how to politely interrupt a conversation partner, how to soften a refusal (mitigation), and how to express disagreement to a superior as opposed to a friend. This required a direct explanation of cultural distances and norms of politeness.

4. *A shift in the format of tasks: interactivity and realistic simulation.* Mechanical repetition (drilling) has been replaced by problem-solving tasks (Task-Based Learning) and role-plays. Students were placed in simulated situations (for example, a job interview with an American company or resolving a conflict with a flat mate), where they had to apply both linguistic and sociocultural knowledge.

5. *The evolution of assessment criteria.* Mistakes are no longer viewed as an absolute evil. If a student makes a grammatical error but manages to convey their idea effectively

and does not breach cultural norms (i.e. does not come across as rude or tactless), such an utterance is now considered a successful form of communication. Sociocultural appropriateness has become an equally important, and sometimes even more important, assessment criterion than grammatical accuracy.

It could be said that the early integration of the sociocultural component in the US “revitalized” teaching methods. It transformed the study of English from a mechanical process of decoding structures into a process of deep social and cultural adaptation for the individual.

These changes have led to the development of new methods that facilitate the integration of sociocultural competence into English language learning. These methods can be broadly divided into the following categories: **cognitive-comparative (analytical), interactive-modeling (simulation-based), project-based research (heuristic), and direct cross-cultural interaction.**

To better understand the practical application of these approaches, let us

Table 2

Factors Contributing to the Early Integration of Socio-Cultural Components in US ESL Methodology

Catalyst / Factor	Description of Impact on ESL Methodology
Demographic Shifts & Immigration	The need to rapidly integrate large waves of immigrants shifted the focus of language teaching from academic translation to practical, daily survival. Educators recognized that mastering socio-cultural norms was just as critical as grammar for social mobility and employment [27, p. 2575].
Internationalization of Higher Education	Following WWII (e.g., the Fulbright Program of 1946), US universities saw a massive influx of international students. Institutions quickly realized that academic success required understanding American academic culture, prompting the creation of culturally grounded ESL programs [13, p. 1].
The Sociolinguistic Turn (1960s–70s)	Influenced by the Civil Rights Movement, academics began to closely examine the link between language, power, and cultural identity. This led to the rejection of rigid structuralism in favor of “communicative competence,” emphasizing the social context of language [12, p. 270–274].
American Educational Pragmatism	Deeply rooted in the philosophical traditions of “learning by doing,” the US educational system naturally favored functional, communicative approaches. Language was increasingly viewed as a pragmatic tool for social action rather than a static system of rules [3, p. 74–76].
Geopolitical & Global Outreach	Government initiatives like the Peace Corps (1961) required Americans to learn languages and adapt to new cultures rapidly. The realization that linguistic training failed without cultural training created a feedback loop that heavily influenced domestic ESL pedagogy [24, p. 17–20].

first examine the **cognitive-comparative (analytical) methods**. Table 3 provides a detailed breakdown of the specific techniques and classroom activities associated with this category.

At the same time, the development of sociocultural competence cannot be limited solely to the analysis of ready-made materials provided by the lecturer. To develop genuine autonomy in future professionals, a shift is required from guided analysis to independent exploration and interpretation of cultural meanings. It is precisely this transition that is facilitated by **project-based and research-**

oriented (heuristic) methods, which encourage students to engage in in-depth, individual study of socio-cultural realities through the prism of their own academic and intellectual interests.

Project-based and research-oriented (heuristic) methods are based on the principles of active learning, whereby students move from the role of passive consumers of information to that of active researchers or “ethnographers.” The main idea behind these methods lies in the independent “discovery” (*heuriskein*) of socio-cultural patterns through the resolution of cognitive problem-solving tasks.

Table 3

Cognitive-Comparative Methods for Developing Socio-Cultural Competence

Method Name	Description of the Method	Example of Application in an English Class
Culture Assimilator (Intercultural Sensitizer)	Students are presented with a description of a “critical incident”—a situation involving a misunderstanding between representatives of different cultures. The student must choose the most accurate explanation for the foreigner’s behavior from a set of options. This method teaches learners to view situations from the perspective of another culture and develop intercultural empathy [7].	Incident: A student from Ukraine gives an American professor an expensive souvenir, but the professor becomes embarrassed and declines the gift. Task: Identify the reason. The correct answer is based not on personal dislike, but on American academic ethics and university policies regarding the avoidance of “conflicts of interest.”
Comparative Value Analysis	A systematic comparison of basic values and worldviews between the native and target cultures (e.g., attitudes toward time, power distance, collectivism vs. individualism) using established sociological matrices and dynamic cultural mapping [17].	Task: Compare the concept of “Privacy” in the US and Ukraine. Students analyze why fences are called “privacy fences” in English, and how the concept of individualism influences the formation of friendships in dormitories (among roommates).
Sociocultural Discourse Analysis	An in-depth analysis of authentic texts (articles, advertisements, speeches) focusing not merely on grammar, but on uncovering hidden cultural meanings, social markers, stereotypes, and ideologies underlying word choices [14].	Task: Students analyze two advertising campaigns for the same product (e.g., a car) targeting the US and UK markets. They identify how the text reflects cultural priorities: the American ad appeals to success, dynamism, and status, while the British ad emphasizes tradition, safety, and economy.
Linguo-cultural Lexical Analysis	An etymological investigation into the origins of idioms, phraseological units, and culture-specific vocabulary. It helps to understand exactly what historical or everyday national experiences are “encoded” in the language and how the cultural community conceptualizes the world [22].	Task: Analyzing “sports” idioms in American Business English (to touch base, to hit a home run, to drop the ball, ballpark figure). Students examine how the immense popularity of baseball in the US has historically shaped the lexicon of the American corporate world.

Here are the key characteristics of these methods:

1. Student autonomy: The teacher acts as a facilitator (advisor), whilst the student independently determines the strategy for searching for, selecting and analyzing socio-cultural data.

2. Inquiry-based learning: Learning takes place through the formulation and testing of hypotheses. The student does not simply memorize facts about the USA or the UK, but investigates them (for example, through interviews with native speakers, media analysis or the study of digital archives).

3. Product orientation: The outcome of the activity is a specific physical or digital product (a presentation, blog, ethnographic report, poster) that demonstrates a deep understanding of the cultural context.

4. Development of “learning to learn” (*savoir apprendre*): According to Michael

Byram, these methods explore the ability to independently acquire new knowledge about another culture and integrate it into one’s own experience, which is critically important for life in a dynamic, globalized world [4].

These methods allow students to go beyond the textbook and see language as a living, constantly changing socio-cultural phenomenon.

However, transforming these research-based insights into spontaneous communicative skills requires a transition from theoretical discovery to social performance. To bridge this gap, **interactive-modeling (simulation-based) methods** are employed, providing students with a safe environment to rehearse and internalize the social behaviors they have previously investigated. The core components and applications of these methods are summarized in the table below (see Table 4).

Table 4

Interactive-Modeling Methods for Developing Socio-Cultural Competence

Method Name	Description of the Method	Example of Application in an English Class
1	2	3
Role-Playing	A technique where students assume specific social roles and act out improvised or semi-scripted scenarios. This method facilitates the internalization of sociocultural norms by requiring students to adapt their verbal and non-verbal behavior to the status and expectations of their interlocutors [21].	Scenario: A “Grade Appeal” meeting. One student plays a polite but firm American professor, and the other plays a student requesting a higher grade. Task: The student must use appropriate “softeners” and indirect requests (e.g., “I was wondering if...”) to understand the power distance typical of US academic culture.
Intercultural Case Studies	The analysis of real-life intercultural dilemmas or “mishaps” where students must identify the underlying cultural conflict and propose a viable solution. This method bridges the gap between abstract theory and practical problem-solving in professional or academic contexts [11].	Case: A failed international business merger due to differing communication styles (direct vs. indirect). Task: Students work in groups to analyze the transcript of the meeting, identify where the “face-saving” needs were ignored, and rewrite the dialogue to ensure a successful outcome. (among roommates).
Educational Simulations	Complex, rule-governed activities that mirror large-scale social processes or environments. Unlike role-plays, simulations often involve long-term engagement with a set of cultural rules, requiring students to “live” within a simulated cultural framework to understand its systemic pressures [6].	Activity: “The Global Village.” The class is divided into groups representing different cultural “tribes” with specific communication rules (e.g., one group cannot make eye contact; another must start every sentence with a compliment). Task: Groups must negotiate a trade agreement while strictly adhering to their assigned cultural constraints.

1	2	3
Drama-in-Education (DiE) Techniques	The use of theatrical strategies—such as “hot-seating” or “freeze-frames”—to explore the emotional and psychological dimensions of cultural identity and acculturation. These methods develop a deep, embodied understanding of the “third place” in language learning [10].	Activity: “Hot seating:” one student plays the protagonist of a story about an immigrant’s first day at a US university. Task: The rest of the class interviews the character about their internal feelings of “cultural shock” and “alienation,” forcing the student in the “hot seat” to articulate the psychological process of adaptation.

Despite the effectiveness of simulations in providing a scaffolded environment, the ultimate objective of socio-cultural training is successful engagement in **direct cross-cultural interaction**. While modeling allows for controlled practice, real-time communication with native speakers or representatives of other cultures introduces an element of unpredictability that requires the highest level of communicative flexibility and emotional resilience.

In terms of implementation, the following methods of direct cross-cultural interaction can be identified:

1. Virtual Exchange / Telecollaboration—the organization of joint educational projects between students from different countries using digital platforms (Zoom, Slack, Moodle). This method focuses on solving problem-based tasks collaboratively in real time, which helps develop digital etiquette and skills for overcoming communication barriers [19].

2. Tandem learning—a form of mutual learning in pairs, where each participant is a native speaker of the language the other is learning. The interaction is based on the principles of autonomy and reciprocity, with partners taking turns in the roles of “teacher” (cultural consultant) and “learner”, helping each other to master linguistic and cultural nuances [16].

3. Academic mobility and study abroad—a long-term immersion of students in a foreign-language educational and social environment through participation in international exchange programs (such as Fulbright or Erasmus+). This method ensures the highest level of socio-cultural transformation of the individual through daily participation in the life of another linguistic community [4].

4. International Service Learning is a combination of volunteering in another country with academic study and reflection. Students engage with members of local communities to achieve socially meaningful goals, which allows them to experience the culture “from the inside” through collaborative work and civic engagement [2].

5. The “Human Library” method and guest speakers—involving representatives of other cultures (such as foreign lecturers or volunteers) directly in the learning process to conduct interviews and discussions. This method helps to break down stereotypes through personalized dialogue and by obtaining authentic, first-hand information [15].

Conclusions. The study and adaptation of the American approach to developing SCC is of strategic importance for contemporary Ukrainian higher education due to several objective factors. Firstly, this is due to the pragmatism of the American educational model, which has spent decades refining mechanisms for integrating representatives of different cultures, and Ukraine’s pressing need to build social cohesion and an inclusive environment amidst the challenges of war. An analysis of established frameworks in the US—from inclusive pedagogy to social sensitivity methods—opens broad prospects for modernizing domestic foreign language education, transforming it from a process of studying linguistic structures into a powerful tool for training specialists capable of effectively representing and defending the state’s interests on the international stage.

The key to success in cultivating genuine intercultural fluency among future teachers

lies not in singling out a single approach, but rather the synergistic combination of four groups of methods: cognitive-comparative (analytical), interactive-modeling (simulation), project-based research (heuristic) and methods of direct cross-cultural interaction. Only through the systematic integration of these tools in the classroom—from the

analysis of critical incidents and role-plays to independent research and real dialogue with native speakers—can holistic personal development be ensured. Such a comprehensive approach enables students to progress from a theoretical understanding of cultural differences to confident, ethical and strategically considered communicative behavior in any sociocultural context.

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