

## Forming "cultural fit" through mediation as the basis for intercultural interaction

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**Abstract.** *The paper reflects the concept of "cultural fit", rather new term for Ukraine, which represents in a broad sense suitability or unsuitability of an individual to the cultural peculiarities of a certain country, and the transforming role of a teacher: becoming not only a facilitator, teaching foreign languages, but also as mediator, showing socio-cultural differences in mentality, thinking and lifestyle in another cultural environment and that's why possible difficulties in intercultural interaction or integration, thus helping to understand those students who think about going abroad if they are really ready for it. Especially this problem of cultural fit or unfit is actual nowadays, when a lot of Ukrainian families are forced to leave their homes and search for shelters all around the world because of Russian war aggression. And many of them have to deal with additional great psychological stress while trying to integrate in another country, which could be a real problem if not to know enough about foreign culture, specifics of verbal and non-verbal communication there, language nuances in form and gist.*

**Keywords:** *"cultural fit", mediation, teacher-mediator, intercultural interaction, integration, forming foreign language sociocultural competence of students at Ukrainian schools.*

In the modern multicultural world, the goal of learning foreign languages, particularly English as the globally recognized language of international communication, is considered to be: "the use of a foreign language as a tool in the dialogue of cultures and civilizations of the modern world" [2]. It determines the need for the formation of appropriate sociocultural competence in the process of learning foreign languages.

As we know, foreign language communicative competence includes: 1) language (phonetic, grammatical, lexical, orthographic); 2) speech (in listening, speaking, reading and writing); 3) socio-cultural, which involves "acquainting students with the national-cultural specifics of speech behavior and the ability to use elements of the socio-cultural context, relevant to origination and perception of speech from the perspective of native speakers. These elements are customs, rules, norms, social conventions, rituals, social stereotypes, country studies knowledge, etc." [2]. So, mastering sociocultural competence means acquisition of the necessary minimum of sociocultural knowledge, as well as a system of skills and abilities to coordinate one's behavior in accordance with communicative tasks, taking into account possible differences in the interpretation of meanings in different cultures, which is reflected in the peculiarities of translation, in verbal and nonverbal communication. For example,

to the question "How are you?" English people do not expect a detailed sincere answer as we, Ukrainians, get used to do for such questions – it is rather a polite English form of greetings, a standard exchange of good manners according to etiquette, so in most cases the answer will be usually reduced to a neutral phrase like everyone is "OK"; and the phrase "Nice to meet you!" shouldn't be understood by non-natives in its literal translation – it can be used only once when getting to know each other, not every time when meeting, etc. There are also a lot of differences between American and British English which can confuse non-native learners.

But could all sociocultural peculiarities be reflected in school textbooks, introducing foreign culture through language? Do these means actually prepare for the real, not separated from life, realities of another country, so that our compatriots might consciously understand all the possible challenges and risks associated with living, studying or working abroad? Thus, according to the statistics, even before the war came, about 1,857,000 Ukrainian migrants had already lived in the United States [1]. And with the beginning of the Russian large-scale military invasion on the territory of Ukraine from 2022, the number of refugees is still increasing, turning into the "migration capital" [1] of other countries. Is it possible to organically integrate into another culture with its peculiarities of mentality, habits of life and thinking, so as not to feel like a stranger there? May cultural barriers be overcome together with language barriers? How different can theory be from real-life practice? Let's analyze the example of intercultural communication between Ukrainians and Americans.

The concept of "cultural fit" [4; 5] best reflects the above phenomenon. This term appeared for the first time in the 1980s in an article by the American researcher Lauren Riveri in the New York Times. And in Ukraine it's just becoming popular, gaining more and more importance nowadays due to the forced migration of our compatriots for objective reasons, thus justifying the relevance of such research, aimed at optimizing integration in different countries. The ability of cultural fit or unfit can help or, on the contrary, complicate successful integrating of migrants into a foreign cultural environment, so one should not underestimate the importance of this phenomenon as the basis for the formation of sociocultural competence, which should be developed during the process of learning foreign languages from middle and high school age, in order to simplify the process of intercultural interaction later.

However, as it becomes clear from the anonymous survey, made by me and my colleagues for the students of grades 9-11 in three different general secondary schools of Ukraine (100 people) which took place in December 2023 – January 2024, not all cultural traditions of Americans are known, and therefore understandable or acceptable for Ukrainians, just as not all the features of our mentality can be perceived accordingly by foreigners. And this means that it is important to take into account all possible problems related to intercultural interaction in order to adequately deal with

integration, socialization and adaptation. Therefore, to achieve this goal, the role of a teacher as the "mediator" [3] of educational process becomes really defining, that is, a socio-cultural mediator during communication between representatives of different cultures, focusing on better understanding between them, capable of explaining the specifics of different worldviews both at the language/speech level and at the behavioral, semantic or cultural.

So, the concept of "cultural fit", which represents in a broad sense suitability or unsuitability of an individual to the cultural peculiarities of a certain country, actualizes the need to include this term in the learning process at Ukrainian educational institutions, starting from the middle school age because of the importance of developing in our citizens understanding of all socio-cultural differences and that's why possible difficulties in order to help them consciously make a choice regarding education, work or living in some foreign country. Those who want to connect their activities with a real foreign-language environment should think about the difference in mentality, thinking and lifestyle in another cultural environment before, but not after moving abroad, so that to determine for themselves whether they are really ready for it. In this regard, the issue of preparing future Ukrainian graduates to successfully solve all the above-mentioned socio-cultural tasks while learning foreign languages, requires further, more detailed researching, as well as the role of a teacher-mediator.

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