

## **DEVELOPING TRANSCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN A DIGITAL ELT COURSE MATERIAL FOR PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In recent years English has become a lingua franca, a mediating language used for communication by speakers with different first language backgrounds. As a consequence, language users' needs have changed too: instead of aspiring for native-like communicative competence enabling them to talk to native English speakers and fit into an English speaking country, they need transcultural awareness to cope with linguistic, contextual and cultural variety. ELT should respond to these needs. In a primary school context developing transcultural skills in English lessons can be an educational aim opening up new perspectives of language use for students and offering new motivations for foreign language learning. The aim of the talk is to clarify the concept of a transcultural approach in ELT, and demonstrate how a digital English course material for primary school students offers opportunities to facilitate it.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years English has become a lingua franca (ELF): speakers of English as a foreign language have by far outnumbered native speakers [1], and English is increasingly used as contact language chosen by people with different L1 backgrounds for shared communication [2]. ELF is necessarily characterised with unique phonological, lexico-grammatical and pragmatic features reflecting the speakers' first language (L1) background as well as striving for cooperation and an intensive use of compensatory strategies [2]. This new context of language use requires a high level of intercultural sensitivity and advanced negotiation skills rather than native-like language competence. Thus many experts [3] [4] now question the relevance of target language (TL) norms in ELT and emphasise the need to prepare learners for managing linguistic, contextual and cultural variety. This objective could be realized by representing non-native speakers and international communication more intensively in ELT course materials [2], highlighting the transformative power of non-native speakers and the role of the internet in this process [5], rehabilitating the role of the mother tongue [6], and offering new paths of motivation instead of the fading integrative motivation in learning World Englishes [7].

However, developing what is labelled as "transcultural awareness" [8] presents a great challenge for ELT teachers. They themselves do not always have the experience of multicultural immersion to rely on, and although foreign course books produced for the international market now offer a lot of interesting information about

different cultures, they usually do not account for the learners' home culture and mother tongue. Hungary is also a highly homogeneous country both in a linguistic and cultural sense [9]: most people do not have daily opportunities to meet someone from another culture or interact in a foreign language. We are simply not used to intercultural encounters where code-switching and negotiation of meaning are obvious necessities. Thus, developing transcultural skills in English lessons can serve as an important language teaching as well as an educational objective: learning about cross-cultural differences in communication and acquiring corresponding coping strategies not only opens up new perspectives of language use for students, but might also offer new motivations for foreign language learning and raise learners' curiosity about other cultures.

The aim of the present paper is to define the concept of transcultural competence, and demonstrate how a digital English course material for primary school students developed in the cooperation of Miskolc University and KIFÜ (Governmental Information-Technology Development Agency) offers opportunities to develop it.

## THE TRANSCULTURAL APPROACH IN ELT

The changing role of English in international communication is spectacularly reflected by the multitude of concepts that have surfaced in the literature to account for the competencies facilitating communication between speakers of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The **communicative competence** models of the 1980s and 1990s focus on the knowledge systems, linguistic, discourse, illocutionary, socio-pragmatic and strategic competences [10] that learners should acquire to be able to function effectively in the target language (TL) environment. This is a monocultural approach in which learners' competences are judged according to native norms and thus often deemed inappropriate or deficient. The learners' own cultural background is not considered to be an important asset, and no attempts are made to create links between the mother tongue (L1) and TL culture.

The early 2000s bring a shift of emphasis from linguistic competences to interpersonal skills, as accumulating research evidence proves that English is increasingly used as a medium of communication between people from diverse cultural backgrounds, and in these contexts interpersonal skills appear to be more important than native-like linguistic competence. Stier [11] proposes a model of **intercultural communicative competence** in which he distinguishes content competences (factual knowledge about mother culture and the target culture such as lifestyle, habits, taboos, literature, history, religion, etc.), and process competences accounting for personal openness, empathy and self-awareness as well as the ability to perceive and interpret emotions, verbal and non-verbal messages transmitted in the interaction. The intercultural approach still focuses on developing linguistic and cultural skills to fit into the target culture, but encourages learners' to build on their L1 background and develop a reflective attitude to L1 and TL culture.

In 2011[12] Kramsch defined intercultural competence from a broader perspective claiming that it enables multilingual speakers to create a "symbolic" or "third culture" based on their mother tongue and target language related experience, which is a unique knowledge system shaped by the comparison and synthesis of the

cultures they know. What Risager [13] labels as a **multicultural approach** shifts focus from a single, idealised TL norm to linguistic and ethnic variety among language users, highlighting the importance of awareness of cultural diversity, sensitivity and tolerance to manage international encounters successfully. In intercultural contexts there is no panacea for effective communication: personal solutions must be sought for arising problems relying, among others, on the mother culture as a key resource [14]. All this facilitates the understanding that our behaviour is culturally determined. While learning and using a foreign language, we can explore and appreciate other cultures, which enables us to find our own cultural style and identity, and to mediate between cultures.

The multicultural approach reflects the appearance of the ELF phenomenon and the growing awareness that learners of English will most probably use the language to communicate with other non-native speakers in different parts of the world, and not with native speakers in a TL context. ELF connects speakers globally and accelerates cultural transfer between them. Communicating in English in complex international contexts where the different partners rely on a host of assumptions deriving from their varied L1 backgrounds and experience related to speakers from other cultural and ethnic groups calls for a **transcultural approach** [8]. In terms of ELT objectives it means that instead of approaching a single TL norm, emphasis is laid on representing linguistic variety including ethnic and dialectal variation in the TL and in and outside TL cultures. The learners' L1 is integrated as an important resource, but references are also made to other languages that shape English language communication in different contexts and which can raise awareness of the cultural embeddedness of languages. „Topics and discourses [...] are sought to be contextualized transnationally” (p. 8) [8] placing TL-related phenomena both in a local and global perspective. Thus, foregrounding the importance of affective factors (openness, tolerance, empathy, etc.), this approach supports the ELF principle by focusing attention on transcultural and translinguistic awareness facilitating the negotiation of meaning in multicultural contexts.

#### COMPLEX INSTRUCTION PROGRAM: DIGITAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE COURSE FOR THE 4<sup>TH</sup>-8<sup>TH</sup> CLASSES OF PRIMARY SCHOOL [15]

In primary schools, huge, mixed ability classes often pose a substantial challenge for language teachers to handle individual learner needs, develop motivation and autonomy crucial for effective learning, and implement practices helping constructive learner cooperation. The Complex Instruction Program: Digital English Language Course created in the cooperation of Miskolc University and KIFÜ (Governmental Information-Technology Development Agency) is intended to function as a flexible resource for classroom work and homework for the 4th-8th classes of primary school. Moodle, the digital educational platform housing the material offers an attractive surface for the „Z Generation” to process motivating content reflecting our changing reality through interactive learning methods. At the same time, it is a viable option for mixed ability classes including learners with special education needs to set an individual pace and difficulty level, and thereby increase their autonomy and activity. The digital language course is framed by the principles of the Complex

Instruction Program: equal learning opportunities and cooperation.

The structure of the material is identical at all levels. Ten topic areas are introduced in 7-7 modules. The first module introduces the central topic and related key vocabulary through picture description or video tasks, to be followed by the detailed exploration of the topic in modules 2-5 through integrating the four skills. Module 6 contains revision tasks and module 7 closes the topic with a test. All topics include minimally one KIP lesson plan. Catering for varied learner needs, each module contains tasks at different difficulty levels as well as open ended tasks that allow for individual solutions. Besides task choice, learner autonomy is supported by interactive tasks, individual projects, optional supportive pop-up content (Hungarian translations, vocabulary, grammar explanations, solutions) and self-check procedures. The material contains a wide variety of games to encourage learner involvement, and rich visual material and many external links that bring reality into the classroom.

The tasks developing learners' transcultural awareness are definitely among the most motivating types. Besides integrating elements of distant, exotic worlds, learners can also experience looking at the local and familiar through the lens of another language. Translating their own reality into English gives them confidence and viewing English as a means of communication with the world shifts emphasis from grammatical accuracy to effective negotiation of meaning and cultural exploration. At this point, language teaching fulfils an important educational aim: increases learners' awareness of their own unique linguistic and cultural background, as well as the cultural embeddedness of human communication, thereby awakening their curiosity for other languages and cultures and developing a positive attitude towards others. The transcultural competence model based on which the elements of the course material will be inventoried combines the aspects of Bachman's [10] classic communicative competence framework and Risager's [8] transcultural approach (cf. Table 1):

KEY COMPETENCES	SUBCOMPETENCES
Knowledge systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- TL cultures</li> <li>- L1 culture</li> <li>- Non-English speaking culture</li> </ul> <div style="text-align: right; margin-top: 10px;">Local/global approach</div>
Language and discourse competences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- TL grammar, lexis, phonetic features, discourse conventions</li> <li>- Variability of TL features in different Englishes &amp; non-native varieties</li> <li>- Differences and similarities between L1, L2 and L3 L&amp;D structure and conventions</li> </ul>
Illocutionary and socio-pragmatic competences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Expressing and interpreting illocutionary functions in L1, L2, L3 ...</li> <li>- Using and interpreting paralinguistic signals, body language and proxemic features in L1, L2, L3 ...</li> <li>- Awareness of socio-pragmatic expectations in L1, L2, L3 ...</li> </ul>
Strategic competences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strategies compensating for pragma-linguistic deficiencies</li> <li>- Strategies compensating for negotiating meaning</li> <li>- Strategies for coping with multicultural conflicts</li> </ul>
Affective competences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Managing egocentric aspects (imitation/identification, motivation, attitude, inhibition)</li> <li>- Managing social aspects (empathy, extroversion/introversion, aggression)</li> </ul>

**Table 1. Aspects of transcultural competence**

## ELEMENTS OF THE TRANSCULTURAL APPROACH IN A DIGITAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE COURSE

The transcultural approach infiltrates all aspects of language development and cultural awareness raising in the course material. Providing varied, colourful and up-to-date information about the target language cultures and other cultures where English is spoken is the greatest opportunity to raise learners' curiosity. The local/global approach suggested by Risager [8] means discussing L1 culture from an outsider perspective, encourage L1 culture – TL culture comparison, and learn about non-TL cultures using English. The course provides rich printed and audiovisual material about English speaking countries using links to online media and interactive maps providing fresh input or live material about famous people and sights. For example, the text about the Ascot Derby is accompanied by a link to a recent media photo gallery about the 2015 derby<sup>1</sup>, while through the link<sup>2</sup> attached to the description of Windsor castle, the learners can take a virtual tour in the premises of the Castle. Learners can also take a Harry Potter tour in London, wander on the small and mysterious island of Mallaig, among the mountains of New Zealand and the on the streets of New York, and they can also discover Australia on an interactive map<sup>3</sup>. The local perspective is involved by comparing life, people, celebrations and geographical features in Hungary and the TL countries, as well as introducing aspects of L1 culture to foreigners. Naming local foods or the sights of Budapest and other towns, explaining the historical and cultural significance of Ópusztaszer to a foreign penfriend, and discussing the different nature conservation strategies in Australia and Hungary present a genuine linguistic challenge for students. The global perspective, on the other hand, is opened up by learning about non-TL cultures using English including food around the world, the ethnicities living in New York, or the unique habits and customs of European nations around us. This approach creates contexts for experimenting with intercultural mediation, which in turn naturally leads the participants of the teaching-learning process towards developing positive affective features.

Developing **linguistic and discourse competences** involves three strategies. The primary issue is familiarizing learners with TL linguistic and discourse norms and expectations. While native-like competence in these areas is not a teaching aim, even partial competence can only be developed and any variety can be interpreted in relation to a standard. Secondly, to facilitate the acquisition of TL features, learners are encouraged to rely on their L1 as a key resource of linguistic patterns, semantic awareness and communicative competence. While English course books produced for an international market promote the methodological myth that all grammar and vocabulary can and should be taught in the TL, this often deprives especially primary school learners of the opportunity to capitalise on their L1-based linguistic awareness.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/horseracing/royal-ascot/11678220/Royal-Ascot-2015-in-pictures.html?frame=3348330>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.royal.gov.uk/TheRoyalResidences/WindsorCastle/VirtualRooms/Overview.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> <http://mapmaker.education.nationalgeographic.com/?ls=000000000000>

Based on this consideration, the optional grammar explanations are provided in the learners' L1 with many contrastive examples in L1 and TL. Special emphasis is laid on highlighting differences between the languages (e.g. preferring complex modifying phrases in English and translating these with subordinate clauses into Hungarian). Such contrasts are reinforced with related translation tasks from TL to L1. Semantic contrasts are also highlighted by matching tasks and scales as in the case of the preference expressions demonstrated by Figure 1:

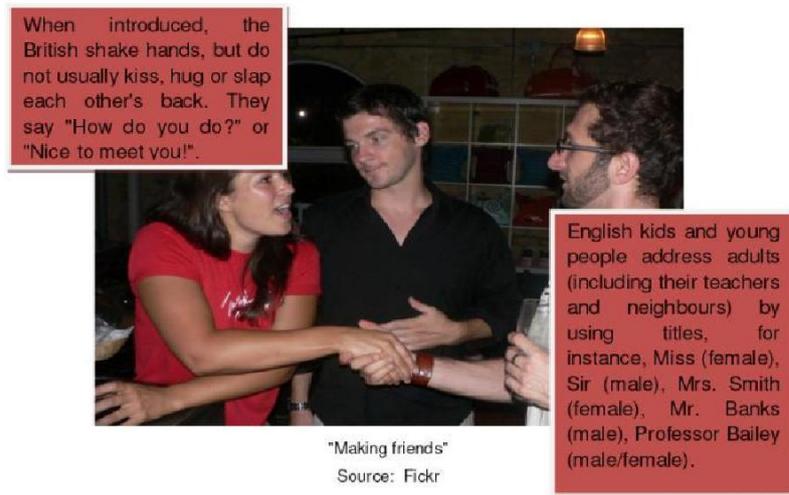
ENGLISH		 HUNGARIAN
I hate	Utálok	Utálok
I can't stand	Jobban szeretem	Ki nem állhatom
I can't bear	<b>Nem bírom</b>	<b>Nem bírom</b>
I dislike	Imádom	Nem kedvelem
It's not my cup of tea.	Nekem való	Nem az én műfajom
I don't mind	Rajongok érte	Nem bánom
I'm fine with	<b>Elfogadható számomra</b>	<b>Elfogadható számomra</b>
I prefer	Szeretem	Jobban szeretem
It's in my line.	Nem az én műfajom	Nekem való
I like	Nem kedvelem	Szeretem
I'm into	<b>Nagyon kedvelem</b>	<b>Nagyon kedvelem</b>
I'm keen on	Nem bánom	Rajongok érte
I love	Ki nem állhatom	Imádom
I'm mad about	<b>Megőrülök érte</b>	<b>Megőrülök érte</b>

Figure 1. Semantic contrast with a scale, matching task and pop-up solution

The third language and discourse related strategy for transcultural sensitisation is representing a variety of Englishes (British, Australian, American, Canadian, Indian, non-native) in the course material. The internet offers a rich resource of video materials, which not only show different English accents, but also connect visual images of speakers and cultural contexts to which these accents are related. These audiovisual materials also face the learners with the reality of English use, which is far from being so sterile as it is often implied in educational contexts.

Strongly related to linguistic competences are **illocutionary and socio-pragmatic skills**, including an awareness of the different ways of expressing language functions, using and interpreting paralinguistic signals, body language and proxemic features, the socio-pragmatic requirements of language use in L1, TL and multicultural contexts (e.g. directness, politeness, initiating a conversation, turn-taking, small talk, etc. ). Some tasks address these issues directly providing information about TL socio-pragmatic expectations to be compared to L1 norms as shown in Figure 2; others present situations where mistakes in these areas provoke a conflict, the roots of which are to be identified by the learners. Conversational taboos, for instance, represent a highly culture-sensitive aspect of interaction. Across cultures different topics are regarded as safe enough to keep the channel of communication open in small talk, but they also present a challenge even when the speakers believe they are on close enough terms to discuss more personal issues. Sensitisation in the course material happens through explicit discussion and comparison of taboo topics as well as situation-embedded activities, in which learners can examine typical intercultural encounters

with regard to potentially embarrassing topics. In the task demonstrated in Figure 3, learners are required to read a conversation between a Hungarian student and a Canadian teacher and comment on the reasons of disharmony.



1. The Hungarians need a) more b) less c) the same personal space than the British. We often kiss and hug people even when we meet for the first time.
2. We have a a) complexer b) more complex c) less complex system of address forms than the British. Hungarian has a "tegező" (informal) and "magázó" (formal) style. However, Hungarian kids talk to adults (including teachers, neighbours, relatives) by addressing them "néni" (female) or "bácsi" (male), e.g., Marika néni, Zoli bácsi.
3. Hungarians are a) more open b) opener c) less open about topics

**Figure 2. Information about TL socio-pragmatic expectations and related task to make comparison with L1 (extract)**



**TASK 3. Read and listen to the dialogue between Anna and the new British teacher at her school. The conversation is rather embarrassing as Anna does not seem to know the rules of English conversation. Give her advice how to avoid similar mistakes next time.**

Anna: Hello Mr Roberts, how are you?  
 Mr Roberts: I'm fine, thanks. I'm actually very happy as I've just bought this bike. I will go to school by bike while the weather is good.  
 Anna: It's a lovely bike! Where did you buy it? And how much did it cost?  
 Mr Roberts: Well, it was a good bargain. It wasn't very expensive.  
 Anna: Do you ride a bike at home as well, with your family?  
 Mr Roberts: I often go biking at home, too, but, well, my partner is not very keen on it.  
 Anna: You could join us on our biking tour with the Association of Catholic Youth. Are you religious?  
 Mr Roberts: Err ... well, I am, but I'm not a regular churchgoer  
 Anna: Oh, that's fine. Do come along!  
 Mr. Roberts: Thanks! I'll think about it. I must go now ...  
 Anna: Please, come! I'm sure you will enjoy it!  
 Mr. Roberts: I'll see if I can make it, but thanks, anyway ... Bye!  
 Anna: Bye ...

**Figure 3. Conversationsl taboos**

**Strategic competence** is interpreted as the ability to resort to compensatory strategies when unexpected difficulties arise due to the speakers' pragma-linguistic deficiencies, misunderstanding caused by the speakers' different communicative expectations, and multicultural conflicts deriving from the speakers' L1-based value systems. We can distinguish "reduction strategies" (avoiding topic, message, omitting politeness or speech act markers) and "achievement strategies" [16] (e.g. code switching, foreignising, literal translation, generalisation, paraphrasing, restructuring). The course material does not aim to provide exhaustive training in all these areas, rather to call attention to the possible areas of communicative difficulties and encourage learners to use negotiation and compensation strategies with confidence. Students are offered models of strategic communication as illustrated by Figure 4, and are encouraged to think over their own reactions (e.g. in the form of quizzes) in critical situations, and to what extent these are appropriate.



**TASK 2.** It is good to have some polite but effective strategies to handle difficult situations. The pictures show typical problems that occur among foreigners. Pair them up with the correct problem-solving strategies.

	
	<p>- It was really embarrassing ... They whispered something to each other every time they saw me! I felt I was walking on eggs when I had to talk to them!</p> <p>-???</p> <p>- You know, I didn't know what to say. I was afraid of saying something wrong.</p>
	<p>Do you mean your boat? I'm sorry but I don't know this word.</p>
	<p>Do you mind if I just stay here and don't try it now? But I'd love to watch you!</p>
	<p>There is this river here and I'd like to .... Do you have a ....., you know, a thing you can use on water? Sorry, I don't know the word, but I'll draw it.</p>

**Figure 4. Strategies of compensation and negotiation**

**Affective variables** in language learning comprise egocentric (imitation-identification, motivation, attitude, inhibition) and social variables (empathy, extroversion/introversion, aggression) [17], which can conveniently accommodate sensitivity, openness, tolerance, the key attitudinal features contributing to transcultural competence [8, 13]. Learners can be sensitised to cultural diversity by developing the awareness that English is used as a medium of communication in non-TL countries as well, by learning about different cultural values, by challenging their own beliefs, attitudes about other cultures, and eventually by imagining themselves in others' position. The course material provides varied opportunities to learn about the challenges of multicultural communication, for example, by offering personal accounts of summer holidays in which the characters report about the difficulties they countered while using English in Croatia or Italy, and the strategies they applied to cope with them. Some of these difficulties arise from the different culturally rooted values that speakers bring into the communicative situation, so facing learners with a variety of life philosophies and coping strategies is not only an adventurous journey into other cultures but also an opportunity to realise that there are alternative ways of existence. The exercise illustrated in Figure 5 targets culturally determined values of a multitude of migrants in the USA through the narratives and photos of the Humans of New York [18]. The task is to match different values with the individual stories of the speakers and decide if in their new home, they preserve or discard them. Such reflection helps learners understand that cultural values are relative to specific contexts, and a coping mechanism which is effective in one cultural environment might be completely irrelevant in another.



**TASK 2.** Anna and Tomi are amazed how multicultural New York is. It seems that there are people here from every corner of the world. They are all looking for the "American Dream" - but they all bring their own values and traditions with them. Read the portraits of 6 immigrants and pair them up with the most important value they brought from home. Also indicate if they stick to these values (✓) or reject them (X).

Source of materials: Human of New York: <http://www.humansofnewyork.com/>

HUMANS OF NEW YORK	VALUES	✓/X
		
 1. An Indian girl <a href="http://www.humansofnewyork.com/post/127646032071/we-first-met-in-the-bazaar-he-owns-a-shop">http://www.humansofnewyork.com/post/127646032071/we-first-met-in-the-bazaar-he-owns-a-shop</a>	a. Parents choose the wife or husband for their children.	
 2. An Iranian boy <a href="http://www.humansofnewyork.com/post/127643269001/my-mother-died-when-i-was-two-years-old-so-its">http://www.humansofnewyork.com/post/127643269001/my-mother-died-when-i-was-two-years-old-so-its</a>	b. Parents should determine their children's profession. Don't show your emotions.	
 3. A Chinese girl <a href="http://www.humansofnewyork.com/post/111573582546/it-seems-">http://www.humansofnewyork.com/post/111573582546/it-seems-</a>	e. Children should choose a profession that benefits the family.	

Figure 5. Cultural values

Many multicultural conflicts arise from the negative beliefs, attitudes and stereotypes people hold in relation to others. Encouraging learners to recognise their own attitudes might be the first step in the direction of reconsidering and reshaping them. A particularly suitable task to initiate such self-analysis is the quiz format familiar to students from social media (Figure 6).



"Winter swimming"  
Source: Wikimedia

- a. You find many of these things very annoying, but you try to accept them. However, you can't cope with the food. You ask your hosts to make different food for you. You hate even the smell of fish and you don't want to try it.
- b. You try to put up with these things, but you don't like the sauna and your feet are cold at school. However, you don't want to complain: in Rome, do as the Romans do.
- c. You think these strange habits are simply ridiculous. You won't take off your shoes at school for anybody's sake, and no one can convince you to try the sauna. After all, you are Hungarian, and you cannot be expected to live as the Finns do.
- d. You gathered a lot of information about the Finns before your trip, so most of these do not surprise you. You enjoy that life is different here, and try as many new things as possible.

**Figure 6. Sample question from the multicultural quiz**

There are no right or wrong answers here, but the emerging profile indicates how open and tolerant the respondents are towards others. The response alternatives provide options to react to certain situations, which might be food for thought or a topic of discussion. Finally, positive attitudes can also be developed by asking learners to take an outsider perspective and try to imagine themselves in other people's position. We might become more empathic to others if we leave our own perspective behind and imagine how others see us, or what plans and desires migrants in New York or Hungary have. Digital surfaces provide powerful devices to visualise alternative realities helping learners to relocate their perspectives as shown in Figure 7.



**TASK 4. You can see today's migrants in the picture. What do they wish? Write 5 sentences based on the clues.**

Key words:	
work, meet, be, not be, live, have	home, in danger, clothes, enough food, in peace, at a good workplace, their family and friends again, sick



"Migrants in Hungary 2015 August"  
Source: Wikimedia Commons

**Figure 7. Taking an outsider perspective**

## CONCLUSION

“Language learning success is determined by attitude, not aptitude” (Kaufmann in [19]). The beliefs and attitudes transferred into the learning situation significantly influence the amount and intensity of effort that learners will invest in coping with the difficulties of language learning and seeking out opportunities of practice. The transcultural approach contributes to shaping positive affective learner features by developing an outsider perspective, raising awareness of cultural diversity and the need to negotiate meaning in multicultural contexts. By focusing on cultural and linguistic mediation between non-native speakers instead of achieving unrealistic TL norms, it contributes to developing the feeling of competence as well as openness and empathy towards speakers from other cultures.

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