

**Интеркултурна комуникация**  
**Intercultural Communication**

## **Cultural Sensitivity Training for Bulgarian Teachers: Results from an Observation Experiment**

**Hristina Sokolova**

University of Ruse “Angel Kanchev”, Faculty of Business and Management

E-mail: [hsokolova@uni-ruse.bg](mailto:hsokolova@uni-ruse.bg)

**Abstract:** The article presents training methods and results from an observation experiment in cultural sensitivity training of 39 Bulgarian teachers from a multi-ethnic secondary school in Vetovo, Ruse region. School children belong to 5 ethnic groups: Bulgarians, Bulgarian Christian Roma, Bulgarian Muslim Roma, Bulgarian Turks and Gagauz. The teachers were trained for 3 days in developing their cultural sensitivity, digital literacy and pedagogical competence. They were trained by 4 university professors and were divided into 4 groups of 10 people each, where each group had to switch training to go through all modules. The author's module included developing cultural sensitivity among teachers of all ages. The training included 6 tasks employing the following pedagogical methods: role play, discussion, feedback and group work. The following skills were developed: team work, creative thinking, conflict reconciliation, negotiation skills, adaptability, cultural intelligence, cultural self-awareness. Teachers shared in the course briefing that they felt it was difficult to adapt and use newly developed cultural sensitivity skills in the classroom because of the bureaucratic requirements in their daily work routine. They also expressed concern about the cultural distance between them and their pupils, which could become an obstacle to applying the newly learned skills in the classroom.

**Key words:** cultural sensitivity, multicultural education, digital literacy, pedagogical competence, cultural intelligence.

### **Introduction**

Teaching in a multicultural environment is a growing challenge for Bulgarian teachers of all ages. The pandemic of COVID-19 brought even more challenges to multicultural classrooms with the rapid introduction of virtual training and computer-based learning. The main problem was that teachers had to replicate in-person teaching and learning in an on-line based environment. Some of the disadvantages of this new educational environment were reduced emotional well-being of learners and diminished sense of accomplishment in teachers. [1] With regards to these challenges, teachers in multicultural environ-

ments faced greater challenges in the education process. In the course of this analysis we would like to use the terms intercultural, cross-cultural and multicultural education interchangeably. During training it was important for lecturers to offer new tools to be used by teachers in their multicultural classrooms.

### **Defining cultural sensitivity in multicultural classrooms**

There is a variety of definitions of *cultural sensitivity* in cross-cultural research and literature. The term is related to notions such as *cultural intelligence* (CQ), *intercultural competence* (IC), *intercultural literacy*, *cultural shifting*. [2] According to UNESCO “Intercultural competences aim at freeing people from their own logic and cultural idioms in order to engage with others and listen to their ideas, which may involve belonging to one or more cultural systems, particularly if they are not valued or recognized in a given sociopolitical context.” [3] Conceptualization of *cultural intelligence* (CQ) was introduced by Earley and Ang (2003), who theorised that CQ comprised metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral dimensions of individuals, relevant to successful functioning in culturally diverse settings. [4] *Intercultural competence* [5] is another representation of the concept which comprises of having the proper *knowledge, attitudes, skills and awareness* in a multicultural environment. According to the Center for Social Development’s report at Washington University [6], intercultural exposure of teachers during trainings increases their intercultural competence at the end of service and improves their language proficiency. In UNESCO’s Conceptual and Operational Framework, the concept spins off with notions of *intercultural literacy* and *cultural shifting*. [7] Intercultural literacy represents all the knowledge and skills necessary to the practice of intercultural competences, accentuating storytelling as a tool to improve it. Cultural shifting represents the cognitive and behavioural skills of the culturally sensitive individual, where both connotations and denotations of meanings in the multicultural environment could be understood.

Roiha & Sommier (2021) share their conclusions of teaching multicultural education approaches among 11 Dutch teachers. Teachers emphasised differences over similarities with their students and between students as the main principle of multiculturalism in class. Their perspective on culture included developing intercultural communication skills to minimize misunderstandings, and to teach basic national differences. In depth realization of cultural prerequisites was not present. [8] This presents the *cognitive realizations* of the importance of multicultural education among teachers. On the other hand, it is more needed to reach *experiential realizations* about multiculturalism through experiential learning (learning-by-doing) about foreign cultures. We must admit it is not possible to recreate authentic foreign cultural environment in any of our trainings, but approaching the issue first through cognitive realizations is a good

start for educators. Multicultural classrooms require *readiness to change* and *open-mindedness of educators* together with *support from the school system*, and *significant support from national education strategies*.

### **Main purpose and research method**

The main purpose of the study is to assess the results of cultural sensitivity training of teachers. Research method employs the *descriptive deductive* approach via an observation method [9] [10] [11]. Observation took place in three consecutive days, April 7<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> 2022, in a tourist education center in Arbanasi – a mountain resort in Northeastern Bulgaria. The training included 39 Bulgarian teachers from the secondary school in Vetovo, Ruse region, where pupils have a multi-ethnic background. Local school children belong to 5 ethnic groups: Bulgarians, Bulgarian Christian Roma, Bulgarian Muslim Roma, Bulgarian Turks and Gagauz. The teachers were trained for 3 days in developing their cultural sensitivity, digital literacy and pedagogical competence. They were trained by 4 university professors: 2 lecturers in intercultural communication, 1 lecturer in pedagogy and 1 lecturer in digital and computer literacy. They were divided into 4 groups of 10 people each, where each group had to switch trainings to go through all modules. Observation took place during all cultural sensitivity modules and it was conducted by the author. Teachers volunteered to take part in the observation experiment under the following conditions: first, teachers were informed that participation is voluntary and non-compulsory; second, anonymity of participants would be preserved at all times in analyzing and presenting results; third, observation could be cancelled at any time if the teachers weren't feeling comfortable with taking part; fourth, observation wouldn't take place if all teachers weren't in a unanimous agreement about it.

Research tasks included observing the difference between cultural sensitivity in all teacher groups, their feelings of uncertainty or discomfort during cross-cultural training, their propensity to participate and complete tasks and their feedback after each task.

### **Cultural sensitivity training**

The training proceeded in three consecutive days, where the 4 groups were taking turns and all teachers participated in the same training content and duration. Training focused on three main topics: (i) *defining culture and its influence on our perceptions*, (ii) *experiencing cultural group formation and acculturation*, (iii) *developing in-depth understanding of "otherness" and learning to accept one's cultural similarities and differences*. The training included 6 tasks employing the following pedagogical methods: *brainstorming*, *role play*, *discussion*, *feedback and group work*. The following skills were developed: *team work*, *creative thinking*, *conflict reconciliation*, *cross-cultural*

*negotiations, adaptability, cultural intelligence and cultural self-awareness.* Training employed a popular approach using exercises and simulation games about *synthetic cultures* as introduced by G. J. Hofstede and P. B. Pedersen (2002). [12a] Training included two self-reported self-assessments in the beginning of the training and at the end, where teachers freely shared and discussed their impressions, feelings and self-perceptions of cultural sensitivity.

<b>Main topic</b>	<b>Content</b>	<b>Duration</b>
1. What is culture? Influence of our own culture on perceptions of the world around us.	Introduction to the concept of “culture”. Awareness of our cultural identity. Self-assessment at the level of cultural sensitivity of the participants. Key terms: culture, cultural group, subculture, cultural stereotype.	120 minutes
2. Formation of cultural groups. Acculturation and adaptation in the new cultural group.	Formation of the cultural group. Integration. Key terms: Acculturation and adaptation, culture shock.	120 minutes
3. Understanding cultural otherness. Acceptance of one's own and other people's cultural peculiarities.	Strengthening the role of the cultural group. Self-assessment of the level of cultural sensitivity of the participants. Key concepts: culture, cultural group, values, symbols.	120 minutes

**Table 1. Main topic, content and duration of training.**

The tasks performed in training varied from simple to complex with lesser number of people, to increasing the number in subgroups later. We encouraged participants to recreate formation of a cultural identity based on common interests and values. Thus teachers could experience first-hand formation of cultural groups and their values, as well as intensification of cultural identity and belonging. This way we practiced enculturation and later on acculturation in the groups.

Simple games ←			→ Complex games		
“What is culture?”	“Introduce yourself!”	“True or False”	“Be my guest!”	“Negotiation kingdom”	“My Magical Country”
<b>Task types</b>					
Brainstorming, Discussion	Brainstorming, Discussion	Discussion. Quiz. Role play.	Role play. Group work	Role play Group work	Role play Group work
<b>Small number of participants</b>			<b>Large number of participants</b>		
1	2-4	3-5	5-10	10-20	10-20
<b>Scattered identities (old identity) Enculturation</b>			<b>Consolidated identities (new identity) Acculturation</b>		
Identifies with one’s own interests	Identifies with newly formed group’s interests	Identifies with newly formed group’s interests	Strongly identifies with newly formed group’s interests	Identifies with the newly formed culture	Strongly identifies with the newly formed culture

**Table 2. Structural model of cultural sensitivity training.**

The **structural model** presents how tasks evolved from the start to the end of the modules. First, they evolved in their *degree of complexity* - from simple to complex games. This was done to introduce participants to the concepts of cultural diversity and cultural sensitivity. Second, tasks changed in relation to the *number of participants* – it grew from smaller to larger. Reason behind this was the necessity to help teachers gradually get used to experiencing simulated cultural diversity, i.e. *synthetic cultures*. [12b] Third, training evolved from incorporating scattered identities (individual interests and values) to consolidated identities: *building and strengthening the new synthetic cultural identities*. Or in other words, simulating enculturation and acculturation.

**Goals of cultural sensitivity training** included, *first*, using gamification of tasks to help teachers understand acculturation based on their personal experiences during the game. We employed methods such as role play and group competitions to allow participants to experience first-hand belonging to a cultural

group that is foreign to them. *Second*, we stimulated self-reflection and mutual understanding while asking questions about teachers' emotional well-being and feedback. *Third*, the training aimed at supporting emotional awareness and self-expression during completion of tasks. *Fourth*, the training aimed at reinforcing newly formed cultural identities and later promoting them to other cultures. *Fifth*, the training fostered a sense of positive perceptions of foreign cultures and attempted to reduce anxiety and uncertainty among participants.

<b>Task</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>Goal</b>
<b><i>What is culture?</i></b>	Introduction to the concept of “culture”. 10-12 participants, duration: 15-30 minutes.	Discussion. Brainstorming.	To emphasize the importance of perception when understanding foreign cultures.
<b><i>Introduce yourself!</i></b>	Introducing one's own personal values and interests. Grouping participants into simulated cultural groups based on their interests. Introducing one's own cultural group to the others. 10-12 participants, duration: 30 minutes.	Brainstorming. Role play. Discussion.	To help teachers understand cultural group formation and acculturation based on their personal experiences during the game.
<b><i>True or False?</i></b>	Preparing a questionnaire with 5 most important values identifying participants' cultural group. Participants had to give the questionnaire to another cultural group of their choice and check their knowledge. Experiencing acculturation and integration. 5-10 participants, duration was 30 minutes.	Discussion. Quiz. Role play.	To stimulate self-reflection and mutual understanding.
<b><i>Be my guest!</i></b>	The newly formed cultural groups need to choose a representative from another cultural group to be invited as their guest. Group	Role play. Experiential learning.	To stimulate adaptability, conflict reconciliation and communication

	<p>members need to make the person feel as comfortable as possible and cater to his/her needs, while the “foreigner” feels anxious and cannot understand what they want to do. The goal is to try to communicate successfully and reduce the anxiety of the guest. 5-10 participants. Duration was 30 minutes.</p>		<p>skills in reducing anxiety.</p>
<p><b>Negotiation Kingdom</b> <i>(Adaptation of BaFa BaFa by R. Gary Sherts [13])</i></p>	<p>The game includes two cultures with opposing values, who need to negotiate about key resources that one of the cultures needs to survive. The first culture is called Wheat culture. Its values are collectivist, tribal, people value physical closeness and touch, hierarchy is observed when making decisions. The second culture is Cyclists’ culture which is individualistic, egalitarian, mobile, and innovative. The Wheat culture has plenty of wheat that the cyclists need to avoid starvation, while they can offer an innovative bicycle. The goal of the cyclists is to convince the Wheat culture to trade some of their wheat. 10-20 participants. Duration was 30 minutes.</p>	<p>Role play. Negotiation skills. Experiential learning.</p>	<p>To practice negotiation skills, conflict reconciliation and creative thinking.</p>

<p><b><i>My Magic Country</i></b></p>	<p>The goal of the game is to motivate participants to identify with their newly formed cultural groups and to promote their culture to “foreigners”. Their task is to visualize a perfect version of their culture and to attract new people to join them and leave their own native culture. Participants were allowed to use any materials at hand to visualize their ideas. 10-20 participants. Duration was 30 minutes.</p>	<p>Role play. Experiential learning.</p>	<p>To practice creative thinking and adaptability.</p>
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**Table 3. Description of tasks, methods applied and goals of training.**

Execution of training was conducted following two training models. The *first* one was introduced by Alonso (2019), who suggests a comprehensive structure of **gamified cultural sensitivity training**. The author presented an intercultural training workshop with the following steps:

1. *Selection of the learning objectives* should be based on participants’ previous knowledge, the proposed content must be assessed according to participants’ skills, and new knowledge could be introduced when necessary. Fostering critical thinking and teamwork is encouraged.

2. *Getting acquainted with participants’ demographic characteristics*, such as age, sex, profession, ethnic or cultural background, education level, foreign language competence, other interests.

3. *Creating a narrative of the training* – selecting popular and accessible topics for tasks and games, contextualizing these topics within a mission or conflict, using popular cultural tropes such as magicians or warriors, setting simple and achievable goals.

4. *Creating specific, clear and concise rules or guidelines*. Rules should be implemented in the following stages: planning, creation, installation, preparation, execution. Participation order and number should be determined beforehand. There should be roles and tasks for all participants.

5. *Selecting and curating appropriate materials* – for example, drawing materials, construction materials, audio and visual aids, visualizations, pictures, or any other everyday objects useful in simulation games.

6. Selecting and curating *appropriate challenges* based on the capabilities, interests and experience of participants. It is important for to reward completed challenges appropriately.

7. *Summarizing the results* to conclude and reflect on the success of the group. Discussing feedback from participants.

8. *Assessing the results* of each group by taking into account whether the intended objectives were achieved.

Alonso employs a **three-dimensional approach** to gamified cultural sensitivity training, including a *visual* aspect, a *comparative* aspect and a *discovery* aspect of interculturality. In respect to the above-mentioned approach, **we employed all three aspects of multiculturalism in our training.**

The *second* approach used in training is Dimitrov & Haque's (2016) **intercultural teaching competence model, level 1 – foundational competences.** [14] According to Dimitrov & Haque, foundational competences include the following:

1. Developing awareness of one's own cultural and disciplinary identities and positionality in the classroom.

2. Anticipating, valuing and accepting cultural differences in the classroom; paying attention to culturally determined ways of learning and creating cultural safety and trust.

3. Modelling and encouraging a variety of shared perspectives in the classroom.

4. Modelling and encouraging non-judgmental approaches to exploring cultural differences in class.

5. Modelling and supporting tolerance of ambiguity.

The *structure, duration, goals* and *feedback* from training were conducted according to Dimitrov & Haque's model.

## **Observation findings and discussion**

### ***1. Observations of teachers' cultural sensitivity***

Our observation of training included following up with teachers' emotional state and first-hand impressions of the tasks they performed.

**I. Teachers' background.** The groups consisted of teachers in mathematics, Bulgarian language and literature, English language, chemistry, geography, physics, physical education, primary school class teachers, music, arts, civic education, computer science. All teachers had children with special education needs in their classes, as well as ethnically mixed classes with children from all five ethnic groups. Teachers shared they were used to working in a multicultural classroom. They were aware of the necessity to be culturally sensitive and had cognitive realizations of the importance of adapting methodical materials to children's needs. Most of the teachers showed enthusiasm in working in

multicultural classrooms and were open to new approaches. Teachers shared their discontent with lack of support from education authorities in Bulgaria and the difficulties it causes in their classes. Educators also explained that their town and region are multiethnic, with a predominant Roma minority with a lifestyle and values that do not support child literacy. The school uses two mediators of Roma ethnic minority, but to no avail, according to educators. Their explanation for it is that cultural distance between the two mediators and the local Roma community, which belong to different kinship communities, has something to do with lack of communication and cooperation between them. This points to cultural traits of local Roma communities which remain fragmented under the umbrella term “Roma people” and their cultural attitudes remain misunderstood. It is important to note that Roma communities share a great variety of cultural diversity within the ethnic group, with sub-communities differentiated according to their religious affiliations, spoken languages, locality and cultural attitudes. Tomova [15] discusses Bulgarian Roma people’s attitudes to education between 1990 and 2001. Attitudes to education and staying in school remained negative because of the lack of perspective and prevalent segregation of Roma children in Bulgarian schools at the time. The following quotes present a part of shared opinions by Roma parents: “We won’t let our children go to school if the State won’t do anything for us”, “It doesn’t make a big difference if they go or don’t go to school. There are no jobs for us.”, “We’re poor. That’s why the children don’t go to school.” Neminska and Borisova (2021) [16] share contemporary developments on Roma education successes in Bulgarian towns Pazardzhik, Dve Mogili, Stara Zagora, Nova Zagora and a few others. The authors suggest that Roma children should be welcomed to the school environment with value-based education, supporting their own cultural identity and practicing reading and writing in their language, mostly focusing on Roma folk tradition, such as fairytales. [17] According to our observation, the teachers from Vetovo shared similar impressions from their work with Roma children, which included *introducing value-based education practices*, *solely pragmatic approaches*, i.e. why the math task is important for children’s daily life, *simplifying and adapting* the new material to children’s needs and including *physical exercises*, *digital innovation and gamified approaches in class*. Creative approaches and firm boundaries were also considered important for education success. Teachers shared their concern that it was difficult for them to explain the value of education beyond the challenges of everyday life. Values like *civic participation*, *importance of human rights*, *importance of national identity and history* were difficult to perceive by students between ages 10-15 and older. Younger students were more interested in these topics if they were presented in a gamified context or in fictional story for better illustration. Teachers expressed concern that children weren’t feeling motivated to visit school since an early age and there

was not enough support from parents. Overall, teachers expressed content with being able to cope with challenges and help students graduate. Their main fear was that it gets more difficult with time to motivate students to stay in school. Our impression is that *teachers are actively involved in supporting students to their ability and they have developed sufficient cultural sensitivity to respond to students' needs.*

## II. Observations of teachers' participation

Teachers expressed interest in notions such as culture, perception, cultural sensitivity and gamified education. They were taking active part in all tasks, fully immersing in the activities. We observed that only two teachers of 39 resisted taking part in the tasks and opposed the trainer's viewpoints in the beginning. With the course of training the two teachers managed to reconcile their differences with the trainer and completed the objectives of training. Most teachers shared that they managed to experience how cultural identity formed during the games. Some of the teachers claimed they felt they were open-minded during the first self-assessment and confirmed this self-observation during the final self-assessment. All teachers also expressed that they had a variety of interests and hobbies that they feel help them destress and be more adaptable at work. Some of them were interested in travelling - they showed rich general knowledge of foreign cultures and ability to communicate and negotiate in the last two tasks. Teachers also expressed desire to use the games from training in their own classes and adapt them accordingly. Our overall impression was that team culture in the school is based on mutual support and positive outlook on colleagues' activities, goals and challenges. Some of the teachers expressed strong attachment to working with their students, which we deem extremely important for successful multicultural classrooms.

**III. Training was concluded with a briefing based on Hofstede's *Exercises, Stories and Synthetic Cultures*.** [18] Teachers answered eight questions.

Questions	Answers
<i>1. How did you feel as a member of your culture? Were the feelings of all members the same? Why?</i>	Teachers shared that it was easy for them to feel like they belonged to a new culture. The feelings of belonging intensified at the end of training.
<i>2. How has your real culture influenced your behavior as representatives of the simulation culture?</i>	Teachers expressed that they had to adapt their behaviour to the new norms and context in the games. Overall, being aware that it was a

	simulation did not stimulate feelings of anxiety.
<i>3. What determined the outcome of the games: the personalities of the players, the instructions, the simulation cultures or your real cultures?</i>	They shared a variety of responses to this question and concluded that all of the above mentioned had an impact on the outcomes of the games.
<i>4. How did you feel in the presence of people from different cultures? Have you experienced chills, frustration or pleasure?</i>	Being experienced in teaching in multicultural classrooms, teachers shared that they experienced frustration mostly when there was miscommunication during tasks and impossibility to reach an agreement in the last two group tasks.
<i>5. Did any misunderstandings arise? What and why?</i>	Misunderstandings arose in the more complex games, Negotiation Kingdom and My Magic Country, where there were breaking points with the groups not being able to reach an agreement at all.
<i>6. Have you experienced cognitive conflict? Have you experienced emotional conflict (tense atmosphere, hostility)? How were the two connected? How did you deal with them?</i>	Teachers shared that they didn't experience strong negative emotions because they knew each other very well and how to cooperate easily.
<i>7. Which synthetic cultures were well understood and which were not?</i>	Teachers managed to understand the values, norms, motivations and symbols of all synthetic cultures they partook in.
<i>8. What did you learn about yourself and your own culture from this module? What would you apply in your work?</i>	Teachers attributed their quick adaptation to culturally sensitive gamified approaches to their professional experience and personal qualities. They also shared that they would use gamified approaches in the classroom in person and in a digital form, because it helps make teaching more interesting for their students. Pedagogues expressed the desire to introduce the group games "Negotiation Kingdom" and "My Magic Country" in subjects in literature, humanities

	<p>and civic education. The games “Introduce yourself!” and “True or False?” were seen as good for shorter tasks and practicing team work in a variety of subjects.</p>
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**Table 4. Questions asked in training briefing.**

## 2. Propositions for future research

We suggest that using the Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS) by Ang et. al. (2007) [19] to assess cultural sensitivity before and after training can shed light on the actual levels of cultural sensitivity. Observation bias could be reduced or even eliminated with a standardized cultural assessment approach. Author suggests that CQ dimensions in teacher training groups, such as *metacognitive*, *cognitive*, *motivational* and *behavioral* dimensions might be tested to find relationships with one or more of the *intercultural effectiveness outcomes* (i.e. cultural judgement and decision making, cultural adaptation, or task performance in culturally diverse settings). [20]

## Conclusion

Cultural sensitivity training with introduced gamification of tasks *helps teachers understand cultural identity formation and acculturation* based on their personal experiences during the games. Gamification in education has significant potential both for teachers and students, particularly in train-the-trainer approaches. Cultural sensitivity training through gamification also develops self-reflection and mutual understanding. [21] It is evident that this team of teachers experienced better team cohesion at the end of training. Benefits of working on cultural competence also include reinforcing one’s own cultural identities and promoting them to other cultures in a friendly way. And last but not least, fostering a sense of positive perceptions of foreign cultures and reducing anxiety and uncertainty should remain goals of cultural intelligence trainings in education.

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