



Literature on the Intercultural Teaching of Russian as a Foreign Language (2007–2022): Some Critical Notes

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Abstract

This mini review summarizes and evaluates the results from research on the intercultural teaching of Russian as a foreign language (RFL) during the period 2007–2022. We focused on 10 studies (books, articles, and book chapters) that dealt with concepts and issues relevant to the area of intercultural education (IE) (e.g., the definition of intercultural communication, the development of intercultural communicative competence). In addition to highlighting common patterns in the treatment of IE in the RFL field, we identified the strengths of the literature on IE in the RFL field (the holistic intertwining of IE and RFL and an emphasis on both IE theories and practices) and weaknesses (the isolation of RFL scholars from international debates on IE and their essentialized view of Russian culture). The mini review concludes with suggestions of possible new avenues for the development of IE theories and practices in the RFL sphere.

Keywords: Intercultural communication; Intercultural communicative competence; Intercultural education; Intercultural practices; Intercultural teaching; Intercultural theories; Interculturalism; Russian as a foreign language; Russian culture; Russophone culture

Abbreviations: IE – Intercultural education; RFL – Russian as a foreign language; RO – Research objective

Introduction

As is well known, intercultural education (IE) (in the teaching of foreign languages, but not only) has roots in the policies of the European Union and UNESCO dating to the 1990s [1–17]. With the beginning of the second millennium C.E., the foundations of intercultural theories and practices laid previously have been the subject of numerous treatments and developments, which have shaped the modern-day idea of IE [18–29].

In the field of Russian as a foreign language (RFL), the topic of IE has been studied since the early 2000s, with first works devoted to RFL intercultural teaching [30, 31]. To date, researchers have mainly addressed two basic components of IE: intercultural communication (*mezhhkul'turnaya kommunikatsiya*) and intercultural communicative competence (*mezhhkul'turnaya kommunikativnaya kompetentsiya*), as defined below.

Intercultural communication is generally understood by RFL scholars to be the “adequate mutual understanding of two participants of a communicative act who belong to different national cultures” [32, p. 43] (hereafter, all translations are the author’s). This definition is used throughout the present paper, but with a slight modification, eliminating the adjective “national” to refer not only to national (e.g., Russian) culture, but also to the transnational (e.g., Russophone) culture of individuals speaking a language and participating in the culture without being ethnic/national bearers of it, for example in bilingual/multilingual or migration/diaspora contexts (see the Section “Weaknesses in the RFL Literature on IE”). In this way, the definition of intercultural communication adopted is as follows: “adequate mutual understanding of two participants of a communicative act who belong to different cultures.” The precondition for the occurrence of intercultural communication,

according to experts, is intercultural communicative competence, which can be described as “the individual’s ability to exist in a multicultural society, to be successfully understood by representatives of other cultures and by representatives of one’s own culture[s]” [33, p. 160]. Here, we changed the final word to the plural form (*cultures* instead of *culture*), to account for the “multiple identities” [17, p. 10] in which a single person who speaks a language can partake, given the fact that no one has a single identity/culture (see the Section “Weaknesses in the RFL literature on IE”).

This mini review aims to summarize the results of the RFL research on intercultural teaching since the topic of IE emerged in the Russian scholarly discourse following the 11th congress of the International Association of Teachers of Russian Language and Literature, which was held in Bulgaria in 2007 (see [34, p. 313]). In particular, the sample examined is formed by the most important studies (books, articles, and book chapters) devoted to concepts and issues pertinent to IE that have helped to delineate the ideas of intercultural communication and intercultural communicative competence in the RFL field. More specifically, the sample is made up of 10 references, of which four are books, five are articles, and one is book chapter; all published between 2007 and 2022 [35–44] and mainly written in Russian (with the exception of [43], which is written in English).

The sample was selected using a purposive sampling method based on the researcher’s choice, with attention paid to the source’s relevance to the topic under investigation and the prestige of the venue (e.g., renowned Russian and international RFL publishing houses such as Russian Language. Courses, Flinta, Zlatoust, and Georgetown University Press, or top RFL scientific journals such as Russian Language Abroad, RUDN Journal of Russian and Foreign Languages Research and Teaching, Russian Language Studies, and The World of Russian Word).

Priority was given to general research on IE theories and methods, but in one case, given its significance for RFL intercultural teaching, a book on textbook theory was also included [41] (in support of this choice, it should be noted that the author, Anatoliy Berdichevskiy, is a key name in the treatment of IE in the RFL sphere. He is the author of countless articles on intercultural communication and intercultural communicative competence, such as [37, 38], and co-author of two other books analyzed here [39, 40]). At the same time, for the purposes of this mini review, works in which IE served as a backdrop to research that had other focuses, such as the didactics of literature or translation issues (e.g., [45, 46]) were not considered, nor were (with the exception of [42]) studies based on stated approaches of Russian cultural linguistics (*lingvostranovedeniye* and *lingvokul'turologiya*) and which, therefore, although close in themes and directions, were external to the aims of IE as we have defined it (on this topic, see [37, pp. 63–64]).

This mini review has four specific research objectives (RO):

- RO-1: To highlight common patterns in the treatment of IE in the RFL field (2007–2022).
- RO-2: To identify the strengths of the literature on IE in

the RFL field (2007–2022).

- RO-3: To identify weaknesses in the literature on IE in the RFL field (2007–2022) and
- RO-4: To suggest possible areas for improvement in the RFL research on IE, taking into account the analysis of RFL literature (RO-1, RO-2, and RO-3).

Discussion

In this section, we provide the results from the analysis and evaluation of a selected sample of studies on the intercultural teaching of RFL published between 2007 and 2022. After making some general observations and highlighting common patterns in the treatment of IE in RFL, we first identify the strengths and then the weaknesses of the literature.

General Observations and Common Patterns in the RFL Literature on IE

Since 2007, when the theme of IE entered the Russian academic discourse (see [34, p. 313]), RFL scholars have been consistently interested in theories and practices related to intercultural communication and the development of intercultural communicative competence. The sample analyzed in the present study reveals the growing interest in IE in recent years, as the 2010s gave way to the 2020s. We identified four relevant works dedicated to the theme published between 2007 and 2015 [37, 39, 41, 44] and six significant studies published between 2016 and 2022 [35, 36, 38, 40, 42, 43], of which four were released between 2020 and 2022 [35, 38, 40, 43].

We recognized common patterns in these studies, published between 2007 and 2022, which constitute a shared background in the RFL literature dealing with the topic of IE:

1. In general, IE is interpreted as a key topic for teaching and learning RFL as a whole; that is, it is inserted into the RFL methodological system as one of its constituent elements (see, e.g., [37, 38]). This means that, from the point of view of RFL scholarship, it is no longer possible to teach or learn Russian without taking into account the intercultural dimension. This point is explored more deeply in the Section “Strengths in the RFL literature on IE.”
2. IE is treated from both a theoretical and a practical point of view (see, e.g., [40, 44]). This second observation implies the presence of a holistic perspective on IE in the studies examined that involves both the theoretical level and the implementation of intercultural approaches and methods in RFL classes. This point is revisited in the Section “Strengths in the RFL Literature on IE.”
3. Scholars move preferably within a Russian theoretical-methodological framework derived from previous RFL studies. With few exceptions (e.g., [41, 43]), references to the international literature on IE are almost entirely missing from these works (see, e.g., [39]). This point is addressed in greater detail in the Section “Weaknesses in the RFL literature on IE.”

Strengths in the RFL Literature on IE

The literature on IE in RFL in the studies analyzed here is notable for two major strengths.

First, IE is not a disjointed and isolated topic that gives rise to studies as an end to themselves but is actually and profoundly linked to the RFL sphere. In other words, RFL experts recognize that IE is a building block of RFL, when conceived of as a system. In this sense, the discussions on RFL methodologies as a whole cannot disregard the treatment of IE, just as discussions on IE cannot disregard the treatment of RFL methodologies as a whole. This is demonstrated not only by the inclusion of specific chapters dedicated to intercultural communication in textbooks and guides to RFL instruction [43], but also by articles investigating the content of IE within the wider RFL system [35, 37, 38] or exploring different approaches to RFL that are deeply connected to intercultural communication, such as anthropological linguodidactics and cultural linguistics [36, 42]. In reality, the connection between IE and RFL, and its inclusion in the theoretical-practical system of RFL learning and teaching, is well exemplified by the recent books on the subject of IE in RFL [39–44], which interpret intercultural dynamics and mechanisms as elements of RFL teaching and learning and apply to IE the same approaches and methods developed within established RFL studies. For example, Berdichevskiy et al.'s book [39] builds a real IE system for the RFL field in which vocabulary, grammar, and the four main language skills (reading, listening, writing, and speaking) are learned through and thanks to intercultural means. An analogous system is the one proposed in Berdichevskiy and Golubeva's work [41], where it is applied to the theory of RFL textbook development (pp. 44–112).

Secondly, we can observe how these studies give ample space, alongside the theory, to concrete teaching practices in RFL classes that can be used to promote intercultural communication through the development of intercultural communicative competence. For example, in Berdichevskiy et al.'s book [40], the first part (pp. 9–123) is dedicated to the methodology of IE in a foreign language (with a focus on RFL), but assumes a more theoretical view, while the second and longest part (pp. 124–357) describes the teacher's work as it relates to trainings on intercultural skills via pronunciation; lexical and grammar areas; and intercultural abilities in reading, listening, speaking, and writing. This is achieved by providing numerous examples of exercises to be proposed to students. Turning to Petrikova et al.'s book [44], the problem-solving skills of the RFL teacher grappling with IE are tested, but teachers are also provided with more complex activities as training examples based on case studies (see, e.g., pp. 74, 86). The book provides exemplars of intercultural activities such as dramatizations, debates, and group projects (see, e.g., pp. 289–300). Works such as Nemtchinova's [43] also focus on concrete teaching strategies for the intercultural teaching of RFL, by considering various techniques, methods, activities, and practical suggestions for facilitating IE in the RFL curriculum, from inviting native guest speakers to scenario-based activities. For her part, Amelina's article [35] questions how to create favorable conditions for intercultural dialogue in RFL in specific modern teaching contexts, such as the

blended learning format.

To summarize, the literature on IE in RFL has two strengths, the holistic intertwining of IE and RFL, on the one hand, and an emphasis on both IE theories and practices on the other. However, the literature is also marked by some weaknesses.

Weaknesses in the RFL Literature on IE

The literature on IE in RFL has several weaknesses that must be considered. For instance, the scientific discussions by RFL experts are marked by a rather local character, since not all of the studies analyzed in the present paper come from international IE literature. Some rely exclusively on previous Russian studies of IE and RFL for their theoretical framework.

While the books we examined [39, 40, 41, 44] and the most recently published articles (e.g., [43]) try to enter the international debate by recalling, alongside RFL studies, those of IE (in a general sense, and in the specific area of RFL), there are other instances where the situation is very different. For example, Mamontov's article dedicated to the analysis of a specific Russian branch of cultural studies (*lingvokul'turologiya*), in its applicative aspects, is related to intercultural communication in RFL teaching [42]. However, among the 30 references he provides, none is a text from the international literature on IE. Instead, Mamontov is mainly focused on Russian studies of general foreign language teaching and RFL, which emerged from the linguistic and cultural disciplines of *lingvostranovedeniye* and *lingvokul'turologiya*. The same is true for Aschi et al.'s work [36], where support for the construction of an intercultural didactic model based on Russian anthropological linguodidactics is promoted only by the use of Russian references (not only from RFL, but also from psychology, pedagogy, and philosophy). The only text cited relating to the basics of IE is a well-known Russian-language book that is, perhaps, outdated in some respects [47]; international studies on IE are not considered.

Moreover, the sample of RFL studies on IE reviewed here seems, in general, to share an essentialized view of the concept of Russian culture and, consequently, IE. This may be a consequence of the first reported weakness (the local character of the research, its non-international orientation, and isolation from the international debate), since an anti-essentialist approach has long been established in international studies on language education [25, 26]. Such an essentialization of culture basically passes through the consideration of culture under the national aspect, thus neglecting the Russophone [48], non-ethnic component of the culture of Russia, and the non-recognition of the complexity and dynamic nature of the concept of culture in the implementation of intercultural dialogue in RFL, that is, the possibility that an individual speaking a language has "multiple identities" [17, p. 10] and participates in multiple cultures simultaneously (such as the case of a Belorussian speaking both Belorussian and Russian and thus participating in both Belorussian culture and Russian/Russophone culture).

In other words, in many of the studies analyzed here (e.g., [37, 39, 40, 41, 44]), we found no problematization of the concept of culture, which is qualified as exclusively national (Russian culture) and ultimately conceived in a simplified manner as a unitary,

homogeneous, and fixed concept (for a better insight into this issue of RFL research on IE, see [49]). For instance, Berdichevskiy's pioneering article dedicated to the "why," "how," and "what" of IE [37] lays the foundations of the IE model in the RFL area that are developed in subsequent studies [38–41], but does not address the complexity and versatility of the concept of culture, which in the end is presented as something static and changeless to be acquired by RFL learners (not surprisingly, on p. 63, Berdichevskiy refers to the traditionalistic definition of culture by Efim Passov, the father of the communicative method in Russia, as "part of the general culture of humanity" [50, p. 23]). Not even Nemtchinova [43], while dwelling on many issues of teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence in the RFL class, highlights the need to present culture in RFL as something that is multifaceted (Russian and Russophone, or national and transnational), dynamic, and complex. On the contrary, although recognizing that intercultural communicative competence is "a complex, multifaceted construct" (p. 334), her idea of culture remains rooted in a national, static, and essentialistic base. For example, she argues that the use of Russian paintings in an RFL class should serve the function of providing learners with "an important way of understanding the Russian cultural canon and its reflection of the national consciousness" (p. 345). For more on the use of the expression "national consciousness," which together with other terms and expressions denotes a nationalist and essentialized vision of culture that still dominates in RFL studies today, please refer to [49].

We are not saying that RFL experts do not admit the value of personal differences in intercultural dialogue (see, e.g., [37, p. 64; 39, p. 11]). However, by fostering a national and simplified (unitary, homogeneous, and fixed) viewpoint on culture in practice, they propose an essentialized idea of culture that achieves the opposite effect; it flattens every individual difference, complexity, and stratification in the light of which IE cannot happen as we defined it in the Introduction. Furthermore, such an interpretation of culture and IE is also obsolete, because, as we have seen, it does not take into account the modern sociolinguistic situation of RFL teaching.

In summary, the literature on IE in RFL has both strengths and weaknesses, including the isolation of scholars from the international debate on IE and their essentialized view of Russian culture.

Conclusion

This mini review has summarized and evaluated the results from research on IE in the RFL field published between 2007 and 2022, with a focus on a sample of 10 relevant studies on the subject. The analysis has highlighted common patterns in the treatment of IE in the RFL field and identified strengths and weaknesses of the examined literature (RO-1, RO-2, and RO-3).

Building on the analysis and evaluation of this selected sample of RFL research on IE, we suggest two possible areas for improvement of IE theories and practices in the RFL sphere (RO-4):

1. RFL studies dedicated to IE should include a greater dialogue with international studies on IE. Among other things, this would have a positive impact on the perceptions of cultural

and intercultural phenomena through a non-essentialist vision of the concept of culture (a long-established view in international linguistic education).

2. RFL studies should afford greater sociocultural attention to the different contexts in which Russian is spoken. This would not only make it possible to overcome the essentialist vision of culture (and therefore to improve intercultural dialogues), but also have positive implications for the teaching and learning methodology of RFL as a whole, given the close link demonstrated herein between RFL and IE.

If the research on IE in the RFL sphere takes up the challenge of changing and addressing its own issues, the benefits for both IE and RFL as a whole will be enormous.

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Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest of any kind.

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