

# FINDING THE PATH TO SUCCESSFUL LANGUAGE LEARNING

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## ABSTRACT:

*The focus in foreign language education in the third millennium does no longer fall on the learners' purely linguistic competence, but rather on using the language communicatively alongside with cultural knowledge as a means to effectively communicate with other people around the globe. Students should learn how to reach out to the professional world around them, using not only the foreign language but mainly cultural skills. Therefore, learners themselves should be getting ready to face the challenge of interculturality. A prerequisite to learning how to become culturally competent is the individual's own awareness of and motivation for that. The paper will present and analyze some recent research findings on higher education students' motivation to adapt to a cross-cultural approach in the language classroom. The results show that most students learning English in Romanian technical universities do have the motivational availability required for an intercultural venture.*

**Key words:** *education, intercultural competence, language learning, motivation*

## Introduction

The twenty-first century world has become a *global village* in which physical and geographical distances between people of different political, social and cultural backgrounds have diminished dramatically. Cultural diversity, linguistic pluralism and globalization, endorsed by an unprecedented growth of human mobility, broad access to information, use of latest technologies and more and more frequent intercultural interactions among people in all domains of activity, already constitute permanent dimensions to our modern way of living. This is the background against which our learners live and are educated for life.

The 'school' must keep up and comply with the newly emerging requirements of education - education for a multicultural society and intercultural contacts. The institution of the school needs to accommodate the cultural dimensions which are encompassing its curricula and

methodologies. Dialogue, tolerance, social cohesion and peaceful coexistence should be fostered through educational endeavours – they are not in-born human values, they are acquired by individuals through a process of learning .

Given these circumstances, traditional educational systems are currently called to reflect all these changes in their programmes by adjusting their objectives, values, and practices to the contemporary demands placed on them. Nowadays universities are expected to produce ‘interculturally’ competent graduates who can live and perform successfully in a global society. Accordingly, adding an intercultural dimension to educational goals is becoming a prioritized target, particularly within the area of humanities which include foreign language education. Mastery of a foreign language provides a first ‘passport’ to accessing other cultural spaces. However, it is the communicative intercultural competence of the speaker that plays a key role in promoting a successful dialogue across cultures.

In the light of these preliminary considerations, in the first part of the paper we will discuss aspects concerning intercultural competence and its relation to foreign language learning as well as the educational need for developing such competencies. The second part will focus on part of a research study on the learners’ motivational availability regarding the integration of an explicit cultural element into foreign language teaching and learning.

### **1. The cultural dimension in foreign language education**

The importance of teaching language and ‘culture’ at the same time has gained significance since the late ‘70’s when there was a crucial change in foreign language education methodologies: the traditional teaching of language structures and grammar rules within teacher-centered approaches was abandoned. The importance of cultural norms was highlighted in communication once the communicative, learner-centred methods in instruction began to be applied<sup>1</sup>. In the years that followed, researchers signalled the need for adding sociolinguistic and cultural components to the foreign language study in existing curricula and practices. Studies argued for the obvious relation between culture and

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<sup>1</sup> (Pulverness, A. (2000). Distinctions and dichotomies: Culture-bound, culture-free. *English Teaching Professional*, 14.)

language<sup>2</sup> based on the idea that culture and language are inseparable parts of a whole - one cannot be properly approached (i.e. taught/learned) without considering the other.

At present, the concern about 'cultural' teaching/learning has increased, and both national and international governmental and educational bodies pay full attention to this issue. For instance, the European Council's report for the year 2000 includes special reference to the fundamental cultural features that should be given importance in foreign language education<sup>3</sup>. Other researchers<sup>4</sup> pinpoint the advantages of teaching about the target 'culture' in foreign language classes by claiming that:

- a) Students can discover that the target 'culture' provides a realistic reason for them to learn the target language;
- b) The examples from daily life that the course books used in foreign language education contain can be perceived by students as unreal ones. By learning about the target language 'culture, learners are more likely to establish a link between language forms with naturally occurring situations in another cultural space;
- c) Cultural teaching and learning also raise the students' motivation towards learning.

It seems that the more recent research on the effect of 'culture' integrated language courses expresses similar views. As an example we can quote Tsou<sup>5</sup> who makes the observation that the students' language proficiency improved significantly and their interests in language learning increased after culture lessons had been integrated into EFL (English as a Foreign Language) instruction.

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<sup>2</sup> (e.g. Byram, 1989,1994, 1997; Kramsch, 1988, 1993, 2001)

<sup>3</sup> These are related to a community's daily life, social life standards, people's relationships with each other, social values and beliefs, body language, social traditions and behaviors about social customs (Common European Framework in Its Political and Educational Context, 2000, pp. 102-103).

<sup>4</sup> (e.g. Kitao, K. (1991). Teaching culture in foreign language instruction in the United States. *Doshisha Studies in English*, 52-53, pp. 285-306.)

<sup>5</sup> (Tsou, W. (2005) The effects of cultural instruction on FL learning. *RELC Journal*, 36(1), pp.39-57)

The question that might still stand on someone's mind is why we should comply with the change in our way of being and doing things. For what reason should someone embrace the option of becoming 'intercultural'? Our answer is that, simply, because diversity is an undeniable reality. We are all connected through the increasing globalization of communications, trade, and labour practices. Changes in one part of the world do affect people everywhere. Considering our increasing diversity and interconnected problems, getting ready for the change seems to be the best strategy for accomplishing our personal and professional goals. Since social, economic and cultural changes are coming faster and faster, individuals should understand the need for (inter)cultural competence - if we don't improve our existing skills we will find ourselves in a serious gridlock, not only with society but also with ourselves.

### **1.1. Intercultural competence**

It has been argued that intercultural competence (IC) holds a key position in the specific area of tertiary foreign language education. One traditional reason which supports this argument is that, indeed, language and culture are regarded as inseparable constructs<sup>6</sup>. The forms and uses of a language reflect the cultural values of the society in which that language is spoken. That is why linguistic competence alone is no longer enough for learners of a language to become fully competent in that language. To function successfully in a culturally-diverse society, language learners need to become aware of the culturally appropriate ways to communicate, e.g. address people, express regret, make requests, refuse or agree or disagree with someone. They should develop an awareness of the fact that verbal and non-verbal behaviours, that are appropriate in their own speech community, may be perceived differently by members of the target language speech community. They have to understand that, in order for their own communication to be successful, language use must be endorsed by culturally appropriate behaviour. In order to be able to do this, learners need to develop specific skills and strategies which together will form their intercultural communicative competence.

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<sup>6</sup> (e.g., Byrnes, H. (2002). Toward academic-level foreign language abilities: Reconsidering foundational assumptions, expanding pedagogical options. In B. L. Leaver & B. Shekhtman (Eds.), *Developing professional-level language proficiency* (pp. 34-58). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press., and Kramsch, , C. (1993) *Context and culture in language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.)

Therefore, the path to successful language learning leads through the discovery and exploration of the hidden part of the ‘iceberg’ of communication<sup>7</sup>. To be able to carry out this demanding task, learners must be endowed with a proper amount of motivation for learning, because intercultural competency requires a process of individual adaptation – ‘intercultural’ individuals need to develop an inclusive and integrative world view which allows them to effectively accommodate the demands of functioning in a culturally diverse society.

## **1.2. What is intercultural competence?**

There is a wide range of definitions given to intercultural competence – lots of pages have been written on this topic. However it would be easier to start from what we have suggested in our discussion so far. One of the things we certainly know about IC is that mere language learning may not be sufficient for ‘culture’ learning. Another thing which could be inferred is that cultural knowledge (i.e. providing of information about the people, products, and customs of the target culture) as such does not necessarily lead to competence. Indeed, the presentation of culture as a set of learnable ‘facts’ promotes the notion of culture as a static construct. Such an approach fails to acknowledge the variability of behaviour within the target culture community, it ignores the participative role of the individual in the creation of culture, and it disregards the interaction of language and culture in the making of meaning.

Then, what is it that leads to intercultural competence? Let us consider just one of the definitions given to the concept. Fantini<sup>8</sup> defines IC (intercultural competence) as “a complex of abilities needed to perform *effectively* and *appropriately* when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself” (p. 12). What someone should understand from this definition is that ‘performing effectively’ requires the acquisition of skills, which means intentional IC training,

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<sup>7</sup> Culturally determined verbal and non-verbal behaviours and values

<sup>8</sup> (Fantini, A. E. (2006). Exploring and assessing intercultural competence.

[http://www.sit.edu/publications/docs/feil\\_research\\_report.pdf](http://www.sit.edu/publications/docs/feil_research_report.pdf)

while ‘performing appropriately’ implies cultural awareness<sup>9</sup> and sensitivity<sup>10</sup>.

Since the concept displays so much complexity, researchers have sometimes resorted to sophisticated theoretical constructs in order to express its meaning. Based on findings in the literature, his own work and experience in the European context, Byram<sup>11</sup> suggested a multidimensional model of intercultural competence with the following components:

1. *Attitude* – this element refers to the ability to relativize the one’s self and value others. The ‘attitude’ factor expresses the individual’s “curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one’s own” (p. 91).

2. *Knowledge of one’s self and others* – this means knowledge of the rules for individual and social interaction and it consists of knowing social groups and their practices, both in one’s own culture and in the other culture.

3. *Skills of interpreting and relating* – this component describes the individual’s ability to interpret the information and make connections between it and similar data.

4. *Skills of discovery and interaction* - these allow the individual to acquire “new knowledge of culture and cultural practices,” including the ability to use existing knowledge, attitudes, and skills in cross-cultural interactions.” ( p. 98).

5. *Critical cultural awareness* - this factor describes the ability to use perspectives on practices and products in one’s own culture and in other cultures to make comparisons and evaluations.

An interesting aspect of Byram’s model lies in signalling that IC does not include only knowledge in terms of insight and awareness of the

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<sup>9</sup> understand, accept and even appreciate the differences in attitudes and values between oneself and people from other backgrounds.

<sup>10</sup> being aware that cultural differences and similarities exist and have an effect on values, learning and behaviour.

<sup>11</sup> (Byram, M. (1997) *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.)

target culture (C2) and own culture (C1), but also positive attitudes towards C2.

Definitions and models like the ones exemplified above seek to explain the types of skills and abilities an individual needs in order to function adequately in culturally diverse settings, i.e. to be interculturally competent. Intercultural competence can be regarded as the individual's ability to step beyond one's own culture and interact with other individuals from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds.

To sum up, transcending the framework of traditional foreign language education requires the acquisition of a set of cognitive, affective and behavioural skills and the development of personal characteristics that will support the effective and appropriate interaction with people from other cultural contexts. Such an ability involves the individual's own learning and as already stated before, successful learning is determined to a great extent by motivation.

Since there is apparently no magic carpet ride to another culture<sup>12</sup>, it is vitally important—in addition to teaching/learning about products, practices, and perspectives—that 'culture' education should address components vital to the development of the learners' IC, including *cultural self-awareness*, *favourable attitudes* towards C2 and, particularly, the *motivation* to learn.

The next section of this paper presents a body of research which reflects some of these concerns.

## **2. Experimental**

In this part of the paper we are going to present part of a wider research study on the technical higher education students' motivation, willingness and readiness for having an intercultural dimension added to their language learning.

The research, carried out in 2010-2011, was based on a questionnaire of 19 items administered to 367 participants – first and second-year students learning English - sampled from three main technical universities in Romania, i.e. 'Politehnica' Bucuresti, 'Gh. Asachi' Technical University

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<sup>12</sup> Robinson, G.L.N. (1988) '*Crosscultural Understanding*', London; Prentice Hall

of Iasi and The Technical University of Cluj-Napoca. Participation in the study was voluntary in all three universities. A call to participate in the survey was sent by e-mail via fellow teachers in Iasi and Cluj-Napoca. In Bucharest 'Politehnica' we appealed to our own students and requested our colleagues to help with their learners. The students' ages ranged between 18 and 20, and most respondents were male (66%), a fact which is not very surprising given the profile of the institutions in which the research was done, i.e. engineering.

The data were obtained and interpreted by means of statistical procedures.

### **2.1. Rationale and hypothesis for the study**

One reason for initiating this research is that a renovation of education cannot be implemented without the unconditioned involvement and support of the learners, who are the direct beneficiaries of the educational process. We must know what they wish, expect or need their learning to achieve, especially in a learner-centred approach. On the other hand, it is our belief that higher education can provide an excellent opportunity for learners to explore 'cultural' learning and practise the development of intercultural competencies owing to several reasons:

- at the age of 18 and over, students have already gone through a general education process and have become mature enough to cope with concepts such as *stereotypes*, *cultural shock* or *ethnocentrism*;
- the university 'classroom', life on campus, study or work abroad programmes are 'intercultural' experiences which offer students the opportunity to develop corresponding competencies. The times with old 'buddies' from the same neighbourhood are long forgotten; fellow students come from all over the country, sometimes from foreign countries; they have different family and social backgrounds, learning experiences and so on, in a word, their individual 'cultures' are different and diverse;
- higher education students are young adults who are motivated to succeed in a professional career; so, once they realize what the requirements are, they will engage in training which satisfies labour market demands (in this case, the ability and capability of communicating efficiently in a foreign language and dealing with people who do not share the same cultural background).

The research was intended to test the validity of the proposition according to which the introduction of a deliberate cultural element into



FL teaching could increase the students' motivation and provide more incentives for their learning. Overall, the major purpose of the study was to identify the FL learners' attitudes in terms of knowledge, perceptions, expectations and awareness in relation to a cross-cultural approach in the study of English as a foreign language.

We examined several variables for learners, of which only 2 items have been selected for discussion in this paper: These are

- the way in which the research subjects understand the concept of 'culture', and
- their motivation for the introduction of an explicit cross-cultural approach in their study.

## 2.2. Results and discussion

### 2.2.1. The concept of 'culture'

The students' understanding of the concept of 'culture' was investigated by using the simple, straightforward question of: *'What does culture mean to you?'*

Being an open-ended item, we used 6 main categories to encode the respondents' answers, as shown in Figure 1 below.

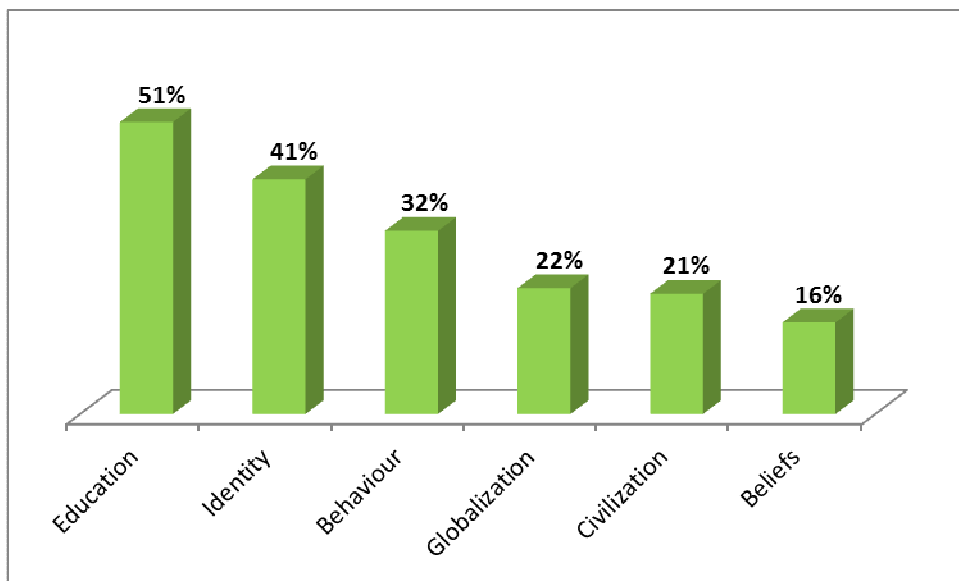


Fig.1. Associations with the concept of „culture”(%)<sup>13</sup>

The meaning given by students to the concept of ‘culture’ is an essential ‘ingredient’ for adopting an intercultural approach in foreign language education. Learning a language from an intercultural perspective begins with a certain perception of culture’s significance, applicability or mission in the process. If culture is seen as important or of major significance to the individual, then the motivation for learning will be high.

As illustrated by the bar graph, ‘culture’ is perceived and understood as ‘*education*’ with the highest score. This result leads to the assumption that the majority of the respondents share the belief that, through ‘culture’, individuals can attain full intellectual and moral formation of their capacities as an important part of the integral development of a person. Although this result may also suggest a somehow elitist view on culture<sup>14</sup>, seeing ‘culture’ as education provides a sound motivational resource for intercultural learning within which ‘culture’ is a core reference.

A very interesting point is that, in their second choice, most of the student respondents equate ‘culture’ with ‘identity’. Definitions given to ‘interculturality’ focus on the individual and his cultural identity<sup>15</sup>. Such a view on ‘culture’ is likely to facilitate the introduction of an intercultural approach because it reveals an inner motivation for preserving a culturally-determined identity and self-esteem. Moreover, if ‘culture’ is understood as the process of building an identity, the intercultural approach in the local context can make plenty of room for C1 (learners’ own culture) discovery and exploration, which is an essential component of intercultural training. To interact successfully with others, individuals need to know first who they really are.

To sum up, the subjects’ major rating of ‘culture’ as ‘education’ – a formative process –provides the prerequisites for an existing inner motivation for learning, which can be made more dynamic within an explicit intercultural approach in the language class.

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<sup>13</sup> The added percentages exceed 100%, because the question asked respondents to choose 3 items.

<sup>14</sup> To become an ‘educated’ person in terms of having connoisseurship and appreciation of cultural products, e.g. literature, fine arts, etc. This assumption mostly applies to the item of ‘civilization’.

<sup>15</sup> Interculturality involves encounters between culturally-diverse individual identities.

### 2.2.2. Motivation

Without a true relevance to the learners' life and their communities, an intercultural approach would be limited to 'a fairy tale magic land' (Nieto, 1996:9). An educational philosophy becomes valuable when it responds to certain immediate, contextual needs such as the need to provide training for life and work in a culturally-diverse world.

The question addressed was

*Do you think that the introduction of an explicit cultural element into foreign language teaching/learning would make it more appealing, interesting and useful to you?*

*Explain and justify your answer.*

The question is of a mixed-type: first, it requires two options -Yes/No, and secondly the respondents are asked to supply an argument for their answers. The data obtained were organized in 6 categories:

1. *Motivation for learning more about the target language culture*
2. *Fulfilment of general education*
3. *Motivation for learning what is 'new'*
4. *The importance of 'culture'/cultural aspects in modern society*
5. *Awareness/knowledge of one's own culture*
6. *No answer*

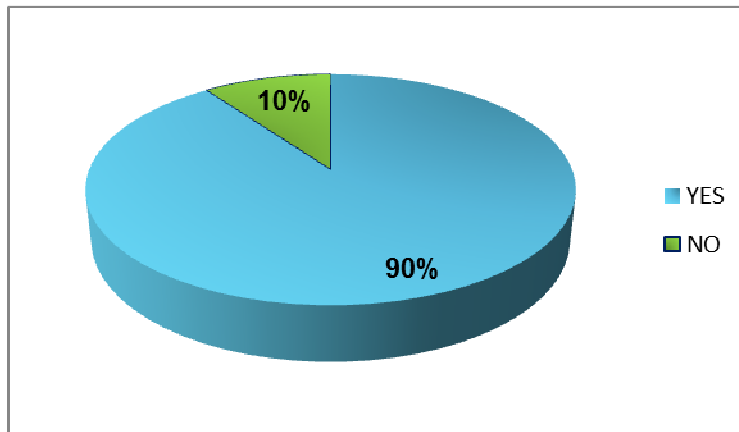


Fig.2. *The introduction of an explicit cultural element into teaching (%)*

As observed, the 'yes' answer scores an extremely high percentage of 90%, which suggests that there is a level of high student motivation for

the adoption of an intercultural approach in learning English as a foreign language. An interesting remark is that not one of the students who answered 'no' produced an argument for their response, so we may never find out why they are against this change in foreign language education.

The answers of the 328 de subjects who made a choice for 'yes', mainly fell into two categories with close scores: *the importance of 'culture' in modern society* and *motivation for learning what is 'new'* (Figure 3 below). ”

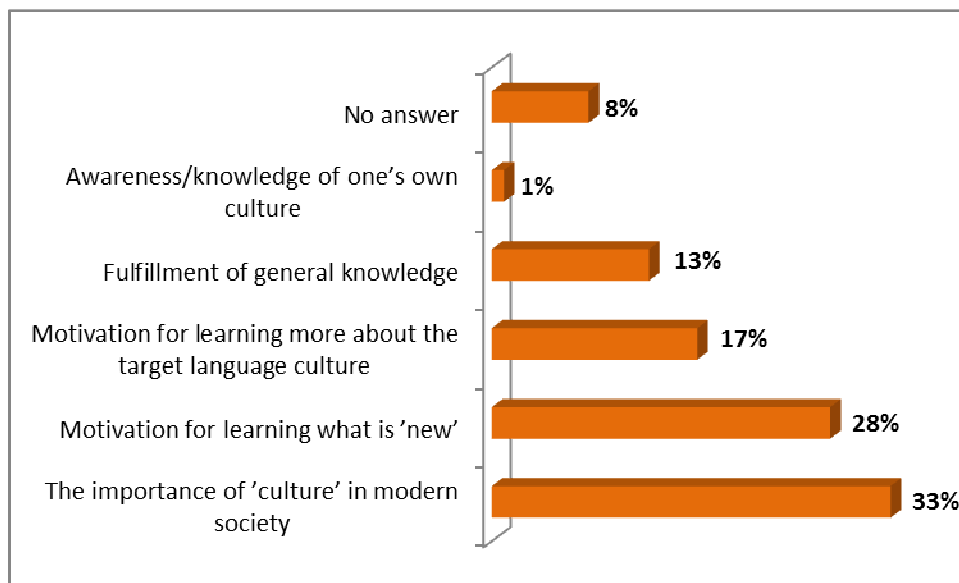


Fig.3. Reason for the 'yes' answer ref. the introduction of an explicit cultural element (% of N=328)

The rankings obtained prompt several observations. Thus, the score of 33% for the importance of culture in the modern world shows that not very many learners (not even half of them) are aware of this dominant aspect of our lives. This may be due to the students' being still very young or to their previous learning experiences, most of them in the traditional way. On the other hand, since it is the highest score, it means that the largest number of the subjects involved in the research<sup>16</sup> keep up with information and are rooted in reality – 'culture' has become an indubitable presence in all domains of human activity, from business to leisure, and the integration of an intercultural approach in foreign language education is a 'must'.

<sup>16</sup> The results can be generalized to the sampled students and not to all the universities in Romania.

The next item clearly shows that the ‘new’ input represented by the cultural element has strong connections with prospective motivation. What is ‘new’ usually arouses interest and curiosity which are basic ingredients and incentives for an increased motivation to learn the language.

As for the motivation to learn more about British culture, its relatively low score indicates that some of the students mistake ‘cultural information’<sup>17</sup> for the cultural knowledge and awareness that an intercultural approach entails.

The lowest score obtained by ‘*awareness/knowledge of one’s culture*’ is indicative of the students’ understanding that this is not so important when dealing with intercultural matters, a belief which needs to be amended.

### **2.2.3. Culture and motivation**

In order to find out whether the understanding of the concept of ‘*culture*’ has any influence on the type of motivation<sup>18</sup> for the adoption of a cultural element in the language class, we correlated two sets of answers. We selected only the answers of the students who positively appreciated that the cultural element would be motivating (e.g. appealing, interesting and useful) and joined them with the same students’ answers regarding the

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<sup>17</sup> Having studied English for many years, our students may consider that they already know lots of things about British culture in terms of geography, history, literature, politics or lifestyles. These topics are to be found in high school textbooks.

<sup>18</sup> Integrative and instrumental

concept of 'culture'. This is illustrated in Figure 4 below.

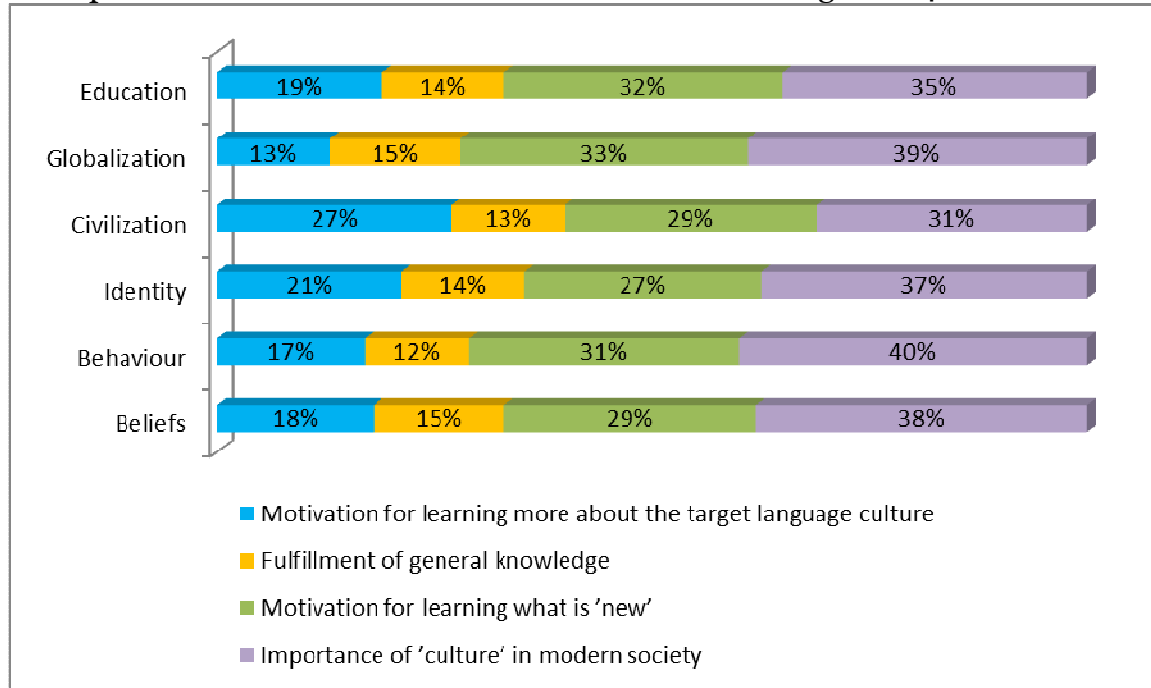


Fig.4. *Relation between the students' understanding of 'culture' and approval of an explicit cultural element*

It can be noted that, regardless of the meaning given to the concept of 'culture' and the type of motivation expressed, all the respondents rate *the importance of culture in modern society* as being a priority on their agenda – the item scores highest in every subgroup.

The acknowledged importance of culture and the motivation for the 'new' (rank 2 in each subgroup) can contribute to building an adequate motivational framework within which the intercultural approach in teaching/learning can be shaped to the students' needs and characteristics.

To sum up, we can infer from the research findings and results that the great majority of the students sampled from three important universities situated in three different geographic regions of our country are motivationally 'open' to adopting a cultural dimension in their learning of English as a foreign language. What is of more relevance to the future is that the motivations expressed by the learners are directed towards a broadening of learning goals in keeping with today's requirements of social and professional integration.

## Conclusions

Throughout the paper we have promoted the idea that the goal of acquiring intercultural competence should be a priority in foreign language education today.

The students' motivation toward the integration of an intercultural approach is determined not only by the importance of 'culture' today but also by curiosity for and interest in the 'new' elements that will be added to learning the language from a different perspective. The learners mostly view 'culture' as 'education', which is a valuable starting point for implementing the change. Learning to be 'intercultural' is achieved through education, mediated through the foreign language and supported by a consistent motivation to keep learning. It is not diversity or cultural differences that raise problems but the way in which we all learn to build rapport with these issues.

The research findings present the perspectives of the learners, and they can be interpreted as a modest contribution to the wide field of intercultural studies. Overall, the research is intended to provide an empirical basis for tracking development and working toward motivating learning in our classes. In this particular case, we may consider that a first step in implementing an intercultural approach in technical higher education has been made: we are now in a better position to seek a fitting alignment between the educational renovation desired and the motivated learning of our students. This may give us some guarantee for making sure that 'intercultural competence' language learning really happens.

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