

The Dark Sides of an Intercultural-Based Teaching of RFL: A Critical Approach

Linda Torresin
Università degli Studi di Padova, Italia

Abstract This article aims to analyze the topic of culture and intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in Russian as a foreign language (RFL) at an academic level. The work offers a critical overview of the main relevant studies in the Russian language on RFL and ICC from 2008 to 2022. The findings show that even the most recent research (in the wake of *lingvostranovedeniye* and *lingvokul'turologiya*) still leans on an ambiguous, essentialized, and nationalistic idea of 'culture'. Finally, through a critical reinterpretation of intercultural dialogue, the author provides a first insight into some new perspectives on RFL teaching.

Keywords Teaching Russian as a foreign language. Culture. Intercultural communicative competence. Intercultural communication. Intercultural dialogue. Cultural studies. Linguoculturology. National culture.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 General Theoretical Framework of ICC. – 3 A Critical Overview of Russian-Language Studies on ICC in RFL, 2008-22. – 3.1 Definition of ICC. – 3.2 Definition of ICC. – 3.3 Genealogical and Critical Observations. – 3.3.1 Culture and Nationalism. – 3.3.2 Tolerance. – 3.4 Conclusion. – 3.5 Pedagogical Implications. – 4 Conclusions: New Perspectives for an Intercultural-Based Teaching of RFL.

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1 Introduction

Teaching Russian as a foreign language (RFL) at the university level is fraught with challenges, the greatest of which is the need to introduce students to not only the Russian language but also the Russian culture, which plays a central role in the development of learners' intercultural communicative competence (ICC).

Theoretically, the present work is a line of research on intercultural linguistics education (among others, Kramsch 1993; Byram 1997; Liddicoat, Scarino 2013; Deardorff 2020).

There is no shortage of attention in the literature on Russian didactics paid toward the development of ICC for the purpose of language learning. Intercultural communication (IC), or *mezkul'turnaya kommunikatsiya* (межкультурная коммуникация),¹ is the subject of most traditional research in the Russian language field (cf. Torresin 2022a, 24-5). Generally, recent research, from Dmitrenko (2010) and Berdichevskiy et al. (2011) to Amelina (2022) and Berdichevskiy, Giniatullin, Tareva (2020), takes into account the challenges of IC in the teaching of Russian and other languages.

This study provides a critical overview of Russian-language studies dedicated to ICC for university learners of RFL from an intercultural perspective. The present work involves an in-depth analysis and evaluation of qualitative data collected from a specific sample to generate new insights into RFL research.

The specific research goals of this article are as follows: 1) to critically examine the extent and characteristics of ICC-related scholarship within the RFL area produced between 2008 and 2022, with a particular emphasis on the university context, in order to gain a comprehensive picture of how intercultural RFL teaching is conceptualized at a theoretical level; and 2) to identify the pedagogical implications of such theoretical contributions for an intercultural model of RFL teaching.

I chose to consider the period 2008-22 because IC - which has been in the Russian-speaking scientific discourse since the 11th Congress of the International Association of Teachers of Russian Language and Literature (MAPRYAL) in 2007 - has become an indispensable concept in RFL since 2008. The sample of studies considered is a purposive sample selected on a non-probability basis by identifying keywords/search terms in Russian and English related to the research topic (e.g., IC and ICC as well as synonyms and related concepts, such as 'interculturalism', 'intercultural', 'intercultural di-

1 The term, in the wake of Edward T. Hall's research, entered the shared vocabulary of Russian glottodidactics after the 2000 release of works by Gudkov (2000) and Ter-Minasova (2000).

mension', 'intercultural dialogue', and 'intercultural education'). In other words, the sample represents a judgmental or authoritative sample that includes all the most relevant contributions that have shaped the concept of ICC in RFL.

The sample contains prestigious publications, including monographs and teaching textbooks printed by major Russian and Russian-language scientific publishers, articles from important Russian scientific journals, and significant conference/congress proceedings in the RFL field or related to the RFL field with references to the intercultural dimension.

Publications by well-known RFL publishers include monographs and teaching textbooks edited, for example, by Flinta, Russian Language. Courses, Zlatoust, Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN), Belarusian State University, and Belarus State Economic University (among others, Passov, Kuzovleva 2010; Pugachëv 2011; Shibko 2011; Lebedinskiy, Gerbik 2011; Shchukin 2019; Berdichevskiy 2022). In collective monographs/teaching textbooks, single chapters with specific relevance to our investigation were also considered (e.g., Berdichevskiy 2020).

The RFL publications from scientific journals consist of articles dealing with ICC issued in Russian renowned scholarly journals, both specialized in issues related to RFL and foreign language teaching (*RUDN Journal of Language Education and Translingual Practices*) and general humanities topics (*Izvestia: Herzen University Journal of Humanities & Sciences*) (Shamsutdinova 2008; Vasilyuk 2010).

Contributions in the congress proceedings of MAPRYAL, along with materials from relevant conferences, were also analyzed due to their importance in (re)defining and/or legitimizing RFL theories and methods (e.g., Kharitonov 2013; Masyuk, Suvorova 2013; Varichenko 2015).

Moreover, it should be noted that leading experts in the RFL area were also examined, including Passov, Berdichevskiy, Shchukin, Shibko, Kryuchkova, Moshchinskaya, and Azimov. As most of these scholars are also authors of RFL textbooks (both for RFL teachers and learners), the sample includes research that has a concrete impact not only on RFL theories but also on RFL practices, that is, on RFL teaching as a whole.²

In addition to the aforementioned authors and important scholarly research, further sources were considered, including studies of lesser impact (appearing in less renowned venues and/or written by minor scholars), based on the recurrence and treatment of the keywords/search terms employed in the present investigation.

2 Further, the influence of the views of such studies on RFL teaching can be seen not only in the Russian RFL textbooks but also in the Italian ones (see Torresin 2022b).

After outlining the theoretical framework (§ 2), this article aims to provide a critical overview of the Russian-language studies dedicated to ICC for university learners in RFL from an intercultural perspective (§ 3). Starting from the definitions of IC and ICC, it will be seen that, in addition to an ambiguous use of the term ‘intercultural communication’ as a result of the influence of *lingvostranovedeniye* (лингвострановедение) and *lingvokul'turologiya* (лингвокультурология),³ the concept of ‘culture’ at the base of these studies is poorly problematized, static, and linked to national dynamics. In RFL, all this translates into a vision of ICC (and therefore of IC) that is stereotyped, uncritical, and nationalistic, based on *tolerantnost'* (толерантность) ‘tolerance’ rather than on a real intercultural interaction.

The proposed review of studies and related considerations will finally lead us to question what issues affect RFL today and what new spaces have opened up for future university teaching (§ 4).

2 General Theoretical Framework of ICC

In RFL and in overall foreign language learning, the ICC – *mezhkul'turnaya kommunikativnaya kompetentsiya* in Russian (межкультурная коммуникативная компетенция) – of the interlocutors is linked to an awareness of the existence of culturally conditioned cognitive schemas (Knapp, Knapp-Potthoff 1990, 83). An accepted definition of ICC in RFL is the following:

the ability of the individual to exist in a multicultural society, to be successfully understood by representatives of other cultures and representatives of one’s own culture. (Azimov, Shchukin 2009, 134)⁴

This, however, is not the only meaning of ICC that is understood in the present study. The concept of ICC is linked to the ‘pragmatic competences’ identified by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe [CoE] 2001, 13, 123-6), which places ‘intercultural skills’ among the ‘know-how’/‘savoir-faire’ skills, which imply

the capacity to fulfil the role of cultural intermediary between one’s own culture and the foreign culture and to deal effectively with intercultural misunderstanding and conflict situations. (105)

³ For more on these RFL scientific disciplines, see Azimov and Shchukin (2009, 127-8).

⁴ Translations are by the Author.

In other words, ICC can be explained as

the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioral orientation to the world. (Spitzberg, Changnon 2009, 7)

Defined in this way, ICC avoids risks such as “the promotion of an essentialist perspective on culture” (UNESCO 2013, 7).

If we think of ‘culture’ as the complex of spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional characteristics of a society or social group (UNESCO 2001) within a constructivist perspective (Georgescu 2018, 15-16), we must also conceive of cultures as ‘multiple’. According to UNESCO,

cultures are themselves multiple, so that to insiders, every group reveals itself not as homogeneous but rather a nested series of progressively smaller groups whose members are all too aware of distinctions between themselves. (UNESCO 2013, 10)

On the other hand, no one belongs to only a single culture – “everyone has multiple identities” (12), both “personal” and “social” (CoE 2018, 29). Furthermore, each individual will usually use only some of the resources available in their cultural group(s) and occupy “a unique cultural positioning”, belonging to and participating in different cultures (30).

Moreover, culture itself can be seen as an ongoing process in which meanings and the boundaries between groups or communities are continuously renegotiated and redefined (Byram et al. 2009, 8). Thus, “cultural diversity” – which constitutes the spirit of ICC – is based on the principle that “each culture provides only one option among many possibilities” (UNESCO 2013, 11), which is also expressed in the *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (UNESCO 2001).

Probably the most comprehensive definition of ICC is that of the Council of Europe, which interprets ICC as

the ability to mobilize and deploy relevant psychological resources in order to respond appropriately and effectively to the demands, challenges and opportunities presented by intercultural situations. (CoE 2018, 32)

More specifically, ICC, within the framework of the ‘competences for democratic culture’ model (CoE 2018), fits within the context of intercultural education, which plays a central role in democratic processes within culturally diverse societies.

Intercultural dialogue arises when “an individual perceives another person (or group of people) as being culturally different from themselves” (31). Obviously, no cultural fundamentalism is tolerable because

intercultural learning promotes the view that no culture is better or worse than the other, that there is no hierarchy of cultures. (Georgescu 2018, 17)

This is where ICC comes in, advocating a “combination of values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and critical understanding” that enables an individual to “understand and respect” the cultural differences between themselves and others establishing “positive and constructive relationships” with others (CoE 2018, 74).

After providing an overview of the theoretical framework of this research, the next section examines how key concepts of IC, ICC, culture, and identity are defined and addressed in Russian-language studies of RFL. The analysis investigates whether these concepts are problematized or essentialized and explores the theoretical foundations that shape the proposed visions of culture and identity.

This examination reveals that research on intercultural issues in the RFL field is embedded in a broader culturally hegemonic discourse.

By ‘discourse’, I refer to the rules and practices that shape knowledge and ideology in constructing subjectivity and identity, drawing from Foucault’s (1980) conceptualization. According to Foucault, discourse is not only a form of power but also instrumental in producing “truth”. In this way, each society has its own “regime of truth”: that is,

those who produce the discourse also have the power to make it true - i.e., to enforce its validity, its scientific status. (Hall, Gieben 1992, 295)

The following section employs a genealogical analysis of how the topic of ICC has been addressed in RFL research to demonstrate that the discourse commonly shared among RFL scholars is rooted in a nationalist and static conception of teaching/learning processes. Remarkably, the scholars themselves are unaware of this discourse, and they continue to unconsciously promote and propagate it as accepted “truth” (cf. also Torresin 2022c).

3 A Critical Overview of Russian-Language Studies on ICC in RFL, 2008-22

3.1 Definition of IC

Modern studies on the development of ICC in RFL remain linked to the definition of IC proposed in the 1970s by the founders of *lingvostranovedeniye*, Vereshchagin and Kostomarov, who understood *mezhkul'turnaya kommunikatsiya* as

an adequate mutual understanding [*взаимопонимание*] of two participants of a communicative act who belong to different national cultures. (Vereshchagin, Kostomarov 1973, 43)

Since Vereshchagin and Kostomarov, Ter-Minasova has noted how:

Every foreign language lesson is a crossroads of cultures [*перекрёсток культур*], is a practice of intercultural communication [*практика межкультурной коммуникации*] because every foreign word reflects a foreign world and a foreign culture: behind every word there is an idea of the world conditioned by national consciousness. (Ter-Minasova 2000, 24)

More recently, Shibko proposes a view of IC as

the capacity for interaction [*взаимодействие*] between participants in the communicative act who belong to different national cultures. (Shibko 2011, 15, 90; cf. also Shibko 2014, 36, 197).

Similarly, Shchukin defines IC as follows:

interaction [*взаимодействие*] between communication participants who belong to different national communities, in order to establish mutual understanding [*взаимопонимание*] and interaction [*взаимодействие*] in various situations of verbal activity. (Shchukin 2018, 153)

First, we can observe how the idea of IC, in the definitions we have examined, is built around two keywords: *vzaimoponimaniye* (взаимопонимание) 'mutual understanding' and *vzaimodeystviye* (взаимодействие) 'interaction'. The concept of 'culture' links them together (see more infra) because, as Ter-Minasova notes, it is in the exchange between cultures – the “crossroads of cultures” or *perekrestok kul'tur* (перекрёсток культур) – that IC takes place.

It is no coincidence that since Shchukin's systematization (2003, 125, 135-6; also, cf. Shchukin 2019, 193, 206 ff.), the designation IC is generally used in RFL to denote the object of 'acquisition' (*learning*) corresponding to the object of 'teaching' (*culture*). In fact, Shibko (2011, 14, 90; 2014, 34, 196) describes IC as the "object of acquisition", or *ob'yekt usvoyeniya* (объект усвоения) in reference to culture (which is, in turn, the "object of teaching", or *ob'yekt obucheniya* объект обучения; also, cf. Moskovkin, Shchukin 2012, 91, 93). Consequently, IC is identified with the "ability to communicate with the bearers of another culture" (Lebedinskiy, Gerbik 2011, 62).

3.2 Definition of ICC

Creating the possibilities for an IC is the ICC of the interlocutors, which can be seen as a set of "practical skills and abilities" that fosters "the development of the individual's ethnocultural sensitivity" (Pugachëv 2011, 34) in relation to other people and cultures.

According to scholars, ICC is directly related to the purposes of RFL teaching, which presupposes not only the acquisition of grammar, but also "knowledge of the culture of the country of the studied language" (Basova 2014, 49).

Since IC is a process of verbal and nonverbal communication between bearers of different languages and cultures (Kryuchkova, Moshchinskaya 2011, 54), ICC can be defined as

the ability of the individual to exist in a multicultural society, to be successfully understood by representatives of other cultures and representatives of one's own culture. (Azimov, Shchukin 2009, 134)

For Berdichevskiy, this implies

the ability to understand the limitations of one's own culture and language and the ability to switch when encountering another culture to other not only linguistic but also non-linguistic norms of behavior. (Berdichevskiy 2020, 9)

Thus, ICC is the *conditio sine qua non* for IC, as understanding the target culture allows participants in a linguistic act to accurately understand each other and its ultimate outcome since it fulfills the purpose of language learning (Pugachëv 2011, 28).

According to Kryuchkova and Moshchinskaya, ICC may be described as

the ability to act as an intermediary between the representatives of one's own culture and those of the foreign culture and effec-

tively eliminate misunderstandings and conflict situations generated by intercultural differences (Kryuchkova, Moshchinskaya 2011, 40).

3.3 Genealogical and Critical Observations

3.3.1 Culture and Nationalism

Generally speaking, Russian-language studies on ICC in the RFL field from 2008 to 2022 explicitly or implicitly refer to both *lingvostranovedeniye* (Vereshchagin, Kostomarov, and Prokhorov) and *lingvokul'turologiya* (Vorob'yëv, Shaklein, Stepanov, Teliya, Arutyunova, Krasnykh, and Maslova), which continue to dominate the treatment of IC in modern-day RFL (Shchukin 2019, 459 ff.). The former scientific discipline is based on the idea of IC discussed above and *dialog kul'tur* (диалог культур) 'dialogue between cultures', or, more generally, on the idea that the study of language should be accompanied by the study of the country in which that language is spoken. The latter is linked to the conception of the individual as *yazykovaya lichnost'* (языковая личность) 'linguistic personality', to the representation of language as the embodiment of cultural values and culture as the highest level of language, and to the idea of *yazykovaya kartina mira* (языковая картина мира) 'linguistic world-view' (Azimov, Shchukin 2009, 127-8).

Although ICC is clearly not neglected in today's RFL studies, an ambiguous and potentially equivocal use of the term 'culture' is generally observed.⁵ This is evident in the definitions of ICC during the period 2008-22 considered here, which, in addition to relying on 'classical' cultural models (e.g., Tylor, Kroeber, and Hofstede), welcome influences and suggestions from *lingvostranovedeniye* and *lingvokul'turologiya*. At first glance, in the studies influenced by these disciplines, we note that the concept of 'culture' is often not even defined. Where defined, it is mostly simplistically identified with "a set of the experience of people whose language has become the object of study" (Moskovkin, Shchukin 2012, 93).

On closer examination, these studies seem to be based on a static idea of 'culture', which within the field of RFL could be a legacy of *lingvokul'turologiya*. For example, the primary theorist of *lingvokul'turologiya*, Vorob'yëv (2006, 15), describes the "fix-

⁵ It must be said, however, that the concept of 'culture', due to its various contexts of use and varied shades of meaning that change from discipline to discipline, nevertheless remains one of the most complex and debated concepts in modern *kul'turologiya* (культурология, cf. Sadokhin 2014, 18-19).

ity" (*ustoychivost'*, устойчивость) and "stability" (*stabil'nost'*, стабильность) of culture, which would be guaranteed by its national character (see more infra). According to Lebedinskiy and Gerbik (2011, 62), the action of individuals within the same culture is "systematic". According to other scholars (e.g., Moskovkin, Shchukin 2012, 93), culture (including, e.g., values and traditions) would be transmitted unchanged from generation to generation. Even in Azimov and Shchukin's (2009, 117-8) lengthy definition of 'culture', with its recognition of its various declinations, there is no trace of the intrinsic complexity and dynamism of this concept.

This leads us to a third observation. Ultimately, 'culture' seems to be limited to the ethno-national context.⁶ "Every culture is national [*национальна*] in content", write Passov and Kuzovleva (2010). It is important to recall that the prominence given to the national element in IC was already present in the definition used by Vereshchagin and Kostomarov (1973, 43) and was maintained by Ter-Minasova (2000, 24) with reference to 'national consciousness' (*natsional'noye soznaniye*, национальное сознание).

This view of IC is also found in more recent definitions that echo Vereshchagin and Kostomarov, which we have already mentioned. Shibko (2011, 15, 90; 2014, 36, 197), for example, repropose an idea of IC constructed from 'national cultures' (*natsional'nyye kul'tury*, национальные культуры). Shchukin (2018, 153) considers IC an "interaction between communication participants who belong to different national communities". Similarly, for Berdichevskiy (2022, 35), RFL teaching is closely linked to national culture (*natsional'naya kul'tura*, национальная культура).

It is worth mentioning a few more significant examples. In the first research focused on the teaching of Russian in a foreign-language learning environment, Bykova (2011, 15), among the "internal factors" affecting RFL teaching/learning, mentions the 'national mentality' (*natsional'nyu mentalitet*, национальный менталитет), which has been defined as the "genetic memory of reason inherent in language" (Kharitonov 2013, 877). Pugachëv devotes an entire section of his monograph to a fixed 'national character' (*natsional'nyu kharakter*, национальный характер), understood as that "part of the mentality" he interprets as

6 On the other hand, Russian is also spoken in the former Soviet republics and in various diaspora and emigration contexts, and thus becomes a conduit not only of the proper 'national' (Russian) culture but also acquires a 'transnational' character as it becomes an entry to other (Russophone) cultures.

a specific combination of the stable character traits of the representatives of a concrete ethnic group, or as dominant values and orientations in a given society. (Pugachëv 2011, 46-9)

Vasil'eva (2016, 88) emphasizes the importance for IC of *natsional'nyy mentalitet* and *natsional'nyy kharakter*. For their part, Kryuchkova and Moshchinskaya (2011, 55) argue that for the foreign learner to develop effective IC with natives, the learner must approach the native's 'national values' (*natsional'nyye tsennosti*, национальные ценности), 'national character' (*natsional'nyy kharakter*), and 'national culture' (*natsional'naya kul'tura*) as a "system of concepts that is transmitted from generation to generation".

This insistence on a 'national culture' (*natsional'naya kul'tura*) made up of a fixed and immutable combination of 'character' (*kharakter*, характер), 'mentality' (*mentalitet/mental'nost'*, менталитет/ментальность), 'values' (*tsennosti*, ценности), 'self-consciousness' (*samosoznaniye*, самосознание), and 'worldview' (*mirovozzreniye/kartina mira*, мировоззрение/картина мира) clearly shows the legacy of *lingvostranovedeniye* and *lingvokul'turologiya*. In fact, concerning *lingvostranovedeniye*, in the 1990s, Prokhorov (1995) was the first to interpret it as a methodological discipline in which the 'national culture' of learners plays a key role in the development of communicative competence. Similarly, according to Kryuchkova and Moshchinskaya (2011, 62), *lingvostranovedeniye* studies 'national-cultural specificity' (*natsional'no-kul'turnaya spetsifika*, национально-культурная специфика) and views language as a means of learning about 'national culture'. Turning to *lingvokul'turologiya*, its founders were fervent supporters of national discourse. For example, Vorob'yëv (1999, 125) believed that this new scientific orientation should analyze the 'national mentality' (*natsional'nyy mentalitet*) and identify the triad "language [язык] - nation (national personality) [нация (национальная личность)] - culture [культура]" as the core of *lingvokul'turologiya* (Vorob'yëv 2006, 13). Similarly, from Teliya's point of view, the main aim of *lingvokul'turologiya* is

the study of the means by which the material culture and mentality of an ethnic group are embodied in the living national language [национальный язык]. (Teliya 1996, 216)

The influence of *lingvokul'turologiya* and its foundational idea of *natsional'nyy kharakter*⁷ can be found also in non-RFL-specific IC literature, where the latter is defined as

⁷ For an in-depth discussion of the topic, see Pomarolli (2019; 2023).

a set of specific physical and spiritual qualities, norms of behavior and activities typical of representatives of one or another nation. (Grushevitskaya, Popkov, Sadokhin 2003)

This static, essentialized idea of ‘culture’ and its correlation with the national dimension seems to suggest an uncritical, unproblematized resumption of the theoretical framework of both *lingvostranovedeniye* and *lingvokul'turologiya*, which is taken for granted and implicitly or explicitly shared by the research examined so far. Such a view, which is well integrated into Russian and Russian-speaking academic thought,⁸ may also be found in the writing of Azimov and Shchukin, who reiterate the shared static nature of the concept of ‘national culture’, which they interpret as

the historical worldview by a people, which is realized in traditions, national relics and reflected in language. (Azimov, Shchukin 2009, 158)

It should be clear by now that we can find a common approach to culture in RFL studies dating from 2008 to 2022, and that is quite different from the approach delineated in § 2. Instead of a dynamic, complex, and problematic concept of culture in which individuals partake on many levels in different social groups of various dimensions, the idea of ‘culture’ that emerges from Russian-language studies of ICC in the RFL field is, by contrast, quite static, reductive, and ‘ideologized’. As we have observed so far, in such research, culture is understood (in the wake of *lingvostranovedeniye* and *lingvokul'turologiya*) as an immutable factor, not subject to change, but hinged on stable traditions and firmly anchored to the national context.⁹ The possibility that culture – as well as identity – can be ‘multiple’, change, renegotiate, and redefine its meanings and boundaries is not admitted.

In fact, if we agree that it is people (and not cultures) who meet or clash (Ghilardi 2012, 29), it will be recognized without difficulty that the very accentuation of the national (as well as supranational or universal) aspect of culture in RFL goes precisely to the detriment of the recognition of the variations and differentiations within the culture itself, whether of a geographical, sexual, social, or religious nature (see § 2).

⁸ Suffice it to say that, since the 1990s, Mitrofanova and Kostomarov (1990, 126) have indicated precisely in the ‘national culture’ (*natsional'naya kul'tura*) “the indispensable condition for an adequate, full acquisition of the foreign (Russian) language”.

⁹ This emphasis on the national aspect lends itself to any criticism directed at “methodological nationalism” (see, e.g., Chernilo 2011).

Thus, it will be agreed that the ICC promoted in RFL during the period 2008-22 is based on a *de facto* stereotyped conception – uncritical, granitic, and inflexible – of ‘culture’ (see also Torresin 2022a). For this reason, it does not seem rash to me to state that the ICC advocated in these more recent studies is partial and highly nationalized, continuing to rely on an image of ‘Russianness’, which is at least naïve, if not overtly nationalistic.¹⁰ In fact, with very few exceptions, we are faced not with the welcoming of diversity, but with the leveling of difference. Presently, it is instead the dynamic articulation of cultural difference that creates “cultural hybridity” – where IC can take place and ICC is realized – as argued by Bhabha (1994, 2).¹¹

On the contrary, in the Russian-language studies on ICC that we have analyzed, cultural difference is not exalted but completely annulled, thus removing the very possibility of creating a “third space” (in Bhabha’s terminology) capable of overcoming the self-other dichotomy.

3.3.2 Tolerance

In these studies, more than ICC, it is the “tolerant and spiritually sensitive Russian culture” (Ikonnikova, Bol’shakov 2008, 248) that dominates the scene. The use of the adjective ‘tolerant’ (*tolerantnaya*, *толерантная*) does not seem coincidental in the context of these strongly nationally oriented studies. It is one of the most recurring terms, more than ‘intercultural interaction’, and, as has been argued (Mansouri, Arber 2017, 26), it is already ambiguous and questionable in itself, as it presupposes the passive acceptance of a minority’s cultural diversity by the dominant group.¹²

It seems that the ultimate goal is, for the foreign learner, “the refinement [...] of tolerance [*tolerantnost’*]” (Fomina 2018, 58). After all, according to Russian scholars, it would be precisely the RFL teacher’s job to “realize the functions of intercultural tolerance [*межкультурная толерантность*]” (Bykova 2011, 36), conceived as a “pedagogical problem” (Shamsutdinova 2008).

The principle of *tolerantnost’* ‘tolerance’ – from Latin *tolerantia* meaning ‘forbearance’, which for Miloslavskaya (2001) constituted

¹⁰ I share Plamenatz’s (1973, 23) opinion on ‘nationalism’, defined as “the desire to preserve or enhance a people’s national or cultural identity”.

¹¹ The idea – central to postcolonial studies – that all cultures are hybrid (according to Burke 2009, 102, “no culture is an island”) and heterogeneous can also be found in the works of Mikhail Bakhtin, Edward Said, and Peter Burke.

¹² In the context of *kul’turologiya* (культурология), Sadokhin (2014, 248) defines ‘tolerance’ as “an attitude of condescending indulgence toward the opinions, beliefs, behavior, customs, culture, feelings, and ideas of others”.

the first step of IC - today remains the basis of ICC for Azimov and Shchukin (2009, 134), who describe it as

an understanding and respect toward another culture, towards the differences of the representatives of another culture-ethnic, national, racial, religious, linguistic. (317)

In the research examined so far, *tolerantnost'*, which is interpreted as a core component of ICC, is simultaneously considered a principle to be observed and a competence to be achieved. This happens because *tolerantnost'* is ultimately identified, on the one hand, with IC and, on the other hand, with ICC, also linking itself to the traditional myth of the 'Russian soul' (*russskaya dusha*, русская душа), which is very present in *lingvokul'turologiya* (Pomarolli 2019, 388). Indeed, according to Afanas'yeva, one of the factors that paves the way for ICC is "the understanding and perception of the values and norms of Russian society, founded on the ideals of goodness, justice, honesty, and tolerance" (Afanas'yeva 2018, 204).

This continuous re-proposition of the category of *tolerantnost'* in the examined RFL studies is informed by a recovery of the idea of the 'Russian soul'. This fact, in addition to reinforcing further an adherence to a stereotypical and nationalistic (self-) representation also delineates a paradoxical situation in which IC between two or more 'nations' should be based on a principal characteristic of only one of these 'nations'.

3.4 Conclusion

In the research conducted in Russian from 2008-22, ICC is based on highly ideologized, nationalistically conditioned, and monolithic self-representations and self-perceptions; on uncritical, unproblematic, partial, and homologated conceptions of 'culture'; and on a general attitude of 'tolerance' rather than 'interaction' with diversity.

There is no critical rethinking of concepts, such as 'culture' and 'identity', which are taken for granted and used uncritically within the conceptual systems of *lingvostranovedeniye* and *lingvokul'turologiya*.

Moreover, all the elements highlighted up to this point, i.e., the static idea of culture and denial of cultural hybridity, the references to *natsional'naya kul'tura*, and the appeal to the principle of *tolerantnost'*, seem to indicate that the RFL literature written in Russian on ICC from 2008-22 is firmly anchored in a culturally hegemonic type of discourse (see § 2). Such types of discourse, which constitute the dominant paradigm drawn from *lingvostranovedeniye* and *lingvokul'turologiya*, produce significant knowledge that influences

RFL's "regime of truth": that is, the types of discourse generally accepted and made to function as 'true'.

It follows that even the conception of 'interculture', from which these works claim to take their cue, should rather be identified with a 'multicultural' approach in which ICC is achieved through the promotion of *plyuralizm* (плюрализм) 'pluralism' and *lingvisticheskoye mnogoobraziye* (лингвистическое многообразие) 'linguistic variety' (Azimov, Shchukin 2009, 134). Not surprisingly, the "decrease of interethnic tension", as much as "education for tolerance in relations between representatives of different cultures" (149), is included in the goals of so-called 'multicultural education'. In short, what would be prefigured here is the peaceful coexistence of different cultures (typical of a 'multicultural' approach) and not a dynamic and flexible interaction between cultures (typical of an 'intercultural' approach).

In essence, even though the goals set for the development of ICC by Russian-speaking RFL scholars are embraceable, they are paradoxically 'betrayed' by conceptions of 'culture' that are still too anchored in essentialist and nationalist paradigms.

3.5 Pedagogical Implications

The prevailing conception of ICC found in the reviewed Russian-language research has significant pedagogical implications.

First, the RFL teaching model advocated in these studies reflects an ambiguous and limited understanding of 'culture' and ICC, which is closely tied to the national context. For example, Vasilyuk argues that RFL students should be exposed to

the typical phenomena of Russia's socio-economic, cultural, and scientific life, as well as to the values associated with the lifestyle of the Russian people. (Vasilyuk 2010, 25)

This approach to intercultural education in RFL contradicts the supranational guidelines and reference frameworks put forth by the Council of Europe and UNESCO, which advocate for consideration of culture and identity as multifaceted and complex phenomena (see § 2). According to the Council of Europe, for instance, cultural groups "are always internally heterogeneous", and

cultural affiliations are fluid and dynamic, with the subjective salience of social and cultural identities fluctuating as individuals move from one situation to another, with different affiliations - or different clusters of intersecting affiliations - being highlighted depending on the particular social context encountered. (CoE 2018, 30)

UNESCO also speaks out against the idea that culture and identity are fixed and monolithic, predetermined by the nationality of individuals or cultural groups, and reminds us how even our own personal perceptions show us that the reality is quite different:

everyone understands their own identity to be a more complex matter, with multiple identities relevant to different contexts: gender, class, age, ethnicity, region, history, nationality, occupation, each becoming relevant at different times in the same person's day. Identities change over time [...]. Recognition of the multiplicity and fluidity of identity complicates our understanding of cultural pluralism (implying that people cannot accurately be categorized as only members of one group). At the same time, these facts simplify intercultural dialogue: since everyone has had the experience of moving between contrasting identities, it makes sense to recognize others as members of multiple groups as well. (UNESCO 2013, 10)

Second, teaching Russian within an unproblematic and fixed view of culture and identity results in students' identities being reduced to their national affiliation, excluding their active and subjective engagement with multiple cultures and identities. This approach hinders the development of critical thinking in response to representations of other cultures.

In other words, this appears not to be a student-centered model, in which the student is an active protagonist of her/his own learning and is "getting involved with the information presented, really thinking about it" (King 1993, 31) rather than just passively receiving it, but rather a teacher-centered model,¹³ in which the whole process of learning revolves around the teacher - "the one who has the knowledge" and transmits it to the students (30); the student, instead, is simply seen as an empty vessel to be filled with Russian national (timeless and essentialized) culture. To quote Masyuk and Suvorova, an RFL teacher is the one who initiates foreign learners into "Russian national-cultural traditions", bringing them into

the study of the world of native speakers, their culture, lifestyle, character, and national mentality. (Masyuk, Suvorova 2013, 177, 179)

13 For the distinction between student-centered and teacher-centered models (i.e., models implying, respectively, an active or passive involvement of learners), see Markina, Garcia Mollá (2022).

The role of student is, therefore, configured as a passive one, since s/he “immerses herself/himself in the new linguistic environment and begins to acquire a new worldview” (Varichenko 2015, 201).

As a result, in this context, alternative ways of talking, thinking, or representing ICC in RFL are indeed necessary but equally difficult to propose.

4 Conclusions: New Perspectives for an Intercultural-Based Teaching of RFL

At this point, what should an intercultural-based approach to teaching RFL in the university context be today? In my opinion, such an approach should be built on the following theoretical assumptions:

1. Teaching RFL means promoting ICC in the meaning of the term ‘culture’ adopted here (see § 2).
2. Teaching RFL does not mean teaching a ‘national’ language and culture, but rather a ‘transnational’ Russophone one.
3. Teaching RFL means paying attention to the great risk of replacing stereotypes with other stereotypes (e.g., *russkaya dusha*).
4. Teaching RFL does not mean encouraging coexistence and tolerance between cultures, but rather interacting, exchanging, and changing.

From a practical angle, an intercultural approach to teaching RFL may be fostered by providing more information about culture (understood as we proposed in § 2) in textbooks.

When choosing and using teaching materials, it will not be sufficient to ensure avoidance of stereotypes. We have seen that for the purpose of effectively employing ICC, it is of little use to work on ‘national-cultural specificity’, as *lingvostranovedeniye* requires. In particular, typical ICC reading activities – *predtekstovyye* (предтекстовые), *pritekstovyye* (притекстовые), and *posletekstovyye zadaniya* (послетекстовые задания) – should not be aimed at simplistically making students understand the ‘worldview’ and ‘concepts’ of Russian ‘mentality’.¹⁴

Intercultural learning activities should be based on the following principles:

1. Key terminology needs to be changed so as to include strictly ‘Russian’ and the wider ‘Russophone culture’, given that this is the target culture in RFL.

¹⁴ This, instead, is the opinion of literature (see, for example, Kryuchkova, Moshchinskaya 2011, 357-9, 383-4, 398-9).

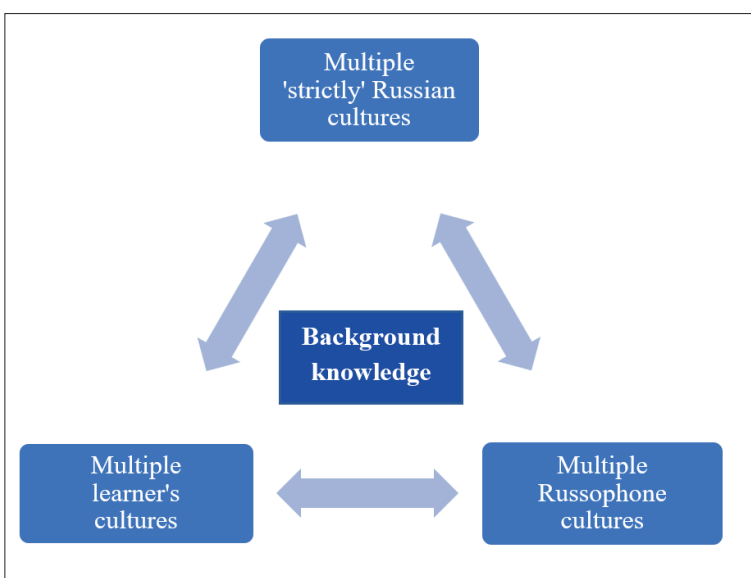


Figure 1 Multilateral interaction between multiple learner's cultures, Russian and Russophone cultures in RFL classes

2. The comparison between different cultures should be promoted, including learners' various background cultures, which enter into dialogue with multiple Russian and Russophone cultures; it is from this non-unilateral but rather multilateral interaction that the foundations are laid for 'background knowledge' (*фоновые знания*, *фоновые знания*), which is continually redefined and reshaped by the relationships between all the cultures involved [fig. 1].

In conclusion, to teach RFL from an intercultural perspective, it is important to provide learners with background knowledge that considers the complexity and non-essentiality of culture and does not revolve around dated, rigid, and ineffective multicultural models/approaches involving a nationalist hegemonic discourse (*lingvostranovedeniye* and *lingvokul'turologiya*), but rather focuses on new paradigms based on a critical understanding of 'culture'.

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