

# Developing Intercultural Language Materials

Freda Mishan and Tamas Kiss

Series editors: Anne Burns and Jill Hadfield

Research and Resources in Language Teaching



# DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL LANGUAGE MATERIALS

*Developing Intercultural Language Materials* puts intercultural competence at the forefront of the learning agenda. It unpicks its underlying theory and provides a framework and practical methodologies for practitioners, providing a toolkit for them to create their own learning materials and design their own classroom activities to nurture intercultural competence.

This innovative book showcases some of the new ways language teachers in practice successfully integrate this essential skill into their curricula. Directions for further research, pulling out recurring threads in this book, such as critical pedagogy and cultural sensibility, offer opportunities for professional development.

This research-grounded and action-oriented text is essential reading for language and cultural studies practitioners who want to help their students thrive in today's multicultural world.

**Freda Mishan** has over forty years' experience in TESOL. Her research and publications are primarily in materials development, including the development of intercultural language learning materials, ESOL, and blended learning.

**Tamas Kiss** works as an associate professor at Sunway University, Centre for English Language Studies, in Malaysia. He has been involved with language teacher education programmes in Europe, the Middle East, South Asia, Latin America, and South East Asia.

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# DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL LANGUAGE MATERIALS

*Freda Mishan and Tamas Kiss*

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# FOREWORD

Not remotely concerned  
Nightly, the tanks in Iraq roll down my streets  
Spectres of African hunger haunt my inglenook  
Plague and pestilence assail me as I face  
Neat newscasters in suburban studios  
Each solemn smile an uncomfortable reminder  
Of man's inhumanity to man  
And with one lazy click  
I can make it all go away

*Martin Eayrs, April 2022<sup>1</sup>*

Books are not written in a void. We are fully aware as authors that personal experience and cultural backgrounds will have shaped our thinking. Layered onto this are national and global events that will have influenced our writing. In the case of this book, its writing has been overshadowed by two world-changing events, a global pandemic and a war in Europe.

The pandemic saw many millions of people worldwide isolating in their homes, working, transacting business, educating their children, and endeavouring to maintain social relationships with friends and family via electronic communication networks such as the application Zoom. The 'Zoom phenomenon' has been a critical feature of the pandemic; people have been obliged to resort to it, and have recognised its ease of use and employed it in ingenious ways. Such networks have been used for everything from staging international choirs and concerts to conducting transnational business

meetings, online schooling, and socialising with family and friends. An unforeseen consequence of the pandemic has thus been, paradoxically, increased and enhanced cross-cultural communication on a global scale, albeit situated in the online environment. It could never have been imagined that this worldwide shift online and onto social media would mean that war would be abruptly thrust onto our screens, allowing us to witness its human impact at closer proximity than ever before. It has, what is more, added a grim dimension to Zoom's repertoire; political and humanitarian appeals.

It is of little consolation to us that this book's core rationale, how important intercultural understanding is to our welfare as a race, has been powerfully reinforced by having sprung from, and being situated within, these traumatic universal experiences. It is our sincere hope that the ideas in this book might make some small contribution to promoting an altruistic, globally concerned pedagogy.

## **Note**

- 1 Reproduced with permission: 'Not remotely concerned' by Martin Eayrs  
*The Pity of War: The Poetry is in the Pity*  
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# SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

## About the series

*Research and Resources in Language Teaching* is a groundbreaking series whose aim is to integrate the latest research in language teaching and learning with innovative classroom practice. The books are written by a partnership of writers, who combine research and materials writing skills and experience. Books in this series offer accessible accounts of current research on a particular topic, linked to a wide range of practical and immediately useable classroom activities. Using the series, language educators will be able both to connect research findings directly to their everyday practice through imaginative and practical communicative tasks and to realise the research potential of such tasks in the classroom. We believe the series represents a new departure in language education publishing, bringing together the twin perspectives of research and materials writing, illustrating how research and practice can be combined to provide practical and useable activities for classroom teachers and at the same time encouraging researchers to draw on a body of activities that can guide further research.

## About the books

All the books in the series follow the same organisational principle:

### Part I: From Research to Implications

Part I contains an account of current research on the topic in question and outlines its implications for classroom practice.

**Part II: From Implications to Application**

Part II focuses on transforming research outcomes into classroom practice by means of practical, immediately useable activities. Short introductions signpost the path from research into practice

**Part III: From Application to Implementation**

Part III contains methodological suggestions for how the activities in Part II could be used in the classroom, for example, different ways in which they could be integrated into the syllabus or applied to different teaching contexts.

**Part IV: From Implementation to Research**

Part IV returns to research with suggestions for professional development projects and action research, often directly based on the materials in the book. Each book as a whole thus completes the cycle: research into practice and practice back into research.

## **About this book**

Educators are increasingly concerned with preparing their students for life in today's globalised world, aware that language learning alone is not sufficient for intercultural understanding. This book offers pathways to creating learning materials which nurture intercultural competence; openness to other cultures underpinned by insight into one's own. Like all the books in this series, it moves from research to practice. It unpicks the intricate concepts of culture and the intercultural and uses them as the basis for its 'framework for developing intercultural learning materials', along with the theory of Complex Dynamic Systems – which accounts for that unpredictable transformation that we know as 'learning'. This framework is implemented in the second part of the book to devise and offer a diverse range of intercultural learning activities. Along with activities for teachers to familiarise themselves with the concept, and ideas for developing their own materials, comes the centrepiece, a broad set of intercultural activities for classroom use. The logical next step, how to integrate intercultural objectives into the curriculum, is explored in Part III, and the book concludes with directions for researching interculturality in the classroom.

We hope that you will find this series exciting and above all valuable to your practice and research in language education!

*Anne Burns and Jill Hadfield (Series Editors)*

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Both authors acknowledge the true inspiration for this book – the thousands of students in and from many different countries whom they have met, taught, and learned from over their years as teachers.

# Part I

## FROM RESEARCH TO IMPLICATIONS

## Introduction

At the conclusion of the 2018 soccer (football) world cup, South African political commentator and comedian Trevor Noah caused some French outrage by quipping “Africa won the world cup”, alluding to the number of the French team’s players of African descent. Rebuked subsequently by the French ambassador that the players were French, Noah replied that this detracted from their African heritage and that French-African duality was an essential part of their identity. In the Irish sitcom, *The Young Offenders*, the teenage hero Conor is talking to Linda, the black daughter of the school principal (who is white). He asks her “are you adopted?”. When she replies, in a native Cork accent “why are you asking?” he answers helplessly, “You... you *look* adopted”. Indeed, looks can be deceptive. When one of this book’s authors, Tamas, a native Hungarian, conducted a teacher training workshop in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2006, one of the participants asked him: “Are you British?” to which he replied “No”. Then came the surprising follow-up question: “Are you sure?” Of course, he was certain he was not British, having been born in Hungary to Hungarian parents and holding a Hungarian passport. Only years later when he got his DNA tested to trace his ancestry did he learn that he is indeed 11% English. Such anecdotes illustrate the complex networks of multiculturalism in today’s world, and which are a lived reality for many societies.

This is thus a world that is shrinking, not only superficially as a result of high-speed travel but also due to the twin influences of accelerated global migration and social and mass media that ‘virtually’ knit together all corners of the earth. However, while multiculturalism is a fact of life for many, genuine intercultural understanding between peoples and cultures lags behind these societal changes. Intercultural tensions, racism, and discrimination are, unfortunately, still rife in societies around the world. Striving to overcome these to achieve social inclusion and integration depends on a ‘meeting’ of languages and cultures. In the context of societal diversity, understanding and accepting different cultural norms – known as *intercultural competence* – is an essential skill in oiling the wheels of social interaction. This is particularly crucial today in countries finding themselves newly hosting high numbers of diverse immigrant communities as a result of seismic geopolitical events of the last decade. In the context of the concerns of this book, teaching newcomers the host country’s language via learning materials that promote intercultural competence both recognises the normalisation of societal change and prepares learners for the experience of multiculturalism. At the same time, such training for students of second or foreign languages is essential to raise awareness and understanding of the differences and similarities between their culture/s and those of the language/s they aspire to

speak. In fact, it is the shortcomings in – and indeed shortage of – materials in this field that inspired this book, and which serve as its starting point.

## Outline of the book

This book is conceived as an intercultural materials development ‘toolkit’, a resource for intercultural materials development, offering both theoretical grounding and a practical guide to designing learning materials, to fulfil this perceived gap. It offers language practitioners the critical, research, and practical tools to develop materials situated within, and thus relevant to, their own contexts. It is seen as being used in diverse language teaching settings, ranging from monocultural groups learning a single second or foreign language to learners from multicultural and multilingual backgrounds learning, perhaps, a third or fourth language.

The four-part structure of this book moves from theory to practice. The first part, *Core concepts for designing intercultural materials*, explores the theoretical concepts at the heart of the book, culture and intercultural competence. It seeks to reach contemporary and practical conceptualisations that can be used in the pedagogical sections of the book. Section 2 of Part I homes in on materials development itself, using as a route into this, materials evaluation frameworks such as content analysis and semiotic analysis. Section 2 concludes with a practical framework for the development of intercultural materials. This is based on principles drawn from the concepts presented in Section 1, intercultural competence and Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST). CDST, we argue, offers a fresh look at intercultural learning and reflects current trends in Second Language Acquisition (SLA).

Part II, *Developing materials for intercultural competence*, is the practical heart of this book, the promised ‘toolkit’ for designing activities intended to foster intercultural awareness. Here the activities are staged, starting with ones for teachers/materials developers, intended to promote critical awareness of the content and pedagogy of existing published textbooks. The second stage offers intercultural awareness-raising activities for both teachers and learners. The final stage offers principles, structures, and practice for teachers developing intercultural materials, as well as tips for adapting and exploiting existing textbooks.

In Part III, *Integrating Intercultural competence materials into the curriculum*, we propose how intercultural activities of the type offered in Part II can be included in the curriculum in different contexts. In doing this, we draw on the experiences and examples of intercultural competence teaching in international situations. This is complemented with practical examples from the field of language teaching. These describe widely varying degrees

of institutional support for the teaching of intercultural competence skills in terms of materials and how these materials are integrated into the curriculum, and vignettes from an international research study carried out by the authors (2020–2021) serve to showcase innovative and creative pedagogical practice ‘on the ground’.

The final part, Part IV, is both a conclusion and a beginning. *Intercultural competence – ‘Where to go from here?’* explores directions for both academic and practitioner research in what is considered an urgent and burgeoning area for materials development.

### **Intercultural competence in language teaching coursebooks**

The impetus for studying language within its cultural contexts came to the fore (in modern times at least) in the 1980s, with Byram’s work on an integrated language and culture pedagogy (e.g. Byram, 1994, 1997) and numerous publications in this area in the context of Modern Foreign Languages (MFLs) in the pan-European context. A seminal outcome of this work was the concept of ‘intercultural competence’ (IC) (a concept central to this book which will be examined below). Apart from its enormous impact in the field of cultural studies and beyond, this should have made for significant adjustments in cultural content and its treatments in language teaching materials. This has been seen to an extent in the academic realm and in high-level curriculum design in some countries (such as Argentina, New Zealand, and some Scandinavian countries). But how far has it actually effected change in the language teaching materials which are often the learner’s first glimpse into the target language culture?

This can be examined via academic materials evaluation studies, such as ones discussed later on. However, it is as – if not more – important to consider the perceptions of coursebook users themselves. We believe that it is imperative that both teachers and learners are invited to voice their concerns and experiences about the cultural offerings within their language materials – particularly given language practitioners’ high dependence on published language teaching coursebooks.

Teachers drive textbook use; they use their professional judgement to critically evaluate their materials, mediating and adapting them to fit their teaching context. McGrath (2013) reviews a body of published research that reveals what teachers like or do not like about materials and what they would like to see in them. Aspects that emerge from such studies reveal teachers’ commitment to critical evaluation of their materials, and how they see this as part of their professional duties. With respect to the treatment of culture in coursebooks, this is obviously context-dependent. A frequent

complaint from teachers using global coursebooks in parts of the world that are distant from the cultural roots of such books is that they are not relevant to their learners and cannot meet local needs. Even where used in the (English) context in which they are rooted, global coursebooks can be considered by teachers as “culturally inappropriate and irrelevant” with inaccurate “representation of the world” (Norton & Buchanan, 2022, pp. 56–57). Teachers are critical of global textbooks whether they have the power to choose their own materials, or when the coursebook is set by ministries of education and the like; teachers show themselves to be well capable of critically evaluating this material, as studies from places as diverse as Iran, China, Algeria, Egypt and Malaysia reveal.

Like their teachers, language learners (particularly adults) have a healthy critical attitude to their learning materials – even though they are rarely consulted. A famous study conducted by McGrath (2006) eliciting learner images of English language coursebooks threw up everything from a Bible, map, or helper to a barrier, sleeping pill, or devil. That coursebooks can be dull and predictable with inadequate treatment of cultural factors (the latter voiced in an evaluation of an Iranian coursebook, Khodabande & Mombini, 2018) is a common lament of the learners constrained to use them. A contemporary shift towards learner-centredness has seen some consultation of this neglected cohort, with a movement towards learner-generated materials (see for example, Choi & Nunan, 2022 and Part IV of the book).

Critiques from language coursebook users ‘at the chalk face’ can be seen to feed into the metrics for textbook treatment of culture. Karen Risager, who has conducted some of the most well-known work on this area, summarises the ‘ground rules’ for this as follows:

The writer(s) of the textbook must try to avoid representations of culture, society and the world that are incorrect, outdated, overly simplified superficial or stereotypical, or socially culturally or geographically biased. On the other hand, positively: the writers should compose a textbook that is inclusive as well as power-sensitive; it should include many countries of the world.

*(Risager, 2018, p. 219)*

Let us then examine how well contemporary language coursebooks fit the positive and avoid the negatives in this regard. Starting with coursebook evaluation studies then, a number of comprehensive studies of language coursebooks have revealed not only inadequate but often ‘problematic’ coverage of culture and the intercultural. The overall findings of a study on German, French, Spanish, Danish, English, and Esperanto textbooks

by Risager (2018) were that the representations of culture in the textbooks were problematic in that they tended to homogenise, languages and communities, and had a limited focus on intercultural competence. The findings of an analysis of French, Arabic, and German language textbooks were not dissimilar; “nation-state ideologies and tourism discourse prevail in how the textbooks imagine language learners and communities, and they fail to represent the complex identities and cultures of language users and learners” (Uzum et al., 2021, p. 1). This type of oversimplified ‘touristic’ portrayal of culture is a critique often levelled at English language coursebooks. In the context of teaching a language such as English which is an international lingua franca it would be hoped that coursebooks steer clear of stereotyping and an over-emphasis on English-speaking cultures and highlight its lingua franca role, a mediator between different cultures and peoples. This brings us to a particular issue in language coursebooks from countries with colonial pasts, such as Britain, Spain, and France, which are notorious for their neglect, or even revisionism, of their histories. The only vestiges of Britain’s colonial past to be seen in typical ‘global’ ELT coursebooks, for example, are the (minority) non-white populace found in them – with such figures tending to be middle-class, with white-collar jobs, and with few representations of the working classes where many immigrants remain. A more ominous treatment of a colonial past can be perceived in the German textbook analysed by Uzum et al. (2021) which “mentions immigrants in Germany but does not discuss how people with a migrant background are embedded within the social networks of Germany, and ends up casting immigrants as perpetual others” (Uzum et al., 2021).

Post-colonialist attitudes are only one aspect of a broader, underlying issue in the teaching of language and the language coursebook. Even more than education in general, language teaching is never an ideologically neutral endeavour, and its textbooks are:

Sociocultural materials, they are the products of complex, selective processes reflecting political decisions, educational beliefs and priorities, cultural realities and language policies. As such, language teaching and learning are not ideologically neutral practices; they are located within complex webs of political and historical contexts and sociolinguistic practices, all of which is mediated through the textual and visual world of textbooks.

*(Curd-Christiansen & Weninger, 2015, p. 1)*

Language teaching and the materials used for it are thus products of diverse and at times conflicting influences; the policies and ideologies of the country in which the language is taught, the country where the materials are produced, and attitudes to the target language itself.

Given this ideological burden, it is perhaps, unsurprising that the producers of language textbooks opt to play safe and pay only ‘lip service’ to the notions of culture, multiculturalism, and intercultural competence. Culture tends to be represented in superficial and simplistic terms as elements of ‘the three Ps’, cultural products (including art, literature, cuisine), practices (based on value systems, including aspects such as dress, behaviour, and rituals), and perspectives (value systems and ideologies which both influence and draw on the previous two).

The coursebook *Headway* produces a typical example: “Hi, I’m Erika Nordstrom. I’m Swedish. I live in Malmo in the South of Sweden. I’m a product quality manager for IKEA” declares a young blonde woollen-clad woman (Soars, Soars, & Hancock, 2019, p. 10).

As this example illustrates, this type of simplification represents an essentialist view of culture – that people have a set of characteristics which make them what they are.

Essentialism is particularly dangerous in the context of learning about other cultures. The perception that other cultures can be simplified into “an underlying common core set of values, beliefs, and behaviours in a given country” (Byram & Masuhara, 2013, p. 145) can lead, at worst, to ‘othering’ (“reducing a group of people to a negative stereotype”, Holliday, 2018, p. 17). Especially in the case of English language textbooks, it can cultivate a ‘Western’ perspective that implicitly denigrates non-western countries and cultures. Texts on overseas charities in (often former-colonial) countries which are quite common in English language coursebooks can (unwittingly) do this.

An example is in *English File* (2019, p. 20) in which a text on the Ugandan charity Adelante Africa describes how British and Spanish volunteers set up the charity, and pictures orphans, children of colour, together with its (white) British secretary.

Observing cultural treatment like this in language coursebooks (even, one might note, in ones for international markets) highlights how wary materials writers need to be of risking patronising other peoples and cultures, or of any sort of “West versus the rest” discourse (the term is Holliday’s, 2019).



### ‘Localisation’

A practice that would seem to avoid such abuses is the producing of so-called localised or local coursebooks. The rationale for ‘localisation’ is that locally produced books favour the ‘source culture’ (the region where the coursebook is to be used) and can be more relevant to and culturally appropriate for the learners there (for a cogent argument, see Ates (2012) describing the production of three series of ELT books in Turkey). A half-way house between local and global coursebooks are ‘versioned’ editions of well-known coursebook series, such as a Spanish and a Middle Eastern version of the coursebook *Headway*, published within and for countries other than ones where the target language is the L1.

#### Further Reading

Norton, J., & Buchanan, H. (2022). Versioning coursebooks. In J. Norton & H. Buchanan (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of materials development for language teaching* (pp. 307–321). Abingdon: Routledge.

It might be pointed out that the terminology (‘local’) is itself somewhat patronising, implying that the default context for producing a language coursebook is solely the country where the target language is spoken as an L1. Indeed, this view might be held responsible for the advent of British and American-published ‘global’ ELT coursebooks designed for the international market with variable relevance to the different places in which they are used (for more on this, see Mishan, 2021). Language coursebooks have long been produced in cultures other than those where the TL is spoken, without controversy. Nevertheless, the internationalisation of English has meant that the need for the language is geographically widespread prompting ‘localisation’ practices in the context of ELT coursebooks. The most successful examples are those produced by teams of local practitioners and experienced materials writers, sometimes under the auspices of the countries’ ministries of education. There are many examples of this; Bolitho (2008) describes projects in places such as Romania, Russia, and Uzbekistan; a collaboration between the Tunisian ministry of education and the British Council to produce the *Teaching for Success Tunisia* coursebooks is reported in Rached and Zayer (2021), and Tomlinson and Masuhara (2017) give a summary of international examples.

Localisation and versioning are not, however, without their own pitfalls. A fundamental issue is positioning the TL within the local culture in an authentic way. Situating a TL – such as English – within an L1 culture where

it is not a part of that culture, inevitably detaches it from its culture and can ultimately strand the language in “culturally neutral” territory (Tajeddin & Teimournezhad, 2015, p. 180). A case in point is Iran, where English is seen as an international language, “a vehicle for academic attainment and international communication” (Tajeddin & Teimournezhad, 2015, p. 189) but for socio-political reasons, the preference is to distance the language from English-speaking countries – so coursebooks tend to foreground international culture with “no allusion to a particular culture” (ibid.). The example of Iran brings us full circle to the covert socio-political agendas underlying the portrayal of culture within L2 coursebooks mentioned earlier, which we come back to time and again in this book.

Yet, even in the most localised and seemingly homogeneous contexts, the language classroom can be seen as a (inter)cultural space with learners representing a diverse array of subcultural affiliations while upkeeping, at the same time, a dominant culture to which they all belong. Therefore, even if culture is seemingly ‘neutralised’, intercultural learning and dialogue within the classroom, among the learners, reflects reality.

This brief overview of the diverse positioning of culture within language coursebooks exposes the need for critical perspectives on culture within the materials we offer to our learners. It provides the springboard for the concept of ‘intercultural competence’ that is central to this book.

Before we start, there are two important caveats to what we argue and what we present in this volume. The first is an inescapable paradox that no book on ‘interculturality’ can avoid – relativism. This is influenced, first of all, by its authors, by the pedagogies they have absorbed unconsciously, due to their backgrounds, and by those they embrace consciously as a result of their research and experience. At a deeper level lie their cultural backgrounds with embedded values, beliefs, and ideologies. We thus acknowledge that as authors, it is unavoidable that we will have projected something of our own selves on to what is presented in the book. These ‘selves’ involve mixed nationalities/ethnicities: one author is a British-born Irish citizen with Jewish heritage settled in Ireland, and the other is Hungarian-born and a Hungarian citizen, who has been living in Southeast Asia for over a decade. His recent DNA analysis revealed that he is of a very mixed ancestry: East European, Balkan, Iberian, English, North-West European, and Jewish (he may have an intercultural dialogue when he talks to himself).

Second, the very matter of the book, language education, cannot be considered neutral, apolitical, or free from ideology (see, for example, Curdt-Christiansen and Weninger (2015) *Language, ideology and education*). Textbooks written to teach language are themselves imbued with the ideology of the social, cultural, historical, and political contexts in which

they are produced, making them *de facto* sociocultural materials. As such, everything from the learning content to the teaching methodologies and discourses around language and culture are rooted in their sociocultural origins. This, goes, of course, for this book as well. A book, what is more, written in English, a language associated with colonialism, imperialism, and aggressive globalisation (see, for example, *Linguistic Imperialism* (Phillipson, 1992) or *The cultural politics of English as an international language* (Pennycook, 2017)).

We endeavour to overcome these delimitations by practicing what we preach in this book. Armed with (self) awareness and reflectivity, embracing a post-positivist and essentially non-linear approach, we attempt to reach beyond our cultural restraints, striving for objectivity, balance, breadth, and perspective.

## Section 1: Core concepts and influences

### *Contextualising intercultural competence*

Since Michael Byram proposed his seminal model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (Byram, 1997), sparking a preoccupation with intercultural competence and, indeed, a veritable new field, the world and our understanding of culture and education have changed significantly; “Across the globe, migration, travel, business and international education are facilitating face-to-face intercultural contact. Advances in technology (e.g. the internet, social networking sites) are also making it easier to link people virtually in different parts of the world” (Jackson, 2012, p. 1). Globalisation of business and education has further facilitated intercultural communication, not necessarily between L1 speakers of a language and its L2 or foreign language users, but between people from different language backgrounds for whom an L2 – in most cases English – has become the lingua franca. As Matveev (2017, p. 4) says, “global communication transcends geographical boundaries” and this links people closer to each other than ever before. With such influences in mind, in this section, we contextualise the notion of intercultural competence within what we see as the key contemporary influences upon it:

- Globalisation, multiculturalism, and nationalism
- Education in the 21st century
- Intercultural communication and L2 identity
- The digital environment.

We start, however, by exploring the concept underpinning the central concern of the book; the complex and fluid notion of ‘culture’ itself.

### *Towards a conceptualisation of ‘culture’*

Conceptualisations of culture, of course, have filled books, and they vary widely in their scope and focus, depending in large part on the discipline in which they are applied (e.g. sociology, psychology, anthropology, ethnography, sociolinguistics, applied linguistics). For the purposes of this book, we seek to establish a contemporary understanding of culture that can act as a conceptual foundation for its focus, intercultural competence. Our concern here is therefore not to try to ‘define’ culture, but to explore the complex and dynamic relationships between culture, context, learning, and the individual.

This seminal conceptualisation of culture, from the 1960s, makes a useful starting point. Goodenough (1965) saw culture as a personal cognitive

(and affective) representation of its constituents; “culture is not a material phenomenon; it does not consist of things, people, behaviour, or emotions. It is rather an organisation of these things. It is the forms of things that people have in mind, their model of perceiving, relating, and otherwise interpreting them” (Goodenough, 1965, p. 36). That culture is within, rather than external to, an individual, makes it, in a way, perceptible through “the minutiae of everyday life” (Johnson & Rinvolutri, 2010, p. 8) such as our attitudes to time-keeping, boarding a bus or waiting for service at a bank or hotel reception. How we perform such everyday practices varies from culture to culture and reveals patterns of behaviour that are inevitably rooted in our culturally-based values and beliefs about how things should be done. Trivial though they may seem, then, the minutiae of daily life are effectively *cultural practices* which expose the shared sets of values and ideologies that anchor a society. Some of these culturally-directed rituals and routines are what Holliday terms ‘universal cultural processes’ (Holliday, 2019) – eating, family interaction, and celebrating, for example. Using ‘universal cultural processes’ as a prism through which to ‘read’ a culture would seem to offer (one) authentic, accessible approach to reflecting on and characterising it in pedagogy, and this is trialled in some of the activities in Part II. Making the concept ‘accessible’ does not equate to simplifying or reducing it of course; no matter how wide or narrow a lens we use for our exploration of culture, it will reflect the same levels of complexity and fluidity.

Indeed, fluidity would seem to characterise the cultures of today’s ever-accelerating movements and intermingling of populations. Such patterns of movement definitively undercut any old-fashioned, simplistic idea of ‘culture’ based on heritage or nationality; a 2020 TV advertisement for HSBC bank (available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HFlnCLIMDE>) captures this contemporary conundrum:

Where are you from? It’s a tricky one. Is it where you were born? Or where your parents were born? Or where your great great great ... grandparents were born? Is the answer in your passport? Is it where you grew up? Could it be where you *found* yourself? Or is where your heart is? Perhaps the question is not where are you from – but where do you feel at home?

So while concepts like nation, country, citizenship, heritage, ethnicity, language, race, and identity can all be seen as *aspects* of culture, they cannot be said to *determine* it. Just as we need language to portray our identity, language itself cannot truly express who we are due to its arbitrary and abstract nature. An aspect such as language, therefore, is one of the means by which

culture manifests itself, but there is no direct, single language culture correspondence. This is particularly demonstrated in a language such as English which operates in a global context, where it is used variously as a second language (e.g. India, Pakistan, Hong Kong), a first language (e.g. Britain, the USA), and a lingua franca within vastly diverse geographical areas and ‘cultural’ environments. The same can be said, of course, of other languages spread globally as a result of colonisation and migration such as French and Spanish.

The colonialism of yesteryear has today given way to the contemporary phenomenon of globalisation with its accelerated movements and intermingling of peoples. This has led to multiculturalism and multilingualism being more the norm today than monolingualism/monoculturalism. This is complemented, in a way, by the ‘virtual multiculturalism’ of the online environment: “today’s learners – especially those learning online – are exposed to too many cultural influences to be able to reduce their identities to national origins, particularly given the growing multilingual and multi-ethnic makeup of so many countries today” (Godwin-Jones, 2019, p. 12).

### ***Culture, language, and identity***

With the online environment in the mix, ‘deterritorialization’ as Kramersch (2014) calls it, means that elements like identity become increasingly fluid. They can no longer be defined in terms (solely) of national, cultural, or linguistic affiliation. Rather than something that can be roughly generalised along societal, geographic, or linguistic lines, then, culture is envisaged as intrinsically dynamic and hybrid: “culture is not a fixed, stable institutional reality that individuals belong to by virtue of having been socialised in it and that pre-exists the individual” (Kramersch, 2014, p. 42). Linguistic and cultural identity become more and more a factor of individual choice and something that is constructed in relation to interaction with others, ideas, and values. In this complex web of relationships, connections are fluid and may change, contributing to the constant redefining the self as a cultural being. Hence, culture is always more than the component parts of which it is formed. Culture *emerges* from the many elements that contribute to its existence, and even these represent highly complex phenomena.

This characterisation of culture appears to be at odds with traditional ones, particularly with how it is situated in the basic context of this book; language teaching. The general perception that drove the movement towards incorporating cultural studies into language education in the 1980s, was that there was a fundamental symbiotic relationship between the language

that we were teaching and ‘culture’, that needed to be taken into account. Hence, we have Byram, arguing from the cultural studies standpoint, that:

Language is not simply a reflector of an objective cultural reality. It is an integral part of that reality through which other parts are shaped and interpreted ... it follows that to teach language without culture is fundamentally flawed and to separate language and culture teaching is to imply that a foreign language can be treated in the early learning stages as if it were self-contained and independent of other sociocultural phenomena. (1991, p. 18)

Meanwhile, going even further back, cognitive psychology had given us the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (the linguistic relativity hypothesis) (first published in Whorf, 1956) which conceived that language encodes culturally specific content and affects the way people think. In the words of its conceiver: “The world is presented as a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic system in our minds” (Whorf, 1956, p. 213).

This would seem, at its most basic, the ultimate justification for incorporating culture into language teaching. The language-thought correspondence that Sapir-Whorf posits, however, gets more slippery in the context of the multilingualism that is increasingly a characteristic of today’s world, as we have noted above. This is pursued in the discussions on multilingualism and multiculturalism later on.

What is clear though from even this cursory look at how the language – culture relationship has been conceived over the years is that this very much depends on the (disciplinary) perspective. Where identity comes into the mix, it tends to be the sociological and sociocultural perspectives that we look to – as we see below.

#### **Further Reading**

Barkhuizen, G., & Strauss, P. (2020). *Communicating identities*. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis.

We have observed that simplifying cultural identity as a homogeneous and static concept based on nation-state, ethnicity, geography, gender, language, etc. misrepresents what constitutes identity in today’s world. Recent concepts of cultural identity such as ‘cultural hybridity’, which refers to how linguistic, cultural or ethnic ‘mixing’ can lead to a new, hybridised cultural identity, are becoming increasingly appropriate to today’s mobile generation.

One such category is Third Culture Kids (TCK) or Global Nomads (GN), referring to children and young adults who have been exposed to new cultural experiences and raised in countries different from their ‘home’ cultures. We use inverted commas here as ‘home’ is a difficult concept to define for TCKs/GNs since when they return to their country of origin – sometimes referred to as ‘passport home’ – they often feel unable to fit in and find themselves on the edges of two (or more cultures) belonging neither here, nor there (Schaetti, 2015). They may be called ‘rootless’, ‘confused’, and ‘arrogant’ by some, but in reality, they usually have a much better and “deep understanding of the complexity of the human condition” (Schaetti, 2015, p. 799) than their ethnocentric peers who grow up in a fairly monocultural environment.

The process of identity shift further complexifies how culture, identity, and language are connected to each other. Risager (2007, p. 15), for example, points out that in Central and Eastern Europe, “fertile ground can be found for ideas about the inseparability of language and (ethnic) culture” and thus language serves as a cultural identity marker. In other parts of the world, however, this would not be the case due to different histories both at the cultural and the individual levels. In Southeast Asia, for example, it is very common to find people with multicultural and multilingual backgrounds who have a more practical view of language. As a Peranakan (Chinese Malaysian) friend once explained, they used different languages for different purposes: Hokkien was used in connection with food and cooking, infused with loan words from other local languages; English was used to discuss politics; and Malay was used for official business and most schoolwork. How they viewed the connection of language and culture was completely different from how, for example, a Hungarian would do.

To summarise our exploration of the concept of culture so far, given the multiplicity of aspects that influence it and how far it eludes definition, it would seem easier to describe culture in terms of what it is *not* than what it *is*. We can no longer equate ‘culture’ directly (if we ever could) with aspects like nation, country, citizenship, heritage, ethnicity, language, race, or identity in today’s increasingly multicultural and multilingual world. Instead, culture is conceived as a fluid, dynamic, and even multiple concept which exists as much within the individual as external to them. This conceptualisation of culture has to be flexible enough to encompass the idea that multiple cultural, subcultural, and sometimes hybrid cultural identities can exist within one language community (and in one classroom) – as well as the converse. Culture, therefore, can perhaps best be conceived as an ever-evolving *process*, a reflection of the living, shifting interplay of peoples, environments, geopolitics, and global relations. Conceiving culture like this, as something constantly regenerating in the ongoing globalisation



and internationalisation of today's world, makes cultural awareness more important than ever in driving (intercultural) communication, education, international commerce, and other such elements of society.

In the next sections, we look more closely at the phenomena that have led the ability/ies needed for intercultural communication – *intercultural competence* – to be such an important contemporary concern and we conclude our working definition of it. However, one further aspect of identity needs to be explored first, given the pedagogical concerns of this book, and that is the identity of the L2 learner.

### ***Intercultural communication and L2 identity***

The earlier discussion on the complexities of the relationship between identity, language, and culture begs the question of how these operate in the development of learners' L2 identity. L2 identity refers to the subtle shifts learners experience as they come to view themselves as L2 learners and speakers – and it is often seen as one of the measures of language learning success. It is also a gauge of learners' developing intercultural communication skills. There is no doubt that the experience of being exposed to other cultures, other ideas, and ways of thinking prompts an individual to reflect on their own values and positions in the world. As a Persian proverb says, 'a new language is a new life' (یک زبان جدید یک زندگی جدید است), an opportunity to think, feel, and express oneself in new ways. Yet, shifting to and embracing a different, often more complex identity, is not a straightforward process.

Research has shown that the development of an intercultural self "evolves from a way of understanding and acting that is egocentric, ethnocentric, and cognitively simple to one that includes a broader range of perspective" (Berg, 2015, p. 229). It is indeed not a simple process and is characterised, especially at the beginning, by denial, protesting against, and minimising differences between the perceived 'us' and 'them' as most learners are convinced that the way they look at and interpret the world, i.e. through their own values and cultural filters, is the only true reality (Carr-Ruffino, 2015). When they are prompted to think about and question these realities, they often feel uncomfortable as they may have to revise and reconsider ideas they have held to be true and unquestionable and even the core values underpinning their belief systems.

The implications for activities such as those proposed in this book are that when working with materials that aim to develop learners' intercultural competence, practitioners need to pay attention to the different values and perspectives students bring to the classroom. They need to be aware of the potential conflict learners may feel between the values and beliefs of their L1/C1 identity and their developing L2 identity. (See Part II activities such as 15 'View through a different lens' and 20 'The Johari Window of culture' for techniques for sensitive handling of this).

## *The context for intercultural competence*

### *Multiculturalism, interculturalism, and nationalism*

An ever-shifting global population, migrating for economic, political, or humanitarian reasons, has made for an increasingly heterogeneous world. Models for managing these immigration patterns have evolved over the years – as well as providing a fruitful area of contention for sociologists. In essence, “multiculturalism is a response – or a set of responses – to diversity that seeks to articulate the social conditions under which difference can be incorporated and order achieved from diversity” (Hartmann & Gerteis, 2005, p. 222). This was the conceptual framework for the multicultural model to emerge in the 1970s:

Multiculturalism ... defends the idea that the societal institutions need to provide the same degree of respect, recognition and accommodation to the identities of ethnocultural minority groups as they traditionally have to the majority group. In order to prevent the obligation or expectation that the minority speak the language of the majority, or adopt its customs and lose their distinctiveness, multiculturalism favours all sorts of minority measures or group rights to protect and/or promote linguistic, ethno-cultural and religious diversity.

*(Levrain & Loobnyck, 2018, p. 3)*

For how this traditional model of multiculturalism fared, we can look to two of the most well-known examples, the United Kingdom and the United States. The UK has traditionally pursued an ‘assimilationist’ model of multiculturalism, which is (theoretically) designed to respect incoming cultures while at the same time merging them into the host culture. This has resulted in an ‘uneasy’ multicultural and consequently multilingual society. There is a tension between acknowledgement of multilingualism at an institutional level – with leaflets being provided in different languages in social service offices for example – and a government requirement for a level of English proficiency for citizenship. It is interesting to compare this to the European position. As multiculturalism and multilingualism overtake monolingualism and monoculturalism in today’s world, as we noted earlier, “within multilingual Europe, a widespread assumption is that in a global society, monolingualism is a dangerous anachronism” (Torres & Tarozzi, 2020, p. 15).

The American multiculturalist agenda, meanwhile, was born of a different exigency in the mid-1960s, the challenge of racism and integration. Immigration reform to address this in 1965 resulted in high rates of immigration over the following half century (with inevitable socio-political consequences, see below). In America and elsewhere in popular discourse

today a common connotation of multiculturalism is a negative one, placing multiculturalism in opposition to social cohesion. This may hark back to a view of multiculturalism as a system based on an essentialist view of culture, which, by recognising diversity, highlights cultural difference. It has tended to be replaced (theoretically at least) by the so-called intercultural model, which hinges on “social interaction, contacts between people of different backgrounds and shared membership” (Levrau & Loobuyck, 2018, p. 2) aimed at integrating migrants into the host culture, with ensuing citizenship. The model’s emphasis on the meeting of cultures and interpersonal contact is in line with our focus in this book. It is the intercultural model that has been the approach advocated in Europe, via directives from European bodies such as the Council of Europe. European countries clearly need direction in this regard, due to accelerating accession – 12 countries have joined since 2004 almost doubling membership of the union – as well as geopolitical events that have seen unprecedented waves of migrations from outside and even within the continent of Europe.

For successful models of interculturalism, one can look at an example such as Quebec, whose ‘harmonisation’ practices of accommodating diversity have often been held up as “one of the most substantive models designed in a North American society” (Torres & Tarozzi, 2020, p. 12). The model held that newcomers to Quebec were to be “welcomed without being expected to assimilate to the majority culture as long as they accept certain basic conditions” (Kircher, 2014, p. 223). However, its success is often seen as a factor of Quebec’s secularism and its existing tradition of citizenship rights. The paradox of different models of integrating diversity is that they are developed within and in response to particular societal attitudes which by their very existence dictate the models’ effective operation.

Despite the success stories of Quebec, which portray the welcoming attitude of society in general, language teaching materials, written specifically for immigrants, seem to use a different approach. These textbooks are critical of how migrants are covertly encouraged to assimilate through redemptive narratives (Gulliver, 2010) which mainly portray success stories of assimilation and do not portray the difficulties or the negative experiences immigrants may face. In his research, Gulliver (2010) identified 40 stories that portray how newcomers settle down in Canada and found that stories which had an ambivalent or negative outcome were marginally represented. While this may be the case across Canada, through the discursive strategies used in these textbooks, the authors seem to legitimise success stories, while difficulties and failures are marginalised.

Models of integration have, moreover, been stress-tested by the 21st century's waves of migration. These have increased hostility towards the cultural pluralism embodied in the various models of multiculturalism, and fuelled nationalism. In the US, the anti-immigrant stance of Donald Trump's presidency between 2016 and 2020 saw fierce debates about the protection of borders and draconian anti-immigration measures.

Turning to Europe, the European Union was conceived as a panacea for the ills that nationalism had visited on Europe in the form of a world war. It is ironic that being part of such a union came to be felt by some with nationalist tendencies, as weakening national solidarity, diminishing self-determination, and marginalising member states as being merely part of the EU 'mega-state' (Duroy, 2020). The present-day neo-nationalism which we see in countries such as Hungary, Poland, and France is characterised as "informed by essentialist ... ethno-cultural and linguistic perspectives on identity" (Duroy, 2020, p. 994). (Neo)nationalism thus feeds on such perceptions of difference and 'otherness' to portray immigrants as some sort of societal threat. This emphasises the need for intercultural learning materials to be part of the education system to develop learners' critical cultural awareness and enable them to differentiate between ideas and ideology.

This perspective is vividly expressed by one of the protagonists in the novel *Apeirogon* (McCann, 2020), albeit referring to the 'other' here as 'the enemy'; "People [are] afraid of the enemy because they [are] terrified that their lives might get diluted, that they may lose themselves in the tangle of knowing each other" (McCann, 2020, p. 279).

The result of neo-nationalist social policy agendas influencing government policy is, of course, strong anti-immigration policies of the type enacted in post-EU Britain and elsewhere. While the early 21st-century focus for this anti-immigration stance was incomers from Muslim countries, a new and terrifying locus of neo-nationalism emerged on the continent of Europe at the time of writing this book, with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

This situation is a far cry from the 'mutual intercultural understanding' embedded in the models of multiculturalism/interculturalism (ostensibly) framing societies in Europe and elsewhere as sketched above. In reality, this crucial ingredient is too often missing. In Britain, for example, despite the existence of linguistically and culturally 'superdiverse' cities, accounts of discrimination against people speaking languages other than English in public spaces are not uncommon and intensified from the time when Britain initiated its withdrawal from the EU in 2016 (Cooke, Bryers, & Winstanley, 2019).

“Some people don’t like when you speak Polish outside. My friend in the supermarket was told to speak English when she was talking to her daughter” (from Cooke, Bryers, & Winstanley, 2019, p. 146).

The media’s role in inciting intercultural mistrust is as irrefutable today as it has always been. Historically, we can look to examples such as the influence of the press in driving antisemitic public opinion in the Dreyfus affair in 19th-century France, or the use of the media to propagate Nazi propaganda in 1930s Germany. The mistrust of ‘the other’ permeating the right-wing British press that nailed the coffin of Britain’s membership of the EU in 2016, the anti-Chinese resentment raised at the start of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, and today’s social media ‘echo-chambers’ of racism, bring us right up to date. How intercultural misunderstanding is one root of intercultural mistrust is demonstrated by another contemporary example from Hungary. With the arrival of refugees from Syria in 2015, there were media reports (e.g. on the news sites [hvg.hu](http://hvg.hu) or [444.hu](http://444.hu)) that food provided for them by the Immigration and Asylum Office was refused. The officers did not understand why the ‘ungrateful’ refugees would throw the food out and shout abuse at them – until it was pointed out that the canned poultry pâté contained ‘industrial bacon’ as one of its ingredients and which, thus, is forbidden food for the Muslim refugees.

Such episodes stem from a general ignorance about other cultures and a lack of skills/understanding of how to tackle intercultural encounters. While *education* may seem to be too facile a ‘get out clause’ for developing intercultural understanding and tolerance of diversity, it is a direct avenue of influence. Let us look at 21st-century practices in education and examine their potential in this regard.

### *Education in the 21st century*

The end of the 20th century saw unprecedented changes in many fields of life due mainly to technological advancements and processes of globalisation as we emphasised earlier. Education is one of the areas which experienced reforms in its delivery practices and also a paradigm shift in general. Old educational norms of equipping students with functional literacy and numeracy skills, traditional lecture-type delivery of content, and the fact that students should study in the confinement of the classroom were brought under scrutiny. The development of technology tools – not necessarily for educational purposes – prompted teachers to think about their applicability in their classrooms, taking learning to areas, both physically and virtually, where it has never been before.

Globalisation increased the movement of trained professionals across the world and politicians started to realise that a similar move would be beneficial for education as well. In the European Union for example, there was strong political will to improve student mobility. This resulted in the launch of the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (ERASMUS) programme, an initiative to expand the learning experiences of tertiary students beyond the borders of their own countries. The programme has been highly successful and, although there have been some variations in regional participation, it was extended in its scope. ERASMUS+ was launched in 2014 to include collaboration between students and institutions beyond the EU. With such increased student mobility – not limited only to EU programmes, but including other organisations (e.g. Fulbright, EdOdyssey, GoAbroad, etc.) and also geographical contexts, two phenomena that have an impact on intercultural learning increased in prominence are Transnational Education (TNE) and English Medium Instruction (EMI).

TNE is the realisation that not all students are mobile; therefore, knowledge should be made mobile. By definition “the mobility of knowledge lies at the heart of TNE; it crosses, transects, and overcomes the parochialism and embeddedness of national education systems, to deliver educational programmes to students who are both culturally and spatially removed from home” (Waters & Leung, 2017). TNE thus refers to an educational setup in which learners are studying (sometimes virtually), in a different country from the awarding institution, but in an environment which is infused with the educational philosophy and practices of that institution. This means that although they may not leave their homes, they are immersed into a new cultural learning experience which is further accentuated by the fact that most TNE institutions offer their programmes in English via the mechanism of English Medium Instruction (EMI), the use of English to teach academic subjects in countries where the first language is not English.

The broadest globalisation initiative for education is UNESCO’s (2014) framework *Global Citizenship Education* (GCED). GCED is intended to “empower learners to engage and assume active roles, both locally and globally, to face and resolve global challenges and ultimately to become proactive contributors to a more just, peaceful, tolerant, inclusive, secure and sustainable world” (p. 14). This concern is reflected in global citizenship skills being given precedence as the first of eight characteristics defining ‘quality learning’ by the World Economic Forum (2020).

The idea of global citizenship (GC) is far more holistic and abstract than national citizenship, with its legal and geographical boundaries. In transcending national and cultural borders, the concept implies a critical perspective not only on language and culture but on the power dynamic between them, and the societal issues this creates. GC has been conceived as an ethos “a set

of ethical principles underscoring the connection between democracy, social justice, equity and solidarity” (Tarozzi & Torres, 2016, p. 14). Thus, Global citizenship or Intercultural citizenship *education* extends far beyond what could at this stage be considered outmoded concepts of language and culture education: “GCE is an educative concept ... grounded in the assumption that today people in the process of learning live in a global context and, even if in an unequal way, interact at a planetary level” (ibid., p. 11).

These worthy educational aspirations have, inevitably, been taken up as ‘business opportunities’ as the tertiary education sector spotted the potential of markets like China and the Middle East and did their utmost to attract people from there. Universities in Britain host thousands of Chinese students each year – a record 151,690 came to the UK in 2022 and over 125,000 came from India and Southeast Asia (Study in UK, 2023). The situation has been similar Europe-wide, with over 303,000 Chinese students reported pre-pandemic, in 2015, in countries including France, Sweden, Germany, and Ireland (Xinhua, 2019). In the USA too, China is the number one origin country for international students, representing 31% of all international students in 2016. This may, however, shift in the light of recent changes in the country’s educational and migration policies. In 2014, Chinese overseas students accounted for 14% of all international students in the world.

However, the management of diversity and cultural differences in third-level institutions appears, overall, to be inadequate. ‘Cultural preparation’ offered to Chinese students in preparation for exchange to Britain, for example, is basically learning facts about the UK that have little cultural value for everyday life. Support for Chinese students at UK Universities, while improving as understanding has developed of the multiple problems they face including emotional, cultural as well as academic issues, remains insufficient (this is the conclusion of a 2006 report on universities in the UK, for instance). In other parts of the world, such as the USA, many universities do not provide adequate initiatives to sufficiently help international students adapt to life in a new country. Reports on the integration of international students into their new environment in places like the UK, Australia, New Zealand, and the USA suggest that lack of engagement between international and domestic students remains an issue. In some situations, international students still tend to socialise only among themselves, in monocultural groups, or as an international student body, thus not fully exploiting the intercultural potential of the overseas experience.

### *The digital environment*

As we have discussed above, one of the key drivers of globalisation is technology. The first e-mail was sent only 50 years ago by Ray Tomlinson

(O'Regan, 2018) and in that relatively short timespan, our communication patterns have changed tremendously. It is without doubt that the development and spread of information technology and digital communication has changed not only the ways we interact with each other but also how we understand and enact cultures in our everyday lives. With the move to a more global cultural village, we have had to reinterpret what it means to belong to a cultural group. The boundaries between how we have understood 'us' and 'others' have been shifting as "representations of other cultures on the internet have made the foreign both more familiar and more stereotypical" (Kramsch & Uryu, 2012, p. 213). This has led to the creation of 'third spaces' or 'third places' where distinct national cultures do not exist anymore and hybridity is the norm.

Communication technology has indeed brought the world closer together and it has shaped how we use language in our everyday communication. It has also had an impact on education and created opportunities for language learning to go beyond the physical boundaries of the classroom. The outside world is now available to learners in an instant and the internet has taken them to places where they have never dreamt of going – and to where some of them will never ever venture. This has brought about new educational formats, such as online intercultural exchange, "engaging language learners in interaction and collaborative project work with partners from other cultures through the use of online communication tools such as e-mail, videoconferencing and discussion forums" (O'Dowd, 2007, p. 4). This way of learning offers students the opportunity to engage and communicate with people from all over the world while they negotiate and participate in knowledge construction. Moreover, online communication can lead to learners constructing an identity as a user of the second language beyond the classroom – as a global citizen, in other words.

The idea of the internet as an intercultural space inspires educators in the field. Holliday (2016, p. 257), for example, sees the internet itself as a culture, "a place where culture is created and recreated". Therefore, he goes on, it is not surprising that a new branch of ethnography, virtual ethnography, i.e. the study of the "sociocultural dimensions of the internet" is a thriving new field. If so, what does this mean for the language teacher? And for our context, what does it mean for intercultural communication? How will concepts like 'cultural hybridity' and 'third places' fit – and/or be affected by – the online environment? More prosaically, how can practitioners tap into the 'natural' multiculturalism of the online environment to nurture intercultural competence?

Educators were not long in spotting the potential of social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Twitter, or Facebook which offer groupings based on common interests and a shared environment to any and all online