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Russian Language and Cultural Education as a Tool for Developing Intercultural Competence among International Relations Students: A Pedagogical Perspective

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Abstract

International Relations (IR) curricula have, in most institutions, treated foreign-language study and intercultural competence development as adjacent but separately administered requirements: students take a language course in one department and, if their programme offers one at all, an intercultural or area-studies course in another, with little structural expectation that the two will reinforce each other. This paper argues that Russian language and cultural education, taught deliberately as a single integrated pedagogical process rather than as parallel requirements, offers a particularly effective vehicle for developing intercultural competence in IR students, given the continued geopolitical salience of Russian-speaking regions to the discipline and the language's well-documented pedagogical demands, which force a depth of engagement with cultural framing that more instrumentally taught languages sometimes avoid. Drawing on Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence, Deardorff's process model of intercultural competence, and the

sociocultural tradition in language pedagogy associated with Vygotsky and Kramsch, together with the empirical literature on Russian-language study-abroad and heritage-learner outcomes, the paper develops a pedagogical framework — Integrated Language-Culture Pedagogy for International Relations (ILCP-IR) — that specifies how Russian-language instruction for IR students should be sequenced and assessed to build not only linguistic proficiency but the attitudes, knowledge, and critical cultural awareness that intercultural competence frameworks treat as its necessary components. A mixed-methods methodology for evaluating the framework against a conventional, non-integrated language-course comparison group is proposed. The paper concludes by considering what the framework implies for IR programme design, instructor training, and the broader case for treating language pedagogy as a core, rather than peripheral, component of intercultural and diplomatic education.

Keywords: Russian Language Pedagogy, Intercultural Competence, International Relations Education, Foreign Language Teaching, Intercultural Communicative Competence, Area Studies, Language and Culture

1. Introduction

The relationship between language study and intercultural competence is, in principle, well established in applied linguistics: a language cannot be taught as a purely formal system of grammar and vocabulary without also, implicitly or explicitly, transmitting the cultural frames within which that language's speakers make meaning. In practice, however, International Relations (IR) programmes have tended to treat language requirements instrumentally, as a credentialing hurdle oriented

toward reading proficiency or basic conversational competence, and to house whatever intercultural or area-studies content a curriculum offers in a separate course, taught by different faculty, with little deliberate coordination between the two. The consequence, this paper argues, is that many IR graduates complete language requirements without acquiring the intercultural competence that language study, taught differently, could have been expected to build — and that this gap is especially costly in the case of Russian, a language whose continued relevance to the discipline (in diplomacy, security studies, post-Soviet area studies, and international political economy) is not in serious dispute, but whose pedagogy is too often reduced to grammar-translation instruction stripped of the cultural depth the language and the region actually demand.

This paper makes the case for a deliberately integrated approach, in which Russian language instruction for IR students is designed from the outset around intercultural competence outcomes rather than treating such outcomes as an incidental byproduct of linguistic study. The case rests on three observations developed in the literature review below. First, established models of intercultural competence specify attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical cultural awareness as interdependent components that language instruction, properly sequenced, is unusually well positioned to develop together, precisely because language use inherently requires a learner to take up a cultural perspective rather than simply acquire cultural facts about it. Second, the empirical literature on Russian-language learning outcomes, particularly from immersion and study-abroad research, already demonstrates that sustained engagement with the language produces measurable gains in sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence that closely track intercultural-competence outcomes, even where the programmes studied were not explicitly designed around intercultural-competence frameworks. Third, IR as a discipline has its own distinct competence requirements — negotiation, diplomatic register, the capacity to interpret political discourse critically rather than merely translate it — that a generic language-for-general-purposes curriculum does not address, and that a purpose-built integrated pedagogy could. The paper proceeds by reviewing the relevant literatures on intercultural competence models, sociocultural approaches to language pedagogy, and Russian-language pedagogy specifically, before proposing the ILCP-IR framework and a methodology for testing its effectiveness relative to conventional instruction.

2. Literature Review

Three literatures inform the framework developed in section 3: general models of intercultural competence and its relationship to language education; the sociocultural tradition within applied linguistics, which supplies the theoretical rationale for treating language and culture as inseparable in instruction; and the specific body of research on Russian-language pedagogy and learning outcomes.

2.1 Intercultural Competence and Its Relationship to Language Education

Byram's (1997) ^[2] model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) remains the most widely cited framework linking foreign-language education specifically to intercultural competence outcomes, proposing five interrelated components — attitudes (curiosity and

openness, and a willingness to relativise one's own cultural values), knowledge (of one's own and the target society and culture), skills of interpreting and relating (the ability to interpret a document or event from another culture and relate it to one's own), skills of discovery and interaction (the ability to acquire new cultural knowledge in real time), and critical cultural awareness (the ability to evaluate perspectives, practices, and products critically, on the basis of explicit criteria, in both one's own and other cultures). Byram's model is distinctive, relative to general (language-independent) intercultural competence frameworks, in treating linguistic competence not as a separate, parallel requirement but as the medium through which the other four components are developed and demonstrated, which is precisely the theoretical basis on which the present paper's integrated pedagogy rests.

Deardorff's (2006) ^[4] process model of intercultural competence, developed through consensus among intercultural-education scholars rather than specifically within language-teaching research, offers a complementary account, situating attitudes (respect, openness, curiosity, and discovery) as foundational, feeding into knowledge and comprehension and skills at an internal outcome level, which in turn produce an external outcome of effective and appropriate communication and behaviour in intercultural situations. Deardorff's model is useful to the present paper primarily as an assessment referent: because it was developed with explicit attention to how intercultural competence can be measured, it offers a more assessment-ready vocabulary than Byram's model alone provides, and the framework proposed in section 3 draws on both — Byram's for pedagogical sequencing, Deardorff's for outcome assessment.

Bennett's (1986) ^[1] Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, already discussed in comparable pedagogical contexts, supplies the developmental-staging logic — from ethnocentric to ethnorelative orientations — that the present framework uses to sequence when in a language programme particular cultural content should be introduced, on the premise that content assuming an ethnorelative orientation (for instance, critical comparative analysis of Russian and Western political discourse) will be poorly absorbed by learners still operating from a minimisation or defense orientation toward the target culture.

2.2 Sociocultural Theory and the Inseparability of Language and Culture

The theoretical case for integrating language and culture instruction, rather than treating them as sequential or parallel, draws on the sociocultural tradition in language learning associated with Vygotsky (1978) ^[7], for whom higher-order cognitive functions, including language, develop through socially and culturally mediated activity rather than as context-free formal systems acquired in isolation. Kramsch's (1993) ^[6] extension of this tradition into language pedagogy specifically argues that language classrooms constitute a "third place" or "third culture" in which learners negotiate meaning between their own cultural frame and the target culture's, rather than simply absorbing target-culture facts as an external body of knowledge layered on top of grammar instruction. This reframing matters pedagogically because it shifts the instructional goal away from transmitting cultural information about Russian-speaking societies (facts a

student could, in principle, acquire from a textbook or documentary without language study at all) and toward developing the interpretive and perspective-taking capacities that Byram's skills of interpreting and relating, and critical cultural awareness, specifically require — capacities that depend on sustained engagement with the target language itself, since a great deal of cultural meaning is carried in pragmatics, register, and discourse patterns that translation strips away.

2.3 Russian-Language Pedagogy and Learning Outcomes

Empirical research on Russian-language acquisition, much of it conducted through American Councils for International Education's long-running study-abroad and testing programmes, provides some of the more extensive outcome data available for any single less-commonly-taught language, and offers a useful evidence base for the present framework despite not having been designed around intercultural-competence outcomes specifically. Davidson's (2010) ^[3] analysis of longitudinal proficiency gains among American undergraduates studying Russian in immersion contexts found substantial oral proficiency gains associated with extended in-country study, with gains closely tied to the depth and structure of learners' interaction with the host environment rather than to classroom instruction hours alone — a finding consistent with the sociocultural account in section 2.2, and a caution to any purely classroom-based version of the framework proposed here, which should build in structured contact with authentic Russian-language material and, where feasible, interlocutors, rather than relying on formal instruction in isolation.

Kagan and colleagues' extensive work on heritage and non-heritage learners of Russian (see Kagan, 2005 ^[5], and subsequent work on differentiated instruction for heritage-language learners) documents the pedagogical complexity introduced when a single Russian-language classroom serves both learners with prior home exposure to the language and culture and learners encountering both for the first time — a complexity highly relevant to IR programmes, which often enrol students with genuinely mixed heritage backgrounds in Russian-speaking communities, and which the ILCP-IR framework addresses through differentiated cultural-content tracks discussed in section 3.3.

Beyond the American Councils and heritage-learner literatures, a smaller body of work specifically addresses Russian for diplomatic or specialised professional purposes, generally converging on the view that generic conversational or literary Russian instruction, however proficiency-building, under-prepares students for the specific registers of political, diplomatic, and media discourse that IR practice actually requires, and that dedicated attention to these registers needs to be built into a programme's design rather than assumed to develop as a byproduct of general fluency.

3. Conceptual Framework: The ILCP-IR Model

The Integrated Language-Culture Pedagogy for International Relations (ILCP-IR) framework translates the literatures above into a sequenced pedagogical model with three structural components: developmental staging, register-differentiated content strands, and outcome assessment aligned to Byram's and Deardorff's competence components.

3.1 Developmental Staging

Following Bennett's (1986) ^[1] developmental logic, the framework organises a multi-year Russian-language sequence for IR students into three broad stages rather than treating language proficiency level as the sole basis for curricular sequencing. An early-stage focus concentrates on building foundational linguistic proficiency alongside knowledge-oriented cultural content (history, geography, institutions) that does not presuppose an ethnorelative orientation and is unlikely to provoke the defensive reactions Bennett's model associates with premature exposure to more contested comparative material. A mid-stage focus introduces Byram's skills of interpreting and relating directly, through paired analysis of Russian- and English-language media coverage of the same event, requiring students to interpret cultural and political framing differences using their developing linguistic competence rather than relying on translated summaries. A late-stage focus, reserved for students who have demonstrated an ethnorelative rather than purely ethnocentric or minimising orientation in mid-stage work, introduces critical cultural awareness activities proper — structured critical comparison of Russian and Western political discourse, diplomatic rhetoric, and media framing, evaluated against explicit, student-articulated criteria rather than against an assumed "correct" Western interpretive standard, which Byram's model treats as essential to critical cultural awareness but which is, in practice, the stage most conventional language curricula never reach.

3.2 Register-Differentiated Content Strands

Addressing the diplomatic-register gap identified in section 2.3, the framework specifies parallel content strands running alongside general proficiency instruction from the mid-stage onward: a diplomatic and political-discourse strand (negotiation language, formal register, political speech analysis) and a media and public-discourse strand (news analysis, public commentary, informal political discourse), allowing IR students to build the specific registers their subsequent professional or academic work is likely to require, rather than treating diplomatic Russian as a specialised add-on reserved for advanced or postgraduate study.

3.3 Differentiated Tracks for Heritage and Non-Heritage Learners

Drawing on Kagan's heritage-learner research, the framework recommends differentiated entry tracks and, where enrolment allows, differentiated small-group instruction for students with prior home or community exposure to Russian language and culture versus those without, on the grounds that the two groups' starting points with respect to Byram's attitudes and knowledge components (not merely their linguistic proficiency) typically differ substantially, and that a single undifferentiated classroom risks under-challenging one group while overwhelming the other.

3.4 Outcome Assessment

Assessment within the framework combines conventional proficiency testing (oral proficiency interviews, of the kind used in the American Councils research reviewed above) with intercultural-competence-specific instruments built

around Deardorff's (2006) ^[4] internal and external outcome categories — for instance, structured reflective portfolios assessed against explicit criteria for critical cultural awareness, and simulated negotiation or briefing exercises assessed for appropriate and effective intercultural communication rather than for grammatical accuracy alone. This dual assessment approach is intended to make explicit, and therefore gradeable, the intercultural outcomes that a proficiency-only assessment regime would leave implicit and unmeasured.

4. Proposed Methodology for Empirical Validation

4.1 Design

A quasi-experimental, pre-post design comparing IR students enrolled in an ILCP-IR-structured Russian sequence against a comparison group enrolled in a conventional, non-integrated Russian-language sequence (matched as closely as possible on starting proficiency, prior heritage exposure, and year of study) is recommended as the most feasible rigorous test available within a normal academic programme structure, given that random assignment to language curricula is rarely administratively possible.

4.2 Participants

Participants would be drawn from IR (or closely related area-studies and political science) programmes at institutions offering a multi-semester Russian-language sequence, ideally across at least two institutions to reduce the risk that results reflect a single programme's idiosyncratic features rather than the framework itself. A combined sample of 60–100 students across treatment and comparison groups, tracked across at least two consecutive semesters, would be a reasonable minimum for the mixed-methods analysis proposed below, acknowledging that enrolment sizes in less-commonly-taught language programmes are often considerably smaller than in large-enrolment introductory courses generally.

4.3 Instruments and Measures

Linguistic proficiency would be assessed using a standard oral proficiency interview format consistent with the measures used in existing Russian-language outcome research, administered at the start and end of the observation period. Intercultural competence would be assessed using a combination of a validated general intercultural-competence self-report instrument (adapted, where necessary, to reference Russian-speaking contexts specifically) and the portfolio- and simulation-based assessments described in section 3.4, scored by raters trained on Deardorff's (2006) ^[4] outcome categories and blind to whether a given student belongs to the treatment or comparison group. Semi-structured interviews with a purposive subsample at the end of the observation period would supplement the quantitative measures, particularly to capture students' own account of which activities they experienced as shifting their cultural perspective, information the structured instruments alone are unlikely to surface fully.

4.4 Analytic Strategy

Between-group comparison of pre-post gains on both the proficiency and intercultural-competence measures, using analysis of covariance to control for baseline differences, would test the framework's central claim that integrated

instruction produces larger intercultural-competence gains than conventional instruction without sacrificing proficiency gains. Within the treatment group, correlating gains with the developmental stage and content strand each student progressed through would allow a secondary test of whether the staged, register-differentiated structure specifically (rather than integration in some more generic sense) accounts for any observed advantage. Interview data would be analysed thematically and used primarily to interpret quantitative findings and to identify which specific pedagogical activities students associated with perspective change, informing refinement of the framework ahead of any larger-scale or multi-institution trial.

5. Implications for Practice and Curriculum Design

If supported, the framework would argue for IR programmes to restructure language requirements around integrated intercultural-competence outcomes rather than proficiency credit hours alone, with implications for how language faculty and IR faculty coordinate curriculum design — a coordination that, at most institutions, the current departmental separation between language instruction and area-studies or IR content does not structurally support. Instructor preparation is a related implication: delivering the mid- and late-stage critical cultural awareness content the framework specifies requires language instructors comfortable facilitating genuinely open-ended critical comparison of politically sensitive material, a skill set distinct from, and not always included in, standard foreign-language teacher preparation, suggesting a role for joint faculty development between language and IR departments rather than treating this as a language-department training matter alone.

More broadly, the framework's logic — that intercultural competence is best built through staged, register-aware, critically oriented language pedagogy rather than through language study and cultural content taught in parallel — is not specific to Russian, and a validated version of the framework could plausibly be adapted to other languages of continuing strategic relevance to IR programmes, though the specific register strands and content sequencing would need to be redeveloped for each target language and region rather than transferred wholesale.

6. Limitations

As a conceptual and pedagogical framework, ILCP-IR has not yet been tested against the comparison-group design proposed in section 4, and its central claim — that integration produces intercultural-competence gains beyond what conventional parallel instruction achieves — remains a hypothesis pending that test. The quasi-experimental design proposed, in the absence of true random assignment, leaves open the possibility that unmeasured differences between students who self-select into differently structured programmes (where more than one is available) account for some portion of any observed effect, a limitation common to curricular intervention research in real academic settings and one the covariate-adjustment strategy in section 4.4 only partially addresses. The framework's late-stage critical cultural awareness component, in particular, depends on instructors' comfort facilitating open critical comparison of political material, which may vary considerably across institutional and political contexts and could limit how faithfully the framework, as specified, is implementable in

programmes without appropriately prepared faculty. Finally, the framework has been developed with primary reference to Russian-language pedagogy research conducted in North American institutional contexts, and its applicability to IR programmes situated in other regions, including in contexts with different historical relationships to Russia and different student prior-knowledge baselines, would need separate consideration rather than assumed transfer.

7. Conclusion

This paper has argued that Russian language and cultural education, when deliberately structured around established intercultural-competence frameworks rather than taught as a proficiency requirement running in parallel with separate cultural content, offers IR programmes an unusually effective vehicle for developing the attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical cultural awareness that intercultural competence models treat as interdependent rather than separable outcomes. The Integrated Language-Culture Pedagogy for International Relations framework developed here specifies how such instruction should be staged, register-differentiated, and assessed, and a mixed-methods methodology has been proposed for testing its effectiveness against conventional instruction. Should the framework's central claims be supported empirically, the clearest implication is structural rather than purely pedagogical: IR programmes seeking genuine intercultural competence outcomes from their language requirements will need to bring language and area-studies instruction into closer curricular coordination than most currently do, treating language pedagogy not as a credentialing hurdle adjacent to the discipline's real content, but as one of the discipline's more effective means of delivering it.

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