



# Teaching German within the Framework of Intercultural Exchanges

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## Abstract

*This paper examines the teaching of German as a foreign language within the framework of intercultural exchanges, emphasizing its educational potential in non-formal learning contexts. Grounded in theoretical approaches to non-formal and intercultural learning, the study conceptualizes language learning as a holistic, experiential process that develops through social interaction, participation, and reflection. Intercultural learning is approached as a key educational objective, fostering intercultural competence, empathy, and critical cultural awareness among young people. Intercultural exchanges are analyzed as structured yet flexible learning environments that enable authentic communication and collaborative engagement across cultural boundaries, thereby supporting the meaningful acquisition of linguistic and social skills. Furthermore, the paper highlights the role of youth institutions and international youth work organizations in designing, implementing, and sustaining intercultural exchange programs. These institutions contribute significantly to the promotion of multilingualism, democratic values, and transnational cooperation. The study concludes that teaching German in the context of intercultural exchanges not only enhances linguistic proficiency but also supports the development of intercultural sensitivity and active citizenship, positioning language education as a central component of contemporary European youth work.*

**Keywords:** non-formal education, youth work, youth exchanges, intercultural competence

## 1. Introduction

One of the primary objectives of foreign language teaching and learning is to foster students' awareness of multilingualism and multicultural living, while simultaneously promoting intercultural communication competence (Huneke & Steinig, 2010: 199). One effective means of cultivating intercultural communicative competence among adolescent learners is participation in intercultural exchange programmes. In Greece, such opportunities have traditionally been associated mainly with Erasmus programmes, in which English is typically used as the lingua franca for communication. In recent years, however, the establishment of the Hellenic-German Youth Foundation has created new opportunities for intercultural exchanges between Greece and Germany and/or France. Through these initiatives, participants are able to come into direct contact with native speakers and use the foreign languages they have studied for several years in authentic communicative contexts, an element considered fundamental within the framework of contemporary foreign language pedagogy (Savignon, 2017). Although similar youth foundations and exchange programmes between Germany and other countries have existed for several decades, such initiatives have only recently begun operating in Greece, specifically since 2021. Consequently, the educational opportunities provided through these programmes are gradually becoming more widely recognized within both formal and non-formal education settings.

The present study aims to highlight the educational value of intercultural exchanges and to investigate their impact and effectiveness in relation to different dimensions of foreign language teaching and learning, with particular emphasis on German language education. Special attention is given to the cognitive, social, and intercultural benefits that may emerge through participation in such programmes. This focus is particularly relevant, as intercultural communicative competence (Baros, Stergiou & Chatzidimou, 2014) is increasingly considered one of the key competencies required of individuals in contemporary multilingual and multicultural societies.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1 Non-formal Education

Non-formal learning is generally defined as learning that takes place outside the framework of compulsory curriculum-based instruction and formal teaching hours. It may occur either within the school environment, for example through educational groups and extracurricular activities, or outside formal

educational settings, such as in foreign language centres and youth programmes. Non-formal learning activities are highly diverse, as the objectives of non-formal education encompass a broad range of educational, social, and personal dimensions. In general, non-formal learning refers to planned educational activities that may not always be explicitly identified as “learning” in terms of learning objectives, duration, or instructional support, yet remain intentional from the learner’s perspective (Cedefop, 2008: 133).

One of the distinctive characteristics of non-formal learning is its emphasis on the targeted development of personal and social competences, including initiative-taking, collaboration, communication, and active participation. In this sense, non-formal education promotes a more authentic and learner-centred approach to the learning process, encouraging learners to assume greater responsibility for their own educational development. More specifically, non-formal learning differs from formal education due to its less teacher-centred structure, while at the same time differing from informal learning because it is usually organised, facilitated by trained staff, and based on specific educational objectives and methodologies. Consequently, it may be described as an experiential form of learning and skills development grounded in voluntary participation and focused primarily on the learner’s active engagement. Such approaches are widely implemented in mobility and intercultural exchange programmes, where non-formal learning constitutes a central methodological framework. In these contexts, non-formal educational practices are extensively employed by youth workers and educators, contributing significantly to young people’s personal, educational, and social development.

### **2.2 Intercultural Learning**

One of the central aims of foreign language learning is the development of learners’ ability to communicate effectively, both orally and in written form, with native speakers of the target language. Nevertheless, when exposure to the target language remains limited to the classroom environment, achieving this objective often becomes challenging, since important aspects of authentic communication -such as stylistic variation, intonation patterns, spontaneity, and familiarity with cultural practices- may remain insufficiently developed. Within the framework of communicative language teaching, emphasis is placed on moving beyond traditional teaching methods and exclusive dependence on the textbook, towards a more communication-oriented and learner-centred approach (Savignon, 2017: 138). In this context, intercultural exchange programmes can function as an important complement to classroom instruction, as they provide learners with opportunities to engage in authentic communicative situations and interact directly with native speakers of the target language (Edelenbos & Kubanek, 2004: 20).

Research findings indicate that participation in intercultural exchanges may contribute positively to both receptive and productive language skills. More specifically, participants often appear to improve their listening comprehension while simultaneously developing greater confidence and fluency in oral communication by the end of the exchange experience (Edelenbos & Kubanek, 2004: 20). Such experiences reflect one of the fundamental principles of contemporary language teaching, namely the active involvement of learners in meaningful communicative situations that resemble real-life language use beyond the classroom environment (Chatzidimou & Stamovlasis, 2014: 41). Furthermore, communication within intercultural exchanges is not limited to linguistic development alone. Interaction with peers in authentic social contexts often acquires emotional significance, particularly when meaningful interpersonal relationships are formed. As Edelenbos and Kubanek (2004: 23) argue, communication experiences connected to personal interaction and emotional engagement tend to leave a more lasting impact on participants than isolated or impersonal communicative encounters. Consequently, intercultural exchanges may substantially influence learners’ autonomy, self-confidence, and understanding of the culture of the “other” (Edelenbos & Kubanek, 2004: 20).

At the same time, intercultural contact encourages learners to reflect critically on their own cultural assumptions while becoming aware of alternative ways of thinking and behaving. According to Heringer (2004), encounters with individuals from different cultural backgrounds may create moments of tension or misunderstanding, precisely because participants are confronted with perspectives and behavioural norms different from their own. Such challenges become even more evident in international youth exchanges, where participants differ not only in terms of cultural background, but also in language proficiency, communicative competence, expectations, and previous intercultural experiences. As a result, communication difficulties are often unavoidable in intercultural settings characterised by such diversity. In some cases, misunderstandings may contribute to the formation or reinforcement of stereotypes, prejudices, or insecurities among participants. However, these situations also create opportunities for reflection, negotiation of meaning, and intercultural learning.

Through intercultural learning processes (Lane, 2012), learners gradually develop intercultural communicative competence, which includes both verbal and non-verbal dimensions of communication. Participants become more aware that communicative behaviour differs across cultural contexts and, consequently, acquire strategies that facilitate more effective interaction. In addition, they develop the ability to interpret misunderstandings, negotiate meaning, and demonstrate empathy towards cultural difference (Biechele & Padros, 2003). This perspective is further supported by Byram's (2008) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence in foreign language education, according to which learners should develop, among other competences, the ability to interpret cultural phenomena within intercultural contexts and to independently acquire new knowledge regarding other cultures.

### **2.3 Intercultural Youth Exchanges**

International youth exchanges constitute an important component of both formal and non-formal educational opportunities for young people in many countries. Their long-term impact has been examined extensively, including within the framework of the research project *Long-term Effects of Participation in International Youth Meetings on the Personal Development of Participants*, conducted by a research team at the University of Regensburg. One of the central conclusions of the study is that even relatively short intercultural experiences may have a lasting influence on participants' personal development. Beyond the improvement of foreign language skills, participation in intercultural exchanges appears to contribute positively to self-confidence, teamwork abilities, openness towards new perspectives, and, consequently, to young people's future professional opportunities.

At the same time, the demands placed upon young people in an increasingly globalised and multicultural world are becoming progressively more complex. The process of shaping one's identity and developing a stable sense of self within rapidly changing social environments often presents significant challenges. In this context, intercultural exchanges may play an important role, as they foster the development of intercultural competence and encourage participants to engage constructively with cultural diversity. Through participation in such programmes, young people are provided with opportunities to strengthen communication skills, develop empathy and adaptability, and acquire experiences that may prove valuable both in their everyday social interactions and in their future professional lives. The ability to coexist and cooperate effectively within multicultural environments is increasingly regarded as an essential competence in contemporary societies.

For these reasons, intercultural exchanges should be considered an integral element of youth work and educational practice. Their educational and social potential highlights the importance of further supporting, expanding, and systematically integrating such programmes into both formal and non-formal educational contexts.

### **2.4 IJAB – Specialist Office for International Youth Work of the Federal Republic of Germany e.V.**

IJAB serves as a central institution for the promotion and coordination of international youth work and youth policy cooperation in Germany, both within Europe and at a global level. Its primary objective is to foster mutual understanding through the promotion of international youth exchanges and intercultural encounters, while simultaneously supporting international education, youth participation, and the prevention of xenophobia, racism, and violence. In cooperation with international partners, IJAB implements projects related to youth policy and facilitates the exchange of knowledge and expertise in the field of child and youth welfare. Furthermore, it promotes networking among institutions and organisations operating in youth work both within Germany and internationally.

In addition, IJAB provides information, counselling, and professional support to youth welfare organisations, policy makers, and public administrations. Its activities include the organisation of training opportunities, professional exchange programmes, educational resources, and specialist publications related to international youth work. At the same time, the organisation offers guidance to young people regarding opportunities for international mobility and available funding schemes. As the specialised agency for international youth work in the Federal Republic of Germany, IJAB has been operating since 1967 under the auspices of the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, in collaboration with its member organisations and other youth work institutions (<https://www.dfjw.org/das-dfjw-entdecken.html>).

### **2.5 Hellenic-German Youth Foundation**

The Hellenic-German Youth Foundation (HGYF) was established following the bilateral agreement signed on 4 July 2019 between the Federal Republic of Germany and the Hellenic Republic, officially commencing its operations in Leipzig and Thessaloniki in April 2021. The Foundation functions as an international organisation dedicated to supporting and financing Greek-German youth exchanges, as well as professional exchanges among youth workers. Its primary objective is to strengthen mutual understanding and intercultural dialogue between young people from Greece and Germany by creating opportunities for meaningful intercultural encounters and cooperation.

Within this framework, the Hellenic-German Youth Foundation promotes a wide range of educational and intercultural activities, including youth exchange programmes, professional exchanges, internships, job-shadowing initiatives, and small-scale collaborative projects. Such initiatives enable young people from both countries to meet, interact, exchange perspectives, and cooperate on topics of common interest, thereby fostering intercultural learning, active participation, and international collaboration (<https://dgjw-egjn.org/wir-ueber-uns/>).

### **3. Practical Background**

#### ***3.1 The Aim of the Research***

The aim of this study is to highlight the importance of intercultural exchanges and their potential benefits across multiple dimensions of participants' development, including social and cognitive aspects. More specifically, the study first focuses on the development of oral comprehension skills. By assessing participants' listening comprehension before and after the exchange programme, the study seeks to examine the extent to which their ability to understand native speakers of German is affected by participation in the exchange.

A further objective is to investigate the development of oral production skills. By comparing participants' oral performance prior to and following the exchange, the study aims to determine the extent to which their communicative effectiveness and fluency in interactions with native speakers have improved. Based on prior experience, it is hypothesised that more pronounced improvements may be observed among participants at A2-B1 proficiency level, as they are already equipped with a sufficient range of linguistic structures and vocabulary to manage a variety of communicative situations.

Finally, the study also explores participants' attitudes towards different cultures, as well as their broader perspectives on multilingualism and the equal status of languages.

#### ***3.2 Research Questions***

The present study seeks to explore the impact of intercultural exchange programmes on foreign language learning and intercultural development, with particular emphasis on German as a foreign language. More specifically, the research focuses on participants' linguistic confidence, communicative competence, and attitudes towards multilingualism and cultural diversity. In this context, the research questions addressed in this study are the following:

1. To what extent do exchange participants feel more confident in understanding spoken German by native speakers following their participation in the exchange programme?
2. To what extent do participants feel more confident and effective in oral communication with native German speakers after participating in the exchange programme?
3. What are participants' attitudes towards the target language (German) and the corresponding culture?
4. What are participants' attitudes towards multilingualism?

#### ***3.3 Methodology and Research Tools***

Regarding the methodology employed in the research component of the study, a mixed-methods approach was adopted in order to explore participants' linguistic development, intercultural communication, and attitudes towards multilingualism within the context of a youth exchange programme.

Initially, a pre-exchange questionnaire was administered to the eight Greek participants in order to examine their perceptions regarding German language comprehension and use, as well as issues related to intercultural contact and multilingualism. The questionnaire consisted of 13 closed-ended questions. Throughout the duration of the exchange programme, a daily observation protocol was completed for each participant individually. The protocol included approximately 10 items focusing

primarily on participants' interaction with peers, communication patterns, and engagement in intercultural activities. At the end of the exchange, a post-exchange questionnaire was distributed to all participants. This instrument aimed to investigate their overall experience, perceived language development, intercultural communication skills, and evolving attitudes and perspectives. The questionnaire consisted of 41 closed-ended questions and two open-ended questions, allowing participants to further elaborate on their experiences.

In addition, online semi-structured interviews were conducted a few days after the completion of the exchange programme. The participants responded to approximately 12 open-ended questions focusing on their experience of coexistence and collaboration, language development, intercultural interaction, and the attitudes and perceptions developed through participation in the exchange. Furthermore, one or two parents of each participant were also interviewed and answered 11 questions related to the cognitive, emotional, and personal changes they observed in their children following participation in the programme, including aspects such as autonomy, self-confidence, initiative-taking, and social development.

#### 4. Discussion and Preliminary Conclusions

At the current stage of the research, the analysis and triangulation of the collected data are still in progress. Nevertheless, preliminary findings indicate an overall positive evaluation of participation in the exchange programme. More specifically, participants appeared to develop more positive attitudes towards other cultures, while also demonstrating signs of personal growth, increased autonomy, enhanced self-confidence, and a greater willingness to take initiative in intercultural settings. Preliminary findings further suggest that participation in intercultural exchanges enhanced students' motivation, strengthened their intercultural awareness, and increased their confidence in authentic communication in the German language.

#### 5. Conclusions

Intercultural exchange programmes constitute an important educational context that combines foreign language learning with experiential and intercultural education. Through authentic communication and direct interaction with native speakers and individuals from different cultural backgrounds, learners are provided with opportunities to develop not only their linguistic competences, but also broader social, personal, and intercultural skills. In this respect, intercultural exchanges appear to support the principles of contemporary communicative language teaching by connecting language learning with meaningful real-life communication and intercultural engagement.

Furthermore, the present study highlights the importance of integrating non-formal learning practices into foreign language education, particularly in relation to the teaching and learning of German as a foreign language. The findings discussed in this paper suggest that participation in intercultural exchanges may positively influence learners' motivation, communicative confidence, intercultural awareness, and openness towards multilingualism and cultural diversity. Consequently, intercultural exchange programmes should be regarded as valuable educational initiatives capable of contributing both to language development and to the formation of active and interculturally aware citizens.

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