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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FOSTERING AND DEVELOPING SOCIOCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS IN SERBIA

The emphasis on the sociocultural dimension of foreign language teaching and learning has gradually grown over the years, leading to increasing expectations for contemporary educators to enhance learners' acquisition of sociocultural competence. Accordingly, this study seeks to examine the perspectives and attitudes of Serbian foreign language teachers regarding sociocultural competence in language teaching and learning, and to investigate the extent and manner in which these teachers develop and integrate sociocultural competence within their teaching practices. Data were collected from 32 teachers through a questionnaire. The results indicate that these teachers regard sociocultural competence as an important aspect of foreign language learning and actively strive to incorporate and develop it in their classrooms. For the purpose of effectively developing sociocultural competence in foreign language teaching, they recommend: organising student exchange programmes and opportunities to travel outside Serbia, incorporating additional texts on sociocultural topics in textbooks and increasing the frequency of foreign language classes from two per week to a higher number.

Keywords: sociocultural competence, second language acquisition, second culture acquisition, foreign language teaching, teachers' attitudes

1. Introduction

Considering the fact that the English language has become essential for communication worldwide, in other words, a lingua franca or an international language, the Republic of Serbia introduced the practice of teaching two foreign languages starting from 2003. Since that year, English has been taught as a compulsory subject from the first grade in primary schools, while the second foreign language, as a mandatory elective subject, is taught from the fifth grade. As language is a fundamental means of communication, the primary goal of learning is to achieve communicative competence. Specifically, *the Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia[2]* (11/2019: 15) highlights that the objective of foreign language teaching and learning is to enable students to acquire essential oral and written communication skills, develop effective strategies for learning a foreign language,

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2 T*he Official Gazette of the RS* [orig. Služžbeni Glasnik Republike Srbije - Prosvetni glasnik] is an official document encompassing all national regulations pertaining to the organisation of curricula and educational programmes, premises, equipment, and instructional resources.

and cultivate a positive attitude towards other languages and cultures, as well as an appreciation for their own cultural heritage, through the acquisition of functional knowledge about linguistic systems and cultural contexts.

From this objective, we can ascertain that language should not be viewed separately from culture, but rather as elements that influence one another. In other words, learning a language involves not only learning vocabulary and grammar, but also the cultural characteristics of the language community being studied. The assertions made by the eminent linguist Ranko Bugarski, who highlights the interdependence of culture and language by stating that "there is no culture without linguistic expression, nor language without cultural content" (BUGARSKI 2005: 16), further substantiate all of the aforementioned statements.

Given that culture serves as the fundamental basis for the entire social structure, Kramsch (1995) suggests that the term *culture* has always encompassed at least two definitions of a social community. The first definition arises from the humanities, focusing on how a social group represents itself and others through its material productions, including works of art, literature, social institutions, and everyday artifacts, along with the mechanisms for their reproduction and preservation throughout history, whereas the second definition stems from the social sciences and refers to the attitudes and beliefs, ways of thinking, behaving, and remembering shared by members of that community (KRAMSCH 1995: 84).

Considering that language is regarded as a fundamental means of communication and is interdependent with culture, which in turn defines society, this study concentrates on sociocultural competence and its significance in foreign language teaching and learning. Nevertheless, the predominant focus is usually placed on achieving linguistic competence in foreign language learning, which encompasses the development of skills in reading, writing, comprehension, and speaking, as well as the acquisition of grammar, vocabulary, and syntax. Particularly, Pajić (2020: 17) claims that sociocultural competence appears to be, to a certain extent, neglected in foreign language learning.

Thus, the following sections will present an overview of previous research on competence and sociocultural competence, along with an empirical study examining the significance of developing and fostering sociocultural competence in foreign language learning and teaching.

2. Theoretical framework

The term *competence* has undergone various interpretations within the linguistic context. It was initially introduced by Noam Chomsky, who, in the latter half of the twentieth century, particularly during the 1950s, revolutionised the field of linguistics with his generative theory. Chomsky's theory delineated not only the distinction between deep and surface structures but also between *competence* and *performance*. According to Dash (2023: 13), linguistic *competence* refers to the native speaker's internalised knowledge of their language, encompassing the system of rules they have mastered and their capacity to generate and comprehend an extensive array of novel sentences. Chomsky (1965) posited that competence represents the fundamental mental system underlying linguistic ability, highlighting the capacity to analyse language, resolve ambiguities, disregard errors, comprehend new sentences, and produce original sentences. Whereas competence comprises

the principles a speaker has internalised, performance denotes the actual utilisation of these principles.

In reaction to Chomsky's term *competence*, Dell Hymes (1972) defined the term *communicative competence* which is not only seen as an inherent grammatical competence, but also as the ability to use grammatical competence in a variety of communicative situations (BAGARIĆ & MIHALJEVIĆ DJIGUNOVIĆ 2007: 95). In other words, focus is on capacity to communicate rather than to produce grammatically correct sentences.

The term *communicative competence* was further developed by Michael Canale and Merrill Swain. They argue that communicative competence should encompass not only grammatical competence, but also contextual or sociolinguistic competence (CANALE & SWAIN 1980: 4). In other words, grammatical rules would be ineffective without rules governing language use. It is evident that within the field of linguistics, the concept of sociocultural competence was introduced and discussed approximately 40 years ago. According to Drlíková (2011: 10), Canale divides communicative competence into four components:

- Grammatical competence- the mastery of the language code;
- Discourse competence- the ability to combine forms and meanings to produce cohesive spoken or written texts across different types of discourse;
- Strategic competence- the mastery of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies employed to address communication breakdowns and improve communication effectiveness;
- Sociolinguistic competence- the understanding of sociocultural rules of language use.

However, Zhuang argues that Canale and Swain's framework overemphasises Hymes's concept of appropriateness by confining it mainly to contextual factors, while, to a certain extent, neglecting the role of grammatical accuracy in achieving the directive (communicative) function (ZHUANG 2007: 41).

Khouni and Boudjelal (2019: 439) further contend that successful communication extends beyond mere linguistic competence. In their study (2019), they emphasise that, according to Hymes, being recognized as *a competent foreign language speaker* requires the acquisition of sociocultural competence alongside the acquisition of linguistic competence. Through these studies, it has been noted that the development of sociocultural competence has gained increased significance. Authors who have explored this topic (DRLÍKOVÁ 2011; LILLIS 2006; VALIEVA 2024) have provided examples illustrating why understanding and possessing sociocultural competence is truly more important than merely ensuring grammatical accuracy. Specifically, when communicating in a foreign language, individuals may inadvertently apply their own cultural norms, leading to misunderstandings (VALIEVA 2024). It is widely known that Western and Eastern cultures differ significantly in their communication practices. For example, in Japanese culture, direct eye contact is perceived as disrespectful, whereas in European cultures, it is regarded as a sign of respect and sincerity.

Additionally, Lillis (2006: 1) asserts that speakers of languages with both formal and informal forms of address, such as *vous* (formal) and *tu* (informal) in French, must know when to use each form. Drlíková (2011: 26) claims that an American is much more

likely to be shocked if the speaker asked for help by saying: *"Show me the way to the gas station."* instead of *"Could you please show me the way to the gas station?"* or any other polite phrase. In other words, to be socioculturally competent one does not need to have an extensive knowledge about target language society, but rather to have knowledge to communicate successfully. Pajić (2020) further highlights that misunderstandings in conversations with native speakers often result from a lack of sociocultural competence. According to her research (PAJIĆ 2020: 1-12), errors resulting from insufficiently developed sociocultural competence are more likely to elicit negative perceptions or reinforce stereotypes about the speaker's nationality, as native speakers typically demonstrate lower tolerance for sociocultural misunderstandings than for linguistic inaccuracies. Thus, to facilitate effective communication, learner must not only switch language codes, but also adapt to the sociocultural norms of the interlocutor rather than relying solely on his/her own cultural practices (LIM 2020: 2).

In addition to the work of these researchers, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) states that no European language community is entirely homogeneous. Different regions exhibit their own peculiarities in language and culture (CEFR 2001: 121). Tasks of any nature require the activation of a spectrum of pertinent general competences, such as: knowledge and experience of the world; *sociocultural* knowledge (concerning life in the target community and the essential differences between practices, values, and beliefs in that community and the learner's own society); and skills such as intercultural skills (mediating across different cultures), learning skills, and everyday practical skills. Thus, to accomplish a communicative task, whether in a real-life context or a learning/examination setting, the language user or learner relies on communicative language competences (linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic knowledge and skills) (CEFR 2001: 158).

Michael Byram (1997) is also a researcher who has extensively examined sociocultural competence. Drawing upon van Ek's propositions, Byram describes sociocultural competence as the knowledge of the context in which the language is used by native speakers, with competence assuming a requisite level of familiarity with that context. In his model, it involves knowledge of social norms, cultural practices, and the ability to mediate between two different cultural frameworks (native and target). Additionally, Geeslin (2021) defines sociolinguistic competence as the ability to employ the variable features of language according to social norms, taking into account the identity of the speaker and other interlocutors.

Nevertheless, Safina (2013: 81) provides a more precise definition of sociocultural competence, stating that it is a multifaceted phenomenon comprising the following components:

- Linguistic-cultural: knowledge of lexical items with socio-cultural semantics, such as greetings, forms of address, politeness, in both oral and written communication;
- Sociolinguistic: knowledge of the linguistic features characteristic of different social classes, generations, genders, and social groups;
- Cultural: knowledge of the cultural peculiarities of countries where the target language is spoken , including their habits, traditions, standards of behaviour,

and etiquette, along with the ability to understand and appropriately utilise these in the communication process, while maintaining one's own cultural identity.

Thus, the following sections of this paper will present the empirical research on sociocultural competence, the perspectives of foreign language teachers encompassing their attitudes towards this competence and its significance in foreign language acquisition.

3. Methodology

In the official curriculum for foreign language learning and teaching presented in the *Official Gazette of the RS* (11/2019: 108), the term sociocultural competence is defined as "a set of knowledge about the world in general, as well as knowledge about the similarities and differences between the cultural and communicative models of one's own speech community and the community/communities of the target language." It is noteworthy that additional definitions of sociocultural competence exist, as previously indicated. However, in the formulation of the research design for this study, as well as in the development of the questionnaire, we have adhered to the aforementioned definition, specified in the *Official Gazette of the RS* (11/2019). Researching studies on sociocultural competence in foreign language learning and teaching published between 2004 and 2017, Pavlović and Petrović (2018: 465-470) revealed that teachers are hardly willing to develop sociocultural competence in foreign language learning and teaching. Furthermore, Pavlović and Petrović (2018) reviewed papers on incorporating (socio)cultural component in foreign language learning and teaching across various countries with different levels of economic development, educational traditions, and emphasis on learning foreign languages, claiming that cultural topics are often marginalized, receive less classroom time, and are considered less important by teachers compared to linguistic content. Momčilović (2013) has also researched the cultural component in foreign language teaching and learning, asserting that it is essential to understand whether and to what extent this competence is integrated into foreign language instruction. According to Momčilović (2013) this understanding is crucial for raising awareness that there are cultural frameworks different from our own.

Therefore, the subject of this research is the development of sociocultural competence in foreign language learning and teaching. The aim of the study is to investigate whether teachers of foreign language (in Serbia) regard sociocultural competence as an important component of foreign language learning and teaching, as well as whether and to what extent they indeed develop sociocultural competence through their foreign language teaching. Based on the subject and the aim of this study, the following research questions were defined:

1. Do foreign language teachers consider the development of sociocultural competence to be as important as the development of linguistic competence?
2. Do foreign language teachers develop sociocultural competence through their foreign language teaching?
3. To what extent and in what manner do foreign language teachers develop sociocultural competence through their foreign language teaching?

The instrument of the study is a Google questionnaire, which was distributed

online via a link to foreign language teachers. It was anonymous and it consisted of 14 questions: 12 closed-ended and 2 open-ended questions (numbers 5 and 14). The final question in the questionnaire (Q14) was an open-ended question, allowing teachers to provide their opinions, suggestions, or comments regarding the significance and development of sociocultural competence in foreign language teaching.

The respondents were 32 teachers who teach foreign languages in public (elementary and secondary) schools and private language schools in Serbia.

The survey was conducted during July 2024, and the data were analysed using descriptive statistics, focusing on frequency counts for most of the questions. Each question is descriptively explained with the majority of the obtained results presented in tables[3] and graphs to ensure clarity and conciseness. Statistical analysis of the collected data was conducted using *JASP version 0.17.1.0* and *Microsoft Excel 2013.*

3. Results and discussion

Thirty-two foreign language teachers were questioned through a Google questionnaire in this study. According to the results of the questionnaire, 78.12% (25) of them work in elementary schools, 12.5% (4) in secondary schools, 6.25% (2) in private schools, and 3.12% (1) respondent works in both public and private schools. Most of them are English language teachers 78.12% (25), 9.37% (3) work as German language teachers, 6.25% (2) as French language teachers, 3.12% (1) as a Spanish language teacher, and 3.12% (1) as a Russian language teacher. Regarding the teaching experience of the respondents, the results indicated that 43.75% (14) of them have worked for more than 20 years as foreign language teachers, 18.75% (6) have worked between 16 and 20 years, 15.62% (5) have worked between 11 and 15 years, 9.37% (3) have worked between 6 and 10 years, and only 6.25% (2) have worked between 1 and 5 years.

As the primary objective of this study was to examine teachers' attitudes on the importance of sociocultural competence in foreign language learning and teaching and the degree to which they integrate it into their teaching practices, teachers were requested to indicate on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "*To a great extent*" to "*To no extent*" the degree to which they develop sociocultural competence in addition to linguistic competence (question 6). The analysis of the mean scores revealed that teachers' answers were somewhere between "*To a great extent*" and "*To a large extent*", reflecting the fact that these teachers indeed develop sociocultural competence in their foreign language teaching (Mean= 4.18; Max.= 5; SD= 0.64).

The following question, question 7, addressed the degree to which teachers regard the development of sociocultural competence as an important element for the effective acquisition of a foreign language. The statistical analysis yielded the following findings:

- Thirteen respondents (40.62%) expressed that they consider the development of sociocultural competence to be highly important (rating 5).
- Sixteen respondents (50%) affirmed that they perceive the development of sociocultural competence as moderately important (rating 4).
- Two respondents (6.25%) indicated that they consider it sufficiently important (rating 3).
- One respondent (3.12%) reported that he/she views it as less important

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3 Certain sections of the tables are shaded to highlight significant results.

(rating 2).

To enhance clarity regarding the results obtained from questions 6 and 7, Table 1 is provided.

Table 1. *The extent to which teachers develop sociocultural competence and perceive its development as a crucial factor for the effective foreign language acquisition*

Question	Answer	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Q6: In addition to lin-guistic competence, to what extent do you develop sociocultur-al competence in your classes?	3-to some extent	4	12.500	12.500	12.500
	4-to a large extent	18	56.250	56.250	68.750
	5-to a great extent	10	31.250	31.250	100.000
	Missing	0	0.000		
	Total	32	100.000		
Q7: To what extent do you believe that the development of socio-cultural competence is an important factor for successful acquisition of a foreign language?	2 - slightly important	1	3.125	3.125	3.125
	3- sufficiently important	2	6.250	6.250	9.375
	4- important	16	50.000	50.000	59.375
	5 - extremely important	13	40.625	40.625	100.000
	Missing	0	0.000		
	Total	32	100.000		

Based on the data presented in Table 1, it can be concluded that these findings diverge from some studies (ATAY et al. 2009; PAVLOVIĆ, PETROVIĆ 2018; PAJIĆ 2020) which assert that teachers regard sociocultural competence as less significant compared to linguistic competence in foreign language instruction or that it is seldom developed. Specifically, teachers in this study reported that they develop sociocultural competence to a great extent (31.5%), to a considerable extent (56.25%), and only 12.5% described it as adequately developed. None of the respondents indicated that they develop sociocultural competence to a minimal (2- to a little extent) or negligible extent (1- not at all). In other words, these teachers perceive sociocultural competence as a crucial component for the effective acquisition of foreign languages, and they actively incorporate it into their teaching practices.

Recognizing that textbooks serve as the primary teaching resource, question 8 was designed to investigate teachers' views on the extent to which the content incorporated in textbooks promotes and enhances the development of sociocultural competence in foreign language learning and teaching. The results presented in Table 2 indicate that the majority of teachers believe the textbook content contributes to the development of sociocultural competence.

Table 2. *The extent to which textbook content enhances the development of sociocultural competence*

Q8: To what extent does the textbook content enhance the development of sociocultural competence?											
5- enhances significantly		4- enhances considerably		3- enhances moderately		2- enhances slightly		1- does not enhance at all		Total	
N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
10	31,25	9	28,12	11	34,37	2	6,25	0	0	32	100

Furthermore, question 9 aimed to explore whether these teachers, in addition to using textbooks, also utilise additional materials in their classes to support the development of sociocultural competence. The results are provided in Table 3, which indicate that a majority of foreign language teachers (93,75%) utilise additional materials in addition to textbooks to enhance sociocultural competence. Question 10 will be examined along with Question 13, as both address related areas.

Table 3. *The use of additional materials for the development of sociocultural competence*

Q9: Do you utilize additional materials to further enhance the development of sociocultural competence?						
	Use additional material	Videos	Authentic materials	Magazines	Do not use additional material at all	Total
N	30	22	7	1	2	32
%	93,75	68,75	21,88	3,12	6,25	100

Since the official curricula for foreign language instruction are outlined in the *Official Gazette of the RS* (11/2019), questions 11 and 12 were designed to examine teachers' perspectives on which topics should be integrated into the foreign language teaching curricula to enhance sociocultural competence (Q11) and which topics have already been incorporated into the textbooks (Q12). It is important to note that all the topics listed in the questionnaire are adapted from the curricula outlined in the document *Official Gazette of the RS* (11/2019: 15-109) and have been modified by the author of this study to align with the focus of this research.

The topis were as follows:
1) the similarities and differences between daily life and activities in our country and the target language-speaking countries;
2) the similarities and differences in culture, customs, and traditions between our country and the target language-speaking countries;
3) the similarities and differences in cuisine and food practices between our country and the target language-speaking countries;
4) the similarities and differences in sports practices and preferences between our country and the target language-speaking countries;
5) the similarities and differences in educational systems and school subjects between our country and the target language-speaking countries;
6) notable figures in the fields of art, literature, music, film, and sports;
7) prevalent stereotypes in both native and target culture/communities;
8) historical events, significant discoveries, and important historical figures from both our country and the target language-speaking countries;
9) the distinctive geographical characteristics and notable features of our country and the countries where the target language is spoken;
10) important holidays, cultural events, and traditional practices related to greetings and congratulations;
11) the use of mimicry and gesticulation;
12) behavioral expectations and social norms in various settings, including

home, school, and public spaces;

13) the fundamental norms and rules governing politeness and effective communication;

14) metaphorical language use and idiomatic expressions within the native and the target language;

15) the currencies used in the target cultures;
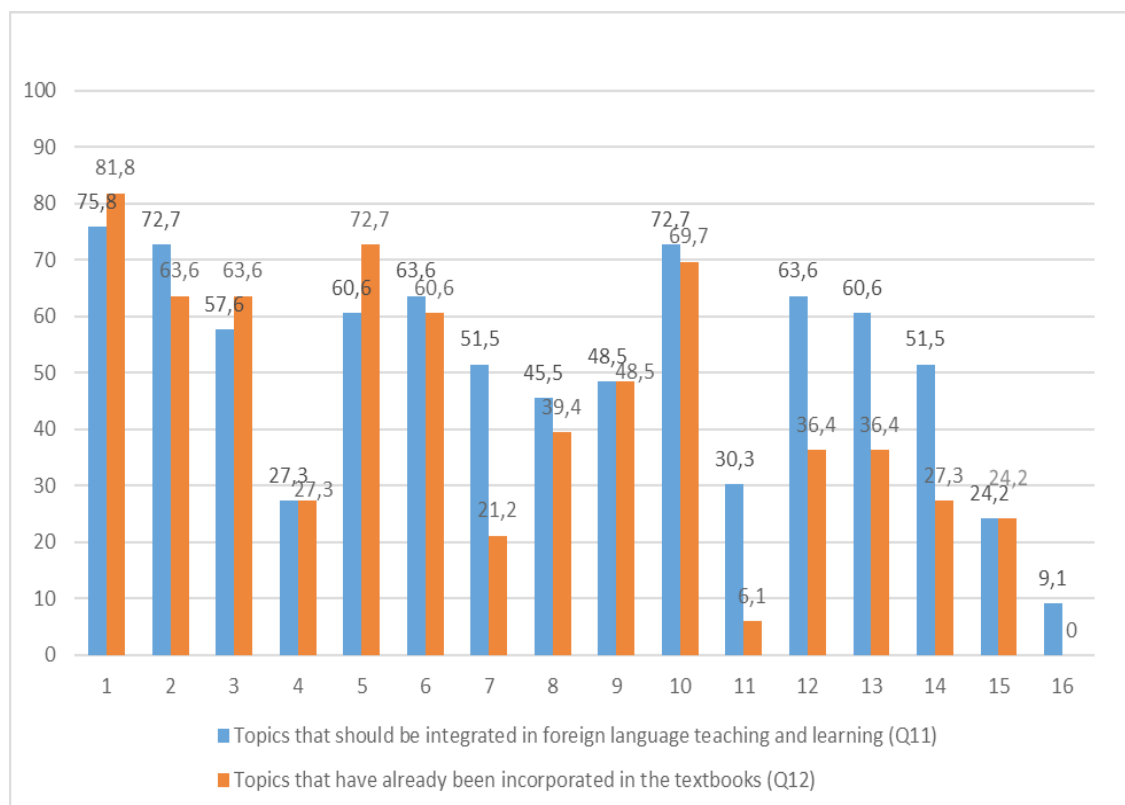
16) other (please specify): _____.

Figure 1. *Topics that should be integrated and topics that have already been integrated in foreign language teaching and learning*

The results illustrated in Figure 1 show that the majority of teachers consider Topics 1 (75.8%), 2 (72.7%), and 10 (72.7%) to be the most important for enhancing the development of sociocultural competence. Topic 1 addresses the similarities and differences between daily life and activities in our (learners') country and those in countries where the target language is spoken. Topic 2 explores the similarities and differences in culture, customs, and traditions between our country and the target language-speaking countries, whereas Topic 10 pertains to important holidays, cultural events, and traditional practices related to greetings and congratulations. Conversely, Topics 4 (27.3%) and 15 (24.2%), which cover sports and currencies, are regarded as least important.

There is a notable discrepancy regarding Topic 5, which examines the similarities and differences in educational systems and school subjects between our country and the target language-speaking countries. While 72.7% of teachers believe that this sociocultur-

al content is currently included in textbooks, 60.6% assert that it should be incorporated.

There is no significant difference in opinions regarding Topic 6, which involves notable figures in the fields of art, literature, music, film, and sports. Similarly, Topic 7, concerning prevalent stereotypes in both native and target culture, shows that 51.5% of teachers consider it important to include in foreign language teaching, whereas only 21.2% believe this topic is currently integrated into textbooks.

Topic 8, which addresses historical events, significant discoveries, and important historical figures from both our country and the target language-speaking countries, does not reveal a significant difference between its perceived importance and its current integration in textbooks.

Interestingly, Topic 9, focusing on distinctive geographical characteristics and notable features of our country and the countries where the target language is spoken, is valued similarly in both questions 11 and 12, with 48.5% of respondents rating its importance.

Topic 11, related to the use of mimicry and gesticulation, presents intriguing results. While 6.1% of respondents indicate that this topic is included in textbooks, 30.3% consider it as an important topic to introduce into foreign language teaching.

Regarding Topics 12, 13, and 14, [(12) behavioral expectations and social norms in various settings, including home, school, and public spaces; (13) fundamental norms and rules governing politeness and effective communication; and (14) metaphorical language use and idiomatic expressions in both the native and target languages] fewer teachers reported that these topics are currently incorporated in textbooks. Specifically, 36.4% of teachers indicated that Topic 12 is included, 36.4% reported the same for Topic 13, and 27.3% for Topic 14. Nevertheless, there is a consensus among teachers that these topics should be integrated into foreign language instruction to enhance the development of sociocultural competence, with 63.6% of teachers endorsing the inclusion of Topic 12, 60.6% supporting Topic 13, and 51.5% advocating for Topic 14.

Option 16 was included to allow respondents to suggest additional topics they believe should be incorporated. Three respondents (9.1%) selected this option and suggested that all 15 topics listed in the questionnaire should be included in the curricula, indicating a preference for a comprehensive approach to sociocultural competence.

As we mentioned above, the question 10 will be discussed together with question 13. Namely, these questions were formulated to investigate to what extent do teachers discuss with the students the culture, lifestyle, ways of behavior and communication of the speakers of the target language (Q10) and to what extent do teachers think that they influenced their students to develop tolerance and a positive attitude towards the characteristics of speakers of other languages, that is, other cultures that differ to a greater or lesser extent from their own. Teachers were asked to indicate their opinions on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "*Significantly*" to "*Not at all*". The frequency of the responses is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. *The extent to which teachers discuss culture, lifestyle, and behavioral norms, and their impact on fostering positive attitudes towards the target culture*

Question	Answer	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Q10: To what extent do you discuss culture, lifestyle, ways of behavior and communication of the speakers of the target language during the classes?	2-discuss slightly	2	6.250	6.250	6.250
	3 - d i s c u s s moderately	5	15.625	15.625	21.875
	4 - d i s c u s s considerably	13	40.625	40.625	62.500
	5- discuss significantly	12	37.500	37.500	100.000
	Missing	0	0.000		
	Total	32	100.000		
Q13: To what extent do you think that you influenced your students to develop tolerance and positive attitudes towards the characteristics of speakers of other languages?	2- slightly influence	3	9.375	9.375	9.375
	3- moderately influence	11	34.375	34.375	43.750
	4 considerably influence	13	40.625	40.625	84.375
	5-significantly influence	5	15.625	15.625	100.000
	Missing	0	0.000		
	Total	32	100.000		

In addition to Table 4, the analysis of the mean values further demonstrates that teachers engage significantly with students in discussions about the culture, lifestyle, behaviors, and communication practices of speakers of the target language (Mean= 4.09, Max.= 5; SD= 0.89). Additionally, the findings reveal that teachers also encourage students to develop tolerance and positive attitudes towards the traits of speakers from different cultures, which may vary to a greater or lesser extent from their own (Mean= 3.62, Max.= 5; SD= 0.87).

Furthermore, to achieve a comprehensive understanding of teachers' attitudes on the enhancement of sociocultural competence in foreign language teaching, question 14 has been formulated as an open-ended question. Respondents were asked to provide their suggestions, remarks and any additional observations concerning the development and significance of sociocultural competence within the context of foreign language teaching and learning.

Ten of them neither have suggestions nor remarks. Specifically, four teachers emphasised that sociocultural competence is very important and that teachers should strive to develop it to help students successfully acquire a foreign language, as it is also essential for the overall development of students. Another four teachers emphasised the need to integrate more texts on sociocultural competence, including those related to culture, tradition, and literary figures, into textbooks. Three teachers mentioned the importance of intercultural student exchange programs and international travel. One of these teachers provided an illustrative example of students participating in an intercultural exchange in Switzerland, noting that this experience constituted an invaluable component of learning about sociocultural communication.

Additionally, three teachers stressed the importance of enhancing teachers' competencies for implementing such approaches in foreign language instruction. They noted that many teachers continue to rely on traditional teaching methods and emphasised that participation in projects, especially through mobility, is the most effective way to develop this and other competencies in learners. Two teachers pointed out the need for more than two weekly classes to effectively cover sociocultural content. One teacher believes that sociocultural competence should be developed across all subjects, not just within foreign languages. Another pointed out the need to allocate more class time to discussing the similarities and differences between the native and target languages and their respective countries. One teacher proposed a comprehensive redefinition of the curricula and teaching methods and approaches. Lastly, two teachers noted the importance of parental involvement, observing that children often adopt attitudes at home that are challenging to alter.

5. Conclusion

Given the increasing interest in and emphasis on the sociocultural dimensions of foreign language teaching and acquisition, it is fundamental to recognize that, in addition to variances in vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure, there are distinct communicative principles, methods and norms between native and target cultures. It is essential to emphasise these differences in foreign language teaching and learning to prevent potential misunderstandings when communicating with foreign interlocutors, as well as to enhance awareness of the diverse norms and practices related to behavior, communication, and culture that differ from learner's own.

Thus, this study demonstrates that teachers, as primary facilitators in the instruction of foreign languages, effectively develop sociocultural competence. It is important to note that, despite claims by some authors (ATAY et al. 2009; PAVLOVIĆ, PETROVIĆ 2018; PAJIĆ 2020) teachers may lack sufficient interest in fostering sociocultural competence or that they focus predominantly on linguistic competence, this research yields positive results. Specifically, we are able to provide affirmative responses to the research questions posed by this study.

The first question was "Do foreign language teachers consider the development of sociocultural competence to be as important as the development of linguistic competence?" Thirteen participants (40.6%) expressed that they consider the development of sociocultural competence to be highly important (rating 5). Sixteen participants (50%) affirmed that they perceive the development of sociocultural competence as moderately important (rating 4). Two participants (6.25%) indicated that they consider it sufficiently important (rating 3). Only one participant (3.12%) reported that he/she views it as less important (rating 2).

Regarding the second research question, „Do foreign language teachers develop sociocultural competence through their teaching?" the results indicate that these teachers do, in fact, enhance this competence. Specifically, 31.25% of teachers develop it to a significant extent, 56.25% to a considerable extent, and 12.50% to a moderate extent.

Considering the third research question, "To what extent and in what manner do foreign language teachers develop sociocultural competence through their teaching?" we have already addressed the extent to which this competence is developed. Concerning

the manner of development, the majority of foreign language teachers (93.75%) utilise additional materials beyond textbooks to enhance sociocultural competence, including videos, authentic materials, and magazines. Additionally, the results illustrated in Figure 1 indicate that most teachers regard Topics 1 (75.8%), 2 (72.7%), and 10 (72.7%) as the most crucial for advancing sociocultural competence. These topics encompass the comparison of daily life and activities between the learners' country and countries where the target language is spoken, the comparison of cultures, customs, and traditions between the learners' country and target language-speaking countries, as well as important holidays, cultural events, and traditional practices related to greetings and congratulations.

Teachers also identify the following topics as significant for enhancing sociocultural competence: Topic 7 (prevalent stereotypes among native and target cultures/communities), Topic 12 (behavioural expectations and social norms in various settings, including home, school, and public spaces), Topic 13 (fundamental norms and rules governing politeness and effective communication between native and target cultures), and Topic 14 (metaphorical language use and idiomatic expressions within both the native and target languages). More than 50% of teachers consider these topics important, but they report that these subjects are insufficiently covered in textbooks (between 20% and 30% of teachers) (see Figure 1). In contrast, Topics 4 (27.3%) and 15 (24.2%), which address sports and currencies, are viewed as the least significant.

Additionally, the mean values indicate that teachers engage considerably with students in discussions about the culture, lifestyle, behaviours, and communication practices of speakers of the target language (Mean= 4.09, Max= 5; SD= 0.89). The findings also suggest that teachers encourage students to develop tolerance and positive attitudes towards traits of speakers from different cultures, which may differ significantly from their own (Mean= 3.62, Max= 5; SD= 0.87).

Given that this research includes only 32 teachers, which is a relatively small sample size, further studies on this topic are essential. However, it is noteworthy that 43.75% of these teachers have more than 20 years of experience in foreign language teaching, and 18.75% have between 16 and 20 years of experience. This extensive experience underscores the value of their perceptions and recommendations, which should be considered given their substantial teaching background.

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ZNAČAJ PODSTICANJA I RAZVIJANJA SOCIOKULTURNE KOMPETENCIJE U NASTAVI STRANIH JEZIKA IZ PERSPEKTIVE NASTAVNIKA STRANIH JEZIKA U SRBIJI

Rezime

Tokom godina, fokus na sociokulturnu dimenziju u nastavi i učenju stranih jezika postepeno je rastao, što je uticalo na to da nastavnici stranih jezika, pored poučavanja gramatike i vokabulara, odnosno razvijanja lingvističke kompetencije, podstiču i razvoj (socio)kulturne kompetencije kod svojih učenika. Stoga, ova studija istražuje stavove i mišljenja nastavnika stranih jezika u Srbiji o sociokulturnoj kompetenciji, kao i načine na koje, i da li uopšte razvijaju i smatraju da je razvoj sociokulturne kompetencije značajan faktor u učenju stranih jezika. Ispitano je 32 nastavnika putem *Google* upitnika. Dobijeni rezultati pokazali su da ovi nastavnici sociokulturnu kompetenciju vide kao značajnu komponentu u učenju stranih jezika i da je razvijaju tokom svojih časova. Kako bi se pospešio razvoj sociokulturne kompetencije u nastavi i učenju stranih jezika, ovi nastavnici predlažu sledeće: organizovanje programa razmene učenika i putovanja van Srbije, uvođenje dodatnih tekstova u udžbenike koji obuhvataju sociokulturne teme i povećanje broja nedeljnih časova stranog jezika na više od dva.

Ključne reči: sociokulturna kompetencija, usvajanje drugog jezika, nastava stranog jezika, stavovi nastavnika