

**OPPORTUNITIES OF THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT: MODELING
INTERCULTURAL CONTEXT USING SOCIAL MEDIA, PODCASTS,
VIRTUAL REALITY, AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TOOLS**

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Abstract

The article explores ways of creating an environment of real intercultural communication in English classes using digital tools – social media, podcasts, virtual reality and AI-based conversational agents. Drawing on international experience, the functions of five tool groups are revealed, and a four-step learning cycle is proposed (input and noticing – joint analysis – interaction and simulation – reflection and product). Five conditions of use, selection criteria and limitations are shown, along with resource-efficient solutions adapted to Uzbekistan: browser-based tools and offline alternatives.

Key words

digital learning environment, social media, podcast, virtual reality, artificial intelligence, telecollaboration, intercultural communicative competence, English language teaching methodology

INTRODUCTION

The primary challenge in teaching intercultural competence is straightforward: there is a lack of genuine intercultural communication within the classroom [7]. The vast majority of students complete their studies without traveling abroad. Where, then, do we obtain authentic communication experience? Global experience has found the answer within digital environments—connecting with foreign peers via the internet, working

with authentic cultural materials, and virtually testing communicative situations. In international literature, this approach is referred to as "internationalization at home" [8; 9]. The same conclusion was drawn in the context of Chinese schools: where access to a real cultural environment is restricted, authentic digital materials serve as the optimal solution [10].

How extensively is this opportunity being utilized in our context? Empirical evidence and existing findings indicate a significant gap between student engagement and practical application, leaving the digital environment largely underutilized.

A fundamental truth must be acknowledged from the outset: technology in itself teaches nothing. Research consistently yields the same conclusion: outcomes are driven not by the platform, but by the rigor of the learning task and reflection-based reinforcement [5; 11]. Even the most advanced tool, if used without a clear pedagogical purpose, devolves into a time-consuming distraction. Therefore, this article focuses not on the tools themselves, but on the systematic framework for their effective implementation—delineating which tools serve specific pedagogical functions, the appropriate sequence for their integration, and cost-effective strategies adaptable to our local context.

TWO KEY CONCEPTS

When working with digital tools, two concepts serve as a navigational compass. The first is noticing. Students must observe and analyze cultural differences independently; a video presented with predefined conclusions or without a structured task remains mere passive entertainment [12]. Therefore, a specific observational prompt is embedded into every material—such as "*How are the interlocutors addressing each other?*" or "*How was the refusal articulated?*"

The second concept is presence. Research examining virtual environments demonstrates that when students experience a sense of presence—for instance, within

social virtual reality—they communicate more actively and confidently compared to standard video calls [11; 13].

Underpinning both concepts is a familiar theoretical framework: the skill of "discovery and interaction" in M. Byram's model develops seamlessly within online environments, as the critical factor is the authenticity of the interaction rather than the medium itself [7]. Digital environments synthesize language and culture into a unified context [1; 2], while online exchanges yield educational value not spontaneously, but under structured pedagogical guidance [8; 9].

FIVE GROUPS OF TOOLS AND THEIR PEDAGOGICAL FUNCTIONS

Tools that have proven effective in international practice can be categorized into five distinct groups; their specific functions and sample tasks are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

How digital tools work in the classroom

Tool	Role in the lesson	Sample assignment
Social media [3; 12]	Living cultural material; noticing difference; space to "publish" one's own culture	Compare posts about student life in two countries and explain three differences; prepare an English post about your city
Podcasts [14]	Learning about different accents; creating one's own podcast – a ready-made "mediation product"	Find three signs of communication etiquette from the fragment; record an episode of "Our Holidays"
Virtual reality [4; 13; 15]	Safely "rehearsing" an intercultural encounter	Play a scene of getting to know each other and resolving

		misunderstandings in a virtual environment
Artificial intelligence chatbots [16; 17]	An infinitely patient practice partner; personal feedback	Practice the dialogue "inviting a guest" with a chatbot, then check its response from a cultural perspective
Online courses [18; 19]	Independent work; linking cultural topics to the formal program	Write three conclusions in a diary after completing the course module

A couple of important details about each group. Social media (e.g. Instagram) works both ways: the student gets live material from there and also publishes content about their own culture, with the added benefit of learning how English sounds “differently” in different countries [3]. Listening to podcasts can train the ear for different accents, and creating a podcast can be a natural extension of the project [14]. The evidence for virtual reality is growing: groups that study in a virtual environment perform just as well as those who take a traditional online course, and are more motivated [13], and one study even found positive effects on grammar and vocabulary [4; 15]. Two things need to be said about AI interlocutors: they are great as tireless practice partners, but their responses can be culturally simplistic and even stereotypical [16; 17]. Therefore, the rule is that at the end of each exercise with a chatbot, there is a check-up phase to ask “Is his answer correct?” – this is also a great exercise in critical thinking [17].

FOUR-STEP LESSON CYCLE

To avoid the tools being scattered, we organize them into a single four-step process. The first step is material and observation: students are introduced to live digital

material (post, podcast, video) and are looking for an answer to a specific observation question [3; 10; 12]. The second step is joint analysis: the observed phenomenon is compared with the teacher - in terms of communication habits, forms of address, politeness, concepts of time and distance, it is placed next to a similar phenomenon in our own culture. This is where critical understanding is born [7; 20]. The third step is communication and simulation: the student communicates with an online partner or plays a role in a chatbot and virtual environment, before the task is given a clear task - what to solve, what to explain [4; 9; 16]. Alternatives are available for groups with limited Internet access: written chat, a scene in the auditorium, a meeting with a foreign guest. The fourth step is reflection and product: the student records their experience in a diary and creates a final product – a podcast episode, a digital story, a culturally-informed post [14; 21]. With this step, the circle closes, the student turns from a “consumer” of culture to its “presenter”.

We will show how the cycle looks in practice on the topic of “Hospitality”. First, students watch short videos about family dinners in two countries and fill out an observation chart. Then, with the teacher, they compare expressions for invitation, acceptance, and refusal. Then, each student practices the conversation “inviting a foreign guest” with a chatbot, and a live scene is played out in pairs. Finally, everyone records a one-minute audio clip on the topic “How we host guests in Uzbekistan” and fills out a diary. Please note that a smartphone and free apps are enough for the entire cycle - no expensive equipment is needed.

HOW DO WE SELECT THE RIGHT TOOL?

The main question for the practitioner is – which tool is right for my group and topic? Four simple criteria will help. The first is stage-appropriateness: social media and podcasts work well in the introductory phase, chatbots and simulations in the practice phase, and online collaboration and product creation in the final creative phase [3; 14;

16]. The second is language-appropriateness: written and unhurried forms of response (post, chat, forum) are convenient for groups A2–B1 – they give time to think, live video-chat and free simulations justify themselves above B1. The third is technical threshold: first of all, tools that open in a browser, do not require registration, or are already available to the student are selected [13]. The fourth is traceability: the result of the tool should leave a visible trace (writing, audio, product), otherwise it will be impossible to track growth.

These criteria prevent two common mistakes. The first is the “all at once” approach, where five new platforms are introduced in one semester and none of them are mastered in the end. The second is following a fad: a tool is chosen not because it is useful, but because it is new. The right way is to master one or two tools in depth in one module and use them consistently throughout the cycle [5; 12].

FIVE CONDITIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND LOCAL ADAPTATION

Experience shows five conditions. The first is that the task comes first, technology comes second, and every digital task must answer the question “what does it grow and how will it be evaluated?” [5; 12]. The second is that reflection is mandatory: an online experience passed without reflection leaves no trace [21]. The third is that the teacher remains a moderator, especially when working with artificial intelligence: it is the teacher who eliminates the risk of accepting the machine’s answer as the final truth [16]. The fourth is that we must not forget about technical inequality: browser solutions instead of formats that require expensive glasses, an offline alternative to every online task [13]. The fifth is ethics: how the student’s personal data and photos are used, and online communication etiquette (netiquette) is agreed in advance [22].

Limitations should also be clearly stated. The social network algorithm shows the user the same content over and over again - the material can become one-sided. Cultural stereotypes are found in the responses of artificial intelligence. Reliable tools for

measuring growth in the digital environment are still few [16; 17; 22]. These shortcomings do not call for abandoning the tools, but for using them with an open eye and under control.

Finally, three principles for adapting to the conditions of Uzbekistan. The first is economy: the entire system works on students' own smartphones and free platforms. The second is "soft integration": the digital part is not a separate subject, but is embedded in existing topics. The third is gradualism: there is no sudden jump to an international online project, first digital assignments in the classroom, then correspondence, and only then live communication.

Let's answer two more questions that concern the teacher. The first is "how long will it take?" Experience shows that the main time is spent on the first preparation. Finding material, writing observation questions, thinking up a chatbot script, three to four hours for the first module. In subsequent modules, this time is sharply reduced, because the found materials and tasks are reused. If a common collection is maintained in the department, the preparation will not differ from that of a regular lesson. The second is "how will I evaluate the result?" The convenience is that the cycle itself leaves traces that can be evaluated. The observation table shows knowledge and perception, the simulation record shows communication behavior, and the final product and diary show the entire path traveled. It is enough to evaluate them with a simple three-level sheet (content accuracy - cultural relevance - language accuracy). It is important that the criteria are explained to the students before the assignment [5; 20].

The easiest way to start is to start small. You don't have to build the entire system at once, but try to go through the four-step cycle once in one topic. One well-chosen video, one tracking chart, one chatbot conversation, and one minute of audio – these four elements are already a full-fledged cycle. Once you see that it works, you add a

second tool to the next topic. In three or four modules, the system will form on its own, and students will have time to get used to the new workflow.

CONCLUSION

Digital media is the most convenient way to introduce real-world intercultural communication to an audience today. However, its effectiveness depends not on the novelty of the tool, but on how well the lesson is thought out [5; 12]. Social media provides live material and a space for self-expression, podcasting provides the practice of listening to and creating, virtual reality provides a safe testing ground, and artificial intelligence provides a tireless training partner [3; 4; 14; 16]. Combining these tools into a four-step cycle – observation, analysis, communication, reflection, and product placement – and adhering to five conditions makes it possible to provide a full-fledged intercultural experience without going abroad [8; 9]. Our survey showed that there is a great need for such a solution. The next step is to pilot-test the cycle, clarify the evaluation criteria for working with artificial intelligence, and adapt the tools for measuring growth in the digital environment to the national audience.

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