

## DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN THE CLASSROOM BY MEANS OF RESEARCHING CONCEPTS

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**Abstract.** *In the context of globalization, migration and outsourcing the plurilingual competence is of paramount importance. Alongside the necessity to be plurilingual for the employee there is a need to develop the ability of intercultural management competence for the heads of international companies who hire competent people all over the world.*

*Common European Framework of Reference for Languages is an international standard for describing language ability. It promotes multilingualism and plurilingualism. These two concepts refer to two different ideas in the language context. The latter refers to changing the paradigm of teaching English as the language of today's business. The paradigm shift is becoming known as the 'multilingual turn in education.'*

*According to King this is a new model for language (2024, cited in Cambridge Assessment English. There is a move to the practice of content and language integrated learning (CLIL). This means teaching English today by taking into consideration the first language of the student and comparing the cultural patterns that are described or expressed linguistically in both the native language and the foreign one.*

*A typical way of studying cultural differences and similarities cross-culturally and developing intercultural competence is the research of concepts in various languages and their association with mental models. Cultural linguistics is a branch that has developed since the beginning of the 90s of the previous century. It started by combining several domains in conducting a research of concepts cross-culturally. From the linguistic point of view it was done by the Polish-Australian scholar Anna Wierzbicka (Wierzbicka, 1999) and her followers and from the cultural or anthropological point of view these were Geert Hofstede (Hofstede, 2024), E.T. Hall (Hall, 1990) and others.*

**Key words:** *concept, cross-cultural study, cultural linguistics, intercultural communication, multilingual turn in education.*

**INTRODUCTION.** The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is an international standard for describing language ability. It was updated in 2020. It refers to Learning, Teaching and Assessing.

One of the main ideas of CEFR is promoting multilingualism and plurilingualism. There is a difference between the two as the cited above document says that mainly in a multilingual classroom languages are used and learned separately, while a plurilingual classroom is a class which base on diversity to improve communication awareness and learning. Plurilingualism values all language knowledge however small a person acquires throughout life. Plurilingual people develop open attitude to all languages and cultures.

When asked what the plurilingual approach means to teachers who work with multilingual students they say: "A plurilingual approach is a combination of ability and attitude. It is the ability to use all linguistic resources and a variety of strategies when trying to communicate with people who speak other languages. Several languages are present in our classroom, so it is plurilingual, the language of schooling is English but the students know German, Croatian, Romanian, Arabic and Turkish as their first language; at the same time they learn French, Italian or Spanish as well. The

tasks they are given at the lesson with emphasis on plurilingualism is working on a project, problem solving. The members of a company come with various national backgrounds and the students who speak more languages can mediate between those who still learn the second or third language (Common European Framework for Languages, 2024).

### **DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE BY STUDYING CONCEPTS**

One source in the context of language learning is to recognise the language ability that language learners already have when learning English. They already have at least one language, the language they use at home, but more often than not, they may also have additional languages – if the language of schooling is different, if they speak a regional dialect or variant, or if they speak another lingua franca, for example. This multilingual world ‘is the natural way of life for three-quarters of the human race. In the modern world, monolingualism is not a strong point but a handicap’ (Crystal, 2006).

In Europe, recent migration, as refugees, economic or academic migrants, have added to the number of people who, like Basque or Luxembourgish speakers, already usually have more than one language before they start learning English. In the EU, 97% of school pupils learn English as their first foreign language (European Commission 2018b). More than three-quarters of academic journal articles are written in English (Montgomery 2013), and in the 2019 Shanghai Jiao tong index of universities, 19 out of the 20 top-ranked universities were in the USA or UK, English-language settings. This has led to the growth in English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI). But it is recognised that English is not enough. Employability may demand English language skills as a given – other language proficiencies as well as multicultural sensitivities can mark employees out. These skills enable confidence in less familiar situations and domains that employees can find themselves in. Furthermore, using these linguistic resources – of the home language(s) and any other languages the individual knows – now has to be seen as an aid, not an impediment, to learning and teaching English. This idea is supported by many scholars such as Cenoz and Gorter (2013), Chabert and Agost (2020), Duarte and van der Ploeg (2019), Lau and Van Viegen (2020), Ziegler, Durus and Sert (2013). This means a change from the ‘native speaker standard’ as the ideal for learning English to the recognition that knowing other languages is a tool for learning English. There is a move to the practice of content and language integrated learning (CLIL), which Evans states is a ‘more effective approach than EMI’. There is an increase in recognition of knowing other languages as being useful tools in learning English. This paradigm shift is becoming known as the ‘multilingual turn in education’. King summarises this as ‘a new model for language’ (2024, cited in Cambridge Assessment English).

So in the context of this language policy the companies that are created nowadays hire employees from various ethnic groups who come from different cultural background. In this context managers of the company have to possess a high level of intercultural communication skills alongside with intercultural management abilities.

Intercultural Management is an understanding and respect of other cultures within an international context. In order to do well in an increasingly globalised world, managers need to be able to navigate different cultural waters. So the task of the managers is even more difficult than that of the teachers as they have to implement the information acquired into practice.

The first thing to begin with is revising the “concept of culture” and to identify the values of a certain culture, which is not always easy. Because of the wide range of definitions given to the notion of culture the teacher or the manager should rely upon well known studies so as to create similar ideas to the people from the classroom or the team at the office.

Culture is often described through Professor Geert Hofstede's definition: “*The programming of the human mind by which one group of people distinguishes itself from another group* - the set of shared beliefs, values, and norms that distinguish one group of people from another” (Hofstede,

2024). It is also important to keep in mind that the language as a code of the culture expresses the essential wisdom of the people who speak the language in the proverbs and sayings and in the metaphorical expressions by means of which the language bearers render the abstract concepts. This is how the unwritten rules or specific values in a certain culture are expressed. At this point we want to emphasize the idea of “privacy” that is transmitted in the individualistic types of cultures by peoples’ behavior and also by the expressions found in the English language.

There are similar situations in any other culture and when growing and learning the child from a certain culture absorbs it automatically and associates it with a mental model as concepts are studied cognitively and culturally. So, the teacher of the foreign language knows this specificity very well and in the course of teaching the foreign language explains the difference or asks the students to compare if the same concept exists in at least two cultures and which way are they expressed linguistically and if the mental models are similar. At this point we would like to give an example of how “Western union” concept was implemented in Moldova. From a dialogue with a German expert for whom I worked as an interpreter I found out that “Western union” as a money transfer operator was a bank rival in Germany, this was the main idea of it, while in Moldova it was just a subdivision of the Bank.

Another important issue is the connection between the types of culture and intercultural management. Intercultural management is the process of managing people from different cultures in a way that minimizes misunderstanding and conflict, while maximizing communication and collaboration (Hofstede, 2024).

The difference of National Culture and Organizational Culture lies in the following: National Culture is the overarching culture that exists within a country, while Organizational Culture can be described as “the way we do things around here” within an organization, and how that differs from other organizations. While National Culture is based on values, Organizational Culture is based on practices (Hofstede, 2024), so the manager has to hold both competences and make a clear distinction between them, thus avoiding intercultural conflicts in the multinational office.

As stated above different cultures also have different values and customs. For instance, some cultures value success and competition almost above everything else whereas others prioritize leisure time and emotional well-being. Obviously, it can be difficult for people from these two different types of cultures to work together if they don't understand and respect each other's values, especially if it is the manager that comes from one of these cultures and the employees that come from the other.

At this point we introduce Geert Hofstede’s model of a National Culture, or the 6-D Model of National Culture, which is a way of understanding the culture of a country based on its cultural values. Developed by Professor Geert Hofstede, the model has been used to help organizations improve communication and cooperation between people from different cultures. The model can provide a useful framework for understanding how cultural differences can affect business dealings.

The model consists of six dimensions:

**Power distance (1).** This dimension expresses the degree to which the less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally.

A preference for a loosely-knit social framework in which individuals are expected to take care of only themselves and their immediate families is called **individualism (2)**.

The **Masculinity (3a)** side of this dimension represents a preference in society for achievement, heroism, assertiveness, and material rewards for success. Society at large is more competitive. Its opposite, **Femininity (3b)**, stands for a preference for cooperation, modesty, caring for the weak and quality of life. Society at large is more consensus-oriented.

The **Uncertainty Avoidance (4)** dimension expresses the degree to which the members of a society feel uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity. The fundamental issue here is how a society deals with the fact that the future can never be known: should we try to control the future or just let it happen?

**Long term orientation (5).** Every society has to maintain some links with its own past while dealing with the challenges of the present and the future. Societies prioritize these two existential goals differently.

Societies that score low on this dimension, for example, prefer to maintain time-honoured traditions and norms while viewing societal change with suspicion. Those with a culture which scores high, on the other hand, take a more pragmatic approach: they encourage thrift and efforts in modern education as a way to prepare for the future.

**Indulgence (6)** stands for a society that allows relatively free gratification of basic and natural human drives related to enjoying life and having fun. Restraint stands for a society that suppresses gratification of needs and regulates it by means of strict social norms.

Long term orientation types of cultures and short term ones refer to time which is a universal concept only the attitude to the concept is different depending on the geographical position of the country, the individualistic or collectivistic type of culture and whether the people from a certain ethnic group belong to a feminine or a masculine type of culture. The concept of time is most often studied by the students in the classes of intercultural communication and there they compare proverbs and sayings about time and the idioms that refer to it, thus finding out that the English “fortnight” has no equivalent in Romanian or Russian, being translated by two words in the mentioned languages, fact which indicates the idea neither of the two languages of translation value this period of time, “a fortnight” being specific for the English culture. Talking about warranty given on goods the English say 18 month warranty, while the Russian culture says “полтора года” (a year and a half), similarly the Russian “сутки” has no equivalent either in English or in Romanian in which the term is translated as “twenty four hours round the clock” and “douăzeci și patru de ore”, but we know that the existence of only one word to denote an idea highlights the fact that the concept denoted by this very term is important in the culture it exists.

Another concept the students prefer to study is the concept of space. It is a well-known fact that people from the collective types of cultures like to stand very close to each other they interact by touching each other when communicating face to face while the representatives of the individualistic types of culture follow the idea of “privacy” and prefer to keep a certain distance from the interlocutor. Very often American teachers who come to work in ex-Soviet countries like Poland or Romania, also Moldova and Ukraine feel indignant and angry about their students that come too close to their interlocutor when communicating anything.

The expression of emotions is another type of communication behavior associated with cultural specific mental models. The English that are quite reserved or cold by controlling their expression of emotions and the Americans that by their history started to communicate by means of the smile, idea that we will develop further in this study, or the Chinese that use several types of smiles to render various emotions.

The concept of politeness is also very often researched cross-culturally by the students who primarily study English as this language uses very many linguistic means to render politeness, as the society puts an emphasis on the etiquette and conventions and the Russians who are quite direct in their expression seem to be rude in their speech as perceived by the representatives of other cultures. But all these ideas depend on many factors such as the language structure, history, the class system and the period of research.

Students also dive into other universal topics, mostly abstract such as the idea of truth and lies, success and failure, love and hate, envy and jealousy, work, the family, etc. Also they

investigate various universal moral values that manifest themselves in a culture specific way and by using the approach of studying concepts they become aware of the specificity of each language and develop the intercultural communication competence.

In intercultural communication both types, verbal and non verbal interaction matter. The social function of the smile, for example, is explained by means of American culture which used this non-verbal means for communication at the time when immigrants from various cultures met on the North American continent. As they were bearers of various languages they could not speak to each other verbally so, as a sign of accepting someone they used the smile. Since then the smile in America has a social function. It serves as a sign of politeness, it has a pragmatic function and the Americans do not understand the serious face of a Russian or a Romanian who would smile only in a certain context, where the smile is appropriate.

In the article “What Feelings Mean in Different Cultures” by Charlene Solomon, the author shares her experience of work in London by comparing the way the people use the smile in communication. “Americans are recognized internationally for their big, white, toothy grins – though perhaps less so in New York” (Solomon, 2020).

The fact that Americans smile more than other peoples or smile in different situations than the citizens of other countries can be grounded by the following idea: “Countries that were built and populated with many different cultures coming together smile more often and more enthusiastically than more homogenous nations. When immigrants from many different cultures and languages come together, they often have to rely on non-verbal communication cues to make connections with their neighbours. In such a way smiling played an important role in pleasant, nonverbal communication across cultures” (Solomon, 2020), in the ages when America was forming as a state.

In the Romanian culture the smile always associated with joy and was promoted on the social level by organizing the national dance “Hora”. This tradition was preserved during hundreds of years and the dancing festivals used to be organized seven times a year: after/on religious holidays (Bahtin, 2022), and some social celebrations as the Independence Day, the National Language Day, Europe Day, etc.

The study of concepts cross-culturally is an example of plurilingual way of teaching English and I use it during my classes of Intercultural communication. We start with the concepts or values which are most important in one language and culture and research them in at least one or two languages; very often we do it in three and more languages.

This branch of linguistics is called cultural linguistics and it supposes a trans-disciplinary research of language through culture or cultural parameters. One of the founders of anthropology, E.T. Hall in his books “Silent Language” and “Beyond Culture” speaks about the importance of the deep culture, the behavior and the values that are learned by the people of an ethnic group from their ancestors.

T. Larina, a Russian scholar, who works in a multilingual environment at the Russian University of Friendship between People, where international students from all over the world come to study to obtain different degrees, in her monograph “The Politeness Category and the Style of Communication” (Translated by Viorica Lifari) tried to compare the category of politeness in Great Britain and Russia not only by means of analyzing instances from literary works but also by using the method of the questionnaire (Ларина, 2009).

The scholar supports the idea that if a concept is important in a certain culture, it has a term for it. This is the case of the concept of “privacy” in the English and American Societies.

The studies devoted to researching concepts cross-culturally started over 30 years ago. The famous Polish scholar, now a professor at the Australian University, Anna Wierzbicka wrote her famous monograph Emotions across cultures: Universal or culture specific (Wierzbicka, 1999). As emotion concepts are very important in intercultural communication and

they are culturally biased a plurilingual person has to be aware of the emotion concepts promoted at the level of one culture or another. Here we refer not only to the “smile” and the “weep” as non verbal means of rendering sadness, unhappiness, joy or happiness but to other mental states associated with the mental models accepted in one country and inadmissible in another one.

When choosing the topics to study cross-culturally the students are very ingenious. An example of such a research is the cultural and linguistic study of the anthems in English (Great Britain and America) Russian and Romanian (the Republic of Moldova).

Another instance of a topic that seems universal but turns out as quite culture specific is the study of colours and the colour metaphors associated with emotional states and traits of the character in various cultures, even in close languages that come from the Indo-European family.

The algorithm according to which we study concepts is identifying the lexico-semantic field or the synonymic row of the notion denoting the concept. Then we use the method of definition and compare the idea of a certain concept not only cross-culturally but also trans-disciplinarily. As well to avoid ethnocentrism we implement the cognitive prototypic scenario suggested by Anna Wierzbicka (Wierzbicka, 1999), and decompose the meaning of a notion into a scenario by means of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) that includes 59 semantic primes which can be found in any language. By comparing the scenarios we can identify the differences in the mental models of apparently similar terms.

The questionnaire method is a very popular way to investigate concepts as well nowadays. The difficulty here is the elaboration of the questionnaire as its completion and analysis is done by the internet program and the results are illustrated in diagrams and charts.

## **TWO CASE STUDIES.**

In what follows we present two samples of the concept analysis in three different cultures, done by students and guided by the author of this article to illustrate the development of intercultural communication concept.

The first Case Study is devoted to the concept of hospitality. It was elaborated by Bondarenco Mihaela.

“The importance of hospitality and generosity towards guests is a cultural concept that is common in English, Romanian, and Russian. In this presentation, we will analyse this concept, by comparing proverbs and idioms related to hospitality in each language using the parameters of culture outlined in T. Larina's book “Категория вежливости и стиль коммуникации. Сопоставление английских и русских лингво-культурных традиций”.

The proverbs and idioms of a given language reflect cultural concepts and values in any language, therefore a comparative analysis can help us understand how the concept under discussion is expressed and valued in each culture, and how it may differ or overlap across cultures.

“Guests, like fish, begin to smell after three days” (English) - reflects the value of independence and individualism in the English culture in which emphasis on personal space and privacy is done. Its Romanian equivalent is “Peștele, ca și musafirul, e bun numai două zile”. In this examples both proverbs convey the idea that excessive behavior or prolonged visits are often seen as undesirable. It also emphasizes the importance of respecting boundaries and personal space, as well as the need for balance in relationships and interactions.

When comparing Russian and Romanian proverbs about hospitality we notice the following: “Гость в дом, а Бог в доме”, which expresses the idea that guests should be treated with utmost respect and hospitality, as if they were divine beings. It also implies that a host should be grateful for the company of their guests, as they bring joy and blessings into their home. In Romanian: “Oaspetele din casă, Dumnezeu din cer”, a proverb which emphasizes that treating guests well is not only a sign of good manners, but also a reflection of one's religious beliefs. In

essence, in both languages, this proverb is a reminder that hospitality is not just a cultural norm, but a fundamental aspect of one's moral and spiritual beliefs.

In the Russian culture, the concept of “душевное гостеприимство” (warm-hearted hospitality) is highly valued. This means that hosts are expected to not only provide food and shelter to their guests, but also to make them feel welcomed and comfortable in their home. The proverb “Гостям дверь всегда открыта” reflects this cultural value and reinforces the idea that guests are always welcome in the home and that the host is always ready to receive them with warmth.

The Russian proverb “Хлеб да соль - всего дороже гостя”, reflects the Russian hospitality tradition which places great importance on welcoming guests into the house and treating them with warmth and generosity. In addition to its literal meaning, the proverb also has a deeper symbolic meaning. Therefore, offering bread and salt to guests is seen as a sign of respect and honour towards guests and implies that their arrival should be celebrated with the offering of these symbolic things. The proverbs “Дома гость – в доме радость” and “Гость на гость — хозяину радость” suggest that guests are seen as blessings rather than a burdens, thus, welcoming guests into the house is a source of happiness and fulfillment.

The English proverb “A guest is a jewel on the cushion of hospitality” highlights the importance of treating guests with kindness and respect; the phrase “on the cushion of hospitality” suggests that the guest is treated with comfort and luxury; the proverb emphasizes that guests are highly valued and should be treated accordingly and it is important to go out of one's way to make guests feel welcome and appreciated.

“Hospitality consists in a little fire, a little food, and an immense quiet” is a proverb that suggests hospitality not being extravagant. It is about creating a warm and welcoming environment for the guests: the “little fire and “little food” suggest a modest yet comfortable setting, while the “immense quiet” implies that the guest should be given peace and space to relax.

Among the ideas denoted by the proverbs in the three languages we notice associations with similar scenarios: “Make yourself at home” in English and “чувствуй себя как дома” in Russian. Both convey a similar meaning, which is to encourage the guest to feel comfortable and relaxed in the host's home. The host is extending an invitation to the guest to treat the space as their own and to feel at ease. Another instance is “My house is your house” and “мой дом твой дом”, both conveying the meaning that the host welcomes the guest to their home and offers it as a place of refuge, warmth, and comfort. The guest is treated as an honored visitor, as if they were part of the family.

To conclude the Case Study we claim that hospitality is an important cultural concept in all three languages, but with different cultural parameters. English culture values personal space and boundaries, while in Romanian and Russian cultures there is a greater emphasis on generosity and community. It reflects broader differences between these cultures, such as individualism vs. collectivism and the importance of social relationships. However, despite these differences, hospitality is seen as an important social duty and a way to show respect and honor to guests in all three cultures.

**The second Case Study** will introduce the Concept of Apology. This is the work of my student Sabina Sobolevskaya.

The work starts with the definition of “apology” in Romanian, Japan and the USA: In Moldova, an apology is not always a direct expression of regret or taking blame. It often focuses on maintaining social harmony and avoiding confrontation (Maddux, 2024). In Japan, apologies are seen as a way to show that one understands the burden one has caused for the person they are apologizing to and to acknowledge the relationship between them and that person. They are used to ease the stress in damaged relationships and show interconnectedness (Talaera Talks, 2024). An apology in the USA is a direct and sincere expression of regret or remorse for a mistake or offense.

It acknowledges responsibility and aims to repair the situation and rebuild trust (Talaera Talks, 2024).

So the three definitions mentioned above show the mental models with which the representatives of three different cultures associate the apology and what this act means for each culture. In the Romanian culture it is more an act of politeness to avoid conflict, in the Japanese cultures it is connected with respect and empathy, while in American culture this is just regret or remorse for a committed mistake.

Next come the functions and the meanings of “apologies” in the three types of societies (Talaera Talks, 2024).

**Table one. The functions and the meanings of “apologies”.**

English	Romanian	Japanese
Direct and sincere apologies are valued. Taking ownership of mistakes and expressing regret is important. The focus is on repairing the situation and rebuilding trust.	Direct apologies are uncommon. Taking indirect responsibility through phrases like “Perhaps I was not explicit enough” is more common. Focus on maintaining harmony and avoiding confrontation is privileged. Offering gestures of goodwill like sharing food or drinks can signify an apology.	Apologies can be complex and nuanced. Focus is on acknowledging the inconvenience caused and restoring harmony. Expressions like “sumimasen” (excuse me) or “womem nasai” (I am sorry) are used frequently, even for minor offenses. Direct apologies for serious mistakes might be avoided to save face.

Having introduced the functions of the “apology” in the three mentioned above cultures we would like to firstly highlight the common traits and after put emphasis on the differences in conceptualizing “apology” in English, Romanian and Japanese.

Thus we notice that while the style of taking responsibility differs across these cultures, the core value remains the same. All three cultures value taking responsibility for actions. Moldova and Japan might favor indirect expressions of responsibility, while the USA inclines towards directness; the underlying principle is acknowledging the impact of one's actions and strive to restore balance.

The study of concepts is always based on proverbs and sayings after considering the definitions and the function of the discussed idea in the society and in interaction. The wisdom revealed in the proverbs either confirms or augments the idea expressed in the theory of culture.

**Table two. Examples of proverbs in three languages.**

English	Romanian	Japanese
<i>Who errs is human, to forgive divine</i> (A. Pope). – Forgiveness is seen as a noble act, highlighting the importance of apologies leading to reconciliation. <i>The only true apology is the one that leads to a change of attitude</i> (A. Pope). – True apologies result in a change of behavior, not just words. <i>Pride goeth before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall.</i> This biblical proverb suggests	<i>greși e omeneste, a persevera e avolesc.</i> <i>În om înțelept își cere scuze nu în vorbe, ci cu fapte.</i> – The second proverb emphasizes actions over words in seeking forgiveness. <i>Îți bine te îndoii decât să te rupi.</i> This proverb highlights the value of compromise and commends avoiding confrontation, which can necessitate an apology.	<i>Sincere apology is the best medicine</i> (Japanese Proverbs and sayings by A.A. Bullock, p. 14). <i>single apology can heal many wounds.</i> – The power of apologies to restore harmony is emphasized. <i>It is better to apologize once too often than once too seldom.</i> – readily offering apologies, even for minor offenses, is seen as important. <i>The thorn of regret is worth a</i>



at humility is necessary for apologies, as pride can lead to mistakes that require them (The Bible, Book of Proverbs 16:18).	<i>n cuvânt bun poate încălzi trei rni.</i> – A sincere apology can be seen as a kind word that fosters warmth and understanding.	<i>urden of delights.</i> – Expresses the importance of resolving issues through apologies to avoid future regret.
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## CONCLUSION

In order to follow the CLTL recommendation in teaching a foreign language, instructors should use the plurilingual approach and also take into consideration the multilingual turn in education.

The next step in developing the intercultural competence with learners of English is involving them into team work in elaborating projects and by doing that preparing them for their future activity and interaction in a multi-ethnic company, as in the process of project development they learn to interact with each other and develop tolerance, empathy and other skills that refer to emotional intelligence and intercultural competence.

While interacting within the International project management discipline the Master students study the values, concepts and cultural patterns of a certain culture by comparing them and by contrasting them with their native one or adding two or three more languages they know.

They are aware of how much the verbal and non-verbal means existing in a certain language express the values of the given culture and highlights its identity.

The variety of methods the students use while developing their projects are chosen from the diversity of the theoretical material from the American, Australian, European (English, German and French) and Russian linguistic schools devoted to cultural linguistics and linguistic anthropology and the implementation of the trans-disciplinary approach in studying concepts helps them to give a wider view to their intercultural projects.

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