

Using Proverbs to Develop 4th Grade Students' Language and Intercultural Competence

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4th-grade students, creative learning methods, cultural awareness, English language teaching, intercultural competence, language development, primary education, proverbs

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This article explores the role of proverbs in developing both language proficiency and intercultural competence among 4th-grade students. It emphasizes the cultural value of proverbs as concise expressions of societal wisdom and moral values. The study outlines age-appropriate teaching strategies—including project-based learning, storytelling, games, visual tasks, and the use of technology—that make learning engaging and meaningful for young learners. Practical classroom examples are presented to demonstrate how proverbs can enhance vocabulary, critical thinking, creativity, and cultural awareness. The article concludes with recommendations for incorporating proverbs into the English language curriculum to support holistic student development.

Keywords:

proverbs, intercultural competence, primary education, 4th-grade students, English language teaching, cultural awareness, language development, creative learning methods

In the 21st century, foreign language education has shifted from focusing

solely on grammar and vocabulary to also fostering intercultural competence. As the world becomes more interconnected through globalization, it is essential for learners to not only develop language skills but also to appreciate and respect cultural differences. This is particularly important at the primary school level, where children's values and thought processes begin to take shape.

A valuable way to incorporate culture into English lessons is by using proverbs. These concise, traditional sayings reflect the cultural beliefs and traditions of English-speaking societies. Through learning proverbs, students not only expand their vocabulary but also deepen their understanding of the culture [1].

This article examines how proverbs can be utilized to enhance both language proficiency and intercultural competence in 4th-grade students. The research aims to highlight the educational benefits of proverbs and provide practical advice for teachers. The main objectives are:

- Understanding the theoretical foundation for using proverbs in teaching
- Exploring the characteristics of 4th-grade students and how they engage with cultural content
- Presenting strategies and activities for incorporating proverbs into lessons
- Offering practical examples and assessing their impact

Ultimately, the goal is to highlight the importance of using culturally rich materials like proverbs to improve both language development and intercultural awareness in primary education.

Proverbs are short, traditional sayings that encapsulate wisdom, values, and cultural perspectives. As Wolfgang Mieder notes, a proverb is «a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and easily memorable form.» Due to their metaphorical richness, proverbs provide valuable insight into a society's worldview and historical context [1].

From a linguistic perspective, proverbs enhance vocabulary development, understanding of idiomatic expressions, and mastery of grammatical structures. Learning a proverb like «Actions speak louder than words» helps students grasp verb forms and comparisons, while also offering a cultural lesson that deepens understanding and retention.

Interculturally, proverbs reflect what is valued, wise, or acceptable within a society. Comparing proverbs from different languages helps students recognize both similarities and differences between cultures, fostering intercultural competence [2].

In primary education, proverbs are an age-appropriate tool to build cultural awareness. For 4th-grade students, exposure to proverbs fosters curiosity, empathy, and a broader understanding of different perspectives. It encourages critical thinking as students interpret the meanings of proverbs and compare them with those in their native language, supporting cognitive and linguistic growth.

Teaching a foreign language to 4th-grade students requires careful consideration of their age-related psychological and cognitive characteristics. At this stage—usually around 9 to 10 years old—children are active, curious, and imaginative. They learn best through visual aids, storytelling, repetition, play, and hands-on activities. Their ability to understand abstract concepts is still developing, which means that language learning should be closely tied to meaningful, real-life contexts [3].

When introducing culturally rich elements such as proverbs, it is important to select those that are simple, relatable, and age-appropriate. For example, proverbs like “*Honesty is the best policy*” or “*Practice makes perfect*” convey clear, universal messages that young learners can easily connect to their daily experiences. Moreover, comparing such English proverbs with equivalents in Kazakh language makes learning more engaging and personal.

Proverbs also support the development of moral and emotional intelligence in young learners. They often include ethical messages and life lessons that resonate with children’s own experiences in school, at home, or in their

community. When children discuss or act out proverbs, they reflect on their own values and behavior, which contributes to holistic development.

Another important feature of teaching this age group is integration with other subjects. Proverbs can be naturally incorporated into lessons in various disciplines:

- *World Around Us (Дүниетану)*: using environmental or nature-related proverbs to introduce ecological thinking.
- *Kazakh or Native Language Lessons*: comparing equivalent proverbs across languages.
- *Art and Handicrafts (Еңбекке баулу)*: drawing or crafting visual representations of proverb meanings.
- *Drama or Music*: creating short performances or songs based on proverbs.

In this way, teaching proverbs supports cross-curricular learning and strengthens both linguistic and cultural knowledge. Because 4th-grade students are active learners who benefit from creativity and movement, using proverbs in games, storytelling, drawing, or dramatization ensures that lessons remain engaging and memorable.

To effectively integrate proverbs into English language lessons for 4th-grade students, teachers must use methods that align with young learners' developmental characteristics. Children at this age learn best through interactive, creative, and meaningful experiences. Therefore, the use of proverbs should go beyond simple translation and memorization. Instead, it should involve active participation, critical thinking, and opportunities for emotional engagement. Let us summarize the data from our research in Table 1.

Table 1

| Method | Description | Examples/Activities | Benefits |
|--------|-------------|---------------------|----------|
|--------|-------------|---------------------|----------|

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|-----------------------------------|--|--|---|
| 1. Project-Based Learning | Encourages teamwork, critical thinking, and creativity through collaborative tasks. | — Create illustrated proverb posters — Compare English proverbs with native ones- Make a class “Proverb Book” | Enhances cultural understanding, creativity, and deep language learning. |
| 2. Storytelling & Role Play | Brings proverbs to life through stories and performance, making abstract ideas concrete. | — Read fables that match proverbs — Act out short skits- Use puppet shows for expression | Builds speaking/listening skills, empathy, and confidence. |
| 3. Games & Interactive Activities | Uses play and competition to make learning engaging and memorable. | — Matching games- Proverb puzzles (unscramble) — “Finish the Proverb” challenges- Proverb Bingo | Increases motivation and supports memory through repetition and movement. |
| 4. Visual & Artistic Tasks | Helps visual learners express understanding through creative projects. | — Draw proverb scenes- Make comic strips — Create magazine collages | Promotes symbolic thinking and appeals to different learning styles. |
| 5. Use of Technology | Integrates digital tools to modernize learning and boost media literacy. | — Watch animated proverb videos — Use interactive apps/websites- Create digital presentations or short videos | Develops tech skills, deepens understanding, and keeps learners engaged. |

Such methods enhance media literacy while keeping learning engaging.

To illustrate the effectiveness of integrating proverbs into 4th-grade language lessons, it is helpful to consider real-world examples of classroom activities. These examples highlight how proverbs can be used to achieve both

language learning goals and intercultural competence development in a practical setting.

Example 1: Creating a Proverbs Poster

In one classroom, the teacher introduced the proverb “Don’t judge a book by its cover.” After a lively class discussion about what it means, students were divided into small groups and asked to create posters that visually represent the proverb. Using drawings, magazine cutouts, and their own words, they brought the idea to life on paper. When the posters were ready, each group presented their creation to the class, explaining how the images and text captured the proverb’s message.

What students gained:

- **Language Skills:** They learned new vocabulary related to appearance, judgment, and values.
- **Cultural Insight:** The proverb helped spark conversations about not making assumptions about others based on looks.
- **Creativity:** Students got to express their understanding through art—something that appeals to many learning styles.

Example 2: Acting Out a Proverb

In another lesson, students learned the saying “A stitch in time saves nine.” Once they understood the meaning, the class split into groups to act out short skits that illustrated it. One group showed a student who ignored a small issue with their bike and ended up with a much bigger problem. Another group acted out a situation where the character fixed something right away, preventing trouble down the line.

Why this worked well:

- **Speaking Confidence:** Acting helped students practice speaking clearly and expressively.
- **Moral Learning:** They explored values like responsibility and time management.

- **Teamwork:** The activity encouraged cooperation, planning, and sharing ideas.

Example 3: Comparing Proverbs Across Cultures

This activity asked students to explore the proverb “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” Each student or group was tasked with finding a similar proverb in Kazakh or Russian, then comparing the cultural meaning behind both. They created small presentations showing how different cultures emphasize the importance of adapting to local customs.

Key takeaways:

- **Intercultural Awareness:** Students explored how different societies express similar ideas.
- **Language Growth:** They learned to explain meanings in both English and their native language.
- **Critical Thinking:** The project encouraged them to reflect on how culture influences behavior.

Example 4: Making a Proverb Video

In a tech-savvy classroom, students were asked to create a short video explaining the proverb “You can’t have your cake and eat it too.” Using a simple video app, they acted out stories where someone wanted two things at once—but had to make a choice. After recording, they added narration to explain the meaning and why it mattered.

Benefits of this project:

- **Digital Skills:** Students learned to use video tools and plan digital content.
- **Deeper Understanding:** They explored the proverb’s meaning in a way that connected to real-life situations.
- **Excitement and Engagement:** Students loved the creative challenge and were proud to share their videos.

In conclusion, this study examined the methods and techniques for integrating proverbs into English language lessons for 4th-grade students. Proverbs are essential elements of language and culture, and through their use, students can develop not only language skills but also intercultural awareness, empathy, and moral values [1].

The findings of this research demonstrate that using proverbs in primary school English lessons plays a significant role in students' linguistic and cultural development. Proverbs help learners understand language in context, allowing them to apply it in meaningful, real-life situations. Moreover, they offer a chance to learn important life lessons that resonate across cultures [5],[1].

Additionally, the creative methods used in teaching proverbs—such as project-based learning, role plays, drawing, and digital tasks—enhance student motivation and support deeper learning. These activities provide opportunities for students to engage with proverbs actively and creatively, which strengthens both language proficiency and cultural understanding [4].

The practical examples drawn from classroom experience suggest that teachers can effectively integrate proverbs into their lessons by using a variety of hands-on and interactive methods. To support this, teachers can benefit from instructional materials, guidelines, and additional resources focused on integrating proverbs into the curriculum.

Recommendations:

- *Incorporate proverbs into the curriculum:* By including proverbs in the English language curriculum, teachers can enhance not only language learning but also intercultural competence.
- *Develop instructional guidelines for teachers:* Creating resources and step-by-step guides for teachers to effectively teach proverbs in class.
- *Create interactive educational tools:* Developing digital platforms and apps that engage students in creative tasks related to proverbs.

These recommendations aim to improve the quality of education and foster students' cultural awareness and language skills.

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