

DEVELOPING THE INTERCULTURAL DIMENSION IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract

The 'Intercultural Dimension' is nowadays part of the language teaching. Its aims are to give learners intercultural competence and linguistic competence, to prepare them for interaction with people of other cultures, to enable them to understand people from other cultures as individuals with other distinctive perspectives, values and behaviours, and to help them to see that such interaction is an enriching experience. The components of intercultural competence are knowledge, skills and attitudes, complemented by the values one holds because of one's belonging to a number of social groups. Understanding the 'Intercultural Dimension' requires skills of comparison, of interpreting and relating and critical cultural awareness. Some useful techniques that can be successfully used in the intercultural approach are student exchanges, e-mails, project works and films. Systematic intercultural training is a precondition for educating a new generation of young people who will tolerate, understand, accept, and respect people from different world cultures.

Keywords: *intercultural education, knowledge, skills, attitudes, intercultural teacher.*

Nowadays, teaching and learning a foreign language does not mean only direct teaching of linguistic skills such as phonology, morphology, vocabulary, and syntax. Learning a language well usually involves knowledge about the culture of that language. Communication that does not have appropriate cultural content often results in humorous incidents due to miscommunication and misunderstanding.

Besides grammatical competence, a culturally competent learner must possess sociolinguistic competence, pragmatic competence, sociocultural knowledge, and intercultural awareness. Culture, according to one definition, is the values, traditions, customs, art, and institutions shared by a group of people who are unified by nationality, ethnicity, religion, or language.

The language teaching profession's interest in cross-cultural communication has increased during the past few decades. According to

Kramersch (1995), this development is due to political, educational, and ideological factors; even though politicians might feel that learning a foreign language will solve socioeconomic problems, educators think that for that to happen a language course must contain legitimate cultural content.

Culture is a very broad concept, so it would be useful to distinguish between the so-called **big-C** culture and **small-c** culture. The big-C part of a given culture is usually easy to study, as it represents factual knowledge about the fine arts such as literature, music, dance, painting, sculpture, theater, and film. Small-c culture, on the other hand, involves a large variety of aspects, such as attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, perceptions, norms and values, social relationships, customs, celebrations, rituals, politeness conventions, patterns of interaction and discourse organization, the use of physical space and body language. Some of the small-c cultural aspects are directly noticeable and easy to understand and learn (*e.g.*, celebrations and rituals). However, many aspects of a given culture are hidden from the eye, they are deeply internalized and subconscious and are often noticed only in contrast with another culture. A person who gets into contact with an unfamiliar culture will not realise that miscommunication due to the lack of such behaviours may lead to amusing situations and even conflict. This happens because these aspects of culture are unspoken rules created by a community. There are many examples of cross-cultural encounters, and they illustrate that the knowledge of the small-c culture of a given community is of great importance for successful cross-cultural communication. An English person might be

amused if a Romanian person, on hearing the conventional greeting "How are you?" started complaining about his/her health; the Romanian, on the other hand, would wonder why her/his interlocutor was amused. Even if the participants in such situations spoke English fluently and were well informed about cultural facts such as famous works of art and religious celebrations, this knowledge would be of little help to avoid the misunderstanding.

If EFL learners are to become successful intercultural communicators, it is important to offer them a thorough and systematic intercultural training, and not only of the culture of the main English speaking countries. EFL students will benefit by gaining solid knowledge of the different world cultures, and they must also develop the ability to compare their native culture to other cultures, to evaluate critically and interpret the results of such comparisons, and to apply this knowledge successfully in both verbal and non-verbal communication, for both transactional and interactional purposes. In many countries, there is still much intolerance towards and prejudice against other nations and cultures. Intensive intercultural education seems to be a good way to teach students what tolerance, acceptance, understanding, and respect mean.

The Council of Europe's "Common European Framework of Reference" emphasises the importance of 'intercultural awareness', 'intercultural skills', and 'existential competence'. Thus, the 'Intercultural Dimension' is introduced into the aims of language teaching. Its essence is to help language learners to interact with speakers of other languages on equal terms, and to be aware of their own identities and those of their interlocutors. Developing the intercultural dimension in language teaching involves recognising that the aims are:

- To give learners intercultural competence as well as linguistic competence;
- To prepare them for interaction with people of other cultures;
- To enable them to understand and accept people from other cultures as individuals with other distinctive perspectives, values and behaviours;

- To help them to see that such interaction is an enriching experience.

So language teaching with an intercultural dimension aims not only at helping learners to acquire the linguistic competence needed to communicate in speaking or writing, to formulate what they want to say/write in correct and appropriate ways. It also develops their intercultural competence *i.e.* their ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and their ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality.

As a consequence the 'best' teacher is neither the native nor the non-native speaker, but the person who can help learners see relationships between their own and other cultures, can help them acquire interest in and curiosity about 'otherness', and an awareness of themselves and their own cultures seen from other people's perspectives.

Some of the differences in intercultural language teaching and learning include a shift from concern with 'covering' a body of content to a stronger focus on learning how to learn in and beyond the classroom. It also requires a more active role for learners as makers of knowledge rather than being recipients of knowledge from the teacher. Teachers' expertise lies not so much in what they know about the language and culture, but how they construct opportunities for learners to learn about language and culture for themselves. Some time needs to be provided in less structured and personal ways for individual learners to reflect on their experiences.

To be an intercultural teacher involves self-awareness. Each teacher brings to the class his/her whole person values, beliefs, experiences, and knowledge. Moreover, the teacher plays an important role in constructing ideas and attitudes about other languages and cultures for his/her learners. Intercultural learning also involves dealing with both knowledge in the form of facts, information etc., and also more subjective ways of knowing, including attitudes, emotions, and values. Much time is spent in learning to be intercultural in investigating who we are as learners and how our understanding of who we are influences what we do and say.

Interaction is a central part of intercultural language teaching and learning as it allows language learners to be language users. Language users are involved in creating, discovering, and exchanging meanings through language use, whether the interaction is a spoken event, an exchange of email, reading a text etc. It is through creating, discovering, and negotiating meaning with and for others that interculturality becomes a practice. In interacting interculturally, the learner needs to recognise what is present in the interaction. This includes his/her own beliefs, values, attitudes, history, experiences etc. It also includes those of the other. Making meaning across cultures involves recognising and responding to what each brings to the interaction.

Interaction has consequences. The ways in which people present themselves (friendly, interested, bored, rude etc.) and their ideas, thoughts, and values have an effect on the interpersonal interaction they have with others. The interpretations he/she draws of an interlocutor have consequences for future interaction. All communication is social, not simply an exchange of information, and the act of communicating has consequences for how we are perceived as social beings.

In intercultural teaching, teachers' talk is important as it provides a basis for learning and interacting that enables students to engage with the intercultural. In explaining and instructing, a teacher working from an intercultural perspective is more interested in students' understanding and interpretations of the language they are learning than in accuracy for its own sake. He/she involves the learner more in developing views and reasoning through questions that emerge, rather than providing answers. The classroom is less directed by the needs of the teacher to cover the curriculum than by the needs of the students to learn and deal with questions that arise for them as the result of their learning. In supporting learners, it is important that the teacher uses the target language as much as possible. Learning about culture is not independent of language learning, and students need to engage with as much language as possible. At the same time, the student needs to be given more time for thinking, questioning, and reflecting. The teacher needs to help learners to connect instances and events

into more coherent wholes, through questioning practices and constructing learning, so that learners' knowledge is connected and new learning reinforces prior learning.

Teachers' talk needs to encourage students to reflect on questions that emerge from their exposure to language and provide them with support in finding their own solutions. The language practices used in class should include opportunities for learners to notice cultural and linguistic differences and to view differences from multiple perspectives, reflecting on their own language and culture and not just on that of the other.

The teacher plays a role in structuring and managing discussion, by providing different ways of approaching the material, through a range of question types, by eliciting multiple and varied responses and by enabling learners to deal with complex or confronting issues in their talk. Students need to be encouraged to develop their own perspectives and not seek to conform to a notion of a particular 'right' answer to understand their experiences of language, culture, and learning. Students need to learn to talk about issues of language, culture, and diversity. Such talk is not something that learners may be aware of when they begin to learn a new language. Students should be encouraged and given the resources to use all of their language abilities is interacting and dealing with questions.

Dialogue is important for intercultural learning. It means that classroom interactions must be genuine interactions between participants. It is not just about what teachers say and what students say, but how teachers and students, students and students use language to communicate with each other and how they engage with language (texts). Such dialogue allows meanings and perspectives to be developed, negotiated, redesigned, and rethought. Dialogue allows the individual to work through his/her own ideas and interpretations with others, getting feedback, challenges, and reinforcement.

According to Byram (1997), one of the foremost theorists in the field of intercultural language teaching and learning, the components of intercultural competence are **knowledge**, **skills** and **attitudes**, complemented by **the values** one

holds because of one's belonging to a number of social groups.

The attitudes required for effective intercultural communication and learning comprise two aspects: (a) values and beliefs, curiosity, and openness and (b) relativising self and valuing others. Byram describes these as "readiness to suspend disbelief and judgment with respect to others' meanings, beliefs and behaviours", and "a willingness to suspend belief in one's own meanings and behaviours, and to analyze them from the viewpoint of the others with whom one is engaging" - requirements that apply to teachers as well as students.

Knowledge includes knowledge of self, of other cultures, and of social and cultural processes. Knowledge of self is knowledge about society and cultures in one's own country. Knowledge about other cultures includes information about such things as everyday living, interpersonal relations, values and beliefs, body language and social conventions. Knowledge of social and cultural processes is knowledge about culture in general and how it affects behaviour.

Skills are just as important as attitudes and knowledge, and teachers can concentrate as much on skills as upon knowledge.

Because intercultural speakers/mediators need to be able to see how misunderstandings can arise, and how they might be able to resolve them, they need the attitudes of decentring but also the skills of **comparison, of interpreting and relating**.

Skills of interpreting and relating involves "the ability to interpret a document or event [or

visual materials] from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one's own".

Skills of discovery and interaction is "the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction".

Critical cultural awareness an ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries.

One pathway for helping learners explore culture in language is that proposed by Liddicoat (2002) (fig. 1). The starting point is exposure to a wide range of authentic texts and sources (including oral, visual and written texts and sources) or opportunities for interaction with speakers of the target language (*input*). Learners are encouraged to notice features about the communication that are unfamiliar (*noticing*). This requires learners to draw on their knowledge of their own culture, and make comparisons between the observed communication and their own. They then discuss the reasons for these features as well as their personal response to them (*reflection*). Learners next practice the communication, trying out new forms, expressions or strategies derived from the earlier input (*output*). Learners then attend to how 'comfortable' these feel and how successful the communication was interpersonally (*noticing again*). Finally, they reflect again on what they have learned.

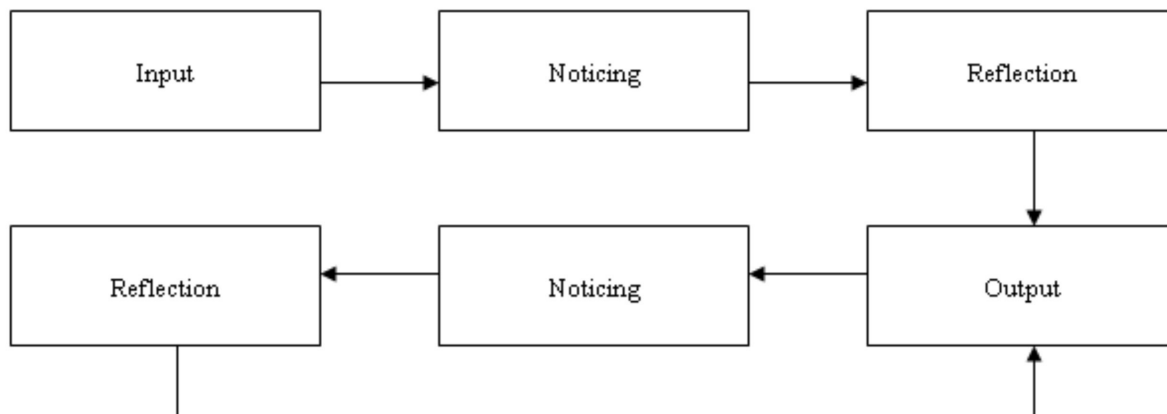


Figure 1. A pathway for developing intercultural competence (Liddicoat, 2002)

Four key learning and teaching processes underlie the pathway in the figure: awareness raising; experimentation; production; and feedback. In *awareness raising*, learners are introduced to new input about language and culture, using authentic texts wherever possible. They are encouraged to notice differences between the input and their own practices, and to talk about what they notice. In the process of *experimentation*, learners begin working with their new knowledge. This involves short, supported communicative tasks, often with a specific focus on students' language and cultural needs. With *production*, learners integrate the information they have acquired in actual language use through role play and communication with native speakers of the language. Finally, through the process of *feedback*, learners discuss how they felt about speaking and acting in a particular way.

When developing intercultural skills, teachers can make use of **themes**, **grammatical exercises** and **vocabulary**.

Themes treated in text-books can lend themselves to development in an intercultural and critical perspective. The key principle is to get learners to compare the theme in a familiar situation with examples from an unfamiliar context.

Different themes *e.g.* sport, food school, leisure, can be examined from many perspectives, including gender, age, region, religion, racism.

Grammatical exercises can reinforce prejudice and stereotypes or challenge them. For instance female subjects may be linked to stereotypically female activities or actions (Mary likes cooking; John likes football); stereotyping generalisations may be encouraged about groups (The French like...; Germans are...; Older people...). Starting from the exercises proposed by the text-book, learners can devise further exercises, reinforcing the same grammatical structures, but using a different range of contexts and examples. They can then swap exercises and work on examples provided by other learners.

One important contribution to an intercultural perspective is the inclusion of **vocabulary** that helps learners talk about cultural diversity. This can include terms such as: human rights, equality,

dignity, gender, prejudice, stereotype, racism, ethnic minority.

How is intercultural competence assessed? Learners' acquisition of information does not seem difficult to assess and this can be done by designing simple tests of facts. However it is difficult to decide which facts are important. It is also possible to assess learners' knowledge and understanding. In the teaching of history for example, historical understanding is assessed in essays where learners discuss events. Most difficult of all is to assess whether learners have changed their attitudes or become more tolerant, which cannot be quantified. But quantification is only one kind of assessment. If however, assessment is not in terms of tests and traditional examinations, but rather in terms of producing a record of learners' competences, then a portfolio approach is possible and in fact desirable.

The Council of Europe has developed a **European Language Portfolio**. It has three parts:

The Passport section provides an overview of the individual's proficiency in different languages at a given point in time; the overview is defined in terms of skills and the common reference levels in the Common European Framework.

The Language Biography facilitates the learner's involvement in planning, reflecting upon and assessing his or her learning process and progress; it encourages the learner to state what he/she can do in each language and to include information on linguistic and cultural experiences gained in and outside formal educational contexts; it is organised to promote plurilingualism *i.e.* the development of competencies in a number of languages.

The Dossier offers the learner the opportunity to select materials to document and illustrate achievements or experiences recorded in the Language Biography or Passport.

The role of assessment is therefore to encourage learners' awareness of their own abilities in intercultural competence, and to help them realise that these abilities are acquired in many different circumstances inside and outside the classroom.

There are some useful techniques that can be successfully used in the intercultural approach.

I. Student exchanges

Learners going on an exchange should be appropriately prepared so that they are able to research certain cultural aspects by talking to and observing people. On their return, they should report to others on what they have found out.

II. Email exchange

Nowadays, technology allows students from different cultures to “meet” in virtual reality. In case of technology-based contacts, just like with traditional exchanges, the teacher must direct learners about proper ways of getting to know other cultures. Appropriate activities must also be designed so that students can share the new information with the rest of the class.

III. Project work

When working on a project and preparing a presentation, groups of students may discover various facts about a given culture. Project work lends itself very well to the development of learners’ intercultural knowledge because it is typically content-oriented. It also develops students’ language skills, problem-solving skills, creativity, imagination, research skills, and teamwork skills. In addition, project work can allow students to learn in an autonomous way. In assigning projects, good foreign language teachers help their students develop the ability to learn about the world’s cultures without supervision. Effective projects, and learning activities in general, teach students where to look for information, how to infer cultural information encoded in a written or spoken text, how to make comparisons between different cultures, and how to make use of the new knowledge.

Teachers wishing to implement the intercultural approach in the EFL classroom must consider possible problems and ways of dealing with them.

A. Motivating students

A good foreign language teacher starts a course by conducting a needs analysis in order to be able to teach according to the students’ language needs and objectives, present level of knowledge, learning preferences, and, especially, what they find interesting and engaging.

Needless to say, intercultural lessons need to be interesting for students and should take place in a friendly, relaxed atmosphere. Students need to be active class participants, making choices and taking decisions. Interested, involved, responsible students are motivated students.

B. Encouraging appropriate attitudes

It is vitally important that students do not treat the information about the world’s cultures as a curiosity, or, even worse, ridicule it. The teacher has to see to it that students make a serious attempt to get to know and understand other cultures.

Stereotyped views and prejudices will prevent students from developing intercultural competence. The teacher must help students understand that there can be different sets of behaviors, beliefs, and values, and the fact that we represent just the one that we have been “born into” is pure coincidence. Of course, there are aspects of some cultures that students need not accept, such as inequality between men and women or an inhuman attitude toward animals. The teacher’s task is not to “convert” the students to other cultures; the role for the EFL teacher is to help students get to know and understand different cultures because this knowledge and understanding are indispensable for successful cross-cultural communication.

IV. Films

Since culture greatly impacts communication, it is helpful for teachers to introduce lessons and activities that reveal how different dialects, forms of address, customs, taboos, and other cultural elements influence interaction among different groups. Numerous films contain excellent examples of intercultural communication and are highly useful resources for teachers. Additional reasons for teachers to incorporate films in class and encourage their students to watch movies in English include:

- Films combine pleasure and learning by telling a story in a way that captures and holds the viewer’s interest.
- Films simultaneously address different senses and cognitive channels. For example, spoken language is supported by visual

elements that make it easier for students to understand the dialogues and the plot.

- Students are exposed to the way people actually speak.
- Films involve the viewers, appeal to their feelings, and help them empathize with the protagonists.
- DVDs usually come with subtitles in English, which facilitates understanding and improves reading skills.

Intercultural topics that show how people from different backgrounds communicate and interact are becoming more prominent in language teaching. Although films cannot substitute for actual interaction with members of other cultures, they can provide useful preparation for those encounters by fostering understanding and developing sensitivity.

CONCLUSIONS

There is growing emphasis internationally on the role of culture in language teaching, particularly what is referred to as intercultural communicative language teaching and learning. Intercultural communicative language learning and teaching differs from approaches to language teaching that focus on language with little reference to culture, and from approaches in which teaching about culture is secondary to teaching language or is treated as a standalone strand alongside language. Intercultural communicative language teaching starts from the point of view that language and culture are integrated. Such an approach does not transmit

information about culture. Rather, it focuses on raising awareness of culture in the lived experience of the learners and people from the target language culture as well as other cultures present in a classroom or community. Implementing the intercultural approach is a challenging, demanding task for the language teacher, who must possess at least some intercultural knowledge and very often keep developing it alongside his or her students. What must not be overlooked is that intercultural education leads, to a certain extent, to the acceptance of values, beliefs, and behavior that may conflict with one's own. The EFL teacher must implement the intercultural approach in a tactful, skillful, and conscious way. Systematic intercultural training is a precondition for educating a new generation of young people who will not only tolerate, but also understand, accept, and respect people from different world cultures, will communicate with them successfully, and will learn from them through that communication.

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