

The concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence in language learning

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ABSTRACT

As we know, learning a language gives people many opportunities and advantages, but also increases their “cultural portfolio” allowing them to navigate various cultural and linguistic landscapes. As a matter of fact, it seems very interesting to recall what the Italian film director Federico Fellini affirmed, “A different language is a different vision of life”, because it opens up new visions and perspectives on our own world and the others’. Mastery in foreign languages is considered as a key element for people to be more flexible and “linguistically” adaptable, to gain new points of view and benefit from cultural diversity. In other words, it is not merely exchanging information and it is far more than a knowledge of words and how to combine them to form correct sentences. Mastery in foreign languages is much more than that: it involves linguistic appropriateness and cultural relevance, too. It becomes clear the significant role of cultural elements in learning a foreign language and that linguistic competence is strictly linked to intercultural communicative competence: when we communicate with people, we also immerse ourselves in their culture. The purpose of this paper is to discuss around this question: is the primary aim of teaching foreign languages to develop communicative competence and a correct language in learners or also appropriate for various cultural situations?

Keywords: Communication, culture, language learning, intercultural competence.

INTRODUCTION

“Language is the roadmap of culture. It tells you where its people come from and where they are going” (Brown, 1989, p. 124): in fact, language is the primary way we use to communicate and interact in our everyday life, even if we rarely and hardly realize about that. Through language we communicate our experiences, thoughts, meanings, intentions, feelings, and identity, paving the way to our culture. The relationship between language and communication is perfectly expressed by Bonvillain (2003, p. 1): “language is the primary means of communication between people. (...) Language links interlocutors in a dynamic, reflexive process. We learn about people through what they say and how they say it; we learn about ourselves through the ways that other people react to what we say, and we learn about our relationships with others through the give-and-take of communicative interactions.”. Language is our main link with the outside world: through it we can “reliably cause precise new combinations of ideas to arise in each other’s minds.” (Pinker, 2000, p. 13). So, through language we say about us, about our own world and we connect to other people’s world.

The communicative function of language is the basic tool by which people make society develop thanks to its cultural, communal, and societal functions. Firstly, it helps to preserve culture and transmit it to the new generations. Secondly, it links individuals into communities of shared identities (Cooper, 2007). Thirdly, it is relevant for all human interactions, it serves as social identification aspect unifying speakers as members

of a single speech community. As we understand, it is impossible to separate language from culture: learning a native language means also learning, unconsciously, a culture. Language reflects culture and culture reflects language. Sapir and Whorf (Whorf, 1956, p. 38) claimed: “human beings do not live in the objective world alone (...) but are at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. (...) The fact is that the «real world» is unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group (...) we experience the world because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.” In other words, their hypothesis is that the way one culture sees the world may not be the same as the way another culture does. Mastery in a foreign language is not enough to communicate with different cultures, speakers should also know the “silent language” of communication such as colors, distance, perception, mimics, gestures (Samovar, 2007). In fact, if, during our life, we learn another language or grow up speaking more than one language, we realize about many other various ways a language can allow us to perceive and describe reality. Consequently, when we encounter a speaker of a different language, we gain access to a different view of the world: communication cannot be considered only as a mere information exchange, but it should be regarded for its capacity of creating and maintaining relations into a specific cultural context.

Taking into account all these considerations, we should wonder what the main purpose of teaching and learning a language is, if it is only the acquisition of new language skills or also about gaining new cultural points of view and benefiting from them. To communicate with other people, is it enough just to master grammar, vocabulary, speaking, writing skills, or is it important also to focus on cultural and intercultural aspects? Can a sort of “linguistic appropriateness” exist according to the cultural context we are in? The goal of this paper is to focus on the intercultural competence as one of the main aspects of teaching a language, regarding it as a surplus value both for teachers and for learners.

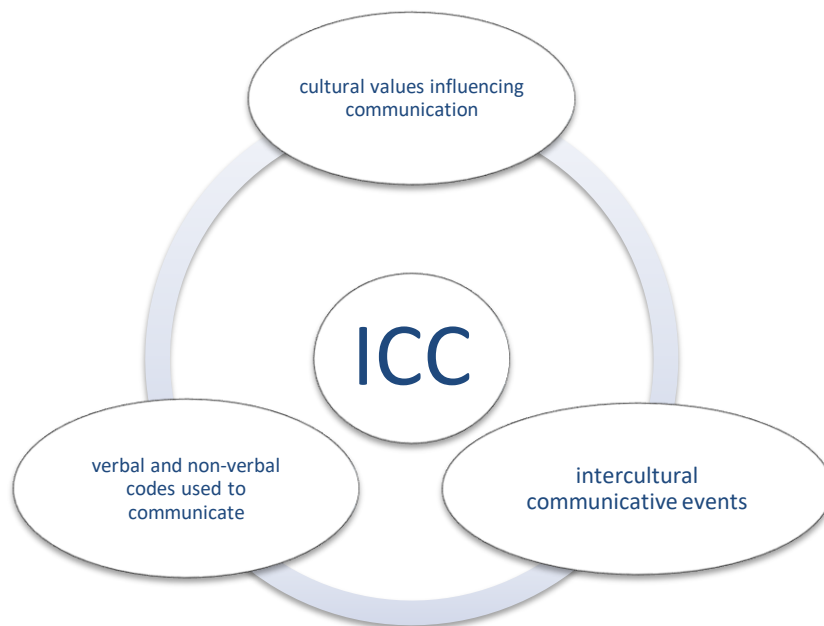
INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

As already stated, language drives people into culture; but we need a bridge, an appropriate way to enter other people’s worlds and that is what intercultural competences are for. Of course, we need to learn and open our minds to other cultures because intercultural competences can represent a barrier or can positively expose learners to their acquisition. In fact, Valdes (1986) argued that learners can become linguistically and culturally competent if they are aware of themselves as “cultural beings”. Along with learners’ acceptance of other cultures, “comes the acceptance of their language and a greater willingness to let go of the binding ties of the native language and culture”. Communication and culture are strongly interrelated, and so linguistic and intercultural competences are.

According to Byram’s five-factor model (1997), intercultural communicative competence requires specific attitudes and skills such as linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse competence, as well as “curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one’s own”, or *skills of interpreting and relating* events and documents from another culture to one’s own culture, *skills of discovery and interaction*, allowing the individual to acquire “new knowledge of culture and cultural practices,” including skills in cross-cultural interactions. The last factor, *critical cultural awareness*, describes the ability to use perspectives, practices, and products in one’s own culture and in other cultures to make evaluations. Another model was developed by Chen and Starosta (1997, p. 28), defining intercultural communicative competence as “the ability to effectively and appropriately execute communication behaviors that negotiate each other’s cultural identity or identities in a culturally diverse environment”. Intercultural communicative competence is comprised of four elements: intercultural sensitivity (effective process), intercultural awareness (cognitive process), and intercultural adroitness (behavioral process), which refers to our verbal and non-verbal factors of communication. Balboni (2006), proposed a model of intercultural communicative competence to express the relation between language and culture in order to succeed in intercultural communicative situations. It should be implemented by teachers in concepts,

methodology and tools used.

Fig. 1: Balboni model of Intercultural Communicative Competence



According to the ICOPROMO Model (2007, p. 39), “acquisition of intercultural competence is determined by the degree of competence in the language and knowledge of the culture. (...) *Interlanguage/interculture* expresses this interdependence between the intercultural competence and language and how mindful we need to be of the effect they have on each other and the overall process of learning.” Byram and other European researchers (Kühlmann, Müller-Jacquier, Budin, 2011), tried to combine existing theories about the integration between language and culture. Their model consists of several dimensions, such as: *Communicative awareness* as “the ability (...) to establish relationships between linguistic expressions and cultural contents, to identify, and consciously work with, various communicative conventions of foreign partners, and to modify correspondingly one’s own linguistics forms of expression”; and *Adaptability* describing the ability to “adapt (one’s) behavior and (one’s) style of communication” (behavioral flexibility + communicative awareness). The Rainbow Model of Intercultural Communication Competence (Mariano, 2011) consists of ten components of competence: foreign language competence, cultural distance, self-awareness, knowledge, skills, motivation, appropriateness, effectiveness, contextual interactions, and intercultural affinity. The first element is foreign language competence considered one of the main elements for the success of communication in multi-cultural contexts. Richards (2006, p. 134) suggested that “in order to transform a foreign language learner into an enlightened intercultural speaker in the foreign language teaching environment, language and culture must be introduced not as independent, but rather, as interdependent attributes of language learning.”

ICC AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

As far as the acquisition of a new language is concerned, gaining intercultural competence has become a critical issue because, given the variety of languages functioning as vehicles of communication among people worldwide, it has become necessary to teach and learn intercultural competence and awareness as well (Graddol, 2006). The integration of language and culture should be considered as one of the fundamental purposes of language teaching and learning and a key element to promote intellectual opening and curiosity, the respect for cultural differences, and the enjoyment in the interaction with people from other countries. Consequently, it becomes necessary to integrate the linguistic code with the culture of that

specific linguistic context. The problem is that it is not enough to possess such competences but to apply them in different situations: the more a person is able to apply these competences, the easier it will be for her/him to reduce cultural distance and favour cultural-linguistic understanding and sharing.

The development of the intercultural competence is an active process of continuous learning which implies even a transformation of the person's identity while experiencing other different cultures or group interactions, in their own country or abroad (Richards, 2006). As far as teaching and learning a new language are concerned, the concept of communicative competence should become 'intercultural communicative competence', needing from students some sort of knowledge, skills, attitudes necessary to communicate interculturally. The linguistic and cultural competences contribute to intercultural awareness, skills, and know-how because within the globalized world intercultural contacts are greater and greater, necessitating both understanding and negotiation of differences through an effective communication. The theoretical framework shows a growing interest in exploring 'culture', both in language teaching and learning (Johnston, 2011). Ruben's behavioral approach (Ruben, 1976) consists in conceptualizing and measuring intercultural communicative competence considering the interaction management as the ability to initiate, direct and end communication. The purpose is allowing learners to interact in intercultural situations. Canale and Swain (1980) defined intercultural communicative competence as consisting of linguistic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence, and sociolinguistic competence while Van Ek (1986) added two more elements: socio-cultural competence, or the ability to function in several cultures, and social competence, meaning familiarity with differences in social customs, confidence, empathy, and motivation to communicate with others. Other researchers (Alptekin, 2002; Coffey, 1999; McKay, 2000) highlighted the importance of cultural information in language teaching, claiming that there is an interrelationship between a language and its people and if cultural information is not taught as a part of communicative competence, complete communication cannot happen. Sihui (1996) affirmed that language and culture are inseparable: beliefs, ideas, and identities of a group of people are constructed and communicated by language.

Later, Byram and Fleming (1998, p. 9) claimed that people benefiting from intercultural communicative competence "have knowledge of one, or, preferably, more cultures and social identities and have the capacity to discover and relate to new people from other contexts for which they have not been prepared directly".

Seen that the intercultural communicative competence is considered "the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts" (Bennett, Bennett, 2004, p. 149), it necessarily involves the acquisition of both language and cultural competence (Lázár, 2003). Risager (2007; in Kaloyanova N., 2010) proposed a wider conceptualization of intercultural communicative competence, taking into account several components: linguistic competence; semantics and pragmatics; poetics; linguistic identity; translation and interpretation; interpreting texts (discourses); use of ethnographic methods; transnational cooperation; knowledge of language as critical language awareness, also as a world citizen; knowledge of culture and society and critical cultural awareness, also as a world citizen. We can sum up that intercultural communicative competence consists of a set of skills needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with people that are linguistically and culturally different from us, facilitating interaction and inclusion. It is evident that linguistic, psychological, and socio-cultural factors play a key role in the integration process of language and culture. Furthermore, the previous theories and considerations, as well as results from research conducted on this topic (Liu, 2017), have shown the emergence of a new approach when teaching and learning a new language, whose purpose is to develop learners' intercultural communicative competence, that is the ability to use the linguistic system in an effective and appropriate way and in a specific cultural context. As the constant changes within the existing context create continuous interactions among people coming from different cultural and social backgrounds and speaking a language that is different from ours, it is evident that language learning and learning about

target cultures cannot be separated (Valdes 1986).

Linguistic competence results insufficient unless it is accompanied with intercultural competences.

According to the Council of Europe (2009, p. 5), “contemporary societies are exposed to greater linguistic diversity because of increased economic and professional mobility. (...) Knowledge of the linguistic history of a context, its current sociolinguistic situation and its language needs is therefore a prerequisite for the development of any language education policy that seeks to be coherent, relevant, contextualized, and realistic. (...) These values are important in intercultural education: social cohesion and solidarity, participatory democracy, reciprocal understanding, and the respect for and valorization of linguistic and cultural diversity. (...) Intercultural education needs to be conceived as a global language education, across all languages of the school and in all disciplinary domains, which provides a basis for an identity open to linguistic and cultural plurality and diversity, insofar as languages are the expression of different cultures and of differences within the same culture.”

As we can see, communication and interactions with people of other languages and cultures are inevitable: people necessarily change their cognitive notions, perceptions, and meanings and to do so a strong and effective medium is required. Because of these several challenges coming from the external context, the mere communicative competence can result not enough when learning a new language: focusing only on grammar, discourse and sociolinguistic aspects can be too limiting. Communication among speakers of different languages is not just a matter of information exchange, it is also about understanding the perceptions and meanings arising from the other speaker, according to his/her cultural context. Engaging in the new cultural setting means both transcending and transforming our personal way of perceiving the reality and interacting within it. Doing so, the “intercultural learner” could acquire a wider vision of the world, be more efficient in his/her interactions with other speakers, have more chances for personal and professional advances. According to Holden (2002), the key elements to bring about intercultural competence are participation, interaction, communication, networking, collaborative learning, knowledge transfer, experiences and values, creation of a cooperative climate. Moreover, it includes the ability to gain and interpret new information, approaches, practices, and products of a different cultural context (Koehn, Rosenau, 2002). Therefore, the educational settings should work on cross-cultural experiential learning encouraging the learners to lose themselves into the target language and become critical towards their own cultural value system (Yang, 2017). An interesting language project (Usó-Juan, Martínez-Flor, 2008), proposed to teach this communicative competence through the four skills (listening, reading, speaking, writing), organizing three main stages: explanation (clarifying the concept to make the students aware of it), collection (gathering cultural-related materials), and implementation (using the four skills to promote cross-cultural awareness and understanding into the classroom). Consequently, also an adequate assessment of ICC should be implemented (Chen, Wang, 2018), together with the design and improvement of specific teaching resources (Rodríguez Ruiz, Varela Spínola, 2019).

Intercultural communicative competence is considered a significant source of learning, enabling the “intercultural learner” to mediate between world/language of origin and world/language of the encountered culture effectively and appropriately. In fact, as Byram (1997) suggested in his model, learners move beyond their dependence on original norms and rules in order to gain the ability to function effectively in a foreign language or cultural context. Lately, he has affirmed that “intercultural competence is the ability to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds, while intercultural communicative competence is the actual performance in foreign language. It focuses on establishing and maintaining relationships and not merely exchanging information”. The above-mentioned theories and models, consider the strong link between linguistic and intercultural competences giving a relevant contribution to the concept of integration of language and culture. They also suggest significant elements for further research and challenges involving this area of expertise. The development of intercultural communicative competence is little by

little becoming a central issue in teaching a foreign language. Consequently, teachers are maybe becoming aware of the fact that enabling learners to communicate effectively with people coming from various cultural backgrounds could be one of their main goals and could fall into their teaching methodology. In fact, learners should be committed to turning language encounters into intercultural encounters and intercultural relationships (Guilherme, 2000).

CONCLUSION

As we mentioned before, recognition of the cultural dimension as a key element both in teaching and learning a foreign language is claiming scholars' attention because the main purpose cannot be defined only in terms of "communicative competence" but rather in terms of "intercultural competence", considered as "the ability to behave adequately in a flexible manner when confronted with words, actions, attitudes and expectations of representatives of foreign cultures" (Atay, 2009, p. 77). Intercultural communicative competence should become a vital part in our contemporary world, laying the foundations of new possible teaching methodologies and goals. Languages are strictly linked to cultures and societies that use them to communicate and interact. So, language learners should be encouraged to become competent intercultural speakers (Atay, 2009), and teachers should help students to gain new skills and a deeper knowledge in order to better understand the target culture.

Martín Morillas (2000, p. 4) affirmed that "humans communicate linguistically in a cultural environment that constrains the form and nature of communication. Culture constrains both what is acquired and how it is acquired. In turn, communicative processes shape the culture that is transmitted from generation to generation." Intercultural communicative competence increases awareness, understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity and can be considered one of the main "educational purposes" of the future language teaching. It strictly relates people and society.

So, the initial question was: is the primary aim of teaching foreign languages to develop communicative competence and a correct language in learners or also appropriate for various cultural situations? The purpose, and motivation, of this paper is the desirable relationship between intercultural competence and communication and the introduction of "teaching and learning about culture" on language programs and to contribute to try to highlight the issue of "cultural appropriateness" while learning or teaching a language. The challenge of teaching culture and language together probably will not be simple, as the previous discussion has proved, but the point is that only speaking a foreign language does not guarantee success in communication with different cultures. As Kaloyanova (2010, p. 145) stated, "Language teaching must offer a knowledge of the world that students can use to develop their personal and cultural identity, via contact with many different discourses and cultural representations". Of course, some questions arise from all these considerations, in terms of pedagogical innovation, didactic and methodological approaches used by teachers and the necessary requirements and qualifications, as well as motivation, required to teachers. It could be also significant to consider new teaching models contemplating linguistic, cultural, and metalinguistic elements to guarantee a complete set of competences both to learners and teachers. Arens (2010) claimed that teachers should no longer have teaching units that focus on the word, sentence or a paragraph, but rather target individuals' action and agency within a foreign community. It would include teaching sociocultural pragmatics to enable the learners to move away from a monocultural national identity and to learn how to construct multiple cultural identities simultaneously. We can also hypothesize a cross-disciplinary approach to foreign language instruction without of course abandoning the purposes of developing linguistic competence in foreign language learners. Therefore, the wish is to come across further studies and research on this topic, that encourage and promote language learning not merely as a communicative practice but also as a cultural activity.

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