THE INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE: A PRAGMATIC PERSPECTIVE

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In countries where ethnic diversity is on the rise, successful relationships with friends and neighbours and intercultural partners depend on the ability to deal effectively with differences in a positive manner. The present publication seeks to address this topic of growing interest to many audiences in all the regions of the world, intercultural competence. We will present some activities focused on developing the intercultural competence at the English language classes. The development of intercultural competence presents a challenge for educators and learners alike, yet its attainment enables exciting possibilities. Intercultural competence offers the chance of transcending the limitations of one's own world view.

Key words: *intercultural competence, teacher, learner, English language classes*

Globalization shrinks the world, bringing a wider range of cultures into closer contact than ever before. Inevitably, cultural boundaries are shifting; therefore the pace of social transformations is increasing. As a result, cultural diversity and intercultural contact have become facts of modern life, so intercultural competences become a requisite response [6].

Today, intercultural understanding and intercultural competence are more important than ever, because they make it possible for us to address the root causes of some of the most virulent problems of today's societies in the form of misunderstandings across cultural, socio-cultural, ethnic and other lines: discrimination, racism, hate speech and so on. There is a real urgencyin many aspects of our lives for education, which can help citizens live together in our diverse societies. For this reason, we all need to develop intercultural competence. The ability to understand each other across all types of cultural barriers is a fundamental prerequisite for making our diverse democratic societies work [5].

Bennett J. M. states that intercultural knowledge and competence is "a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioural skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts" [1].

Deardorff D. K mentions that "intercultural competence is the ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills and attitudes that lead to visible behaviour and communication that are both effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions" [3].

Wiseman R. declares that “IC “involves the knowledge, motivation, and skills to interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures”. Thomas A. asserts that “intercultural competence is the necessary precondition for an adequate, successful and mutually satisfactory communication, encounter and cooperation between people from different cultures” [9].

Salo-Lee L. asserts that the term intercultural competence is used broadly to refer to intercultural awareness, knowledge and skills, i.e. both competence and performance. For professional purposes, both theory and practice are needed” [8].

Intercultural competence is the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts [2].

Intercultural competences refer to having adequate relevant knowledge about particular cultures, as well as general knowledge about the sorts of issues arising when members of different cultures interact, holding receptive attitudes that encourage establishing and maintaining contact with diverse others, as well as having the skills required to draw upon both knowledge and attitudes when interacting with others from different cultures [6].

Intercultural competences are closely integrated with learning to know, do, and be. Learning to know about cultural others provides the first step in gaining intercultural competences, a step that can never be complete, for there are always still more others to meet. Learning to do serves as the active step of interacting with cultural others; through such interactions people both apply knowledge already gained, and acquire more, learning from interactions with others in the past, and designing future interactions. Learning to be relies upon the reflective step of thinking about one’s social self as having a place in the global world. A culture of peace relies upon intercultural dialogue, as well as conflict prevention and resolution, and so UNESCO is committed to promoting intercultural competences, making these common competences to be studied, taught, and promoted not only at a theoretical level, but as a way to approach a wide variety of diverse situations in daily life [6].

One point of departure on the road to acquiring intercultural competence is a fundamentally positive attitude towards intercultural situations. This attitude is emotional and affective ‘in its core’ and has motivational qualities (and is therefore not easy to develop, as professional developers of intercultural competence all know well). For the intercultural competence learning process, this positive motivation is at least as decisive as, for instance, explicit cultural knowledge that is to be learned. One of the attitudes beneficial to intercultural learning is therefore a general openness for and appreciation of cultural diversity and an ability to encounter and deal with individuals from foreign cultures in an open, curious and unprejudiced manner (i.e. by withholding ethnocentric judgment, observing and reflecting upon one’s own spontaneous feelings, reactions, etc.). This openness and appreciation of cultural diversity requires particular efforts and naturally has its psychological limits. Nevertheless, constructive openness can be promoted, for example, through cultural education or language learning. A cultural blindness for foreign languages and/or cultural backgrounds can, conversely, lead to a wide range of uncertainties, fears and anxieties, which may result in defending one’s own Self and offending others’ identity, in conflict escalation, missed opportunities and unused potentials. A key factor in intercultural competence is, ultimately, when any uncertainties arise, that participants remain open to unknown situations and tolerant of ambiguity and that they continually reflect on these experiences [6].

In addition, intercultural competence presupposes an ability to change perspective, i.e. to shift, expand or universalize one’s own frame of reference and horizons of understanding and acting. Intercultural competence requires that actors be able to adapt flexibly to new intercultural situations, i.e. new communication and cooperation styles, world views, ways of life, norms and value sets (as opposed to uncritically accepting and merely reproducing them). This means, on the one hand, that one’s own cultural world view and way of life is not seen as absolute, but is

reflected upon, and what is known as an ethno-relative view is adopted. On the other hand, this reflection can lead to a new, affective evaluation of foreign communication and cooperation styles, world views and ways of life, norms and value sets. New elements can then be accepted cognitively and emotionally and rejection, defence or fear of the unfamiliar reduced. This is the prerequisite for developing empathy and for taking what is emotionally and cognitively recognized as foreign behaviour into one's own behavioural repertoire or action potential.

The development of intercultural competence cannot be offered by one discipline alone and it demands much more than what language learning or traditional cultural studies can supply, it can and must be integrated into numerous aspects of conventional school and university education. Only when learners are offered diverse opportunities for appropriate intercultural interaction – be it through a change in their learning environment, interaction with people who hold different values, travel abroad, internships or other experiential learning measures – is it possible for intercultural competence in all its aspects to develop and be developed.

If teachers want to prepare students for success in a globally interconnected world, intercultural competence must form an integral part of the foreign language curriculum. Researchers have identified themes (e.g. identity transformation, student as inquirer, process) that characterize an ICC classroom that can assist teachers in creating learning tasks that will move students toward intercultural competence. When intercultural competence is an integral part of the language classroom, learners experience how to appropriately use language to build relationships and understandings with members of other cultures. They can examine their own beliefs and practices through a different lens, negotiate points of view different from their own, and gain an insider's perspective of another culture. By including activities, which develop the intercultural competence in the foreign language curriculum, students begin to see how their attitudes, knowledge, and language skills can affect their intercultural experiences. As a result, students will gain an understanding of how to enter into intercultural situations with an open mind, resulting not only in more successful communication, but in building meaningful relationships with target language speakers [7].

We present some didactic sequences for the English language classes, focusing on the formation / development of intercultural competence.

DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES
PERSONAL HEROES

OBJECTIVES:

- To make participants aware of the differences and similarities within the group
- To get to know each other in the group
- To reflect about the role of history teaching and the media as makers of heroes.

EVOCATION:

1. Ask the students the following questions:

Are there people who inspire you? Why do they inspire you? What are the qualities they share?

2. Ask the students to look at the pictures and answer the questions:

Do you recognize the people in the picture? What are they famous for?









REALIZATION OF MEANING:

1. Ask the participants to form groups of 5-6 people. Then, ask them to think on their own about three people who are their personal heroes. In five minutes, ask them to share their choices and to say what they admire in those people.
2. Ask each group to list on a flip chart the names of the heroes, their nationality, and, if appropriate, the areas in which they became famous e.g. sports, music, cinema, politics.
3. In plenary, ask the participants to present their flip chart to the other groups.

REFLECTION:

1. Ask the students to note down which heroes were mentioned more than once or appear frequently.
2. Invite the participants to say if they enjoyed the activity and discuss the following questions:

a) Were there any surprises or any heroes who were unknown to anybody? Say why.
b) Was there a trend in terms of, for example, nationality or sex? If so, why are most heroes from the same nationality, cultural background or gender? Are they nationals or foreigners?
c) What is it that makes us appreciate some heroes rather than others?
d) Do you think your heroes are universal? Why or why not?

EXTENSION:

a. Ask the students to identify a hero, either local, national or international who they think should be celebrated. Ask them to bring arguments why this person should be celebrated. Then, ask them to prepare a celebration party and invite others to come. This hero could be someone who has shown great strength of character or achieved something special or contributed to the fight against another issue (intolerance against people with AIDS).
b. Ask the students to think of six questions they would like to interview a famous person. Why did they choose these questions? [4]

In conclusion, it should be mentioned that research on intercultural competence underscores the importance of preparing students to engage and collaborate in a global society

by discovering appropriate ways to interact with people from other cultures. Only through joint construction of a relationship in which people listen to one another individuals can gain and demonstrate their intercultural competences. An interculturally competent speaker of a FL possesses both communicative competence in that language as well as particular skills, attitudes, values and knowledge about a culture. When language skills and intercultural competency become linked in a language classroom, students become optimally prepared for participation in a global world. The implication, then, is the critical importance of offering sufficient quality, formal and non-formal learning opportunities for everyone to acquire the intercultural competences required for successful living in the modern complexity of our heterogeneous world.

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