

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE - Intercultural Dialogue in Teaching Foreign Language Literature-

Tatjana Dumitraskovic
University of East sarajevo
Faculty of Pedagogy, Bijeljina
e-mail: tanjadumi@yahoo.com

Abstract: In all European countries pluralism and diversity has become an every day reality. To ensure a harmonious interaction between people and groups with different cultural and religious identities, respect for cultural diversity, tolerance, dialogue and cooperation are becoming basic social skills needed by every European citizen. Intercultural learning, intercultural dialogue, intercultural competence must be understood as one of the preconditions for individuals to cope with the new challenges of having to build societies that must be based on respecting people in their diversity.

Intercultural learning is an experience which involves all senses and levels of learning, knowledge, emotions, behaviour in an intensive way. Language is one of the most visible elements of culture and in that sense a central aspect in intercultural communication. That is why it must not be used as a means of dominance, but can be one tool of communication. Teaching foreign languages means not only teaching the language itself but to constantly develop intercultural awareness through intercultural communicative competence and intercultural skills. We cannot be competent in a foreign language if we do not understand the culture that has shaped it and how that culture relates to our first language culture. It is not only essential to have cultural awareness, but also intercultural awareness. Intercultural communicative competence is an attempt to raise students' awareness of their own culture, and in doing so, help them to understand other cultures.

Key words: intercultural learning, intercultural dialogue, foreign language, intercultural communicative competence

INTRODUCTION

In all European countries cultural pluralism and diversity has become an every day reality. To ensure a harmonious interaction between people and groups with different cultural and religious identities, respect for cultural diversity, tolerance, dialogue and cooperation are becoming basic social skills needed by every European citizen. Intercultural learning, intercultural dialogue, intercultural competence must be understood as one of the preconditions for individuals to cope with the new challenges of having to build societies that must be based on respecting people in their diversity.

What is meant by the word 'culture'?

All ideas about intercultural learning are built on an implicit or explicit idea about culture. We can define it as a way of life, a set of social practices, a system of beliefs, a shared history or set of experiences. A culture may be synonymous with a country, or a region, or a nationality or it may cross several countries or regions.

The most famous model of culture was developed by Edward T. Hall in 1976. It is the iceberg analogy of culture. (Hall 1976) There are some aspects of the culture that are visible, while the larger portion is hidden beneath the surface.

The external part of culture is what we see and is the tip of the iceberg. It includes behaviors and some beliefs. It is supported by the much larger part of the iceberg, underneath the water line and therefore invisible. Nonetheless, this lower part of the iceberg is the powerful foundation. It is the internal part of culture and it is below the surface of a society and includes some beliefs and the values and thought patterns that underlie behavior.

According to Hall the only way to learn the internal culture of others is to actively participate in their culture.

We cannot judge a new culture based only on what we see when we first enter it. We must spend more time in that new culture, get to know its individuals and interact with them. It is the only way to uncover the values and beliefs that underlie the behavior of that society. That is why it is

difficult at times to understand people with different backgrounds – because we may spot the visible parts of `their iceberg`, but we cannot at once see what are the foundations that these parts rest upon.

What is intercultural learning?

The term `intercultural learning` can be understood on different levels. On a more literal level, intercultural learning refers to an individual process of acquiring knowledge, attitudes, or behavior that is connected with the interaction of different cultures.

But, very often, intercultural learning is seen in a larger context to denote a concept of how people with different backgrounds can live peacefully, and the process that is needed to build such a society.

Although there is no clearly defined educational discipline known as “intercultural learning” it can be understood as the process of becoming more aware of and better understanding of one`s own culture and other cultures all around the world.

The aim of intercultural learning is to increase international and cross-cultural tolerance and understanding. This can take a lot of forms - intercultural learning can be applied in all fields of education. (Amorim 2001). Here I suggest some basic principles of importance concerning intercultural learning with special emphasis on intercultural learning in language teaching.

Approaching intercultural learning: a question of attitude

Experiencing Identity

Before being able to understand other cultures, we have to know ourselves, our own background and experience. Trying to understand ourselves, our own identity, is a prerequisite to encounter others (Claire Kramsch 1993)

Confidence and Respect

Building up confidence is a cornerstone of intercultural learning in order to achieve the openness necessary for a mutual learning process. It requires a lot of patience and sensitivity in order to create a learning atmosphere which enables us to listen each other's opinions and feelings as equals and to promote self-confidence and mutual trust. In this sense it is necessary to:

- Give space to everybody's expression;
- Value all experiences, talents and contributions;
- Discuss our needs and expectations openly.

In Dialogue with the «Other»

Intercultural learning should be understood as a process towards the «other». The «other» is at the heart of understanding. It starts with dialogue and is a process that challenges us to perceive us and the «other» as different but nevertheless complementary.

Constant Change and Questioning

The experience of intercultural learning is one of constant change. We have open questions and will raise new ones. Therefore, we need to accept that there is not always an answer, but remain in constant search, accepting and welcoming change. So we have to prepare to question our assumptions, ideas and to break away from our old beliefs and traditions.

The Potential of Conflict

If we see the variety of perceptions different cultures have of time, space, social and personal relations ... it appears evident that conflict is sometimes at the heart of intercultural learning. Not every conflict has necessarily a solution but it certainly needs to be expressed. An environment that creates the conditions for self-confidence and mutual trust should also be an environment where people feel comfortable about expressing their:

- Insecurities
- Doubts
- Misunderstandings
- Frustrations and
- Hurt feelings

At the same time these models invite us to discuss the differences without labelling it. We need to develop conflict management skills, while considering complexity when dealing with the notion of culture. Intercultural learning implies a search, means new insecurities, and that carries a natural conflictive potential. Diversity can be experienced as helpful and enriching, towards new forms and

new solutions, consequently, we can try to unlock the constructive elements and opportunities of conflicts.

**Intercultural communicative competence
(Intercultural dialogue in teaching foreign language literature)**

Intercultural learning is an experience which involves all senses and levels of learning, knowledge, emotions, behavior in an intensive way. The comprehension of the complexity of this process demands a lot of us. Language is one of the most visible elements of culture and in that sense a central aspect in intercultural communication. But it is at the same time limited, often a source of misunderstanding. It must thereby not be used as a means of dominance – especially considering different language skills – but can be one tool of communication. That`s why teaching foreign languages means not only teaching the language itself but to constantly develop intercultural awareness through intercultural communicative competence and intercultural awareness skills. Here the role of foreign language teachers is crucial.

There will have been points in most teachers` careers when we have stopped to wonder “What am I actually doing?” Being an English teacher for ten years I have often asked that question myself. For too long, we have been concentrating on structures and forms, filling our students up with all the requisite grammar and vocabulary, polishing their pronunciation and encouraging their communicative skills without helping them to be able to genuinely communicate with and understand the real world outside the classroom at all. In my opinion, if our students are to use their language skills to comprehend and communicate in the global village, intercultural awareness is crucial.

Intercultural awareness

Intercultural awareness in language learning is often talked about as if it were a “fifth skill” – the ability to be aware of cultural relativity following reading, writing, listening and speaking. But, language itself is defined by a culture and culture in language teaching is not an expendable fifth skill, “tacked on”, to the teaching of speaking, reading, listening and writing, but the very core it. We cannot be competent in the language if we do not also understand the culture that has shaped and informed it. We cannot learn a second language if we do not have an awareness of that culture, and how that culture relates to our own first language/first culture. It is not only therefore essential to have cultural awareness, but also intercultural awareness.

Intercultural awareness is a collection of skills and attitudes better thought of as a competence. Intercultural communicative competence is an attempt to raise students` awareness of their own culture, and in so doing, help them to interpret and understand other cultures. It is not just a body of knowledge, but a set of practices requiring knowledge, skills and attitudes. (Alan Pulverness 2000)

Raised awareness of what we do and of the vital importance of these skills already makes intercultural communicative competence a more attainable goal. Despite the fact that the competence is more than just a body of knowledge, intercultural awareness skills can be developed by designing materials which have cultural and intercultural themes as their content.

Intercultural awareness and perspectives on communication

It has been suggested that intercultural awareness consists of having four different perspectives on communication with a different culture. (Milton 1993). Interculturally students should be able to

1. look at their own culture from the point of view of their own culture (i.e. have a good understanding and awareness of their own culture)
2. be aware of how their culture is seen from outside, by other countries or cultures
3. understand or see the target culture from its own perspective (i.e. understand and be aware of what other people think of their own culture)
4. be aware of how they see the target culture

Ways to develop intercultural competence

There is, as has been noted earlier, a great gap between knowledge and the ability to use that knowledge in terms of communication and the manipulation of that communication. In order to bridge this gap and frame a relevant syllabus its contents should be made to bear a resemblance to the social contexts. This awareness of the social context can be had from the world of literature which depicts

society in all its hues and colors in a language as varied as it is authentic and natural. It is here that the learner might encounter his real world outside the classrooms. The syllabus should include verbal and non-verbal communication, short narratives, short stories, dialogues, conversations, and interviews. These short literary texts will, thus:

- help teachers first to acquaint themselves with language use to develop their own competence and understand language as a social phenomenon, and not as an exclusive branch of learning.
- transform the classrooms as the stage in which there is real practice of communicative language.
- help teachers to consider language as entailing social acceptability; in other words, they can look to classroom language as carrying resemblance with the outside language. As a result, this would raise communication to the level of a social responsibility.
- develop the intellectual ability of the learners and expose them to a variety of linguistic and literary expressions and communicative functions of language.
- contextualize the language to help the learner to acquire grammar implicitly.
- incorporate linguistic competence into communicative competence by putting language into use in different social situations.

Literary texts take into account the functions of language in different realistic situations outside the conditioned atmosphere of the classrooms. The employment of such literary components such as narratives, short stories, one - person acts, fables, dialogues and short social situations, will help learners to use different forms of the language in one notion of the language. It will, more importantly, motivate and inspire the learners to know more and keep his or her interest intact.

Prof. Charles Blatchford of the Department of English as a second language at the University of Hawaii(1972) opines, "*the study of English literature is a luxury that cannot be indulged during the limited amount of time allocated to English*"(Charles Blatchford 1972)

But, is it really so?

Elsa Auerbach in her book, *Making Meaning, Making Change* says that once the teacher has identified major themes in students' lives with these "ways in," she can use a variety of ready-to-hand "tools" to draw students into the deliberate use of language to address the issues they see as important. These tools can include fables, proverbs, published works of fiction, even children's books. One of the most powerful tools is what she calls "codes," carefully scripted dialogues in which characters reveal very controversial attitudes towards pressing social questions, such as racism, crime, or sexual harassment.

By involving students in discussion about these codes, they not only acquire the language to address these issues, but they also begin to learn how to take positions on these issues themselves. (Elsa Aurbach 1992)

Culture and language learning

Literary texts include cultural uses of linguistic expressions such as stylistics, pragmatics and semantics. This social communication reflects the usage of different language aspects in the literary texts. Moreover, in the study of language and culture, literary study can make a valuable contribution in tracing the development of the language in all its components and skills. What is more important is that, non- native students need to be exposed to various literary texts in order to be able to consider the others' culture in their international communication. Therefore, the non-native learners' curriculum should include teaching literary texts or literature to facilitate such international communication for the students. Furthermore, literature consists of some lexical items and expressions, which cannot be found in the linguistic texts. Literary texts and literature texts contextualized and socialized language items and lead naturally to the use of actual words and expressions in real situations. As regards the learning of English as a Second language at the higher level, Prof. Blatchford says,

"there may be more justification for literary studies where English is a second rather than a foreign language." (Charles Blatchford 1973:5)

It is an undeniable fact that the resources of language can be fully utilized by taking recourse to literature as an important aspect of language learning.

Foreign language teachers can also develop their students` intercultural communicative competence in the foreign language classroom by encouraging them:

1. to produce a guide book, poster or webpage for visitors to their town, country or region. They should not only describe famous sites and places to visit, but also give visitors advice about what they may find strange or unusual about their own culture.
2. to read articles, short stories or extracts from books, newspapers, magazines written by people who have visited the students` town, country or region.

3. to familiarize students with sources of information about the target culture. Again, apart from newspapers and websites that can be invaluable source of reading materials here, literary texts often depict and interrogate their own cultures.
4. the non-native teacher has available role to play here, being a person from one culture who has certain amount of knowledge or experience of target culture.

If students have visited the target culture, they can recount their experiences by giving a written or oral presentation with advice for other students.

If there is no such source available, students can do a creative writing activity – imagining a journey into the target culture with all the problems and misunderstandings they may encounter and creatively resolving them. (Milton 1993)

At this step, students can measure their knowledge and awareness of the target culture at the end of a course compared to the beginning of the course.

When should we introduce this?

Previously, “cultural awareness” has often only been seen as something for advanced learners, an extension exercise that can be “tacked on” to an ordinary lesson. This is partly due to the frequent error of assuming that it is impossible to explain intellectual concepts in level one English. Intercultural awareness, as a fundamental feature of language learning, is important at all levels.

How does this affect the role of the teacher?

Intercultural learning gives the teacher a role of an educator. This makes many teachers feel uncomfortable, especially with the idea that we may be influencing our students in some way. Are we responsible for transmitting some kind of ideology to our students?

I think not. We are just helping them to become more aware of the world around them, and to better interact with that world. These are the most important roles of the teachers.

Moreover, EFL teachers tend to have a wide variety of different backgrounds in different disciplines.

They may have had the experience of living in, adjusting to and understanding a different culture. It is imperative on the part of the language teacher to provide learners with interesting short stories from the finest treasures of English literature to induce in them a desire to make reading as a habit and develop text reading strategies. Foreign language learners benefit from reading target-language literature because it gives practice in the pragmatic contextualization of linguistic expression.

There is a lot they can bring to a job. They are unique mediators of cultural relativity.

CONCLUSION

Intercultural learning aims at very deep processes and changes of attitudes and behaviors. It implies dealing most of the time with the invisible forces of culture, those beneath the surface. It is a process of discovery that implies personal engagement and questioning from both sides. It implies risks and tensions, but also opportunities and solutions. It is obviously not easy to accompany people in this process. On the one hand, we need courage to go further, to challenge ourselves and others. On the other hand, we have to be very careful and respectful to peoples` needs and the limits of these processes. It is a question of striking the right balance between challenging ourselves to move further away from our assumptions and respecting our differences as equal elements of reality. And that is not always easy.

Literature or literary text can bridge, to a large extent, the acute realization of the cultural differences that is eating into our understanding of normal and natural human differences. Literature opens the windows to intercultural awareness while at the same time nurturing empathy, a tolerance for diversity, and the fostering of intelligence. Poetry would go a long way in providing language learners with the expansion of their experience of larger human reality which in turn can shape his language and provide more meaning and richness to it.

But, very often a reaction of some teachers when faced with these ideas is “Why bother?”. There is a feeling that we help our students to communicate anyhow, and that if culture is an integral part of the language then students will just pick it up, that culture is impossible to teach, that we shouldn` t be seen to be foisting values on our students

I would say that in order to make our job relevant and meaningful, teaching intercultural awareness is vital.

So, the answer to the question that many of us, teachers, have asked ourselves “What am I actually doing?” could be: Helping our students to understand, interact with and – hopefully – change for the

better world we all live in. Given the current global situation, there are few jobs more important than this.

REFERENCES

- Kramsch (1993): Claire Kramsch,. *Context and Culture Teaching*. Oxford University Press
- Kramsch, (1998): Claire Kramsch. *Language and Culture*. Oxford University Press
- Pulverness (2000): Alan Pulverness. *Changing Skies*. Swan Communications,
- Amorim (2001): Luis Amorim *Intercultural Learning*. Community Foundation Transatlantic Fellowship, Orientation Session, Washington D.C. June 2-4
- Blatchor (1973) Blatchford, Charles H. Blatchford, Newspapers: *Vehicles for Teaching ESOLwith a Cultural Focus*, TESOL Quarterly, Vol. 7, No. 2, TESOL Inc. New York
- Auerbach(1992) Elsa Auerbach. *Making Meaning Making Change: Participatory Curriculum Development for Adult ESL Literacy*, Mc Henry Inc., Illinois.
- Milton (1993):Bennet Milton J. ``Towards a Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity`` in R. Michael Paige, ed. *Education for the Intercultural Experience*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press
- Bennet (2000): Janet M. Bennett. ``Cultural Marginality:Identity Issues in Intercultural Training,`` in R. Michael Paige, ed. *Education for Intercultural Experience*. Milton J. Bennet and Janet M. Bennet