

Teaching English as a “lingua franca” to achieve intercultural communicative competence

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Abstract: Raising intercultural communicative competence has gained a central place in many considerations and discussions in the globalized world. The present paper therefore examines and analyses approaches to achieving intercultural competence proposed by a number of prominent authors from the American and European cultural environment, such as E.T. Hall, Gert Hofstede, R.D. Lewis, Anna Wierzbicka, Elsa Oksaar, Michael Byram, Manuela Guilherme. They base their theoretical and applied methods of teaching, as well as their approaches to raising intercultural awareness in the intercultural dialogue, while highlighting slightly different levels of communication, thus also suggesting somewhat different conclusions. As a consequence two approaches have been developed: cross-cultural and intercultural communicative approach. We could say that even considerations about the intercultural dialogue show signs of cultural conditioning.

Furthermore, the paper deals with the application of such theoretical premises in the English classroom at the tertiary level. Building on language teaching methods, the paper suggests ways of extending the theme to cross-curricular units, since actualization of theoretical insights in the classroom lends itself nicely to intertwining both a critical cultural awareness of multilingualism in one's own environment and the intercultural communicative competence, leading thus to an "intercultural citizenship".

Key words: intercultural communicative competence, cross-cultural communication, multilingualism, plurilingualism.

1 Promoting Multilingualism and Intercultural Awareness in the EU

The main cohesive principle binding together the nations and states forming the European Union is regarded to be a high level of respect for cultural and linguistic heritage of all the peoples living within its boundaries. These core values are clearly stated in the Preamble to the *EU Treaty*, which declares to be »drawing inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe, from which have developed the universal values of the inviolable and inalienable rights of the human person, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law«. Article 151 further elaborates on this integration principle by asserting that »the Community shall contribute to the flowering of the cultures of the Member States, while respecting their national and regional diversity and at the same time bringing the common cultural heritage to the fore«. Moreover, Article 149 points to the importance of promoting and protecting the inherent linguistic variety within the EU by claiming that »the Community shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity.«

The document that suggests to streamline the above tenets into a set of standards for classroom application is the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR). It proposes that »that the rich heritage of diverse languages and cultures in Europe is a valuable common resource to be protected and developed, and that a major educational effort is needed to convert that diversity from a barrier to communication into a source of mutual enrichment and understanding«, as a consequence »it is only through a better knowledge of European modern languages that it will be possible to facilitate communication and interaction among Europeans of

different mother tongues in order to promote European mobility, mutual understanding and co-operation, and overcome prejudice and discrimination.« The CEFR thus advances standards for learning, teaching and assessing modern language skills and competences, while similar standards for learning, teaching and assessing intercultural communicative skills and competences are still being explored and shaped. Furthermore, it is important to consider how these principles and guidelines apply to communication and interaction with peoples beyond the boundaries of the EU.

2 Approaches to Raising Intercultural Awareness

Intercultural awareness and competence is at the centre of many aspects of life in a globalized world. Amidst constant technological advancement daily contacts, real or virtual, with culturally and linguistically diverse groups have become a normal event for pupils from an early age. It is therefore important for teachers and promoters of intercultural communicative competence to consider *which teaching approach can best help them to cope with the challenges presented by multicultural environments and how to integrate it into our teaching practices*. A brief examination of theoretical trends dealing with the development of intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communicative competence will help us grapple with these aspects of education.

In the field of research of communication between people from different cultural backgrounds two quite distinct approaches have been adopted to raising awareness and sensitivity of otherness, namely, the cross-cultural approach and the intercultural approach. They both share common tenets and principles. Indeed, although they even intersect in many aspects, they tackle the common field of research from different angles. The cross-cultural approach originates in the USA and draws mainly on anthropological research principles. In fact in American universities courses on cross-cultural communication are normally offered within departments of anthropology and communication studies. The intercultural approach, on the other hand, derives its methods from the teaching of languages and has developed within European universities mostly within departments of applied linguistics.

2.1 Cross-cultural approach

The cross-cultural approach to analysing communication in multicultural settings draws on insights offered by anthropological, cultural, psychological and communication research. It started developing in response to the needs of diplomats and businessmen for a better understanding of foreign cultural environments and it, therefore, tries to contrast cultures and identify their distinctive features.

An early attempt to map the *distinctive features of cultures* can be found in the work of E. T. Hall (1959: 190-192), who introduced concepts such as *high context* and *low context cultures* (1977: 35-52), as well as cultures functioning within *monochronic* and *polychronic time systems* (1966: 25-32). According to this theory, communication in a *high context culture* is highly ritualised and encodes little explicit information in a message, requiring thus a deeper understanding of behavioural patterns; whereas in a *low context culture* messages are rather explicit and straightforward. In terms of the embeddedness of culture in a time system, Hall suggests that people from various societies have different ways of managing time requirements. The *monochronic time system* is characteristic of cultures that expect people to compartmentalize and plan their activities one at a time, while the *polychronic time system* describes cultures in which people tend to engage in several activities at the same time.

Further tools for a cross-cultural analysis were provided by Hofstede's (1980) *five dimensions of culture*, namely, *power distance*, *uncertainty avoidance*, *individualism versus collectivism*, *masculinity versus femininity* and *long versus short term orientation*, which condition our behaviour, norms, values and beliefs, forming a different *software of the mind* of individuals from each cultural background and thus defining a person's expectations or responses inculcated by the cultural environment. While Hofstede's analysis instruments are based on a large-scale investigation and his approach has had a large following in business circles, it has also been criticised in terms of promoting an oversimplified view of behavioural patterns and can, therefore, lead to stereotyping.

The above approach can also be criticized for neglecting the role of language as a salient and informing element of each culture, for overlooking language's centrality for anthropological research, a facet of culture defined by Whorf in the first half of the previous century with the claim

that "*the linguistic relativity principle* which means /.../ that users of markedly different grammars are pointed by their grammars toward different types of observations and different evaluations of externally similar acts of observation, and hence are not equivalent as observers but must arrive at somewhat different views of the world." (John B. Carroll 1956: 221).

The gap has been amply filled by Anna Wierzbicka's impressive body of work into cross-cultural linguistics. Within the domain of contrastive semantics her research analyses the semantic components (*conceptual primitives*) of core vocabulary of numerous languages and concludes that there are only about fifty *universal concepts* and just one absolute *semantic universal*: the meaning of the personal pronoun "*I*" (Wierzbicka 1996: 36-37). Within the field of cross-cultural pragmatics, her analysis of speech acts across a wide range of languages further illustrates the implications of cultural and linguistic conditioning on cross-cultural interactions (Wierzbicka 2003).

Another attempt to integrate both the cross-cultural and the intercultural approach to communicating across cultural boundaries is given in M. J. Bennett's (2004) *integrative approach to global and domestic diversity*. Postulating *radical constructivism* (Kelly, 1963) as the basis for ethnocentrism, the author devises a model of gradual increase of intercultural sensitivity that leads from the initial *ethnocentric stages* (denial of cultural difference, defence against such difference, minimisation of its importance) to more advanced *ethnorelative stages* (acceptance of cultural difference, adaptation to such difference, a final cultural integration and identification with the adopted culture).

What sets off the intercultural approach from the cross-cultural approach, is that the former seeks to build on the common ground, the similarities and the integrative elements of cultures in contact while developing a deeper understanding of the defining elements of an individual's own cultural conditioning, while the latter compares and contrasts cultures within various parameters in order to discover and understand the differences, thus focusing on unveiling a somewhat simplified system of behavioural features constituting the 'otherness' of unfamiliar cultural environments. Promoting distinctions between cultural circles and analytical oversimplifications can also lead to conclusions predicting the inevitability of a future "clash of cultures" (Huntington 1997).

2.2 Intercultural approach

Drawing on lessons learned from the rich tradition of the language classroom the intercultural approach focuses on understanding one's own culture, on a critical assessment of the limits and impositions of our own cultural conditioning thus helping us to decentre and empathise with people from other cultural environments as we engage them trying to convey our meaning or understand theirs. Just as having a good command of our mother tongue helps us acquire a foreign language while contrasting the two linguistic systems, intercultural awareness helps us to realize the differences and to overcome mishaps, thus easing communication flow. Since both, the communicative and collaborative language teaching approaches have proved successful, applied linguists have tried to extend these methods to intercultural dialogue, extending intercultural communicative awareness to mean language awareness and cultural sensitivity, because "language /.../used in the context of communication is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways" (Kramsch, 1988: 3).

In order to achieve intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and, therefore, be ready to actively participate in the diversified European or global community (in terms of nationalities, cultures and languages), Michael Byram (1997 and 2008a) proposes "an integrated framework for language, culture and citizenship education" based on "*five orientations*" that prepare learners for interacting, understanding and empathizing with the viewpoint of people with different values and beliefs, as well as different norms and expectations. Building on respect for otherness and promoting a critical reassessment of 'own' cultural environment this approach emphasizes the 'oneness' of humanity, positing cultural differences as a challenge that can successfully be integrated into our classroom practices, just like learning foreign languages.

The approach is structured so as to foster mutual knowledge of interlocutors in terms of their social backgrounds, history, practices, perceptions, products, institutions, etc., as well as the processes of interaction as part of the *cognitive orientation*. Within the *evaluative orientation* attitudes of curiosity and openness are promoted, as well as a readiness to suspend disbelief about

other cultures and to question beliefs about one's own. The *comparative orientation* furthers the skill of interpreting documents, events, tenets, customs, values from another culture by developing the skills for explaining and relating these facets of culture to events, documents, customs... from one's own culture, thus helping us to identify areas where misunderstandings can occur and promoting empathy as an approach to overcoming potential conflict. It is mainly in this dimension of intercultural education that insights and devices developed within the cross-cultural approach can fruitfully be adopted. The *communicative orientation* leads to the development of linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse competences. The *action orientation* advances skills of discovery and interaction, whereby these skills can be employed under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction. Integrating all these elements into our classroom practices leads to achieving the *critical cultural and political orientation*, an ability to evaluate practices, perspectives and products critically in one's own environment as well as in other cultures and, on the basis of explicit criteria, enhance efficient communication with persons from other cultures in a foreign language with the purpose of engaging with and affecting in some way an (international) community.

Intercultural communication thus concentrates on developing skills that can enhance intercultural awareness, tolerance of ambiguity, openness to diversity by drawing on research in the field of linguistics, ethnography and political science. It promotes intercultural dialogue as an active, engaged attitude of each individual to discovering and dealing with diversity, while also critically evaluating one's own cultural identity, thus building a common ground within which communication can take place. It leads present and future members of the EU to aspire to developing intercultural communicative competence as a precondition to adopting an intercultural democratic citizenship, which does not postulate cultural otherness as something to observe, copy and adapt to in contacts with foreigners as proposed by the cross-cultural approach, but prepares us for active participation in a multicultural society and a daily engagement with a kaleidoscope of culturally and linguistically tinged behaviour patterns, beliefs, values and world views.

3. The Role of Lingua Franca

It seems that Byram (2008b: 16) also identifies a close relationship between intercultural communicative competence and the actual interiorisation of language use when he draws a fine line between *multilingualism* and *plurilingualism*:

We need to be precise in our use of language and terminology. Another example is the distinction between 'multilingualism' and 'plurilingualism', a distinction which is made in two ways. The first way is to use 'multilingualism' to refer to geographical spaces and 'plurilingualism' to refer to people. Slovenia is a multilingual space in which several languages are present, some of them used in schools as media of instruction, some of them taught as subjects, some of them not recognized in schools. In this multilingual space, there are some people who use more than one language and are plurilingual but there are others – probably very few, in fact – who use only one language, and are 'monolingual'. This is a sociolinguistic usage.

The second way to use the distinction multi/pluri is when referring to individuals. This is a psychological usage. The CEFR says that some people know a number of languages which are kept separate in their minds and experience; this is sometimes referred to as 'co-ordinate' capacity in languages. Other people are considered 'plurilingual' – another term is 'compound' capacity – because they do not keep their languages separate:

Plurilingualism (...) does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages inter-relate and interact in different situations (...) a person can call flexibly upon different parts of this competence to achieve effective communications with a particular interlocutor. (CEFR, p4)

Thus this second definition of integrating various languages into actual communication proposes spontaneous "code switching" between languages as a higher level of interiorization of cultural awareness and self-awareness. On Bennet's (2004) scale it would probably coincide with the highest level of *ethnorelativism*, namely, *integration*, but an integration that does not overlook or deny cultural and linguistic distinctions and, therefore, does not lead to *acculturation*.

Despite marked differences between the cross-cultural and the intercultural approach in terms of the methods used in analyzing communication in multicultural settings and in terms of approaches to overcoming hindrances to communication, the two approaches both contribute to a better understanding of an area of studies that is focal in a globalised world and has been generating increased attention so as to confirm the claim that developing intercultural communicative competence can be defined as the *tertiary socialization* (Byram, 2008a: 106).

The above analysis leads to the conclusion that competent use of English as a *lingua franca* would presuppose that learners achieve a plurilingual status, a 'compound' capacity to switch between their mother tongue and English, while developing a level of empathy for other cultures which would allow them to pause and 'decentre' whenever inferring the meaning of others could be hindered or ambiguous.

4 Conclusions

In order to communicate effectively with members of other linguistic and cultural communities we need a common linguistic code which can help us render our meaning explicit and infer the meaning of others. Building on tenets promoted by the EU, as well as on the vast body of research proposed by both cross-cultural and intercultural approaches, we can discern a path to a better understanding between cultures, ethnicities and peoples of the globalised world.

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