

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE: FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS’ PERSPECTIVE

Stella HÎRBU⁷¹, university lecturer

Abstract: *The development of intercultural competency is a lifelong process that enables individuals to integrate effectively in diverse cultural environments. This article aims to bring language teachers' attention to the field of culture teaching in foreign language classes at a time when the newly released Basic Standards of Competencies in Foreign Language have given this element of language education more emphasis. The first section of this paper introduces the concept of intercultural communicative competence. It then goes on to explore the challenges, new and current teaching methods, techniques, attitudes, and discourses surrounding raising intercultural competence within foreign language classes. Finally, it presents some suggestions how to begin moving in new directions.*

Key words: *language, culture, intercultural competence, language education.*

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1. Introduction

Globalization processes have an impact on ethnic relations, emphasizing the importance of intercultural communication as a component of peaceful coexistence among nations and individuals in the modern world. Geopolitical changes completely alter socioeconomic, political, scientific, and educational domains, drawing attention to the development of personality who is aware of his or her place in the world culture, is willing to perceive and represent other cultures, and is capable of tolerant and successful coexistence in all life areas. The language and cultural diversity are significant sources of information, personal development, and self-fulfillment, and it forms the backdrop of a person's entire development throughout his or her life. As a result, understanding the presence of different people, their sociocultural distinctions, and language as a cultural code of every nation becomes critical.

The need of implementing intercultural education is justified by the increasing demographic mobility of people of many ethnicities. Entering the field of culture involves research into behavior of other members of society, as well as the analysis and identification of interpersonal behavioural norms.

The purpose of this article is to examine and synthesize the research on intercultural competence and intercultural communicative competence in order to better understand how these concepts might influence the cultural component of a foreign language curriculum. Examples of cultural tasks that enhance intercultural communication competence and reflect best practices in language teaching and learning will be given and illustrated for classroom integration, based on several theories of intercultural communicative competence.

2. Intercultural communicative competence: a general overview

Byram and his European colleagues developed one of the most influential approaches towards the teaching of culture and developing the intercultural competence. According to Byram, the intercultural communicative competence includes various categories of skills, which he refers to as "savoirs." There are two prerequisites for intercultural competency. One is in terms of knowing about a foreign society and social processes, about oneself and others, and about interaction and everything that goes into it in a particular circumstance. Another prerequisite is a positive mind-set, that is associated with features like as openness, empathy, flexibility, awareness of others, and the ability to relativize one's perspective and solve issues and problems, all of which facilitate the establishing and developing cross-cultural relationships (Byram, 1989).

⁷¹ university lecturer, ASEM, stella.hirbu@ase.md

Intercultural competence also involves two skills: the ability to interpret, compare and contrast texts and events and the ability “to analyse data from one’s own country as well as from another and the potential relationships between them” (Ware, 2003). Finally, it involves a subcompetency which is based on all the others and implies the development of critical political cultural awareness; that is, awareness of one’s own principles, beliefs and values, and how they affect one’s view of others.

According to Neuner, the concept of intercultural competence within foreign language teaching is a more comprehensive view of communicative competence that goes beyond functional or mere pragmatic aspects of foreign language use and recognizes that foreign language teaching has to deal with the development of the learner's personal and social identities (Neuner, 1997). This kind of competency was described by Alfred and Byram in terms of tertiary socialization, which should ideally be a component of the foreign language learning experience (Alfred & Byram, 2002).

It is about socializing with another culture's norms, beliefs, and values; it should also assist learners in integrating other modes of thinking into the schemata, beliefs, and concepts acquired during the first and second socializations; and it should foster the ability to live in a multicultural environment.

3. Intercultural competence: perspective and challenges

The cultural objectives of foreign language education, as defined by Byram, do not appear to have been achieved. The lack of a systematic approach for assisting learners in gaining information, developing attitudes, awareness, or insights is one of the causes given in the literature (Wright, 1996). However, the new concept is complicated, subjective, and relative, and it needs more than techniques. In this regard, there are several challenges, such as a superficial view of culture, evaluation, the spread of modern technology, teachers' competency, beliefs, and methodologies.

According to Kramersch, culture has usually been seen as a fifth skill, distinct from language, and has consisted of teaching culture as literary classics or works of art and/or the culture of the four Fs: foods, fairs, folklore, and statistical facts (Kramersch, 1991). Intercultural competence necessitates suitable knowledge, abilities, and attitudes for intercultural contacts, which most teachers are unlikely to possess. In our situation, teachers have few possibilities to travel overseas for lengthy periods of time in order to gain real-world experience in the target culture (s). Furthermore, a prevalent structuralist approach to language instruction, as well as misunderstandings about the teaching of communicative skills, place cultural education in a secondary position. Furthermore, cultures are considered to be stable and homogeneous, and what is taught and assessed are generally facts that teachers can readily give and students can easily understand. Textbooks used in foreign language classrooms are seldom reviewed in terms of how well they foster the development of intercultural competence. Students were happy with the culture as knowledge approach, according to Paige, because they know what to study and how to get excellent grades. A shift in method would undoubtedly disrupt present learning circumstances, so it's reasonable if teachers are hesitant to assume it (Paige, 1999).

Culture is still not regarded as equally essential. Many teachers would like to see cultural competency defined and operationalized in a clear manner. Furthermore, because language programs are usually limited in time, many teachers find it difficult to incorporate a new component and develop it within those constraints. This is particularly true when public discourses emphasize a pragmatic perspective of language, according to which it is possible to acquire a language in a few days, enjoyably and virtually effortlessly, and be successful in commerce, negotiations, and other situations (Steele, 1996). Teachers are therefore confronted with the task of making culture education pleasant while still being critical (Kramersch, 1993). Furthermore, learning a foreign language is linked to survival abilities, implying that it is learned for tourism or

brief interactions. These techniques are unlikely to challenge ethnocentric views or contribute to the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century's proposal that education be a foundation for "learning to live together". Peaceful coexistence on the globe is dependent on how all humans are prepared to interact with each other, to comprehend the other's point of view, seeing it as different from one's own, but also to suspend negative judgment and find "third places" where mutual recognition and respect result from the interaction. Foreign language education can help to reduce the likelihood of disputes by making human interactions less hostile, more productive, and mutually reinforcing.

In order to stress cross-cultural comprehensibility among learners as a communicative goal, teachers and students must move away from the traditional perspective, with its emphasis on norms, standards, and regularities, and move toward approaches that focus on perception of language, attitudes, values, belief systems, and behaviours. Many people believe that learning a foreign language entails studying the language of an idealized educated elite that speaks a 'standard' version. The teacher's role is to help students understand that the actual interaction between interlocutors differs from the ideal norm taught in norm-bound classrooms.

The following challenge for foreign language teacher represent the assessment of intercultural competence. How to measure this competency is a question that has no obvious answer. Paige discovered difficulties in determining what to measure in culture, which and whose criteria to apply, how to prevent stereotypes and homogenized perceptions of a foreign language culture, and what activities to create for culture evaluation. Sercu created a paradigm for systematic test creation in intercultural competency, in which he discusses how concerns like validity, reliability, and authenticity must be considered while evaluating culture. He does not, however, provide a tangible tool or a set of criteria. The evaluation of culture appears to constantly be tinged with subjectivity. Teachers often rely on their own experiences to make judgments related to culture but the problem is that most of them have never been abroad (Sercu, 2004).

The spread of modern technology poses a significant challenge. Ware disproves the myths surrounding the promise of online communication for the development of intercultural competency. In his research, he discovered that foreign language learners were more concerned with communicative skills than intercultural competency. Although the students were engaged in conversation, they were 'disengaged,' meaning they missed opportunities to engage in cultural understanding by failing to demonstrate critical inquiry or willingness to suspend judgment, taking risks, remaining emotionally involved, or viewing culture as language (Ware, 2003).

Teacher development, beliefs and methodologies in matters of culture teaching, in fact, represent another significant challenge.

In reality, teacher development in the area of cultural teaching is a major issue. Klein's research of teachers' beliefs about culture and culture teaching revealed that the participants had a vague understanding of culture and the relationship between culture and language. For them, culture learning meant acquiring information about the target culture as well as increasing tolerance and understanding. They considered cultural learning as a natural process, particularly during immersion situations (Klein, 2004).

According to Klein's research, cultural materials are used as means for language practice, and brief dialogues are held, resulting in the reification of information that students have to acquire. In this study, students were never challenged to evaluate their assumptions, and stereotypes were occasionally reinforced. There were two methodological features that may be shared by a number of teachers - the translation into the mother tongue when explaining the cultural connotation of a word or expression, and the teacher's request for a description of the student's understanding of an event, passage, or issue, followed by a question about the student's opinion of that phenomenon. This indicates that the intermediate stage of interpretation from the target culture's standpoint was bypassed. Klein's results emphasize the importance of teacher education.

4. ICC Activities within the Foreign Language Classroom

According to Fennes and Hapgood there is no secret recipe for developing intercultural competence in the classroom or anyplace else (Fennes and Hapgood, 1997). Due to a change in perception, awareness, and attitudes that is difficult to measure, evaluating a social or intercultural learning process is challenging. However, we can indirectly influence the development of ICC by bringing situations into our classrooms where students can reflect on their intercultural behaviour: how to communicate with people from different cultures, both verbally and nonverbally, how to interact and operate properly in a foreign environment. According to Fennes and Hapgood (1997: 63-64), we can assist students build ICC by considering the following learning goals:

- to communicate with others using their ways of expression, both verbally and non-verbally;
- to develop critical thinking;
- to analyse own culture, including data gathering, in order to contrast it with other cultures;
- to empathize, to have sensitivity to others;
- to tolerate ambiguity in self and others;
- to adapt to changing social/environmental factors;
- to listen actively to those from a different culture;
- to be able to give -and receive- intercultural feedback;
- to adapt behaviour in another cultural setting;
- to negotiate conflict that is culturally based (Fennes and Hapgood, 1997).

The activities that follow demonstrate *Attitude exploration with OSEE tool* as the best practice in building intercultural communication competence. These learning activities are intended to aid teachers in developing intercultural competency among language learners in the setting of a foreign language classroom. Before starting the intercultural competency process, students must evaluate their preconceived notions and attitudes. The OSEE tool was designed to assist learners in analyzing their attitudes toward others at the start of the intercultural process. OSEE is an acronym that stands for:

O: Observe what is happening

S: State objectively what is happening

E: Explore different explanations for what is happening

E: Evaluate which explanation is the most likely one (Deardorff, 2000).

A video clip about a topic of interest linked to the curriculum may be included in a foreign language classroom by the teacher. The teacher begins by showing the film with the sound turned off, allowing students to focus only on the sights, actions, and interactions, allowing them to focus totally on what they observe throughout the observation. During the watching, the teacher merely asks the students to observe the activities and interactions on screen and to address the letter O. Students address the letter S by stating or summarizing the observed activities without characterizing the scenario as good or unpleasant after observing. The letter E leads to the following stage, which directs students to work in small groups. Investigating the explanations contained in the target culture's activities and interactions. According to Deardorff, students must have adequate previous knowledge of the culture in discussion, or more particularly the cultural context being observed, for this level of OSEE (Deardorff, 2011). This may also be a good opportunity for students to collaborate as anthropologists, conducting study and investigation as they examine the cultural perspectives that drive the film's actions. During the last phase of OSEE, the learners exercise E by Evaluating the potential explanations in order to pick the best acceptable justification for the conduct observed in the video clip. This is the most challenging step since human interaction does not follow predetermined rules, thus many aspects must be taken into

account in order to properly analyze the situation. In order to successfully pass the OSEE evaluation level, students may need to continue collecting information about the foreign culture.

According to Deardorff, when students reach the final level of OSEE, they are ready to participate in the discussion. The teacher may choose to show the movie again with the sound turned on so that the students may hear the target language. Teachers may provide opportunities for students to practice the target language in reaction to the film by asking them to go back to the cultural guidelines learnt throughout the investigation (OSEE) phase. The teacher fosters an environment in which the notions of intercultural communication competence can be exercised by encouraging communicative activities such as discussions, dialogues, role-plays, skits, and scenarios (Deardorff, 2011). During tasks concentrating on objective observation, investigation, and assessment, this exploration activity allows learners to evaluate their preconceived views about individuals from various cultures, allowing negative attitudes to be changed.

5. Conclusion

The importance of foreign language education could lie in preparing citizens to have more flexible views of the Other and of the Self and in the attempt at having more mutually reinforcing encounters. This is especially true of Republic of Moldova which is a multi-cultural country.

The intercultural competency must be an element of the foreign language curriculum if teachers wish to equip students for success in a globally interconnected world. The learners could experience how to appropriately use language to build relationships and understandings with members of other cultures. They can examine their own ideas and habits through a different lens, negotiate various points of view, and acquire insight into another culture.

Despite immediate pragmatic concerns, foreign language education in general should contribute to the overall goal of improving human connections in the modern world for the mutual benefit of everyone who interact in order to make our world a better place to live in. a better place to live in.

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