

TOPIC 3. PLANNING AN INTERCULTURAL DIMENSION IN THE SYLLABUS

3.3. Planning an intercultural dimension in the syllabus

1. GENERAL ASPECTS

2. THE INTERCULTURAL DIMENSION IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

3. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

4. CONTENTS

5. METHODS

7. MATERIALS

7. ASSESSMENT

2. SET READINGS

3. REFERENCES

1. GENERAL ASPECTS

This module focuses on the implications of the theory introduced so far for planning an intercultural dimension in language teaching. The incorporation of the intercultural approach into the foreign language class requires the teacher to be familiar with its main standpoints and with the most significant aspects which enable its implementation.

Teachers are usually constrained by their national curricula and by the requirements of the syllabus and of the institution they work for. Even though the incorporation of the intercultural component into the foreign language class demands a change of perspective and the consideration of issues that had not previously been in the foreground, the 'traditional' foreign language class can gradually be transformed into a much more educative experience just by putting a few ideas into practice.

Here, some suggestions and guidelines will be provided to this end. Relevant practical issues will be considered such as: how to use the idea of intercultural competence to set aims and objectives, what type of content helps meet these goals, what methods to use, how to assess intercultural competence, how to adapt existing teaching materials to reflect the cultural dimension and intercultural competence and, finally, how to make the most of the study visit abroad.

2. THE INTERCULTURAL DIMENSION IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

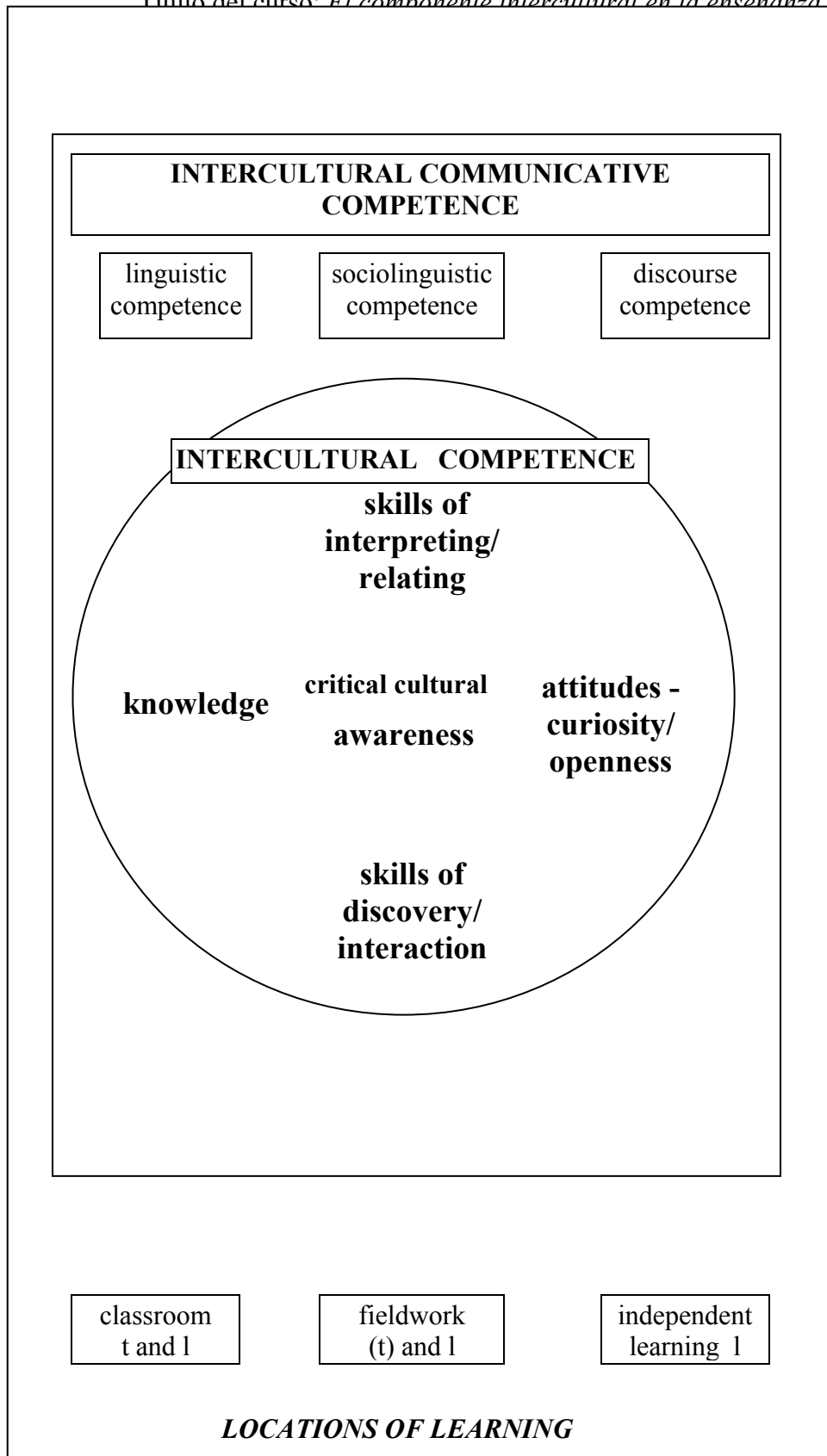
Intercultural Communicative Competence has become a new alternative since the 1990s, presenting the advantage of integrating the cognitive, pragmatic and attitudinal components of foreign language learning (Doyé, 1999: 11). Gnutzmann (2000) includes within the domain of intercultural competence the awareness of the relationship between thought and behaviour, cultural knowledge of elements such as the role of the sexes, sensitivity, cognitive and behavioural flexibility and openness. Likewise, Guilherme (2000: 297-300) discusses the relevance of negotiation on the basis of culture-specific and culture-general features and the development of respectful attitudes.

Different models of Intercultural Communicative Competence have been put forward. Singerman (1996: 74-81) relates the development of foreign language proficiency to the development of intercultural skills, distinguishing an elementary, an intermediate, an advanced and a superior stage for both; from the intercultural perspective, the basic stage emphasises observation and imitation and the most advanced stage covers the possibility to take on socio-professional responsibilities in the target culture. This model is concerned with individuals who move to the target country and is based on the process of adaptation or assimilation in the target culture.

A completely different standpoint appears in the model elaborated by Byram (1997) and Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002). This possibly presents the more widely-acknowledged model of Intercultural Communicative Competence in Europe, since its components are also incorporated into *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (2001: 103-107), which explicitly considers Intercultural Competence to be one of the competences to be developed by the foreign language learner.

The introductory booklet for teachers by Byram, Gribkova and Starkey is a very practical document with the aim of allowing foreign language teachers to incorporate the intercultural approach in their lessons. The starting point in the intercultural dimension propounded by Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002: 9) is the development of foreign language learners as intercultural mediators, defined as individuals “who are able to engage with complexity and multiple identities and to avoid the stereotyping which accompanies perceiving someone through a single identity. It is based on perceiving the interlocutor as an individual whose qualities are to be discovered, rather than as a representative of an externally ascribed identity. Intercultural communication is communication on the basis of respect for individuals and equality of human rights as the democratic basis for social interaction”.

The model Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002: 11-13) propound can be summarised in the following diagram:



It contains a cohesive five components or ‘*savoirs*’ pattern which comprehends the knowledge, attitudes and skills required in an intercultural competent individual. Real cosmopolitan citizens should, hence, develop intercultural communicative competence in its five spheres:

1. *Intercultural attitudes / savoir être*: Curiosity, openness, the affective ability to ‘decentre’, which implies abandoning ethnocentric attitudes and relativising one’s own values, beliefs and behaviours.
2. *Knowledge / savoirs*: of one’s own culture and of the interlocutor’s culture and of how human beings interact and perceive each other.
3. *Skills of interpreting and relating / savoir comprendre*: ability to interpret a document or event from another culture and relate it to similar documents or events in one’s own culture.
4. *Skills of discovery and interaction / savoir apprendre - faire*: ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices; ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction.
5. *Critical cultural awareness / savoir s’engager*: the critical evaluation of practices, perspectives and products in one’s and the other’s culture and countries.

In this comprehensive model, attitudes play a fundamental role being, possibly, the first step towards intercultural competence. On the whole, the intercultural approach favours a stable self-identity, a personal attitudinal preparedness, a personal willingness to make the most of the intercultural contact on the basis of a non-ethnocentric stance and a non-prejudiced judgement of other people and cultures.

Knowledge, both culture-specific and culture-general, is likewise required, cognition sharing the same degree of relevance as the others. The incorporation of the skills necessary to internalise the understanding of otherness on the basis of the individual’s existing categories and the skills necessary to continue a life-long cultural learning and to function successfully in intercultural encounters turn out to be key elements of the model. In comparison with other models, this one presents the obvious advantage of integrating the cognitive and attitudinal domain on equal grounds as well as the skills the individual needs to develop.

Nevertheless, the central and more outstanding constituent consists in critical cultural awareness, the critical approach to one’s own and the other’s cultural phenomena and the constant re-evaluation of one’s standpoints. This demands the presence of an explicit critical pedagogy in the foreign language class, an approach which is certainly not taking place at the moment in most education contexts.

The implementation of this model of intercultural competence asks for the revision of the aims and practices of foreign language learning, although, at this point, a critical analysis of the model proves illuminating. Parmenter (2003) makes a revision of Byram’s (1997) and Byram, Gribkova and Starkey’s (2002) conception of intercultural communicative competence. She analyses this model from the Asian

standpoint and comes to the conclusion that the applicability of this model worldwide presents some constraints, the main one residing in its western orientation.

3. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

In a world in which globalisation and internalisation are powerful forces, individuals should be endowed with the necessary tools to become citizens of the world and an exclusively linguistic training impoverishes the potential of both foreign language teaching and the foreign language learner. The aims and practices of foreign language teaching for the promotion of intercultural citizens reside in the reflection and self-improvement the intercultural experience may facilitate via the foreign language. In other words, foreign language teaching should adopt the development of the knowledge, skills and attitudes of intercultural communicative competence as its guiding and ultimate goal. As a consequence, language learning, far from being reduced to teaching linguistic skills, is inserted into the more demanding and enriching framework of intercultural competence. Corbett (2003: 2) makes this point clear: “Obviously, one key goal of an intercultural approach remains language development and improvement; however, this goal is wedded to the equally important aim of intercultural understanding and mediation”.

Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002: 10) specify that the aims underlying the incorporation of an intercultural approach into foreign language teaching are:

- To give learners intercultural competence as well as linguistic competence.
- To prepare them for interaction with people of other cultures.
- To enable them to understand and accept people from other cultures as individuals with other distinctive perspectives, values and behaviours.
- To help them see that such an interaction is an enriching experience.

Additionally, they (2002: 9) state that a further goal is the development of ‘learners as intercultural speakers or mediators who are able to engage with complexity and multiple identities and to avoid the stereotyping which accompanies perceiving someone through a single identity’.

Corbett (2003: 34-35) also highlights the aim of helping learners become ethnographers, that is to say, training them to approach any kind of cultural phenomena from a ‘detached’ or ‘scientific’ perspective which requires the development of the skills of observation, description and interpretation.

From the attitudinal perspective, showing interest in other cultures and societies, being tolerant and developing empathetic attitudes become relevant aims of the intercultural approach.

Finally, the intercultural approach aims at a personal growth which favours real intercultural communication and understanding. Being aware of cultural relativity and

the questions which arise in comparing values from different standpoints and developing a wider worldview underlie this goal.

4. CONTENTS

Whereas the contents of a language programme are established, are relatively fixed and can easily be graded according to level of difficulty or other criteria, there is no consensus on the ‘best’ type of content to develop intercultural competence.

Perhaps, Byram’s proposal of a minimum cultural content (1994: 51-52) represents an interesting group of issues which, if properly dealt with, can lead to intercultural analysis and reflection. The minimum cultural content Byram proposes is divided in 9 areas of study:

- a) Social identity and social groups
- b) Social interaction
- c) Belief and behaviour
- d) Socio-political institutions
- e) Socialisation and the life-cycle
- f) National history
- g) National geography
- h) National cultural heritage
- i) Stereotypes and national identity

What is particularly relevant in this respect is not only the topic itself but the perspective from which it is analysed. Kramsch (1993: 223) put forward the ‘double perspective of the respective societies’, that is to say, the target and the intended students’ culture, to make learners reflect upon their own and the foreign cultures and become aware of their own culture-bound views. For example, a text which speaks about the ‘Spanish Armada’ from the British perspective, can be supplemented with a similar text which reflects the Spanish perspective, or a text which deals with hurricanes in the United States can be better exploited with a text which represents similar natural disasters in the learners’ culture (for example, forest fire in Spain).

To sum up, almost any text with an insightful cultural content can be used for intercultural teaching when it or a supplementary text refer explicitly to issues, facts or events with a comparable degree of signification in the learners’ culture.

5. METHODS

Comparison and contrast has become the most widely acknowledged method for intercultural training.

Even though there have been differing views on whether the comparison should take place according to similarities or whether it should rather foster a contrastive view – Robinson (1985: 72) deems that comparison should be based on similarities in order to make students see that all cultures share common elements, whereas Damen (1987: 281) is of the opinion that a systematic analysis of contrastive qualities should be carried out so as to develop cultural awareness – nowadays it is accepted that an intercultural approach should keep a balance between similarities and differences.

Byram (1994: 43-45) discusses an interesting method of comparative analysis:

- Same form, different meaning (the foreigner and the native speaker give different meaning to the phenomenon; for example, the costumes and pointed hat penitents worn in Spain during Easter parades can be understood by an American as representing members of the Ku-Klux-Klan).
- Same meaning, different form (two apparently distinct phenomena have a similar meaning; for example, bullfighting in Spain and fox-hunting in England).
- Same form, same meaning, different distribution (for example, in greeting or leave-taking formulae).

Similarly, the study of keywords can be conducted by means of dissociation of words which seem to be translation equivalents ('friend' – 'amigo') or cultural phenomena which do not have an apparent equivalent in the other culture ('Cabalgata de Reyes' takes place in Spain, not in other European countries).

Finally, ethnographic approaches can be used for intercultural purposes. Learners are encouraged to look at any cultural phenomena with a new perspective, observing it, analysing it and interpreting it with objectivity. Corbett (2003: 105-117) lists some ethnographic activities in the intercultural classroom such as:

- A) Concept training: An activity to develop systematic observation. Corbett (2003: 107) deems that "this may be a religious service, a school lesson, or even something as apparently 'ordinary' as people browsing or buying books in a bookshop. The activity tries to 'decentre' the observer's sense of the ordinary by contemplating the concept and devising questions to ask and answer" such as "is this a specialised book or a general one?, where is it situated", etc.
- B) Cultural associations: An activity to foster intercultural awareness. A subject is selected (for example, foods of cultural significance) and learners find out about it, comparing the information across cultures and analysing the specific

cultural associations the topic has in particular cultures. Corbett (2003: 109) gives the following example: ‘feijoada’ in Brazil, ‘haggis’ in Scotland and ‘hot dogs’ in the USA; they analyse matters such as ingredients, meal or snack, where and when it is eaten, what it is accompanied by, origins or things to do afterwards.

- C) Negative etiquette: An activity to help learners deal with the difficulties of intercultural communication. As Corbett (2003: 110) puts it, “one humorous way to raise consciousness of cultural patterns of behaviour is to devise roles of ‘how not to behave’ in certain situations effectively, a guide to ‘negative etiquette’” and he uses examples such as in order to annoy the Scots refer to ‘England’ instead of ‘Britain’.
- D) Critical incidents: These are stories about cross-cultural conflict, often based on real life experiences. Critical incidents revolve around a misunderstanding, a dispute, a linguistic error, or some other kind of cultural *faux pas*. They are the sorts of events that highlight different cultural assumptions and behaviours. They are about attitudes and behaviors that might be interpreted in different ways by different people, particularly when people from different cultural backgrounds interact. Thus, they help illustrate why people need to be aware of multiple cultural contexts in order to make sense of what happens between them when something goes wrong cross-culturally.
- E) Large-scale ethnographic projects: Activities such as ethnographic interviews, observation of cultural phenomena or of people’s acts and behaviours, etc. This said particularly useful as part of a visit to target language community/ies.

Further methodological considerations concern genres and sources of cultural analysis and intercultural reflection. In this respect, Corbett (2003) highlights the relevance of paying attention to:

- Culture in its link with the culture-specific patterns of casual conversation.
- Culture and written genres, with special emphasis on the existence of cultural presuppositions underlying written texts.
- Interviews –structured conversations– also serve intercultural purposes
- Visual literacy, the necessity to view images as complex messages with their own grammar and vocabulary.
- Literary, media and cultural studies are particularly relevant for the EFL class.

6. MATERIALS

Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002: 24) summarise the main aspects in connection with materials: “It is important to use authentic material but to ensure that learners understand its context and intention. Materials from different origins with different perspectives should be used together to enable learners to compare and to analyse the materials critically. It is more important that learners acquire skills of analysis than factual information.”

Therefore, any type of authentic material, from tickets, through journals and ads, to books and the internet can be used to facilitate intercultural analysis and reflection.

Since the foreign language class at pre-university level is very much determined by the textbook chosen, the teacher should ideally supplement it with further texts and realia so that he makes sure that different, and sometimes contradictory, perspectives appear. For example, in the description of the United Kingdom, it is interesting to combine the insider perspective (that is to say, the way British people think of themselves and represent themselves) and the perspective of members of other societies who know the United Kingdom. In this sense, a multiperspective approach can be taken, with people coming from other English-speaking countries (such as the USA), other countries in the world (Japan, France, etc.) and the learner’s fellow countrymen. They are sure to highlight different aspects of the UK and, in this process, project numerous cultural facts, values and beliefs from their own societies.

7. ASSESSMENT

Corbett (2003: 194-201) distinguishes between two main test formats:

- Objective tests: They have been widely used for assessing cultural knowledge, for example, in the USA. An example is a matching exercise in which the person (e.g. Curie) has to be linked with his/her work (e.g. discoverer of radium). Since they simply assess cultural knowledge, they are not generally used for assessing intercultural competence.
- Subjective tests: They are more complex because they ask for the subjective assessment on the part of the marker:
 - One example of subjective texts which could be used for evaluating learners' attitudes, knowledge and skills are role-plays and simulations.
 - A further tool is projects presented to the class and portfolios. The latter have the advantage of showing learners' progression during the course.

Intercultural communicative competence is a conjunction of knowledge, attitude, skills and values. It is obvious that one of the most difficult elements in the intercultural approach is assessment. Language teachers are familiar with different formats which allow assessing knowledge and, to a certain extent, skills are also included in the evaluation of the foreign language as a school subject. However, even though one could argue that assessing attitudes and values is beyond the competences of the foreign language teacher, the chapter by Byram (1997) reveals that it is possible to assess all the components of intercultural competence in a more or less structured format.

Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002: 29-32) clearly state that all the components of intercultural communicative competence, knowledge, attitudes and values, and skills should be assessed. They propose a test which is not based in traditional examinations but, rather, on the record of learners' competences and make explicit reference to the European Language Portfolio as an assessment tool.

Another approach to assessment is taken in the INCA project. This is focused on young people in the industrial world who may have to interact with fellow workers in their own workplace or may be sent to work abroad. The INCA project has developed a profile and some tests and concrete examples of a profile and tests are available on the website: www.incaproject.org (see: 'Tools' and 'Profile').

Different ways of assessing can be used in conjunction, self-evaluation, peer-evaluation and teacher-evaluation. Teacher evaluation can take place in a structured form (by means of a test based on discussions, role play, presentation of projects, etc.) or in an informal way (by means of observation of learners' attitudes and performance in the course. Given the complexity of its assessment, the more efficient way of evaluating learners' intercultural competence may be formative evaluation, that is to say, throughout the course, rather than summative (at the end of the course and by means of a test).

2. READINGS:

For the activities – some chapters from:

Byram, M., Nichols, A. and Stevens, D. (eds) *Developing Intercultural Competence in Practice*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Carol Morgan (England) *The Intercultural Partnership Project*

Elena Tarasheva and Leah Davcheva (Bulgaria) *'Up the Hills of Identity'*

Lynne Parmenter and Yuichi Tomita (Japan) *Virtual Intercultural Competence: a Programme for Japanese Elementary School Students*

Judith Parsons and Peter Junge (Denmark) *"Why do Danes put their elderly in homes?" - Working outside the classroom with adult second language learners"*

Tanya Madjarova, Magdalena Botsmanova and Tanya Stamatova (Bulgaria) *'I thought my teacher fancied me'*

Krassimira Topuzova (Bulgaria) *British and Bulgarian Christmas Cards. A Student Research Project*

Byram, M. 1997. Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters. Chap 5: Assessment (pp 87-111).

For all:

Byram, M., Gribkova, B. and Starkey, H. 2002, *Developing the Intercultural Dimension in Language Teaching. A practical introduction for teachers*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. Please, download this book from the following web page www.coe.int/lang under policy development activities and intercultural dimension.

Corbett, J. 2003. *An Intercultural Approach to English Language Teaching*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

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