

From Cultural Knowledge to Intercultural Competence: A Pedagogical Model for Foreign Language Teaching

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Abstract

Approaches to teaching cultures in foreign language classroom have been changing over the last decades, from cultural knowledge to intercultural competence. A pedagogical model for ICC-based foreign language teaching has been proposed in the paper, which puts emphasis on both linguistic competence and intercultural competence. It aims at preparing learners for interacting with people from other cultures and understanding other distinctive perspectives, values, and behaviors to behave in an effective and appropriate way in intercultural communication. Through knowledge input, skill practice and attitude reflection, learners not only acquire the linguistic competence needed to communicate in the target language but also develop the intercultural competence which makes them become more curious, open-minded, respectful, and empathetic about other cultures and more willing to engage in intercultural communication.

Keywords

Culture; Intercultural competence; Foreign language teaching; Pedagogy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Globalization has brought about a great number of changes in the ways people communicate. More people than ever before have both direct and indirect contact with each other around the globe. In order to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds effectively and appropriately, only access to culture-general or culture-specific knowledge seems insufficient and one needs to be interculturally competent. Faced with this ever-changing demand, the goal of foreign language teaching has gradually changed from a narrow focus on linguistic competence to communicative competence, then embracing the wider emphasis on intercultural competence. Since the issue of developing foreign language learners' intercultural competence has been identified as one of the ultimate goals in the field of language education (e.g., Byram, 1997; Fantini, 2000; Deardorff, 2009), systematic foreign language teaching focusing on intercultural competence seems imperative to help learners tolerate, understand, accept, and respect people from different cultures.

2. CULTURE

Culture, a very broad and complex concept, is usually defined as "a pattern of learned, group-related perception — including both verbal and nonverbal language attitudes, values, belief system, disbelief systems, and behavior" (Singer, 1987, p.34). The anthropologist Geert Hofstede interprets culture as "a collective phenomenon, because it is at least partly shared with people who live or lived within the same social environment, which is where it was learned. Culture consists of the unwritten rules of the social game. It is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others"

(Hofstede et al., 2010, p.6). In other words, culture can be learned in that no one is born into this world knowing how to function acceptably in a certain community. It is through interaction that people learn a shared set of ideas, values, perceptions, and standard of behaviors and react accordingly. Culture also gives people within a group common knowledge, a sense of identity, shared traditions, and specific behaviors in certain situations, which are often distinct from other groups of people. Therefore, learning cultures plays an important role in interacting with culturally different others without misunderstanding. Paige (2006) put forward the five dimensions of cultural learning: learning about the self as a cultural being; learning about the elements of culture; culture-specific learning; culture-general learning and learning about learning. These five dimensions provide the template for effective culture learning.

Culture and language learning are intricately interwoven with each other. Kramersch (1993) emphasized “culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communication competence”. (Kramersch 1993, p.1). In the past decades of years, as the aim of foreign language teaching has shifted from delivering linguistic knowledge to developing communicative competence, the inclusion of culture has shifted from imparting cultural knowledge to developing intercultural competence. Liddicoat (2002) stresses the idea that “the static view of culture does not recognize the link between language and culture” and “the dynamic view of culture requires learners to actively engage in culture learning, rather than only learn about the cultural information of the target culture in a passive way” (Liddicoat 2002, p. 8). Kramersch (2002) further asserts that the dynamic view of culture requires learners to have knowledge of their own culture and an understanding of their own culturally-shaped behaviors. Accordingly, foreign language teaching needs to infuse learners with cultural differences which help learners to be interculturally aware of their own culture and the presence of otherness as well as to appreciate and respect them.

3. INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

Intercultural competence is “abilities to adeptly navigate complex environment marked by a growing diversity of peoples, cultures and lifestyles” (UNESCO, 2013, p5). Much of the literature in intercultural competence can be traced back to works in the 1960s and some even in the 1930s in the United States (Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017). Since the emergence of the concept of intercultural competence, different scholars from different disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, education, and communication, to name a few, have proposed multitudes of related models, e.g., model of ICC (Byram, 1997), IC model (Fantini, 2000), pyramid model of IC (Deardorff, 2006) to address related issues. Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) categorized those models into five types: compositional models, co-orientational models, developmental models, adaptational models and casual path models. They are highly diverse in terminologies and practical goals.

Byram (1997) points out that intercultural competence, which is closely related to other competencies namely linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, and discourse competence, consists of five elements such as attitudes (*savoir être*), knowledge (*savoir*), skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir apprendre/faire*), skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir comprendre*), and critical cultural awareness (*savoir s’engager*). As Davis, Cho, and Hagenson (2005) say, “achieving intercultural competence through intercultural learning is a major goal that complements the development of students’ language competence. Many modern foreign language experts claim there are working definitions of intercultural learning, and related research has identified ongoing challenges in assessing learners’ intercultural competence. Byram’s model, which is widely used in foreign language classrooms, requires the development

of the following.” (p. 2). According to the notion, language teachers should plan systematically their teaching objectives, materials and methods that can develop the specific elements of intercultural competence.

Fantini's (2000) IC model includes four important components of intercultural competence: awareness, attitudes, skills, and knowledge. This IC model is likely to overlap with Byram's (1997) intercultural competence elements. Fantini (2000) explains that awareness, which is fostered through introspection and reflection, leads to “deeper cognition, skills, and attitudes just as it is also enhanced by their development” (p. 29). It was also emphasized that intercultural competence is commonly a longitudinal and ongoing developmental process. One may develop and expand the competencies over time, but new challenges like stagnation or even regression always appear. A good condition for one to develop one's IC is the contact and experience with people of other languages and cultures in a positive setting. Although the element of language is not included explicitly in the IC model, Fantini (1997) argues that proficiency in the target language plays an important part in enhancing one's intercultural competence.

Based on the consensus of scholars in intercultural communication, Deardorff (2006) defined intercultural competence as “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes” (Deardorff, 2006, p.247). As put forward by her study, intercultural competence, which can only be achieved through a ‘lifelong process’ of learning and development, is made up of three critical elements, namely knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Knowledge encompasses cultural self-awareness, culture-specific knowledge, sociolinguistic awareness, as well as deep understanding and knowledge of culture (including contexts, role and impact of culture and others' worldviews). Skills refer to the ability to listen, observe and assess, and the ability to analyze, interpret and relate. Finally, attitudes comprise respect (valuing other cultures, cultural diversity), openness (to intercultural learning and to people from other cultures, withholding judgment), curiosity, and discovery (tolerating ambiguity and uncertainty). This pyramid model of intercultural competence has two other different elements of desired internal outcomes (informed frame of reference/filter shift) and desired external outcomes (behaving and communicating effectively and appropriately) apart from the three elements of attitudes, knowledge, and skills as in Byram's (1997) and Fantini's (2000) models.

In terms of various definitions, labels, and models prevalent in the literature, Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) summarized that “intercultural competence is the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioral orientations to the world” (p.7). Therefore, effectiveness (the ability to achieve one's goal) and appropriateness (the ability to behave in an acceptable manner) are two significant indicators to evaluate whether one is interculturally competent and affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions are three critical elements in developing one's intercultural competence.

4. A PEDAGOGICAL MODEL FOR ICC-BASED FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Foreign language teaching focusing on intercultural competence aims not only at helping learners to acquire the linguistic or discourse competence needed to speak fluently or write correctly in another language but also preparing learners for understanding and accepting people with distinctive perspectives, values, and behaviors and behaving in an appropriate way in intercultural communication. Based on the above rationale, a pedagogical model for ICC-based foreign language teaching is proposed below.

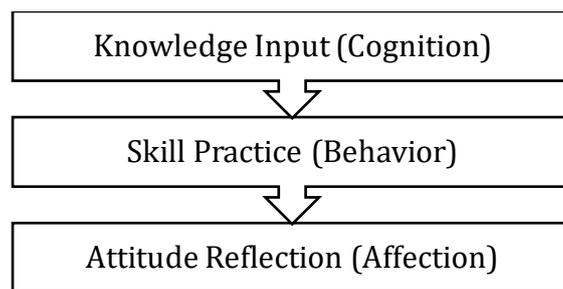


Figure 1. A pedagogical model for ICC-based foreign language teaching

4.1. Stage 1 Knowledge Input

The first teaching step is aimed at providing learners with language knowledge and culture knowledge. Learners can be introduced and exposed to a wide range of authentic oral, visual, or written learning resources such as articles, TV programs, advertisements, movies, and speeches. The authentic learning enables learners to immerse themselves in the world of other culture and leads to their increased interest in learning about other cultures. The subjects of the authentic materials should be about language and different cultures, which are suitable for intercultural comparisons. Given that learning a foreign language is a process of meeting with another culture, intercultural dialogue can be an essential component in a foreign language class. For instance, the personal experiences of foreign language teachers, the representatives from the target culture, as well as the student diversity in the class take on great significance and can be used as teaching assets. Obviously, the role of teachers is irreplaceable in this stage. Teachers should be mindful of the way they approach knowledge and scaffold learners. Through a variety of teaching methods, students' motivation can be encouraged to get interested, involved and responsible. They should be the active makers of knowledge rather than being recipients of knowledge from teachers. Enhancing the factual knowledge about the target language and culture can prepare learners for further exploration and reflection in the following learning process.

4.1. Stage 2 Skill Practice

In this stage, learners need to move from knowing to doing by being given a variety of opportunities to practice the knowledge obtained in the previous step through structured and guided communicative tasks. The tasks should be carefully designed to assist learners to enhance their language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing and foster their intercultural competence in various ways. For instance, as mentioned earlier in this paper, Byram (1997) accounts for a series of skills associated with intercultural competence, skills of discover and interaction, and skills of interpreting and relating. These skills can be largely formulated and practiced by means of interpreting an event of other culture, explaining it, identifying the causes of conflict and misunderstanding in the event and relating the interpretation to one's own culture and experience. Learners' interpretation of the event determines the emotional response they will make and the subsequent behavior of the learners will be congruent with the associated emotions. It should be noted that activities about cultures in the classroom may threaten learners and involve a certain amount of risk for learners. Some risk factors for class participation include loss of face, loss of group identity, conflict avoidance, and risk of self-disclosure related to culture, religion, sexual orientation, or socio-economic background (Paige, 1993). In order to reduce the level of risk in the classroom, teachers should "sequence learning activities in a way that moves from low- to high-risk disclosure, concrete to abstract concepts, personal to institutional examples, structured to unstructured activities and to sequence topics from low emotional intensity to higher emotional intensity" (Nanda & Aisha, 2016, p447).

4.2. Stage 3 Attitude Reflection

Reflection, the most important while most challenging stage in the development process, helps students compare themselves with others, seek to understand different norms and behaviors, and search for appropriate actions (Morris et al., 2014). Researchers and educators have come to understand that effective intercultural pedagogies require intentional time for intercultural comparison and reflection in classrooms if students are to develop intercultural competence in an educational setting (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Without explicit reflection, the knowledge and skills which make up intercultural competence are not likely to evolve. Therefore, during this stage, it is vitally important that learners need to make a serious attempt to understand and accept other cultures rather than ridicule them. Learners should be aware of their pre-existing stereotypes and prejudices towards the target culture, which would prevent learners from developing their intercultural competence. Learners need to be encouraged to think about issues of cultural diversity and develop their own perspectives through reflection. In this stage, teachers of foreign language should be mediators between cultures, who help to raise learners' language awareness and intercultural awareness and adjust their intercultural attitudes. The most competent intercultural mediators are "are those who have an understanding of the relationship between their own language and language varieties and their own culture and cultures of different social groups in their society, on the one hand, and the language (varieties) and culture(s) of others, between (inter) which they find themselves acting as mediators" (Byram, 2003, p. 61). They can bridge the linguistic and cultural differences in the classroom, promote student engagement and facilitate learning. The reflection process under the teachers' guidance would help students become more curious, open-minded, respectful, and empathetic about other cultures and more willing to engage in intercultural communication. They can value cultural diversity without ethnocentric view, tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty, and withhold judgments towards people from other cultures. At the same time, the changed attitudes of learners would activate their knowledge learning and promote skill application.

In sum, the pedagogical model for ICC-based foreign language teaching will enable learners to gain solid knowledge of target language and culture and develop their intercultural competence by comparing their own cultures, interpreting the comparison, and evaluating cultural differences critically and finally behave effectively and appropriately in both verbal and non-verbal intercultural communication.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, linguistic proficiency is not enough for successful intercultural communication in this globalized world. As the learners learn about target language, they must learn how to use the target language correctly in the new culture and how to communicate effectively and appropriately with individuals from the new culture. Culture can be a core and integrated element in foreign language teaching classrooms. However, culture cannot be portrayed as the static and stable knowledge but the complex and evolving entity. Only exposing learners to the target culture knowledge without paying attention to intercultural competence might not suffice for learners' preparation to engage in the intercultural context. Based on the analysis of various definitions, labels, and models of intercultural competence, a pedagogical model for ICC-based foreign language teaching has been proposed in the paper, which is made up of three elements, namely knowledge input, skill practice and attitude reflection. This pedagogical model aims at embedding intercultural competence in foreign language teaching and helping learners not only grasp the target language and culture but also cultivate their curiosity, respect, empathy, and openness towards different cultures through carefully designed class activities.

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