

AN EXPERIENCE OF INTER-CULTURAL EDUCATION IN AN EVOLUTIONARY CLASS

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Abstract

In this paper, students inter-cultural competence in an American classroom has been discussed. An ideal classroom has been created where students with experience abroad can refer to their own experience in order to share their own background with others. Instructors could take advantage of this source of real cultural exchanges without modifying the syllabus of the course. In this way, learners could develop their critical competence by using the intercultural approach. Learners could not only know another culture avoiding discrimination and developing tolerance but also be inter-cultural people with the experience of their own life.

Parole chiave: *foreign language, second language acquisition, communicative approach intercultural competence, learning.*

Learn a new language and get a new soul

(Czech proverb, in Cultural and Language Diversity and the Deaf Experience, pag. 27)

1. Introduction

Intercultural learning is a topic that for many years has been engendering interest in the field of communication competence in a foreign language (Krumm 1995, Jaeger 1985, Müller 1995). Learning a Foreign Language (FL) is an intercultural experience because it allows to know another language but above all to enter in contact with another reality. Drawing on research from inter-cultural perspectives in language classrooms, a lot of results have been reached in order to improve conversation and interaction. For example, the Durham project described by Byram (1997) analyzes pupils attitudes about exposure to French language, knowledge of aspects of French life, information given by the teacher and the image of France in the textbook, in order to reach more tolerance and communicative competence. According to Scheu (1997), learning a FL and its culture can be a frustrating experience because students might suffer an identity conflict.

Inter-cultural perspective differs from other didactic approaches because it also includes the competence to critique. If students are able to learn another culture without ignoring their own culture, they will be able to observe the world with a new perspective. They find not only the differences, but also the advantages and disadvantages of a new culture. If they compare what they observe, they will be able to see the world with new eyes. To reach this skill, students need help of instructors. Learners with an abroad experience, upon the completion of their studies, can teach foreign language to new learners that will be in contact with a new culture. Therefore, if graduate instructors have an inter-cultural background they will then be able to help students in the process of acquiring the competence to critique.

Lifestyle is in continuous evolution and mutation and so students should develop tolerance towards other people and nations, but this is not sufficient because students should be able to live with their own culture and the target culture. Sharing experiences with each other, students should integrate the target language and culture. Instructors play an important role in this process. They should allow students to share their experiences during class. Instructors are not only observers, but also participants of a global experience since they share their own experience. Instructors will not assess the inter-cultural competence of the learners, but they will perceive their acquisition when inter-cultural approach will be part of the learner communicative competence. What it is important is that acquiring awareness that people who are learning a language also acquire culture. They do not have to erase their own culture but being between both. "Inter-cultural", in fact, means among cultures.

In North American universities many of the undergraduate and graduate students study a foreign language with a precise purpose: to be able to communicate fluently in another language, to know the culture of the target language and to fulfill a university FL requirement for graduation. In this case, when students go abroad to learn language, they face a new culture and this experience enriches them. When learners come back to their country, they will not have the opportunity to discuss their point of view about the new culture with the other students. Choosing a new language

course is the only chance to practice language. Learners continue to study the target language but they do not have the opportunity to practice language as they do in the target culture. Students with an experience abroad can remember particular episodes about their own learning process which can be a resource to use each time they practice the foreign language. Native instructors can facilitate this process because they know their own culture, but non-native instructors can also use this inter-cultural approach if they spent a long period in the target country and learned much about lifestyle and culture.

According to Kaikkonen (2001), learning a foreign language or a second language means learning new tools to express ones own communicative intentions and acquiring an open-mind toward diversity or toward what it is called “foreign”. Instructors and behaviorists look for strategies to allow learners to experiment and find some activities useful to train to a larger cognitive flexibility, in order to start the dialogue with the other. As Kaikkonen (2001b) affirms, textbooks and workbooks are not designed in many countries to concentrate on typical everyday life in the target language. There are presently no interculturally oriented textbooks that teachers can use to conduct their language instruction (Baron, 2002). Educating to inter-cultural competence is a challenge for instructors. Textbooks usually contain civilization information, geographical elements, history and other important events about nations of the target language, but solutions can be found to introduce inter-cultural elements. In this paper the possibility to “use” students as a source of inter-cultural exchanges is discussed and ideal classroom techniques for inter-cultural education are suggested. (Particular reference will be done to an Italian language class).

2. How can we improve inter-cultural competence?

Weidenhiller (1998) found different ways to improve inter-cultural competence. In order to guide learners with specific cultural experiences, instructors give them with video material about daily routine (visual drills), which also enrich vocabulary. It is useful to ask to students why they have perceived some elements and not others and why they did one type of description and not another.

The reading and interpretation of pictures or videos should not give an inter-cultural competence because all students should have the same stereotypes, if there are not students in the classroom from other countries and so with a different native language and culture. For example if everyone identifies a man in a picture as a professor, it is useless to ask them: “What kind of job do you think he does?”

Thus, these types of exercises are ineffective in a classroom where there aren't native students.

Inter-cultural approaches ask students their proficiency in order to understand the other culture and to have the same behavior as the native, according to the habits of the target culture. Living with different linguistic behaviors means to develop particular attention or to better create a linguistic- cultural awareness. Translations often transport words from one language to another without carrying on the real speech act included in the words. During a language course, inter-cultural approaches are everywhere: lexical, speech acts, register, oral communication and non verbal communication. Lexical communication is problematic because it often happens that words and sentences appear easy to translate but they can cause misconceptions with

native speakers. If translations are understood differently by others, it can cause misunderstandings. As for speech acts, the speakers of a foreign language have difficulty distinguishing what they wanted to tell with what they said (Müller 1995). For example, it may happen when two non-native English speakers use English but they assign their own cultural value. The aspect of oral communication is also important because of pauses, intonation, rhythm and volume of the voice can all create misconceptions between businessmen. Moreover, according to non verbal communication, when positions and gestures vary, meanings also vary (Binon, Claes 1995).

Thus, learners have to place at a distance their own culture and begin to imitate the lifestyle of the target language. According to Boylan (1992), if a student acquires new perspectives such as cultural values, this represents not only the point of arrival, but also the process of learning a foreign language.

In order to reach this goal, it is necessary to operate according to the following approaches. Firstly, we take into account the communicative dimension because the inter-cultural approach plays a role in communicative skills. Students have to create and maintain interpersonal relations in different social situations as they happen in sociolinguistic competence.

Secondly, we have to consider the cognitive dimension. It is necessary to know the cultural background of students and how they consider culture (stereotypes, prejudices).

Finally, we take into account the affective dimension, which is the requirement considered in this paper. When we are able to see the world through the eyes of another person, we have gained an open mind, flexibility and the competence to critique.

3. An evolutionary inter-cultural language classroom

Following these steps taken for inter-cultural education competence, an ideal inter-cultural language classroom will be presented. This representation is about an Italian language classroom in the USA but the strategy can also be extended to other language classes.

Goal: bring Italy into the classroom

How? 1) Learners can attach on a poster some pictures taken in Italy or postcards bought in Italy or sent by Italian friends or family;

2) learners can write Italian sentences, idiomatic expressions or even dialect utterances that have particularly interested learners on the black board;

3) use titles of Italian magazines or newspapers for young people;

4) learners can take note of the similarities and differences mentioned in class during the comparison of experiences;

5) students and the instructor can choose a place in the classroom where everyone could post a free message in Italian. If learners want to write something

(maybe on an additional blackboard), it means that learners want to inform the other students and instructor that they wish to communicate and compare their experience.

6) instructors can chose multiple choice drills about inter-cultural competence¹. These exercises rely on an ordinary life event with a different value judgement in relation to different cultures. These exercises can create comparison both in multicultural and mono-culture classrooms.

Let's start with the description of the possible inter-cultural approach in a language classroom by stressing the importance of multimedia. In some classrooms where it is possible to have a projector, computers, an overhead projector, a lot of boards, a lot of bulletin boards, controlled lighting, and above all easily removable chairs, some activities could be organized as follows.

1) Instructors could use one of the bulletin boards to create a souvenir language corner: a place where students can attach photos, postcards and sentences from which have been particularly struck. This can be done also by students who have not had an experience abroad. They can use materials from newspapers and magazines in the target language. As we know, these materials help students in their language acquisition process but also in their cultural knowledge. However, if they do not produce anything it is not a problem because they are participating in what happens in class. Instructors and students with an experience abroad could use idiomatic expressions in the target language and sometimes provoke lively interest in the classroom.

2) Instructors and learners can hang a map of the nation(s) where the target language is spoken. It is a useful way to allow learners to feel that they are part of that language. Students can create a map in groups or if it is not possible they can have their own copy.

3) Group activities can be organized during class and so learners must be able to rearrange chairs in the classroom. In groups they can speak about an article read on the internet, about a song, about sports, fashion, art, food or shopping. We do not have to think only about travel and tourist visits but of everything that belongs to the lifestyle of the target language. A lot of instructors do it, but the target is to incite learners to take the initiative in group activities.

4) Instructors and students can choose a place, "a drama corner", where they can act out a scene from passages read and analyzed during the course. This place can be changed from time to time based on the kind of play.

5) Starting lessons with a song in the target language, introduces learners to the use of the target language.

Since the 1980's, the communicative approach arrived in second language studies. Therefore, many instructors try to start lessons in a communicative way. They try to create a comfortable atmosphere by asking about some personal experiences with the usual question: "What did you do yesterday/last weekend?" Students can answer or not and so the instructor is compelled to look for alternative,

¹ They are exercises which regards daily life but they are useful to avoid comparison between cultures. You can find this exercises in: Ute Weidenhiller (1998). La competenza inter-culturale. In Serra Borneto Carlo (1998), *C'era una volta il metodo* (pp.209-225). Carocci editore 1998

fast solutions in order to give students the opportunity to converse. But if instructors give students the opportunity to speak about their experience, it is possible to establish a real communication and not just exchange simple sentences. If every participant in the learning process, both students and instructors, commit themselves to allowing a new approach to conversation, interaction can happen without pressure.

Referring to inter-cultural experiences in the classroom, doesn't mean producing banal everyday communication as it happened with traditional methods², but it means to supply the learners with interesting learning and conversational matter from the first lesson. This could appear as a problem to instructors because they think that these kind of exercises do not belong on a syllabus of a typical language class, but to conversation classes.

But inter-cultural competence is neither content nor a method. Inter-cultural strategies are a useful and effective approach in every kind of language class. In intermediate or advanced classes of literature, history of the language, the cultural aspect is present by default. If the instructor is speaking about the history of the language in a precise period or about a poet or writer that has been important for social, political, literal events, surely the instructor speaks about a character that students know. Moreover, if students have visited the hometown or photographed the grave of a character they can bring an additional discussion.

Witte (2000) found that the inter-cultural approach concerns not only the linguistic, communicative and cultural content, but above all the development of general and sensible abilities, strategies and skills in relation to foreign cultures in order to enhance better understanding of others and oneself.

We can assimilate this concept but we have to help learners in classroom predispose themselves to inter-cultural education.

4. Conclusion

Regardless of the results that could come from the application of the strategies above that can be adapted to the need of each language class, it is important to encourage an approach to inter-cultural competence. Learning culture not only improves a learner's communicative skills, but also helps them produce the target language with inter-cultural competence, making the learner a world citizen who is able to look at reality with new eyes.

Gardner & Lambert (1972) demonstrated that successful second language acquisition was dependent not only on intelligence and aptitude, but also on an individual's motivation. At this point it lets students share their experience, it aids students in enhancing their self-esteem, to be more communicative and also to learn more. In fact, Krashen (1982), since 70s with successive elaborations affirm that if emotional filter is low there is more learning. In this way a large extent of what has been learnt it is also elaborated.

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² For example audiolingual method treated the beginners in foreign language as inexperienced beginners in life.

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