INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING: STRATEGIES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract: *In the field of foreign language teaching in higher education, the scope goes beyond mere language acquisition to include the cultivation of intercultural competence in both teachers and learners. The importance of intercultural competence in foreign language teaching lies in its ability to equip learners with the necessary skills to navigate successfully in diverse cultural environments, especially for students who intend to study abroad or in a multicultural context. The development of such a competence therefore enables them not only to interact effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds, but also to gain a deeper understanding of their own culture and of the cultural nuances embedded in the target language. However, developing this competence is by no means a simple matter; it requires specialised training and continuous professional development for teachers. Teachers are expected to have extensive experience, sensitivity and some knowledge of the cultural implications associated with the language being taught, which presents its own set of challenges. It is therefore essential to provide teachers with ample opportunities to interact with different cultures, to encourage them to reflect on their experiences and to critically analyse their preconceptions and assumptions about other cultures. Drawing on current research, this paper briefly outlines the theoretical underpinnings of intercultural competence in language learning and emphasises the importance of developing awareness and sensitivity for effective classroom interactions. It also discusses strategies used to promote intercultural competence in the foreign language classroom and examines the obstacles teachers face in this endeavour. In addition, the*

paper examines how teachers can integrate intercultural competence into their curriculum and possible methods for assessing intercultural competence. Finally, the paper emphasises the need to integrate intercultural competence into teacher education programmes from the outset and into ongoing professional development.

Keywords: *Intercultural competence, foreign language teaching, teacher training, intercultural awareness in higher education, intercultural communication*

1. INTRODUCTION

First, it seems important to clarify the distinction between 'cultural' and 'intercultural' awareness, which may seem confusing. Cultural awareness involves recognising and understanding different cultural values, beliefs, norms, behaviours and practices, acknowledging the existence of cultural differences and being aware of one's own cultural background (Winkelman, 2005). By cultivating this awareness, it is possible to develop a genuine appreciation of 'otherness', to avoid relying on stereotypes and to foster an open-minded attitude towards other cultures. In addition, actively seeking knowledge about different cultures, including their history, traditions and social dynamics, can be part of cultural awareness.

Intercultural competence builds on cultural awareness. This means that cultural awareness provides the basis for acquiring the necessary knowledge and sensitivity to recognise and respect these differences, while intercultural competence takes this awareness a step further and puts it into practice to enable one to adapt and make meaningful connections with people from different cultures.

Christian Puren (2021d), a French language and culture specialist, explains that intercultural competence is the result of collaboration between language and culture educators. According to him, this collaboration integrated the communicative and cultural elements of intercultural approaches, leading

to the development of the intercultural component. This integration led to the development of intercultural competence as a key skill, especially in contexts where people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds interact.

1.1 Defining intercultural competence

Defining intercultural competence can be somewhat tricky in the sense that the meaning of intercultural competence can vary from one field of study to another, leading to different definitions that are only applicable in specific contexts. This diversity of interpretation may partly explain the lack of a universal definition (Deardorff, 2006; Dervin and Jacobsson, 2021; Fantini, 2000, 2009).

In general terms, intercultural competence refers to the ability to understand, communicate and engage effectively with people from different cultures, demonstrating awareness, understanding and adaptability. Intercultural competence can also refer to openness to different ways of thinking, especially in approaches to evaluation and the design of learning programmes, and to privileging multiple perspectives in the choice of content, reading materials and learning activities (Deardorff, 2011). For the purposes of this paper, which focuses on foreign language teaching in the higher education

sector, the definition provided will be specific to that perspective. The paper proposes a definition first put forward by Fantini (2000) in his use of the term 'intercultural communicative competence'. This definition was later adopted as 'intercultural teaching competence' by Nanda Dimitrov *et al*.(2014). According to their definition, intercultural teaching competence is the ability of teachers to interact with learners in a way that facilitates the learning process for students who are linguistically and culturally different from both the teacher and their fellow learners. To them, this interaction should be effective and contextually appropriate.

1.2 Importance of intercultural competence in foreign language teaching and learning

In Europe, the Council of Europe's 'Common European Framework of Reference' emphasises the importance of 'intercultural awareness' and 'cultural competence' for both teachers and learners; in other words, the framework introduces the notion of the 'intercultural dimension' in language learning objectives (Byram *et al.*, 2002). However, the intercultural dimension is not a new concept in Europe, as it was already addressed in the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, which stressed "the value of intercultural understanding and plurilingualism" (Abdallah-Pretceille, 1999, p. 88). France, for example, has recognised this dimension since the mid-1970s by including the teaching of regional languages and cultures in primary schools (*ibid.*) and now in higher education.

According to the Council of Europe, people with this competence are able to understand and interpret the cultural perspectives of others and relate them to their own. In this way, they are able to enrich their knowledge and reflection of their own cultural beliefs and practices. Through this comparison, they also have a better understanding of their own cultural position. This means that intercultural competence not only increases understanding of others, but also of oneself (Barrett *et al.*, 2014).

In higher education, the increasing international mobility of students has created a multicultural environment. As a result, teachers find themselves in constant interaction with diverse groups, particularly foreign language teachers who often attract a large cohort of foreign students who wish to improve their language skills, either in the target language or in the language of the host country. In such cases, the role of teachers goes beyond teaching vocabulary and grammar. They are also expected to promote an understanding of the cultural aspects associated with the language they teach, as Byram (1997) points out. This understanding enables learners to engage and communicate effectively in the target language while understanding the cultural context in which it is used.

However, the concept of culture can seem ambiguous as it is open to different interpretations. When I refer to students' culture, I am referring to their customs and behaviours that stem from their upbringing, beliefs and values influenced by their geographical origins.

By cultivating intercultural competence, both teachers and students can reduce potential misunderstandings arising from cultural differences and improve their ability to communicate in different situations. It is also essential for them to understand, appreciate and respect other cultures, as this is a fundamental aspect of global citizenship (Abdallah-Pretceille, 1986). Such an ability enables both teachers and students to see the world from different perspectives and to develop empathy and sensitivity towards individuals from different backgrounds (Byram *et al., op. cit*).

In order to foster this particular skill, it is imperative that teachers have the ability to create an inclusive classroom environment that recognises and values the linguistic and cultural differences among their students. In addition, they should use teaching methods that take into account the wide range of diversity within groups of students they teach, incorporating an intercultural approach to enhance language learning and communication (Achieng, 2021).

Questions that might be asked are: How can teachers effectively integrate the intercultural approach into their teaching? How can they develop this intercultural competence for themselves and their students?

1.3 An example of a teacher's development of intercultural competence in an EFL classroom.

Let's take the example of a department teaching English Language to non-English speaking students from different cultural backgrounds. The teacher (me) recognises the importance of intercultural competence and aims to create a classroom environment that promotes cultural understanding and respect while developing students' ability to communicate effectively in English.

When preparing the curriculum, I would design it to include not only vocabulary and grammar lessons, but also cultural components. I would ask students to choose authentic materials such as newspaper, blog or magazine articles, videos produced by themselves, individually or in groups, and/or music that showcase different English-speaking cultures and compare and contrast them with their own, ensuring representation from different countries and regions. This would be a good opportunity for them to practise their oral skills.

Through this example, my aim is to actively promote a deeper understanding and appreciation of different English-speaking cultures. To be effective, I use authentic materials that expose students to different perspectives and experiences. Using a strategy of comparison and contrast, I encourage students to analyse and evaluate the materials they have chosen in relation to their own culture. This approach stimulates critical thinking and reflection, enables them to identify both similarities and differences, and promotes a more nuanced understanding of cultural diversity.

This example also serves to clarify students' perceptions of 'otherness', particularly in relation to stereotypes. By giving them a more accurate and comprehensive view of the English-speaking world, beyond a single geographical region, I aim to broaden their understanding of the context of the language that they are trying to learn. In addition, this approach allows students to improve their oral communication skills as they express their opinions, ask questions and share insights. These interactions deepen their intercultural understanding and facilitate the development of cultural sensitivity, openmindedness and adaptability-essential qualities for successful intercultural communication. Acknowledging the existence of different forms of the target language and culture can enable students to recognise the validity and value of their own variety of English, which can also help to prevent linguistic insecurity

when speaking. This recognition builds confidence and pride in their linguistic and cultural identity, promotes inclusion and prevents linguistic discrimination.

Although students enrolled at university level are expected to have a certain level of English, this will vary greatly depending on their chosen field of study and the official language of the country in which they wish to study. This is also due to the fact that, in the case of France, not all departments offer courses at beginner level.

The above example is just one way of showing how intercultural awareness and competence can be developed in the context of language teaching if a teacher understands what intercultural competence means. While this may seem straightforward in theory, there are specific challenges that teachers face in this regard, particularly in relation to the pragmatic aspects. These are discussed below.

2. CHALLENGES FACED BY TEACHERS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

While teachers have a key role to play in fostering the intercultural competence of their students, they also face a number of challenges. Teachers may have limited knowledge of the different cultures represented in their classrooms. They may lack first-hand experience or exposure to different cultural practices, beliefs and values. Of course, teachers are not expected to know all the cultures of their students, but a lack of in-depth understanding of these cultural nuances can lead to misunderstandings, which in turn can have a significant impact on the attitudes of both teachers and students. If teachers are unaware of the subtleties of different cultures, they may unintentionally make assumptions or misinterpret certain behaviours, leading to bias or stereotyping (Achieng, 2023).

The misunderstandings that can arise can affect the teacher-student relationship and create a negative learning environment. Sometimes teachers do not necessarily notice the misunderstandings as they occur, but after some

reflection or after an incident has been reported . If students notice this before teachers do, they may feel misunderstood or excluded, while teachers may struggle to connect effectively with and support their students who may have different needs. This may also hinder the development of mutual respect, empathy and open-mindedness among students (*ibid).*

Another challenge is that teachers' ability to impart intercultural competence to their students may be hampered by inadequate information or training in this area. To date, there is no single universally accepted framework or programme for teacher training in intercultural competence, and curricula and teaching materials often do not adequately address the importance of cultural diversity. Of course, different frameworks have been developed by scholars, but these have been developed for a specific context, for example, the US (Deardorff, 2006). But would such a framework be applicable to the European context, given the different philosophical and historical backgrounds of the emergence of interculturality in education?

There is also a lack of professional development opportunities that specifically focus on improving teachers' intercultural competence. This may raise the question of whether this competence can be taught at all, or whether it is automatically acquired through personal and professional experience. According to Fred Dervin (*op. cit*), intercultural means different things to different people and teachers tend to interpret and understand it from their own perspectives. This becomes particularly challenging

when there is no common framework or established programme to promote and cultivate this key skill among educators, and teachers may also find it difficult to assess and give feedback in this area. How can this skill be assessed? What exactly is being assessed?

Despite these challenges, there are strategies that teachers can use to effectively promote and assess intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2011), but this requires willingness, openness to other cultures and to what is different,

and commitment on the part of those involved. This is especially true for teachers who are expected to impart this competence to their students.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the concept of intercultural competence in foreign language teaching in higher education although the focus is on language teaching as a whole. In particular, it has looked at the strategies and challenges involved. It has also looked at the assessment of intercultural competence and made some suggestions. It is clear that there are inherent difficulties in assessing this competence. It is therefore necessary to develop assessment methods that provide a comprehensive and holistic evaluation of students' competence in this area. In addition to the traditional formative and summative approaches, other approaches such as the intercultural approach to assessment and strategies should be used to gain a more accurate understanding of a student's intercultural competence. Consequently, this paper argues ***for the need to provide language teachers with adequate training in this area. Further research is needed, particularly on the practical aspects of teacher training and curriculum design. While the focus has been on foreign language teaching, it is important to recognise that intercultural competence goes beyond language teaching and is applicable in a variety of settings. Its importance should therefore be considered by all those involved in education.***

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