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INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT IN LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

When people are talking to each other their social identities are unavoidably part of the social interaction between them. In language teaching, the concept of 'communicative competence' takes this into account by emphasising that language learners need to acquire not just grammatical competence but also the knowledge of what is "appropriate" language. This paper is devoted to cultural competence and its development in teaching and learning environment.

There are many definitions of "culture". The American psychologist Harry Triandis, for example, defines culture as "the human-made part of the environment" [5]. The Dutch cultural psychologist Hofstede defines culture as "the collective programming of the mind" [4]. Culture can be defined as "the sum of a way of life, including expected behaviour, beliefs, values, language and living practices shared by members of a society. It consists of both explicit and implicit rules through which experience is interpreted" [3]. Geert Hofstede, the most famous researcher in the field, refers to culture as a "programming of the mind" [4]. All researchers dealing with the concept of culture on a theoretical basis agree that culture covers a very broad field.

A great deal of research has been undertaken in the field of intercultural competence which has led to many different definitions and understandings. "Intercultural competence is the ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills and attitudes that lead to visible behaviour and communication that are both effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions." [2].

Constituent elements of intercultural competence (Adapted from Deardorff, 2006) are knowledge, skills and attitudes.

Knowledge: cultural self-awareness (articulating how one's own culture has shaped one's identity and world view); culture specific knowledge (analysing and explaining basic information about other cultures (history, values, politics, economics, communication styles, values, beliefs and practices)); sociolinguistic awareness (acquiring basic local language skills, articulating differences in verbal/ non-verbal communication and adjusting one's speech to accommodate nationals from other cultures); grasp of global issues and trends (explaining the meaning and implications of globalization and relating local issues to global forces).

Skills: listening, observing, evaluating (using patience and perseverance to identify and minimize ethnocentrism, seek out cultural clues and meaning); analysing, interpreting and relating (seeking out linkages, causality and relationships using comparative techniques of analysis); critical thinking (viewing and interpreting the world from other cultures' point of view and identifying one's own).

Attitudes: respect (seeking out other cultures' attributes; value cultural diversity; thinking comparatively and without prejudice about cultural differences); openness (suspending criticism of other cultures; investing in collecting 'evidence' of cultural difference; being disposed to be proven wrong); curiosity (seeking out intercultural interactions, viewing difference as a learning opportunity, being aware of one's own ignorance); discovery (tolerating ambiguity and viewing it as a positive experience; willingness to move beyond one's comfort zone).

The above knowledge, skills and attitudes lead to **internal outcomes** which refer to an individual who learns to be flexible, adaptable, empathetic and adopts an ethno-relative perspective.

These qualities are reflected in **external outcomes** which refer to the observable behaviour and communication styles of the individual. They are the visible evidence that the individual is, or is learning to be, interculturally competent [2].

The acquisition of intercultural competence is never complete and perfect, but to be a successful intercultural speaker does not require complete and perfect competence. The first reason for this is the more obvious: it is not possible to acquire

or to anticipate all the knowledge one might need in interacting with people of other cultures. Those cultures are themselves constantly changing; one cannot know with whom one will use a specific language since many languages are spoken in more than one country. Similarly there are in any one country many different cultures and languages. And thirdly any language can be used as a lingua franca with anyone from any country. So it is not possible to anticipate the knowledge language learners need and this has been the main failure of the emphasis on knowledge in civilisation, Landeskunde etc., because whatever is taught it is inevitably insufficient [1].

The second reason why complete and perfect competence is not required is less obvious but just as important: everyone's own social identities and values develop, everyone acquires new ones throughout life as they become a member of new social groups; and those identities, and the values, beliefs and behaviours they symbolize are deeply embedded in one's self. This means that meeting new experience, seeing unexpected beliefs, values and behaviours, can often shock and disturb those deeply embedded identities and values, however open, tolerant and flexible one wishes to be. Everyone has therefore to be constantly aware of the need to adjust, to accept and to understand other people – it is never a completed process.

This also means that there is no perfect 'model' to imitate, no equivalent of the notion of a perfect 'native speaker'. There is no question, either, of expecting learners to imitate or attempt to acquire the social identity of a native speaker, such as a new national identity.

The role of the language teacher is therefore to develop skills, attitudes and awareness of values just as much as to develop a knowledge of a particular culture or country. So a teacher does not have to know everything about 'the target culture'. This is in any case impossible and in fact there are many cultures associated with a particular language, for example many countries where English is spoken as the first language, and within those countries many variations on beliefs, values and behaviours which people share, in other words many cultures [1].

So a teacher should try to design a series of activities to enable learners to discuss and draw conclusions from their own experience of the target culture solely

as a result of what they have heard or read. The teacher might provide some factual information related to the life-styles current in the culture and patterns usually followed by members of these cultures, but the important thing is to encourage comparative analysis with learners' own culture.

The methods of doing this can include simulations and role-play which will activate their schemata and background knowledge about other countries and cultures: learners act the role of visitors to their own country and meet with other learners acting as themselves and not as the stereotypes that the visitors are expecting. This kind of experiential learning is powerful in developing self-awareness as well as perceptions of other countries [1].

Thus, developing the intercultural dimension in language teaching involves recognising that the aims 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, and to help them to see that such interaction is an enriching experience.

References:

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